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# Introduction Themed Section Care or Control? Gypsies, Travellers and the State

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The history of the state, in relation to its 'dealings' with Gypsies and Travellers in Britain and Ireland, has not been one worthy of endorsement, praise or special prizes (Hawes and Perez, 1986; Mayall, 1995). Since the emergence of written records detailing the presence of such groups on these Islands (around the fifteenth Century, according to Fraser, 1995: 111–120) a familiar series of tensions has tended to take shape, tensions that are explored by the articles within this themed section and that we might today discuss in terms of core dichotomies, such as 'integration and assimilation', 'inclusion and exclusion' and, with a social policy focus, 'care and control'. Indeed, where objective academic analysis has been conducted of the state's enactment of social policy measures in relation to both nomadic and sedentary communities of Gypsies and Travellers a brightly coloured picture reveals itself, illustrating, on the one hand, a desire to 'help' (care) for their well-being, safety and security (Parry *et al.*, 2004; Cemlyn, 2006; Mason *et al.*, 2006) whilst, on the other hand, there is also a strong tendency to monitor, classify and regulate (control) their movement, accommodation, work practices and cultural identity (Clark and Greenfields, 2006; Richardson, 2006; James, 2007, forthcoming). No matter what specific area of interest the researcher might have, whether it is accommodation, education or health, the states' activities regarding the care and control of its Gypsy and Traveller citizens often appears to be confused, shifting between the punitive and restrictive as well as being ill-informed and lacking any kind of joined-up coherent strategy.[1] As we will see, through the articles within this themed section, the tensions between the state and Gypsies and Travellers show little signs of being resolved, although in the last few years there have been (policy) signs and (practice) signals that all parties recognise the fact that current entrenched positions are damaging and unsustainable.

It is in the area of accommodation, arguably, where the majority of recent debate and discussion is taking place (Crawley, 2004a; James and Richardson, 2006). This is not a new development of course – witness some of the furious debates when the Caravan Sites Act, 1968 was passed in England and Wales (Acton, 1974) – but since the passing of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act, 1994 (and when the consequences of Section 80 became apparent, in particular) the terms, frequency and intensity of the debate has been heightened as Gypsies and Travellers went out and did exactly what the Conservative government of the time asked them to do – provide for themselves in terms of sites and accommodation. We are now witnessing the 'price' of such a disastrous policy change in the form of an increase in numbers of roadside sites and a plethora of new private site developments that are seeking to gain retrospective planning approval. For sure, whether in the House of Commons or on the letters pages of local newspapers, opinions on Gypsies and Travellers and their accommodation preferences (especially local authority, private or roadside sites) seem united only in their outrage, fear and opposition – it is a



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resounding cry of 'why here?' alongside exaggerated and sensationalised fears of 'waste sites', 'unsociable behaviour' and concern over decreasing property prices (Turner, 2002; Bruen, 2007; Mahadevan, 2007). In subjecting the rhetoric and bluster to proper critical scrutiny, it emerges that one question dominates in relation to accommodation. It is a question that is not only appropriate but, in fact, essential, raising fundamental issues regarding human rights, social justice and community cohesion: how are the 'rights' of both Gypsies and Travellers in caravans and settled people in houses to be accommodated in situations where roadside ('unauthorised') sites or private ('illegal') site developments can provoke severe reactions and local responses? An extreme example of such a reaction was in Firle, Sussex in 2003 when a Gypsy caravan was set alight at the local bonfire event allegedly because of some 'problems' with a roadside site in the area earlier that summer (Townsend, 2003). Although an extreme example, such (explicitly racist) reactions to new Gypsy site developments and roadside encampments are not as uncommon as liberal, settled people might want to imagine – a point made very clear by Trevor Phillips when he said that for Gypsies and Travellers 'Great Britain is still like the American Deep South for Black people in the 1950s' (Crawley, 2004). It was interesting to note that there were few objections heard to this shocking comparison.

As a point of detail, it should be noted that the 'drive' for putting together this themed section came from two main sources: the general election of 2005 and the raft of new Guidance Notes and Circulars that were published by the then Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (now Communities and Local Government) in February 2006.[2] With regard to the General Election, it was on 21 March 2005 that Michael Howard, then Leader of the Opposition, made Gypsies and Travellers front-page news in Britain. The issue of 'illegal' site occupation and retrospective planning applications was used by the Conservative party to appeal to vague notions of British 'fair play'. In robust exchanges with both Labour and Liberal parties during the general election campaign, he suggested that 'special interest groups', such as Travellers, should not have 'special rights' via the Human Rights Act when it came to sites, accommodation and the planning system. To this end, he suggested, the Human Rights Act of 1998 would have to be 'reviewed' if the Conservative Party were elected with a view to either 'improving it or scrapping it'. As he said in his speech at the Conservative Campaign Headquarters (Howard, 2005): 'if you are a Traveller you can use the so-called Human Rights Act to bend planning law – building where you like. That's just not fair. There shouldn't be one rule to (sic) Travellers and another for everyone else.' Fortunately, the Conservative Party were not to be in a position to 'improve or scrap' the Human Rights Act as they were defeated at that election and Michael Howard later resigned as leader of the opposition to give way to David Cameron, who brought with him new ideas on where to take the Human Rights Act (Woodward, 2006). Although the outcome of the 2005 election has now passed into history, the contested issue of Gypsy sites – especially the 'rights and wrongs' of the planning system in relation to private site development – has certainly not gone away. If anything the politics and policy of Gypsy sites has intensified in both Britain and Ireland. For example, in response to events at the election, and earlier Select Committee hearings on the issue of sites, the then Office for the Deputy Prime Minister in January and February 2006 issued a number of new guidance notes and memos on matters such as accommodation assessments, site provision and managing unauthorised encampments (ODPM, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c). These documents are constantly 'under review' and are being interpreted in a number of different ways from local authority to local authority,



