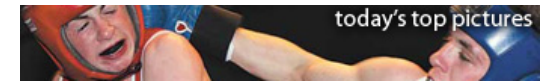


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Is this the right time to protest?

Pro fide et patria

Editorial

30/10/08

While, in a democratic society, everyone is entitled to the right to protest, the circumstances in which it should be exercised must always be subjected to careful consideration.

If, for example, a handful of political extremists set out to march through an neighbourhood where they are

completely unwelcome, a counter-demonstration might be regarded as largely inevitable.

However, if a group which plainly has the overwhelming endorsement of one section of a divided community wishes to parade through a neutral district, different arguments apply.

There can be no doubt that most people within the Protestant and unionist tradition support the homecoming initiative for members of the British armed services scheduled for Belfast city centre on Sunday.

They regard the protests planned by republicans as tribal, and are convinced that they represent an entirely provocative approach to their beliefs and basic sense of identity.

The statement from the Presbyterian moderator, Dr Donald Patton, stressing his view that the main parade should be surrounded by a spirit of thanksgiving, rather than any hint of triumphalism, deserves to be taken particularly seriously.

Although a public challenge to the British government's intervention in Iraq, and to a much lesser extent in Afghanistan, can be fully justified, Sunday is not the day to take such a stand.

It needs to be a dignified occasion, which passes off peacefully and as far as possible reflects attitudes of maturity, tolerance and respect on all sides.

If the debate is not really linked to Iraq at all, but instead is about the record of the British army in Northern Ireland over the last four decades, then the activities of republican and loyalist paramilitary organisations during the same period must also be closely assessed.

It needs to be accepted that an anti-war event on another date, well removed from the emotion of a welcome to soldiers returning safely to their families, and all the symbolism of the UK's forthcoming annual Remembrance ceremonies, would be a reasonable proposal.

Anything resembling a stage-managed confrontation, which could easily be portrayed as sectarian in nature, should be avoided at all costs.

The risks involved in bringing large numbers of demonstrators into a tense atmosphere, during a time of wider political uncertainty, are considerable.


Republicans should ask themselves if some basic point of principle dictates that expressing high-profile opposition to the tragedy of Iraq is essential this weekend, rather than later in the month or the year.

If the answer is no, their course of action should be obvious.



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