

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM DHLÍ AGUS CEART, COSAINT AGUS COMHIONANNAS

JOINT COMMITTEE ON JUSTICE, DEFENCE AND EQUALITY

Dé Céadaoin, 17 Aibreán 2013

Wednesday, 17 April 2013

The Joint Committee met at 2 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Deputy Marcella Corcoran Kennedy,	Senator Ivana Bacik,
Deputy Anne Ferris,	Senator Martin Conway,
Deputy Seán Kenny,	Senator Denis O'Donovan,
Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn,	Senator Katherine Zappone.
Deputy Finian McGrath,	
Deputy John Paul Phelan,	

In attendance: Deputy Áodhán Ó Ríordáin and Senator Fiach Mac Conghail.

DEPUTY DAVID STANTON IN THE CHAIR.

Recognition of Traveller Ethnicity: Discussion

Chairman: I welcome Ms Brigid Quilligan, director of the Irish Traveller Movement, and thank her for coming before the joint committee. I also welcome from the Irish Traveller Movement Ms Susan Fay, managing solicitor, and Ms Jacinta Brack, communications co-ordinator. I also welcome Ms Ronnie Fay and Mr. Martin Collins, directors of the Pavee Point Travellers Centre. We will ask them to make brief opening remarks for approximately five minutes, after which we will have a question and answer session on the issues raised.

By virtue of section 17(2)(l) of the Defamation Act 2009, witnesses are protected by absolute privilege in respect of their evidence to the joint committee. If they are directed by it to cease giving evidence on a particular matter and continue to do so, they are entitled thereafter only to qualified privilege in respect of their evidence. They are directed that only evidence connected with the subject matter of these proceedings is to be given and asked to respect the parliamentary practice to the effect that, where possible, they should not criticise or make charges against a person or persons or an entity by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable. Members are reminded of the salient rulings of the Chair that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person outside the Houses or an official by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable.

I ask everybody to please switch off all mobile phones. It is not good enough to leave them in silent mode because they interfere with the recording system. I even take the battery out of mine to ensure it is completely switched off.

I invite Ms Quilligan to make her opening statement.

Ms Brigid Quilligan: We are delighted to be here to speak about why it is imperative for our people to have their ethnicity recognised by the State. The Irish Traveller Movement has more than 40 member organisations and a mandate to speak on their behalf and advocate for the recognition of Traveller ethnicity. Our submission includes details of Irish Travellers who number 40,000 in Ireland, 15,000 in Britain and 10,000 of Irish descent in the United States. We have a shared history, cultural values, a language, customs and traditions which are recognisable and distinct to our own people. We constitute an ethnic group on the basis of these distinct and separate cultural values and traditions which make us self-identify as a separate group and enable us to be identified by the majority of the Irish population as a separate group. We have been recognised as an ethnic group by all major international human rights instruments and bodies in Europe and worldwide and by the major human rights instruments in Ireland. Uniquely, we also have two distinct features which mark our difference. We have a dual identity of being indigenous Irish and Travellers and an undisputed and historical experience of marginalisation and discrimination in the country to which we belong.

Members will note from our submission that our legal argument is watertight. There is no dispute among national and international legal experts that we constitute an ethnic group. We self-identify as an ethnic group and others recognise us such. I will speak about the impact of not being recognised in one's own country as an ethnic group. No matter how many boxes we tick or how much we fulfil our requirements and responsibilities in Irish society, we still experience discrimination and prejudice in every area of life on a daily basis. People justify racism against us by stating we bring it on ourselves. That is what the general Irish population thinks about us and we know this. We feel the hate, as do our children. We see the hate in the media and displayed by people in positions of responsibility, politicians, judges, the police, teachers

and doctors. We feel, see and experience it on a daily basis. It is not good enough for the State not to offer us the protection to which we are entitled.

We are not speaking about major changes; we are speaking about people who have been on the island of Ireland for as long as anybody can record and recognition for the valuable contribution we have made to Irish society. We are talking about having our own history recorded, rather than a history that has been written for us, imposed upon us and dictated to us. We are talking about setting the record straight and supporting our people to stand tall and feel they are a valuable part of Irish society. Make no bones about it - despite what one might hear regularly, Travellers want to be part of Irish society. We work hard and tirelessly to be part of society. Unfortunately, however, doors are often closed in our faces, so many of our community do not engage. Working with the Irish Traveller Movement, I can see how people - especially the most vulnerable in society who are dependent on the State - are treated by agents of the State. I can therefore understand why people choose not to engage. However, our message today is that both local and national Traveller organisations want to support people to engage with the State.

We want recognition so that our culture and people can survive into the future. We cannot do it on our own, however, so we need your support. We need allies and while we have some already, we need more allies in the Oireachtas. We need people to stand up for us. We are on this side of the table while the committee members are on the other side.

There is a lot we could say about ethnicity and I could talk all day about it, including key points as to why the recognition of our people is so vital for our survival. Our suicide rate is six times the national average. My colleagues and those in the Visitors Gallery know that it is directly related to the oppression and marginalisation our people suffer.

During questions and answers I hope to have an opportunity to elaborate further. I thank the committee for its attention.

Chairman: I thank Ms Quilligan for her powerful presentation. Mr. Collins wants to come in next.

Mr. Martin Collins: I thank the Chairman and other committee members for giving Pavee Point Travellers' Centre this opportunity to present some of the key arguments as to why Travellers should be recognised as an ethnic minority. The Tánaiste is on record as having said that same-sex marriage is the human rights issue of our generation and I would agree with that. I would also suggest, however, that for the Traveller community, the recognition of Traveller ethnicity is the human rights issue of our generation.

We are disappointed at the persistent refusal of successive Governments to recognise what is self evident, namely, that we Travellers constitute a distinct ethnic group. The Government has continued to ignore the opinions and recommendations of a range of eminent domestic and international bodies which have all said the Government should take concrete measures to recognise Traveller ethnicity. The same eminent human rights bodies have also said, very clearly, that Travellers meet all the legal and academic criteria in terms of what constitutes ethnicity.

In particular, I want to draw the attention of the committee to general recommendation No. 8 of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, CERD, which is the principle of the right to self identify, if no objective justification can be put to the contrary. The Irish Government is immediately in breach of this principle because it has not explained or justified why it will not recognise Traveller ethnicity. The mantra we consistently get is that there is a

divergence of views within the Traveller community.

While recognising that there are a number of individuals who disagree with the recognition of Traveller ethnicity, the four national Traveller organisations - the Irish Traveller Movement, the National Traveller Women's Forum, Pavee Point Travellers' Centre, and Mincéirs Whiden, a Traveller-only forum - all agree that Travellers do constitute an ethnic minority and should be recognised as such.

