

Ethnicity – The Core of Our Movement

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Good morning ladies and gentleman, The Irish Traveller Movement are pleased to have this opportunity to outline why Ethnicity is at the core of our Movement, and why we feel it is vital for the survival of Travellers in Ireland. Today I am going to present this input differently to other presentations we have made around ethnicity. We have delivered other Ethnicity inputs in an academic format and focused heavily on the law surrounding Traveller Ethnicity – these materials are available on our website or by contacting our office. All our member groups and most, if not all of the Government Departments represented here today will have also been in receipt of our material.

Today I want to deliver our message in the spirit of the consultations and workshops we've held nationally– and that is, straight from the hearts of the Travellers who participated in these and others are involved with us over the last 22 years. My name is Brigid Quilligan, I'm a Traveller woman from Killarney and I work as the Director of ITM. I am the eldest of eleven children and a mother of one son aged 13. Like all the eldest Traveller women in the audience, my role in my family has been one of being a second mother to all my siblings. I will refer to my family throughout my talk because ultimately when I think of ethnicity, I think of my family, past present and future. My family in this context could be any Traveller

family. During the course of our input I will tell you a bit about the Irish Traveller Movement, clarify what the Irish Traveller Movement mean by Ethnicity, I will tell you about the impacts of denial of our ethnicity, the benefits of recognition of our ethnicity and I'm going to deal with some of the concerns Travellers around the country have identified with recognition of our ethnicity.

The Irish Traveller Movement is a national membership organisation with over 40 member groups. We formed in 1990 due to the need for Travellers to have a collective voice, not just a voice which dealt with the nice issues such as our art, our music or our storytelling, but one which highlighted and addressed the abuse of our human rights. Our movement was formed when a few outspoken visionary people shared the dream of Travellers having the right to self determination, Travellers having the right to self represent and to Travellers having the right to equality. From our conception, recognition of Traveller Ethnicity has been at the core of our movement. Why? Because we recognised that the terrible racism and discrimination Travellers in Ireland faced resulted from us not being recognised for the people we are.

So, Who are we? We are an indigenous Irish people, our people were nomadic before the settlement policies, and some still are. We do not all agree on the different Gammon or Cant words we use to describe our people, we may identify as either Minceir, Pavee, or Tinker but we all agree we are Travellers. Like other Indigenous people across the globe, Travellers fight to be recognised for the people we are while the settled population tries to stamp out our 'Travellerness' and make us conform to settled way of living and thinking. As with the Aborigines in Australia, The Maori in New Zealand, the Roma in Europe and the Sami in Finland, our recognition will come. I have no doubt about that. What gravely concerns and hurts me and other Travellers is, how many of our people will have to die before this happens. I know some settled people get offended when we compare ourselves to the groups I just named because they feel we are nothing like those indigenous groups and have suffered nothing like their level of racism. It is widely believed by some that we deserve whatever hostility we receive – but you know, for a long time in these other groups home countries they were perceived the same as we are. Some still are. We share many characteristics and when as a Traveller woman I meet people from these communities, there is an unspoken understanding and kinship – our experiences of marginalisation, racism and state denial of the authenticity and value of our people is startlingly similar.

What makes Irish settled people able to recognise an indigenous group in another country recognise their mistreatment but deny us the same acknowledgement? It's Racism. Difficult for some to hear, but that's what it is. In Ireland at every level, Travellers are subjected to racism, and people aren't even embarrassed to speak of Travellers in a degrading way or to treat Travellers unfavourably. People in powerful positions abuse their power and discriminate against us without any consequences. What message does that send to people. While being a Traveller should be a wonderful, beautiful thing, most of the settled population think there are no worse people on this earth or at best that we need to become like them to

succeed in Irish society. We self identify and others identify us as a group separate to other Irish People. This doesn't make us any less Irish; this makes us less valued as Irish people. Despite all that has been done to us, we sing Amhran na bhFiann and fly the Tricolour as proud as any other Irish person but we are not as equal in our own country as any other Irish person, why?, simply because we are Traveller.

The Irish Traveller Movement was founded on the principle that Travellers are an Ethnic Group and recognition of Traveller Ethnicity has been at the core of our movement for the past 22 years. Travellers have suffered racism in the areas of Education, Accommodation, Health, Employment and the Justice system for decades. We feel that the root cause of this racism is while we are recognised as different our difference is not celebrated. We are still seen as “failed settled people”, not as a proud indigenous people. In 2008 our members said enough is enough. It stops here. In order for real change to come our ethnicity needed to be recognised. Our ethnicity campaign as we know it began.

