

# Gypsies and British parliamentary language: An analysis

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This article examines how Gypsies and Travellers have been portrayed and discussed in debates and petitions in the British House of Commons—the more important of the two Houses of Parliament—between the 1988–89 and 2001. It finds persistent themes of criticism and vilification, applied in blanket fashion, condemning just about all Gypsies and Travellers as dishonest, criminal, dirty. Gypsies are rarely discussed within the House but, when they are, they are almost always portrayed in a negative light. Labour, Conservative and Ulster Unionist have all categorised Gypsies and Travellers this way. Quotations are extracted from debates and the stereotypical images that emerge have been sorted and examined. Throughout history, the image of the Gypsy has been dichotomised between the romantic, mysterious figure imbued with psychic power, on the one hand, and the thieving, scavenging, dirty brigand, on the other. In Parliament, both images have been present, with the former being portrayed as the ‘real’ Gypsy and the latter the ‘fake’. The very distinction between ‘real’ and ‘fake’ is challenged but, in any case, it is the latter that has been far more prominent in British Parliamentary debate.

*Keywords:* Gypsies, Travellers, Romanies, British Parliament, House of Commons, Political Language, Parliamentary debates, Gypsy portrayal, Gypsy image, ‘Sedentarianism’.

## Introduction

Image often precedes reality. And the reality may be significantly different from the image. Sometimes the reality itself might never be discovered. In the social and political world, images can destroy or commend before there has been chance to unravel myth from truth. Images associated with Gypsies and Travellers are particularly strong, whether at the level of children’s storybooks, poems and folktales or in the media and at high levels of political discourse. And, more often than not, the image of the Gypsy is dichotomised between the romantic, mysterious figure imbued with psy-

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chic power, on the one hand, and the thieving, scavenging, dirty brigand, on the other.

This article looks at British Parliamentary language and Gypsies and Travellers. Specifically, it examines their portrayal within the British House of Commons: how they have been referred to and discussed since the 1988–89 session, in debates and written and oral questions and answers. It is axiomatic that language reflects social values. And Parliamentary language, if not indicative of political discourse at the highest level, at least tells us something about the esteem with which a particular group of people are held within the polity, and about the images held by politicians about that group. Given their representative position within society, their role as opinion-formers and legislators, and the executive role that some of them hold, the language of politicians is particularly important to assess.

The image of the ‘Gypsy’ has been mixed over the centuries but, like the image of the Jew, it has been stereotypical and abiding. And yet, comments made about Gypsies, in the media and by politicians, would probably be deemed illegal in the late twentieth, and early twenty-first, centuries—likely to incite racial hatred—if they were made about Jews or, indeed, any other ethnic group. There is, sometimes, the romantic, arcane figure, bejewelled, head-scarved and possessing clairvoyant powers. Then there is the nefarious figure, in earlier times presented as the ‘child stealer’, the ‘thief’; in more recent as dirty, shifty, criminal. He is still dark and shadowy, but this time he will burgle your house. Even if you are still inside it. As Strauss (1998: 81–90) has demonstrated, the Gypsy is portrayed in a stereotypical way within, for example, German literature. Media representation of Gypsies, both historically and in contemporary times, has been similarly stereotypical, with their frequent portrayal either as dirty scroungers and thieves or, occasionally, as romantic figures (Morris 2000: 215). Very occasionally, there is a bizarre juxtaposition of the two. The *Daily Mail* for months in the late 1990s and the early part of the new century, ran a campaign against asylum seekers, many of whom were identified as European Gypsies. They were beggars and scroungers, they were bogus. There were stories about other issues, such as the Tony Martin murder case, the Lewisham 12 ‘Air Rage’ case, in which the alleged miscreants were identified as Gypsies or Travellers.<sup>1</sup> Yet in March

1. ‘Prison for holiday pair who started a drunken punch-up at 36,000 feet’, *Daily Mail*, 12 August 2000, p. 41; ‘Gypsies accused of intimidation had threatened witnesses before’, *The Mail on Sunday*, 30 April 2000, p. 13; ‘The Romanian gypsies begging on the streets of Britain to pay for their dream homes’, *Daily Mail*, 16 March 2000, pp. 26–7.

2000 it published a spread covering the best part of two pages headed 'Could you wear the gipsy look?' Smiling, confident, prosperous white women were pictured sporting ersatz Gypsy costumes. And female readers were advised to be confident too: 'A shy gipsy does not have the same impact as her glowing rivals.'<sup>2</sup> The same issue carried an article about new powers to be given to police 'to clear the streets of gangs of European beggars'. Obviously, these beggars showed no sign of shyness: 'Many of them are gypsy women with babies and young children'<sup>3</sup> The Commission for Racial Equality (CRE), in its good practice guidelines, advises that the media should not stereotype, and should not identify ethnicity unless it is appropriate. Specifically, it states that: 'Reference to the fact that an individual is a Traveller, Gypsy or Irish Traveller should only be made when it is relevant and appropriate' (Commission for Racial Equality 1998: 3). The trouble is that this might stand in the way of a journalistic enhancement of a story. To say the very least, the guidelines are not strictly adhered to within sections of the British print media. Clark and Campbell (2000: 23–47) have provided an admirable analysis of how British newspapers pandered to, and fuelled, popular prejudices against asylum seekers, some of whom were European Roma, in the late 1990s. They demonstrated how, by the manipulation of images, in 'a very short period of time, then, 'Gypsy as bogus asylum-seeker was produced as a plausible "news" subject and the British public "knew" who Gypsies *really* were' (Clark and Campbell: 32) [emphasis in text].

(The CRE, established under the 1976 Race Relations Act, is a publicly-funded, non-governmental body charged with tackling racial discrimination and promoting racial equality. It recognises Gypsies and Travellers as distinct ethnic minority groups. It has various powers entrusted to it under the Race Relations Act, including advising people how to take forward complaints about racial discrimination, harassment or abuse; conducting formal investigations of companies and other organisations where it is thought there may be discrimination and, where that is found, obliging the organisation to change its behaviour. It can initiate legal action against advertisements which are racially discriminatory, or against organisations encouraging other bodies to discriminate on the basis of race. It also acts as a campaigning body, fighting for race equality and funding local organisations with the same objectives.)

2. *Daily Mail*. 13 March 2000, pp. 44–5.

3. *Daily Mail*. 13 March 2000, p. 6.

Given that Gypsies and Travellers have (mainly) disbenefitted from their image, it is, of course, important to assess *why* certain stereotypes have figured so strongly and so persistently. A number of works have examined this (Shuiéar 1997: 26–53) and, whilst it is not the primary purpose of this piece to look for causal factors, such works will be drawn on as providing some of the explanation. Essentially, however, in examining newspaper portrayals of Gypsies and Travellers and, by extension, Parliamentary portrayals, there is a cogent argument that can be made that the roots of ‘anti-Gypsyism’ are wider than what can be called simply ‘racism’. Clark and Campbell (2000: 28), for example, point to the contrast in the reactions in the press occasioned by relatively *small* numbers of European Roma, while there was much less impact and moral panic brought about by asylum seekers from Somalia, Nigeria and the former Yugoslavia.

McVeigh (1997: 7–24), has recognised the wider roots of ‘anti-Gypsyism’, identifying ‘sedentarianism’ as the influencing ethos behind popular, or popularised, dislike of Gypsies. Within ‘sedentarianism’, according to McVeigh, sedentary lifestyles are seen as the norm, and are promoted as such. Nomadism, by contrast, is seen as perverse and threatening, and the nomads who pursue it are therefore a threat to normal life. ‘Sedentarianism’, therefore, punishes and represses nomadism. It does not actually matter whether or not the ‘nomad’ really does ‘travel’. ‘Travelling’ might, especially for those domiciled for years on council-run, official sites, as many Gypsies in Britain are, be a *myth* itself, but it nevertheless is a myth which identifies certain groups of people as being separate. Travelling was something that they once did, even if they no longer do, and they might, still, if they had the opportunity, take to the road. They are unstable, and unsettled, uncontrolled.

McVeigh (1997: 7–24) traces the imagery of ‘anti-nomadism’, presented as ‘sedentarianism’. Within this imagery, Travellers are popularly seen as ‘dirty. . . dishonest . . . immoral and amoral . . . and, most importantly, they are “nomadic”’.

The ‘travelling dispossessed’ pose a threat to the ‘moral and political order’ and, importantly, ‘Gypsies and Irish Travellers have long been subject to accounts of their dishonesty and shiftlessness. They have also been seen as harbingers of filth and contamination.’

