

Former UK Labour Home Secretary David Blunkett's anti-Roma rant

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David Blunkett, Sheffield Brightside MP and former Labour Party Home Secretary, has launched a vicious attack on Roma families from Slovakia.

During an interview with Radio Sheffield, Blunkett said that Roma living in the Page Hall area of Sheffield, England were creating conditions that will lead to riots in the streets.

“We have got to change the behaviour and the culture of the incoming community, the Roma community, because there’s going to be an explosion otherwise,” he said. “We all know that.”

Simply because families congregate at night in groups in the summer months and drop litter, Blunkett asserted that this will lead to riots comparable to those that erupted in Bradford, Oldham and Burnley in 2001.

His outburst is reminiscent of Enoch Powell’s infamous anti-immigrant “Rivers of Blood” speech in 1968, in which the Conservative MP warned of impending race war over immigration from the Commonwealth.

Blunkett said, “We’ve got to be tough and robust in saying to people you are not in a downtrodden village or woodland, because many of them don’t even live in areas where there are toilets or refuse collection facilities... You are here and you’ve got to adhere to our standards, and to our way of behaving, and if you do then you’ll get a welcome and people will support you.”

In 1968, Powell was dismissed from the shadow cabinet for his remarks. Today, however, his overt racism and threats of the UK being “swamped” by immigrants are the standard fare of all the bourgeois parties.

Within hours of Blunkett’s provocative claims, Prime Minister David Cameron and the Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg added their own comments to the anti-Roma campaign. Clegg mirrored Blunkett’s remarks stating, “If you are going to come and live here and you are bringing up a family here you’ve got to be sensitive to the way that life is lived in this country.”

Cameron reinforced this stance by saying he was committed “to tough action on immigration.”

A clearly buoyed Nigel Farage, leader of the ultra-nationalist United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) declared, “Blunkett should be should be admired for the courage he has shown by speaking so plainly on this issue.”

Labour leader Ed Miliband said nothing publicly on Blunkett’s remarks, but the party’s position was summed up by former Home Secretary Jack Straw. Backing Blunkett’s intervention, Straw set out to mark Labour’s claim to anti-immigrant populism, stating that his party had made a “spectacular mistake” in lifting restrictions on the rights of Polish and Hungarian citizens to work in the UK while in power from 1997-2010.

In the days since Blunkett’s comments, virtually every right-wing newspaper and media outlet has been out trawling the handful of streets of mainly old, dilapidated housing that make up Page Hall—home to workers from all over the world—trying to find signs of unrest. All they could manage were reports of scenes of local police officers yelling at young people to clear the streets and go home. The area is subject to a Section 30 order, which gives police the power to disperse groups from public places. As a result of this latest witch-hunt, the order has now been extended to February 11, 2014.

State intervention into areas such as Page Hall is the logical outcome of such outbursts, which seek to push official politics even further to the right.

The *Daily Mail*, *Express* and *Star* carried screaming headlines—one citing that two Roma youth had offered to sell a baby for £250.

According to the *Guardian*, South Yorkshire police insists it did a thorough investigation, including a trawl of CCTV footage and a search of all babies born in the Page Hall area, but could find no evidence of any missing child.

The claim deliberately builds on recent reports, later discredited, that Roma parents in Greece and Ireland had “kidnapped” children. In Ireland the supposedly “stolen” children were removed from their parents on the sole grounds that they did not look like their parents. They were later returned when it was found that the allegations were without any grounds.

The Roma community in Sheffield and elsewhere in the UK, as throughout Europe, is being deliberately scapegoated. There is little comment in any of the reportage on Blunkett’s remarks that deal with the appalling social conditions that the Slovakian Roma and other oppressed minorities are being forced to live in. According to indices of multiple deprivations in 2010, Page Hall is among the top 10 percent most deprived areas in the country and the Firth Park Ward (which contains Page Hall) is the second most deprived in Sheffield.

The median household income in Firth Park Ward is £19,482 below the citywide (CW) average of £24,297—the fourth lowest figure in the city. Some 52 percent of households earn below £20,000 per annum. More than 15 percent have an income of less than £10,000 a year. An incredible 44.6 percent of children are at risk of living in poverty compared with 24.2 percent CW. Some 38 percent are eligible for free school meals, compared with 20 percent CW.

According to the 2011 census, 35 percent of the working-age population in Firth Park claim benefits compared with 15.9 percent in Sheffield. Over 39 percent of working-age people in the ward had no formal job qualifications. Nineteen percent of workers were employed in elementary occupations, while 43 percent were employed in manual occupations, compared with 30 percent CW.

The problems for Page Hall residents clearly extends far beyond the recent influx of Roma and a bit of littering. It is more true to say that Roma migrants are being forced into poverty-stricken areas that have suffered decades of neglect and indifference from Blunkett, Cameron, Clegg and their ilk.

A presentation by the Sheffield Roma Health Champions Project earlier this year pointed out the Roma in Sheffield make up a fraction of a percent of the total population. Because most of the available housing to rent is situated in the poorest neighbourhoods, Roma comprise 15 to 20 percent in such areas, Page Hall being one. Two general practitioners have 1,000 Slovakian Roma registered patients. The majority of Slovakian Roma in

Sheffield are from towns and villages from the Eastern part of Slovakia, where thousands do indeed live in abject poverty with no running water and electricity.

The London-based Roma Support Group (RSG) has already received hate mail following the media campaign triggered by Blunkett’s comments. Sylvia Ingmire, chief executive of the RSG, said there is an emphasis on encouraging a popular image of the Roma as criminals.

Dave Brown, head of Migration Yorkshire, which is studying the Roma population, told the *Observer* that its researchers have found no statistical link between the Roma influx into Page Hall and crime.

“In Page Hall itself, not a single person, even among community leaders, can recall the arrest of a Roma person,” reported the newspaper. No one could recall a violent incident between the Roma and local communities. Brown added, “The point is that there is no danger of a riot. The danger is entrenched exclusion among the Roma.”

Blunkett is not merely reporting on the threat of social unrest, but contributing to such a danger through his deliberately inflammatory statements.

He is treading a well-worn path in vilifying the Roma, a group that has historically been subject to the vilest forms of abuse and discrimination including the murder of a million Roma by the Nazis and forcible sterilisation under Hitler’s “racial purity” laws. Due to massive ongoing discrimination throughout Europe, Romani speaking-children end up being placed in Special Schools, if they are educated at all, and many are denied access to primary health care. Roma across Europe also have the lowest life expectancy and highest infant mortality rates.

In this instance targeting the Roma also provides a means for attacking far broader targets. The dangers of “swamping” by Roma is repeatedly employed as a warning of the supposed consequences of Bulgarian and Romanians securing the right to enter Britain as European Union citizens on January 1. The *Daily Express* is running a petition urging the government to “maintain strict controls on EU migrants due to lapse on December 31”, that has been hailed by Conservative MP Peter Bone in a Private Members Bill as a “crusade... speaking for the British people.”



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