



## **Review of the Commission on Itinerancy Report**

### **Introduction**

Many Travellers and Traveller organizations have expressed an increasing exasperation on engaging with State Agencies and are questioning how their energy is being used and whether any tangible outcomes have been achieved for Travellers. Many activists have felt that despite successes at many levels that when dealing with officials and elected representatives that their voices are not being listened to or the issues facing Travellers acknowledged.

Some activists feel that many settled people are essentially still operating from a mindset set in the Commission Report in 1963. But this document is out of print and almost unavailable, and thus leaves ITM member organisations unable to chart what these attitudes are, and having understood them, challenge or change this mindset. Given that 2013 is the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of that report, it is timely to revisit what it actually set out to do, what its legacy has been and how it still impacts on the structures and systems that Travellers and Traveller organisations are operating in.

Many activists will be aware of the report and much reference is made about its aims within the Movement, yet given the size, scope and difficulty in sourcing the original document, many members of the Movement will not have a detailed analysis of what the Commission set out to do. This report provides an analysis of what the *Report of the Commission on Itinerancy* set out to do, what is in it and provide a backdrop for our Annual Conference on 11<sup>th</sup> June 2013 in order that as a collective, ITM can look to engaging with that mindset- and ultimately challenge that and bring about positive change for Travellers in Ireland with their identity intact.

### **Report of the Commission on Itinerancy 1963**

The Commission on Itinerancy (hereby referred to as “The Commission” for abbreviation purposes) was established in June 1960 and the publication of the report of the Commission three years later established policy relating to Travellers for the

next twenty years. As the first State policy document on Travellers, this document will be important not only for the strategies it set out for the next two decades, but more importantly for how the Government of Ireland viewed Travellers, their culture, values and ethnicity and how it aimed to accommodate this diversity within the State. However before looking at any of the recommendations, performing any analysis of the language contained in the Report or looking at the membership of the Commission, clear insight can be gained on how Travellers were viewed and policy developed by simply looking at terms of reference.

The report opens by outlining the four terms of reference for the Commission. These were:

- (1). To enquire into the *problem 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 disadvantage to themselves and to the community resulting from their itinerant habits*
- (4). To make recommendations<sup>i</sup>.

[p.11, emphasis added]

Immediately within the terms of reference of the Commission, Travellers are designated as “Itinerants” and a “problem arising from the presence in the country of itinerants of considerable number” must be examined by the Commission. In order to address this “problem”, Travellers must be assimilated or “absorbed” into the “general community” and until this absorption of an ethnic minority into the settled majority population the Commission must consider what steps to “reduce to a minimum the disadvantage” to Travellers and the settled population that nomadism or “their itinerant habits” produce. Everything in the report looks not at the problems Travellers face in Ireland, but the problems Travellers “cause”. Therefore we can be quite certain that the first policy document developed by the state that specifically looks at Travellers is not looking at methods of supporting the culture and values of Travellers, but at methods of absorbing or assimilating Travellers into the majority population and essentially ending Traveller identity.

With those terms of reference in place, it is not surprising to find that there are no Traveller representatives on the Committee: indeed the Committee is drawn almost exclusively from those in positions of power within the state, such as a Judge of the High Court (chair of the Committee); the Vice-president for Leinster of the National Farmers' Association; the Director of the Dublin Institute of Catholic Sociology; a Chief Superintendent of an Garda Síochána; a County Manager; two Chief Medical Officers; a former chief inspector for the Department of Education and the chairman of the General Council of the Committees of Agriculture. Memoranda were also submitted from various organizations not represented on the commission, comprised of Church and Voluntary organizations, but also the INTO, the Irish Medical Association, the Irish Countrywomen's Association, the Irish Creamery Milk Suppliers Association, the National Farmer's Association, Macra na Feirme and Muintir na Tíre. Therefore the members of the Commission and the memoranda they received in developing the report are exclusively from settled people, with no input from those subject to the policies being developed, namely Travellers. Furthermore, the commission and those submitting memoranda represented either State agencies or agricultural/ landowner lobby groups, who are likely to have their own distinct agenda regarding nomadism and Traveller culture.

Having established the terms and reference of the Commission and examined who made up the commission and influenced the development of the report through submissions, one immediate issue needs to be addressed: namely, who is the subject of the report?