Last September, at a conference organised in Dublin Castle by the National Traveller Monitoring Advisory Committee, NTMAC, 99% of the Travellers in attendance also agreed that we do constitute an ethnic minority and should be granted that status. There was one dissenting individual.

Nowhere in international law does it suggest that a consensus is needed for the recognition of ethnicity to be granted to our people. In the final analysis, it is irrelevant whether one agrees or disagrees. It is about recognising that there are international objective criteria on what constitutes ethnicity. It is against this that assessments and decisions ought to be made. If this approach was adopted by the Government there is no doubt in my view that our ethnicity would be recognised.

The 1976 *Mandla v. Dowell-Lee* judgment in the UK is of significant importance to Irish Travellers. It gave a lengthy definition of an ethnic group. I want to convey two essential elements to this committee. One is that the group has a long shared history, of which it is conscious, distinguishing it from other groups and the memory of which is kept alive. The second element is a cultural tradition of its own, including family, social customs and manners, often but not necessarily associated with religious observance.

In 2002, this criterion was heavily relied on in the English courts in *O'Leary and Others v. Allied Domecq and Others*. After long deliberation, the presiding judge, Mr. Justice Goldstein, concluded that Irish Travellers met this criterion and therefore should be recognised as an ethnic minority. In addition, the 1997 Race Relations Order grants recognition to Travellers in the North of Ireland, yet in this jurisdiction we do not.

In that context, we also suggest that the Irish Government is in breach of the Good Friday Agreement which refers to an equivalence of rights. In other words, it is about harmonising legislation upwards. If there is a piece of legislation in the North of Ireland which is inferior to our legislation, there is an obligation on the Northern Ireland authorities to enhance their legislation upwards. Likewise, there is a corresponding obligation on the Irish Government to enhance our legislation. Unfortunately, however, it has not done so.

Our own Equal Status Act gives a very good definition of what constitutes ethnicity in all but name. Traveller organisations have provided evidence, both legal and academic, which clearly suggests that Travellers constitute an ethnic group. Therefore, under international law the burden of proof to the contrary now lies with the State, but it has failed to act. As I said, the mantra we get all the time is that there is a divergence of views in the Traveller community.

This is not some sort of academic or ideological debate. Not to recognise Traveller ethnicity has profound implications in terms of legal protection. It is questionable whether Travellers are afforded the full protection of the EU race directive. There are also implications concerning support for Traveller nomadism, language, culture, history and the inclusion of Travellers in intercultural and anti-racism initiatives.

As regards the ethnic question in our national census, we had to fight tooth and nail to get Travellers included in that because we were not recognised as an ethnic group. In the end, we reached a compromise. As well as practical implications, ethnicity also has a symbolic value. It would be good for Travellers' self-esteem and confidence, as well as being important for our people's overall status in Irish society.

In our opinion, there needs to be an unequivocal recognition of our ethnicity either by way of legislation or constitutionally, or both. In the absence of this unequivocal recognition, the subtext is that we are a dysfunctional, primitive community who need to be civilised and rehabilitated.

Ethnicity is fundamentally about recognition, respect and, by extension, inclusion. It is about recognising our history, culture and language. Let us be clear about it - this is not about saying that the more one claims ethnicity, the less one claims Irishness. We are very proud of our ethnicity and we are also very proud of our Irishness. We are willing, and demanding, to play our part in the Irish nation.

Chairman: I thank Mr. Collins for his powerful presentation. The committee has agreed to have these hearings today and will probably have others. We have invited Deputy Mac Lochlainn to act as rapporteur and prepare a report for the committee, which we will discuss when we have finished this work. We will be presenting that to the Government, as well as publishing it. I wanted to clarify where we currently are and I think I speak for everybody in saying that. Deputy McGrath was the first member I saw indicating a wish to ask one or two questions. Members will ask a question and then get an answer and so on. The witnesses will be glad to hear members do not make speeches but ask questions.

Deputy Finian McGrath: Ms Quilligan, Mr. Collins and the entire delegation are welcome before the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Justice, Defence and Equality. I am an Independent Deputy and on the broader issues, I endorse fully what the witnesses have said. Their submissions were excellent and right to the point. My first question pertains to a single sentence that jumped out at me, namely, Ms Quilligan's comment that Travellers feel the hate. I believe that was the phrase she used. I ask her to expand a little on this because many people in Leinster House and in the broader community do not get that and do not understand the impact it has on adults, as Ms Quilligan mentioned, but also on young Traveller children. That is my first question.

Chairman: Could we possibly focus on the ethnicity question, which is the core of the joint committee's business? We should keep that in mind when debating this point because that is at the core of the work we are doing today.

Ms Brigid Quilligan: In response to Deputy McGrath, the reason ethnicity is an issue so dear to my heart is that I think some of the hate we experience as adults and children - I will speak about that in a second - is because we are seen, as Mr. Martin Collins said, as deviants and as villains, as a kind of a subculture and as people who do not conform and will not participate in society. Through generations, where we were once a strong, proud people - and for some part still are - we have been devalued within society. Never before in my lifetime have I seen such hate as I have seen in the past five years. If one opens a newspaper or turns on the television, if one is in a shop or on a train, if one looks at Facebook, Twitter, thejournal.ie or anything at all, anti-Traveller sentiment is fired at one. As Travellers, we experience this in our daily lives and we try to set about changing that by making people aware of us and by working in partnership with people. However, while we accept there is a certain tolerance from the

people on the street, where it is happening more often is with people in positions of power who are coming out with absolutely outrageous anti-Traveller propaganda in the media in public open forums. It is open season on Travellers, with little or no consequences for their actions. When one is a Traveller, whether one is in the line of work we do or is a doctor, a hairdresser or anything else, be it getting involved or being a mother staying at home with one's children, when one sees such things in the media, one asks whether there is no law in the land of Ireland for one's people. We ask if there no justice for our people if so much hate can be expressed towards us. Like anyone, we internalise things. If one is constantly told and fed negative things about one's self, one internalises them. Certainly, we see some of our young people struggling with their identity and it is very hard, as a parent, to try to instil pride in one's identity because of all the hate one encounters. I do not know whether anyone else wishes to add to this point.

