The Welcome Absence: Streets without Soldiers
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After 38 years the British Army's active deployment in Northern Ireland has ended, not with a bang but with a whimper. A peacetime garrison of 5000 remains. Interestingly 38 years was the length of time that the man beside the pool of Bethesda had been ill for. Jesus asked the man: 'Do you want to be healed?' It has taken us 38 years to haltingly say 'yes'.

The Army originally came to keep Protestant and Catholic apart as street conflict in Belfast escalated and Northern Ireland appeared to be collapsing into chaos. It succeeded in that role but then found itself taking 'sides' and getting caught up in a 'war' with the Provisional IRA, a war which the Army helped to fuel in its initial stages.

Without the Army Northern Ireland would have dissolved in chaos. With the Army there was constant friction with the Nationalist community – some of it encouraged by the Provisional IRA and some of it caused by disastrous policies and actions (particularly in the early 1970s, Bloody Sunday being the most egregious).

Gradually better policies evolved and more restrained actions were used which eventually allowed a space for political agreements to open up.

Conflicts like Northern Ireland's cannot be 'won' by purely military or security force action. 'Unleashing' the security forces – as some Unionists demanded – would have been disastrous. Security force action can try to make sure that terrorists do not win, and this opens a space for political action and eventual peace agreements. It happened in Northern Ireland, but it is not guaranteed to happen everywhere – and it requires time, lots of it.

The use of an army requires restraint and proportion – while at the same time seeking to be effective in inhibiting violence. All of this in the context of communities anxious about their security and of constant media attention – which terrorists are trying to use to their own advantage. None of this is easy and none of it comes easy to an army – armies are crude instruments of public policy, to be used on the streets as an instrument of last resort. It also had its cost in army lives – 763 killed during the 'troubles' – which also needs to be recognised.

Bringing an army onto the streets is the ultimate failure of politics and a dysfunctional polity. Do we want to be healed boils down to the question: Do we want to change? Change means taking responsibility for ourselves and our conflict and finding new ways of living with each other. Real peace means a different and healthy politics and a reconstitutive polity. And it means people in Northern Ireland becoming different people. Then we can be sure that we will never have army vehicles and soldiers nosing about the streets ever again.

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