## Context

By way of a context, it is worth briefly outlining the statutes that have had

a significant bearing on the lifestyle of Gypsies and Travellers in Britain. One was the Caravan Sites 1960, which made it more difficult for Gypsies to purchase small plots of land for placing trailers on because it introduced the need for 'site licences' (Kenrick and Bakewell 1990: 35). In order to gain a site licence, 'planning permission' has to be granted by the relevant local government. Given the unpopularity of Gypsy encampments amongst other residents, gaining planning permission can be very difficult. A second important piece of legislation was the 1976 Race Relations Act. Although it took twelve years to effect, it was this statute which allowed the Court of Appeal to confirm in 1988 that 'Gypsies', in the original sense of Romanies, are a legally recognised ethnic group (Kenrick and Bakewell 1990: 20), and the Central London County Court to hold in August 2000 that Irish Travellers were also an ethnic group under the Act, separate from other Gypsies.<sup>4</sup> A third was the 1986 public Order Act. This tightened laws of trespass, and restricted the ability of people to travel in convoy. It was intended, really, for New Age Travellers but, obviously, Gypsies would also be affected by its provisions, and the government of the day accepted this (Kenrick and Bakewell 1990: 48–9).

But the two statutes that have had the greatest impact this century on Gypsies in Britain are the Caravan Sites Act 1968 and the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act of 1994. Both demonstrate how Gypsies are perceived by politicians; one provided a definition of 'Gypsy', the other abolished that definition.

The Caravan Sites Act was brought about by prolonged campaigning by Norman Dodds, a Labour MP committed to Gypsy rights, and lobbying by the Gypsy Council, which had been established in 1966 to represent Gypsy interests. Eric Lubbock (later Lord Avebury) was presenting a private member's bill on mobile home owners to the House, and the government persuaded him to add clauses on the subject of Gypsy site provision, in return for government support for the bill, and the Caravan Sites Act was born (Kenrick and Bakewell 1990: 37–40). Whilst there were coercive aspects to the legislation, there were also benefits to Travellers, as the Act obliged all local authorities in areas to which Gypsies 'resided or resorted' to provide council-run, official sites. When the government considered that sufficient pitches were available under this mechanism, however, the

4. C. Gray. 2000. 'Irish Travellers gain legal status of ethnic minority.' *The Independent*, 30 August.

authority would be 'designated'. This meant that they would have additional powers to force off any land any Gypsies who had camped illegally. As Acton (1991: 23) noted, the objection of Gypsies themselves to 'designation' was that 'this makes them the only group, ethnic or residential type, subject to quotas as to how many can live in an area.' By this fact, they were rendered separate from any other group.

The government could force local authorities to provide sites, but in practice rarely did, with Secretaries of State making no use of their powers to intervene on this issue until forced to take the matter seriously in 1977 by Court of Appeal decisions that went in favour of Travellers. As Hawes and Perez (1995: 29) argue, 'It is remarkable, and virtually without parallel, that a mandatory duty imposed by Parliament can be ignored for nearly 30 years by a large number of local authorities . . .' By 1990, the Secretary of State had used the powers of direction only twice, and 62 per cent of authorities had failed to provide sites (Hawes and Perez 1995:30).

If Gypsies were going to be referred to in the Act, they had to be defined. The 1968 Act adopted a non-racial definition, focusing instead on lifestyle, and defining Gypsies as 'persons of a nomadic habit of life, whatever their race or origin' (Kenrick and Bakewell 1990: 38–9).

The Caravan Sites Act, with both its liberal and repressive elements, was swept aside by the second piece of legislation to have a major impact on Gypsies, the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act in 1994. This abolished the obligation to provide sites and extended the draconian powers available to authorities which were 'designated' to all areas. Designation, which had overtones of the enforced ghettoisation of a community but which at least ensured that there were some sites for Gypsies to live on, was at an end. The definition of 'Gypsy' provided in the 1968 Act was abolished, without offering an alternative definition. Relatively new on the scene were 'New Age Travellers', who would not fit a 'biologically' ethnic definition of 'Gypsy'—as most of them were from neither Romany or Irish Traveller stock—but might have fitted the 'lifestyle' definition in the 1968 Act. From a government perspective, it was useful to avoid allowing a group such as New Age Travellers an 'ethnicity' and instead to focus on their activities as 'criminal'. Unauthorised camping, for example, was clamped down upon, becoming for the first time a criminal, rather than civil, offence. Having more than six vehicles together would also be a criminal offence, if a police officer believed people had the intention of trespassing or residing there. A collection of families could be evicted from their encampment on the authorisation of

a police constable. The Criminal Justice and Public Order Act was a major threat to the lifestyle of Gypsies in Britain. Not only was no authority under any obligation to provide sites for Gypsies to live on, but they would not be allowed to camp anywhere else either. The prospect was that Gypsies would be forced either into conventional housing, which had not been traditional in Britain, or into trying to buy their own land on which to park caravans, but for that planning permission was necessary and very difficult to get. In practice, many local authorities exercised their discretionary powers and continued to provide official sites albeit, in many cases, reluctantly.

### ‘Criminals by nature’

To return to McVeigh’s taxonomy of stereotypes, the first category is that Gypsies are ‘criminal by nature’, an interesting re-capitulation of the ‘human nature’ approach to politics found in some versions of traditional Conservative philosophy in which some people are born ‘good’ but others are born ‘bad’ (Gilmour 1977: 154–7). The only significant debate in the 1988–89 Parliamentary session, which is where the analysis of language and portrayal presented here goes back to, when the electronic storage of *Hansard*, House of Commons Debates, began demonstrates how this theme was widely accepted by Parliamentarians. Ann Widdecombe, then a backbench Conservative, but later to rise to shadow Home Secretary, was a key player in the debate.

Miss Widdecombe started the debate, in May 1989, by welcoming the opportunity to discuss the ‘control of itinerants’. Domesticated pets played an important role in the proceedings. Widdecombe, the MP for Maidstone, congratulated the minister for a ‘magnificent coverage of just about every aspect of the dog problem’, the House having just debated the issue of dangerous dogs. It was now time to look at the ‘problem of Gypsies’. Dogs would not be left out for long. Dogs were, in some instances it seemed, more favourably disposed towards hygiene than some people. Widdecombe argued: ‘Even where they are not directly responsible for assaults on the population, the behaviour of itinerants is a problem. Dogs and cats regularly disappear from nearby areas to these encampments.’ Widdecombe’s comments paid heed to the existence of a social hierarchy, even within the dog world: ‘My distinguished predecessor, Sir John Wells, lost a pair of much-loved and valuable dogs.’ The police were not interested; the local authority was not interested. Luckily, an ‘alert constituent’, walking past an

encampment, 'noticed two dogs that were cleaner and fitter not only than the other dogs but the occupants'<sup>5</sup>

Even extracted from the substantive points raised in the debate, the terms used are significant. Both dangerous dogs and Gypsies need 'control'; both are 'problems'.

Miss Widdecombe was very explicit about the need for 'control'. It was mentioned by her several times. Indeed, the British way of life itself was threatened. She closed her speech by arguing that there was a need to find a means of 'controlling the menace before it becomes a greater one, when it will no longer be so easy to bring it within the laws that apply to the rest of civilised Britain'.

Miss Widdecombe pointed to the contrast between Gypsies and 'law-abiding residents', as so many MPs were to do subsequently. There was '... continued and blatant bad behaviour, lawlessness and acts of public disorder by the itinerants ... some of my constituents have been assaulted ... they [the Gypsies] are ... carrying out a trade, quite often an illegal one ...'. The next significant debate took place in July 1990. The propensity towards criminality was again an important factor. Sir Hugh Rossi, Conservative MP for Hornsey, told the House that 'I have heard of cases of housebreaking and of pensioners who have suddenly found their front doors broken down and youngsters rampaging through the house ...'.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, Sir David Mitchell, Conservative MP for Hampshire North West, was unequivocal in December 1991 when, in a debate on 'itinerants' in Hampshire, he apportioned the responsibility for all kinds of crime on Gypsies and Travellers: 'Their arrival is accompanied by an increased incidence of break-ins and thefts. Although one cannot prove who is responsible, one has a fairly good suspicion.'<sup>7</sup>

The condemnation of Gypsies as criminals and trespassers was not confined to Conservatives. Joe Ashton, MP for Bassetlaw, presented, in traditional Labour fashion, a social class analysis of the situation, asking the Home Secretary in 1991:

Is he not aware of the problems caused by Gypsies and Travellers, particularly in my constituency, who for 15 years have squatted on parks, car parks, school playing fields and derelict factory sites? As soon as they are moved on, they come back

5. House of Commons Debates. 1989. Hansard. Vol 154, Col 1202, 15 June.

6. House of Commons Debates. 1990. Hansard. Vol 176, Col 236, 10 July.

7. House of Commons Debates. 1991. Hansard. Vol 200, Col 1176, 12 December.

again to another place. Why does the Home Secretary not accept that this is a bigger problem for working class people living in council houses? They have to live next to these Gypsies, with their generators going every night, with their horses, their health problems, their dogs and their threats of violence.<sup>8</sup>

### ‘Outside the Community’

McVeigh identifies a second reason for condemnation of Gypsies as being because they are from ‘outside the community’. The ‘outsider’ status, of course, is symbolic. The Gypsy who is an outsider may, in fact, have lived in the same place, alongside the ‘settled’ community, for years, using the same shops and pubs, but he may still be an ‘outsider’. As Sibley (1981: 1) noted, ‘Groups are identified as outsiders because their social structures and economies are perceptively different from those of the larger society. They are peripheral in the sense that there is a considerable social distance between them and the majority—there is little or no social inter-action—and this social gulf is usually, but not necessarily, reinforced by spatial separation.’