The Commission displays a remarkable obstinate insistence in referring to Travellers as "Itinerants", even though they are aware that this is offensive to Travellers- again instructive of the mindset that developed this policy document.

*"Itinerants (or Travellers as they prefer themselves to be called) do not constitute a single homogenous group, tribe or community within the nation although the settled population are inclined to regard them as such. Neither do they constitute a separate ethnic group" (p.37, emphasis added).*

Interestingly the Commission admits that the settled population recognizes Travellers as a distinct group; however, the Commission refuses to regard them as a separate ethnic group. No evidence for this decision is shown, and despite no rationale for this decision, it has remained official Irish Government policy for the next 50 years, despite the recognition of Travellers as an ethnic group by the UK, Northern Ireland, the UN and repeated calls from researchers and human rights for the Government to recognize Traveller ethnicity. Therefore a policy document from 1963 which was developed by a commission made up of civil servants and informed by charity, religious and agricultural organizations decided that Travellers were not an ethnic group; no reference was made on how ethnicity was defined, no expertise from anthropology or similar disciplines was cited and yet this decision has steadfastly remained official Irish policy.

Further sections of the report can also shed light on the ideology of the Commission. In Chapter two (p. 15) The Commission looks ascertain whether “similar problems” existed elsewhere in Europe and the steps taken to deal with them: including France, Spain, Western Germany. In looking at “itinerant populations more or less similar to those in this country” in Europe in 1963 and in light of the genocide faced by the Roma and Sinti under Nazi rule, the Commission is at best, ignorant of recent European history, although far worse conclusions could be read from this “enquiry” (see endnote 1 for further examination of this “oversight”). Chapter three looks in detail at policies in the Netherlands, a country visited by members of the Committee as examining the systems in place there would “be of great value in considering the problem in this country”.

Chapter four outlines further information the Commission received in order to develop the report. The Commission invited individuals and organizations to submit memoranda; these invitations were extended to those who “might be in a position to assist the Commission”. Advertisements calling for submissions were also made in national daily and local newspapers and two announcements on national radio. However, the Commission felt that “itinerants were unlikely to come forward to the Commission with information as to their way of life or their views and attitudes generally”; however it was felt that it would be “unwise and undesirable” to produce a report “without making direct contact with a representative number of itinerant families”. The Commission decided to visit encampments, although the early State efforts at consultation with Travellers were bizarre in the least, in the impact of these visits would be “greater without prior announcement to or arrangement with the itinerants”. Visits to encampments in Dublin City by the Commission were facilitated by William Reynolds, “an official of the Dublin Corporation *whose regular duty it was to move itinerants from Corporation property*” (p. 29, emphasis added); an astute choice by the Commission in looking to ascertain Travellers’ views, namely bring someone who’s job involves moving Travellers on. Indeed for visits in the country were “made possible” by members of Garda Síochána- however Gardaí did not attend interviews with Travellers. It must be noted that very little of these visits and the views sought make their way into the text of the report; as will be noted, very few instances of discrimination faced by Travellers are mentioned. One of the rare occasions when this surfaces is in discussion of the Traveller “Origins, numbers, travel habits and social structure” (chapter 6) when Traveller emigration is discussed: “The high emigration is due to the harshness of the itinerant way of life at home, *the difficulty of obtaining employment here because of their background* and the opportunities for lucrative employment abroad” (p. 36, emphasis added).

The discussion of Traveller origins in chapter 6 is interesting. As “it was not essential to the consideration of the Commission’s terms of reference, no special study was made of the origins of the itinerant population of this country”; the Commission is aware that “a period of long research” would be needed to answer this question and this is a job for “trained historians” (p. 34). It is interesting that the Commission sees that historical analysis of background of Travellers is beyond their remit and expertise and best left to professionals to examine (historians). However, when Traveller

ethnicity is being examined, the Commission is resolute in providing a definite answer; indeed it provides an answer without any reference to any experts or any call for “a long period of research which would more properly suited” to anthropologists or sociologists. However despite the Commission stating that Travellers “do not constitute a single homogenous group, tribe or community within the nation . . . neither do they constitute a separate ethnic group” (see above), chapter 6 spends considerable time in outlining Traveller habits, social groupings and structures. If the Commission was absolutely certain that Travellers did not constitute a “single homogenous group, tribe or community or ethnic group”, why was such time and space taken up describing Traveller society and culture? Perhaps the Commission, despite their earlier stated conviction, may not have fully convinced themselves; perhaps should have left the question of ethnicity to those qualified to research and define ethnicity.

