Drumcree and the Limits of Mediation: Can a Scout Mindset Help?

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In September 2026, the Parades Commission permitted a restricted Orange Order march along the predominantly nationalist Garvaghy Road in Portadown, reigniting tensions in Northern Ireland ("Orange Order Granted Permission," 2026). Residents opposed the march, while supporters defended it as a legitimate cultural tradition. Protests, political confrontation and failed attempts at compromise brought attention to the dispute. The Secretary of State, Chris Bryant, subsequently prohibited the march over public safety concerns, containing the immediate confrontation without resolving the underlying disagreement (Northern Ireland Office, 2026). This

raises a critical question: why do familiar divisions continue to provoke such intense conflict after decades of peacebuilding?

A great part of the explanation may lie in how conflict is understood. Political disputes are shaped not only by facts but also by memory, identity and historical grievance. When one community sees a contentious march as cultural expression and another as a reminder of historical domination, the disagreement becomes about far more than a route through a town. Julia Galef's (2021) concept of the scout mindset offers a way to examine this divide. Galef contrasts the soldier mindset, which defends existing beliefs and group identity, with the scout mindset, which prioritises understanding reality accurately. This article reviews previous mediation attempts at Drumcree and asks what the scout mindset can add to them. It argues that the approach can support credible mediation but cannot replace it, since the political incentives surrounding the dispute may also shape outcomes.

Competing Claims

The legacy of the Troubles continues to influence political discussion, community relationships and interpretations of public events in Northern Ireland. Since familiarity with a conflict can be mistaken for objectivity, the scout mindset is useful precisely because it does not presuppose neutrality. It asks individuals to assume that they may be biased and to test their interpretations deliberately.

The Drumcree dispute intensified during the 1990s and became a symbol of wider disagreements about cultural expression, territorial identity, equality and sectarian division. For many Orange Order supporters, the route is a traditional procession and an expression of unionist and Protestant identity. For many residents of Garvaghy Road, the march has represented an unwanted intrusion experienced against a history of intimidation, unequal power and sectarian tension. The right to cultural expression matters, but so do the rights, security and dignity of residents who oppose a procession through their neighbourhood. A legal entitlement does not automatically settle how it should be exercised in a divided society, and strong local opposition does not, by itself, eliminate the need to consider the law.

The violence surrounding the dispute gives this history weight. On 12 July 1998, Richard, Mark and Jason Quinn were killed when a petrol bomb was thrown into their family home in County Antrim, amid heightened sectarian tension during the Drumcree standoff (BBC News, 1998; Cleary, 1998). Historical memory therefore cannot be dismissed, yet it cannot alone determine every contemporary decision without regard to current rights and risks. A scout mindset holds both points: it recognises historical experience without assuming that history makes every present-day claim correct.

Political language: politicising conflict and reinforcing division

Political rhetoric shapes whose grievances are recognised and whose actions are considered legitimate. During this dispute, DUP representatives described protests as "mob rule", while Emma Little-Pengelly accused Michelle O'Neill of choosing "the law of the mob instead of the law of the land". Conversely, O'Neill highlighted Garvaghy Road residents' experience of "sectarian domination, intimidation and violence" (House of Commons, 2026; McClements, 2026). Framing the dispute through opposing narratives of lawlessness and oppression risks reducing a complex conflict to a contest between legitimate and illegitimate communities. The term "mob", for example, can conflate individual unlawful behaviour with the wider group, which may make residents' grievances easier to dismiss, while rhetoric that portrays an entire opposing community as inherently oppressive can reinforce fears that one group's security depends on another's defeat.

This does not make the positions equivalent or invalidate forceful political criticism. Leaders must identify unlawful conduct and discrimination where evidence supports such claims, and the question is whether their language distinguishes specific actions from collective identity. The Secretary of State warned that repeatedly calling opponents a "mob" made compromise more difficult (House of Commons, 2026).

Rhetoric cannot, however, be treated as a matter of attitude alone. Research on Northern Ireland's party system suggests that many voters reward parties that combine pragmatism over resources with firm advocacy of group identity, although this need not produce greater polarisation (Mitchell et al., 2009). Where firm positions on identity are electorally rewarded, appeals to reflection are unlikely to succeed unless the incentives surrounding them are also addressed.