Ms Ronnie Fay: May I make a point pertaining to ethnicity? One problem with the denial of Traveller ethnicity is that Travellers are not automatically included in anti-racism and inter-cultural initiatives, many of which are about promoting integration and mutual respect in Ireland. Because this ethnicity is not recognised, the units in those Departments that are dealing with anti-racism and inter-culturalism actually do not include Travellers. Consequently, Travellers have a unique experience of discrimination and we do not call it racism. This, for us, is a key and core part of the debate regarding ethnicity, because if one recognises Traveller ethnicity, one recognises that racism is the root cause of discrimination with which Travellers are faced. If one does that, one then seeks to address and challenge it in order that adults and children are not exposed to hate, racism and discrimination. This is a fundamental problem. The unit in the Department of Justice and Equality that deals with anti-racism and promotes inter-culturalism excludes Travellers. Travellers are dealt with by the Traveller division, and this is hugely problematic. For example, while the Government was developing the inter-cultural education policy, Travellers were excluded until we were obliged to bang down the door and demand to be included. Moreover, we then are perceived to be difficult, awkward and always complaining, whereas, were we to be included as a right, our input would be planned. As Mr. Martin Collins noted, we have campaigned for an ethnic question in the census since 1986. We finally succeeded in getting one in the early 1990s and it was only a Traveller question. When the ethnic question was introduced in 2002, Travellers were going to be excluded from it because they were not recognised as an ethnic group. That is the reason the question in the census is what is one's ethnic and cultural background. Really, however, the issue needs to be that ethnicity is recognised, that racism is named and that Travellers are included in anti-racism and inter-cultural initiatives.

Deputy Finian McGrath: My second question is related, to an extent, and is specifically to do with the ethnic group aspect. In her submission, Ms Quilligan stated that the 40,000 Travellers in Ireland are recognised by many human rights groups, both nationally and internationally, as an ethnic group. She then made a comment about the argument from a legal perspective and stated it was recognised as being, and I believe she used the word, "watertight". Do the witnesses have information about the view of the present Attorney General? Has the Irish Travellers Movement ever been given a view from the Attorney General in with regard to that aspect of the issue?

Ms Susan Fay: I am not in a position to comment on the view of the Attorney General. However, I can state that both the Equality Authority, in a report from 2006 on Traveller ethnicity, and the Irish Human Rights Commission in 2004 and 2013 agreed that Travellers should be recognised as an ethnic group. Both of these statutory human rights and equality organisations agreed. Picking up on a concern raised by Ms Ronnie Fay, the new Irish Human Rights

and Equality Commission, IHREC, that is being formed, with which I am sure all members are familiar, has an inter-culturalism remit. However, because Travellers are not specifically named as an ethnic group, it is unclear whether Travellers will be included within that remit. Consequently, there is less legal clarity, more confusion and more lobbying to be included in provisions and rights that justifiably should be afforded to Travellers. I hope this has dealt with Deputy McGrath's question.

Deputy Finian McGrath: I just get the impression that there are people within the legal establishment or within the State who are blocking the recognition. To zoom in on the highly relevant point made by Mr. Martin Collins when he spoke of the Good Friday Agreement, if legislation both North and South is being brought into line and if we are really serious about equality and human rights, my personal view is to question the reason we are not getting on with it and to ask what is the problem in this regard.

Chairman: When we eventually come up with our report, we might be able to take those points into account. Has Deputy McGrath concluded his questions?

Deputy Finian McGrath: I will put just two more questions because I do not wish to hog the time. First, are there examples internationally of good practice in respect of Travellers, gypsies or different minority groups? Are there international examples of where it works in the context of human rights and recognition? Mr. Collins might answer my final question, which pertains to the burning out of a house allocated to a Traveller family in County Donegal. At the time of that horrific incident, only a minority of Deputies in Dáil Éireann spoke out, and personally I felt very let down. How did Mr. Collins react to that? Violence against Travellers is happening frequently-----

Chairman: I know.

Deputy Finian McGrath: -----and there is a deafening silence from Members of the Oireachtas that is unacceptable.

Chairman: Sure. I wish to keep the debate to the question of ethnicity, if possible. That is the subject on which everyone wishes to focus. Let us not stray too far from it. As briefly as possible, who wishes to come back on that point?

Ms Brigid Quilligan: If I respond on the question of indigenous people, Mr. Collins might answer about Ballyshannon. As for other examples internationally, we have the example of the Sami people in Scandinavia, whose ethnicity was denied for many years. In our consultation with members of the Sami people, the similarities between us were absolutely uncanny. One of the main things from which they feel they have benefited since they were recognised in, I think, the late 1970s is the increase in self-esteem and pride among their own people, as well as preservation of their own culture and identity and the value that has been placed on them within their own country. However, one does not need to look too far. We mention Northern Ireland and how, if one is in Dundalk and crosses the Border, one has more rights in Newry as an Irish Traveller than one has in Dundalk at present.

Deputy Finian McGrath: But is it working in the North on a practical level? I wonder at times.

Ms Brigid Quilligan: It is. We do not think this will be a cure for all ailments. We know this will be a long-term thing. However, Travellers in Northern Ireland are included in all integration policies but, as Ms Fay pointed out, we are not included here. We have to lobby to be

included in everything else.

Chairman: That is what we are here today to do.

Ms Brigid Quilligan: Thank you, Chairman.

Chairman: That is why we are having these hearings. Ethnicity is the issue and I want to keep it to that if possible.

Mr. Martin Collins: I will respond briefly to Deputy Finian McGrath's question about political leadership. The reaction to the burning of a house allocated to a Traveller family in Donegal was disappointing. There was a lack of courage and political leadership from most people, with a few exceptions, including Deputy Finian McGrath and Deputy Pringle. In the absence of that, the signal being given is that it is open season on Travellers and one can attack Travellers with impunity. This does not befit a western, civilised democracy. The rule of law is being completely ignored. I hope the culprits who were responsible will be brought to justice. In fact, it is reported by the Garda this morning that after 61 days the incident has been found to be criminal damage and arson. It was not an accident.

With regard to good practice, in Romania the Roma are recognised as a distinct ethnic minority. That is reflected in its constitution. In Romania there is a model of good practice in political leadership. Its national parliament has an affirmative action programme in which Roma are represented in the political system. That is a model of good practice and is something that potentially could and should be replicated in the Irish context. I agree with Brigid that recognising Traveller ethnicity is not a panacea or a cure-for-all, but it is a step in the right direction. If that is the starting point, it must be supported by appropriate legislation and resources. I can give an example. I was in primary education for six years. Unfortunately, I did not get the opportunity to get a secondary education. In those six years I was in an exclusively settled environment and I was taught about settled history, settled people's culture and so forth. That is quite valuable, but at no stage in those six years was my identity as a Traveller in Ireland affirmed and celebrated. I am not a human rights lawyer but I suspect that if Traveller ethnicity was granted, under international law there would be an obligation on the State to ensure that our curriculum is inter-cultural and reflects diversity. It would be different from what it is now, which is basically a monocultural system.

