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I believe the Royal Irish march is divisive and sectarian

Mark Thompson
Monday, 27 October 2008

In England there was a self imposed moratorium by the British Army on homecoming parades because of anti-war protests.

In Ireland the British Army is responsible for the use of lethal force, shoot-to-kill, the use of rubber and plastic bullets, collusion, internment and torture — all with official impunity.

In Belfast we do not have to look to Iraq or Afghanistan. We have Ballymurphy, Springhill, and New Lodge massacres among a litany of events that claimed several hundred lives across the city yet there is to be a march in Belfast. This defies all logic, given the last 40 years, including this past decade seeking to move beyond conflict — unless the objective is otherwise.

If we are real about having a shared future with genuine respect for the views of all citizens, then unionists need to reflect upon the real

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implications of what this march means beyond political point scoring, given the legacy of unresolved hurt. The irony — the clear contradiction and double standard — is that it was the same unionists who sponsored this motion who reacted most when Casement Park was used to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the hunger strike — an event in the heart of west Belfast that in no way infringed upon unionists, civic space or used ratepayers' money.

What are these?

This is not to deny that there exists a section of unionism that is genuine in their views concerning this event. Rather, it is the intention of a significant element that is more about the domination of nationalists, at the heart of which lies a campaign to thwart equality and rights in which extremism is intertwined and indistinguishable from.

A cabal of unionists, the same people who, on a regular basis, ridicule, belittle and undermine our Irish identity, culture and language, now want to parade through our city the British Army that unsuccessfully sought to subjugate us, killing our loved ones in the process. For them the primary objective is not about celebration but rather a guise for the continued attempt to humiliate. This is totally unacceptable.

Unionists need to fully understand the level of hurt and pain inflicted within the nationalist and republican community at the hands of the British Army which resonates deeply if they are to appreciate the import of this event. For the majority of Belfast citizens, and those bereaved by the British Army, the parade is crass and offensive. Is this the message unionism really wants to promote?

For example, would it be acceptable to unionists for former republican prisoners to march through the city centre, never mind receive a civic reception?

This issue goes to the heart of the truth about our past and the role the British Army played as we inclusively seek a way to address the actions of all actors to the conflict. The march is divisive and sectarian and will attract hangers-on who simply want to cheerlead in a triumphalist way. Those shops promoting loyalist paramilitary regalia across Belfast which during early summer were selling the Irish tricolour to be burned at Twelfth bonfires are now selling RIR welcome home union flags.

The relationship in particular between this regiment of the British Army, loyalist paramilitarism, collusion, sectarianism and criminality are well documented, which make this all the more unacceptable for the majority of citizens within Belfast who look on in horror at the antics of unionists in both putting forward this motion and those who supported it.

If it is the intention of those who sponsored the motion to maintain division and prevent change then they may succeed. If it is the will of those who genuinely want to foster better relations and understanding then they can find a better way of marking this event which is not contentious or provocative. The choice is theirs. They can put forward a motion suspending the parade and create a space where we can have positive dialogue about what is acceptable and unacceptable in celebrating such events. And which can contribute towards better understanding, assisting in dealing with our past constructively, and in creating a united city. However, they need to demonstrate leadership.

Last week the RUC George Cross Foundation held a service at St Anne's Cathedral. This was a dignified and fitting event for all those involved without controversy and one which the overwhelming majority of citizens across the city would have no objection to. Surely this is the type of event those who genuinely want to celebrate the return of the RIR can participate in without provocation and to which others, especially those affected by the actions of the British Army, are not insulted or their views made irrelevant.

Unionists, particularly the Alliance Party, need to reflect and weigh up the overall view and not the failed agendas of sectarian politics at Halla na Cathair.

Tomorrow: Michael Copeland on the why Belfast should welcome the RIR

Mark Thompson is director of Relatives for Justice

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Remember Me


 UDR, RIR, Black and Tans, who cares what they are called...the point is that it is the SAME British Army that has historically been the aggressor and oppressor of the native Irish people on this island.

