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A monument to compromise

Omagh support body did not want a part in a Sinn Fein-tainted event, writes Ruth Dudley Edwards

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By Ruth Dudley Edwards
Sunday August 17 2008

THERE'S been much lamentation by well-meaning people about the refusal of the [Omagh](#) Support and Self Help Group (OSSHG) to attend the 10th anniversary commemoration organised by [Omagh District Council](#). Was this not a time for standing together as a community, they cry. For inclusiveness?

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OK. Here's the main reason why they stayed away: the council has 21 members, 10 of whom -- including the chairman -- are [Sinn Fein](#). Consider what flowed from that.

The council has been extremely coy about mentioning that republicans had anything to do with the bomb. When plans were being made for a new garden of remembrance, they did not want to have anywhere in it the OSSHG plaque: "To honour and remember 31 [29 and unborn twins] people murdered and hundreds injured from three nations by a dissident republican terrorist car bomb."

In order to reach an agreement about what they modishly term "the narrative" for the garden, the council set up an Independent Facilitation team. The chair was the Presbyterian saint [Dr John Dunlop](#), the Quaker woman was little-known, the priest appointed was the radical Jesuit [Brian Lennon](#) -- loathed by Orangemen for his years backing the activists of the Garvaghy Road in blocking a parade from Drumcree church.

Dunlop being a Solomon for our times, after only 80 meetings with interested parties, a compromise was proffered and accepted by the council. The memorial at the bomb site mentions an "act of terror"; that on the street wall at the garden speaks of the bomb; four of the five sections within the garden say nothing contentious; and the fifth includes and attributes to the OSSHG the unhelpful words about the bombers.

The OSSHG stays peeved about this white-washing.

The council decided on having a grand memorial, so the garden of remembrance is now a "garden of light", which has a "heliostat" tracking the sun and pouring a beam of sunlight onto 31 mirrors on tall poles which then carry the light to an enormous sculpture at the bomb site containing a crystal heart. "We had a little garden where we could sit and be melancholy," said one widower. "What's there now is a tourist attraction."

The families knew this garden would be opened on Friday by the Sinn Fein council chairman, who, along with [Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness](#), laid wreaths to victims of republicanism. Oddly enough, many people did not want to witness apologists for the [IRA](#) acting as if they'd spent their lives being peace activists.

What's more, the OSSHG deeply resents the refusal of McGuinness or any other Sinn Fein leader to ask their supporters to help the PSNI or the gardai nail the Omagh bombers. So laying wreaths seems like the rankest of rank hypocrisy.

What was more, for the last few years the OSSHG has had a little inter-denominational ceremony every year on the Sunday nearest the anniversary. The council wanted them to give this up and join with the big event on the actual day. Since the OSSHG didn't trust the council, they refused, and will go ahead as usual today.

The council apparently urged the clergy who annually had attended the families' service to choose the Friday instead. In the end, the clergy agreed to attend both.

It was not just the OSSHG families who stayed away. The council expected 10,000 at the Friday event: there were perhaps 800, of whom my Omagh friend told me at least 100 were council employees. Quite a few republicans also boycotted the ceremony because there were police on the platform. The excuse for the poor turn-out is that the weather was atrocious and it was a weekday, but the evidence suggests it's far more to do with the Sinn Fein connection. Our poor [Taoiseach](#) was there, along with McGuinness; [Shaun Woodward](#), the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland; and [Jeffrey Donaldson](#), a junior minister standing in for [Peter Robinson](#). There was a lot of ersatz Celticy peace stuff and some good poetry and bible readings, but essentially the ceremony was damp. And a squib.

- *Ruth Dudley Edwards*

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