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Belfast Telegraph

A tale of two city halls sparked the Monday madness

The City Hall riot was inexcusable. But the violence was born of a real sense of frustration in working-class loyalist areas
By Michael Copeland
Thursday, 6 December 2012

As an ex-serviceman, I have the utmost respect for the flag of my nation and, for this reason, it is regrettable that today, for the first time since the construction of Belfast City Hall, our Union flag is locked away in a darkened room.

As I stood at Belfast City Hall on Monday night, I couldn't help but think of the two Belfasts being captured in one image.

At the front of the City Hall, we had the continental Christmas market, a cosmopolitan and multi-cultural scene, which is great for Belfast and for its visitors.

At the rear, we had a seriously disgruntled section of our society assembled to show frustration at the erosion of their identity.

Two Belfasts; both of them very real.

While I do not seek to defend, or justify, any violence, we must have a clear understanding of where the frustration is coming from.

In my constituency of East Belfast, I continue to witness at first hand the impact of economic recession on an already deprived section of our society.

Wages are low, costs are rising, employment is at a premium and not a day goes past when good, honest people are not losing their jobs.

This may sound bad enough, but when we consider the high suicide rates in east Belfast, combined with the pending impact of welfare reform, some people can be forgiven for seeking solace in our national identity, which is represented by the Union flag. However, by no means is this an excuse to go on a rampage at our City Hall.

Monday's unsavoury scenes were, without doubt, counter-productive.

At a time when unionism and loyalism should be seeking to convince people of their arguments, this violence only served to further polarise our beliefs and detract from the central issue.

Had the removal of the flag been the only concession recently, it may have been easier to swallow. But the fact is that unionism has conceded ground on many fronts and each issue is perceived as a 'battle' fought and a battle too often lost.

There is, whether it is politically correct to say so or not, a palpable sense of frustration and anger in many unionist and loyalist areas.

They see a constant erosion of their British identity, along with the ignorance of their culture, all the while being dressed up as 'equality' by Sinn Fein.

'Equality' to Sinn Fein, in practice, appears to mean the removal of all things British from the state of Northern Ireland.

I do believe that Sinn Fein's version of 'equality', ultimately, seems to amount to victory, a total eradication of all things British, while marching towards a united Ireland in a zero-sum game.

This is evidenced when Gerry Kelly described Monday's events as a "very good day's work".

What does this idea of 'equality' mean for unionists?

Based solely on the evidence, it means the removal of our national flag from public office, it means the restricting of unionist parades, it means that Conor Murphy (given a recent court case) won't employ you based on your Protestant religion and it means the acceptance of a children's playground in Newry being named after a convicted IRA terrorist.

Next on the agenda is a public consultation regarding the contents inside Belfast City Hall, where those contents are deemed as an attack on 'equality'.

It is a sad state of affairs, given our perilous economic situation, that nationalist and republican councillors would bring the flag motion to the table in the first place.

I believe that the debate surrounding this issue and the subsequent removal of the flag has been more detrimental to community relations than the status quo of flying the flag 365 days-a-year could ever have been.

The Alliance Party has fallen for Sinn Fein's engineered strategy.

Let us be clear: Sinn Fein brought the motion, retreated, allowed Alliance to take all the blame and then watched as unionism lashed out in an all-too-predictable manner.

Elements of unionism are mistakenly looking towards violence as a viable option.

They increasingly look toward the success of Sinn Fein and think, "If violence worked for them, why can't it work for us?"

With this sentiment in mind, there is a real belief that "the bad guys have won", given Sinn Fein's hold on Belfast City Council and its influence at the Stormont Executive.

I empathise with those unionists who feel that they have been backed into a corner.

At the same time, I encourage those same unionists to engage with the political process.

The correct way forward now is for working-class unionism to politicise itself, either by joining the ranks of a political party, or by registering and casting a vote at the next election.

Nothing changes if nothing changes.

Belfast Telegraph
Alliance Party offices set on fire in Belfast flag row
Thursday, 6 December 2012

Offices belonging to the non-sectarian Alliance Party have been set on fire in a new outbreak of loyalist violence in Northern Ireland.

The building in Carrickfergus, Co Antrim, was attacked and police pelted with stones and missiles last night after a crowd of up to 1,600 protested against a decision to restrict the flying of the Union flag at Belfast City Hall.

A number of police officers were also hurt in the trouble in the West Street area of the town.

The party offices were targeted because members of the Alliance Party on Belfast City 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 was also believed to have been damaged in tonight's fire.

