

be shared by everyone I met, regardless of age or occupation or where in Ireland they lived. Political attitudes varied, but sympathy to the plight of people living in the Third World was the norm, with many expressing the opinion that the Irish people themselves were not far removed from such circumstances. It seemed that every second person had a family member living somewhere in Africa, Asia or Latin America working for a relief agency or on some kind of development assistance project, or serving in the UN peace keeping mission in the Lebanon.

All of this was in sharp contrast to the predominantly inward-looking national perspective I was used to. I gradually realised that Ireland was in many respects a far more internationalist society than the United States, despite its much greater ethnic and racial heterogeneity.

Growing racism

After visiting Ireland periodically through the nineties, and then moving here at the end of 2000, my impressions of Ireland have of course undergone some change. The Irish still strike me as among the most friendly people I have ever met. As an American living abroad, I cannot imagine receiving a better welcome. But towards people from the developing world and towards those whose skin is not white, Irish attitudes and behaviour appear to me to have changed markedly, and for the worse.

Perhaps, as some maintain, the racism that is now so visible has been present all along and has only surfaced because Ireland is losing its ethnic and racial homogeneity. Whatever the case, it's there, and you only have to listen to talk radio to get a taste of it. If you doubt it, just look at the statistics: racist attacks were up 60% in the second half of last year over the previous year's level.

The lesson of Boston

Having spent much of the past thirty years living in Boston, I've had the opportunity to learn a great deal about racism and what it takes to stop it. The Tanalste says that in terms of public policy and building a modern society and economy, Ireland should move more in the direction of Boston than Berlin. I don't know about Berlin, but in at least one important respect the experience of Boston has a lot to offer to Ireland, which I believe now stands at a crossroads. Ireland will either build on its history of generosity and internationalism by embracing diversity and tolerance, or retreat from that record by succumbing to racism, bigotry and hostility to newcomers.

For most of its history, Boston was known as a centre of liberal and progressive thinking. Movements calling for independence from England, the abolition of slavery, the development of free and equal public education and opposition to the Vietnam War all had a home in Boston. During the 1970s, however, the court-ordered racial integration of the public schools involving the busing of schoolchildren exposed an underlying racism and ignited a period of racial strife and violence that lasted for more than a decade. Boston, once the City on a Hill, became an international symbol of intolerance featuring scenes not dissimilar from those witnessed at the Holy Cross school in North Belfast two years ago.

It took many years and the efforts of thousands of people in Boston to get past that period and to restore a climate of racial harmony and mutual respect. Much of that work was done by ordinary people working in their neighbourhood and community organisations and in their workplaces to build bridges across the racial divide.

Their efforts, however, would have been for naught were it not for the fact that the political leadership in the 1980's made it absolutely clear, over and over and over again, that discrimination, racial stereotyping and racial violence were illegal and would not be tolerated.

Those in public life who chose to play the race card were repeatedly challenged and, over time, effectively isolated.

By the mid 1980's, the word had gone out that one rule would apply to all and that no resources would be spared and nothing less than the highest priority would be given to making Boston an open city welcoming to all and proud of its racial diversity (including the new wave of young Irish immigrants, the vast majority of whom were illegal).

Heads in the sand

In Ireland, I see little of that type of response on display. In February, in the aftermath of the comments made by the Longford Judge, I saw nothing to suggest that those lessons had been learned.

The people of Ireland had been told that a member of the judiciary, speaking from the bench, had suggested that shopping centres might impose a race-based ban and might begin refusing entrance to people because of the colour of their skin. At no point did the judge say or did the people hear any senior public official (outside of the Equality Authority and the NCCRI) say that

such a ban would be grossly illegal or that it would be an affront to basic human rights or that, if imposed, it would be absolutely prohibited and be met with the full force of law.

Instead, the public heard a deafening silence from the highest quarters.

There were no loud and clear statements about upholding the law, about racism or about equal protection for all under the law. There was no message from on high that judges will have to step down if they are too bigoted to realise that it is an individual, and not a racial or ethnic group, standing in front of them in the dock, or if they convey to the public the clear impression that it's not illegal to ban people based on their skin colour.

The subsequent public 'apology' for giving offence and references to 'sensitivity training' may have even led some to believe that this was merely a PC issue and that you just have to be careful not to use phrases like 'coloured people' that might offend the refined sensibilities of the Dublin 4 set.

If incidents of this sort continue to be handled in this way, Ireland will forfeit its opportunity to check the spread of racism.

Which way from here?

The lesson from Boston is a simple one. The only way to stop racism and racial hatred is to confront it and to confront it forcefully. It can't be ducked and it can't be left to public service ads aired during anti-racism week. If Ireland is to build a society that values diversity and respects the rights of all and has no room for racism, Ireland's political leaders have to rise to the occasion and provide leadership, both by speaking out and through active intervention.

If they don't, a steep price will be paid by Irish society for years to come.

Racial and ethnic minorities, of course, will pay the dearest price, principally in the form of abuse and denial of rights. But racism and overt hostility to non-nationals could also destroy one of Ireland's most important cultural legacies, its history of active concern for the well-being of people throughout the world, regardless of their race or national identity, and its reputation as a friendly people whose door is open.

Such a change, in my view, would strike at the very heart of Irish identity. How sadly ironic it would be if behaviour ostensibly aimed at preserving what it means to be Irish actually helped bring about its loss.

With thanks to the Irish refugee council:

www.irishrefugeecouncil.ie