

'Unhelpful' report will politicise marching

As the Strategic Review Body on Parading prepares to launch its consultative report today, the **Lower Ormeau Concerned Community** in Belfast and the **Garvaghy Road Residents Coalition** in Portadown set out their concerns

SINCE the 1990s both the Garvaghy Road Residents Coalition and the Lower Ormeau Concerned Community have campaigned for change in the way contentious marches are governed. It is our view that the creation of the Strategic Review Body on Parading was not motivated by any genuine desire to improve the effectiveness of the Parades Commission or current processes for dealing with contentious parades. Instead, its genesis in 2006 was a political concession to unionist

parties opposed to any restrictions on the relatively small number of contentious loyal order marches.

We are very mindful of the injustices inflicted upon our communities as a result of parades, particularly during the 1990s.

All that our communities had sought was the rerouting of a small number of contentious marches.

We had argued for the right to live in peace without the deep sense of fear, outrage and humiliation that consistently marked these sectarian parades through our neighbourhoods.

Instead, due to political expediency, unwanted sectarian marches were imposed upon our communities through the use of threats and violence by unionism and force from both the police and the British army.

The indiscriminate use of plastic bullets, brutal assaults upon residents, illegal curfews and massive restrictions on the movement of people within our communities were a harsh reality.

We welcomed the Independent Review on Parades and Marches (the North review) established in 1996 in response to events in Portadown and Belfast's Ormeau Road.

We expressed some scepticism about the need for a parades commission. It was our belief that the government was abdicating its responsibility to protect minority communities from fear and the



■ **LORRY:** Orangemen march from Portadown in Co Armagh to Drumcree in September 2006. The Parades Commission limited the parade to no more than 1,000 people. A platform lorry was put in place to block the road **PICTURE:** Alan Lewis/Photopress

threat of violence.

Nevertheless, in our view, the Parades Commission concept did succeed in introducing a degree of autonomy into decisions about contentious parades that was noticeably absent when such decisions were previously taken by the police, politicians or the courts.

While we have not agreed with all determinations on contentious marches, there is no doubt that the first and second Parades Commissions did eventually succeed in changing the climate around such contentious marches.

Since the start of this millennium, the rerouting of sectarian marches away from the Garvaghy and Ormeau roads by the commission has meant that our communities – and the wider community – have enjoyed successive peaceful summers.

The clouds of fear, tension and violence – and the physical sieges of our two communities that accompanied those sectarian marches – have also disappeared.

Residents in our neighbourhoods now enjoy family and community life in relative peace and tranquillity.

It is against this background that we believe this present report to be unnecessary and largely unhelpful.

We are concerned that the strategic review body's recommendations will politicise rather than depoliticise the marching issue.

The review body itself has linked the marching issue to outstanding and unresolved political matters.

It links the marching issue to locally elected political institutions, including local councils – a number of which have proven track records

of discrimination.

By making these linkages, the review body has opened a doorway for those who wish to turn the marching issue into a major political football – where political expediency will take precedence over valid human rights concerns.

There is also concern at the review body's attempt to downgrade "the right to freedom from sectarian harassment".

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We do not believe that this report has brought forward any suitable or viable alternative to the concept of an independent parades commission.

Instead, we see only potential for political interference and manipulation within each of the various strands of bureaucracy it proposes.

We fear that the majority of proposals will lead to a pre-1998 situation, reignite past tensions and create future intercommunal unrest during the 'marching season'.

As for the current Parades Commission (which is the third such body), it is obvious that political manipulation lies at the core of its

present difficulties.

The corruption by Peter Hain and the Northern Ireland Office of the appointments process led to a two-year legal battle that culminated in the House of Lords earlier this year upholding the residents' case that those appointments were indeed biased and unlawful.

Questions still remain over the integrity of this commission's own internal processes, which for two years failed to recognise or properly handle the resultant major conflicts of interests.

Leaving those facts aside, we wish to make it clear that we fully support the concept of a parades commission – but it must be a commission that is completely independent and free from political interference at all levels, commencing with the appointments process itself – one that is open and transparent in its dealings with everyone and one that does not second its staff from government departments, including the NIO.

Obviously, this review did not start from the same premise of seeking to enhance the commission's independence, to free it from political manipulation or improve its effectiveness.

Seven years ago, the Quigley review of parades was created following a side deal at Weston Park between the British government and unionists opposed to restrictions on loyal order marches.

The report and recommendations from that review now gather dust on some shelf within the NIO.

The report from this strategic review body should be consigned to a similar fate without delay.



■ **BARRIER:** Ballynaveigh Orangemen are prevented from marching along the lower Ormeau Road in south Belfast on July 12 2001. The Orangemen were stopped by large steel barriers set up by the British army **PICTURE:** Peter Morrison/AP