

6

The Re-invention of the Orange Order: Triumphalism or Orangefest?

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The present challenges facing the Orange Institution have their immediate origins in what has become generally known as the 'Drumcree Debacle'.

One of the oldest, if not the oldest, annual Orange Parade to a church for a service of worship, commenced in 1807 to Drumcree Parish Church, outside Portadown, in County Armagh. Major conflict arose in the 1970s over the route via Obins Street and after a stand-off in 1987, the Royal Ulster Constabulary and Portadown District Loyal Orange Lodge agreed to return by the Garvaghy Road, following the service. However with the change in the religious and political allegiances of those who lived on the Garvaghy Road, conflict arose again in 1995.

The result of this conflict is well documented in terms of widespread opposition to Orange Order parades throughout Northern Ireland. However Gerry Adams's speech at a Sinn Féin Conference in Athboy, County Meath, in November 1996, is often forgotten:

Ask any activist in the north 'Did Drumcree happen by accident?' They will tell you 'No'. Three years of work in Lower Ormeau, Portadown, and parts of Fermanagh, Newry, Armagh, Bellaghy and up in Derry. Three years' work into creating that situation and fair play to those people who put the work in ... they are the type of scene changes that we have to focus in on and develop and exploit.¹

Some years later a letter appeared in the *Irish News* in which John McCabe from Newry confirmed the Athboy assertion:

In 1996 Sinn Féin covertly set up 'Newry Coalition Against Sectarian Parades' of which I was chairman. This was part of its overall strategy

which was replicated throughout the six counties to confront loyalist parades against the backdrop of the then Drumcree dispute.²

The immediate effect of this conflict was the North Report, which led to the establishment of the Parades Commission. The bad publicity surrounding the conflict over parades in the 1990s led the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland to engage the public relations company 'Reputation Matters', in an attempt to deal with the ever-increasing dysfunction of the leadership in relation to the media.

In an attempt to present a new image to the world the leadership of the Orange Institution came up with two new ideas. Whether this was a repositioning, rebranding or reinvention is open to question. Whether this was a genuine attempt to improve the image of the Order or an attempt to make the Order more acceptable for funding, particularly lottery funding, is also open to question. No attempt was made to deal with the extensive issues of discipline, particularly in relation to the engagement and behaviour of paramilitary-style bands.

The first attempt at repositioning was to earmark particular Twelfth parades as 'Flagships'. This initiative is explained on the Grand Lodge website as follows:

Each year since 2006, the Grand Lodge of Ireland has bestowed a small number of the 18 Twelfth demonstrations with flagship status.

Working closely with the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, organisers of the chosen parades will ensure each venue offers a unique programme of events leading up to the big day itself.

Director of Services of the Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland, Dr. David Hume, insisted the flagship initiative has led to a higher profile for the Twelfth.

'The flagship programme has increased confidence, developed capacity and assisted in international marketing of the Twelfth as well as giving obvious pride to the flagship venues over the years', he said.³

As this repositioning continued, the second attempt was the creation of Orangefest as a cultural expression of the Orange tradition. This exercise to persuade a sceptical world that the Institution was genuinely interested in political change was accompanied by an attempt to make the Orange Order more acceptable to the non-religious Orangeman by emphasising the importance of its *culture* rather than its *faith*.

Orangefest appears to have been the brainchild of the Committee for Educational Affairs, and was reported to the Grand Lodge in March