

## **ETHNICITY A KEY TO EQUALITY**

Presentation to the Irish Traveller Movement AGM 2009, Athlone, by Niall Crowley



### **INTRODUCTION**

There has been much discussion as to whether or not Travellers are an ethnic group. This misses the key point. Ethnicity is an academic concept that has been relatively well defined. Travellers are an ethnic group by this definition. The discussion then changes to whether or not the Government recognizes Travellers as an ethnic group and to whether or not Travellers choose individually to be identified as a member of an ethnic group. But the starting point is that Travellers are an ethnic group and this is not something that is in the Government's gift, nor is it a matter of choice for Travellers.

### **DIFFERENCE**

As a society we have a problem with difference. A range of responses to difference are evident. None are positive. They include:

- Discrimination: the Traveller ground has been one of the highest areas for casefiles under the Equal Status Act since its enactment in 2000.
- Denial: the Government continues to deny Traveller ethnicity. Denial is also evident in the words of the teacher or other professional who sets out "I treat everyone the same".
- Segregation: this has been the experience, more in the past than now, of Travellers in the education system.

- Assimilation: this is about demanding that the behavior and values of the minority ethnic group conform to those of the majority group. Travellers have much experience of this approach to difference as do other minority ethnic groups. It is evident too in the words of a politician who stated "the children of today's migrants will in the future be more Irish than the Irish themselves".
- Stereotyping: this involves attributing fixed and unchanging characteristics to all members of the Traveller community.
- Tolerance: this is the dominant response to difference in Ireland. However it is problematic. When we tolerate we essentially put up with something that is otherwise unacceptable. Tolerance requires no understanding of difference and all too often co-exists with contempt for difference. As such the promotion of tolerance does no favours to Travellers.

We have a long way to go before we reach the necessary point of valuing difference- understanding that difference is something necessary, important and beneficial to society, understanding that difference within organizations is good for organizational performance. The key indicator for when difference is valued is when organizations begin to do their business differently so as to take account of the practical implications of difference.

## **A STRANGE SITUATION**

We are in a strange situation when it comes to Traveller ethnicity. Everybody from Government appointed Task Forces to the social partners to the Dail to the United Nations has recognized Traveller ethnicity but the Government continues to refuse recognition.

In 1995 the Government Task Force on the Travelling Community reported. They recommended that the distinct culture and identity of the Traveller community be recognized and taken into account. They noted that the discrimination experienced by the Traveller community equated with racism in the international context. Culture and identity are the two pillars of ethnicity. The Task Force thus recognized Traveller ethnicity and put forward a valuing of this difference in seeking to have the Traveller culture and identity taken into account.

In 1996 the social partners agreed the Partnership 2000 national agreement. This included a commitment to achieving a new status for the culture and identity of the Traveller community. Again ethnicity is recognized and a new approach to difference is put forward.

Most interestingly, in 1999 the Dail passed the Equal Status Bill with an amendment that defined Travellers for the purpose of the Traveller ground. The Dail agreed to capitalize the "T" in Traveller and incorporated what is an ethnic definition of the Traveller community into the Bill:

*The community of people who are commonly called Travellers and who are identified (both by themselves and others) as people with a shared history, culture and traditions including historically a nomadic way of life on the island of Ireland.*

Gerry Whyte, a professor of law at Trinity College Dublin, noted that "This definition thus represents the successful culmination of a campaign by Travellers to be recognized as a

distinct ethnic group, as opposed to an economically deprived group, in Irish society".

Despite this widespread recognition the Government, in a 2004 report to the United Nations Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, stated that "The Government's view is that Travellers do not constitute a distinct group from the population as a whole in terms of race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin". The United Nations Committee responded by expressing concern at the Government's position with regard to Traveller ethnicity and encouraged the "Irish Government to work more concretely towards recognizing the Traveller community as an ethnic group". The Government remains in defiance of this recommendation.

## **DOES IT MATTER?**

There are three very immediate and visible implications of this position of the Government.

Firstly, while it is more widely accepted that Travellers have their own culture and identity this factor of cultural difference is not understood, not valued, and not taken into account at the point where services are delivered to the Traveller community. When Government refuse to recognize Traveller ethnicity, Traveller culture and identity remain a concept promoted at national level but that has not been embedded in local level practice. Traveller culture and identity becomes a concept that is effectively undermined by the refusal to recognize ethnicity.

