

The Political Parties and Gypsies & Travellers

Introduction

This paper analyses recent statements and policy initiatives by the three main political parties on Gypsies and Travellers. Gypsies and Travellers are taken to include English Gypsies, Irish Travellers, New Travellers and other nomadic caravan occupying groups such as Show People.

The aim of the paper is to assess where the parties stand on Gypsy and Traveller accommodation and identify areas where Gypsy and Traveller campaigners and support groups may want to enter into discussions with the three political parties. Such engagement has some importance given the fact that the assessment of Gypsy and Traveller accommodation needs have now been completed as a consequence of new national policies and we are about to move to the next phase which will be delivery and in probability a greater test of political will.

It may be the case that some politicians will attempt to derail plans to deliver Traveller sites in their areas because of negative perceptions about Travellers. Such behaviour will impact upon community cohesion and social inclusion. It is important therefore to establish whether such politicians are acting in accordance with or in defiance of their political parties.

The Labour Party

Despite the Labour Party's opposition to the repeal of the 1968 Caravan Sites Act in the Criminal Justice and Public Order in 1994, it was not until the third term of a Labour Government that new measures were introduced.

The Labour Government has placed a statutory duty on local authorities to assess the accommodation needs of Gypsies, Irish Travellers and other Traveller groups (Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessments carried out under the Housing Act 2004). The assessment of need will feed into Regional Spatial Strategies, and Regional Planning Bodies will determine how many pitches are needed within each authority in the region.

Planning guidance (ODPM Planning Circular 1/2006) obliges local authorities to identify land in their Development Plans that is appropriate for Gypsy and Traveller sites. Gypsies, Irish Travellers and other Traveller groups will be able to buy such land and develop sites, but some public provision could be created as the Government has now enabled Registered Social Landlords to apply to the Housing Corporation for funds to develop sites. Where local authorities fail to identify land the Secretary of State has powers of intervention, which include the right to direct local authorities to do so (ODPM, Guide to Responsibilities and Powers, 2006, 8). Where local authorities fail to meet their new responsibilities it will be a material consideration in the planning process.

This means that planning inspectors should give consideration to this fact in deciding whether to grant a retrospective planning application by Gypsies and Travellers.

Despite this policy initiative a number of Labour MPs and councils have acted in a manner which is not in the spirit of these policies.

For example, in the summer of 2008 Brent Labour MP Barry Gardiner issued to his constituents an Anti-Social Behaviour guide. In the content page Travellers were included in a list of anti-social behaviour aggravators such as 'alcohol', 'graffiti', neighbours from hell', 'harassment' etc. In the section on Travellers the reader is immediately struck by a picture of a pile of rubbish in the background. The Irish Traveller Movement in Britain contacted Gardiner to express their concern and argued that the guide is reinforcing a very negative stereotype of Travellers and needs to be challenged. Whatever the perception that some anti social behaviour is carried out predominantly by certain ethnic groups, it is unthinkable that an MP would single out other groups in this way, yet some politicians seem to think they can generalise about the whole Traveller community with impunity. It should be noted that Barry Gardiner MP has since unreservedly apologised if the guide has caused any offence.

Such statements are not isolated. In an adjournment debate held on 30 January 2008, certain Labour MPs were vociferous in condemning Travellers who occupied unauthorised encampments. . Mr Brian Donohoe, MP for Central Ayrshire, for instance, said, in reference to Travellers in general: "Those people have become a threat to the community, and the powers-that-be seem powerless to intervene effectively. ... when the Travellers are in town they breach all the security put in place around empty factories, for example, with the result that the factories are trashed and millions of pounds-worth of damage is done."

The Conservative Party

In the 2005 General Election campaign the Conservatives said they would clamp down on Travellers' supposed abuse of the planning system. They proposed to give councils more powers to remove caravans from land, encourage police to adopt a tougher stance towards illegal sites and review or scrap human rights laws that Travellers were said to have used to defend their homes. They also wanted to make it a criminal offence for Travellers to trespass on private land.