Senator Katherine Zappone: I welcome the witnesses and thank them for their very persuasive and powerful presentations. I welcome the other Travellers in the gallery.

I favour the recognition of Travellers as an ethnic group for all the reasons the witnesses have identified, particularly the strength of the argument that there are international objective criteria which should be used to acknowledge ethnicity as well as the principle of the right to self-identity. What do the witnesses believe are the reasons for the State's resistance to this? Is there a paper or body of evidence that the State has produced to argue against the recognition of ethnicity? Does it have anything to do with some of the policy or, perhaps, service implications of Travellers being recognised as having a distinct ethnic identity?

Mr. Martin Collins: None of the Traveller organisations has received any documentation or heard orally any cogent, logical reason that Travellers should not be recognised as an ethnic minority. We ask the Government to produce its evidence or rationale for not recognising Travellers as an ethnic minority. I agree with Deputy Finian McGrath's suggestion. At some stage it would be appropriate and productive if the Attorney General could be invited to appear

before this committee and account for why Travellers are not recognised as an ethnic minority. I hope the committee will do that.

Senator Martin Conway: The witnesses are very welcome. Ms Brigid Quilligan gave a fantastic presentation. I believe it will be a defining moment in terms of what this State can and should do to right the absolute wrongs that exist in this society against members of the Traveller community. Am I correct in suggesting that, from the witnesses' perspective, this will be the test of whether politics cares about or respects the Traveller community and whether politics works for the Traveller community? Is this such an important issue for the witnesses that it will define their relationship with politics and with the State?

Ms Brigid Quilligan: Absolutely. This is the core issue of our time, as the Senator said. It means building a good foundation for everything else. We have everything else in place but if people are not recognised as the indigenous minority and ethnic group they are, everything else is like a house of cards. It just falls. We need political leadership and allies. We need somebody to step up and support us to further our human rights within Ireland and to take our rightful place in Ireland. As Mr. Collins said, we are a people who are seen as outcasts, deviants and undesirable. Regardless of how hard we work in Ireland, this is still the opinion. We need people at political level to show leadership and lead the way with us. We are absolutely willing to work alongside them to achieve this. This is the issue of our time.

Senator Martin Conway: I fully support the recognition of Travellers as an ethnic minority. I sincerely hope the deliberations here will result in the committee's recommending that to the Government. I will certainly do my part to ensure that happens.

Chairman: We will have to wait for Deputy Mac Lochlainn's proposal on that.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: My views on this subject are well known. I commend the witnesses on their presentation. The human rights and legal framework for this, domestically and internationally, is watertight. It cannot be argued with. It is that simple. I invite anybody to argue the case against it, as there is no case against it. We will develop that as the hearings proceed. We will see if it can be argued against, but that is my analysis at this point. However, there is a far more important question than my analysis. The transcript of these proceedings will be produced and perhaps could be circulated to a wider audience, particularly the Minister for Justice and Equality. Will the witnesses take us through the history of the Traveller people? What is their history over hundreds of years of nomadism? I have read a number of books in the recent past but we have not yet had this conversation. It might be helpful if the witnesses would discuss the history of the Traveller people, how they are connected to this island over hundreds of years, their nomadism and how it evolved and how we as a people evolved into an urbanised, settled people, because we all emanated from the same place originally.

Ms Brigid Quilligan: We are a group that is indigenous to Ireland. We believe there is a record of Irish Travellers in the island of Ireland as far back as the fifth century. There is a fallacy that we were a by-product of the Famine, but we strongly dispute this. We know, for example, that Travellers emigrated to Murphy Village in America prior to the Famine. I did not bring them with me but there are different references to Travellers throughout the past. We are a nomadic people, mainly working in tin smithing and known as tinkers. Some of us are musicians, bards and storytellers. There are people in the gallery who are far more experienced at telling our history than I am, so I apologise to those people. I do not know if the Chairman wishes to invite them to speak.

Chairman: I am sorry, but we cannot invite people from the public gallery to speak, unfortunately.

Ms Brigid Quilligan: Perhaps we could make a submission.

Chairman: This is an extraordinarily interesting question and it will take time to address it. We may invite the ITM to make a written submission to the committee on it. It is both interesting and important, but we cannot give it the time it deserves. Perhaps we might revisit it because it is central to what we are doing.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: We might let Mr. Collins and Ms Quilligan give a brief summary and then, with the Chairman's agreement, we might revisit the issue in a future presentation.

Deputy Finian McGrath: It would be great to receive an oral presentation rather than a written submission at some stage.

Chairman: My concern is that we will not be able to do it justice now in the time available. I would like to give people an opportunity to think about it, prepare and make a presentation at a later date.

Senator Martin Conway: I support the Chairman's proposal.

Chairman: The delegates can nominate somebody to make a presentation if they believe there are people who are more qualified and experienced to enlighten us because it is interesting.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: We might let Mr. Collins and Ms Quilligan make an assessment before we revisit it at a later date.

Ms Brigid Quilligan: Our history is that we are a nomadic people who roamed the land and made a good living from tinsmithing, horse dealing, labouring and music. Our recollection is that settlement was imposed on us rather than being something we wanted. I deferred to one of our members in the Visitors Gallery because of one of our cultural norms, which is to defer to older people who have more experience. I take on board the Chairman's suggestion to come back and outline the detail involved, but in the assimilation policies from the 1960s onwards something got lost along the way and we began to be seen as the Traveller problem. Once anything is approached as a problem, that is how one will respond to it. I am sorry I cut Mr. Collins off.

Mr. Martin Collins: As Ms Quilligan alluded to, our people have been here since the 5th century. There are sporadic references in some historical texts which suggest our people date back that far. The reason the references are sporadic is history is always written by the victors, the powerful, the privileged and the elite; therefore, minorities and women, in this case, were largely excluded from the texts. Their contribution to the evolution of the State has been largely overlooked. We have been on the island since the 5th century and, in that context, are an integral part of it. Travellers and settled people have a shared history. As Travellers, we also, unfortunately, have a discrete history of oppression and persecution. In some cases - I do not mean to be emotive - there was attempted genocide or ethnic cleansing to rid society of Travellers through assimilationist policies.