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depending on circumstances and the size of the Gypsy and Traveller population in their respective geographical areas.

The central purpose of this themed section is to unpack and explore some of the issues raised above, especially the connections and tensions between what McVeigh calls 'anti-Travellerism', accommodation and related social policy services (such as health and education). The articles raise important questions that not only highlight the structural dynamics at play when it comes to the 'place' of Gypsies and Travellers in British and Irish society but also the (settled) individual and local community responses to the presence of Gypsies and Travellers within the neighbourhood. The role of the state in managing these issues and tensions, in all this, is seen as critical.

Turning to the articles, Margaret Greenfields outlines the ways in which the question of safe and secure accommodation is of paramount importance to Gypsies and Travellers, whether nomadic or sedentary. She acknowledges that since the passing of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act, 1994 such accommodation has been increasingly difficult to find, given that the Act criminalised roadside encampments and removed the duty on Local Authorities in England and Wales to provide sites. Greenfields notes a 'policy turn' – the coming of Stevenson's 'liberal hour' perhaps – in 2003 when central government started to appreciate the human impact (not to mention the economic costs) of constant evictions and disputes over instances of trespass. The article guides us through the legislative maze of the Housing Act, 2004, various Circulars and the beginnings of the Needs Assessments exercises, illustrating in what ways the new system differs from what came before it. Like McVeigh, Greenfields captures the essence of anti-Travellerism, placing it in the context of an ideology of sedentarism (this equating to, essentially, anti-nomadism) (McVeigh, 1997). As a means of exploring causes and consequences of tensions between settled and Gypsy and Traveller communities, Greenfields turns to social theory as well as reviewing three accommodation Needs Assessment studies (Cambridge, Dorset and Surrey), and on the basis of the results of these assessments signal possible ways ahead in terms of improvements to community relations for all residents, both those on sites and those in houses.

The article by Robbie McVeigh shifts our focus to the South and North of Ireland but the argument he conveys – despite the specific 'Irishness' of it – could equally apply in England, Slovakia, Romania or Spain. McVeigh traces the development and persistence of what he terms, anti-Travellerism, that is the state's (post-colonial) construction of Irish Traveller as 'other' and thus subject to intrusive and discriminatory state intervention across social and economic areas of Traveller life. He argues that although some limited progress *was* made in certain areas of policy reform, the state is now engaged in an unsubtle campaign to claw back 'advances' in the hard won area of Traveller civil and human rights. A key element within all this is the role of the state – as he argues in his paper; 'we … find the state as the key structuring element of both repression and reform for Travellers in Ireland'. McVeigh examines state efforts – via various Task Forces and Commissions – to 'solve' the 'problem' of Travellers and, he argues, to search for a 'final solution' (with all the connotations that expression brings with it). At one and same time, a strong 'care and control' agenda was operationalised via state policies in the Irish context. Likewise, the role of non-governmental organisations are detailed and how they are responding to state initiatives to prevent the further championing of Irish Traveller rights, such as a process of what McVeigh terms as 'ethnicity denial' (that is, attempting to query and limit the 'claims' to an ethnicity by Irish Travellers, in both a cultural and



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socio-legal sense). His conclusions are fairly bleak and placed within wider questions of nationalist politics, immigration and Irish racism. The time of optimism has 'long passed', he argues, and there are new 'friends' being won over to the anti-Travellerism movement – clearly worrying times.

If thinking of Beveridge's 'Five Giants', then perhaps the most researched of these 'giants' in relation to Gypsy and Traveller communities in Britain and Ireland is 'ignorance'. As Sally Kendall and Chris Derrington illustrate, since 1967 and the publication of the ground-breaking Plowden Report (DES, 1967), concerns over educational inequalities and the lack of access to education for Gypsy and Traveller children have been on the legislative and policy radar. Since this time, a wealth of government-funded and charity-funded research projects and studies have been conducted to try and address the inequalities that continue to exist. Kendall and Derrington's own study was carried out over a five year period (2000–2005) and examined the key transition 'moment' for a group of 44 Gypsy and Traveller students – the shift between primary and secondary schooling. The project covered some 15 local authority areas in England and included both urban and rural areas (although most of the group were 'relatively settled'). As other studies have shown, the transition between primary and secondary education is noted as being a complicated and difficult time for Gypsy and Traveller pupils and parents to manage, for both structural/institutional as well as individual/cultural reasons (Reynolds, McCartan and Knipe, 2003; Bhopal and Myers, forthcoming, 2007). In their paper, Kendall and Derrington argue that a combination of factors, such as mobility, the nature of home/school relationships, racism, cultural identity, behavioural issues all play a role in the transition process, as evidenced by the experiences of 'Linda' who painfully illustrates the inter-connectedness of the issues and the need for 'joined-up' solutions to questions of access, take-up and performance at the secondary school level.

