

LESSONS TO TAKE: PUTTING THE PARADE THROUGH

Q. Who made this decision?

A. The Chief Constable, whose decision I fully support.

Q. Why will it be forced through?

A. The Chief Constable decided that for wider public order reasons, and on the basis of intelligence about the intentions of terrorist groupings on both sides, that it was in the best interests of everyone in Northern Ireland that a parade, tightly controlled and with conditions imposed, be allowed to pass down the Garvaghy Road. It was not an easy decision but one he made after considering with the utmost care the advantages and disadvantages.

Q. Isn't a violent backlash inevitable?

A. No it is not. It is time for clear thinking and wise counsel. I recognise the disappointment and hurt that some will feel as a result of the decision. I hope that any protests will be peaceful and lawful. For the sake of all the people of Northern Ireland, I urge all those who may be contemplating violence to think again.

Why couldn't the march be re-routed or banned?

- A. The decision was taken after very careful consideration of all the relevant factors. A whole range of options were canvassed with marchers and residents, and intensive decisions involving a range of intermediaries, including the Secretary of State and the Chief Constable, took place in an attempt to broker agreement.

Q. Aren't the police/Government favouring/giving in to Protestant/Orange bully boy tactics? The same catastrophic error as last year?

- A. This decision has been taken in the best interests of all the people of Northern Ireland, in the light of public order and resource considerations and intelligence information about the intentions of paramilitaries on both sides. I wish it had not been necessary to take this decision, but in all the circumstances I am sure it was the right one.

Q. Can the residents of Garvaghy Road expect this same decision every year?

- A. All decisions on parades are taken in the light of the circumstances prevailing at that time. Circumstances may well be different in future years - for example, next year the Parades Commission will have a role in decision-making on parades.

Q. Do you not fear that this decision will result in nationalist families leaving the area through intimidation?

A. Protestants and Catholics have suffered at the hands of bully-boys over years of the "troubles". Such activities are wholly disgraceful, and we will do everything in our power to prevent them.

Q. Don't residents/nationalists have rights?

A. Yes they do, as do the Orangemen. That is precisely the difficulty: contentious parades involve a clash of rights and corresponding responsibilities. It's to try to find a way of dealing with this vexed problem that the Government is committed to implementing in full the North recommendations, and why the Secretary of State has made intense personal efforts to achieve an accommodation over this particular parade.

Q. What implications will this decision have on the talks process?

A. I would hope none. The Government's overriding objective is to reach a comprehensive, lasting political settlement which has the broad support of all parts of the community in Northern Ireland. It is also committed to creating a society here in which different identities are heeded equally and in which there is mutual tolerance for all legitimate expressions of identity. That is our vital project, and nothing will deflect us, or I hope other parties to the Talks, from that path.

Q. Haven't you alienated the Nationalists of NI by forcing the parade through?

A. I accept that many Nationalists will find this decision deeply unwelcome. I understand that, and I wish that the Chief Constable had not had to take this step. So does he. But I can assure everyone, on both sides of the community, that the decision was taken in the best interests of everyone in Northern Ireland in the light of the circumstances facing us.

Q. What are you going to do now for Nationalists?

A. It is not a question of doing something for one side or the other. This decision has been taken in everyone's interests.

Q. What difference will the Parades Commission make next year?

A. When the new legislation comes into operation the Parades Commission will assume responsibility for many decisions on parades (from the RUC), when local accommodation cannot be achieved. The Commission will take into account the wider impact of the parade on the community. There will be a Code of Conduct regulating the conduct of marchers and protesters and the Commission will be able to take into account past breaches in deciding on future parades.

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Q. What about other parades this summer?

A. Key to resolving the parades issue is local accommodation and agreement. I am optimistic that these can be reached.

Q. Will this decision provoke further PIRA activity?

A. To try to use the fact of contentious parades as an excuse for further terror would be the height of cynicism. PIRA is already active - witness the brutal slaying of 2 police officers in Lurgan recently. Terrorists will be pursued relentlessly with the full force of the law. The decision was taken to ensure a minimum of disruption to the ordinary decent people of Northern Ireland.

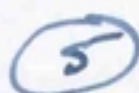
Q. Will PBRs be used this year?

A. PBRs are used by police and army in Northern Ireland only where life or property are at risk. Ideally it would not be necessary to use them - if there were no violent disorder there would be no need to deploy PBRs.

Q. Will the Army be deployed in Portadown?

A. If the RUC require their support they will be there.

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Q. Have soldiers been brought in again from England this year?

A. The Army will provide whatever support the RUC require.

Q. Will education and health have to pay for the destruction this year?

A. Don't know yet, all the more reason for those thinking of violent confrontation to hold back.

Q. Did you not consider the implications this decision may have on the safety of the security forces?

A. Yes I did. Over the years, members of the security forces have suffered terribly at the hands of terrorists. I pay tribute to these men and women, who despite the threats, maintain their professionalism and do excellent work. Their job is to remain impartial and uphold the rule of law. They should not be attacked because of this.

Q. Do you fear for the Protestant families in Portadown and other sectarian interfaces?

A. It is a time for clear thinking and wise counsel. For the sake of all the people of Northern Ireland, I urge all those contemplating violence to step back from the brink.

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Was this decision taken to keep the Protestants sweet prior to the resumption of talks?

A. As I have said the decision to put the parade through was taken solely on operational grounds it was not a political decision.

Q. Was a deal struck with the Orange?

A. Not a question of doing deals. The decision was taken because local accommodation could not be achieved and for wider public order reasons the Chief Constable took this decision - which I support.