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Independent

Riots flare in Northern Ireland for second night over Union flag decision

Michael McHugh

Thursday 06 December 2012

More attacks have been carried out on the non-sectarian Alliance Party during a night of violence in Northern Ireland.

The office of Employment and Learning Minister Stephen Farry was targeted for attempted arson in Bangor, Co Down, while a paint bomb was hurled at the house of a married councillor couple with a 17-month-old baby girl who represent the party in the same seaside town.

Hundreds of loyalists rioted and burned the offices of Alliance MLA Stewart Dickson in Carrickfergus, Co Antrim, last night and four police officers were injured after missiles were thrown. Non-lethal baton rounds were discharged.

The violence followed Monday's decision of Belfast City Council to fly the Union flag only on designated days at its city hall in a measure supported by Alliance.

Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) assistant chief constable Will Kerr said: "We saw criminal, thuggish, intimidating behaviour here and we need to put a stop to this."

An Alliance Party spokeswoman said petrol was used at Mr Farry's central Bangor office but police attended the scene before damage was caused.

Also in Bangor, North Down councillors Michael and Christine Bower were at home with their young child when a paint bomb was thrown at the front of the house, smashing a window.

Last night party offices in Carrickfergus were attacked and police pelted with stones and missiles after a crowd of up to 1,600 protested against a decision to restrict the flying of the flag at Belfast City Hall.

The party offices were targeted because members of the Alliance Party on the council voted in favour of the flag being flown only on designated days.

Offices in east Belfast belonging to the party's only MP, Naomi Long, have been picketed and one councillor was advised not to return to her home because of fears for her life.

An office belonging to a charity for the disabled is also believed to have been damaged in last night's Carrickfergus fire.

Stewart Dickson, an Alliance Party member at the Northern Ireland Assembly who used the Carrickfergus offices, said the building had previous been sprayed with graffiti by loyalists.

He accused the two main unionist parties of whipping up tensions.

He added: "This is an outright attack on democracy and cannot be allowed to continue. This campaign of intimidation against the Alliance Party cannot be allowed to continue."

There was serious street disorder in Belfast on Monday night after the city council voted to limit the flying of the flag. Loyalists rioted and at one stage attempted to smash their way into the City Hall.

The Guardian

Northern Ireland police injured trying to defend office from rioters

Unrest in Carrickfergus as unionists try to storm Alliance party office over Belfast city council union flag decision

Henry McDonald, Ireland correspondent

The Guardian, Thursday 6 December 2012

Several police officers have been injured trying to protect a regional office belonging to the non-sectarian Alliance party in Northern Ireland from crowds of rioting loyalists.

The disorder in the County Antrim coastal town of Carrickfergus is connected to loyalist protests over the decision of nearby Belfast city council to end its policy of flying the union flag all year round.

Alliance councillors in Belfast city hall managed to persuade nationalists to back a compromise motion allowing for the union flag to be flown only on designated days, such as the Queen's birthday. But the decision provoked anger among unionist politicians and sparked riots outside Belfast city hall in which 18 police officers were injured on Monday. The violent protests over the union flag row have now extended to the East Antrim town, which has long-standing historical links to the Ulster loyalist-Protestant cause.

King William of Orange landed his forces in Carrickfergus in 1690 before the decisive battle against King James II's Catholic forces at the river Boyne.

On Wednesday night baton rounds were fired at a crowd of more than 1,000 loyalist demonstrators while fire crews had to deal with a blaze at the constituency office of the Alliance party assemblyman for East Antrim, Stewart Dickson.

Police were holding back the loyalist protest at the Irish Gate area of Carrickfergus, and said that four people had been arrested.

Dickson has confirmed that his office was on fire and claimed that the blame lay "solely at the feet" of the Ulster Unionist party and the Democratic Unionist party. Both the DUP and UUP have been bitterly critical of Alliance's role in ending the policy of flying the union flag at Belfast city hall every day of the year. Alliance holds the balance of power on Belfast city council and has been arguing that the policy is in direct contradiction of the power sharing executive at Stormont and its aim for a shared future in Northern Ireland.

Alliance party leader and Northern Ireland's justice minister, David Ford had demanded a recall of the Stormont assembly where he wants answers from mainstream unionist politicians about the violence.

Speaking about Wednesday night's trouble, Dickson said he had witnessed "hand-to-hand combat" between loyalist protesters and the police during the evening's disturbances.

"This is an outright attack on democracy and cannot be allowed to continue. The police have informed me that my office is on fire ... this campaign of intimidation against the Alliance party cannot be allowed to continue," he said.

On Tuesday, Laura McNamee, a fellow Alliance party member councillor said she had been forced to leave her home in east Belfast due to threats from extreme loyalists over the city hall flag vote.

