Britain's Home Secretary denounced for inciting racial hatred against Gypsies

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British Home Secretary Jack Straw has been reported to the West Midlands police for inciting racial hatred. The complaint was lodged by the Friends, Families and Travellers Advice and Information Unit (FFTAIU) following Straw's remarks during a BBC radio programme last month that there was widespread criminality amongst "many" travellers.

The FFTAIU had originally lodged a complaint with the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE). On Thursday the CRE released a statement that, whilst it opposed any stereotyping of travellers or gypsies, the complaint was a police matter, as the CRE has no jurisdiction over broadcast radio. The FFTAIU then referred their complaint to the police in Sussex, where the group is based, and West Midlands where the remarks were made, for investigation as to whether the Home Secretary had breached the Public Order Act by inciting prejudice and hatred against an ethnic minority.

On July 22, Straw told BBC Radio West Midlands, "There are relatively few real Romany gypsies left, who seem to mind their own business and don't cause trouble to other people. And then there are a lot more people who masquerade as travellers or gypsies, who trade on the sentiment of people, but who seem to think because they label themselves as travellers that therefore they've got a licence to commit crimes and act in an unlawful way ...

"Many of these so-called travellers seem to think that it is perfectly OK for them to cause mayhem in an area, to go burgling, thieving, breaking into vehicles, causing all kinds of trouble... In the past, I'm afraid, there has been rather too much toleration of travellers and we want to see the police and local authorities cracking down on them."

Straw's remarks took place in the midst of such a crackdown. For some time, Labour MPs in the West Midlands have been complaining at the presence of travellers in the region and demanding tougher action. Straw's diatribe was a strong statement by the government that it would now move on their demands. That same day, a major police operation—involving 100 armed officers—was despatched to a travellers' wedding in Coventry, supposedly because of fears of violence.

The Department of the Environment also issued a report, warning that travellers were increasing the burden on taxpayers. The DoE claimed that unauthorised travellers were parking on green lands, industrial estates, parks and restaurant areas. Whilst the report could provide no figures, and admitted that the "costs to local authorities and the police of dealing with unauthorised camping are unknown", it claimed that they were "considerable". It continued "One estimate puts annual costs at some £7 million nationally, including officer time, legal costs, costs of eviction and site cleansing."

By any standards—and especially when one considers that the DoE would have used the most inflated figures—this estimate is paltry. Of far more concern to local authorities is that the travellers' presence deters would-be investors and prospective home buyers.

Straw's outburst was backed by the Home Office, the Conservative Party and the police. A Home Office spokesman said of Straw that "there is absolutely no way his remarks could be construed as an incitement to racial hatred. He was talking about people who were hiding behind the term Gypsy in some way to circumvent the law". Tory Shadow Home Secretary Ann Widdecomb—who just days earlier had been touring Dover demanding a clamp down against "bogus" refugees—said she would "not quarrel with his remarks". The West Midlands police are reported to be "scornful" of the FFTAIU complaint. A spokesman said

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that whilst they were obligated to investigate any complaint reported, "looking at his remarks, I have no doubt that there is nothing criminal about them".

Travellers' organisations, however, are gravely concerned that such comments could seriously inflame racial prejudices. Susan Alexander for the FFTAIU said, "We are not suggesting for one moment that there isn't criminal activity within the traveller community. However that does not justify the whole community being branded as criminals. No other section of the community would be treated in that way." Charles Smith, chairman of the Gypsy Council of Britain, said that Straw was "accusing all travellers of going thieving and burgling. Just imagine what the reaction would be if he had said it about black people. We've had all this stuff about institutional racism and here we have a Home Secretary doing exactly the same thing."

Historically, Gypsies have been one of the main targets of racial discrimination and persecution. All Gypsies were banished from England in 1530. In 1555 to be a Gypsy was a capital offence, which was punished by flogging, removal of the left ear and finally death. The law remained in force until 1789.

During the Nazi holocaust, Gypsies were defined first as "non-Aryan" and then as "asocial". An estimated half a million Gypsies were rounded up and killed in Hitler's concentration camps.

As social and economic conditions in many European countries decline, Gypsies have once again become easy scapegoats. In Eastern Europe particularly, they bear the brunt of unemployment and poverty, whilst facing increasingly violent persecution. More than 300 have been killed in pogroms in Romania since 1989. In the Czech Republic and in Slovakia they are regarded as non-citizens and are driven from one area to another. Kosovo has witnessed the most extreme examples of anti-Gypsy sentiments. Since the end of the NATO bombardment, some 23,000 to 33,000 Gypsies have been driven out of the province by the Kosovo Liberation Army in its efforts to ethnically cleanse the region.

Straw's remarks are particularly sinister in this context. The Home Secretary's favoured campaign is "law and order". Social stereotyping has become a primary means through which the government has justified its significant incursions against democratic rights. Straw's modus operandi is to identify areas of the law which need to be changed or strengthened, and then choose a "target" which can be used to justify these measures. Thus, curfew orders and increased policing were introduced on the grounds of "criminal" youth, apparently "out of control" on council estates.

In this instance, Straw's concern is to justify the passage of Labour's draconian Immigration and Asylum Bill. Its objective is to make the conditions faced by would-be refugees in Britain so appalling that they will be deterred from entering the country. This includes not only the economic situation faced by asylum-seekers—replacing cash benefits with vouchers—but also the political climate. In recent months Labour and the Tories have joined forces to portray Britain as an island being "swamped" by "bogus" asylum-seekers. The political establishment bears direct responsibility for the racial bigotry and violence that has since erupted in Dover over the last weeks.

Since Labour launched its new Immigration and Asylum Bill last October much of this prejudice has been directed against Gypsies. Every effort is being made to prevent those fleeing persecution in Eastern Europe, and now the Balkans, from taking refuge in Britain. The Home Office has been involved in discussions with the Czech government over the number of Gypsies leaving the country to claim asylum in Britain. Home Office Minister Lord Bassam reported that applications from the Czech Republic had risen from 55 in January to 150 in June, and that most of the applicants were Romanies. All were rejected. Bassam said, whilst Czech Gypsies may genuinely face discrimination, they did not fulfil the "necessary criteria" for asylum status.

The British government has threatened that unless the Czech government takes measures to prevent Gypsies from leaving the country, they will impose visa requirements on all entrants to Britain from the Czech Republic. According to reports, some Czech towns are considering creating walled ghettos for their Romany populations.

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