Stewart Dickson, an Alliance Party member at the Northern Ireland Assembly who used the offices, said last night the building had previously 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 east Antrim Democratic Unionist MP Sammy Wilson said last night that there was no justification for the violence in Carrick.

Mr Wilson, also the economy minister in the Northern Ireland executive, added: "Those involved do a disservice to the flag they claim to defend."

"Today in the House of Commons several MPs backed the Union flag being flown from City Hall. However this criminal behaviour undermines and distracts from the argument."

Police later said they made four arrests in Carrickfergus.

Belfast Telegraph

Belfast flag row violence: We're not going to take it

By Stephen Donnan

Thursday, 6 December 2012

I write this post even as our offices in Carrickfergus are being burned out by a loyalist mob.

Never in Alliance's history has it faced such an unprecedented challenge, this is not an issue regarding the economy, or civil rights nor is it something that Alliance has done badly.

No, the challenge we face is the outcome of standing by our principles in the face of incredible adversity and threats of violence.

I have received abuse and condemnation in its lowest, most ugly form from people who claim to represent 'Protestants of East Belfast.'

I have news for you, I am a Protestant from east Belfast, I come from a working class, loyalist-Unionist community and somehow I, like the majority of others in my community, manage to avoid behaving like a criminal and animal.

This is no longer about a flag.

Burning down Stewart Dickson's offices in Carrick will not lend legitimacy or draw rational supporters to your cause. We will not be brow beaten, bullied or intimidated for what we believe and for staying the course.

Where are the Unionist politicians now? Where is Cllr Christopher Stalford who had oh so much to say about Alliance before Monday night? Where is Peter Robinson MLA, the man who talks of opening the arms of Unionism to Catholics and moderates?

I understand and I encourage protest, that is how democracy works, as long as it is peaceful. Intimidating our Councillors into leaving their homes, burning down the offices of our MLAs and Ministers and sending sectarian abuse over Twitter to our supporters is not 'engaging in the debate', it's mob mentality.

This is not a protest, this is criminality and barbarism. You just lost the argument.

Stephen Donnan is a community and voluntary worker and an Alliance Party activist.

Belfast Newsletter

Thursday 6 December 2012

Plea for 'fair consideration' of cenotaph flag proposal

Published on Thursday 6 December 2012 09:16

The Union Flag could be flying in the grounds of Belfast City Hall within weeks of its removal from the front of the building, unionist councillors have claimed.

On Monday evening, the City Council voted to end the flag's permanent presence above the iconic landmark.

The decision sparked outrage among unionists, and some of the 1,000 demonstrators holding a protest at the City Hall attempted to storm the building when news of the decision filtered through.

Sporadic violence spread to east Belfast later the same evening and an Alliance councillor has since left her home following a threat.

Although the original vote to remove the flag was proposed by a nationalist SDLP councillor, the Alliance grouping – which holds the balance of power – proposed the successful amendment to fly the flag on 20 designated days.

With a series of further protests being planned for several areas of the Province, unionist councillors are proposing the Union Flag is given a permanent position at the City Hall cenotaph.

Christopher Stalford, of the DUP, had vociferously opposed the proposal voted through on Monday.

He told the News Letter yesterday he was hopeful the flag could reappear within weeks.

With the new proposal already drafted and submitted for consideration by the relevant committees, a vote on the cenotaph flag is likely to be held in the chamber as early as January 2013.

Councillor Stalford said: "If the nationalist political parties are not motivated by a zero sum desire to insult and offend the unionist people of Belfast then I believe they should support our proposal that the Union Flag fly all year in the Garden of Remembrance at the City Hall."

Cllr Stalford said he was bitterly disappointed the flag would no longer be a permanent fixture on the building, but added: "This is an opportunity for the nationalists to prove that they genuinely believe in

the idea of a shared future. I hope that every party in the council will be able to give this proposal fair consideration and, if the consideration is fair, then they will support it.”

Alliance group leader on the City Council, Maire Hendron, agreed there could be an early decision on the cenotaph issue, but said the hasty actions of unionist councillors — in attempting to push through a new proposal within weeks — had “disrespected” the memorial.

“I object strongly to how that was done. It was such an underhand way of bringing a piece of business before the council and it took away completely from any honour or respect for the cenotaph,” she said.

On Tuesday, in a statement to the News Letter, Cllr Hendron said she would have “no objection to supporting” the cenotaph proposal.

“The Alliance Party group has not discussed flying the Union Flag at the cenotaph 365 days,” she said. “However, this is something that I personally would have no objection to supporting.”