It may be by choice, it may be by exclusion, or it may be a mixture of both, but Gypsies are clearly ‘outsiders’. More than simply ‘outsiders’, they are ‘folk devils’. Everyone knows they are bad. Political language, media portrayal, common mythology, constantly reinforce the image. People engaged in perpetrating the image may never have even met a Gypsy, or if they have it may have been a brief encounter of perhaps just a few seconds as a fortune telling or charm is offered.. As Guthrie (not dated: 1) noted in his study of Aborigines in Australia, ‘Perhaps it is easier to be moralistic on behalf of people one never meets . . .’

In the July 1990 debate referred to earlier, Christopher Chope, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State responding to Members for the government, unwittingly put his finger on the real problem of the representation of Gypsies within the British polity. The debate, he said, had been of a high quality. It had ‘. . . fairly reflected the fact that this is the first prime time debate on Gypsies for many years’<sup>9</sup>

Chope was right. Gypsies are rarely mentioned in British Parliamentary debates. They are an ‘outsider’ group whose problems are basically ignored. There is a close parallel between the idea of a group who are ‘social outsiders’

8. House of Commons Debates. 1991. Hansard. Vol 196, Col 157, 15 October.

9. House of Commons Debates. 1990. Hansard. Vol 176, Col 257, 10 July.

and the concept of the 'ideological outsider group', to employ Grant's (1990: 107–11) terminology, where a pressure group with particular interests are uninvited and uninvolved in policy decisions. By extension, as Liégeois (1994: 199) has argued, the 'image of the stranger and of the strange . . . exposes the fears and worries of those who create it'.

When Gypsies *are* mentioned in Parliament, the terms used to refer to them are almost always negative. The debate nearly always turns on how the 'problem' should be controlled. The real issues that might make a difference to their lives, and which might change the behaviour of those amongst them who do live up to the stereotypical image of a trouble-maker, such as access to education and to health care, the right to have somewhere to live, are hardly ever raised.

Both the media and politicians can present what might otherwise be classed as 'normal' behaviour in a particular way in order to create a particular image. In a motorised age, Gypsies have cars. But as in media portrayals, the make of vehicle suddenly becomes part of the story. The more expensive it is, the more suspicions are raised. As Clark and Campbell (2000: 32) argue, material can be presented by the news media in such a way 'which "fits" readers' developing knowledge' of a particular group of people. There is a traditional sequence to this in news reporting and, drawing on the evidence here, perhaps in Parliamentary portrayal: the general message is that Gypsies are 'bad'; 'evidence' is presented to support the view; people begin to believe that they are 'bad'; the 'image' is accepted as 'reality'. Gypsies have cars; the source of their wealth is dubious; they are from outside the community, but when they arrive anywhere, they 'invade'. And, wherever they go, they are a 'menace'.

Bowen Wells, Conservative MP for Hertford and Stortford, sought to introduce a private members bill in November 1992, for instance, aimed at the privatisation of Gypsy sites. Wells told the House that his bill was 'stimulated by the anger and fear instigated by the arrival of huge numbers of shiny and expensive caravans, hauled by Range Rovers, Jaguars . . .'<sup>10</sup> The implication, of course, is that the money for these expensive cars cannot have been earned legitimately. There must be a scam. They are only Gypsies. How can they possibly afford such cars?

Description bordering on the abusive has been very common in the British House of Commons. The one major debate on Gypsies that took place

10. House of Commons Debates. 1992. Hansard. Vol 213, Col 262, 4 November.

in the 1994–95 session of Parliament, in June 1995, for example, was opened by Teresa Gorman, the Conservative MP for Billericay. She said that she was grateful for the opportunity to debate the subject of Gypsies, who had been a ‘great problem’ for ‘many years’ in Essex. She congratulated the government on the greater powers given to the police and to local authorities by the Criminal Justice Act and Public Order Act, referred to above. Mrs Gorman was concerned, amongst other things, about honesty. She was not quite sure how best to describe members of the travelling community, so she used a number of different terms: ‘. . . these itinerants, or Gypsies, or didicois, or tinkers, or new age travellers, or mobile trotters, which is what they are.’<sup>11</sup>

### Menace

But even if she did not know which name was the most appropriate, she knew that they were a ‘menace’, referring to them as that on three occasions. Gorman concluded her speech by calling for the legal powers that already existed to be used more frequently to prevent illegal encampments and use of farmers’ fields to ‘dump all the rubbish taken from people’s drives’ by Travellers offering their services to lay tarmac: ‘These people must be dealt with and made to act within the law of the land’. The situation was so bad, thought Mark Wolfson, Tory MP for Sevenoaks, that ‘capping numbers’ ought to be considered.

As always with ‘problems’ relating to groups different in racial origin—in this case those having Irish Traveller or Romany ethnicity—to the majority of the indigenous population, there are politicians and others who see the answer in restricting numbers. This was seen in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s with immigration from the New Commonwealth, and was seen in the 1990s and currently with asylum seekers. Mark Wolfson, Tory MP for Sevenoaks, argued in the House in July 1990 that: ‘. . . capping of those numbers [of Travellers] could be considered. That . . . needs following up and pursuing and unless we do that, we shall not find a long-term answer’.

The impact of having Gypsies nearby was far more problematic than simply a ‘nuisance’ level: ‘. . . lives are being ruined . . .’<sup>12</sup> The themes throughout the June 1995 debate were familiar. Mrs. Gorman, for example, offered

11. House of Commons Debates. 1995. Hansard. Vol 262, Col 127, 19 June.

12. House of Commons Debates. 1990. Hansard. Vol 251, Col 176, 10 July.

the following opinions: the ‘value of their [her constituents’] properties can be severely affected if they live near a piece of land that Gypsies or Travellers frequently visit’; Essex is ‘invaded’ in the summer; a farmer ‘was set upon by scavengers’, ‘these people are positively uncivilised’. Summarising her view in a phrase not over-endowed with subtlety, Mrs Gorman said, ‘the Travellers are simply not acceptable.’<sup>13</sup> And they were to be contrasted with the ‘hard-working and honest farmers’. There was no input into the debate from Labour. Gorman was merely supported in what she was saying by other Conservative MPs.

The images, themes, views—of criminality, scavenging, filth—were constantly present whenever there was a discussion of Gypsies or Travellers in the Commons in the period 1988 to 2001. They were rarely mentioned, but when they were it was usually with a negativity. Of particular importance was that Gypsies refuse to adhere to integrated lifestyles. Sir Jerry Wiggin, for instance, Conservative MP for Weston-Super-Mare, told the House in a debate in January 1997 that: ‘The truth of the matter is that the Gypsy problem is about integration. It has plagued me all my life . . .’<sup>14</sup>

In other words, Gypsies should alter their lifestyles and become like everyone else. Moreover, Gypsies, believed in some circles to suffer discrimination, are actually treated better than other people. In a reference to the implication of ‘Gypsy’ status for planning applications, where certain concessions have been made to people who can demonstrate a ‘nomadic’ lifestyle, Wiggin said: ‘The Traveller who is clearly not prepared to confine himself to the social customs of the rest of the population now seems to be treated infinitely better than the ordinary citizen.’ And the policy of confining where Gypsies should be allowed to be and where they should not be—enshrined in the ‘designation’ element of the 1968 Caravan Sites Act and extended by entrusting police with the right to make a judgement on what constitutes a ‘trespassory assembly’ under the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994—ought to be continued. Sir Jerry told the House about two sites that the local government covering his constituency was considering establishing. One was near where some elderly people lived, so there should not be a site there. The other: ‘. . . is in a quiet backwater between two nice villages where Gypsies have never been and have no business to be.’

Nor could Sir Jerry see the need for facilities of any kind to be near to

13. House of Commons Debates. 1995. Hansard. Vol 262, Col 127, 19 June.

14. House of Commons Debates. 1997. Hansard. Vol 298, Col 264, 28 January.

Gypsy sites: 'Why must the new site be within five miles of a former school, and why should there be facilities for this, that and the other?' Wittingly or unwittingly, Sir Jerry turned himself into something of a comedian. He provided the House with all the 'usual' complaints about rubbish being deposited everywhere and fencing being torn up, but also thought that it would like to know that the trouble was not simply confined to humans: 'There is even a record of a goat making a nuisance of itself', and chickens had been 'digging up flowers'.