Given the enormity of the report, it is not the intention of this document to exhaustively list every example of how Travellers were viewed and what the Commission sought to do; therefore it is necessary to highlight some examples that give further light to what the Commission aimed to do.

In relation to education, chapter 10 points out the poor educational attainment of Travellers in relation to literacy. The Commission points out that: “Many itinerant parents expressed a desire to have their children educated but few appear to have made any effort towards that end” (p. 65). However in a later section one of the reasons Travellers have difficulty accessing education is hinted at: “In so far as the Catholic families are concerned, itinerant parents see to it that their children receive the sacraments of Baptism, Penance, Holy Communion and Confirmation, and go to some trouble to enable them to obtain the necessary instruction by remaining long enough in the vicinity of schools and convents where the children can be instructed. The Legion of Mary is very active in this field *and the Garda refrain from moving on families who remain in one place for this purpose*” (p.88, emphasis added). This is instructive for two points: firstly that a religious organization in conjunction with the Gardai will ensure that there is no forced movement, allowing uninterrupted access to schools in certain circumstances, highlighting that forced, unplanned movement (naturally) will impact on access to education. Secondly, Travellers are not moved on *until* they receive religious sacraments- suggesting that schools were there to provide pastoral care for Travellers, not to provide formal education.

Nomadism continues to tax the Commission in education provision for Travellers: “An educational policy for itinerants can only be successful if it is one which aims at catering for those who have been *induced* to leave the wandering life and for those who are likely to do so” (p. 69, emphasis added). The Commission has either showed a total disregard to nomadism as a way of life, or a total lack of imagination in developing strategies to make State services accessible to nomadic Travellers- trends that would continue from the publication of this document over the next 50 years. Education is introduced as a tool for “normalizing” or “civilizing”, and the Commission sees that a “lack of education extends beyond the school subjects. They

also lack the respect for social conventions, law and order and for the rights of property that are inculcated in the children of the *normal family* in the settled community by word and example in the home, in the school and in the community generally” (p. 65, emphasis added). Despite some analysis of Traveller social structure and values, these count for nothing for the Commission as they are not settled values and norms. Also, from the Commission’s perspective, all ills are caused by Travellers, never by settled people: the marginalized minority are always responsible for any imbalance, the powerful, settled majority are never at fault. These sentiments are continually reiterated throughout the report (see below for more examples). However at no point does the Commission offer ugly biologically deterministic views of Traveller intelligence and notes that “all available information indicates that itinerant children are no less intelligent than the average child in the settled community and the opinion of teachers with experience of such pupils is that they are no less apt than the ordinary children” (p.65) <sup>ii</sup>.

The Commission notes that for many Travellers it is economically unviable to remain in the same location for the entire year. The proposed “solution” to keep Traveller children in school is “itinerant children being taken from their families and placed in institutions”. The Commission notes that strong bonds in Traveller families would make it unacceptable and any advantage of “education imposed in such circumstances with its lasting legacy of bitterness” would be negligible. However the benefits being suggested to the Commission are not benefits of education for Travellers; they are in fact incredibly sinister “benefits” for the settled population, especially those who are intent on destroying Traveller identity. “Indeed such as ‘solution’ of the itinerant problem generally has been suggested to the Commission- not with a view to education as such but based on the belief that a separation of parents and children would result in the children growing outside the itinerant life and that thus *in one generation the itinerants as a class would disappear*” (p. 69, emphasis added). This suggestion is startling and is tantamount to an explicit perusal of a policy of cultural genocide, with striking parallels with other ethnic minorities, namely practices against Roma in Austria and the Aboriginal population under the rule of white colonialists.

Again relation to employment the Commission recommends that Travellers change their lifestyle to “adapt” to the “ordinary population”, not that any measures be put in place to support the Traveller economy: “It will be of the utmost importance if absorption into the general community is to succeed that many itinerants as possible should be encouraged, and where necessary assisted, *to adapt themselves to the employment patterns of the ordinary population*” (p. 73, emphasis added).

