young fabian pamphlet 42
Gypsies: where now?

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1. history, culture and traditions

"There are good and bad Gypsies. Whether they are good or bad they are all human beings" (Norman Dodds MP).

This pamphlet is an unapologetic attempt to state the Gypsy case. Its aim is to describe and analyse the situation of Gypsies in modern British society, to criticise certain mistaken non-Gypsy (gaujo) attitudes to the travellers, and to make recommendations for future action.

The two principal arguments are as follows. Firstly, the Gypsies have a right to determine their own destiny, and in particular, have a right to decide for themselves whether collectively, or as individuals, they stay on the road living the traditional life, or come off it to live the life of the non-Gypsy. Secondly, it is contended that a just society, the type of society which socialists wish to create, is pluralist and must have a place, and a protection, for minority cultures. It will be clear from what follows, that these ideals are a long way from being realised in the 1970s.

origins and history

The Gypsies come from India. Their slow migrations into Europe are thought to have begun about thirteen or fourteen hundred years ago, and have been an ongoing (though not a constant) process ever since. The general direction of movement lay to the north and to the west. At each stage of the migration, many stayed behind, some in the Balkans, some in the present day communist countries, whilst other tribes pressed on into Western Europe. The categorisation of European Gypsies into Rom, Sinti and Kale, represents an incomplete comment on the suggested threefold nature of these first migrations.

Gypsies first entered Britain in the fifteenth century. In England, laws were passed in 1530, 1554 and 1562 against "Egyptians" and the exaction of the capital penalty for the crime of simply being of this description (and even for being with someone in this category) is on record. There is ample evidence that hostility to the Gypsy soon became part of the popular demonology of the rest of society. Thus John Bunyan's reference to "... gipsies (who) go about, in naughty-wise the country to defile ..." (Pilgrim's Progress, first published 1684).

In 1783, the repressive measures of the Tudors were removed from the statute book. Gypsies fared little better in the nineteenth century however, beyond the fact that their very being was no longer to be regarded as inherently criminal. The spiritual sons of Jeremy Bentham were not over impressed by George Borrow, New Poor Law utilitarianism made few allowances for the Gypsies. Vagrancy Acts, Commons Acts and Enclosure Acts were all enforced to the considerable disadvantage of the Gypsies. The reprisals of the state were severe; some were transported, and many more saw the slow erosion of camping rights by the fencing off of traditional stopping grounds, a process which has been continued in the twentieth century.

The tradition of legislative and penal intimidation and intolerance has been inherited by modern generations (see chapter two). Britain, however, has thankfully nothing to compare with Hitler's extermination of half a million European Gypsies (see Donald Kenrick and Grattan Puxon, The Destiny of Europe's Gypsies, Chatto-Heinemann, 1972). The Comité Internationale Rom in France is still trying to negotiate compensation for this mass homicide, the most notorious of the atrocities to have been inflicted upon the Gypsy people.

Given all this, it is scarcely surprising that Gypsy culture betrays so much of a resigned acceptance of, and yet resistance to, oppression in all its guises. This is apparent from even a cursory examination of the rich, verbally transmitted Gypsy folklore. Exposure to persecution explains much of the "suspicion" with which many travellers view all forms of authority, and has moulded the resilience characteristic of the Gypsies.

A travelling man can usually turn his hand to anything practical. The traditional
Gypsy occupations were those of horse-dealer, tinker and musician. But this pattern has long been undergoing a process of partial and gradual destruction, brought to a climax by the onset of the motorway age. Lorries have replaced horses, although horse-dealing has by no means entirely died out (indeed, the trade seems at present to be reviving). Tarmac contracting work is now widely practised. Scrap metal dealing and agricultural work, particularly of the seasonal type, are both occupations much pursued. They are, furthermore, of positive and considerable economic value to society as a whole. East Anglian fruit growers for example, are eloquent in defence of this proposition.

Lack of specialisation has historically been a great source of strength. Gypsies have had to adapt to changing social and economic conditions, and this process of adaptation has in many respects been a painful one. The freedom to travel itself, fundamental as this is, has been made subject to increasing constraints. The encroachments of urban society and the ever expanding web of higher speed roads have slowly but surely consumed more and more of the old pulling-in places. Grass verges have disappeared and commons land has been appropriated. A population increasing at the rate of 2,000 persons a year, enlarging its demand for caravan (“trailer”) pitches, has thus suffered both a real and a relative decline in supply.