The Times

UK News

Ulster party's offices set on fire in Union Jack row

Tom Farmery

5 December 2012

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The offices of the Alliance Party in Northern Ireland were set on fire yesterday and several police officers were hurt in further loyalist violence after a decision to restrict the flying of the Union Jack at Belfast City Hall.

The office building in Carrickfergus, Co Antrim was attacked and stones and missiles were thrown at police officers after a loyalist crowd of about 1,600 came out for another night of protests.

Stewart Dickson, the Alliance MLA, said: "The police have informed me my office is on fire and all I can do is wait to see the extent of the damage."

Police later said that they had made four arrests in Carrickfergus.

The party offices were targeted because members of the Alliance Party at Belfast City Council voted in favour of the Union Jack being flown at City Hall only on designated days, such as the Queen's birthday. Previously the flag had been flown every day.

Other offices in East Belfast belonging to Naomi Long, the party's only MP, were picketed and Laura McNamee, an Alliance Party councillor, was advised not to return to her home after threats were made on Facebook.

Mr Dickson accused the two main unionist parties of fuelling the tensions. "This is an outright attack on democracy," he said. "This campaign of intimidation against the Alliance Party cannot be allowed to continue."

On Monday night a 1,500-strong loyalist crowd came close to storming the council chambers.

Sammy Wilson, the Democratic Unionist MP for East Antrim, said that there was no justification for the violence in Carrickfergus.

"Those involved do a disservice to the flag they claim to defend," he said. "Today in the House of Commons several MPs backed the Union Jack being flown from City Hall. However, this criminal behaviour undermines and distracts from the argument."

The Daily Mirror

MOB BURNS MLA'S OFFICE; Police injured as flag protest turns ugly

JILLY BEATTIE

6 December 2012

The Daily Mirror

Ulster

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AN MLA's constituency office was burnt out and police officers injured last night as Union flag protests descended into violence.

The Alliance Party premises in Carrickfergus, Co Antrim, was gutted after bins were set alight while missiles were thrown at the PSNI.

And East Antrim MLA Stewart Dickson blamed the DUP and UUP for whipping up tension after his party's motion to allow the Union flag to be flown at Belfast City Hall on 17 days a year was passed.

He said: "This is an outright attack on democracy and cannot be allowed to continue. The blame lies firmly with the two unionist parties who distributed bogus leaflets across loyalist areas in Belfast ahead of the meeting of Belfast City Council.

"They cannot expect to whip up unionist tensions and encourage people to protest and then wipe their hands of involvement."

Several police officers were injured in the trouble as a crowd of 2,000 protested against the Union flag not flying permanently at Belfast City Hall.

th Ctiw As the numbers swelled around the Irish Gate roundabout area of Carrickfergus missiles were thrown at police and officers were involved in hand-to-hand combat with members of the public.

pro crow pla do a Riot squad officers responded to prolonged violence by surging crowds by firing several rounds of plastic bullets.

Firefighters also came under attack from a number of rioters.

to the Two men and two women were arrested.

claim Violence flared in Belfast on Monday night after the Alliance Party motion was passed. Nationalists had wanted to remove the flag altogether.

More mass protests are planned for Ballymena, Belfast and Derry. East Antrim DUP MP Sammy Wilson condemned last night's violence and said: "People are entitled to peacefully protest but there is absolutely no justification for the carnage in Carrickfergus this evening.

"Those involved do a disservice to the flag they claim to defend. I urge those involved to step back from criminal activity and channel their energies through democratic politics."

John Stott, 54, from Lisburn, Co Antrim, attended the rally with his his teenage son. He said: "We didn't come here to take part in violence but there was a stage when we were trapped by the crowd and couldn't escape.

"People started throwing all sorts of things including bottles and bricks. It was terrifying, full-scale rioting. If things go like tonight someone could easily be killed."

Those involved do a disservice to the flag they claim to defend SAMMY WILSON

The Guardian

National: Belfast councillor flees her home after vote on union flag

Henry McDonald, Ireland correspondent

5 December 2012

The Guardian

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A councillor in Northern Ireland was forced to flee her home yesterday because of Ulster loyalist threats against her for voting to end the policy of flying the union flag at Belfast city hall 365 days a year.

After a night of violence in the city, Alliance councillor Laura McNamee, 27, said she believed hardline loyalists who abused her on Facebook are linked to the Ulster Volunteer Force in east Belfast and were last night picketing her party's constituency headquarters in the east of the city.

McNamee and several party colleagues have been warned of threats against them by a new extremist loyalist faction enraged over Belfast city council's decision on Monday night to only allow the union flag to be flown for up to 20 designated days.

The 29-21 vote in favour of changing the flag-flying policy provoked a riot in the grounds of city hall that left 15 police officers injured, at least one council security guard hurt and an Associated Press photographer beaten over the head by a police baton. Peter Morrison, the photographer caught up in clashes between police and around 1,000 loyalists, has claimed he was ignored when he told riot squad officers he was a member of the media.