Instructive throughout the report is the fact that poor relations between the settled population and Travellers is almost exclusively explained as a cause of Traveller behaviour or lifestyle. Very rarely is discrimination of the majority population towards an ethnic minority mentioned, it is often hinted to in passing when proposing a scheme for assimilating or “absorbing” Travellers into a local community. The

Commission takes it for granted that Travellers are demonized and viewed as inferior by the settled population, yet this attitude is never analysed (let alone denounced) for what it is: a racist, discriminatory attitude. For example in proposing “absorption” of Travellers into housing, the Commission notes: “the deliberate provision of substandard dwellings for itinerants would *stigmatise those persons as inferior beings* and could only widen the gap already existing between them and the settled population” (p. 63, emphasis added). Also the Commission notes that Travellers are acutely aware of the racism they face daily: “In general, itinerants are *not antagonistic to the settled population* although they tend to be aloof and keep to themselves, possibly from experience and a *knowledge of the low regard in which they are held*” (p. 84, emphasis added). The Commission notes “allegations of intimidatory begging” which have been alluded to by some rural dwellers and organizations, and while some may have occurred the Commission felt “that most of them arise, *not so much from direct intimidation* by the itinerant as from a fear, *whether well founded or not* of the consequences of a refusal” (p. 84, emphasis added). So some of these allegations stem not from “direct” actions of Travellers but a fear “well founded or not” of the settled population. The chief grievance of settled people towards Travellers, notes the Commission, is Travellers “attitude to property of settled population” which is “one of the most serious problems and the cause of the greatest dissatisfaction and exasperation” particularly in relation to “the agricultural section of the community” (pp. 85-86); the latter section being well represented on the Commission itself and those who submitted memoranda, it should be noted.

In relation to criminality, the Commission notes that some Travellers are involved in crime but that: “In fairness, however, it must be acknowledged that itinerants are often blamed for many more crimes of this nature than they commit and for many other crimes of a nature which they seldom commit” (p. 94); a situation that appears not to have changed drastically in 50 years. The Commission notes of 239 instances of “retaliation” from the settled population, mostly farmers, in reaction to “acts of trespass”. These acts of retaliation were “mostly demands by local people for payment of compensation” for damage. However more serious acts of retaliation included:

“Assaults on itinerants, and attacks on their encampments, seizure of their property, shots fired in the vicinity of camps or at trespassing animals, animals wounded and disfigured by various means including slashing, the cutting of horses’ tails and manes, and horses being driven long distances” (p. 96).

The Commission also notes that they were “many more” than the 239 instances of retaliation over the last 10 years which “were not reported and that they were satisfied that there were many other cases which had not come to the notice of the Garda” (p.; 96). Given the severity of these acts of “retaliation” inflicted on Travellers by settled people, it should be no surprise why Travellers “keep to themselves” and why Travellers’ initial reaction to settled people may be “inclined to be somewhat defensive and even suspicious” (p. 84), given that it is settled people who inflict such acts, and that it is settled people (Gardai) who adjudicate in matters of dispute

between the two communities. Indeed the majority of the recommendations of this chapter (Chapter 14, *Criminal Offences and Penalties for Trespass*, p. 94) list recommendations for strengthening the law in favour of landowners, and discouraging “excessive tolerance and leniency by the courts” (p. 100) and if intimidation by Travellers is proved “the culprit should be dealt with severely” (p. 100). Consummate with the asymmetry of the entire report “retaliation” of settled people against Travellers is left unmentioned for new measures. However, the Commission does note a sinister, draconian measure that was suggested, that again has eerie recent historical parallels:

“The Commission rejected suggestions made to them that itinerants should be registered and issued with personal identity cards to overcome difficulties of identification encountered by the Garda in following up crime committed by them. The main ground for the Commission’s rejection was the undesirability of singling out any group in the community for this type of special treatment for police purposes. It was also considered that any such system would have damaging effects on any process of absorption and, in any event, would present great administrative difficulties, would be open to abuse and would be of doubtful utility in practice” (p. 100-101).