We need to be careful in looking at Travellers through a cultural lens because we can end

up pigeon-holing people. That is why, in terms of a legal framework, we would be better off considering this issue from an ethnicity point of view because ethnicity recognises a distinguishable group, but, within it, it allows people to be individuals also. In other words, not every Traveller is in favour of having large elaborate headstones when a loved one dies. Some Travellers like it and are quite flamboyant and extravagant, while others are more modest. Likewise, some celebrations of christenings and weddings are flamboyant and extravagant, while others are not. Similarly, some Travellers value nomadism, while others do not. Some Travellers see language as valuable, while others do not. It the same for settled people when it comes to ethnicity. They do not all share the same cultural practices and do not have the same values and beliefs. That is why it is better to look at Travellers from an ethnicity point of view in terms of a legal framework rather than through a cultural lens.

Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn: I am trying to get the representatives to outline what historically has distinguished the Traveller community from the settled community. How is it that there are 40,000 people in that culture today? What is the historical context? Various members of the community have different aims and outlooks. How did the community evolve?

Mr. Martin Collins: I hear what has been requested, but that is a chapter of our history that has yet to be written. The Deputy might recall a programme was made on researching Travellers' DNA. It concluded that more than 1,000 years ago there were the beginnings of a separation of the two communities. The information is quite sketchy, but it is a chapter that has yet to be written. I hope it will be researched and written.

Senator Fiach Mac Conghail: As I am not a member of the committee, I thank the Chairman for allowing me to contribute. I am present because I want to bear witness to the stories told. I support the Chairman's view because it is important to have all of this information on the record in order that historians and others can look back on them. It is embarrassing for somebody such as me to feel I have a right as an Oireachtas Member to somehow convey or transfer ethnicity to fellow citizens. I also acknowledge the artist and playwright, Rosie McDonagh, who is in the gallery, someone with whom I have worked, collaborated and fought on many occasions. I thank the representatives for their vivid, lucid and articulate presentations which have given me clarity. I have one question for Ms Quilligan which emanates from Mr. Collins's comments on the Good Friday Agreement and the disparity between the North and the South. They outlined a number of compelling stories, particularly in the context of the suicide rate. What are the practical differences between being a Traveller in the two jurisdictions? Are there headline issues that would help the committee to clarify what recognition of ethnicity would bring to the Traveller community in the South?

Ms Brigid Quilligan: Travellers have increased protection in the North and there are increased, targeted supports in place because they are named as members of an ethnic minority. For instance, integration policies, supports and affirmative actions to support people from an ethnic minority automatically include Travellers. In Ireland we have had to battle to be included in anything positive to do with equality. Initially, it was equality legislation, then broadcasting legislation and the press complaints procedures. We have had to lobby every step of the way to be included in legislation under which we should be automatically included.

Senator Fiach Mac Conghail: What was the issue with the Press Council of Ireland?

Ms Ronnie Fay: We lobbied for many years on the need for an independent press complaints authority and when it was finally introduced, the only ground excluded under the Equal Status Acts was the Traveller ground.

RECOGNITION OF TRAVELLER ETHNICITY: DISCUSSION

That was very telling for us and we do not believe it was an accident. It ran counter to the report prepared for the Department of Justice and Equality when it was making preparations for the establishment of the Press Council. The only ground excluded initially was the Traveller ground. This coincided with visits to Ireland by members of the advisory committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance. We brought the matter to their attention and I subsequently brought it to the attention of the National Traveller Monitoring and Advisory Committee. We lobbied the Department of Justice and Equality and many Deputies on the issue and succeeded in having the decision rescinded and Travellers included in the scope of the Equal Status Act. For this reason, we take the view that just because we are not paranoid, that does not mean they are not out to get us. The case I cited was a clear example of the further exclusion of Travellers.

In terms of the media, these developments took place at the time of the Pádraig Nally case.

Chairman: Witnesses should not refer to people by name.

Ms Ronnie Fay: I will withdraw that example but there are many examples of Travellers being vilified in the media. Research done in 2000 showed that 90% of people would not want a Traveller as part of their family, yet some 80% of the respondents to the survey had never met a Traveller. When they were asked how they formed their view, the respondents indicated it was based on media reports. The media have a major responsibility in this regard. Unless Traveller ethnicity is recognised and Travellers are planned into matters by design, representatives of Travellers end up being viewed as difficult, in other words, those who come hammering on the door to make a case. We end up being perceived as highly adversarial, even though we work professionally, collaboratively and in a spirit of solidarity and partnership. We want to be included by design and recognised as equal but different. Difference must be factored into the planning.

Ms Susan Fay: To respond to the comment made by Senator Martin Conway, this is not only a question of respect for Travellers but of the State's respect for international human rights and the treaties it ratifies. We have been continually reminded that unfounded denials of Traveller ethnicity are not in compliance with the third Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. As Mr. Collins pointed out, the burden of proof on the question of showing that Travellers are not an ethnic group rests firmly with the State. It has not been established that Travellers are not an ethnic group.

To respond to Deputy Finian McGrath's comments, the Irish Traveller Movement has contacted the Attorney General on the issue of ethnic recognition but has not yet received a definitive answer.

On international human rights legislation, which has been alluded to previously, when international conventions or covenants are being implemented in Irish law groups such as the Irish Traveller Movement, Pavee Point and the National Traveller Women's Forum must lobby to have Travellers included as they are not included as a matter of right. When the Equal Status and Incitement to Hatred Acts were initiated they did not include Travellers, nor were Travellers automatically included within the scope of the Press Council and lobbying was required to address the issue.

Some people assert that the protection afforded to Travellers under the Equal Status Act is sufficient. As my submission sets out, however, there is a lack of legal clarity in this regard. As Travellers are not recognised as an ethnic group, the question arises as to whether Travellers

can seek the application of the EU racial equality directive in national courts or seek to impugn the State in relation to the transposition of the directive. The lack of legal clarity on these issues is a serious matter. It is not a case of paranoia on our part because we have experienced this in the Irish Traveller Movement law centre. The fact that Travellers are not recognised as an ethnic group has been used against us in cases taken by the law centre. I am unable to give clients advice on the interpretation of whether the Equal Status Act transposes the racial equality directive because no one can give such advice. Ireland has a seat on the United Nations Human Rights Council but is refusing to recognise the country's indigenous ethnic group as a people in accordance with international human rights norms and anthropological and sociological norms and definitions. This is an uncomfortable position for the State to be in.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: I thank the Chairman for allowing me to contribute to the meeting given that I am not a member of the joint committee. I know the witnesses before the joint committee as I am a member of the education committee of Pavee Point. If that restricts me from making a statement or amounts to a conflict of interest, I ask the Chairman to alert me.

Chairman: The Deputy should ask a question.

Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin: It is in the nature of Irish politics that it tends to represent the more powerful. If one considers the composition of the Dáil, it is 87% male, almost exclusively white, does not include anyone from a Traveller background, as far as we are aware, and has few Members from the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual, LGBT, community. Unfortunately, therefore, when one seeks to run for election some people use hatred of minorities as a political platform. Given that minorities are powerless and do not have the same access to mainstream media as others or political power and people willing to advocate for them, the fear factor tends to win out. Unfortunately, the Traveller community has been on the receiving end of prejudice, including in some disgraceful recent cases. Individual councillors or Deputies who have made outrageous statements have never paid a political price for doing so.

Inequality is incredibly destructive. Discrimination and inequality impacts on the individual and his or her community and hangs over him or her for life. I am delighted we are having a positive discussion about a step the country and travelling community wish to take. A major healing process can take place between two groups that have probably never come to terms with each other. This is what is so engaging, attractive and positive about the discussion on ethnic status for Traveller people.

The international argument for ethnic status is undeniable. Do the witnesses agree that it would be a wonderful step for the Traveller community, one which would also bring responsibility, and something the settled community will also have to embrace and celebrate? Ethnic status must not be viewed as exclusively an issue for the Traveller community, as it is one for all of Irish society and one which everyone should feel part of and celebrate. In response to the decision made at the weekend on gay marriage, some people indicated their marriage will be slightly diminished if we extend marriage rights to other people. I ask the witnesses to nail the lie that ethnic status for Travellers will somehow diminish other people's sense of themselves or identity. On the contrary, it is a major cause for celebration. An argument based on the law of unintended consequences is always rolled out to oppose such steps.

Mr. Martin Collins: Choosing not to recognise Traveller ethnicity has cost implications. When one considers the context in which the Traveller community finds itself, educational outcomes for Travellers are much inferior to those of the settled community, few Travellers have an opportunity to go to post-primary education, never mind third level education, and the outcomes

of accommodation policy are despicable. The health inequalities between the two communities show that, on average, a Traveller man will live 15 years less than his settled counterpart and a Traveller woman will live 12 years less than her settled counterpart. The infant mortality rate among Travellers is almost four times the national average. Ms Quilligan referred to the suicide rate among Travellers, which is almost seven times higher than in the settled community. There is also a significant and growing drugs problem in the community and an alcohol problem. All of these issues are fundamentally tied up with the issue of identity and for these reasons, the issue of ethnic status has more than practical implications for us. It has symbolic meaning to us in terms of our self-esteem, self-worth, confidence and status in society overall. That is the point I was trying to make. It is not some sort of academic, ideological or philosophical debate but an issue with practical and symbolic implications. This is a core point and the reason ethnic status is the human rights issue for our generation, in the same way that same sex marriage will be the issue for many people, including Travellers. The starting point, in the context in which we find ourselves, is that choosing not to recognise Traveller ethnicity has cost implications.

I can only speculate as to whether the Government has done its own work and research which may show cost implications in recognising Traveller ethnicity. While that may be the case, investment and parity of esteem are needed in the long term.

There is a peculiar understanding about ethnicity in an Irish context in that we seem to attribute it to minority groups only. People tend to overlook that there are also majority ethnic groups. In the Irish context, settled people belong to a majority ethnic group. I am not suggesting that all the members present practise the same traditions or hold the same values but they all belong to one ethnic group. I am not suggesting that all settled people have the same traditions and values but they all belong to the same ethnic group. Settled people have no need to be conscious of that because they have developed an infrastructure which supports and validates their ethnicity. We do not have the same infrastructure. I would like Traveller history and identity to be reflected in our schools. I would like our history, our culture and our contribution to Irish society to be reflected in museums and heritage centres.

As already stated, we do not have the relevant infrastructure. We are continually conscious of that fact. Our ethnicity is, therefore, always under siege and being contested and questioned in a way that does not happen to other groups. That is the fundamental message we are trying to get across to members and I hope we will succeed in that regard. I have never had an opportunity to meet the Attorney General or to hear an explanation as to why the Government has refused to recognise Traveller ethnicity. I hope, therefore, the committee will at some point invite the Attorney General to appear before it in order that she might explain what is the objection-----

Chairman: We cannot do that but we can certainly discuss the matter with various Ministers.

Mr. Martin Collins: Perhaps the Minister for Justice and Equality, Deputy Shatter, could be invited to come before the committee.

Chairman: We may end up inviting him to come before us.

Ms Brigid Quilligan: With regard to Deputy Ó Ríordáin's question, our communities are already in conflict. We are of the view that focusing on ethnicity will commence a dialogue and foster an environment of respect and understanding. We believe that, in general, Irish people are good people. We are known throughout the world for being generous, good-hearted and welcoming. However, the question of Travellers relates to one of the last battles. Very good-

hearted and politically correct people still feel it is okay to openly discriminate against us, to make anti-Traveller comments and to use the “K” word in reference to us. I refer here to conversations which take place around the dinner table in good, respectable homes and in good, respectable offices. In these places, we continue to be discriminated against and spoken about as if we come from another world. Recognition of our ethnicity would be a start in the context of commencing a dialogue, promoting respect and understanding between both communities and, hopefully, rolling back the years of conflict we have experienced. We find ourselves standing in a place that is not very nice. We are continually justifying ourselves, fighting for our rights and explaining who we are. We know there is a lack of understanding among the general public with regard to who we are.

Deputy Marcella Corcoran Kennedy: I thank our guests for coming before the committee and I welcome those who are present in the Gallery. I spoke to the latter earlier and discovered that one of their number is a native of Offaly. It was lovely to meet all of them.

Our guests’ presentations have been both informative and educational. In the context of what they are seeking, have our guests liaised with the Department of Justice and Equality’s Traveller policy division? Have they engaged with the Garda racial, intercultural and diversity office? Our guests stated that the fact Travellers are not identified as a separate ethnic group excludes them - unless they have to do battle - from the various projects to which they want access. To what type of projects are they referring? Of the 40,000 members of the Traveller community to which reference was made, how many are actually settled, how many move during the summer months and how many are always on the move throughout and out of the country?

I take our guests’ point with regard to recording Traveller history. It is extremely important that it should be recorded. I have seen many old photographs of members of the Traveller community and, as a county councillor and a member of my local authority’s Traveller committee, I received the magazine for a number of years. I found the magazine fascinating and there is no doubt that the Traveller community has an incredible history which we do not discuss enough.

Mr. Collins referred to the Roma community in Romania and ethnic recognition. Is there any evidence available in respect of how successful this recognition has been for the Roma community in Romania? What can we learn from what happened in that instance?

Chairman: The Deputy posed a number of questions. Who would like to respond?

