

A hotbed of racism? - Hardly

A city centre resident's view on criminality

The word 'racist' has been bandied about by many in relation to the protests that occurred on Manor Street on Saturday week last.

And while there has been a certain racist element both at the protests and online via the Facebook pages which called for them, I feel that the majority of those who attended did so in frustration at the widespread assertion that that a criminal gang has been running rampant in the Manor Street/John Street area, seemingly unchecked.

I looked on in despair as Waterford was suddenly made out to be a hotbed of racism in Ireland.

Calling all the people who protested racist is the same as saying all Roma people are criminals.

The irony seems to have been lost on the nation's media, a lot of whom know little about the city and the problems it faces.

The fact is, that while a certain racist few joined in and help fan the flames, the main issue here has little to do with race.

Most people are just fed up with this gang operating in the city's major entertainment area, preying on people coming home from a night out and making the area a no-go area a certain times.

And how do I know? Well, I've been living in the Johns Bridge area for five years now and I've seen so much in that time. So much.

A year or so ago I walked outside and saw a girl walking home to her apartment in the next building alone. As I came out the back gate, one of the gang ran behind her and grabbed her bag.

My natural instinct was to give chase and as he ran across Railway Square. He crossed the road into the house that had its windows smashed in the first protest at which point I stopped and called the guards.

They came after about 10 minutes, went inside to investigate and re-emerged empty handed. I was told I'd be called to give a statement but that was seemingly the end of it.

Only a few weeks ago I came outside to find a bag outside Station House, the office building next door. It had been taken from a girl who I found sitting on the side of the road by Railway Square, crying.

She had been going home with her friend who was in a wheelchair after a night out and as she was pushing him along Manor Street, she had her bag stolen from behind.

Of course, passport, phone, wallet were all gone. She was clearly distraught. The description she'd given was that of one of the gang members I'd seen hanging around outside when I was coming home earlier in the evening. The Guards came and never asked for my details so I left and heard nothing more about the situation.

Two weeks ago, I was walking home from a friends house and saw a girl sitting on the ledge at the corner of what was the Dignity Bar until recently.

Two members of the gang were standing at the bridge, another coming from Waterside towards her.

I spotted they were staring at her and so I stopped to talk to her and then helped her to get a taxi. This has happened a few times and more frequently of late.

Over the time I've lived here, I've come across people sitting outside, some of them crying, having had their wallets, phones and whatever else stolen. They always give the same descriptions of the muggers.

Each time I've told them to ring the Guards to help get them sorted, rang people to help them home or helped them into a taxi. Once or twice I've actually dropped people home, complete strangers but I felt it was the right thing to do.

I'm not a drinker so I'm sober at the end of the night coming home. I see the same gang hanging around outside constantly. I could point out every single one of them. I've seen them waiting to pounce when they get their chance.

They hang around for hours between Manor Street, John Street, Waterside and Railway Square.

I've watched them following people, harassing people coming across Johns Bridge and working in groups, a spotter in one area while others mingle among the crowd standing outside the chippers on John Street.

Let me be clear: I completely disagree with the mob mentality of what happened on October 25th. Such a protest may well have been more suitable outside at the Garda Station, perhaps?

The truth is, people protested because they felt, rightly or wrong, that nothing – or not enough – was being done. This city and especially the John Street/Manor Street/Railway Square areas have become dangerous. This is where our nightlife is centred and this gang operated there for that reason.

For those who've branded people thugs for making a stand, I suggest they think of what they'd do if there was a gang operating outside their house, if they knew exactly what they were up to and were making the area unsafe for anyone passing through.

This for me is the primary issue and I can't be any clearer on this, it's irrelevant what ethnic minority this gang belong to.

I live here. There is a criminal gang operating outside my home most nights of the week. I have every right to feel safe and quite frankly, I don't.

I have no issue with the Roma community. I have an issue with a particular criminal gang and quite frankly, something needed to be done, not the way it was I'll agree but I understand the frustration. I feel it too.

To brand this situation as a race issue is simply deflecting from the actual problem, one that needs to be sorted away from keyboard warriors and mobs.

Kolyn Byrne is a John's Bridge resident