She added: “At our next group meeting, the Alliance Party will give its full care and consideration to this issue, which I anticipate we will support.”

Yesterday, the Alliance councillor said that, at this time, she couldn’t “give any guarantee” Alliance will support the new proposal, and added: “We agreed to that timeframe at the council but I’m not convinced that that’s the right way to go in the current climate. It doesn’t pay proper respect to the cenotaph.”

Following Monday’s vote, the 20 designated days for the flying of the Union Flag include: January 20 for the birthday of the Countess of Wessex, St Patrick’s Day, Remembrance Sunday in November and the Queen’s wedding anniversary on November 20 — however, the list does not include July 12.

UTV

Alliance home attacked amid flag trouble Published Thursday, 06 December 2012

Alliance party offices have been attacked - and two councillors have had their house paint bombed - during a night of loyalist trouble in Northern Ireland.

Police were attacked with missiles in Carrickfergus after a large crowd gathered on Wednesday night to protest against Belfast City Council's decision to only fly the Union flag on designated days.

A number of officers were hurt but the extent of their injuries is not yet known.

The constituency office of Alliance MLA Stewart Dickson was ransacked and set on fire.

Three arrests were made, including a 20-year-old woman who has now been charged with riotous behaviour, assault on police and resisting arrest, to appear on court on Thursday.

Meanwhile in Bangor, councillors Michael and Christine Bower had the front window of their home broken by a paint bomb.

They said it was lucky their 17 month old daughter was not playing underneath.

"An attack like this on the home, just above where my daughter could have easily been playing, where her toys were gathered in the room, makes this all the more disturbing," Mr Bower told UTV.

"It doesn't bear thinking about the consequences had she been there."

North Down MLA Stephen Farry said there was also an attempted arson attack on his constituency office in Bangor.

"Petrol or some other accelerant was poured over my shutters by a number of people," he said.

"Fortunately, they were interrupted by a passing police patrol and fled the scene. I am grateful to both the police and the fire and rescue service for their assistance."

There have also been reports of trouble in Lurgan.

Bottles, masonry and other missiles were thrown in the West Street area of Carrick as the trouble erupted.

Riot police fired a number of baton rounds as they dealt with the disorder, which started after 7.30pm. Two men and two women have been arrested.

More than 1,000 people gathered in the Irish Gate roundabout area but the majority of the crowd later dispersed before trouble broke out.

Loyalist protests have also taken place at Alliance offices in Belfast this week.

It comes after the City Council passed a proposal to restrict the flying of the Union flag at City Hall, which the party put forward.

Alliance has requested that the Assembly be recalled in light of the violence.

Mr Farry continued: "An orchestrated campaign of intimidation against Alliance elected representatives has unsurprisingly turned violent. We in Alliance will remain resolute in standing up for values of a shared future, democracy and the rule of law."

Unionist parties have condemned the trouble.

DUP East Antrim MP Sammy Wilson said: "I unreservedly condemn the violence.

"People are entitled to peacefully protest but there is absolutely no justification for the carnage which has been caused in Carrickfergus this evening.

"Those involved do a disservice to the flag they claim to defend."

UUP leader Mike Nesbitt said: "What unionism needs today is brains, not brawn. We need an analysis, a strategy and an agreed outcome.

"I am happy to talk to anyone, if they commit to repent and desist from violence."

TUV leader Jim Allister said: "The great political and constitutional wrong done to the Unionist majority in Northern Ireland by the Alliance Party delivering the Sinn Féin agenda of denuding the capital city of its daily expression of its Britishness does not warrant or justify violence, rather it calls for a sustained political response."

Meanwhile SDLP leader Alasdair McDonnell said: "Stewart Dickson is doing his best for the people of East Antrim and an attack on him is an attack on everybody in East Antrim," he said.

"The SDLP stands fully with the Alliance Party in utter abhorrence to this attack."

On Monday night 18 people were hurt when violence flared in Belfast following the passing of the Alliance motion. First Minister Peter Robinson described the scenes as "totally unacceptable".

Police in Carrickfergus liased with local community representatives in their effort to restore calm.

UTV

Alliance 'not intimidated' by threat

Wed, 05 Dec 2012

Alliance leader David Ford says his party will not be intimidated amid a second day of protests outside constituency offices in reaction to a Belfast City Council vote restricting the flying of the Union flag.

Mr Ford said his colleagues will "continue to work for a fair, shared and equal society for everybody" after Belfast Councillor Laura McNamee was advised by police not to return home on Tuesday due to a security risk.