If you call yourself British, then fine, this is your army, go to Iraq, have fun! But calling yourself Irish and participating in this outfit, you are a mercenary and you do not understand your history or your culture

Posted by Tom | 28.10.08, 11:13 GMT

 Mark calls City Hall 'Halla na Cathair'. Why do people use Irish in this tokenistic way, and always totally wrongly? Say 'Halla na Cathrach' for City Hall or don't say anything.


Posted by Tired with tokenism | 28.10.08, 10:39 GMT

 Patrick O'Reilly is correct, and Mark Thompson completely wrong - the battalions of the Royal Irish Regiment are descended from the Royal Irish Rangers and its forebears, NOT the UDR.


By the way, who on earth appointed Mark Thompson the spokesman for "the majority of Belfast citizens"??

Belfast has a democratically-elected City Council, which took a democratic vote.

Posted by Mike | 28.10.08, 10:08 GMT

 Sectarian? Does Mark Thompson of Relatives for (nationalist) Justice know what the meaning of sectarian is? He must think it means if republicans don't agree with it, it must be sectarian then. Both Catholics and Protestants in the Royal IRISH Regiment, both northerners and southerners in the Royal IRISH Regiment hardly sectarian, hardly divisive. Just because the anti-British brigade like Thommo and his republican ilk claim its divisive doesn't make it so. How about standing up for the many people murdered by republican terrorists Mark? Or would that be too divisive for you??


Posted by Gary | 28.10.08, 09:34 GMT

 well this is for guys and girls whos choice it was to sign up and stop a bitter war going on in iraq and around the world,would we be thinking of them when we are partying with friends NO so give these brave people a show of how much we appreciate wot they are doing.The question is would we join? as i woudnt be brave enough .

Posted by stephen | 28.10.08, 00:41 GMT

 Don't let me spoil the party but the record of the British Army in Iraq and Afghanistan is quite abysmal and in some cases nothing short of capitulation to the enemy. All this talk about their good work against the Islamic enemy holds little water. But as we know truth is the first casualty of war, right? As the Iraqi Prime Minister referred to last week, the Brits chickened out of Basra, locked themselves into their bunkers at the Airport leaving the city to the murderous militias, until Uncle Sam and the Iraqi army took the city back. And in Afghanistan, the Brits handed Musa Qala over to the Taliban in 2006 and high-tailed it out of there . Again Uncle Sam had to prise the area back from Taliban control and again, not a Brit to be seen...

Posted by GI Jacques, Boca Raton, USA | 27.10.08, 23:06 GMT

 Im an Irish Catholic and I have a brother in the Royal Irish who is coming home. The parade is a great welcome back. He joined not cause he loves the British army but to help get terror away for good. IRA are not evil they fought for what they believed in but they're gone and so is the UVF and so on.. But the day when my bro left he said he didnt want the taliban to do here what they did to the innocent american people.

Posted by Ryan | 27.10.08, 20:00 GMT

- A marvellous well thought out and well researched article which totally reflects the thoughts of the majority in our City i.e. Nationalists.
Where have you been all this time?. Let's hear more from you.
Let's tell us as it is and not what the Unionists would like it to be.

Posted by Trevor | 27.10.08, 19:42 GMT

- I think the real issues here are that Sinn Fein have been backed into a corner by the dissident groups, and have to be seen to toe the republican line.

What they the Shinners and the Dissidents have done is to ensure that what would have been a family affair will now turn into one of the largest turnouts in the city for years and yes bring out the hangers on.

it is right that the regiment should have the parade through our city, its the least we can do to show our support.

As for as Mr Thompson

how many innocent people from Ballymurphy, Springhill, and New Lodge have been murdered by the IRA over the last 40 years

Posted by mal | 27.10.08, 18:56 GMT

- This statement is also not correct "In England there was a self imposed moratorium by the British Army on homecoming parades because of anti-war protest" There are parades in every town where troops are based. If the writer Mr Thompson is referring to one RAF base which did not allow service personnel to wear Uniform in public due to the actions of some idiots. Which due to the public outrage they reversed that rule pretty quick to allow it. I suggest Mr Thompson research a little more as he clearly does not have facts on his side.

