



CNI Comment

Democracy, demos and real politik

To commence by stating the obvious. In the USA there was a presidential election. In the UK there was a national vote on Brexit. Houston McKelvey writes...

Demonstrations about the outcomes of both elections followed, despite those outcomes

being decided by democratic mandate in accord with the statutes of each respective jurisdiction. The objectors for the most part would seem to be people who would regard themselves as democrats and “liberals”.

Primarily, the objectors in the USA do not concern me. Like Theresa May, I view the electoral process there, the decisions made by the consequent administration and any reactions to the same, to be the direct and foremost concern of the US electorate.

What does concern me, and much closer to home is the selectivity of objectors to US policy who demonstrated in London, Dublin and Belfast.

Viewing the swarms of people around the US Embassy in London, I could not recollect seeing any demonstrations against Russia over its military actions in the Crimea or Ukraine in which civilians are still being killed after these invasions of their countries.

Neither can I recall masses of people demonstrating outside the Russian embassies in London or Dublin when Russian airplanes were quite recently blanket bombing civilians in Aleppo.*(Hence cartoon above).*

Perhaps this a tacit admission by the demonstrators of a view that Russia is beyond sensitivity in respect of such demonstrations, and is a *de facto* acknowledgment that Mr. Putin is highly unlikely to be swayed by such expressions permitted in states

more democratic than his own?

Whilst demonstrators were filling the news media, there has been by comparison little coverage of developments in Europe and the Middle East in respect of Russia and Iran.

If credit is afforded to the adage that war is the extension of politics by other means, then there is much afoot currently which provides a focus for sincere prayer and genuine concern.

Last month there was a major deployment of US tanks and other NATO defence forces to eastern Poland. This critical response was at the behest of that nation and other Baltic states who feel they are being threatened by Russia and have produced verifiable evidence of the same. The new deployment bolsters a token force from NATO which has been in the region for some time.

The sight of tanks on the move recalled to me the Cold War of those post-war years when the

Iron Curtain dominated Europe. The Iron Curtain cannot adequately be described. It had to be experienced.

Having been deployed as an army reserve chaplain on too many occasions from 1970 - 2000 along the Iron Curtain, I had a strong sense of *deja vu* upon seeing the re-enforcement of the new deployment in Poland.

The Russian-led Warsaw Pact forces of those so-called Cold War days were quite formidable. Both in size of numbers and weaponry they dwarfed the NATO forces, and personally they certainly affected my spirituality! To deploy beside the Curtain and between it and the first river west of it, armed only with a Book of Common Prayer, to put it mildly concentrated one's prayer life.

The Warsaw Pact's strategy was one of over-facing by sheer weight of numbers and weapons. Allied to this was the certain knowledge that the commanders of those forces would accept a much higher fatality rate in their own personnel than any NATO commander would.

In the end the NATO forces held the ground through long year after year until the East German communist state self-imploded and the

Berlin Wall and the Iron Curtain were obliterated from the landscape and consigned to history.

The current defence developments in Poland concern me deeply and I find the general ignorance of and the general public indifference to the developments which have led to the same more than worrying.

Add to this the fact that the RAF has been airborne to a greater extent than at any time since the Cold War in response to Russian craft which with increasing persistence are threatening the airspace of the United Kingdom.

Also, the Royal Navy has had to 'escort' Russian ships through the English Channel, including those returning from active service in the Black Sea and the eastern Mediterranean where some had been heavily engaged in ship to shore bombardments.

These airborne and naval operations are in addition to the current situation in the Straits of Hormuz where international forces including the Royal Navy are daily under the close attention of Iran craft, now controlled by a nuclear armed power. For a further addition to the nuclear nightmare vector in North Korea and China with their aggressive military actions as they seek regional domination.

Where I do have sympathy for President Trump is in his challenge to the overwhelming majority of European members of NATO who have failed to contribute the required commitment of 2 per cent of gross national product to their defence budgets.

The United Kingdom does so. However one does not need to be an expert in defence or strategic studies to know that there are serious challenges in the UK forces' size, personnel recruiting and retention, as well as severe budget constriction in the key areas of adequate armament provision and ongoing development.

Democracy has a price which is beyond expenditure of finance. It is readily demonstrated in war graves. We enjoy the democracy we do due to the men and women of our armed services. The freedom to vote, to assemble for worship, and indeed to demonstrate, has been secured not so much by politicians but by those who have served in wars, and those who in peacetime have maintained the conditions necessary for its maintenance.

I would most readily welcome demonstrations in favour of the defence of democracy.

I have often wished that the excellent defence forces of the Irish state were committed to NATO

and in tandem, the Irish government could help shape and inform its political decisions and deployments. Post-Brexit, those in the European community seeking to establish a European force will certainly present the Irish government and people with a dilemma and a major re-assessment of its alignment in the safeguarding of international peace. I would prefer if they chose the longer-established and proven alliance of democracies which NATO represents rather than an ersatz military token of the European Union's identity. .

No doubt there could be demonstrations on the issue of committing to a military alliance of the forces of the European Union; thus exemplifying the luxury of democracy. One can but ask and ponder will the turnout exceed those objecting to President Trump's policy on the travel ban?

Houston McKelvey

Acknowledgment - Cartoon by Adams from The Times

