

Gypsies and Travellers and the equalities debate

The equalities world is in a state of flux, with a wide-ranging debate triggered by the Discrimination Law Review and questions about the future of multiculturalism. Two campaigners for Travellers' rights highlight the possible implications for Gypsies and Travellers.

Gypsies and Travellers have been described as one of the most marginalised minorities in society, as reflected by poor health and access to services (*Common Ground*, CRE, 2006, p14). Gypsies and Travellers also suffer from high levels of prejudice. A survey by Stonewall found them to be one of the most reviled groups in society alongside groups like asylum seekers.

2005 election

This marginalisation and prejudice came to the fore in 2004 and 2005. The tabloid press launched a media offensive against Gypsies and Travellers, portraying them as law breakers and a danger to mainstream society in articles such as the Sun newspaper's 'Stamp on the Camps' series. Much of the reporting centred on unauthorised encampments (where Gypsies and Travellers were stopping on the road side and other public space) and unauthorised developments (where Gypsies and Travellers had moved on to land they owned and submitted retrospective planning applications). None of this sensationalist reporting drew attention to the fact that in 1994 the then Conservative government had abolished the duty on councils to provide sites and that councils had ignored a planning circular encouraging them to help Travellers buy their own land and develop sites. This created a policy vacuum that led to an acute accommodation crisis in the Gypsy and Traveller community, which, in turn, led inevitably to an increase in unauthorised encampments and developments and a resulting rise in community tensions.

In the opinion of campaigners, the media were preparing the ground for Gypsies and Travellers, along with asylum seekers, to be an election issue which the Conservative opposition could exploit. During the run up to the election, Michael Howard, then leader of the Conservative Party, visited Dale Farm, an unauthorised development in Essex. As part of his 'proud to be British' campaign, Travellers were castigated as 'law breakers' who were being aided and abetted by the Human Rights Act.

CRE response

The response from the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) was both robust and principled. For a number of years, Gypsies and Travellers felt neglected by the CRE and there was a great deal of cynicism towards the race watchdog. However, this was to change. In a series of high-profile speeches, CRE chair Trevor Phillips referred to the racism against Travellers as the 'last acceptable form of racism' and compared their suffering to that of the black community in the deep south of America during the age of segregation. Furthermore, the CRE lent its voice to the campaign to amend the Housing Bill in 2004 so that Traveller accommodation needs were addressed. Eventually, the Government relented and created an obligation on councils to identify land for Traveller site development. Without the intervention of the CRE, it is likely that the government would have shelved the issue as, in this pre-election period, it was anxious about how the opposition would portray this new obligation.

Some would describe the CRE's role during this period as one of its finest moments but recent developments are causing Gypsy and Traveller rights campaigners some concern and there is a danger that much goodwill could be lost. When the idea of a single equalities commission was first mooted, the CRE opposed its integration into this body, claiming that it would lead to a loss of focus on race issues and impede priority work on groups like

Gypsies and Travellers. The CRE eventually reversed its position and Trevor Phillips was to become chair of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights (CEHR), but there is a danger that those initial fears may yet prove justified.

Concern about CEHR

Many Gypsy and Traveller campaign groups are in a state of anxiety about the creation of the Commission for Equality and Human Rights. There has been little contact from the CRE and CEHR with Gypsy and Traveller groups about the formation of the new body. The contact that has taken place has only come about as a result of Traveller groups persistently requesting such dialogue. There is concern that there will in the new CEHR be a reduction in resources on Traveller issues. This would be a cause of grave alarm on account of the fact that as the government's new accommodation policies identify land for sites, public opposition is likely to be huge. Where councils have already tried to identify land for sites, we have seen large -scale public opposition: in one case 1,000 people attended a meeting opposing a proposed site. In the face of this opposition, some councils have abandoned their site plans. A well-resourced and dynamic CEHR will be needed to intervene in such situations and ensure that Gypsies and Travellers are not the victims of irrational prejudice. Public opposition is expected to mount and could be one of the greatest race relations challenges in the coming years- a great test of the effectiveness of the new CEHR.

A number of Gypsy and Traveller campaign groups are also concerned by some of the proposals in the Discrimination Law Review that will shape the Single Equalities Bill. In particular there is concern about the proposed changes to the equality duties. It is felt that the proposal to replace duties to have 'due regard' to race equality with a duty to take 'proportionate' action on a few self-chosen 'priorities' will fatally weaken existing duties, making race equality optional rather than a mainstream duty for public bodies. Gypsies and Travellers have already seen how the existing race equality duty has forced one council to halt a forced eviction against one Traveller site pending a high court action and another council to relocate a Traveller site to an acceptable permanent location rather than a temporary and unacceptable one on a former lorry park.

The integration agenda

However, this duty is not being used to its full potential. Rather than diluting this power, there is a need for improved monitoring, guidance and, where necessary, enforcement. A concerted campaign will be needed to ensure that the government does not include the damaging proposals made in the Discrimination Law Review in the Single Equalities Bill but such a campaign may be undermined by the divisions caused by the fierce debate around the future of multiculturalism caused by Trevor Phillips' attack on the concept. Phillips and other adherents of what became termed the 'integration agenda' asserted that minorities were falling into dangerous cultural enclaves that created instability; instead, minorities should subscribe to core British values. Critics have derided this discourse as assimilation and stated that it ignores the economic and racial factors that segregate communities. For Gypsies and Travellers and other minorities with unique forms of identity, this discourse could lead to even greater persecution and discrimination as demonised and misunderstood communities become the 'enemy within'.

It was an extreme form of the integration agenda that led to Howard in 2005 claiming that Gypsies and Travellers flouted British conventions of 'fair play', a flawed analysis that failed to understand or appreciate that central to the Gypsy and Traveller community are values such as a strong sense of community, family and hard work that figures like him and Phillips would approve as the exemplar of core British values.

Within the race communities camp, a sense of unity and even security can only be achieved when genuine understanding and commitment to diversity and tolerance are established and protected by a set of equalities duties that effectively challenges the institutional racism that groups like Gypsies and Travellers frequently suffer . Only such a prerequisite would enable the race and wider equalities lobby to enter into a wider debate with a general public which still fails in large numbers to appreciate and understand the benefits of our existing equalities legislation. This is the real danger to our cohesion and well-being. The lack of public support prevents the building of firm and secure foundations. It means that those politicians who seek to exploit public misconceptions over minorities like Gypsies and Travellers and equalities legislation, will have fertile ground to exploit in the future. This could be the dangerous legacy of the integration agenda and failure to develop an effective CEHR and Single Equalities legislation.

Andrew Ryder, Irish Traveller Movement in Britain
Richard Solly, Traveller Law Reform Project

<http://www.irishtraveller.org.uk/> **Irish Traveller Movement**

<http://www.travellerslaw.org.uk/> **The Traveller Law Reform Project**