While clearly expressing moral qualms about “singling out any group in the community” the Commission qualifies the rejection of these highly dubious practice not with reference to recent history (again, see footnote 1) but in the difficulties this would create in “the process of absorption” (assimilation) of Travellers.

The penultimate chapter (prior to the general recommendations) relates to the “*Attitude of settled population to Itinerants*” (p. 102) and this chapter will be instructive in elucidating the levels of discrimination faced by Travellers 50 years ago and whether any change in attitude has occurred among the settled population. Settled people’s attitudes are “largely conditioned by the behaviour pattern which by experience *or hearsay has come to be regarded as the norm for itinerants*” (p. 102, emphasis added). Therefore “hearsay” of Traveller behaviour has become the norm and an entire ethnic group has become tarred by the actions (real or imagined) of a few. How do settled people manifest these “norms”? The attitude of Settled people to Travellers is “one of hostility” (contrast this with the Commission’s findings on Travellers’ views of settled people) and Travellers are:

“*despised as inferior beings and are regarded as the dregs of society. Many feel that they would demean themselves by associating themselves with them. Their presence is considered to lower the tone of a neighbourhood and those who live in that neighbourhood are seldom satisfied until the itinerants have been moved on*” (p. 102, emphasis added).

The Commission highlights these attitudes of settled people towards Travellers but shies away from the logical conclusion and naming this attitude for what it is: racism. Indeed, this racism is not even noted as discrimination in the entire report. It is left for



the reader to perform the mental exercise and analyse the above quote and ascertain whether the views of the majority of settled people in Ireland has progressed, remained stationary, or even regressed further.

The Commission notes that settled people's views on the situation is not one of concern for Travellers, but rather purely in terms of settled peoples grievances.

“The plight of itinerants and their isolation by the settled community, which is becoming progressively worse, is a serious problem and one which has not troubled the public conscience to any degree. The concern with the Commission found among very many members of the public that the problem of itinerancy should be solved was one which stemmed from a desire to deal with *a nuisance to the settled community* rather than from any desire to ameliorate the lot of families living a primitive and harsh existence” (p. 103, emphasis added).

Therefore isolation of Travellers from society, discrimination at an individual and State level and denial of identity are nothing compared to “a nuisance to the settled community”; a statement that requires no further comment.

And how do settled people aim to “solve” this “nuisance”? Those settled people who are interesting in actions that aim “to ameliorate” conditions conclude that “absorption is the only real solution” (p. 103). Essentially nomadism is the crux of the issue here: settle, be absorbed/ assimilated and this “problem” the Commission has been charged with addressing will cease to exist. Having already dubiously decided that Travellers are no different than the settled population, assimilation would mean then Travellers would no longer be Travellers. However the Commission notes that this is problematic as:

“The attitude of the settled population in so far as itinerants is concerned is not confined to those on the road. It has been brought to the notice of the Commission that some families of itinerant extraction who have managed to settle in different areas are still, often scornfully, known as “tinkers”, *even in succeeding generations*. This must affect the ability of such families to live a normal life and must be taken into account in estimating the time necessary to achieve complete integration” (p. 103, emphasis added).

Therefore it appears that “complete integration” is not contingent on whether Travellers are nomadic or not: the racism of settled people and the ethnic identity of Travellers (previously denied) are obviously the major factors as outlined in the above paragraph.

However it should be noted that those “enlightened” settled people who are interested in “ameliorating” the situation of Travellers are the exception rather than the rule: “There is so far little apparent desire on the part of the general public to act collectively for the betterment of the itinerants *as they do in many ways for other*

*poor sections of the community*<sup>iii</sup>. In general, little serious consideration has so far been given either to *the futility or the grave social injustice of a policy of just moving them on*” (p. 103, emphasis added). The final sentence seems to have escaped from being analysed by politicians and policy makers for the last 50 years; the provision of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2002 conclusively confirms that this statement regarding “the futility and grave social injustice of just moving them on” without the adequate provision of quality halting sites has been steadfastly ignored.