So having outlined who the ITM is, why we were formed and why ethnicity is at the core of our work, I now turn to the term ethnicity itself. So, the million dollar question, what is ethnicity? There are many different definitions by various experts on what it is, and we will hear from some of those experts today. The word ethnicity in itself seems very exotic –we usually hear it used to describe someone of a different skin colour. Travellers are white and Irish so you wouldn't automatically think of us as being of an ethnic group. However, when you look at what constitutes ethnicity, we most certainly fit the criteria. To be an ethnic group, you must be born into the group. For instance, many people opt out of being recognised as Travellers, but no one can ever become a Traveller unless they are born into it. Travellers have a shared history, culture and language. We acknowledge ourselves as being of a group different to settled people and settled people acknowledge us as being a separate group. While we share the same history and culture as many settled Irish people in Ireland they do not share our Traveller history and culture. That is our own. Ethnicity is our identity – it is who we are. Our culture changes – we are a different people than we were even twenty years ago, but our identity remains the same. It is often easier to define what we were than what we are now. The contrast is our Ethnicity, our identity. That never changes. We may not be able to describe easily and for all Travellers what makes us Traveller but we know in our hearts we are. We feel it. It really is in our soul.

Take my family, we've lived in houses since 1979. All my brothers and sisters live in houses, all my cousins live in houses, but we are none the less Traveller. The term settled Traveller is one which is often used to describe Travellers who live in houses. Well meaning people use it to infer that those of us who live in houses are better, more normal. But ask any Traveller here and they will tell you, if we are living in houses for a hundred years we are still Travellers. As a matter of fact, the term settled Traveller is an insult. Traveller is our identity, and no matter if we live in a tent, a trailer, a chalet, in a council estate or in a palace, we are still Travellers, never settled Travellers. As Travellers, our identity is something we

have always had and always will have. It is not something that is for a government to grant. All we are looking for is for our ethnicity to be recognised and protected by law for the people we are. Travellers in the room do you feel valued and protected as a Traveller? If you don't, could you raise your hands. I have no doubt but that there are Travellers around Ireland who feel they are equal and that they are valued for being who they are. If you are one of these Travellers, you are indeed rare.

Having set out what ethnicity is, I am now going to talk about what some of the benefits of having our Ethnicity might be. We know that even if our ethnicity is recognised tomorrow, that we still have to struggle for our human rights. The difference we feel it will make through is that we will be fighting with a strong foundation. At the moment we are seen as failed settled people. No matter what is said about respecting our culture or our rights, the state seeks to assimilate us and by doing so oppresses us. Of course the state will deny this, but really any Traveller here can vouch that that has been our experience.

Above all other benefits, is there one which fundamentally could change the track our people are on. While we talk of the recognition of us for the people we are would result in increased self esteem and pride amongst our people. We all know of Travellers who are struggling with their identity. We see the effects this has on people. Some people look as if they are thriving, they are principals, doctors, lawyers, teachers, guards, but how must it be for them to live and work in a society where Travellers are openly spoken about in degrading terms? How must it be for them if they feel someone they teach or a client of theirs recognises they are Travellers? Could their whole world fall apart if their identity is revealed? The unfortunate answer is yes.

So while we have some really positive role models who are open about their identity, we have many more that conceal it. This is not what I wish for my child. Given that he is male, you will not be surprised to hear that he has already suffered racism and despite him being my little gentle baby boy, he is seen as a 6ft thug by shopkeepers and treated like crap at times. So much so, that he now has changed his way of dressing. What next will he have to change and, at what cost? I want for my son what you want for your children. I want him to be able to stand tall and say I am a Traveller and say it with pride. I want my son to be able to provide for himself financially after completing college, I want my son to be free from drugs and other harmful substances, I want my son to have good mental health, I want my son to feel part of Irish society. I want my son to be a good man. I want my son to live a good, long, happy and healthy life. I can do my part, he can do his, but the state needs to step up and protect my son and your children.

I'm ashamed to say it but have my expectations of my son dropped because society's expectation have? Why do I pray that he doesn't get depressed, why do I pray that he doesn't do drugs? At 13? Why? I'll tell you why, because like ethnic minorities across the globe who are marginalised, the young male absorbs the lack of value on him, the lack of opportunity for him and internalises it. What is the effect of lack of denial of our ethnicity? We continue to be viewed as failures and criminals who will not tow the line. We internalise this sense of failure. We continue to be made to feel powerless and useless. We are made to feel not good

enough, not equal. Most of us do not have any faith in our government, our civil service, because we are in constant conflict and do not feel respected or heard. Our people are forced into denying their identity to try to make a live for themselves. Travellers have only so much of a fight; I know we say we are strong and proud. But which family here hasn't been pushed to the brink? Which family here doesn't have several crosses to bear, which family here doesn't feel like you're spinning out of control unable to stop the destruction to our people to our families? Our young people are poisoning themselves with drugs and alcohol, domestic violence is more violent, Traveller conflict is imploding and our finest youngest brightest people are taking their own lives. I am no psychotherapist, but I know this has everything to do with being an out casted people. A people marginalised, and not heard.