Reacting, Mr Ford said: "Any threat to a democratically elected politician for carrying out their duty, for saying what they said they would do is utterly outrageous."

On Wednesday the First and deputy First Ministers also condemned the threats.

"They need to stop and those people in positions of influence need to use their influence to ensure that these activities cease," Martin McGuinness said.

Peter Robinson added: "There are some issues that parties are not going to agree on, and that's a fact anywhere in the world and in those circumstances those issues have to be determined democratically, and peacefully, it has to be said. I certainly deplore any personal attack or threat on any elected representative or indeed any person in Northern Ireland."

On Wednesday a second protest was organised outside the Alliance constituency office in east Belfast, with Union flags and red, white and blue balloons.

Local Alliance MLA Chris Lyttle said the party's constituency services continued despite attempts to "disrupt" work.

"The participants in these protests must be aware that they are causing serious damage to local businesses working flat out to deliver much needed economic development and jobs in this area and I would urge them to cease this disruption and I would welcome them to direct their concerns in a more safe and constructive manner," he said.

Violence flared in the city centre on Monday night following the passing of the Alliance motion to display the Union flag at City Hall on 17 designated days.

The plan, which follows the accepted protocol on flying the Union flag at Stormont, was backed by 29 votes to 21. Nationalists had previously wanted to remove it altogether.

Mr Ford described the vote as a "balanced decision in line with the Equality Commission recommendation that the Union flag should only fly on designated days".

"Alliance proposed a compromise that nationalists accepted, which unionists will not yet recognise as a valid compromise."

He said his party had not backed Sinn Féin and the SDLP but had suggested an alternative proposal. He said a similar motion was passed in Lisburn City Council seven years ago.

DUP Lagan Valley MP Jeffrey Donaldson said unionists had been "very clear" in condemning the violence and intimidation.

"This country is still part of the United Kingdom and the Union flag is the flag of this country. It's recognised in international law so why can't we fly the flag on our premier civic building in our capital city?" He also asked.

In the House of Commons on Wednesday, Secretary of State Theresa Villiers also condemned the violence scenes.

She said the decision on flying the Union flag was "a matter for Belfast City Council to decide".

Ms Villiers said: "I fully appreciate the strength of feeling on the flying of flags, but there is nothing that could possibly justify the scenes of disorder that were witnessed outside City Hall in Belfast earlier this week."

Irish News

Alliance Party office torched in violence

Published 06/12/2012

BY Claire Simpson

THE row over the flying of the Union flag over Belfast city hall spread to Carrickfergus last night after loyalists torched the Alliance party's office.

Alliance leader David Ford has called on the assembly to be recalled following violence in the Co Antrim town.

Around 1,600 people gathered in the Irish Gate roundabout yesterday evening to protest against Belfast city council's decision to restrict the flying of the Union flag.

Most of the protestors dispersed but at about 8pm Alliance MLA Stewart Dickson's constituency office was set alight and police were attacked.

Police fired several baton rounds after bottles, bricks and other missiles were thrown at them.

Several officers were injured.

Two men and two women were arrested.

It is understood loyalists bent back the shutters outside the Alliance's office on West Street before they broke into the building and set it on fire.

The inside of the building was extensively damaged.

An Alliance party spokesman said the attack was the worst against the party since it backed Sinn Fein's Alex Maskey as Belfast lord mayor a decade ago.

The attack came a day after graffiti was sprayed on the front of the office.

On Monday, Belfast city councillors backed an Alliance motion to allow the Union flag to be flown on 15 set days over city hall, rather than all year round.

The vote sparked violence outside city hall and in east Belfast.

Alliance Belfast councillor Laura McNamee revealed on Tuesday that she had to leave her home following a threat on her Facebook page.

Police remained in Carrickfergus late last night and were working with community representatives to restore calm.

Mr Dickson said the DUP and UUP were solely to blame for the violence because they "distributed bogus leaflets across loyalist areas in Belfast ahead of the December meeting of Belfast City Council".

"They cannot expect to whip up Unionist tensions and encourage people to protest and then wipe their hands of any involvement," he said.

Mr Dickson said he and Mr Ford had asked that the assembly be recalled.

DUP East Antrim MP Sammy Wilson said there was "no justification" for the violence.

"Those involved do a disservice to the flag they claim to defend," he said.

"I urge those involved to step back from this criminal activity and channel their energies through democratic politics."

Earlier, three Alliance Party offices were forced to close.