Ms Brigid Quilligan: I will take a stab at answering some of them and then others can come in. We are in close contact with the Department of Justice and Equality’s Traveller policy division on an ongoing basis in the context of the question of Traveller ethnicity. The division is fully aware of our campaign during the past 25 years to have our ethnicity recognised. I am sure those in the division are blue in the face listening to us. We are of the view that there is a blockage somewhere along the line. The division is the liaison between us and the various Ministers. As Mr. Collins stated, we held a conference on ethnicity last September. That conference was supported by the national Traveller monitoring and advisory committee, which comes under the remit of the Department. With the exception of one individual, every Traveller present was in favour of our ethnicity being recognised. The Department is, therefore, fully aware of our position on Traveller ethnicity. We try to work with the Department in a collaborative way and we hope to work with it in an even more collaborative way on the issue of Traveller ethnicity. We seek its support in respect of that matter.

We also liaise with the Garda racial, intercultural and diversity office. The national groups

meet representatives from the office once a year and we attend its conference. Again, there is an issue in terms of our being recognised as an ethnic group. We can liaise with the office's liaison officers throughout the country but, again, it is very wishy-washy. For example, one of our members went into the Garda station in Ballyshannon-----

Chairman: I would prefer if Ms Quilligan would not discuss that matter.

Ms Brigid Quilligan: One of our members went into a Garda station to report an incident involving a politician under the Prohibition of Incitement to Hatred Act and to make a complaint. The garda on duty was not aware of the existence of the legislation to which I refer and advised the person that it would not apply to them in any event because they were not a member of an ethnic minority. We collaborate with people but obviously there is room for even further collaboration.

On nomadism, the Irish Traveller Movement is currently hosting a national conference to deal with the crisis we face in the context of accommodation. The most recent figures available to us will be released at that conference today. We can, therefore, submit them to the Chairman for distribution to members later in the day.

Mr. Martin Collins: The key message in recognising Traveller ethnicity is to establish the principle and to ensure that this is reflected in legislation or in the Constitution. As a number of speakers indicated, this, in itself, will not act as a panacea but it is a step in the right direction. It needs to be followed up with a policy and legal framework which can, in turn, create the conditions in which our existence and contribution to Irish society can be affirmed and celebrated. Under international law, the right to self-identification is sacrosanct. However, as a result of the hostile environment in which we live, it is easier for Travellers to choose not to be Travellers. We need to reverse that and consider how we can create the conditions in which one's identity can be affirmed and celebrated. There is no doubt that many more people would identify themselves as members of the Traveller community if we created a context in which our ethnicity is affirmed and celebrated and an infrastructure which supports that ethnicity. It is not a question of how many Travellers want to pursue a nomadic existence or wish to research, practice and speak the language, rather it is a question of choice. However, we do not have that choice because we have not created the conditions that would facilitate it. I do not know how many Travellers want to be nomadic, speak the language or have their culture reflected in the educational curriculum. It is a question of creating the conditions in which people can make these choices, which can only be done by recognising Traveller ethnicity and introducing a legal and policy framework, whereby one is free to choose to give expression to one's identity. We do not have that luxury.

Irish society has made considerable progress in terms of human rights, although we still have a long way to go. It is not that long ago when homosexuality was criminalised. Thanks be to God, that is no longer the case. Recently there was an apology to the victims of the Magdalen laundries. Several years ago the then Taoiseach, Mr. Bertie Ahern, apologised to the victims of clerical sexual abuse. We are becoming more enlightened as a society, but we want that spirit of inclusivity extended to our community. Frankly, we have not seen this happen yet.

Chairman: We are discussing the issue and listening today.

Ms Susan Fay: Deputy Marcella Corcoran Kennedy raised the issue of services or protections that were not available. International human rights and equality protections do not automatically include Travellers because Travellers are not recognised as an ethnic group. I have

made an interesting observation on the benefit of recognising Traveller ethnicity. It is interesting that Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn needed to ask Ms Quilligan and Mr. Collins about their history. All of the members before me are educated and we should know. There are many versions of history. As a woman, for example, I often feel women have been written out of history because history is written by men. Travellers and their contribution have been written out of history. We should have been taught it in school.

There is more. When I learned about Travellers in the civil, social and political education, CSPE, programme, it was about deprivation. We do not learn about the richness of their culture. Ethnicity recognition will bring about an enrichment of society by valuing an indigenous group. It must be noted that there have been cuts to the Traveller education budget. On average, €17 million per annum used to be spent, but in 2010 that budget was cut totally. Many of the special provisions, for example, the Traveller transport scheme and the allocation of special teachers, were axed. That pain will be felt for generations to come.

We should know the history of Travellers. I hope ethnicity recognition will bring about value and respect.

Deputy John Paul Phelan: I do not want to repeat the comments of others. I have often heard Mr. Collins speak. He is a powerful advocate. However, I have never heard Ms Quilligan speak. She should do so more often. I was surprised by her contribution. Coming from Kilkenny and having been a member of the local authority which was involved with the Traveller community, I want to focus on a specific comment made by Ms Quilligan on a matter of which I was not aware, namely, the suicide rate among the Traveller community.

In the context of our discussion on ethnicity, is there practical discrimination? I agree that there is casual discrimination, even among people who regard themselves as educated and politically correct and who throw around phrases not heard in the past. I often speak with my mother. She is elderly, but she refers to the symbiotic relationship between small rural farmers and the Travellers who visited areas during the summer while she was growing up in the 1940s and 1950s. As Ms Fay mentioned, that relationship changed in the 1960s and 1970s.

Is there a denial of access to services? While the settled community has always regarded mental health issues as a taboo subject, are they even more so in the Traveller community? It is probably too much to expect a brief explanation, but why is there such a significant disparity in the rate of suicide between the Traveller community and the settled community?

Mr. Collins is right about newspaper headlines. A member of the Traveller community who does something is identified as being a Traveller. If a politician does something, he or she is identified as being a politician. We have empathy in that regard.

Deputy Finian McGrath: That is not all that is said.

Deputy John Paul Phelan: If someone in the settled community does something, the same tagging does not take place. Will our guests answer these questions, please?

Ms Brigid Quilligan: Like others, I attribute the high suicide rate to years of extreme marginalisation. People internalise it. Consider any minority across the globe that has been marginalised or excluded for generations, for example, the Aboriginal peoples of Australia or America or the Maori of New Zealand. The suicide rate among such peoples is higher than it is among the majority population.

