

Editorial

Human Rights, Cultural Identity and the Struggle for Traveller Ethnicity

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We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.¹

Martin Luther King Jr.

Introduction

Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre (hereafter Pavee Point) has worked to challenge racism and promote Traveller and Roma inclusion in Ireland since 1985, this includes the recognition of Traveller ethnicity. The organisation works from a community development perspective and promotes the realisation of human rights and equality for Travellers and Roma in Ireland. The group is comprised of Travellers, Roma and members of the majority population, who work together in partnership to address the needs of Travellers and Roma as minority ethnic groups experiencing exclusion, marginalisation and racism. This article traces the evolution and struggle for State acknowledgement of Traveller ethnicity, the role of Traveller organisations in working with the State to achieve this and looking forward to the implications and opportunities in relation to the acknowledgement of Traveller ethnicity.

Irish Travellers

The experience of Travellers in Ireland is similar to indigenous groups around the world. We share a history of being defined as inferior by the majority population, resulting in oppression and assimilation. Our culture has been denied and relegated to something that has no worth or value, our languages are becoming extinct and our connection to land through traditional camping areas have been demolished in the name of ‘so-called’ modernisation.

Travellers are a minority ethnic group, indigenous to the island of Ireland. We have always recognised ourselves as a distinct group, sharing a history, language, traditions and culture. While nomadism is a fundamental part of Traveller culture, many Travellers are no longer nomadic, either by choice or due to the lack of support for and criminalisation of

¹ Martin Luther King, *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: SIGNET Books, 1964).

nomadism by the Irish state.² Travellers are explicitly named as a group protected from discrimination under Ireland's equality legislation.³ Yet despite legislative protection, Travellers continue to experience racism and exclusion in a number of settings, including accommodation, education, health, employment and political representation. According to the 2016 Census, there are 30,987 Irish Travellers living in the Republic of Ireland, accounting for approximately 0.64% of the total population.⁴ These figures reflect a count of ascertained Travellers only. I would suggest that this is a conservative estimate, as the *All Ireland Traveller Health Study* establishes the Traveller population at 36,224 in the Republic of Ireland.⁵

Evolution of Traveller Policy

We know that Travellers have been part of Ireland for centuries with some researchers tracing Travellers as far back as the 5th Century A.D., however, it was only as recently as the 1960s with the urbanisation of Travellers we became more visible within policy.⁶ The first example of this is in *the Report of the Commission on Itinerancy*⁷ on which was predicated on the acknowledgement "there can be no final solution to the problems created by itinerants until they are absorbed into the general population".⁸ The Commission, in its inquiry, set out to:

1. to enquire into the problems arising from the presence in the country of itinerants in considerable numbers;
2. to examine the economic, educational, health and social problems inherent in their way of life;
3. to consider what steps might be taken
 - (a) to provide opportunities for a better way of life for itinerants
 - (b) to promote their absorption into the general community
 - (c) pending such absorption, to reduce to a minimum the disadvantages to themselves and to the community resulting from their itinerant habits and
 - (d) to improve the position generally

The terms of references illustrate the problematising of Travellers by the State. It is within this context that Travellers were conceptualised as a community that needed to be 'normalised' and

² Pavee Point, "Irish Travellers and Roma Shadow Report: A Response to Ireland's Third and Fourth Report on the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD)" (Dublin: Pavee Point Travellers Centre, January 2011), <http://www.paveepoint.ie/document/irish-travellers-and-roma-cerd-shadow-report/>.

³ "Employment Equality Act, 1998," Pub. L. No. 21 (1998), <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1998/act/21/enacted/en/pdf>; "Equal Status Act, 2000," Pub. L. No. 8 (2000), <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2000/act/8/enacted/en/pdf>.

⁴ Central Statistics Office, "Census 2016 Summary Results - Part 1" (Ireland: Central Statistics Office, April 2017), <http://www.cso.ie/en/media/csoie/newsevents/documents/census2016summaryresultspart1/Census2016SummaryPart1.pdf>.

⁵ All Ireland Traveller Health Study Team, "All Ireland Traveller Health Study: Summary of Findings" (Dublin: University College Dublin, September 2010), https://www.ucd.ie/t4cms/AITHS_SUMMARY.pdf.

⁶ Edmund Gilbert et al., "Genomic Insights into the Population Structure and History of the Irish Travellers.," *Scientific Reports*, February 17, 2017, 42187, <https://doi.org/10.1038/srep42187>; Seán Ó Riain, *Solidarity with Travellers: A Story of Settled People Making a Stand for Travellers* (Dublin: Roadside Books, 2000).

⁷ With its roots in criminal law, the term 'itinerant' is offensive and pejorative when applied to Travellers.

⁸ Commission on Itinerancy, "Report of the Commission on Itinerancy" (Dublin: The Stationery Office, August 1963).

‘civilised’ through assimilation, paralleling State’s responses to indigenous communities globally.

The *Report of the Commission on Itinerancy* lacked the participation and/or involvement of Travellers and Travellers organisations, speaking to a whole range of issues. However, there was a shift in this, as subsequent policy developments such as the *Report of the Travelling people review body* and in particular, the *Report of the Task Force on the Travelling Community* included Traveller organisations who had a clear and strategic analysis on Traveller issues, providing clear solutions of how they should be addressed using a community work and human rights approach.⁹ These documents, in addition to persistent lobbying by Traveller organisations leading to international pressure from human rights monitoring bodies, created the necessary conditions to further advance our campaign for State acknowledgement of Traveller ethnicity.

