

UK Johnson government launches anti-Gypsy/Traveller/Roma measures

Paul Bond**28 December 2019**

Among the repressive legislation in the Queen's Speech of Boris Johnson's Conservative government are racist measures targeting Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) communities.

The proposals for the Police Powers and Protections Bill include: "Potential measures to criminalise the act of trespassing when setting up an unauthorised encampment in England and Wales, and the introduction of new police powers to arrest and seize the property and vehicles of trespassers who set up unauthorised encampments."

At present unauthorised encampments are a matter of civil rather than criminal law. The change is aimed at faster dispersal. The pro-Tory *Daily Mail* enthused that it "could give police more power to break [encampments] up instead of local residents having to wait for councils to take action."

Justifying the proposals, Johnson's office noted that there were 1,098 caravans on unauthorised camps in England and Wales in July 2019, 728 of them "on land without the permission of the landowner."

This only points to a lack of social provision of adequate transit sites and stopping places—a critical problem for the recognised ethnic GRT groups in Britain. The Criminal Justice Act 1994, introduced by John Major's Conservative government, repealed the duty of local authorities to provide official sites.

Unlike most European populations of Roma and Sinti, many of Britain's 63,000 Gypsies, Roma and Travellers still pursue some itinerant life. The proposals would enforce a solution to this question by criminalisation and police repression.

Without enough authorised encampments, the proposal to allow police to seize Travellers' caravans—their homes—and destroy their property would effectively criminalise the existence of GRT communities. One Gypsy woman, who was too afraid to give her name, told *Foreign Policy* magazine, "Every single thing of value, financial or emotional," is in her caravan. Another called it "a legal pogrom."

Speaking ahead of the election, a member of the GRT community told the *Canary*, "The violence of me and my family being forcibly destroyed should scare all reasonable people. It's ethnic cleansing."

Anti-Gypsy discrimination has long been a component of right-wing populism. The current proposals were contained in

the Tory election manifesto, which made the typical fascistic appeal for the legislation "to protect our communities."

Alongside making "intentional trespass a criminal offence," the manifesto also pledged to give councils "greater powers within the planning system" aimed at removing groups from the area altogether.

The Welsh Conservative Manifesto went further, promising not just to "tackle unauthorised camps," but that police would have "more power to break up travellers' camps" generally.

Michael Gove's campaign material referred to "illegal traveller incursions."

The proposal to criminalise trespass and give the police greater powers to seize property and possessions was first floated by Home Secretary Priti Patel early in November. Her consultation outlined the proposals on criminalising trespass and making it illegal to stop alongside or on a road. It also outlined proposals that the police could force Travellers to move to a transit site in a different county, rather than locally, as now. It also proposed banning Travellers from the local authority area for one year rather than the current three months, which would serve to cut off access to homelessness support.

Patel resorted to familiar racist tropes, referring to "reports of damage to property, noise, abuse and littering." The charity Friends, Families and Travellers (FFT) noted that this focused on "the behaviour of a minority, yet tar[s] all Gypsies and Travellers with the same brush." If this were truly Patel's concern, FFT pointed out, there is already ample legislation to tackle it. Two-thirds of police forces contacted by FFT said that lack of adequate site provision was the real issue.

Patel's proposal to make it a criminal offence for Travellers to stop anywhere without prior permission clearly criminalises a whole ethnic group. She sought to give police power to seize the vehicle of "anyone whom they suspect to be trespassing on land with the purpose of residing on it." She said she wanted to "test the appetite to go further" than her predecessor Sajid Javid's proposal to "lower the criteria... for the police to be able to direct people away from unauthorised sites." The police would be authorised to intervene in the presence of two vehicles rather than six, as now.

In 2011, Patel herself acknowledged, "There are not enough authorised sites. If travellers had authorised sites they wouldn't

need illegal sites.”