The party's East Belfast constituency office on the Upper Newtownards Road shut at lunchtime for a second day after a crowd waving Union flags gathered outside.

There were similar protests at Alliance offices in Bangor and Newtownards in Co Down yesterday afternoon.

Ulster Unionist leader Mike Nesbitt said: "To be clear, let me repeat yet again, violence is wrong, legally and morally, and if perpetrated by unionists, tactically counter-productive, not an equal and opposite reaction to republican aggression."

SDLP leader Alasdair McDonnell said the violence was "disgusting" and "mindless".

"Political parties cannot call people onto the streets and then seek to abdicate themselves of all responsibility when things become violent," he said. ■ **ATTACK:** The inside of the Alliance Party offices in Carrickfergus yesterday ■ **TENSIONS:** The Alliance Party's office in Carrickfergus after it was set alight last night following a loyalist flag protest. Several police were injured when trouble broke out. Missiles, bottles and masonry were thrown at police. A number of baton rounds were fired

Irish News

Alliance councillor forced from home

Published 05/12/2012

BY Claire Simpson

A FEMALE Alliance councillor has been forced to leave her home amid an escalating row over the flying of the Union flag at Belfast City Hall.

Councillor Laura McNamee (27) said yesterday police advised her not to return to her east Belfast home after a threat was posted to her Facebook page on Saturday.

The revelation came after about 100 loyalists held a protest yesterday outside an Alliance constituency office in east Belfast - the base of MP Naomi Long.

On Monday, Belfast city council backed an Alliance motion to allow the Union flag to be flown on 15 set days, rather than all year round. A loyalist protest outside city hall erupted into violence which spread to east Belfast.

Ms Long last night condemned the "utterly despicable" threat to Ms McNamee and said she had to close her office yesterday amid fears protest could have sparked violence.

Belfast Newsletter

Thursday 6 December 2012

Plea for 'fair consideration' of cenotaph flag proposal

Published on Thursday 6 December 2012 09:16

The Union Flag could be flying in the grounds of Belfast City Hall within weeks of its removal from the front of the building, unionist councillors have claimed.

On Monday evening, the City Council voted to end the flag's permanent presence above the iconic landmark.

The decision sparked outrage among unionists, and some of the 1,000 demonstrators holding a protest at the City Hall attempted to storm the building when news of the decision filtered through.

Sporadic violence spread to east Belfast later the same evening and an Alliance councillor has since left her home following a threat.

Although the original vote to remove the flag was proposed by a nationalist SDLP councillor, the Alliance grouping – which holds the balance of power – proposed the successful amendment to fly the flag on 20 designated days.

With a series of further protests being planned for several areas of the Province, unionist councillors are proposing the Union Flag is given a permanent position at the City Hall cenotaph.

Christopher Stalford, of the DUP, had vociferously opposed the proposal voted through on Monday.

He told the News Letter yesterday he was hopeful the flag could reappear within weeks.

With the new proposal already drafted and submitted for consideration by the relevant committees, a vote on the cenotaph flag is likely to be held in the chamber as early as January 2013.

Councillor Stalford said: "If the nationalist political parties are not motivated by a zero sum desire to insult and offend the unionist people of Belfast then I believe they should support our proposal that the Union Flag fly all year in the Garden of Remembrance at the City Hall."

Cllr Stalford said he was bitterly disappointed the flag would no longer be a permanent fixture on the building, but added: "This is an opportunity for the nationalists to prove that they genuinely believe in the idea of a shared future. I hope that every party in the council will be able to give this proposal fair consideration and, if the consideration is fair, then they will support it."

Alliance group leader on the City Council, Maire Hendron, agreed there could be an early decision on the cenotaph issue, but said the hasty actions of unionist councillors — in attempting to push through a new proposal within weeks — had "disrespected" the memorial.

"I object strongly to how that was done. It was such an underhand way of bringing a piece of business before the council and it took away completely from any honour or respect for the cenotaph," she said.

On Tuesday, in a statement to the News Letter, Cllr Hendron said she would have "no objection to supporting" the cenotaph proposal.

"The Alliance Party group has not discussed flying the Union Flag at the cenotaph 365 days," she said. "However, this is something that I personally would have no objection to supporting."

She added: "At our next group meeting, the Alliance Party will give its full care and consideration to this issue, which I anticipate we will support."

Yesterday, the Alliance councillor said that, at this time, she couldn't "give any guarantee" Alliance will support the new proposal, and added: "We agreed to that timeframe at the council but I'm not convinced that that's the right way to go in the current climate. It doesn't pay proper respect to the cenotaph."