The Conservatives' strong position on Gypsies and Travellers coincided with a vociferous campaign by the tabloids on Traveller accommodation, with newspapers like *the Sun* carrying headlines like 'Stamp on the Camps'. This, together with the fact that it was a Conservative Government which repealed the 1968 Caravan Sites' Act in 1994, scrapping the duty on councils to provide sites, has created a perception, especially amongst Travellers, that the Conservatives are anti-Traveller.

Such an assessment, though, may not be fair. Under the Conservatives a large number of public sites were developed as a consequence of the 1968 Caravan Sites Act, many of which were located in Conservative local authorities. It was also under a Conservative administration that the 100 % exchequer grant for site development was introduced in 1980.

Furthermore, some of the leading 'best practice' councils on Gypsy and Traveller issues are Conservative. *The Road Ahead: Final Report of the Independent Task Group on Site Provision and Enforcement for Gypsies and Travellers* refers to Conservative controlled Fenland district council as a model of good practice. The report states:

"Fenland District Council has engaged and consulted with its Travelling community to provide a tailored, responsive service, which successfully meets their needs. This relationship is based upon a mutual understanding between the council and the Travelling community, which has won respect from all sides. The objectives Fenland DC has for its work with the travelling community are to educate, engage and consult to allow Gypsies and Travellers to lead safe, healthy and supported lives. This also includes bringing about better community cohesion within the District". (*The Road Ahead*, 2007, p55).

It should also be noted that it was a Conservative MP, David Atkinson, who in 2002 and 2003 introduced the Traveller Law Reform Bill as a private members' bill. The Bill would have reintroduced a statutory duty on local authorities to provide sites. Atkinson's proactive consultations with Gypsies and Travellers triggered the mobilisation of Gypsies and Travellers leading to the formation of the umbrella campaign group the Gypsy and Traveller Law Reform Coalition. More recently, Richard Bennett, a Conservative councillor and chair of the Local Government Association task group on Gypsies and Travellers, has been a staunch advocate and campaigner for more Gypsy and Traveller sites.

A number of recent statements from Conservatives indicate that some in the Party have major disagreements with the Government's policies on Traveller accommodation and will seek to reverse them. In an adjournment debate on Traveller sites on the 18th June 2008, Jacqui Lait MP (Conservative front bench spokesperson) stated that "We will get rid of the Regional Spatial Strategies and we will ensure that local councils and local communities are on top of the development of their community so that it suits them rather than the Government" (Hansard Column 288WH). Later in the debate this was clarified as a pledge that there will be "no top-down targeting or pressure on councils to provide a set number over which they have no control" (Hansard Column 289WH).

Opposition to the Government's Traveller accommodation policies is further indicated in a letter from James Gray MP to the Chief Executive of his council. In the letter Mr Gray states:

“I have had informal discussions with Eric Pickles MP, Shadow Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, who has assured me that an incoming Conservative Government will seek to remove the necessity to provide sites of this kind and under these circumstances. It was after all the last Conservative Government who repealed the 1968 Gypsy Caravans Act in 1995. My strong instinct therefore is that the District Council should make representations to the Government that they are unable to comply with this requirement to provide a new gypsy encampment” (Letter from James Gray MP to Lachlan Robertson of North Wiltshire Council dated the 15th May 2008).

A possible ‘marker’ as to the Conservative position on Traveller sites at a local level in some areas is revealed by recent events in Southampton where Conservative council leaders will spend £150,000 over the next three years to prevent Gypsies and Traveller unauthorised encampments. The cash will be used to reinforce boundaries and secure entrance points over the next three years to prevent unauthorised access. The Conservatives in Southampton also scrapped Labour and Liberal Democrat plans to build a permanent Gypsy and Traveller transit site at Monks Brook in Swaythling. Southampton Council joined Conservative controlled Thurrock in December 2008 in stating that they would not develop more Traveller sites despite of the allocations given to them from their regional spatial strategy. It has been reported that Conservative Basildon and Southend Councils are considering legal challenges to the pitch allocations they received as part of the East of England regional spatial strategy.

