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The Troubles won't be over until

these killings stop

Recent murders, like that of my friend Edward Burns, are gnawing away at Northern Ireland's shiny post-conflict veneer



- m [Mary O'Hara](#)
- o [The Guardian](#),
- o Tuesday February 19 2008

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I asked a former paramilitary recently if 10 years ago he could have imagined that in his life the Troubles would be declared over, power would be devolved, and Ian Paisley and Martin McGuinness would have such a good rapport as to earn them the monicker locally "the chuckle brothers". "No way," he said emphatically. "Not in a million years." It is a sentiment shared by many of us who lived through the 70s, 80s and 90s in Northern Ireland. The violence seemed so entrenched, so woven into the fabric of everyday life, that it was inconceivable an enduring political settlement could be found.

Even when the Good Friday agreement was signed in 1998 - the first real glimmer of peace - the years of relentless carnage had taught us not to count our chickens. From "no surrender" to "not an inch", the language of our lives was laced with intransigence. But of course a lot has changed in Northern Ireland since 1998. Loyalist and republican paramilitaries announced ceasefires. Soldiers no longer patrol the streets as they did in my childhood. The ominous, fortress-like police stations that once overshadowed the Falls Road where I grew up have been demolished. Political power is back at Stormont and appears to be functioning, an economic and tourism boom has provided jobs, wealth and tangible incentives to make peace last. Cross-community groups working to dismantle sectarianism are flourishing. And there are genuine material changes in the quality of many people's lives. It is astonishing - but it is not the whole picture.

No one thought a transition to peace - to a "normal" society - would be easy, and sure enough that has proved to be true. In August 1998, the bomb that killed 29 people in Omagh was a terrible reminder of the hazards still remaining. There were plenty of other serious hiccups along the way, including paramilitary feuds, and a fair share of political brinkmanship (usually involving Tony Blair arriving at the eleventh hour to mediate). At community level there are more "peace lines" (walls that slice between loyalist and nationalist communities, thereby

guaranteeing their continuing segregation) than there were 10 years ago.

However these are not, given time, insurmountable hurdles to peace. More worrying is that beneath the shiny new veneer of "post-conflict" Northern Ireland there is an insidious gnawing away at the hope of the past few years because of recent murders. Just last week, the body of 27-year-old Andrew Burns, who had been shot, was found near a village church on the border with the Irish Republic, allegedly the handywork of a dissident republican group. And last March, the bodies of 38-year-old Joe Jones and 36-year-old Edward Burns - a childhood friend of mine - were found in Belfast. Burns had been shot, while Jones was beaten to death.

But it was perhaps the death last year of Paul Quinn in Co Monaghan and that of Robert McCartney in Belfast in 2005 that have resonated most because their families have emerged as unlikely but vociferous campaigners. (Indeed, the McCartneys' campaign took them all the way to the White House.) Both say they want justice for their loved ones - innocent victims of brutal beatings - and the perpetrators convicted. But they are also attempting to use what happened to highlight problems that persist within Northern Ireland.

Catherine McCartney claims that although there is government at Stormont and relative peace on the streets, her brother's death is indicative of a "sick society" that is still a long way from coming to terms with its past. "People really want [peace] to work," McCartney says. "But outside Northern Ireland people only see the bigger political picture. Real people on the ground are still living with it. The threat is still there." We need to be wary, McCartney argues, of "sweeping under the carpet" those events that do not fit in with the "peace agenda".

It has been a long, hard road to get to where Northern Ireland is today, and there is an understandable reluctance to focus on things that might destabilise it. This includes in any way exaggerating the impact of recent murders. This is not, after all, the 70s. Nevertheless, we should be cautious about brushing aside the concerns within communities affected by deaths of people such as Robert McCartney or Paul Quinn. As I was told recently: "People in Northern Ireland have very long memories."

I have been interviewing a lot of people recently who, like myself, lived in the areas worst affected by the Troubles: former paramilitaries and soldiers, people who lost family and friends and who were, to varying degrees, damaged by what they saw and experienced.

What we all share, I realise, is a horror at the prospect - however unlikely it appears - of returning to "the bad old days". Sometimes there is a feeling that we should be grateful for so few deaths compared to the years of the Troubles. This is a misguided impulse. We should be grateful that the worst is over and for the enormous strides made by one-time political foes. But we should only be satisfied when there are no more deaths, no more "punishment" beatings, and no more generations who have the threat of these hanging over them.

• Mary O'Hara is writing a book about the experiences of people who grew up during the Troubles

mary.ohara@guardian.co.uk

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