We have just looked at some of the benefits of having our identity recognised. Now, I want to look at some of the fears that some Travellers may have about having our identity recognised. Throughout the ethnicity campaign, the Irish Traveller Movement created spaces all across the country for Travellers to discuss ethnicity - what it meant, and what its recognition would mean for us as a people. Almost all of our experiences out doing regional workshops were positive. As mentioned earlier, some people had fears, I will address those fears shortly, but I would like to say that we are an organization and a movement which respect diversity and diversity of views within the community. We never have claimed that we speak for every single Traveller in the country. As a movement, we have tried to create spaces for these discussions. Often an argument used against recognizing Traveller ethnicity is that not every single Traveller in the country agrees with our campaign. However as with other movements, such as the women's movement and the disability movement, total consensus is not necessary.

The ITM as a movement played a huge role in having Travellers recognised within the Equality Legislation. At the time, not every Traveller agreed with this- yet we went ahead as we knew what the long term benefits would be for the community as a whole. So while ITM always strives to create ways for all Travellers to get involved, the ethnicity campaign is and never was about waiting until every Traveller agreed on this. Why should we as a community have to bear an unfair burden to wait until every one of us agrees on this? As I said, other marginalized groups never have had to do this.

And as for the ethnicity campaign, nothing is being forced on Travellers. If the State recognises our identity, Travellers who don't agree chose to can self identify as coming from an ethnic group or they can opt out. Some of the concerns we heard were would our Irishness would be called into question if our ethnicity was recognised? To answer that, No. First and foremost, we are all proud Irish citizens, despite not having the same rights in the island of Ireland, we love country and our ethnicity has nothing to do with our nationality. For instance, Irish Traveller children born in England are still Irish Travellers – their nationality on their passport is English, but they are Irish Travellers. Why, because it is their ethnicity, Traveller is the name of the people they come from but English is their nationality.



Further division between settled and Traveller community has also been raised as a concern. Our answer to that is - For the last 40 years the state has tried to assimilate us, to make us settled. By holding on to our Traveller identity we have become victims of racism, discrimination and state oppression. We held our ground and onto our beliefs against great oppression. We are already divided. When our people die younger than settled people and when suicide is 6 times more prevalent amongst Travellers, what more divide could we have? Don't be fooled by the plamasing about us being just as Irish as everyone else, we know that, but do we have the same rights? Don't be fooled by the scare mongers, whether we like it or not there is already a dangerous divide. And now the scare mongers will tell us that we will create more of a divide by standing up for our rights, up for our right to finally be recognised for the people we are?

ITM rejects the theory that there will be more of a divide with settled people. Long-term, recognition of us as a people will bring us closer together. Recognition and value of us as a people, our contribution to society, to culture, to history and arts can only enrich and build relationships. Slowly how we are a people are viewed will change. Our history books will need to tell our right history, we will need to be acknowledged and Traveller will not be a dirty word. Travellers have been an integral part of Irish society for centuries, acknowledgement of this would raise the self esteem of Travellers everywhere and create a wave of changed behaviour towards Travellers

We would no longer have to defend ourselves for being a Traveller.

There would be more protection under national and international law. Other speakers will go through this later, but as it stands we are protected under the Equal Status Act, but while it offers some protection, it is not enough. Remember how easy it was for the Vintners to lobby for a change in that act which left us less protected when being refused entry to a licensed premises. Attitudes take a long time to change, but behaviour changes more quickly when we realise there are consequences.

Another impact of recognising our identity would be to name the discrimination we face for what it is: racism. No one wants to be called a racist, yet the racism we face is denied as we are told “Irish people cannot be racist to Travellers, sure aren’t they white and Irish like us”. Again, recognition would not change things overnight, but it would help build a society where anti-Traveller racism would not be something that is proud to rear its ugly head. Another benefit that we would lobby for is Affirmative action programmes for Travellers. In other countries minority groups have successfully lobbied for affirmative action programmes in education, employment and politics. So for instance what would Ireland look like in 20 years if we had places in the Government put aside for Travellers? What would it look like if 5% of the jobs in the civil service had to be filled by Travellers? What Ireland look like if a certain number of places colleges were kept for Travellers, not unlike the positive action programmed in the Royal College of Surgeons. Now what would Ireland look like after 50 years of affirmation action programmes for Travellers. Think Obama. I know I am.