And yet, for all the damage that Gypsies were responsible for, referring to another, privately run site in the constituency which had seen a petition of 700 signatures against it, Sir Jerry agreed that the site was not causing any trouble: 'I am happy to say that I believe that the site has settled down and is causing no difficulty. It appears to be well run'.

Responding to Sir Jerry for the government, Robert B. Jones, the Minister for Construction, Planning and Efficiency, congratulated him for obtaining the Adjournment debate and went on to describe him as 'gallant'. The presumption within the Minister's speech was that trouble from Gypsies was always a likelihood: '... local authorities ... should consider the option of tolerating the presence of Gypsies who camp on council land if—I stress this—they are not causing a nuisance'.<sup>15</sup>

## Dirty

Another element in McVeigh's taxonomy of condemnation is that Gypsies are 'dirty'. This theme of dirt, and of trashing the local environment, inter-laced with references to excrement, was also commonplace in the Commons. Miss Widdecombe, in the 1989 debate referred to earlier argued that 'They all cause a great deal of mess, particularly where there are no proper arrangements for disposal of sewage from the caravans or proper rubbish disposal ...'.<sup>16</sup> The trash was '... extremely detrimental to the environment, particularly to a beautiful part of Kent'.

Sir Hugh Rossi, in the speech of July 1990 referred to earlier, acknowledged that time in the debate was short, and therefore felt that he could not comment on every site where Gypsies had camped in his constituency. So, he had to summarise: 'There is a pattern of filth, of danger to public health

15. House of Commons Debates. 1997. Hansard. Vol 298, Col 267, 28 January.

16. House of Commons Debates. 1989. Hansard. Vol 154, Col 1204, 15 June.

and hygiene, of rubble, of litter, of disorder, of children running wild, of a spate of housebreaking and of excrement where one would not expect to find it . . . ordinary, decent people, despair because nobody seems to be ready to help them deal with the problem.<sup>17</sup> The essence of Rossi's speech, like the speeches by so many others, was to portray Gypsies as dirty criminals.

Dirt, dishonesty, and 'outsider' status, all link together, of course. There is a symbolism to them all which allows for condemnation. Gypsies must be avoided, purged, like a leper, must not be touched. Parliamentary language is replete with these images, as is media portrayal. Whilst not specifically mentioning the Gypsy in this context, a parallel can be seen with the position of the Gypsy and how Mary Douglas (1992: 86) views the witch in history, or the leper: 'The regular strategy of rejection starts with the libel . . . Sometimes disenfranchised masses or hordes of refugees attract the libel, so that they can be put under restraint. Imputing filth to the victims enables them to be rejected without a qualm.'

### Dishonest

Teresa Gorman, barred from the Commons in March 2000 because of an 'intention to deceive the House over property dealings held in offshore trusts', was clearly worried in 1992 about benefit fraud amongst Travellers. She asked the minister responsible if he would explain: 'how it is that people who call themselves Travellers, Gypsies and didicois, or who are just a thundering nuisance, seem able to move around the country getting benefits wherever they stop, whereas my constituents are, quite rightly, required to report regularly to a social security office.'<sup>18</sup>

Bowen Wells, Conservative MP referred to earlier, was also clearly worried about levels of dishonesty amongst Travellers. In the speech introducing his attempt to privatise Gypsy sites in 1992, Wells distinguished between three separate groups of people in his constituency. The first was the 'law-abiding, property-owning resident population'. There was no mention of council or housing association tenants, though presumably there are some people who live in social housing, even in Bowen Wells' constituency and, presumably, at least some of them are law-abiding. The second was the group 'known as Travellers'; these 'trespass, molest, vandalise and intimidate others'. Again, it

17. House of Commons Debates. 1990. Hansard. Vol 176, Col 235, 10 July.

18. House of Commons Debates. 1992. Oral Answers. Hansard. Vol 211, Col 8, 6 July.

was not just *some* Travellers that did this. They were all implicated. The third group was 'legitimate Gypsies'. The latter should be sold the sites currently in the ownership of local authorities.

Ian Taylor, MP for Esher in Surrey, offered his view in the July 1990 debate that Travellers were not only inconsiderate in where they deposited their waste, they were also connen: 'Travellers often attempt to take advantage of gullible people in the area in conducting their business. 'My constituents and those of my colleagues are justifiably angry about the disgraceful rubbish that is often left by Gypsies—excrement has been mentioned several times, and it is a genuine problem.'<sup>19</sup>

In the one other debate in the 1989–90 session in which Gypsies were referred to, in November 1990 on the law towards squatting, John Marshall, the Conservative MP for Finchley and Golders Green, wanted the government to consider further '... the law on Gypsies, who frequently behave anti-socially, are often parasites on society and frequently tax dodgers.'<sup>20</sup>

### Immoral and amoral

In July 1999, Colin Pickthall, Labour MP for West Lancashire, complained to the House of the 'foul and aggressive behaviour' of Travellers who regularly visit Skelmersdale in his constituency. Pickthall recognised that 'most Travellers go about their nomadic business in a perfectly reasonable way' but there were others who are 'violent and destructive', and, in an eerie portent of sentiments expressed in the tabloid media during the Tony Martin murder case in April 2000—(where some tabloids had defended Martin's retaliation against an intruder who was also a Traveller, eventhough it resulted in the intruder's death, as 'self-defence')—Pickthall argued that there were no 'effective defences against them [Travellers] without taking the law into our own hands'. Business people near the encampment had complained to Pickthall of a 'sea of excrement'. Pickthall contrasted the travellers with the 'perfectly respectable businessmen', and was 'amazed' that people did 'not take matters into their own hands'.<sup>21</sup>

Sessions of Parliament in the late 1990s and early part of the new century

19. House of Commons Debates. 1990. Hansard. Vol 176, Col 247, 10 July.

20. House of Commons Debates. 1990. Oral Answers. Hansard. Vol 180, Col 698, 15 November.

21. House of Commons Debates. 1999. Hansard. Vol 335, Col 940, 19 July.

saw similar trends continue. There were seven mentions of Gypsies, either in debates or written questions, between November 1999 and March 2000. By and large, these were short and fairly neutral: on planning issues, on the potential voting impact on particular constituencies of transient New Age Travellers. Probably the only significantly controversial intervention of the session came from David Atkinson, Conservative MP for Bournemouth East, in a debate on Town and Country Parks in March. A ‘threat’ to urban parks, he told the House, comes from an annual ‘invasion’ by Travellers. ‘Crime and vandalism rise . . . Pets disappear. Human excrement is left.’<sup>22</sup>

Local authorities should press for increased powers from government to ‘enable them immediately, without having to obtain a county court order, to obtain possession of any council-owned land in the occupation of caravan-dwellers, travellers and Gypsies. Better still would be the power to have licences taken away from those licensed to drive the vehicles’.

### Nomadic

The most important condemnatory factor levelled at Gypsies, because of ‘sedentarianism’, was that they were ‘nomadic’, according to McVeigh (1997: 12–17). They move about, sometimes encamp on land where they should not be. Nomadism, alongside the (often temporary) accommodation of land by travelling people, was seen to be a problem in the House of Commons debates.

Robert Dunn, Conservative MP for Kent North West, for example, was keen to let the House know in February 1992 that the law and order problem to ‘local authorities and the police’ posed by Traveller families should not be under-estimated. It was no less than ‘immense’.<sup>23</sup> Dunn wanted the government to ‘increase the penalties’ for ‘unlawful occupation of private or public land by Traveller families’. Presumably, if any other group of people was unlawfully occupying land, the existing penalties were sufficient. It was not an ambiguity in his language. Mr Dunn must have *meant* increased penalties for occupation by *Traveller* families, because in May 1992 he pressed the issue again, using exactly the same words.<sup>24</sup> He returned to the attack in July 1992. In a debate on a completely different subject—housing needs in

22. House of Commons Debates. 2000. Hansard. Vol 345, Col 91WH, 2 March.

23. House of Commons Debates. 1992. Oral Answers. Hansard. Vol 204, Col 453, 20 February.

24. House of Commons Debates. 1992. Written Answer. Hansard. Vol 207, Col 129, 13 May.

rural areas—Mr Dunn wanted to impress his views on the government: ‘In the context of housing needs and preserving village life, will my honourable friend assure the House that every effort will be made to prevent the illegal encroachment of Traveller families in our villages?’<sup>25</sup>

In March 1992, in a comment worthy of pass laws in the apartheid era in South Africa, Mr Dunn wanted to know from the Home Secretary why ‘. . . the officer commanding Southwark division Metropolitan Police did not alert Kent county constabulary, Gravesend, that six Traveller families were moving into the county of Kent.’<sup>26</sup>

The government accepted that Kent constabulary should have been told. It regretted that it had not happened. Yet, it is scarcely believable that this could happen to any other group. Would Greater Manchester police be so keen to inform West Yorkshire police about a group of six Jewish families moving from Manchester to Leeds? The retort would be, no doubt, that the six Jewish families would be moving from one set of houses into another, and doing nothing beyond the law. But it could not be assumed, *in advance*, that the Traveller families would be breaking any law and to deem that they might be likely to *on the grounds of their ethnicity* is surely discriminatory.