Posted by Patrick O'Reilly | 27.10.08, 18:50 GMT

- There is nothing that would be considered too much trouble for Sinn Fein in order to be offended by all things British. If the RIR march were to take place on the North Pole, Sinn Fein would order their supporters to mount an expedition of protest, and West Belfast would be forced to empty like a sink. They are in fact the closest living example of Star Trek's Borg in action - a political organisation that behaves and acts like a parasitic virus, mindlessly multiplying and consuming its long suffering host.

Posted by Man Dingo | 27.10.08, 17:55 GMT

- This parade has nothing to do with the past goings on in northern ireland. The solders in the RIR who where born and bred in this country and who have risked there lives, lost friends, taking on the most evil people ever to walk the earth, so called men who beat rape and murder women and children in there own country.
Our solders deserve to parade through our city centre and be applauded for their efforts in the ongoing fight against evil around the world. In the real world we all have to move on and forget the hurt of the past, but without the solders from Northern Ireland, and everywhere else around the world fighting this fight, there will be no future, at least not the one we would all hope our children and grand children could have. If we keep on mixing the past with the present we always risk taking our eye of the main objective, making the world a better place for our children. The RIR of today are fighting against the things that threaten our future not our past.

Posted by Michael Wilgar | 27.10.08, 17:43 GMT

- Mark Thompson alleges " The march is divisive and sectarian." The language of his article is equally so.
Most, if not all,of his alleged crimes of the British Army in this part of the United Kingdom have been subjected to intensive public investigation unlike so many killings carried out by his fellow-travelling republican freedom fighters.

Posted by George | 27.10.08, 16:27 GMT

- great article true no need for parade ... anything to show power over catholics they don't have them in britain why have them in the north of ireland don't have them here in usa ... no more bigot parades

Posted by ray .. usa | 27.10.08, 15:35 GMT

- Just another bitter republican with an ancient chip on his shoulder. Do we expect anything else from their ilk?

This is not about Northern Ireland 40 years ago, but about warfare against modern-day terrorism. Actually, has anyone investigated whether there is some kind of alliance between republicans and the Taliban, in the same way we are led to believe that an alliance exists between Basque terror group ETA and the IRA?

Regardless, they're all part of the axis of evil is you ask me.

Posted by mickey | 27.10.08, 14:51 GMT

I object to this letter writer Mark Thompson,he makes a false statement, the 1st Bn The Royal Irish Regiment is the DIRECT descendant of the 1st Bn The Royal Irish Rangers, the RANGERS have NO documented links to criminalty to state "the relationship in particular between this regiment of the British Army, loyalist paramilitarism, collusion, sectarianism and criminality are well documented" is a lie, The Royal Irish Rangers have nothing like that on their record, With the amount of Catholics who served in the Regiment and its forebearers the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, the Royal Ulster Rifles and the Royal Irish Fusiliers, and in TODAY'S Royal Irish Regiment, I would think a little less bigoted backward thinking and understand that Catholics are not one group who all protest but understand we are also Catholics who served in that fine Regiment.

Posted by Patrick O'Reilly, New York | 27.10.08, 14:28 GMT

Irish people have demonstrated their opposition to to units of the English army since the Anglo-Normans invaded their country in 1167 at the invasion of the King MacMurrough of Leinster and with the blessing of Pope Adrian 1V. If the RIR were to parade through Dublin instead of Belfast, they would be welcomed by many Southern partitionists, including Kevin Meyers,and blessed by some of the high ranking Roman clergy.

Posted by Seán MacCurtain | 27.10.08, 13:58 GMT

Does Mark Thompson as director for Relatives for justice speak up for the relatives if British and Irish soldiers murdered by Irish Republicans. I doubt it very much. He is just displaying his vitriol towards anything British.

Posted by RS | 27.10.08, 11:46 GMT

That's a totally biased view. The British Army only reacted to provocation from minority groups, on both sides ,while carrying out their tour of duty in Northern ireland. At the end of the day, those Catholics, who are in abundance within the Royal Irish must surely feel great to return to their homeland. Also you say the majority of Belfast citizens!! Hardly a true account, considering the shiners are busing as many people as they can from outside of Belfast. Get real and start admitting the truth, no cowardly acts of terrorism then no reason for the British Army.

Posted by Tommy Britten | 27.10.08, 11:09 GMT

Also in this section

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