The Liberal Democrats

The Liberal Democrats at a national level have supported the Government’s accommodation proposals, and figures like Lord Avebury and Nick Harvey MP have been active campaigners for Travellers’ rights. Candy Sheridan is an Irish Traveller and a Liberal Democrat councillor in Norfolk and one of the few Travellers to be elected to office. Some politicians at a local and national level, however, have not been so sympathetic. Following the burning of the effigy of a caravan and Traveller family by the Firlie Bonfire Society in Sussex, the Liberal Democrat MP for Lewes, Norman Baker, argued that this action had been prompted over anger about an earlier unauthorised encampment and that criminal elements were posing as Travellers. In a 2003 press release Mr Baker stated:

“..... there is a need for the Government to take steps to deal with the minority who use the cloak of an itinerant lifestyle to carry out crime in the expectation that they will get away with it”.

It should be noted, however, that following meetings with community representatives, Mr Baker and the Liberal Democrat Council of Lewes played an active role in fostering constructive dialogue and easing the acute community tensions that existed at this time.

In November 2008 Liberal Democrat led Portsmouth City Council decided to oppose calls to develop more Traveller pitches in the city despite being asked to find 10 pitches as part of the regional spatial strategy. Council leader Gerald Vernon-Jackson is reported by the Portsmouth News on the 13th November as stating 'We don't have a need for traveller sites, we don't have the space for traveller sites and we don't want traveller sites”.

Notes on the policies of some other parties

The Far Right

In the past the far right has sought to exploit community fears of Gypsies and Travellers. For example, in Epping Forest and Basildon the BNP have raised unauthorised Traveller sites as an issue in a negative manner. Recently when Thurrock Council resolved to not develop more Traveller sites BNP councillor Emma Colgate is reported by the Essex Echo (3/12/2008) to have said “Travellers sites are not very cohesive for our communities.”

The Green Party

The Green Party’s Manifesto for a Sustainable Society (see <http://policy.greenparty.org.uk/downloads/mfssrr.pdf>) supports the right of Travelling People to follow a nomadic way of life and also to have access to permanent sites or housing if they want it. The Green Party wants to impose a duty on local authorities to provide decent sites according to need and to allow access to traditional stopping places for periods of up to 28 days at a time. Where such sites are traditional wintering places, they would be open from the beginning of October to the end of March and closed for the rest of the year. Local authorities would be required to provide rubbish collection for all sites. The Party also has policies on voting rights and access to education.

Respect

There appear to be no policies on Gypsies and Travellers on the Respect Party’s website.

Conclusions

It is evident that in all the major parties there are local and national politicians who have taken extremely hostile stances on Traveller issue, often on account of pressure from constituents. Rather than challenge prejudice, politicians have all too often preferred to move with a flow of racism towards Travellers. In some cases politicians are even speaking against their official party stand.

Recommendations:

Education

On none of the Party websites was there any up to date information on the rights of Gypsies and Travellers, Government policy or that of the political parties. We believe such information would be useful, as politicians might show more wisdom in some of their statements if such information were readily available. Where racist and dangerous statements are made, political parties should take swift and robust action.

We also believe that the political parties should be more proactive in organising balanced information and discussion opportunities at events for local government such as their local government and regional conferences. There is also scope for the Local Government Association and National Association of Local Councils to do more to educate councillors and forge consensus.

In 2003 the All Party Parliamentary Group for Gypsy and Traveller Law Reform was founded. It includes a cross party section of MPs and peers who feel strongly about this issue. Amongst its members are Julie Morgan MP (Labour), Tim Boswell MP (Conservative) and Lord Avebury (Liberal Democrat). This group will continue to have an important role to play in raising awareness amongst politicians.

Consensus

A concordat on Gypsies and Travellers between the political parties before local and national elections would also be beneficial in discouraging political opportunism and unbalanced arguments.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC)

The former Commission for Racial Equality held a number of successful fringe events on Travellers at the main political conferences. The EHRC should revive these, given that we are entering into the stage of supposed site delivery where political tensions could be greater.

The EHRC needs to do more to foster dialogue and consensus on Gypsies and Travellers amongst politicians at a national and regional level. This should be a priority of the new Commission, and a strategy needs to be devised which actively involves Gypsies and Travellers in this process.

