

ICPRA ARTICLE

Dealing in facts and not the nonsense of keyboard warriors

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Policing in Northern Ireland is seldom out of the headlines. If a mistake is made, it's covered extensively in our media. If officers do something over and above what's expected of them – and that's virtually a daily occurrence – the chances are it will go unreported.

In common with other parts of the world, there is a blame culture that thrives on social media platforms. This is a conveyor belt that does nothing for the profession or officer morale and instead gives a misleading impression that officers wilfully commit wrongdoing on a regular basis or that things are broken and need fixing.

The downright false or malicious is peddled as fact. It can reach a global audience and invariably influences the impressionable. The problem is the police are unable to counter every allegation or claim, as due legal process often prevents this.

Generally speaking, those who condemn and berate are the living embodiment of the Mark Twain adage of 'never let the truth get in the way of a good story.'

The Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) is the most heavily scrutinised and accountable service anywhere in Europe. Every action or intervention comes under microscopic analysis.

We deal in facts, and they are stark. These facts speak of officers and their families who face intolerable pressures because of the job they do.

Our peace since the Belfast Good Friday Agreement in 1998 is imperfect. We still have dangerous republican dissidents who seek a return to mayhem and bloody slaughter, along with loyalists who engage in organised criminality

The facts tell a story of threat and menace directed at officers and their families.

Between January 2017 and November 2020, a total of forty-three officers had to have special protective measures extended to them and their families.

Six officers were forced to move from their homes under threat of death. They had to sell their homes under the Special Purchase of Evacuated Dwellings (SPED) scheme. The keyword here is 'forced'.

Nine officers had to avail of the emergency housing scheme. Fifteen officers had the general or enhanced Home Protection Scheme which provides for the installation of bulletproof windows and protective doors. At the lower end, security cameras and alarm systems were installed at the homes of thirteen officers.

Forgive my repetition, but that's forty-three officers and their families subjected to intolerable and reprehensible targeting by terrorists or organised crime gangs over a three-year period.

Our officers take risks to protect the weak and vulnerable and do their utmost to bring these gangs, the drug dealers and people traffickers to book.

The men and women I represent deserve the unequivocal support of this entire Northern Ireland community and not the qualified backing of some who continue to play politics with policing.

We had two recent very worrying incidents which underline the dangers officers face.

The first was a cowardly attack on an off-duty officer at her home. Terrorists planted a bomb beside the car of the part-time officer. It was designed to cause maximum harm to her and her daughter. Thankfully, it was spotted and dealt with.

The second incident was an arson attack on parked cars at the home of an officer. The blaze also caused serious damage to the side of the house. This was a vicious attempt to bully and intimidate.

These are shocking incidents that have no place in the new Northern Ireland we are committed to building. Everything possible will be done to track down and bring the culprits to justice, but the Courts must play their part by handing down tougher sentences. A clear signal has to go out that society will not tolerate attacks on the men and women who answer the call for help from people in need of our services.

The keyboard warriors will ignore the sacrifices and commitment that officers make day and daily; they're only interested in carping and berating and have nothing positive to offer.

Some of our politicians should also pause before hitting the 'send' button. Remember the forty-three officers and their families and the officers who continue to be the subject of unspeakable attacks and ask yourself this question: why are you not as vocal or outspoken in support of police officers as you are whenever a mistake is made?

Grand-standing, playing to the gallery, doesn't cut it anymore. It's time to make an unequivocal stand, and stand with us as we strive to rid society of those who would drive us back to a bygone and bloody past.

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