

Do we really need a mobilised suburbia?

Do we really need a mobilised suburbia? The things that make us angry, spare a thought for the people who get angry about us such as grass verges and lawns.

problem is too small for of the passionate suburban- who sit on the committees of residents' associations. Uneven strays, party guests who on foot and leave by impecably-behaved children, on a whim, decides to decorate the front wall with murals, you're more to see them as self-appointed to paint the exterior of a house may seem trivial,

Are residents' associations grass-roots democracy at work or Nosey Neighbours Inc? Geraldine Comiskey casts a jaundiced eye over suburban matters

but not to one south Dublin residents' association committee, who sent a delegation to the offending householder to protest. He immediately painted his home black. The dividing wall and pillar looked particularly strange beside the neighbour's whitewash. Another resident was so incensed by complaints about his scrap business that he retaliated by hiring a bulldozer to demolish his yard out to a motor mechanic. A Dublin bedsit tenant had a similar battle with the local residents' association who told him his social habits (i.e. occasional drinking sessions with friends in the small hours) were "lowering the tone of the neighbourhood". He responded in words they'll never print on their agenda.

But most associations use subtler techniques to change our habits and achieve suburban harmony. Even if it's only a polite notice in your letterbox, asking you to help in a "community clean-up", you'll be faced with a dilemma.

Should you give in and spend Sunday afternoon picking up sweet wrappers, feeling like a naughty child who is being punished? Should you confront them with the perfectly reasonable point that they are depriving road-sweepers of an income — and encouraging the local authority to be mean? Or should you walk past the decent folk as they toil outside your front door, picking up dog turds on your behalf?

Strength in their numbers

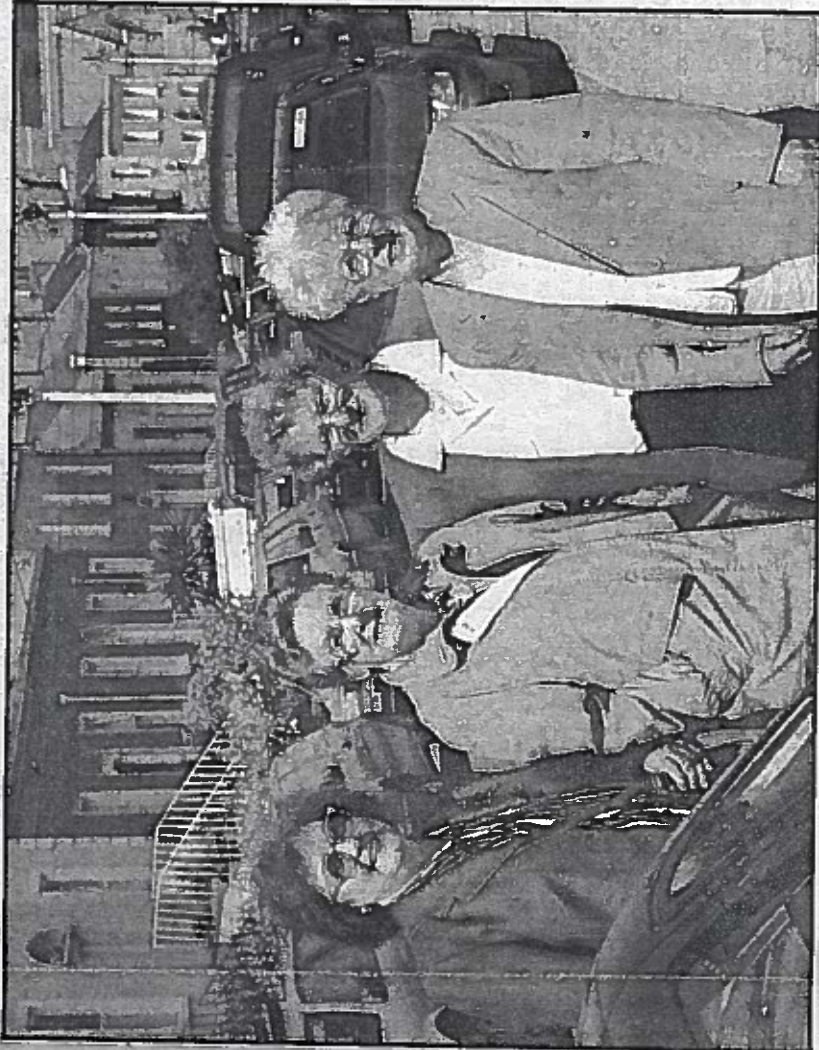
SOME may scorn them, but residents' associations are one of the most powerful movements in modern suburbia, speaking on behalf of large numbers of people — most of whom are too busy or apathetic to speak for themselves.

They wield considerable clout with local authorities, businesses, etc, which will always take seriously the views of a committee claiming to represent a large community. But is this at the expense of the individual's rights? While a Garda spokesman insists that "all complaints are taken seriously — whether from an individual or a group representing a large number of people", politicians often use residents' associations as a gauge of public opinion.

"I believe we do have more clout because we're a recognised group," says Adrienne Murray, chairwoman of Loughlinstown Community Group, which represents about 1,300 local authority houses in south Dublin and is well respected (even by cynics like me).

She points out that while individual residents had often complained of being ignored by the local authority in the past, "we found that, as a large group, we got a response. Council officials would always return our calls."

But there was a less-than-neighbourly feeling in the commu-



Parking problems: members of the Combined Dún Laoghaire Residents' Association, from left Marie Power, Maire Dundun, Pat Walsh and Vera Hill. Photograph: Joe St Leger

area — and its chairperson, Pat Walsh, believes that putting forward a "united front" is more effective than campaigning as individuals. "As a group, we join forces with the Chamber of Commerce, tradespeople and residents, and it definitely means we would have more influence than individuals."

They are currently campaigning to have disc parking introduced. They represent about 1,000 houses and attendance at meetings varies from 10 people to more than 50, depending on the issues on the agenda.

Unlike some residents' groups, the Dún Laoghaire Combined Residents' Association meets only when there's a major issue to be discussed.

Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council's area community officer, Tom Mowlds points out that while individuals are given due consideration and are entitled to contact the local authority directly without belonging to a group, residents' associations "tend to be well organised" and know how to avail of procedures such as the special monthly deputation meetings, in which communities decide the agenda and the council listens. He says community groups representing four areas within the county have been chosen to take part in a Tenants' Participation Scheme to give local people more power in their neighbourhoods.

last year when a group of residents from three streets set up a group of their own — because they believed their views were not being represented by the community council.

The rift appeared when the community council decided to support proposals for an Eastern Health Board drug clinic in the area, a decision it based on the results of

a door-to-door survey, in which more than 50 per cent of respondents said they were in favour of the clinic's location.

This angered residents of Loughlinstown Park, Wood and Drive, who set up their own group. "We felt that the community council had got involved and were backing the clinic, but it was right beside our houses and two

schools," says Debbie Byrne, a committee member of the combined residents of Loughlinstown Park, Wood and Drive group. The community council later decided to back the combined residents in their opposition to the clinic's location (which is still in limbo).

The Dún Laoghaire Combined Residents' Association has always been a strong, unified voice in its

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