### ‘Real’ and ‘fake’ Gypsies

The two stereotypes represented by the ‘romantic, mysterious figure’ and by the ‘dirty criminal’ frequently find expression in the idea of the ‘real’ and ‘fake’ Gypsy. The former is seen to have a modicum of legitimacy; the latter has none. The categorisation is, in reality, an extension of an abiding popular mythology which, in the past, had derided those not seen as being ‘true Romanies’ as ‘mere tinkers’. The ‘tinker’ was always more of a charlatan than the ‘true Romany’. He was less honest. He could not be trusted. The imagery of the true and the fake is a constant theme in British Parliamentary debates (see, for example, Bowen Wells’ speech, referred to earlier), and finds expression also strongly in the media and elsewhere in popular culture. It legitimises coercive and repressive policy towards those seen to be transgressing acceptable behaviour. In a radio interview in 1999, the then Home Secretary, Jack Straw, felt confident enough to condemn ‘many Trav-

25. House of Commons Debates. 1992. Oral Answers. Hansard. Vol 211, Col 1134, 15 July.

26. House of Commons Debates. 1992. Written Answer. Hansard. Vol 205, Col 586, 12 March.

ellers' because they 'go burgling, thieving, breaking into vehicles, causing all kinds of trouble, including defecating in the doorways of firms'. The miscreants, argued Straw, were not 'real Gypsies'. They were, rather, 'masquerading as law-abiding Gypsies, when many are not . . .'.<sup>27</sup>

Straw's comments did, of course, attract some criticism, as well as some support.<sup>28</sup> The comments were considered sufficiently important by *The Times* to merit the controversy forming the lead front page story in August 1999.<sup>29</sup> Straw was reported by the Gypsy Council both to the Commission for Racial Equality and to the police, to see if the comments had contravened the Public Order Act by inciting racial hatred. No action was taken. Straw was deemed not to have made any racist slur: in effect, his defence that he had not been commenting about 'real' Gypsies, only those 'masquerading' as such, was accepted. Straw felt able to re-iterate his views a couple of days after they were first reported in the press, without qualification. There was clearly no damage to Mr Straw's political career. After Labour's second successive general election victory in 2001, Straw was appointed to another of the major ministerial positions: Foreign Secretary.

The very notion that such a division between the genuine and the ersatz Gypsy can be made has been attacked as being false (Acton 1974: 563–5). Though writing as far back as 1974, and despite the emergence of New Age Travellers, particularly from the mid-1980s onwards, Acton's (1974: 563–5) view that the distinction is spurious remains relevant: 'The assertion that only a minority of Travellers on the road are True Gypsies, and the rest are merely spurious drop-outs, is still frequently made by both non-Gypsies and Gypsies; but it part of a structure of belief utterly remote from reality'.

The categorisation into the 'real' and 'fake' has a long pedigree. Prior to Acton in 1974, Okely (1975:59) noted, following fieldwork with Gypsies in southern England in 1970–72, that allegations had been made that the 'majority' of Travellers were not 'real Gypsies' at all. Instead they were 'half breed "Didikois" or "inadequates" dropped out of housedwelling society; or foreign invaders, namely Irish Tinkers'. The 'fake Gypsies' then, as now, were the ones alleged to have 'the most anti-social behaviour' (Okely 1975: 60). She concurs with Acton that the distinction into 'real' and 'fake' is also 'exploited by individual Gypsies in specific circumstances, to reassure offi-

27. *The Guardian*, 20 August 1999.

28. See, for example, letter to *The Guardian*, 25 August 1999, from Steve Pound MP.

29. *The Times*, 19 August 1999.

cially that they themselves are not to blame [for some misdemeanour], but some 'other' groups (Okely 1975: 60).

Okely, like Acton, rejects this dichotomy of the 'real' and the 'fake'. She argues that whilst some Travellers may have elements of non-Gypsy ancestry, within the Travelling community the extent to which one was seen to be a 'real' Gypsy was related to a person's commitment to the 'Gypsy identity' (Okely 1975: 60). And, as Acton noted, the portrayal of the 'myth' of the 'true' and the 'fake' Gypsy served 'several clear functions for each of the parties: the Gypsies, their romantic non-Gypsy friends, and the authorities' (Acton 1974: 563–5).

Gypsies themselves can blame others, who are not 'true' Gypsies, for any misdemeanours. 'Romantic non-Gypsy friends' (Acton 1974: 563–5), in their academic and journalistic studies, see themselves as dealing with an arcane Gypsy aristocracy, rather than an undisciplined rabble. And authorities, in the shape of local or central government, or police, can 'relieve collective guilt at inhumane policies' because, after all, they are not directing them at 'true' Gypsies.

None of this prevented the 'real' and 'fake' distinction from being used in a major way in Parliamentary debates. The 'real' Gypsy might have some honour; but the 'fake' had no credibility whatsoever and must be severely controlled. Some may argue that some of the references in Parliament are to the relatively recent 'New Age Travellers' who may share an attraction to nomadism with Gypsies and other Travellers, but who share little else. And, indeed, *some* references may be to New Age Travellers, though it is not always clear in the Chamber. Nonetheless, most of the references to Gypsies and Travellers in Parliament cited here are to what are often referred to as 'traditional Travellers'—i.e., some variety of Gypsy—and this is obvious from the economic sectors the itinerants are said to operate in. The New Age Traveller would not be the 'cowboy builder', or the 'scrap metal merchant', referred to in debates.

In a short debate in May 1989, for instance, the Conservative MP for Basildon, David Amess, in a speech which ranged from a diatribe against what he called the 'Socialist' council in Basildon through to an attack on the legal availability of late abortions, found time to raise this recurring issue in the debate on Gypsies and their position in British society: 'I fully recognise the enormous difference between Gypsies and travelling people.'<sup>30</sup>

30. House of Commons Debates. 1989. Hansard. Vol 153, Col 721, 22 May.

He thought it worthwhile, also, to comment on the deleterious effect that Gypsies have on the education system: ‘. . . travelling people can cause disruption to local schools.’ Amidst being blamed for a bereavement, accused of ‘terrifying’ children, and alleged to be ‘ruining people’s lives’, the issue of true and fake Gypsies returned in a major way in the July 1990 debate.

Robert Jones, Conservative MP for Hertfordshire West, began the July 1990 debate by introducing the report of the Environment select committee which he had chaired. The committee had been examining the 1968 Caravan Act. The first mention of Gypsies in Jones’s speech was to note that, ‘Above all there is the problem of visual pollution.’<sup>31</sup> Those experienced in ‘the problem’ know that this is not about ‘historic Romany folk with brightly painted caravans’ but, rather, it is about ‘tumbledown caravans . . . beaten-up vehicles . . . piles of scrap and rubbish . . .’ with people occupying ‘inappropriate sites’ that are ‘extremely visible’ to the general public. Like Widdecombe, Jones was concerned for the scenic environment.

Jones was aware of the distinction between true and fake Gypsies. The problem was occurring on the water as well as on the land. There were people illegally mooring boats, presumably even living on the boats. ‘The problem has more to do with the break-up of some parts of society and with general problems of homelessness than with genuine Romany folk.’<sup>32</sup>

Local authorities should provide sites for the ‘genuine Traveller’ but the police should ‘move on those who are not genuine Travellers’. How the police were supposed to distinguish between them was not mentioned.