RECOGNITION OF TRAVELLER ETHNICITY: DISCUSSION

Ms Fay and Mr. Collins, whose organisation deals with health matters more than ours, might address my next point. There is an issue in accessing mental health services. If Travellers can access them, they must then justify their culture to their counsellors. Some Travellers do not have access to a doctor because they cannot register with one. A difficulty is presented by the fact that it is not culturally appropriate to access mental health services and that the person with whom the Traveller is dealing does not value that culture. Not only must one discuss one's mental illness, but one must also justify one's ethnicity. That has been my personal experience, but, of the Travellers present who I know, each has been impacted on by suicide. It is an epidemic. I come from Killarney and the number of people close to me who have passed away through suicide in recent years is shocking.

A component of this issue is the crisis of identity and not feeling part of anything. People need to have a sense of belonging. Thank God for the increased awareness of the fact that good mental health is as important as physical well-being. Mr. Thomas McCann, a Traveller psychotherapist, refers to the link between mental health and oppression. The effect on our people is staggering. It is a generational issue. My earliest incident of discrimination was as a four year old in school. My young son is 13 years of age and attends a good school that has good policies, yet everyday he must correct someone who uses the word "knacker" and act like an advocate for his community. Can members imagine the weight on a 13 year old's shoulders? If someone makes an anti-Traveller comment, he feels he must correct it. This happens everywhere our children go. It is no surprise that the suicide rate is higher, but I am sorry that I am not able to elaborate further on the matter. Perhaps Ms Fay might contribute.

Ms Ronnie Fay: To put the matter in context, one of the main human rights abuses being experienced by Travellers relates to health. The all-Ireland Traveller health study was undertaken in 2007 and published in September 2010. It showed a mortality rate three and a half times the national average between men, women and children, a huge disparity in life expectancy, high levels of morbidity and high levels of mortality due to suicide. The abuse is that since that time there has been no action plan to address the findings of the all-Ireland health study. The Department of Health has refused to develop core recommendations to develop an action plan to address the findings of the study. The Traveller health budget has been decimated both pre-austerity and following it. The criminal aspect is that it was used to balance the HSE's books in 2006 and 2007 and the legacy continues today. There are not enough resources to address the Traveller health inequalities.

The third issue relates to the new directorates being set up in the health service. The national Traveller health advisory committee has not met since last October because we are not allowed to meet owing to the row about the lack of an action plan. This is disgraceful in terms of human rights and the matter must be addressed.

The mental health issues have been well documented. To relate them back to ethnicity, one of the practical implications in the denial of Traveller ethnicity is the mindset of many civil servants at both national and local level where the default mechanism is one of assimilation. The Traveller accommodation budget has not even been drawn down. Even in times of austerity there is an underspend and many Travellers are forced into private rented accommodation and dispersed. Young women with children live in apartment blocks and are totally isolated. They miss their mothers, sisters, aunts and cousins. All of this has a big impact on mental health.

A big issue that emerged in the all-Ireland Traveller health study was the level of trust. Approximately 40% of Travellers had trust in the health service, while the level among the general population was 84%. Many issues arise in terms of access and quality of service. The big

challenge is the outcomes from services. The way to address this is to have an ethnic identifier across all administrative systems in order that we can see what is happening in education, health and the provision of accommodation and the outcomes. We do not have that information. The danger is that Travellers will be excluded if the ethnic identifier has to be introduced under data developments at a European level because they are not recognised as an ethnic group. There are huge practical reasons for the recognition of Traveller ethnicity, not just legal or ideological but also practical reasons that affect their human rights on a daily basis.

Deputy Anne Ferris: I am sorry I was late and missed the presentation. Unfortunately, I was at another meeting. However, I have listened to the answers given to the various questions asked.

Some of the statistics and stories related are shocking. Ms Fay is correct to say people in the settled community just get on with their lives and do not give a second thought to the discrimination experienced by the Traveller community.

I live in Bray where we have a great Traveller community. The training and development centre run by Mr. Jim O'Brien is fantastic and does tremendous work. Like other members, I was a member of a local authority and involved in housing and accommodation matters.

I do not have a question as such. Prior to today I always felt I knew a lot about Travellers, but it is clear that I do not. I urge the Chairman to invite the delegates back again, as it would be interesting to hear stories from some of the accompanying Traveller men and women to give us more information. Information is power. I hope the committee can get the Minister on board to progress the issue.

I thank Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn for being rapporteur for the committee and the tremendous work he has undertaken.

Senator Ivana Bacik: Like Deputy Anne Ferris, I apologise for being late. I was also at a meeting and then had to be in the Seanad Chamber and got delayed. I wanted to attend this meeting. I also commend Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn for putting the issue on the agenda of the committee and thank the delegates for attending.

As a lawyer and someone who has worked on equality legislation, I have always instinctively believed the recognition of Traveller ethnicity is important for legally symbolic reasons to do with equality. I am particularly interested in the last comment made by Ms Fay on the practical reasons for recognition of Traveller ethnicity. That is something we must emphasise because some of the time the argument is made very much in human rights language, something we all appreciate, but there is also an important case to be made on the practical implications. People ask what is the point of it and why one should seek it. That is an important point for the committee to take on board.

Chairman: I thank members for their questions and co-operation. The presentations were very powerful and I am sure all would agree it has been a good initial interaction. The consensus is that we will have further interaction later in the year, if possible, to tease out some of the issues raised. It seems one issue is the understanding of ethnicity which has been well explained and my understanding has improved as a result. It is not about race or culture; there is also a sociological aspect which we must tease out. One speaker referred to a lack of understanding and knowledge. If we can add to this, we will do something good. We have made a start today and will take it from there.

RECOGNITION OF TRAVELLER ETHNICITY: DISCUSSION

I was also struck by the richness of tradition outlined and would like to learn more about it. I sense that there is a very rich tradition, but not many people know about it. I do not know enough about it and would like to learn more. It would also be interesting to know about the history of Travellers.

The delegates might not wish to comment further as time is getting tight, but my sense is that, in addition to Travellers, there are traders who are sometimes confused about the Traveller community. People mix them up. We must take into account the fact that there might be people without Traveller ethnicity who can give Travellers a bad name owing to their behaviour.

Mr. Martin Collins: Some of them are Travellers.

Chairman: That is one issue we could address. Mr. Collins referred to being equal but different. Difference is always an issue. If we do not understand something, we can be afraid of it. This is a start in that regard.

I thank the delegates for attending and their interesting contributions. The matter is a complex one. We are in the hands of our expert rapporteur, Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn, who will advise us on the next step. I thank everyone for attending, including those in the Visitors Gallery. We will follow the issue closely and I hope we will have a further discussion and debate on it before too long.

The joint committee went into private session at 3.30 p.m. and adjourned at 4.05 p.m. until 9.30 a.m. on Wednesday, 24 April 2013.