Following Monday's vote, the 20 designated days for the flying of the Union Flag include: January 20 for the birthday of the Countess of Wessex, St Patrick's Day, Remembrance Sunday in November and the Queen's wedding anniversary on November 20 — however, the list does not include July 12.

BBC Northern Ireland
6 December 2012 Last updated at 09:36
Police 'monitoring' social media after NI trouble

Police are monitoring social media with a view to prosecuting anyone involved in organising violence, Alliance leader David Ford has said.

Mr Ford said if people were called onto the streets in a "charged atmosphere violence is almost inevitable".

Four police officers were injured during loyalist violence linked to Belfast City Council's decision to stop flying the union flag every day.

Alliance properties, including the home of two councillors, were also attacked.

Mr Ford said: "There are certainly people who have been posting messages on social media which amount to incitement to hatred, incitement to commit criminal offences such as arson and that is being monitored (by the police service).

"It is up to them to consider the issue of what charges may or may not be appropriate and up to the Public Prosecution Service to then follow that through.

"What is also clear is there is a need for politicians to stand together to give a united response."

Mr Ford has requested the Northern Ireland Assembly be recalled on Thursday to discuss the attacks. This has been backed by the SDLP's Pat Ramsey.

On Wednesday, two Alliance Party offices and the home of a couple, who are both Alliance councillors, were attacked.

Earlier, about 1,500 people gathered in Carrickfergus to protest over the flag decision.

The crowd dispersed but some people stayed behind, trouble broke out and missiles, bottles and masonry were thrown at police.

Rioting continued in nearby West Street, where Alliance MLA Stewart Dickson has a constituency office.

It was ransacked and the rioters tried to set it on fire. The building was smoke damaged.

Mr Dickson said he had received hundreds of calls and texts from people across the country who were "sickened by the violence".

Police fired a number of baton rounds at the crowd. They said a number of officers were injured in the riot but their injuries were not thought to be life threatening.

PSNI Assistant Chief Constable Will Kerr said the protest was organised through social networking sites.

"What we saw in Carrickfergus was the result of bringing large numbers of people out onto the street where we can't control those large numbers of people," he said.

"We saw criminal, thuggish, intimidating behaviour here. We need to put a stop to this very quickly."

By 22:20 GMT on Wednesday, police said the trouble had come to an end.

Two men and two women have been arrested. A 20-year-old woman is due to appear in court on Thursday.
Assembly call

The home of a couple who are both Alliance Party councillors in Bangor, County Down, was also attacked.

Paint was thrown at Michael and Christine Bower's home, smashing a front window close to where their daughter normally plays.

No-one was injured although the couple said they were shocked by what had happened.

Mr Bower said he was sitting in his living room at about 23:00 GMT on Wednesday when the attack happened. The device shattered a pane in the double-glazed window of the front living room.

"My daughter who is 17-months-old had just gone to bed when I heard an explosion against the window," he said.

"I guessed it was some sort of attack on our family home. I checked that my wife and daughter were okay. The paint bomb hit the corner of the room where my daughter usually plays.

"There is damage to the window, but it could so easily have been so much worse. If events had been different, a young life could have been lost. I would plead with people to calm down and to stop attacking representatives doing their best to support their communities."

North Down Alliance MLA Stephen Farry said there was an attempted arson attack on his constituency office in Bangor.

"Petrol or some other accelerant was poured over my shutters by a number of people," he said.

"Fortunately, they were interrupted by a passing police patrol and fled the scene."
'Brains, not brawn'

DUP MP Sammy Wilson condemned the attack in Carrickfergus, which he said was "morally wrong, legally wrong and politically wrong".

"I have made it quite clear that to engage in protest is one thing, to engage in violence is another," he said.

"If people believe they cannot contain a protest and it is going to turn to violence then they shouldn't do it."

However, he claimed that "Sinn Fein and the SDLP had poked at the sectarian fires in the last number of months".

He added that the "Alliance Party ought to have known that by helping them in doing that in Belfast they were going to create a problem".

"For the last number of months, Sinn Fein and the SDLP have been poking the hornet's nest with sectarian bigotry in Newry and Armagh where they named a play park after a killer; in Dungannon, where they called for the person who attempted to kill a councillor to be released from jail, and then raised the issue of the flags which they knew would open all of these tensions in Belfast City Council and the Alliance Party aided and abetted them in Belfast City Council," he added.