The next issue in the speech was vandalism. Woodlands were being vandalised to ‘provide fuel for fires’. A farmer in Jones’ constituency had had a water supply for his cattle ‘regularly used by itinerants’. In his time as a councillor in Buckinghamshire, ‘no sooner had official sites been built . . . than they were vandalised by the very people who were supposed to benefit from them’. In the same debate, Sir Hugh Rossi also drew the attention of the House to the distinction between the real and the fake. There had been a ‘plague’ of the latter for seven years: ‘I call them Gypsies, but they are not true Romanies. Possibly some of them are tinkers. They may be itinerant scrap metal merchants, but mostly they seem to be motorised squatters.’<sup>33</sup>

‘Ordinary, decent people’, who have children, pay taxes, abide by laws, and

31. House of Commons Debates. 1990. Hansard. Vol 176, Col 227, 10 July.

32. House of Commons Debates. 1990. Hansard. Vol 176, Col 239, 10 July.

33. House of Commons Debates. 1990. Hansard. Vol 176, Col 234, 10 July.

who invariably live in scenic parts of Britain, almost always make an entry at some stage. The July 1990 debate proved to be no exception, with Robin Maxwell-Hyslop presenting the 'real' versus 'fake' Gypsy argument. By implication, it was the 'fake' Gypsies who were the trouble-causers: 'The Romany race—its people call themselves a race—is deeply resentful of the fact that many people who do not have the disciplines that they seek to impose on their community, their dogs and their way of life, are termed Gypsies.'<sup>34</sup>

The debate on the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act in October 1994 saw some sympathy for the position of Gypsies from the Liberal Democrat and Labour benches, albeit tempered as the proceedings moved on by the identification of 'fake Gypsies' as the trouble-causers. David Rendel, MP Liberal Democrat representative for Newbury, was keen to impress upon the House the 'human cost' that would occur from repealing the obligation upon local authorities to provide sites. Rendel made the point that the government was prepared to help to provide homes for the homeless, but was proposing to refuse to pay anything towards accommodation for Gypsies with children. This, he argued, was '... gross discrimination against the Gypsy population, and we should not put up with that.'<sup>35</sup>

George Stevenson, Labour MP for Stoke South, spoke with praise of the way that Stoke city council had been one of the first local authorities to provide Gypsy sites. Gypsies should not be forced on to council house waiting lists. It was impractical, and it was morally wrong.<sup>36</sup> Sympathy continued from a fellow Labour MP from Stoke, Joan Walley, and in much more strident and passionate terms from Jeremy Corbyn, Labour MP for Islington North. The bill was a 'disgusting piece of legislation'. It was an attack on the right of people to live an alternative lifestyle. It presented: '... the worst face of intolerance of the Tory Party; saying that we do not want these sites anywhere, that we do not want a travelling community, that we do not want or believe in a society that encompasses different ways of life from the ones that they understand'.

The man who had introduced the Caravan Sites Act in 1968, Norman Dodds MP, was a 'very brave person' who had 'fought all his life for the rights of travelling communities'.<sup>37</sup>

34. House of Commons Debates. 1990. Hansard. Vol 227, Col 244, 10 July.

35. House of Commons Debates. 1994. Hansard. Vol 248, Col 363, 19 October.

36. House of Commons Debates. 1994. Hansard. Vol 248, Col 367, 19 October.

37. House of Commons Debates. 1994. Hansard. Vol 248, Col 370, 19 October.

Labour itself was not unified in its sympathy. The real problem, again, was fake Gypsies. Tony Wright, Labour MP for Cannock and Burntwood, agreed 'with the government that something had to be done about the kind of problem that has affected my constituents in the past two years'. The problem was caused not by 'Gypsies or Travellers' but by 'scavengers'.<sup>38</sup>

In keeping with typical press portrayals where the make of car and extent of supposed wealth becomes part of the story, Wright commented on their life styles: 'They live in large caravans; they have large cars and large expensive dogs'.

The government was only 'half' right in its approach, however. Wright was worried about the 'blanket nature' of the powers in the bill against unauthorised camping and about the 'absence of tests for nuisance'. The government should ensure that Travellers had places to live. But it nevertheless remained important that something was done to resolve the problem, because: 'What they have done to the community of south Staffordshire has to be seen to be believed'. They had occupied a bowling green at a miners' social club: '... having ruined the green, they burnt down the social club'.

The issue of 'true' and 'fake' Gypsies was also an issue for David Harris, Conservative MP for St Ives, arguing in the October 1994 debate on the Criminal Justice Act that there was a problem in 'arriving at a reasonable definition of "Gypsy"'. But, in any case '... the huge increase in the scale of the problem' had not been caused by people 'whom I regard as genuine indigenous Romany people'.<sup>39</sup>

'Fake' Gypsies had also been causing trouble in the West Midlands. Gisela Stuart, Labour MP for Edgbaston, told the House in July 1998 of the 'fear' brought about by annual 'illegal encampments' in Birmingham. Those illegally camping had brought 'devastation', which 'was more like an invasion of the original tribe of the Vandals than the pursuit of an alternative life style. The village hall's windows were smashed and wooden fences were ripped apart. Several cars were dismantled and torched; one caravan was gutted and dismantled. They even left bits of kitchen unit behind'.<sup>40</sup>

Gisela Stuart made it clear that the culprits were not 'Romanies' and 'other people with an alternative life style ... [who] have the right to be protected'.

38. House of Commons Debates. 1994. Hansard. Vol 248, Col 372, 19 October.

39. House of Commons Debates. 1994. Hansard. Vol 248, Col 365, 19 October.

40. House of Commons Debates. 1998. Hansard. Vol 315, Col 1030, 8 July.

Instead, these were 'cowboy builders and traders who use mobile phones to do business from public sites'. 'Local residents', she said, 'feel threatened, intimidated and helpless'.

Tim Loughton, Tory MP for East Worthing and Shoreham, introduced a debate on Travellers in May 1999 in which he described his constituency as a 'town under siege', because Travellers had set up a 'shanty town'. 'Residents' were 'driven to despair'. There had been 'heavy drinking' and the use of various other illicit substances'. Guard dogs had been 'attacking residents'. The 'whole town' was being 'intimidated'. The Travellers had been 'terrorising little children' on their way to school. 'Drunken Travellers' were 'often crazed out of their minds'. And, there had also been an 'outbreak of petty crime' which was 'more than a coincidence'. And again the ethnic distinction was made. These were not 'Gypsies or Romanies'. Moreover, the Labour government had been making matters worse. The revised good practice guidelines issued in October 1998 had, in fact, been 'an invitation to travellers to occupy first and ask questions later'.<sup>41</sup> It had been a 'charter for squatters'.

Nick Raynsford's response, however, replying in the same debate for the government, could not be described in any way other than reasonable and balanced. He argued that 'people who legitimately wish to adopt a travelling life style should be free to do so', but the government does not 'want local authorities to tolerate the anti-social and sometimes criminal behaviour that can accompany some unauthorised encampments'.<sup>42</sup>

## Petitions

A number of petitions were presented to Parliament in the period between 1988 and 2001. Keith Vaz, an ethnic minority MP, presented a petition on behalf of his constituents in Leicester East in June 1989. What concerned his constituents and himself was that Leicester City Council were planning Gypsy sites in 'densely populated areas of eastern part of the city'.<sup>43</sup> The implication was that Gypsies should be somewhere elsewhere, rather than with the rest of the population. There is a certain irony in the Czech Republic being castigated by the European Union for allowing the construction of

41. House of Commons Debates. 1999. Hansard. Vol 331, Col 84, 10 May.

42. House of Commons Debates. 1999. Hansard. Vol 331, Col 90, 10 May.

43. House of Commons Debates. 1989. Hansard. Vol 155, Col 1083, 28 June.

a Berlin-style wall in Usti nad Labem to contain Gypsies within a controllable ghetto,<sup>44</sup> while other established members of the EU can similarly seek to ghettoise and control one section of the population.

The Parliamentary session for 1990–1991 saw three petitions protesting about Gypsies presented to the House. The first was in July 1991, presented by Richard Page, Conservative MP for Hertfordshire South West. This complained about a plan for a site in a green belt area of Hertfordshire. It asked that a landfill (in other words, a former waste tip) site should be considered instead, because this was considered ‘more suitable’ than the agricultural land that had been proposed.<sup>45</sup>

The second petition came in November 1991, and was presented by Jonathan Sayeed, Conservative MP for Bristol East. It accused Avon County Council of ‘political malice’ because it had not published ‘a list of all sites under consideration for permanent, temporary, emergency or other provision’, and because it was not ‘hold[ing] public consultation on each of the sites.’ Avon County Council was even deliberately attracting Travellers to the area. The petitioners considered this such a heinous offence that it warranted the abolition of Avon County Council all together.<sup>46</sup>

The third petition was also presented by a member for Bristol, the Conservative Michael Stern, also in 1991. This petition proposed that no site should ‘be placed adjacent to residential or industrial premises’, and that ‘provision should be made for compensation to those residents whose property is devalued by the imposition of such a site.’<sup>47</sup>

In fact, it was difficult to know where Travellers should go. They should not be in the countryside, whether it is ‘beautiful Kent’ or the green belt in Hertfordshire. They should not be near residential or industrial premises. There is no where else left.

### Parliamentary sympathy

Apart from certain speeches in the October 1994 debate referred to earlier, the only other significant expression of sympathy in the entire period from 1988 to 2001 came in the July 1990 debate. Some support came here from

44. *The Independent*, 15 May 1999.