FFT, commenting on Patel’s consultation, explained, “Criminalisation of trespass would not make unauthorised encampments and nomadic Gypsies and Travellers disappear; it will however compound the stark inequalities experienced by Gypsies and Travellers and raise serious questions about compatibility with human rights protections.”

A recent spate of council injunctions have aimed at preventing Travellers from stopping on public land. Travellers have still been able to challenge this successfully in the courts, although that would change under these proposals.

In May, Bromley council in south London was refused a borough-wide injunction against encampment on 171 tracts of land. Marc Willers QC, who successfully contested the injunction on behalf of the charity London Gypsies and Travellers, said seeking an injunction against “persons unknown” rather than specific individuals was discriminatory and unfairly demonised all Gypsies and Travellers. He reiterated that “the way to reduce the number of unauthorised encampments is to make adequate site provision for Gypsies and Travellers rather than subject them to a continual cycle of forcible evictions which consigns them and their children to a life of misery and deprivation.”

According to the government, money is available to councils to develop authorised sites, from the £9 billion Affordable Homes Programme. No councils have done so since that programme began in 2016. The government has also made £2 million specifically available to help councils “crack down” on unauthorised encampments, indicating where their true priorities lie.

Demonisation of Travellers and Gypsies has resulted in a spate of racist violence and attacks. Caravans were set alight on Traveller sites in Leicestershire and Somerset this year. Recent council discussions in Lincolnshire have been accompanied by threats to firebomb any new site.

Anti-Gypsy racism is endemic within the Tory party. Last year, one council chief in the West Midlands, Mike Bird, called Travellers “parasites” who cause “misery and mayhem.” In 2014, Berkshire councillor Alan Mellins was suspended after saying that Travellers refusing eviction should be “executed.”

Three years ago, Tory MP Gary Streeter called for Travellers not to be classed as a vulnerable ethnic minority. The press have often evaded accusations of racism by not capitalising Gypsy or Traveller, claiming they are not racial terms. Streeter called Travellers “intruders,” likening them to Genghis Khan.

This year, Sir Paul Beresford MP called Travellers coming into his constituency “a disease.” During the election campaign, the successful Crewe and Nantwich candidate Keiran Mullan led campaigns against Gypsies stopping in a park in Nantwich.

Last year Andrew Selous MP called for caravan sites to be converted to “settled accommodation.” Traveller groups described his bill as an attempt at “forced assimilation.”

Anti-Gypsy racism and legislation must be opposed. They are the thin end of a wedge of more general repressive measures confronting every layer of the working class.

This is underscored by the overlap with the anti-Semitism witch-hunt launched against Labour under Jeremy Corbyn seeking to defame and criminalise anti-Zionist opponents of Israel’s repression of the Palestinians.

In 2007, Blairite Labour MP John—made Baron Mann of Holbeck Moor and the government’s “anti-Semitism Tsar” for services rendered—produced an “anti-social behaviour handbook” for his constituency. This featured a section on Travellers with the bold red headline, “The Police have powers to remove any gypsies or travellers.”

A legal expert on Traveller law and trespass told *Travellers’ Times* that the legal advice in the booklet was wrong. A Gypsy constituent referred the publication to police, who investigated it as a potential “hate incident.” Mann told police it was no longer in print—around 20,000 were distributed—and police advised him against singling out any community in the event of future reprints.

Mann’s response was to write to his constituent, accusing him of “defamatory comments.”

In 2016, Mann was chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Anti-Semitism, which had been invited to a seminar to discuss racism against Gypsies and Travellers. When other organising groups learned of Mann’s booklet they raised questions about it. The APPG pulled out of the seminar without further explanation.

More than half a million Gypsies were murdered during the Holocaust.

Eric Pickles, similarly, was appointed UK Special Envoy for Post-Holocaust Issues by then Tory prime minister, David Cameron in 2015. That year the High Court found he had discriminated against Gypsies and Travellers in the planning process while Secretary of State for Local Government.



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