

Parties Condemn Effigy of Refugees on Northern Ireland Bonfire

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— Categories: *Human Rights*



A controversial bonfire display in Moygashel, County Tyrone, has drawn widespread condemnation from across the political spectrum after an effigy depicting refugees in a small boat was placed atop the structure, accompanied by banners reading “Stop the Boats” and “Veterans Before Refugees”. The bonfire is scheduled to be lit on Thursday evening, ahead

of the traditional 11 July commemorations held annually by parts of the unionist community.

While the Moygashel Bonfire Committee insisted the display is not meant to be “racist, threatening or offensive”, multiple political parties and civil rights groups have denounced the act as inflammatory and deeply inappropriate. The committee said it was intended to express concern about the “ongoing crisis of illegal immigration”, a view echoing wider frustration in some quarters about border control and the perceived prioritisation of refugees over local needs, particularly military veterans.

However, Sinn Féin Assembly Member Colm Gildernew condemned the display as a “vile and deplorable act” and labelled it a hate crime. He called on the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI, the national police service in Northern Ireland) to remove the effigy immediately and urged local leaders to take a firm stance against what he described as unacceptable behaviour.

The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) responded with a more cautious tone, reaffirming support for 11 July bonfires as a “historic and cultural tradition” marking the arrival of King William III. However, the party clarified that “placing flags, effigies or other items on bonfires is not part of that tradition and should not take place”.

Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) leader Mike Nesbitt also condemned the effigy as “sickening” and “entirely out of step” with cultural celebration, calling for its immediate removal. Other political voices, including the SDLP (Social Democratic and Labour Party) and Alliance Party, echoed the criticism.

SDLP councillor Malachy Quinn, who reported the incident to the police, stated: “Racism and intimidation are not culture. This isn’t pride, it’s poison.” Alliance councillor Eddie Roofe described the display as “despicable”, accusing those responsible of attempting to “incite fear and spread far-right beliefs”.

Human rights group Amnesty International described the effigy as a “vile, dehumanising act”. Patrick Corrigan of Amnesty added that it “cruelly mocks the suffering” of those fleeing conflict and persecution. Gaelle Gormley, integration and welfare officer at the North West Migrants’ Forum, said service users, mostly asylum seekers and refugees, were left fearful and distressed. Speaking on BBC Radio Ulster’s *Evening Extra*, she said, “We even had goosebumps of fear. It is a call for hate.”

The PSNI confirmed it is aware of the item placed on the bonfire and said enquiries are ongoing.

Bonfires are lit annually in unionist communities across Northern Ireland to mark the eve of the Twelfth of July, commemorating the Battle of the Boyne. While most events pass peacefully, authorities have consistently urged organisers to avoid displays that provoke division or undermine community cohesion.