Previous Mediation Attempts at Drumcree

The Public Processions (Northern Ireland) Act 1998 gives the Parades Commission powers to impose conditions and promote mediation between disputing parties. Yet formal intervention has repeatedly contained confrontations without resolving them, and conflict management, which limits immediate risks, differs from conflict resolution, which addresses the grievances and mistrust that cause disputes to recur.

The record of mediation shows why resolution has been elusive, and it falls into three phases.

In the first phase, from 1996 to 1998, institutions were built. After the 1996 disturbances, an independent review under Sir Peter North recommended that a Parades Commission facilitate mediation and make determinations where mediation did not succeed (CAIN Web Service, 1997). In the second phase, from 1998 to 2001, determination and local mediation ran in paral-

lel. The Commission ruled against the parade using the Garvaghy Road, while the mediators Brendan McAllister and Joe Campbell worked locally between 1996 and 1999 but encountered an unwillingness among both main parties to compromise (Glencree Centre for Peace and Reconciliation, 2022). The Commission's own 2000 determination acknowledged that earlier attempts had often failed because they were insufficiently structured or took place at the last minute, in crisis conditions (Parades Commission, 2000). In the third phase, from 2001 to 2026, mediation was largely absent. The South African mediator Brian Currin returned to South Africa in November 2001 after the Orange Order withdrew from his initiative, with each side blaming the other (Bradley, 2001).

The 2026 dispute followed a similar pattern. The Orange Order's Portadown District described the Commission's agreement to initiate mediation and appoint an independent mediator as significant and unprecedented ("Drumcree: Portadown District Hail," 2026). The Garvaghy Road Residents' Coalition (GRRC) then rejected the Commission's appointee, Tides Mediation NI, over its previous work for the Orange Order and the lack of disclosure of that relationship (Young, 2026b), and accused the British government of attempting to lure residents into a "stitched up" process, having repeatedly called for an international mediator (Young, 2026a, paras. 1–4). Each side presents the other's refusal to engage as the obstacle ("Drumcree: Portadown District Hail," 2026; Young, 2026b), which is what the soldier mindset would predict, though public statements alone cannot prove it.

Applying the Scout Mindset to Both Sides

The scout mindset requires examining the people and arguments with which one identifies most closely. It is comparatively easy to identify bias in an opponent, and harder to acknowledge when one's own community's narrative omits relevant information, excuses conduct that would be condemned elsewhere, or treats the opposing side's intentions as malicious. Orange Order supporters can ask whether defending a traditional route adequately addresses the experience of residents who oppose the march. Residents and their representatives can ask how opposition can be expressed effectively while respecting the law, and without assuming that every supporter of the Orange Order shares the same motives. Political leaders can ask whether their language clarifies the disagreement or turns it into a contest of collective dignity. These questions do not require anyone to surrender principle, and a commitment to understanding must not become an excuse to overlook intimidation, discrimination or unlawful behaviour.

The framework also separates empathy from agreement. Understanding why a person considers a tradition essential to their identity, or why residents object to it, does not mean endorsing every way it is practised or opposed.

Recommendations

If Northern Ireland is to move beyond repeatedly managing division, the scout mindset could become a supporting component of community-led conflict resolution, though not a substitute for sound mediation structures. First, facilitated cross-community dialogue should allow residents, cultural organisations and political representatives to explain their perspectives on contentious marches. Participants should examine the evidence behind their beliefs, identify gaps in their understanding and consider what might change their minds. Second, facilitators should help distinguish verifiable facts from historical interpretations and assumptions about others' motives, and prevent individuals' actions from being used to characterise entire communities. Their selection should be co-designed, with both sides contributing to published criteria. Third, political representatives should distinguish specific unlawful conduct from collective blame and consider whether their language makes peaceful resolution more or less likely.

Conclusion

The Drumcree dispute highlights the challenge of reconciling cultural identity, historical grievances, individual rights and public safety in a society emerging from conflict. Northern Ireland's peace is an achievement worth protecting, but preventing violence alone cannot resolve the divisions that persist. The scout mindset provides an opportunity to help by encouraging people to question their assumptions, consider opposing perspectives and recognise how political rhetoric can deepen hostility. It does not require consensus, but it does require a willingness to disagree without undermining others' dignity or rights. Ultimately, lasting peace depends not only on managing conflict, but on understanding those with whom it must be shared.

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