45. House of Commons Debates. 1991. Hansard. Vol 195, Col 1268, 24 July.

46. House of Commons Debates. 1991. Hansard. Vol 198, Col 685, 8 November.

47. House of Commons Debates. 1991. Hansard. Vol 200, Col 1229, 13 December.

two backbench Labour MPs, from Labour's front-bench spokesman on the Environment, George Howarth, and even from two Conservatives. Bob Cryer, Labour MP for Bradford, recognised that there might be potential conflict between Gypsies and non-Gypsies, but also argued that there was a need for '... mutual respect for differing ways of life as between the permanent population, who want to live in houses, and who like their cities and areas and who do not wish to move, and the tiny fraction of the population who live a nomadic life'.<sup>48</sup>

Supported in the debate by similar comments from Max Maddon, another backbench Labour MP also representing Bradford, Cryer argued that moving people on, 'from one illegal site to another, like a continuing yo-yo',<sup>49</sup> was not going to solve any problems. Similarly, George Howarth, front bench Labour spokesman, issued a note of sympathy, referring in particular to the health problems faced by Travellers and the difficulties facing Traveller women who were pregnant.<sup>50</sup>

More surprising was the note of sympathy from two voices on the Conservative benches. Robin Maxwell-Hyslop, MP for Tiverton, told the House that it was frequently reminded of the fate of Jews in Nazi Germany: 'The House is less often reminded that Nazi Germany also took into the concentration camps and murdered the Gypsies'.<sup>51</sup> He recognised, also, that Gypsies were rarely presented in a positive light in the Chamber: 'I was elected to the House in 1960, but only once have I heard a Member stand up in the House and speak with pride of his Gypsy ancestry. That was Sir John Arbuthnot who, in a debate in this House in the 1960s, speaking from the Conservative benches, said: "I am a diddikoi". I respected him for that.'

Arbuthnot, with his Eton and Cambridge education, was an unlikely diddikoi. The actual connection was that his father's father's mother's father's father's mother was Janet Fall, reputed to be a 'Queen of the Gypsies'. Given that Fall lived between 1727 and 1802, the connection is pretty remote. And given that she married a baronet who was the subject of a painting by Gainsborough, which must have been an unusuality for a Gypsy to say the least, the authenticity of Fall's ethnicity itself is open to question.

Maxwell-Hyslop, as well as citing the 'real' versus 'fake' which was noted

48. House of Commons Debates. 1990. Hansard. Vol 176, Col 240, 10 July.

49. House of Commons Debates. 1990. Hansard. Vol 176, Col 237, 10 July.

50. House of Commons Debates. 1990. Hansard. Vol 176, Col 255, 10 July.

51. House of Commons Debates. 1990. Hansard. Vol 176, Col 244, 10 July.

earlier, went on to press his major point in the intervention, which was that continually moving Travellers on, from one place to the next, would damage the prospects for their children's education.

## Conclusion

The trawl through Hansard is revealing. The language used to describe a particular group of human beings is nothing short of remarkable. Moreover, the consistency with which Gypsies are vilified, by Tories, Labour, Ulster Unionists and others is striking. The themes are familiar and repetitive throughout the Commons debates. The same words keep re-occurring: filth, crime, excrement, used often in blanket fashion. All of them are criminals; all filthy. There are few words of sympathy. None of this, of course, should provide any major surprises. As Mayall (1995:9) argued, the position of the British state since the sixteenth century has been to characterise Gypsies as a 'problem' in which 'official antipathy' is the general position, expressed in a variety of ways since then.

The latter part of the twentieth and early part of the twenty-first centuries, of course, are seen by most as being more liberal and tolerant on race issues, with the promotion of equal opportunities being presented as—at least the *official*—policy of central and local government and other public authorities. Why, then do Gypsies in Britain appear to be such a socially and politically marginalised group, as demonstrated by their portrayal in the media and by their portrayal in Parliamentary debates with its hostility and almost complete lack of sympathy?

There is no easy, incontrovertible, answer. Clearly, marginalisation is an issue across Europe. As to the politically and socially 'advanced' Britain, the work of Mary Douglas, in her essays on social culture and 'marginalised beings' might be drawn upon to provide some form of illumination. Douglas (1966: 97) argues that, within a dominant society (in this case, 'settled', non-Gypsy society), 'marginal beings' must be guarded against, especially once they have been *officially* designated as marginal beings, by being put in a mental institution, or prison, or, by extension, though she does not mention them specifically, being classified as a Gypsy or Traveller. Once the designation is made, tolerance, for what might otherwise be regarded as behaviour not beyond the bounds of reasonability, is withdrawn. The person is a threat to dominant society, classified as such so that all understand that that is the case and, if possible, excluded. Douglas writes about

rituals of purity and impurity, and Miller (1975: 41–55) uses the approach to show how both the Gypsy and the non-Gypsy view each other as being dirty, contaminated. In the case demonstrated here, the Gypsy is portrayed in Parliament as dirty, unclean, polluting, and criminal as well. But rituals of purity carried out by some Gypsies—certainly in the past and, in some cases now—show how those who *do not* carry them out are also *dirty*, from a different perspective. Writing about the American Rom, she notes that:

They [the non-Gypsy] are observed in various situations which the Rom regard as compromising; forgetting to wash in public bathrooms: eating with the fork that they rescued from the floor of the restaurant: washing face towels and tablecloths with underwear at the local self service laundry: relaxing with their feet resting upon the top surface of the table. (Miller 1975: 45)

A group facing such a hostile environment as ‘marginalised beings’ is unlikely to benefit in the same way as other ethnic minorities might do from policies and laws aimed at ending discrimination and promoting social and economic progress. And, one possible reason for the distinction may be found in Douglas’s (1966: 4) views on the need for society to impose *order*: ‘... I believe that ideas about separating, purifying, demarking and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience’.

Two substantive, though delicate, issues emerge from this discussion which have a bearing on the reporting of ethnic minorities and the activities of some of their members. Firstly, how are the misdemeanours of a few to be reported, discussed in Parliament, without tarnishing an entire ethnic group? And secondly, in an age in which there is more official sensitivity than ever before on racial issues, how is it to be adequately defined who is, and who is not, a member of an ethnic minority group when it is unclear what the requisite qualification is? Most of the politicians discussed here appear certain about who is a ‘true’ and who is a ‘fake’ Gypsy, and about the distinction between a Romany and a ‘scavenging itinerant’. But, given that ethnicity may be defined as being about custom and culture, confirmed in the 1983 Law Lords decision on Sikhs being a separate ethnic minority group from others originating in the Indian sub-continent, rather than simply genetics and biology, their definitions may not be legally defensible. Even within the group of communities classed as Gypsies, there is dispute, too. Leaders of one group of Gypsies will frequently argue that the members of another group are not true Gypsies. ‘He hasn’t got a drop of Gypsy blood in him’, as

one leader of a Gypsy representative organisation commented to me.

And, within law, the position is similarly vague. The Caravan Sites Act defines Gypsies as 'persons of nomadic habit of life, whatever their race or origin,' going on to exclude travelling showmen and circus people. This was a definition specifically designed to be 'non-ethnic' and describe, instead, a way of living. Though, as noted earlier, the 'official' legal definition of Gypsy contained in the Caravan Sites Act 1968 has been removed from the statute book. One thing, however, is not vague. Any politician who referred, collectively, to black people in Brixton as being a 'plague', or Asians in Bradford as 'parasites', would be seen as a pariah, would risk exclusion from his or her political party, and would certainly never reach high office. As far back as April 1968, suggesting that immigration from what was then referred to euphemistically as the 'New Commonwealth' might lead to social conflict was enough to end Enoch Powell's aspirations to leadership of the Conservative Party, though the language used to deliver the message was admittedly inflammatory, at least from the perspective of those with a classical education. There appear to be different rules on Gypsies and Travellers, possibly because of uncertainty over ethnicity, or the inability to secure effective representation within the polity or possibly for other reasons. Few defend them, and nothing that is said about them seems to be regarded as being beyond the pale. Ministerial careers are not jeopardised by blanket criticism. It certainly never stopped Ann Widdecombe becoming shadow home affairs spokesperson; or David Trimble becoming the Ulster Unionist leader; or Jack Straw maintaining his position as Home Secretary and moving on to becoming Foreign Secretary. Straw's comments were, as noted earlier, challenged, but the fact remains that, within the British polity, Gypsies and Travellers remain one of the most marginalised groups in the country. Examining their portrayal in the British House of Commons shows that there is little likelihood of that changing in the near future.

