

**Traveller Rights Are
Human Right**

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Meeting of the Joint Committee on Key Issues Affecting the Traveller Community

18 April 2024 | Opening statement of Patrick Nevin

First, I would like to thank the committee members for offering this space to discuss this extremely important subject.

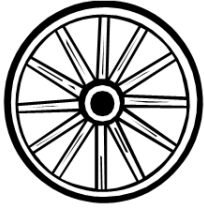
I want to begin by saying that the Traveller quest for ethnic recognition was one of many hills to climb, and for all the amounts support it received, it was also met with as much opposition and ridicule if not more, and indeed at times dismissed as pure folly, both from within the community and from without. However, in March 2017 this quest came to somewhat of an end, when then Taoiseach Enda Kenny, stood up in the Dáil and announced that Traveller Irish did constitute an ethnic group, and therefore should be recognised as such. And I must admit that when this happened, I was extremely proud to be a Traveller, but I was also extremely proud of our Taoiseach, and our nation. It felt like we were finally going to be admitted into societal norms, you might say to become part of the social contract.

However, the quest for ethnic recognition may have been achieved, but that is not the end of the struggle. When I said I was proud of our nation that implies that I felt part of that nation, and indeed for a short period of time after this momentous achievement I was part of this nation. I felt that I was and that my people were finally going to be seen as equals, and that all the years of hard work done by my fellow Traveller and settled ally activists had finally been giving their due recognition. That this was the social contract been extended to Traveller Irish. The Basic definition of the social contact says that people live together in society in accordance with an agreement that establishes moral and political rules of behaviour. But the key element of the social contract is the ability to opt into it, or to be cynical be given the right to opt in, the social contract is only inclusive if you are part of the perceived norm, it will only work for you, if you are valued and seen to part of that norm.

The State was founded on the 6th of December 1921 and from the outset one could argue that it set about creating a mono-cultural identity. And over the following decades the state in partnership with the Irish catholic church achieved this. It imposed a tyranny of majority and in this pursuit of might is right mentality, we see an attempt to remove and erase from the history pages any group or community that did not sit in with the new states ideals of what it decided was the true Irish or valued Irish. In recent years we have become more aware of the treatment of women who were detained against their will in the Magdalen laundries, mother and baby homes and of the incarceration of the working-class poor in the industrial schools. But sadly, that same in debt level of investigation has not been given to the treatment of Traveller Irish, both in these institutions or at a wider societal level.

This process is what we would now call othering, and it is a very simple process. You create a sense of them! They are not us, therefor they are not entitled to the same recognition, investment, resources or rights. You do not value their culture or identity. You create a demarcation, those who are in the majority, and those who are not. It continues to reinforce this othering process, by creating negative stereotypes, of the minority/outgroup. They are morally and intellectually inferior to the dominate majority group. Once you have initiated this process, it becomes easier to create a mind-set that permeates throughout those who are deemed superior and valued, and in the Irish State, this is the





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majority white catholic settled/sedentary population, who are extended this privilege and position. We know following the publication of the Commission of itinerancy in 1963 the disparity between

Traveller Irish and settled/sedentary Irish has increased exponentially, across all the social determinants.

This has been the lived experience for Traveller Irish since the foundation of the State, if we are to follow on from the achievement of the recognition of ethnicity 2017, then the natural progression in this process is to provide a state apology. For some an apology would be meaningless for others there is fear that this would open a Pandora's box, of what ifs. What would the long-term consequences be? And while no one can ever be certain, it must be noted that other states have crossed this Rubicon, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, and closer to home Norway have all given state apologies to their Indigenous minorities, and as of to date I can't find any evidence of any major disruption to these nations.

However, I do feel that the benefits of a State apology to Traveller Irish would be hugely significant, significant, first and foremost that it would be a long overdue welcome to the ideals of the proclamation of independence, and secondly to promote a process of healing and reconciliation between Traveller Irish, white settled/sedentary Irish, and to all our minorities in 21st century Ireland.

My sincere thanks to the committee again.

Patrick Nevin