How does the Commission aim to bridge this chasm between the two communities? Unsurprisingly, given the asymmetric nature of the entire report, all changes must come from Travellers, and the legislation is the key to “protect the settled population” and improve the “climate of public opinion” which will progress the situation:

“Once that much progress has been made the elimination of other causes of friction could be undertaken with every expectation of success and without perhaps the necessity for the continued invoking of the punitive and prohibitive legislative measure recommended in this report. It is felt that strict enforcement of the law, at least in the early years, would have a salutary effect on the itinerants who, with their usually realistic outlook on life, would soon have a greater respect for the rights of the settled population once they realized that the authorities were serious about the enforcement of the law and that the consequences of disregarding it on either the criminal side or the civil side could not be avoided” (p. 104).

Therefore the racism and discrimination that Travellers face and the conditions that the Commission highlight throughout the report will be “solved” not through any positive State actions; no, the situation for Travellers will improve through increased enforcement of legislation targeting Travellers, and if those laws are enforced strongly. If this were not actually a State document that had huge consequences for Travellers for the next 20 years (and possibly influencing a whole host of future policy makers and providers of State services for future generations), this could be viewed as a laughable suggestion. Unfortunately this perverse logic is extended further still, as this view of legislation to punish Travellers as a measure to alleviate the discrimination they face, leads the Commission to see that these “same steps should restore the confidence of the settled population in the ability of the authorities to cope with the problem and encourage them to support the efforts to achieve a just problem” (p. 104). This statement translates as “Settled people will support assimilation of Travellers (authorities’ efforts to achieve a just solution to the problem) if the authorities rigorously enforce legislation against Travellers, specifically trespass legislation that criminalizes their nomadic lifestyle, so much so that Travellers will seek to settle to avoid persecution”. This statement can be again analysed by the reader, compared to the current situation for Travellers; readers can draw their own conclusions and draw parallels where necessary.

The final analysis from the Commission again is instructive of their ideologies and their views on Travellers. Discrimination that Travellers face (neither discrimination

nor the actual discrimination Travellers face, racism, are mentioned once in this report) is a result of their actions: settled people are inherently decent people, and if Travellers were to assimilate then all settled people would return to their normal kindly ways:

“Hostility to a class or group as now exists in relation to the itinerants is uncharacteristic of our people and its existence is indicative of the extremity to which the settled community or a large part of it feels it has been driven. The normal kindly feelings of the people, which are the more deep-seated one, will once again predominate when the immediate pressure of the itinerants’ wrongdoings has been relieved or, at least, substantially reduced (p. 104)”.

Therefore Travellers are guilty of another sin: creating anti-Traveller racism in the inherently noble Settled Irish; without the “problem” of Travellers, there is no “problem” of racism; a standard tactic to blame those being demonized, despised and marginalized for the plight for which they find themselves, with an interesting twist, in that Travellers are now somehow responsible for corrupting the “normal kindly” feelings of the Settled Irish population.

Despite noting earlier that settled people continue to discriminate against Travellers who are no longer nomadic, the Commission persists that “absorption” will occur once Travellers change, albeit not instantaneously. Therefore “local religious, charitable and welfare organizations should be invoked to play a very active part not merely as a liaison between the itinerants and the settled population but also to condition the latter’s feelings towards the newcomers” (p. 105). The approach is not one of achieving inherent rights for Travellers, rather using charitable approaches and appeals by religious groups to “condition” the response of settled people; the success of such an approach can be easily judged. [

The final chapter (*General Recommendations*) reiterates the previous 100 pages or so of the report: Travellers must be absorbed into the “general community” and this can only be achieved by “by a policy of inducing them to leave the road and to settle down” (p, 106). The “inducement” is highlighted in detail above through rigorous enforcement of legislation to criminalise nomadism; while all other measure suggested in the report all serve the same overall aim: assimilation. “All efforts directed at improving the lot of the itinerants and at dealing with the problems created by them and all schemes drawn up for these purposes should always have as their aim the eventual absorption of the itinerants into the general community” (p. 106).

## **Concluding Remarks Report of the Commission on Itinerancy 1963**

There are a number of important observations to be made after reviewing the Commission report. This is the first State document to look at developing Traveller-specific policies. Within that it sets the policy context for the next 20 years, and also sets out the State's relationship with its (then) largest ethnic minority and, intentionally or not, sets the agenda for future policy makers and State providers.

