

## CONTEXT BLURRED IN RACISM DEBATE



Johnville's Salim Ahmed is embraced by team mate Shane O'Brien. Thanks to integration over the recent decade, particularly through education and sport, our younger generation mostly see classmates and team mates as opposed to skin colour.]  
Photo: Noel Browne

Clogheen. It's a South Tipperary village few of us living or working in Waterford have probably spent too much time thinking about at any given time - but I'm referring to it this week with good reason.

Fourteen years ago, the national media trained its focus on Clogheen after two arson attacks on the Lee Valley Hotel, which at the time, was preparing to house 15 asylum seekers.

Initially, it had been proposed that as many as 40 asylum seekers were to be accommodated in a village whose population at the time was approximately 500.

But following talks between the Directorate of Asylum Support Services and the Clogheen Residents' Committee, it was agreed that the village would accommodate 15 asylum seekers.

The perception of Clogheen at that time, at least this is how I recall it, was that those arson attacks revealed an undercurrent of racism prevalent not only in that area, but throughout rural Ireland.

And of course, if practically anyone uttered a word of concern about how such a comparatively large number of asylum seekers would integrate into a small, tightly-bound locality, the word 'racist' wouldn't be long in following.

Yes, there were racist comments uttered by locals at a public meeting held in the village at the time, nonsense about the new arrivals being carriers of infectious diseases and so on, but I suspect that didn't represent the silent majority within that community.

Now, without keeping too fixed glance on Clogheen since 2000, I don't believe that a right-wing extremist group which recommends 'Mein Kampf' on a reading list, has emerged in South Tipperary - or anywhere else in the State for that matter.

And at a time when local and European elections throughout the continent has seen an increase in ultra right-wing representation in political chambers, last June's plebiscites in this jurisdiction saw no such emergence.

The voting population in Ireland, and I'm proud to state this, hasn't provided the extreme right with a platform to spew out crass generalisations about the non-Irish in Ireland, and I sincerely hope that remains the case.

But generalisations about what we who live and work in Waterford think about foreigners living in our city and county, in the wake of the events on Manor Street of October 25th, have, regretfully, been made by some national media commentators.

Take Colette Browne's Irish Independent column of October 29th as an example in which she wrote, I hope, with some sense of wryness: "Before a number of Roma families arrived in Waterford, it was a crime-free oasis, a beacon of peace and tranquillity in an otherwise crime-ridden country.

"No bags were snatched, no one was beaten up at night, no homes were broken into and no cars were robbed. But, all of that changed when some dastardly Roma families arrived and were given carte blanche by the powers that be to direct a massive criminal enterprise."

We who live here, who work here and give a damn about here, know all too well that criminality, intimidation and violent behaviour is not the preserve of one particular ethnic group.

Long before there were any Roma living anywhere in Waterford, we had crime. We know that. And, as has been referenced here previously, the biggest criminal problems we have in our city and county have been instigated by born and bred Waterfordians.

I walk through the city centre at least five days a week, sometimes six. I see at least three people every day who would appear to be of Roma extraction, begging, in John Roberts Square, on the St Olaf's entrance to City Square and on The Quay. It's also worth pointing out on The Quay each day, it would be unusual for me not to be approached by two Irish people looking for 30 cent for a bus fare or a taxi.

And a few weeks ago, an Irish person I refused to give money to tracked me for 20 yards and dished out quite a bit of verbal abuse in my direction for failing to do so.

Incidentally, it is not illegal to beg. However, under Section 2 of the Criminal Justice (Public Order) Act 2011, "a person who begs in an aggressive, intimidating or aggressive manner is guilty of an offence".

Colette Browne's column rightly called for due process to be followed. We are all, nominally, equal under the law, and anyone who burgles, mugs or attacks is, whether we like it or not, innocent until proven guilty.

But to write of the "rabble-rousers" of October 25th without any context to the fact that these 200 people, drawn from a total population of 46,000, represent just 0.23 per cent of our city's population, doesn't strike me as being particularly fair. And let's not forget that there was one arrest made in relation to the incident. One arrest.

My skin continues to crawl when I read online comments alluding to gas chambers, and I'll have no truck whatsoever with racism of any kind, but Waterford City in 2014 is not Birmingham, Alabama in 1963.

I abhor criminality; I've been robbed twice myself in the past 18 months. I don't care where those perpetrators are from. I just want those responsible to answer for their offences.

Our schools, sports clubs and artistic/cultural organisations have been bringing the indigenous and 'new' Irish together at pre-teen level in Waterford over the past 15 years in particular, and they're doing fantastic work. But such civic mindedness doesn't appeal to all that many national newspaper columnists.

What happened on October 25th in Railway Square didn't represent how most Waterfordians believe alleged criminality should be dealt with. Speaking only for myself, criminality, as opposed to the ethnicity of such criminals, is what we ought to focus on.