Secondly, while the past decade has seen intense debate about cultural diversity in Ireland and how most effectively to manage this diversity, Travellers have been left out of this debate. In previous times Travellers and Traveller organizations struggled to get anyone to talk about cultural diversity and its implications. Now that this debate is happening it is deeply problematic that it takes no account of the situation and experience of the Traveller community. In seeking to promote an integrated society we now have an Office of the Minister for Integration that excludes Travellers from its brief. This is bad for Travellers but it is also bad for society when our approach to integration learns nothing from the decades of very difficult experiences of the Traveller community.

Thirdly the lack of recognition of Traveller ethnicity has hindered Travellers in seeking to exercise their rights. This was evident in the 2007 High Court judgement in the case taken by the Dohertys against South Dublin County Council, the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, Ireland and the Attorney General. The case was supported by the Irish Traveller Movement and the Equality Authority acted as amicus curiae. The case related to an accommodation issue. No discrimination was found or no failure by the local authority to fulfill their duties under housing legislation was found essentially because the local authority was able to show that it had offered the same treatment to the Dohertys as it would have offered to settled people. The practical implications of cultural difference were not taken into account and the judgement did nothing to resolve the unacceptable living conditions of the Dohertys.

## **A KEY TO EQUALITY**

In seeking to identify how the recognition of Travellers as an ethnic group might be the key to equality for Travellers it is useful to first set out our understanding of equality. Equality encompasses a range of different objectives. These include:-

- Equality in the distribution of resources in society, resources such as incomes, jobs, health, education and accommodation. Travellers experience serious inequalities in this regard with high levels of unemployment, a low presence in third level education, low life expectancy and many families still living on the side of the road with basic facilities.
- Equality in relation to who holds power or has influence in Irish society. There are no Travellers in the Dail, Seanad, or judiciary for example. Traveller organizations are represented in social partnership but express increasing frustration at their lack of influence within social partnership.
- Equality in access to relationships of care, respect and solidarity with the wider society. Travellers' experience is one of relationships characterized by tension, disrespect, abuse and conflict with the wider settled society.
- Equality in the status and standing afforded to different groups in society. The denial of Traveller ethnicity undermines any status and standing for Travellers in Irish society.

It is important to understand that these different equality objectives are interlinked. Where a group does not have status or standing it will not enjoy relationships of respect with the wider society, it will find it hard to exercise any influence over decisions and it will experience barriers in seeking to access resources. In this way the recognition of Traveller ethnicity can be seen as a key to unlocking the struggle for equality for Travellers. The recognition of Traveller ethnicity will secure a new status and standing for Travellers that will shape new terms on which resources are made available to Travellers, that will shape new relationships of mutual respect with the settled community and that will underpin a new influence for Travellers in their dealings with the state.

The recognition of Traveller ethnicity won't secure equality for Travellers. However it provides a new and solid foundation from which to pursue equality for Travellers. It is key in:-

- Empowering Travellers with a new standing in society.
- Enabling Travellers to engage with the settled community in a context of mutual respect.
- Creating a new access for Travellers to resources including public sector services that take due account of the practical implications of cultural diversity.

The recognition of Traveller ethnicity is also a matter of some internal importance to individual Travellers and to the Traveller community. Recognition will serve to enhance personal self esteem, confidence and pride in one's identity and traditions. Recognition will enable a shared identity and a shared pride in identity which is important for any community seeking to take its rightful place in the wider society.

## **WHAT TO DO**

The Irish Traveller Movement campaign is important in seeking recognition of Traveller ethnicity. It serves to build and articulate the demand for recognition. It assists a shared understanding of ethnicity as being about difference rather than separateness. This is important to address fears that have been expressed by Travellers about recognition. It

enables alliances to be built so that the demand for recognition is being expressed in a wide range of different sectors. Most importantly it underpins a shared pride in Traveller identity, history, tradition and contribution to Irish society.

There now needs to be a high profile and committed recognition by Government of Traveller ethnicity. However this needs to go beyond a mere statement of recognition. It needs to be reflected in the inclusion of Travellers in the brief of the Office of the Minister for Integration. It needs to be underpinned by a new provision in equality legislation that requires service providers to make adjustments to ensure that their services take account of the practical implications of Traveller culture and identity.