Firstly, the Commission denies Traveller ethnicity; and remarkably a group of civil and public servants without any expertise in the manner have defined a position that the Irish State has followed for the next 450 years. While the Commission (correctly) deferred the issue of Traveller background to those qualified to answer it (historians) they feel no such urge to consult with anthropologists to answer the question of Traveller ethnicity, even though Traveller ethnicity is recognized by settled people throughout the report. We can, perhaps, aim to understand the rationale for the Commission's decision in terms of an emerging State attempting to ensure that there are no divisions among the population along lines of ethnicity. Even if this, or other deeper reasons, existed it is still remarkable that nine men and one woman, in the majority civil servants, without any training or indeed without presenting any rationale that could deny Travellers their identity; it is even more remarkable that the decision of those 10 individuals still holds sway in Government to this day. Whatever reason for the decision then and whatever research may uncover misguided sentiments, it is unacceptable in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century that this decision holds firm in Ireland especially when it contradicts the UN, Council of Europe, the government of the UK and anthropological researchers. This is a decision that has held sway for 50 years too long in this country.

Secondly, it identifies a "solution" to Traveller problems as one of assimilation. Namely once Travellers stop traveling they will cease to be Travellers and become absorbed into the wider settled community- despite their findings to the contrary. The entire issue is framed for the Commission in the terms and reference at the start of their research namely "to enquire into the problem arising from the presence in the country of itinerants in considerable numbers" i.e. that the "problem" is Travellers as an ethnic group, who once "absorbed" will cease to be a problem. Travellers need to be "induced" to settle, and this will occur by strict enforcement of a raft of legislative measures that will force Travellers to seek to be housed. It is interesting that choice of type of accommodation is beyond consideration for the Commission, a tactic that has been pursued by State agencies for the next 40 years, in that nomadism is made so difficult as to be forced to abandon, but with only one type of accommodation made available to Travellers.

Thirdly, the settled population is exonerated from almost all its wrongdoings. The acts of "retaliation" by settled people and their blatant racism is all a consequence of Traveller actions; here the victims of the crime of racist hatred are responsible for being viewed as "inferior beings" and "the dregs of society" (p. 102). An historian would not need to look too far to find parallels between the views of the Commission

with odious regimes that have enacted crimes on minorities whilst blaming the minorities for the vicious treatment they face- indeed throughout the document the Commission uses language that chillingly parallels many of those regimes in question.

While the language and analysis contained in the Commission report are deeply offensive, it is important that as a collective we know what it contains in order to highlight how as a policy it has failed Travellers, and to continue to develop our collective analysis as a Movement in order to challenge these failed policies.

---

<sup>i</sup> The Commission would be in no doubt at all in what they were trying to achieve after the address of the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Justice at the inaugural meeting of the Commission. The address almost immediately states that: “the itinerant **problem** is one which has been with us for a very long time and about which a great deal has been written and spoken”. Indeed having outlined the terms and references of the Commission, the address states that: “These terms of reference are comprehensive and they acknowledge the fact that *there can be no final solution to the problems created by itinerants until they are absorbed into the general community*”. It seems extraordinary that the term “final solution” to the “problems created by itinerants” could be used in 1960, in light of the genocide of Jews, Roma and Sinti by Nazi Germany in the very recent past. Could this be simply be complete ignorance of recent history and an unfortunate choice of words?

<sup>ii</sup> Throughout the ages and up to modern times, ethnic groups and social classes who have been failed by the education system, resulting in poor educational outcomes, have often had this explained by the dominant group/ class in terms of an innate inability of a group/ class to learn. The system that discriminates is thus exonerated from failing to provide education by nature of an alleged inborn “inability” to learn. For all its failings, the Commission does not resort to this false, obnoxious reasoning. For examples where dominant groups sought to do just this, see *The Mismeasure of Man* (1992) by S.J. Gould. Interestingly the quote from page 65 in the Commission’s report refers to “ordinary” children- by this inference Traveller children are not part of the “norm”.

<sup>iii</sup> “It is easier to feel injustice about an action that happens half a world away than one that occurs half a block away”. It appears that is one sentiment that has continued from 1963 almost unabated- many groups have struggled for the rights of others across the globe, yet have failed to show real solidarity or support to

---

the human rights abuses of Travellers in their own country, where their actions and lobbying could affect real change.