

Britain: Conservative Party promotes racist campaign against gypsies

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The Conservative Party has embraced a racist media diatribe against gypsies and travellers as a central plank of its campaign for the general election, expected May 5.

Right-wing newspapers such as the *Sun*, the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express* had initiated the anti-gypsy campaign earlier this month, just as the 2004 Housing Act came into force.

Amongst other measures, the new legislation requires local authorities to give consideration to the site requirements of gypsies and travellers in their areas. Eleven years ago, the Conservative government overturned a legal requirement for local authorities to provide adequate sites.

Rupert Murdoch's *Sun* led the attack in deliberately inflammatory terms. Britain's countryside was being "invaded" by gypsies who were setting up illegal camp sites and terrorising local residents, it claimed. Labour's legislation would encourage this situation, by "pandering" to a criminal minority at the expense of the law-abiding majority. Declaring "war" on illegal sites, the *Sun* issued a headline call to "Stamp on the Camps."

In response, gypsy and travellers' organisations denounced the tabloid campaign as racist and lodged complaints with the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) over the *Sun's* coverage.

This did not prevent Tory leader Michael Howard from jumping on the anti-gypsy bandwagon. Television cameras followed him as he visited two unauthorised sites in Billericay, Essex, peering through a fence at one travellers' camp before discussing the complaints of local residents.

On Sunday, March 20, Howard published a full-page newspaper advertisement, arguing that "too many people today seem to think they don't have to play by the rules and they are using so-called human rights to get away with doing the wrong thing."

The Tories subsequently pledged a seven-point plan for

tackling unauthorised sites including making trespass a criminal rather than civil offence. The *Sun* crowed of its success in having set the political agenda for the Tory party.

What accounts for Howard's decision to embrace the *Sun's* campaign as a major electoral issue? After all, of the many problems facing people in rural areas, unauthorised sites hardly figure on the horizon.

There are an estimated 15,000 travellers' caravans in the UK, of which the majority are permanently stationed. According to evidence given to a parliamentary select committee in June 2004, just 700 families could be considered to lead a nomadic life.

The lifting of the statutory requirement on local authorities to provide adequate provision for gypsies and travellers has created a shortage of approximately 300 sites. To find some place to stay, some gypsy families have resorted to buying land on which to site their camps, only to have their request to develop the site thrown out. The *Sun* has used a handful of instances in which families have begun to develop sites without having received planning permission beforehand to back up its charge that gypsies are openly flouting the law. However, gypsy organisations have countered that as 90 percent of their applications for planning permission are rejected, they have no choice but to create "facts on the ground."

But Howard's decision to adopt the *Sun's* campaign as his own has nothing to do with the problems, real or otherwise, caused by unauthorised sites.

In the short term, the Tories hope that with a general election just weeks away, they can show Labour up to be "soft" on gypsies in particular and on law and order in general.

In reality, rather than re-establishing the statutory duty on local authorities to provide sites, Labour's Housing Act stipulates only that gypsies' and travellers' needs should be given consideration.

It also gives local authorities stronger enforcement powers against illegal encampments. This follows several high-profile campaigns by some residents in rural villages. The most notable was at Cottenham, Cambridgeshire, where a group of residents calling themselves Middle England in Revolt withheld payments of their local authority tax in protest at a group of Irish travellers moving onto a legal site near to the village.

The Tories complain, however, that Labour has not empowered the police to enforce evictions because it would run foul of the European Convention on Human Rights, which the Blair government incorporated into British law in 1998. They charge that both the Convention and the UK's Human Rights Act place the rights of "special interest groups" above those of the majority.

This spurious claim appears to relate to a recent case brought by an Irish travelling family, the Maloneys, who had sought to use human rights legislation to challenge their eviction from a council-run site where they had set up without official permission. The family, which has been moved on some 50 times, most recently by Leeds Council, argued that their right to proper housing was being breached.

In attacking human rights legislation, the Tories hope to combine the campaign against gypsies with another favoured bête noir of the right wing—opposition to the European Union.

Howard has denounced the Human Rights Act as a "charter for chancers" and recently told a party convention in Scotland that if it were not possible to amend the legislation, a Tory government would scrap it.

"We are all British. We are one nation," he said. "I do not believe in special rules for special interest groups."

Howard grossly inflates the powers and scope of human rights legislation. The rights set out by the Convention—which, it should not be forgotten, was drawn up in the aftermath of the Nazi holocaust, in which at least 250,000 gypsies were murdered—and the UK's watered-down version of it, are subject to numerous caveats.

In particular, the concept of "proportionality" permits the violation of citizens' rights where they conflict with "national security or public safety" or with measures necessary "for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the protection of health or morals or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others."

In the Maloneys' case, the court of appeal dismissed their claim on the grounds that the right of Leeds Council to take possession of its land outweighed the family's right to a home.

The appeal court referred its decision to the Law Lords, as it could conflict with a recent European Court of Human Rights ruling that stipulates the government has a "positive obligation" to "facilitate the Gypsy way of life."

There is no prospect of the Law Lords reversing the court of appeals decision. All it can do is issue a "declaration of incompatibility" between English law and that of the Convention. It is then up to Parliament to make any changes—something that, especially given the recent anti-gypsy campaign—is completely ruled out.

But what Howard in effect is arguing is that affording minorities any legal protection from discrimination and persecution amounts to unwarranted special favours!

The Tories resort to scapegoating gypsies and travellers is a deliberate effort to channel social resentment and grievances in a reactionary direction.

The ruling elite is well aware that it faces unprecedented social divisions. Committed to policies that advance the interests of big business at the direct expense of the mass of the population, none of the official parties can honestly address this reality. The Tories hope to divert attention from this state of affairs, and their own responsibility for it, by whipping up fear, intolerance and xenophobia.

Moreover, the anti-gypsy binge has a logic of its own. What about legislation protecting minorities or socially disadvantaged groups, such as those outlawing racial, religious or sexual discrimination? Presumably, these should also be scrapped, as they are concerned solely with the rights of "special interest" groups.

No one should be under any illusions. The campaign against gypsies and travellers is but a stalking horse for a broader offensive against the democratic rights of all working people.



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