If we were granted our ethnicity, every piece of legislation, every policy would have to be Traveller proofed. So for instance, the recent housing policy on not building new housing stock, if it were Traveller proofed would have specified that Traveller Specific Accommodation should be exempt from this legislation as there is not enough Traveller specific accommodation in existence to meet even the current needs. We as a people would have future protection for our culture, our history, and most importantly, our identity. We have a lot of expertise in the room; we could spend today to discuss what know of positive actions ethnicity would impact on us. We need to dream and think big.

I’ve spent a large part of my presentation, talking to Travellers about what ethnicity means, what the benefits would be to us as Travellers and fears that some Travellers may have about ethnicity recognition. Now I’m now going to talk to the settled people in the room. Often, we have been approached by public servants and members of the settled community, who struggle with understanding Traveller ethnicity. They often think that if we aren’t nomadic then that we aren’t really Travellers. And how being white, born in Ireland and speaking English, how could we be an ethnic group. Again, I’ll leave the definition of ethnicity to the experts, but before that, there is something very easy you can do to get your head around shared identity and ethnicity.

Practically every settled person has relatives living in the UK, the USA, Canada or Australia. I’m not talking about the very recent unfortunate situation where our young people, Traveller and settled, are forced to go abroad to seek employment. I’m talking about the Irish Diaspora, who emigrated generations ago. Practically every settled person here has an aunt or uncle or a plethora of cousins who were born and raised in the UK, for example. They are citizens of the United Kingdom, have UK passports, speak English, yet identify themselves, should they chose to, as Irish. Their Irish identity is something they are often proud of and celebrate, and what makes the Irish Americans or Irish in the UK has changed over the generations, but their ethnicity, their Irishness, has not. Some of them have never even been to Ireland and while their nationality might be English or American, their ethnicity is clearly Irish.

And like Traveller ethnicity, it is something they are born into and chose whether or not to express it. They clearly identify themselves as a Diaspora community as separate to the majority population, and their Irishness marks them as different, even generations later. They share cultures and values, and these values change over time, while their Irishness does not. And while they are white and speak English in predominantly white-English speaking countries, their ethnicity has singled them out for racism, then and now. And if you were to ask any second or third generation Irish-American what made their identity, it may not be what you see as Irish, but it is something that is part of their identity, their beliefs and it, like Traveller identity, will change and evolve in the future, but it will remain something that their children are born into and that they will feel.

In my presentation, I've outlined the Irish Traveller Movement vision and where our ethnicity campaign has come from. I've outlined what ethnicity means to our member groups and to me as a Traveller, and how important it is for our identity to be recognised at a State level. I've outlined some of the positive impacts recognition would have for Travellers and society as a whole and I've also hopefully put to bed any fears Travellers might have about having our identity formally recognised by the State. I've also tried to make ethnicity clearer as something that isn't based on nationality or colour of your skin in terms that everyone should be familiar with.

To conclude, I would like to say that over and over again we hear reasons why the state won't recognise us a people. As a Traveller woman and activist, I find it hugely insulting and demeaning to be told 'there is a divergence of views'. There is a tiny minority who haven't yet supported the campaign. We don't legally need consensus from every community member, to be protected by the state and recognised for who we are, and let's be very clear about that. I have heard of people asking individual Travellers on the ground if they want ethnicity. Now that is a bit unfair. I didn't know what the word was myself until a few years ago, but I knew that we were our own group of people, native to Ireland with our own values, culture, beliefs, language and history. So the next time ask someone if they share these characteristics and you will see for yourself the support for us to be recognised for the people we are. To back this up, a quote from a piece of research carried out by researcher Anita Pannell in Ennis in 2007 Traveller Perspective on the Clare Traveller Accommodation Programme 'All Travellers interviewed in this research clearly saw themselves as a distinct ethnic group with a specific culture related to the Traveller way of life'.

So ask a question the right way, and you'll get the right answer. Travellers know that the only reason the state will not recognise us a people, is because they do not want to face up to their responsibilities. Excuses have expired, patience has expired and we are a people pushed to the limit. Our children's futures are at stake and we cannot afford the luxury of waiting for the next many years to be recognised. The longer this debacle goes on, the harder it will be for the reconciliation to begin. I would like to acknowledge the politicians, civil servants, academics and of course our beloved settled colleagues and friends who support Traveller Ethnicity. Thank you for your solidarity. Traveller Ethnicity will be a topic in the history books of our grandchildren and great grandchildren. Ask yourselves, what part would I like

to tell them I played?

Thank you ladies and gentleman.