Arguably, since Pahl and Vaile's influential study back in 1986, there has been an increasing interest amongst social policy and health researchers in the health and well-being of Gypsy and Traveller communities in Britain (Pahl and Vaile, 1988). However, it is still fascinating (if depressing) to note that the 'Gypsy Moth' returns more 'hits' on medical research databases (such as Medline) than Gypsy people (McKee, 1997). As with education, the question of health inequalities has been central to this interest and research has largely focussed upon what elements contribute to the poor health record of Gypsy and Traveller patients. In her article, Patrice Van Cleemput brilliantly demonstrates the explicit connections between unsafe and insecure accommodation and health status/experience. Drawing on work that was part of the so-called 'Sheffield study' (Parry *et al.*, 2004), Van Cleemput argues that two dynamics need to be fully understood – firstly, the actual material conditions of where and how Gypsies and Travellers live and, secondly, the degree of control they can exercise in terms of influencing or changing such conditions. The author explicitly states that accommodation is a health determinant and traces the history of research in this area, both in relation to settled people and Gypsies and Travellers. The external environment of sites, however, is seen as crucial here – their positioning close to industrial estates, sewage works, railway sidings, quarries and major motorways does nothing to enhance the health and well-being of Gypsy and Traveller families. It is the lack of control that families have over their accommodation that can lead to certain health-related problems, aptly illustrated by a range of quotes from the Sheffield study indicating the frustration that many people feel about a lack of choice and options



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when it comes to accommodation, especially those families who are even partly nomadic and are being evicted from one roadside site to the next. Stress and anxiety is part and parcel of this process and the uncertainty over where the next *'atchin tan* (stopping place) will be found adds to worries over mental health. This body of work dovetails with what Greenfields argues in relation to her findings from the Needs Assessment work. As well as focussing on roadside sites, Van Cleemput also considers those Gypsies and Travellers in 'bricks and mortar' housing and reports that the majority of respondents in the Sheffield Study felt 'forced' into housing as a result of personal (often health-related) circumstances and external pressures. Residents speak of a 'culture shock' in moving from a pitch on a site to a house and racism from neighbours as increasing their stress levels. Van Cleemput concludes that the only way forward is for Gypsies and Travellers to regain a sense of control over their immediate environments and their movements, and being regarded as a priority group for culturally relevant health-related social justice programmes and initiatives.

What becomes clear when reading this themed section is the enormity of the challenges that have been faced and those that are still ahead. How can the oppressive histories of anti-Travellerism, in all its guises, be rendered impotent? How can the accommodation circle be squared, given the apparent different interests of Gypsies and Travellers and their settled neighbours? How can longstanding health and educational inequalities be more effectively reduced? If the history and contemporary experience of social policy in relation to Gypsy and Traveller communities tells us anything, it tells us that poor communication and consultation, a lack of reasoned and balanced discussion and an absence of truly 'joined-up' policy has been far too common. The political mantra of 'rights and responsibilities' has too often focussed on the latter, rather than the former, in the case of Gypsy and Traveller citizenship. It is argued here that a socially just and inclusive way of engaging with both Gypsy and Traveller and settled communities is not as mutually exclusive as the evidence might suggest. For sure, the majority of Gypsy and Traveller families recognise the difficulties that some roadside sites can bring with them, though they are quick to point out that they have few other options available to them – securing land and planning permission for a private site development is anything but a cheap option and many local authority sites are either being closed down or reducing the number of pitches available on their sites. Critically, this should not be about blaming the victim – what is required on the part of politicians, counsellors, journalists and local settled residents is a genuine and lasting recognition that Gypsies and Travellers are a part of the multicultural landscape of Britain and Ireland and they cannot be stigmatised or labelled in the way they have been to date, and nor can they be pushed from pillar to post in terms of their legal rights to safe and secure accommodation and other essential social policy services.

## Notes

1 For example, Jean-Pierre Liégeois (1988) found in his work that there was a direct contradiction between state policies on children attending school and the time-limited restrictions placed on where nomadic Gypsy groups could stay in urban areas. Similarly, my own work (Clark, 1999) found contradictions in state policies between work, social security and travel as it applies to Gypsy and Traveller groups (whereas it is assumed that to travel around the country is to *not* seek work, the exact opposite is the case for many Gypsy and Traveller families who operate within a particular type of political economy, as commercial nomads).



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2 It should be noted that two further articles were commissioned for this themed section but unfortunately they are not included here. It is hoped that both these articles will be published in the near future within the pages of *Social Policy and Society*, ensuring that discussion and debate continues on the important themes raised within this themed section.

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