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## Appendix

Mention of Gypsies/Travellers in the British House of Commons 1989 to July 2001

MP	Party	Topic	Date	Legislation proposed?	Reaction from another party?
Conal Gregory	Conservative	Public Order Act	01-02-89	No	No, written answer
David Amess	Conservative	Disruption/mess caused by Travellers	22-05-89	No	Yes, debate
Ian McCartney	Labour	Failure to implement Caravan Sites Act 1968	22-05-89	No	Yes, debate
Ann Widdecombe	Conservative	Control of itinerants	15-06-89	No	Yes, debate
Douglas Hogg	Conservative	Public Order Act	15-06-89	No	Yes, debate
Keith Vaz	Labour	Petition	28-06-89	No	No
Keith Vaz	Labour	Petition	02-11-89	No	No
Robert Jones	Conservative	Select Committee Report	10-07-90	Yes	Yes, debate
Max Madon	Labour	Select Committee Report	10-07-90	No	Yes, debate
Bob Cryer	Labour	Select Committee Report	10-07-90	No	Yes, debate
Sir Hugh Rossi	Conservative	Select Committee Report	10-07-90	No	Yes, debate
Dr John Blackburn	Conservative	Select Committee Report	10-07-90	No	Yes, debate
William O'Brien	Labour	Select Committee Report	10-07-90	No	Yes, debate
Robin Maxwell-Hyslop	Conservative	Select Committee Report	10-07-90	No	Yes, debate
Ian Taylor	Conservative	Select Committee Report	10-07-90	No	Yes, debate
Roland Boyes	Labour	Select Committee Report	10-07-90	No	Yes, debate
Anthony Coombs	Conservative	Select Committee Report	10-07-90	No	Yes, debate
Mark Wolfson	Conservative	Select Committee Report	10-07-90	Yes	Yes, debate
George Howarth	Labour	Select Committee Report	10-07-90	No	Yes, debate
Christopher Chope	Conservative	Select Committee Report	10-07-90	No	Yes, debate
Christopher Gill	Conservative	Nuisance by itinerants	24-01-90	No	No, written answer
John Marshall	Conservative	Law on squatters	15-11-90	Yes	No, oral answer
Maureen Hicks	Conservative	Public Order Act	06-12-91	No	No, written answer

Sir Peter Horden	Conservative	Planning Law	12-03-91	Yes	No
Richard Page	Conservative	Petition	24-07-91	No	No
David Amess	Conservative	Law on encampments	24-07-91	Yes	No, written answer
Sir David Mitchell	Conservative	Nuisance from Travellers	12-12-91	No	No
Peter Lloyd	Conservative	Response from govt to above	12-12-91	No	No
Joe Ashton	Labour	Problems caused by Gypsies	15-10-91	Yes	No
Sir George Young	Conservative	Definition of Gypsy	18-10-91	No	No, written answer
Jonathan Sayeed	Conservative	Petition	08-11-91	No	No
Michael Stern	Conservative	Petition	13-12-91	No	No
Timothy Janman	Conservative	'Gypsy invasions'	23-01-92	No	No, oral answer
Peter Lloyd	Conservative	Response from govt to above	23-01-92	No	No, oral answer
Robert Dunn	Conservative	'Unlawful occupation' of land	20-02-92	Yes, increased penalties proposed	Yes, from Ulster Unionists (see below)
David Trimble	Ulster Unionists	Local authority obligation to provide sites should be reconsidered	20-02-92	Yes, new legislation would have to be considered	Yes, from Conservatives (see below)
Sir George Gardiner	Conservative	Complaint of 'disturbance, disorder and disruption' from Travellers	20-02-92	Yes, 'urgent' need for further legislation	No
Max Madden	Labour	On need to enforce 1968 Caravan Act	20-02-92	No	Yes
Peter Lloyd	Conservative	Response from govt to above	20-02-92	No	Yes
Richard Dunn	Conservative	Reasons why police not informed of Traveller movement	12-03-92	No	No, written answer, but sympathetic response from govt
Richard Dunn	Conservative	Request to govt to combat 'unlawful' camping	13-05-92	Yes, revision to existing law	No, written answer, but sympathetic response from govt

MP	Party	Topic	Date	Legislation proposed?	Reaction from another party?
Ian Taylor	Conservative	Asks what govt plans are to tackle 'illegal camping'	13-05-92	No	No, written answer, but sympathetic response from govt
David Trimble	Ulster Unionist	Asks govt for list of sites provided for Gypsies, and population residing in them	17-06-92	No	No, written answer
Peter Hardy	Labour	Asks how many times local authorities have had trouble with occupation of land by Gypsies	23-06-92	No	No, written answer
David Nicholson	Conservative?	Requests information on legality of Travellers' vehicles	03-07-92	No	No, written answer
Teresa Gorman	Conservative	Requests information on arrangements for Travelling people to claim social security benefits	06-07-92	No	No, oral answer
Cranley Onslow	Conservative	Asks govt to suspend approval of any expansion in Gypsy site provision	13-07-92	No	No, written answer
Richard Dunn	Conservative	Asks govt to stop 'illegal encroachment' of Travellers in villages	15-07-92	No	No
Bowen Wells	Conservative	Bill to privatise Gypsy sites	04-11-92	Yes	No
Barry Jones	Labour	Asks for conference to discuss ways of 'alleviating ill effects' of encampments	09-12-92	No	No, written answer
Ann Winterton	Conservative	Question about an encampment	09-06-93	No	No, written answer
Peter Pike	Labour	Asks for numbers of Gypsies on official and unofficial sites; asks how many complaints against them have been made	17-12-93	No	No, written answer
Robert Hicks	Conservative	Asks govt what statutory arrangements exist on Gypsy accommodation	20-06-94	No	No, written answer
Bernard Jenkin	Conservative	Petition against Gypsy site	07-07-94	No	No

Robert Jones	Conservative	Debate on Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994	19-10-94	Yes	Yes, debate
David Nicholson	Conservative	Supporting govt re above	19-10-94	See above	Yes, debate
Peter Prikke	Labour	Argues for modifications to above	19-10-94	See above	Yes, debate
Sir Trevor Skeet	Conservative	Outlines trouble caused by Gypsy sites	19-10-94	See above	Yes, debate
David Rendel	Liberal Democrat	Calls for consideration of 'human cost' of this legislation to Gypsies	19-10-94	See above	Yes, debate
David Harris	Conservative	Broadly supportive of new bill	19-10-94	See above	Yes, debate
Paul Tyler	Liberal Democrat	Issue of encampments in Cornwall	19-10-94	See above	Yes, debate
George Stevenson	Labour	Broadly not supportive of new bill	19-10-94	See above	Yes, debate
Joan Walley	Labour	Broadly not supportive of new bill	19-10-94	See above	Yes, debate
Jeremy Corbyn	Labour	Opposed to new bill	19-10-94	See above	Yes, debate
Dr Tony Wright	Labour	Agrees action needs to be taken against Traveller encampments	19-10-94	See above	Yes, debate
Jim Cunningham	Labour	Asks what provision has been made for health and welfare of Travellers	05-12-94	No	No, written answer
Teresa Gorman	Conservative	'Invasions' and unacceptable behaviour from Travellers	19-06-95	No	No, merely same party support
Christopher Gill	Conservative	Agreement with above	19-06-95	No	No, merely same party support
Eric Pickles	Conservative	Outlines powers available to deal with unauthorised camping	19-06-95	No	No
Sir Jerry Wiggins	Conservative	Recounts problems caused by Gypsies	28-01-97	No	No, but has sympathetic hearing from govt
James Paice	Conservative	Asks govt to review guidance on unauthorised camping	14-07-97	Possibly	No, written answer
Charles Wardle	Conservative	Czech and Slovak Gypsies	30-10-97	No	No
Peter Brooke	Conservative	Romanian Gypsies	14-11-97	No	No
Doug Hoyle	Labour	Asks for costs of cleaning up after Travellers	27-02-98	No	No, written answer

MP	Party	Topic	Date	Legislation proposed?	Reaction from another party?
Gisela Stuart	Labour	Complains of 'invasions' from Travellers	08-07-98	No	No, but same party support
Robin Corbett	Labour	Support for above	08-07-98	No	See above
Dr Tony Wright	Labour	Support for above	08-07-98	No	See above
Tess Kingham	Labour	Gypsies should be recognised in police training	29-03-99	No	No
Archie Norman	Conservative	Gypsies trespassing	23-03-99	No	No, written answer
Tim Loughton	Conservative	Intimidation by Travellers	10-05-99	No	No
Nick Raynsford	Labour	Response from govt to above.	10-05-99	No	No
Colin Pickthall	Labour	Recognises right to alternative lifestyles Complains of 'foul and aggressive' behaviour from Travellers	19-07-99	No	No
Nick Raynsford	Labour	Balanced response from govt to above	19-07-99	No	No
David Atkinson	Conservative	Call for new powers to evict Travellers from private land	02-03-00	Yes	No
Nigel Waterson	Conservative	Gypsies causing 'considerable problems' by unauthorised camping	09-05-00	No	No, standing committee