McNamee last night said she was too frightened to return to her house in the Sydenham area near Belfast city airport. The Police Service of Northern Ireland had warned her she and other councillors from the centrist non-sectarian Alliance party were under threat.

The loyalists opposed to any change in the flag policy are targeting prominent Alliance members because the party holds the balance of power on the council. It was their compromise motion - that the flag would be still be flown on top of city hall on days such as the Queen's birthday - that led to the union flag no longer being a permanent fixture on the council building.

"The police have told me not to go home until further notice. It is a horrible feeling but as a public representative you expect a backlash but only in terms of politics, not physical threats. They [the police] had us on a high alert from the weekend," McNamee said.

While condemning the violence on Monday evening, mainstream unionist politicians have continued their verbal onslaught on the Alliance party.

Lord Empey, a former Ulster Unionist minister, described the Alliance as "a delivery system for the advancement of Sinn Fein's anti-British strategy".

Monday's riot at city hall, which spilled over to a sectarian interface in east Belfast, where Catholic homes and a church were attacked, has again illuminated the deep sectarian divisions in the city despite power-sharing and the peace process.

Northern Ireland's Community Relations Council (CRC) warned last night about the wider dangers of disputes about issues such as flags. Tony McCusker, the CRC chairman, said: "It is clear from the angry response last night that more work needs to be done to ensure this is fully understood."

The Guardian

Leading Article: National identities: Valid not vexing

5 December 2012

The Guardian

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The Belfast Telegraph recently observed that the learned term for the study of flags is vexillology. How appropriate. For if ever there was a vexed question in some parts of these islands it is the flying of flags. Monday night in Belfast witnessed an alarming example of such vexillological vexations, when the city council split along sectarian lines over whether to continue the practice of flying the union flag every day over Belfast's fine Edwardian city hall. Unionist politicians wanted to continue. Nationalists wanted no flag at all. In the end, nationalists and the Alliance party combined to carry the proposal by 29 votes to 21 that the union flag would fly only on designated days during the year. By topical coincidence, one of the first such days could be to mark the birthday, on 9 January, of the newly pregnant Duchess of Cambridge.

The result of the vote was an outburst of public disorder involving angry unionists, a brief siege of the city hall itself and an attack on a Catholic church. Eighteen people were injured. These were ugly events that cannot be condoned. But they showed how flags can be powerful dividers as well as, on other occasions, potent unifiers. Though it is a famous flashpoint for such issues, Northern Ireland has in recent years managed to compromise about them better than it did on Monday. The motion adopted in Belfast brings the city hall into line with the flag-flying policy now in force on government buildings in Northern Ireland generally, including at Stormont. Given that Belfast is divided roughly 50:50 between Protestant unionists and Catholic nationalists, it was more than usually sensible to compromise in some way.

Many people will dismiss bitterness about flags as backward-looking - and so, on one level, it undoubtedly is. The lives of the people of Northern Ireland, both unionist and nationalist, are qualitatively so much better as a result of the peace process that a squabble about symbols is more than usually foolish. Local politicians who insist on re-fighting the old sectarian battles are leading their communities into a blind alley from which they have only recently emerged at the cost of much blood and suffering.

Monday was also a reminder that the new Northern Ireland needs to continually negotiate its particular sense of belonging - or not. Yet Ulster is not alone in this. Learning to belong together in the modern world is a continuing issue elsewhere too, even if not in such an entrenched way. Overlapping national and community sensitivities exist in every corner of these islands. These identities are not set in stone, though it sometimes feels that way. Very few of those who waved their union flags when William married Kate did so in order to insult Irish nationalism. This summer's Olympics were another major reminder of how identity and the meaning of flags can be reinvented in modern ways. Flying the flag this summer struck many people as an acceptable form of patriotism - inclusive, diverse and alive to irony. But there was not much irony on display either inside or outside Belfast city hall this week.

"Better off together" - the slogan of Scots opposed to separation from the UK - is a more meaningful and modern idea than "ourselves alone" - the old core idea of Sinn Fein. That's why Britain and Ireland now have a relationship overwhelmingly based in the 21st century, not the 19th. But togetherness has to be genuine - and the past is rarely irrelevant to it. Togetherness has to have meaning, whether in terms of Scots and English, Protestant and Catholic, black and white or rich and poor. "We're all in this together" is a powerful slogan that can be energising if it feels honest or shabby if feels false. Togetherness in modern Britain, in Northern Ireland and in the European Union has to respect difference, not dismiss or, even worse, demonise it, while asserting the modern case for union, if there is one. Flying a union flag is valid only if the union itself is more valid than vexing. And validity depends on a lot more than royal birthdays.