Formal acknowledgement of Traveller ethnicity

It would take half a century after the *Report of the Commission on Itinerancy* for Traveller ethnicity to be formally acknowledged by the State. This historic day was marked on March 1st 2017, by our then Taoiseach Enda Kenny in Dáil Éireann. In his address, Kenny, on behalf of the State and the Irish people declared, “As Taoiseach, I wish to now formally recognise Travellers as a distinct ethnic group within the Irish nation. It is a historic day for our Travellers and a proud day for Ireland.”¹⁰

I, alongside, hundreds of Travellers, allies and supporters from the majority community witnessed a truly historic day for Travellers. I was fortunate enough to be inside the Dáil during Kenny’s address and as he uttered those words, I was overcome with emotion and pride of what we had achieved together, collectively. It was at that time that I was very conscious of our ancestors who showed great resilience, surviving for centuries on this island in spite endemic racism and exclusion. We owe a great deal of gratitude to those Travellers who have been the custodians of our culture. I was also very cognisant of the presence of generations of Travellers and Traveller activists who dedicated their lives in campaigning for Traveller human rights. I am so proud to have been on this journey with so many of them. They have shown great patient, vision, leadership and determination.

Taking stock and looking forward

I believe that having our identity and culture acknowledged and validated by the State is hugely symbolic. I remain optimistic that it will deconstruct centuries of internalised oppression, shame and the belief that we are inferior to the majority population. Traveller ethnicity, is not, as some would suggest, about being separate or isolationists, it is about respect and inclusion.

It is well documented that Travellers continue to be one of the most marginalised and excluded groups in Ireland, experiencing racism and discrimination on institutional and individual levels. This has been clearly documented by various researchers, independent national reports and reinforced by international human rights monitoring bodies. Manifestations of exclusion and racism are evidenced in the high unemployment rates, low

⁹ Travelling People Review Body, “Report of the Travelling People Review Body” (The Stationary Office, 1983), <http://www.lenus.ie/hse/handle/10147/46682>; Department of the Environment, “Report of the Task Force on the Travelling Community” (Dublin: Department of the Environment, Government of Ireland, July 1995).

¹⁰ Enda Kenny, “Statement by An Taoiseach Enda Kenny TD on the Recognition of Travellers as an Ethnic Group, Dáil Éireann,” Department of the Taoiseach, March 1, 2017, https://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/eng/News/Taoiseach's_Speeches/Statement_by_An_Taoiseach_Enda_Kenny_TD_on_the_recognition_of_Travellers_as_an_ethnic_group_Dail_Eireann_1_March_2017.html.

educational attainment, health inequalities, high suicide rates and inadequate accommodation, resulting in homelessness. Racism also permeates throughout State institutions i.e. judiciary, politics, media, etc.

Numerous national and international bodies have raised significant concerns in relation to the persistent and deteriorating situation of Travellers in relation to social, economic, cultural and political rights, placing pressure on the State to take proactive measures to effectively address these issues. As a consequence, Travellers are targeted under various EU strategies, including Europe 2020 and the EU Framework for National Roma¹¹ Integration Strategies (NRIS) up to 2020.¹² This creates obligations for the Irish State to unequivocally include Travellers in all relevant strategies, which address the inclusion of vulnerable and marginalised groups. In June 2017, Minister of State, David Stanton (Department of Justice and Equality) launched the revised National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy (2017-2021).¹³ With ten thematic areas and almost 150 actions, Strategy sets out an institutionalised policy response to Traveller exclusion in Ireland. Similar to the *Report of the Task Force on the Travelling Community*, Travellers and Traveller organisations were central in Strategy's development and will oversee its implementation through a National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy Steering Group.

In the past, Traveller organisations witnessed the development of very clear policies to promote Traveller inclusion, but often those policies are not implemented. This is both frustrating and demotivating. However, despite limited resources, we will continue to hold the State to account and do our utmost to ensure that actions in the Strategy are implemented to improve the quality of life for Travellers.

Conclusion

This journey is not complete. The acknowledgement of Traveller ethnicity is not an end point, but instead, it is another key milestone for the promotion of Traveller rights in Ireland. I look forward to working with all of those Traveller activists who have been part of this great achievement to ensure Travellers' basic human rights will be promoted, protected and respected.

Finally, I would say to our people, "Have pride in how far we have come and have faith in how far we can go."

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¹¹ The Council of Europe uses 'Roma' as an umbrella term for people who self-identify as belonging to Roma, Sinti, Kale and other groups with a nomadic tradition, including Irish Travellers.

¹² Europe 2020, "Ireland's National Traveller / Roma Integration Strategy," January 23, 2012, http://ec.europa.eu/justice/discrimination/files/roma_ireland_strategy_en.pdf; European Commission, "National Roma Integration Strategies: A First Step in the Implementation of the EU Framework," April 21, 2012, https://ec.europa.eu/anti-trafficking/sites/antitrafficking/files/national_roma_integration_strategies_a_first_step_in_the_implementation_of_the_eu_framework.pdf.

¹³ Department of Justice and Equality, "National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy, 2017-2021" (Department of Justice and Equality, 2017), <http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/National%20Traveller%20and%20Roma%20Inclusion%20Strategy,%202017-2021.pdf/Files/National%20Traveller%20and%20Roma%20Inclusion%20Strategy,%202017-2021.pdf>.

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