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Blog article by Chief Commissioner Dr Michael Wardlow

Names can never hurt you?

Events which have taken place over the past few weeks have caused me to focus on words and how we use them. I grew up where the received wisdom was “big boys don’t cry” and the adult advice dispensed when name calling took place was “sticks and stones may break your bones, but names can never hurt you”.

Like so much of the perceived wisdom which I have been offered over the past 60 years, I soon determined that both statements were untrue and, and in later life I have, in fact, come to believe both to be precarious observations.

I have seen grown men cry over the past weeks as they have suffered at the hands of racist thugs. Over the past 40 years I have seen grown men cry over the unnecessary suffering they have experienced during the period that some of us call “The Troubles”. The truth is we can all be subject to the type of verbal abuse and harmful language which cause us to reach the end of our normal human reserves and begin to weep.

Over the past few weeks I have seen words and name calling break bones, metaphorically at least and damage futures. I have seen groups of people negatively stereotyped, due to the use of a few ill chosen words. I have seen the term “freedom of speech” used almost totemically, as if this is the right to trump all other rights, as if it can be used to justify all manner of personal opinion without recourse to any consideration of the harm those ill chosen words might cause or the offence which they might give. It is an important right, but it is not without limits. It needs to be debated further.

As we work together to create a united community, we must aim to build on a solid foundation made up values which support the maintenance of the common good - values such as equality, mutual respect, dignity, worth and integrity. We must aspire to uphold the principle of do no harm in all we do and say. Such a principle doesn’t deny the freedom to debate and discuss strongly held opinions, creeds or beliefs, but rather



places such debates within a safe place where learning from others with whom we differ can be as much an outcome as making sure we are heard by those others.

The Commission has been clear in its statements over recent days about what type of society we wish for this place. Words can and do harm, but they can also build and encourage. But to build and encourage they must be spoken by all, those in leadership and well as those who follow. Martin Luther King once observed that “at the end of time it will not be the words of our enemies we remember but the silence of our friends”.



Read the Chief Commissioner’s blog *“Here’s the thing...”*

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