

A proposal to the Parliamentary Committee on the Observation of July the Twelfth Celebrations

To: The Lady Lieutenant of Belfast;
members of the Northern Irish Assembled Parliament in Stormont;
designates from The Parades Commission

Re: An Alternative Marching Season mini-festival

My Lady Lieutenant of Belfast, Honourable Members of Parliament, Ladies and Gentlemen,

As you know, for many years there has been throughout Belfast an underlying tension between two groups of people – the largely protestant English-speaking unionists, and the largely catholic Irish-speaking republicans. Historical issues stretching back over 325 have informed the entrenched positions of loyalists of both sides and have impacted on generations of young people in Northern Ireland.

In particular, every year in "Marching Season" great crowds of Protestants gather to march through central Belfast banging drums and playing loud military music to commemorate the 300-year old Battle of the Boyne and the end of Catholic rule in Great Britain. As you are only too well aware, this military action over 15 generations ago paved the way not only for the formal prohibition of Catholics to wear the crown, but also the establishment of a Protestant ruling class in the nine counties of Ulster, followed by the eventual partition of the island of Ireland into an independent Republic in the south and the province of Northern Ireland governed as part of the United Kingdom from Westminster. You know, again only too well, the surge of violence and murder and mayhem that overwhelmed this island during the three decades known as The Troubles, and the tentative peace treaty that has so far avoided a return to those days of bloodshed after its signing on Good Friday in April of 1998.

The March of the Orangemen every year is deliberately routed through Catholic areas, and its participants are protected – courtesy of the freedom of political speech - by police and armed forces support. Along the route of the march, supporters build giant bonfires out of wooden crates and other combustibles and burn Irish flags and effigies of Irish politicians and religious figures like the Pope. This action, too, is protected by freedom of speech provisions, and serves to antagonise the Catholic and Republican elements, who frequently organise their own bonfires to counter-protest.

As the delegates from The Parades Commission will be aware, in addition to the main March through the streets of Belfast, there were over 4, 500 marches and march-related protests registered with them last year alone, with 190 Marches designated as "sensitive", and conditions and restrictions placed on 166 Protestant, Unionist, or Loyalist Marches. On the other side of the ledger, The Parades Commission imposed conditions on 8 Catholic, Republican, or Nationalist counter-protests,

Recently, the incidence of violence surrounding these Marches has been getting worse, as Brexit tensions, recent election results, and a growing Irish Unification movement threaten the stability of the Protestant stronghold on political power. The result has been mob violence, police attacks and bashings, and a danger of a return to the violence-in-the-streets and sectarian murders that dominated the 1970s-80s and was called The Troubles.

I stand before you today to seek your cooperation in developing a suite of activities, contained within a mini-festival, and designed to offer a counterpoint to both the worship of historic conflict and what some see as a provocative tribal triumphalism calculated to antagonise and distress on one hand and as to indoctrinate and inculcate on the other.

I therefore propose to implement an "Alternative Marching Season" – a mini-festival with peaceful activities developed in a spirit of co-operation to stand as a civic repudiation of the violent undertones of the March. This would be a mini-festival of sports, arts and civic pride that would offer not only a refuge for Irish Nationalists and Catholics who feel victimised by the Marching Season, but would also provide an avenue for those who do not wish to be involved in the March - or who wish to prevent their children from becoming indoctrinated in the cycle of sectarianism - to register their peaceful dissent to the March. If the Marchers can exercise their rights to freedom of speech through intimidation, we can register ours through symbols of co-operation.

I propose a number of activity types that could be useful in considering the range of programming that could be offered by the mini-festival:

1. Theatre / Performance Activities

The proclivity of the Irish towards meaningful and deeply expressive theatre performance is legendary, and the ability to take large-scale events and distil them into deeply personalised reflections on a broader theme is one of the hallmarks of the Irish theatrical tradition. As has been evident in the presentation of several bilingual plays in the professional theatres of Belfast over the recent past, the telling of stories has the ability to create an immediate bridge between people of different generations, upbringings, and socio-cultural experiences

2. Musical Activities

The musical traditions of the Irish people are very well known, and each side of the conflict has an abiding musical history with which they record the deeds of the past and celebrate the heroes of their movements. Using this hidden resource to bring together disparate belief systems through the unified language of music might be a means to bridging the social gap as well.

3. Irish Language Activities

The knowledge of many young people of the Irish language as well as English has long been a marker of the cultural differences between Unionists and Republicans. Expanding on this knowledge – perhaps by teaching non-speakers from across the political divide how to speak small phrases or even how to swear in Irish – could mine this hidden resource for transferable value and increase knowledge-share and appreciation of similarity between the two groups.

4. Sporting Activities

A love of sport runs very deeply through the Northern Irish cultural life, although traditionally the codes of sport have been divided between the two sides of the conflict, with soccer preferred by one and rugby by the other. Perhaps by combining the shared love of athletic competition and combining elements of both codes (as are found in a sport like Australian Rules Football, for example), the opportunity might be created for teams comprising of players from both sides of the political divide to play alongside one another instead of in opposition or, currently the case, in completely different sports altogether.

I further propose a means of making use of Belfast's evident and hidden resources in order to place this mini-festival deep within the sociological grassroots of these affected communities:

a) By desegregating traditionally demarked buildings

This includes physical buildings that have traditionally been associated with one faction or the other, for example the Hall of the Orangemen in South Belfast or the catholic headquarters in West Belfast. These buildings are only used at certain times of the day, and exclusively by members of one partisan group. If these buildings were made available to those who identify with the other factional group at times when not in use, this may foster a sense of community among the disparate groups

b) By integrating the wall murals of Belfast into an 'active history' narrative

The many murals and wall paintings throughout Belfast that commemorate both murders and the murdered are a stark reminder of the sectarian violence of the past. The streets surrounding these wall spaces are almost always empty, and if carefully utilised (perhaps by virtue of promenade performances or retellings of events to a crowd of individuals from different groups) could be utilised to give context to the events of today through an invigilation of what they represent from the recent past

c) By repurposing the remains of the Marching Season bonfires

Every year during Marching Season, bonfires are erected throughout Belfast and each group burns effigies and flags of their sectarian rivals. rather than just discarding the burnt-out remains of these bonfires, they could be utilised in either an artistic or other community project to attempt to bring both sides together to turn the anger of the flames into something more passive, contemplative and peaceful

As I hope is evident from this initial proposal, the current social climate is not one that permits the ongoing reinforcement of the status quo. As we approach the beginning of a new Marching Season, I hope that you will join with me in wishing it to be the last instance of an archaic practice that forces people who are either its intended targets, or who wish to distance themselves from its sectarian connotations, into hiding. Let us join together now to plan to effect lasting change in this social landscape, and create a reality where those who wish to participate in the activities of the Loyal Orange Order may do so, but those who wish to reflect in a more inclusive way may also be given the freedom to exercise that right. Let those who desire to breathe life into the embers of sectarian bonfires continue do so, but I hope you will join with me in assisting as well those who wish to breathe life into the embers of the more tolerant and all-inclusive Northern Ireland of the future.

Thank you.