

When protest becomes intimidation

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There were many things I did not like about the pro-Brexit marches on Friday.

The right to protest is, of course, vital.

And I try very hard to understand the Brexit viewpoint, although when it is the racism I heard from a stallholder on Ely market yesterday I fail to do so, and I made that clear to him.

But there is something I cannot tolerate, and that is intimidation. And the presence of flute and drum bands on Friday was meant to intimidate.

The history of these bands in Northern Ireland is obvious. Marching in their quasi-military uniforms they were meant to intimidate catholics, and for decades they did just that. Now they are meant to intimidate those who will not agree to hard Brexit. The intimidation comes with menace attached, just as it always did in Orange Order parades. And that is wholly unacceptable.

What is bizarre is also how contradictory it is. The bands on Friday did, apparently, come from Scotland. And yet Brexiteers harassed SNP MPs that day, telling them to go back to their own country. It takes some doing to embrace both the band and the comment. My sympathy is with the MPs who suffered the abuse.

There were good points arising from this. Some in the media called out those leading the protests for what many of them are.

The tone of these tiny protests were appropriately contrasted with the People's Vote march.

But let's not ignore the fact that it only takes a small minority to intimidate a lot of people.

We have to be aware of the threat. No one knows what will happen on Brexit as yet. We may hard Brexit. I still think that the most likely outcome.

But I now give almost as much chance to a long extension, MEP elections in May and a second referendum.

Most will accept this. That is what happens in democracy. Courses of action change. But some will not be willing to do so. And the long term legacy of these ghastly three years will be a country divided for decades if not generations. And some of that division will turn to anger. I sincerely hope that the protection required for those that might suffer it is in place.