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Martina Devlin: Why survival means Omagh must move on

Some families are boycotting today's memorial service in Omagh, but are they just determined to see slights where none exist, asks Martina Devlin

Friday, 15 August 2008

Some victims' families have chosen to move away from Omagh as it was to upsetting to remain

The problem is down to the elasticity of time. To most of us, the events of August 15, 1998, took place 10 years ago. But to those who lost family members in the Omagh bomb, they happened yesterday. So their sorrow and loss remain red-raw.

The broader community may be able to acknowledge their suffering but we cannot fully grasp it, and this leaves us out of step with each other. What is history to us lingers on as the present — a still shocking present

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— to them.

Here, then, is the context. It helps to explain why some of the Omagh families are squabbling as the 10th anniversary unfolds. Their wrangling puzzles people, disappoints them, too. We prefer to think of Omagh as a symbol of unity, stoicism and nobility in the face of provocation, not as a town bickering over what most would consider minor details.

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What are these?

Why the stand-off, I've been asked all week, by anyone who knows I grew up there. Why are there two commemoration services on two separate days, with some relatives refusing to attend the official one organised by the council?

There is a general sense that the schism is unseemly: the failure to present a united front detracts from an anniversary which should be about honouring victims and nothing else.

It is important to stress that only some relatives have grievances. A large proportion of them either have no reservations, or choose not to air them in public, or to let them overshadow tomorrow's formal occasion.

These grievances may appear to boil down to disagreement over the wording on memorials and whether certain political representatives should be invited to the ceremony. But they run deeper than that.

Some — not all — of the families feel a driving sense of outrage that no one has been brought to justice for the carnage wreaked on that sunny Saturday afternoon.

They feel betrayed by a system which has delivered prosecutions but no convictions, and offers no real prospect of any. They feel disrespected by everyone from the Northern Ireland Office to Omagh District Council, although the latter has taken pains to be inclusive and behave sensitively.

And — most insidiously — they feel marginalised by their neighbours: the people who mourned with them for a time ... but moved on.

It's inevitable that people less directly affected would put it behind them, for 'too long a sacrifice can make a stone of the heart'. The calendar could never be allowed to stand still at 1998.

Some victims' families don't necessarily see it that way, however. They accuse people of shrugging them off too readily, believe them embarrassed by their grief and calls for justice; they are convinced their neighbours no longer want to remember something they are incapable of forgetting.

In such an environment, an official ceremony — with its obligation to accommodate many components and positions — is reduced to the status of fig leaf for them. That sense of dislocation from those you live and work alongside fosters a degree of isolation. Some family members have chosen to move away, perhaps a necessary step for their welfare. They found it upsetting to remain in a town associated with death and destruction on such a scale.

Others have turned to each other, forming the Omagh Support and Self-Help Group. Some people are ambivalent about its focus on pursuing the killers and their facilitators. The group's decision not to participate in tomorrow's formalities, and to mount an alternative ceremony on Sunday, gives ammunition to those detractors.

It is no longer possible to refer to the Omagh families, as happened in the aftermath, because they are not a unified group. There are the families which shun publicity, point no fingers and have achieved a degree of acceptance. And there are the families campaigning for justice.

They have spent 10 years seeking it: waiting, first, for the State to deliver it, and when that failed, pressing their own civil action.

But jailing perpetrators never delivers justice, exactly. It delivers an element of justice but cannot return what was stolen. And maybe, just maybe, you lose something of yourself in the quest for it.

Campaigns for justice can last the best part of a lifetime. The Birmingham Six and Guildford Four cases show us how perseverance, with obstacles and criticism ignored, can generate results.

A similar missionary zeal is in evidence among the Omagh support group.

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But that single-minded drive has also spilled over into issues of relative unimportance, and in the process risks becoming counter-productive.

We should salute the group's courage in campaigning so doggedly, and its members' willingness to continue crusading for another decade if necessary — sacrificing any hope of a return to normal life.

But sometimes energies become misdirected, a sense of proportion is lost. And people see slights where none exist. Even if aspects of the official commemoration ceremony are flawed, the intention is to honour their loved ones shoulder to shoulder with them.

Omagh is an ordinary country town which behaved in an extraordinary way, handling an appalling event with dignity and community spirit. I was there, I witnessed it.

Now, it wants to be something more than a town that suffered a devastating bomb attack. It wants to be a town that survived a devastating bomb attack. Yes, it has moved on.

This progression is in no way disrespectful to the victims of the explosion. It is simply part of the human survival instinct.

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