"That's the context and anyone knowing what was happening on the ground in Northern Ireland could not have been surprised that a Pandora's box was being opened."

Ulster Unionist leader Mike Nesbitt MLA said violence was legally and morally wrong.

He said: "What unionism needs today is brains, not brawn. We need an analysis, a strategy and an agreed outcome. I am happy to talk to anyone, if they commit to repent and desist from violence."

Jim Allister of TUV said the violence was "utterly wrong" and was not the way forward. A loyalist flag protest also took place in Lurgan.

The Irish News

Editorial - Flag riot stains image of city

5 December 2012

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Monday night outside Belfast city Hall provided a depressing spectacle as an angry mob rioted over the flying of flags - scenes which yet again tarnish the image of the city and heighten tensions.

However, the issues raised by this disgraceful and indefensible violence go beyond the thugs who will seize any opportunity to lash out, their destructive urge unrestrained by any rational thought.

So police officers and council staff become targets, as does a car belonging to an elected representative who was in the chamber supporting the protesters' point of view.

The PSNI officer in charge of policing the protest has defended how it was handled, saying there was no "definitive intelligence" suggesting there would be violence.

It is hard to understand this position. The fact that large numbers of loyalists were due to gather at the city hall was information freely available on social networking sites, while this newspaper highlighted the issue on its front page on Monday.

Recent experience also tells us that when disgruntled loyalists are called onto the streets on a divisive issue, there is a high probability of trouble.

When protesters took exception to Sinn Fein lord mayor Niall O Donnghaile's failure to present an award to a British army cadet, a relatively small crowd managed to attack cars as councillors left the city hall.

On Monday the PSNI strategy resulted in the main gate of the city hall being breached, allowing protesters to reach the door of the building.

There are questions to be asked over the delay in deploying riot police and the failure to stop a mob from forcing their way into the city hall precincts, which did not happen even during the height of disorder and protest in past years.

As well as thuggery, assaults and vandalism at the city hall, trouble continued in east Belfast, with St Matthew's Catholic Church attacked and an attempt made to hijack a bus.

A further protest was held outside Alliance MP Naomi Long's constituency office yesterday while threats were issued against elected representatives.

There is a clear danger of this situation escalating, with malcontents taking every opportunity to ratchet up tensions.

It is important efforts are made to calm this volatile atmosphere.

What should be happening is an exercise in responsible leadership, with unionist representatives telling loyalists they have nothing to fear from a compromise on flying flags which already applies to Stormont.

People are entitled to voice their concerns but attacking police and property, causing intimidation, widespread disruption and sharpening sectarian divisions, cannot be justified in any circumstances.

The Irish News

Loyalist flag fury - Hurt photographer's agency to complain

5 December 2012

The Irish News

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One of the world's leading news agencies is to complain to the PSNI after a press photographer was left with a serious head injury following violent clashes at Belfast City Hall.

Freelance photographer Peter Morrison, who was working for the Associated Press, was struck on the head by a police baton during scuffles between loyalist protesters and police outside the city hall on Monday night.

Santiago Lyon, director of photography with the US news agency, described the incident as "unprovoked".

He said the agency was "drafting a vigorous complaint" to police in Belfast.

"Morrison was using professional equipment and identified himself verbally to the police," Mr Lyon said.

"Nonetheless he was beaten, suffering cuts to his head as well as a broken finger.

"We understand the police are carrying out their own investigation of the incident."

Mr Morrison, who started his career at The Irish News, was treated in hospital.

Last night he was unavailable for comment.

Paul Connolly, a Society of Editors board member for Ireland, called for a full investigation.

Police last night said the incident had been referred to the Police Ombudsman's Office.

Belfast Telegraph

News

Alliance shows its mettle in flag vote

5 December 2012

Belfast Telegraph

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The disgraceful threats that backlash against the party following the vote to reduce the number of days on which the Union flag flies over Belfast City Hall. Yesterday loyalists staged a protest outside a party office in the east of the city. So what despicable action was Alliance guilty of? Simply trying to be a honest broker between unionist and nationalist/ republican blocs on the city council which had adopted typically dogmatic and provocative positions on flag flying.

What Alliance did was courageous. The flag will still fly over the City Hall on the same number of days that it flies over Parliament Buildings at Stormont. Alliance did not sell out but instead brought a sense of realism to a debate which, frankly, should never have been held at all given the all too predictable outcome. At a time when one in four shops in Belfast are lying empty, when the city needs regeneration and is marketing itself as a tourism destination, the city fathers decide that flag flying should be the top of the agenda.

