

## Between Rhetoric and Reality: Travellers and the Unfinished Republic

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During a recent conference on the new Equal Status Bill, the head of the new Equality Authority, Niall Crowley, was asked a particularly poignant question. The questioner, Mags O'Leary, a Traveller woman living on a halting site in Sallynoggin, was interested to know if the new law would change the situation on her site where eleven people share a single toilet, or would she have a safe place for her children to play. Would these fine words make any difference to how she lived her life? An awkward silence followed. Apparently it was not possible to answer in the affirmative, or guarantee a timescale in which such deprivations would be redressed.

This paper sets about an open contemplation of the guiding principles of republicanism, namely liberty, equality, and fraternity, as enunciated during the French revolution. The particular focus of the piece is the relationship between these principles and the Travelling community, as the Irish Republic enters a new century. This paper discusses the philosophy, rhetoric, and practice related to these concepts.

Following a hard-fought campaign, a definition of 'Traveller' that is in keeping with Northern Ireland legislation has been enshrined in Irish law. According to the new Equal Status Bill the 'Traveller community' means 'the community of people who are commonly called Travellers and who are identified (both by themselves and others) as people with a shared history, culture and traditions including, historically, a nomadic way of life on the island of Ireland'.

The belief that Travellers are an ethnic minority has become one of the most contentious issues in modern Ireland. On one hand, the idea of an ethnic minority is criticised as being a middle-class, liberal smokescreen, hiding a sub-culture of poverty. Writers, like the historian Dymphna McLoughlin, challenge the term ethnicity as used in relation to Irish Travellers. She argues that basing a campaign for human rights on the special claim to ethnicity is to betray a conservative agenda. Better by far to recognise that society in the Republic has been oppressively monolithic, and that many minority groups have been denied full expression of their identities. However, it has only been since groups like

the Irish Traveller Movement and Pavee Point began organising under the idea of ethnicity that progress of any kind has been achieved. Yet this has not precluded these organisations from taking part in broad national platforms like the Share the Wealth campaign.

Whether or not Travellers organise through identity politics, it remains a fact that opinions exist within the settled community which attach innate 'negative' characteristics to Travellers. The assumption of innate characteristics and discrimination based on these assumptions are, in effect, racial discrimination. This is true whether or not the group being discriminated against has organised on the basis of being an ethnic group. Dr. McLoughlin's analysis, however, should prompt us to question our commitment to extending basic human rights to all the citizens of our thriving republic.

Long before Ireland had become a republic, James Connolly stated his belief that:

Ireland without her people is nothing to me, and the man who is bubbling over with love and enthusiasm for 'Ireland' and yet can pass unmoved through our streets and witness all the wrong and suffering, the shame and degradation wrought upon the people of Ireland, aye, wrought by Irishmen upon Irish men and women, without burning to end it, is in my opinion a fraud and a liar in his heart.

Connolly's denunciation of the yawning gap between rhetoric and reality remains as important and incisive today as it was when these words were first uttered. It will prove worthwhile to examine each of the foundation stones separately, beginning with fraternity.

#### **Fraternity, 'n. group of people with shared interests, aims etc'.**

The use of the term fraternity is still in common usage in popular culture. Our TV screens are regularly treated to American students partying in their 'Frat' houses. Indeed, based on the above definition, the term 'frat' house is entirely accurate. It has been the history of republican fraternity that the term has been as inclusive as the user's conception of that republic was inclusive. Whether it was the exclusion of slaves from Plato's republic, or women from the French revolutionary republic, or Blacks from the independent American nation, the rhetoric of a republic has never been a guarantee of an all-inclusive society.

#### **Liberty, 'n. freedom'.**

What does the word freedom imply? Surely it must include the freedom to live one's life in keeping with one's culture. If this is true, then what of the impact of the two recent pieces of legislation that have directly affected Traveller culture, i.e. the Casual Trading Act and the Control of Horses Act. When politicians call themselves liberal these days, it refers mainly to their attitude to the economy. At the same time as the economy

is being liberalised, the Traveller economy is being regulated out of existence.

**Equality, 'n. state of being equal'.**

The Equal Status Bill will be law this summer. Although the equality of all citizens is one of the fundamental principles of a republic, the Equal Status Bill has been forced upon us due to international treaty commitments. It is obvious that Travellers will still suffer from an inequality of opportunity. Years of disadvantage will not disappear with the passing of this law.

There is now an onus on the Republic to finally turn rhetoric into action. The country needs to be pro-active in making the principles of republicanism a lived reality, experienced by all of its citizens. It is no longer acceptable that we talk inclusion and practice exclusion. The Irish Traveller Movement promotes a common understanding of the distinct ethnic identity of the Traveller community, a community with its own culture, of which nomadism is an important part. The right of Travellers to self-determination as a community, and the alleviation of the horrendous living conditions which so many Travellers experience, remain among the most pressing civil rights issues any where in Europe. A comprehensive and sustained programme of action, based on the much vaunted principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity, would indeed constitute a good start.

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