The Standards Board

Over the years a number of complaints have been made against councillors and their statements on Travellers to the councils watchdog the Standards Board. We are not aware of any councillors who have been reprimanded and in some cases the Standards Board has failed to take the strong action that many expected it to take. "If I had cancer I'd strap a big bomb round myself

and go in tomorrow." These were the words of South Cambridgeshire Independent Councillor Deborah Roberts and referred to Travellers living in Cottenham (Cambridge Evening News, 25/1/2007).

The remark was made at a meeting of the council in 2004. Cllr Roberts has got into difficulties in the past for offensive remarks about Travellers, bullying staff and sending disrespectful emails to council officers (Cambridge Evening News, 21/3/2007) . However the Standards Board decided to take no action despite ruling that she had brought her office into disrepute. Fellow Councillor. Susan Van De Ven was puzzled by this decision and said "I couldn't understand why the remark was not condemned immediately and openly... I am very worried that the Standards Board has deemed this conduct not worthy of action. This sends out a dangerous message that violent racist remarks on the part of our elected representatives will be tolerated" (The Irish World, 31/1/2007).

Inaction such as this causes deep offence to Travellers and reinforces a strong perception that they cannot get justice when attacked by politicians. The Standards Board needs to ensure rulings are made promptly and are seen to reflect fairness and effectively challenge prejudice.

Capacity Building

Low levels of education and a lack of experience of organisational structures has in the past reduced engagement between Travellers and politicians. The UK Youth Parliament has introduced a number of useful initiatives on Gypsies and Travellers. Capacity Builders are also now funding a number of projects that will build up Gypsy and Traveller organisations and have funded the Irish Traveller Movement in Britain, the National Federation of Gypsy Liaison Groups and the Northern Network of Travelling People. European Dialogue has worked with the National Federation of Gypsy Liaison Groups in presenting Gypsy opinion to parliamentarians. The Traveller Law Reform Project has assisted a number of Gypsies and Travellers in making their views known to members of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Gypsy and Traveller Law Reform. We believe there is greater scope for Operation Black Vote to focus on increased political participation by Gypsies and Travellers.

The Empowerment Agenda

In the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Bill and white paper 'Communities in control: real people, real power' the Government says that it hopes to increase community empowerment. This programme contains many opportunities but also some dangers. The new duty to involve people and increase tenants' rights will hopefully ensure that Gypsies and Travellers are given a greater say in decisions that affect them.

This bill applies mainly to England, with some parts applying to Wales and very little to Scotland and Northern Ireland. It places a duty on councils to "promote democracy" and monitor local economic conditions; and makes it a legal duty for them to respond to petitions. Whilst we welcome opportunities

for the public to raise their concerns, it should be noted that in the past inflammatory petitions have been circulated in opposition to Traveller site development. Safeguards will need to be in place to ensure that such petitions do not demonise vulnerable minorities and cause strain to community relations.

Policy and Voice Groups

We believe there is also more scope for groups like Shelter and the British Institute of Human Rights to initiate dialogue and discussion between the major political parties and Gypsies and Travellers through staging discussion forums, disseminating discussion papers and lobbying.

Written by:

Andrew Ryder – Irish Traveller Movement in Britain

Richard Solly – Traveller Law Reform Project

Steve Staines – Friends Families and Travellers

Appendix

This paper will be sent to:

- The All Party Parliamentary Group for Traveller Law Reform
- Equalities and Human Rights Commission
- The Traveller Law Reform Project
- The National Federation of Gypsy Liaison Groups
- The Standards Board
- Communities and Local Government
- The Local Government Association
- Capacity Builders
- Operation Black Vote
- Shelter
- British Institute for Human Rights

The following Early Day Motion has been tabled which has cross party support – please write to your MP and ask him or her to sign
(by 5 February, 43 MPs had signed)

Early Day Motion (EDM) 504

That this house notes the shortage of Gypsy and Traveller sites and believes that an increase in the supply of Gypsy and Traveller sites related to actual need will reduce the number of unauthorised encampments and developments and enforcement costs, improving community relations and cohesion, and further believes that more sites will improve Gypsies' and Travellers' access to services and opportunities to contribute culturally and economically to communities.

For more information email:

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