But, of course, nothing excuses the violence which followed the council's decision. The protestors, some of whose actions were no doubt pre-planned, brought shame to the flag in which they wrapped themselves by attacking police officers and council workers and then causing further mayhem in east Belfast. Little wonder that people from outside Northern Ireland who viewed the scenes on their television screens simply shake their heads in bafflement.

Equally baffling was the decision by SDLP and Sinn Fein councillors in Newry to continue naming a children's play park after a convicted terrorist who died on hunger strike. The proverbial blind man could see that that decision would be viewed as provocative by unionists and they have a strong case. One of the guns linked to the terrorist was used in the Kingsmill massacre in which 10 Protestant workmen were killed by republicans.

In spite of the progress made here, it seems that many politicians at ground level still cannot stop prodding each other simply to get a reaction.

Belfast Telegraph

Councillor is forced to flee home after web threats; STORM OVER SYMBOLISM

VICTORIA O'HARA

5 December 2012

Belfast Telegraph

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AN ALLIANCE councillor has fled her home after she received threats on her Facebook page ahead of Belfast City Council's controversial vote to change its policy on the flying of the Union flag. The online threat to Laura Mc-Namee, who represents the Victoria area of east Belfast, was posted on Saturday.

Ms McNamee was advised by police not to return home, the BBC reported.

Meanwhile, Alliance vowed it would not be intimidated after protesting loyalists targeted its sole MP's offices yesterday.

Around 100 protestors gathered outside the Alliance office on the Upper Newtownards Road where East Belfast MP Naomi Long is based.

During the protest the Union flag was tied to the building and red, white and blue balloons were strung up.

Sinn Fein MLA Gerry Kelly has also said he would not be intimidated after receiving a death threat. It came just 24 hours after Alliance played a key role in passing the historic vote to only fly the Union flag at City Hall on 15 days a year.

Unionists accused Sinn Fein, the SDLP and Alliance of attacking their British identity. Within minutes of the vote, ugly scenes of violence broke out among 1,000 loyalists protesting outside the City Hall during a debate.

Eighteen people, including 15 PSNI officers, were hurt in the violence.

East Belfast Alliance MLA Chris Lyttle said his party would not be intimidated.

"People can seek to intimidate my party colleagues and I from doing our job but we will continue to work on the democratic mandate we have been given to help us to deliver a shared and better future for all in east Belfast," he commented.

"Some unionist representatives have gone as far as to encourage protest at Alliance Party constituency offices despite the serious violence that followed original protests at City Hall on Monday night."

"This demonstrates a complete disregard for the safety of people, businesses and the PSNI in east Belfast."

Mr Lyttle also hit out at unionists for "missing an opportunity to demonstrate real leadership on community relations".

Gerry Kelly criticised those behind the threats.

"The people who made the threat should understand that neither I nor any of the other Sinn Fein representatives will be deflected from pursuing equality in the city of Belfast or anywhere else," he said.

But DUP Alderman Ruth Patterson said the removal of the flag was both "destructive and grossly disrespectful". "While I fully understand and appreciate the frustrations of those protesting outside, violence which resulted in both council staff and police officers being injured was not the route to take and achieved nothing other than taking the real focus of those who voted to have the Union flag stripped from City Hall."

"The controversy has not gone away yet, as the DUP's Lee Reynolds is expected to put forward a motion to fly the Union flag in the City Hall grounds in the Cenotaph.

It is understood it will be discussed at committee level on December 14 and then at full council in the first week of January 2013.

It would require Alliance's support to be passed, as the party holds the balance of power in the council Alliance's Maire Hendron said she was likely to back the proposal when it comes before a committee meeting in the New Year. Mrs Hendron described it as a "reasonable proposition" and said she had not ruled it out.

But Ms Patterson added: "I hope the Alliance members of council do not make the same shameful mistake a second time."

Sinn Fein described the move of erecting a flag in the Cenotaph as "sheer madness".

Councillor Jim McVeigh warned they will be writing to the Council chief executive to ask for an equality impact assessment to be carried out.

"We will be doing everything we can to ensure this doesn't happen, even to the extent of taking a legal case if necessary," he said.

Mr McVeigh described it as a "recipe for disaster".

"We voted to take the flags down and immediately the DUP propose to put a flag up and re-run the argument again," he said.

"This is sheer madness. We respect the fact that the cenotaph is a place where many unionists and citizens come to pay their respects to the dead, but this is a mistake by the DUP. It is going to be divisive again," he said.