Pressure on local authorities has been intensified, and tensions have been heightened as the jeeps and bulldozers have been brought into action. On many occasions throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, violent acts were committed in the name of the law, some petty, a few fatal. These were the consequence of the attempted execution of what were usually short sighted eviction policies, notably in the Home Counties and in the West Midlands (for instances of actual violence, see Grattan Puxon, On the Road, NCLT, 1968). There are many well documented cases of police brutality.

These events have undoubtedly taken their toll on some of the travellers, and have thus, in an insidious fashion, at least partially achieved the aims of many of the Gypsies’ antagonists. “The individual cannot indefinitely withstand the continued psychological attack—amounting to a wish to annihilate him as a member of an unwanted minority—and from this, the dissolution of the personality may begin” (Kenrick and Puxon, op cit). In an effort to evade this attack, some Gypsies have moved into houses, though they remain essentially Gypsy when they have done so, and may perhaps take to the road again summer by summer.

The whole story is a complex tale of varied harassment, of discrimination in social practice and of discrimination at law. In 1975, perhaps no less than in 1575, the expectation of trouble remains a fundamental and unrelenting reality for the Gypsy.

problems of definition

Clearly, some sort of statement about precisely whom is being referred to by the term “Gypsy” would be useful. The terminology in current use, such as “Gypsy,” “traveller”, “tinker”, “didicoci” and “Rom”, is both confused and confusing. The definitional problem is indeed a difficult one, a full discussion of which would demand the deployment of considerable anthropological and linguistic expertise (see Thomas Acton, Gypsy Politics and Social Change, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974).

It is, however, both desirable and possible to point out a few popular misconceptions, to indicate briefly a few pitfalls for the unwary. In particular, many fallacies have arisen and are currently being exploited as a consequence of the “search for the true Gypsy.” The precise meaning and significance of this “search”, and the dangers which result from a practical application of it, are made clear below.

European Gypsies are basically divided into the “Rom” (Eastern Europe, the Kalderash and so forth) and the “Romanichals” (Western Europe, German Sinti, English Gypsies and similar).
Both terms are in practice claimed as a self-description by many English travellers, and preferred to the word “Gypsy” because of the stigma which is now attached to that label. Many Romanichals or Gypsies have over the centuries married into other ethnic groups (although certain families have resisted this development more strongly than others). Such marriages have produced “half breeds,” frequently and derogatorily referred to as “didicoi” (variously spelt) though, as Acton has shown, this supposed meaning of the word is in fact based upon linguistic myth. These “half breeds”, frequently and derogatorily re-group; they attach themselves to the family into which they have married, and are in general keen to become indistinguishable from that family, in terms, for example, of language.

Several other forms of verbal misdescription designed to indicate ethnic inferiority are in circulation such as “mumply”, “hedgecrawler” and “mumper.” None of these supposed categories, for all that they are often used by the Gypsies themselves, can reliably and demonstrably be said to correspond with clearly defined ethnic distinctions.

There are, in addition, the much reviled “tinkers”—Scottish or Irish Gypsies commonly misunderstood to be mere idlers of no particular ethnic description: “n’er do wells” taken to the road for a variety of (largely nefarious) reasons. The distinctions implied by this verbal usage are now recognised to have little, or in some cases, no basis in fact. Generations of various degrees of intermarriage provide just one reason for this. The word “traveller” is therefore sometimes used as an umbrella term embracing everyone whose life style is dictated by the fact of being, for at least a good part of the year, on the road. The term is purely a convenience, and is used in this pamphlet synonymously with the word “Gypsy” (although it is recognised that even this defensive verbal usage would not be universally acceptable. To complicate matters further, some Gypsies themselves even talk of “true” or “real” travellers). To the extent that these definitional disputes are academic disagreements, they are not very important. The essential point is that for all practical purposes (for example national and local government work), any attempt to hunt out the “true Gypsy” or the “real Romany” is likely as an exercise to be both chimerical and damaging—damaging because of the implied existence of “untrue” or second class Gypsies. Yet the “search for the true Gypsy” is all around us. There are countless examples of local authorities, journalists and others who have attempted to wriggle out of difficult or embarrassing situations by exculpating “Romanes” and turning against the “tinkers”, the “didicoi” or simply the “dirty van dwellers.” The search for an ideal type, in other words, will inevitably lead to the discovery of lesser mortals: these inferior people will then be discriminated against because they are not the “real” thing. Therein lies the danger (and the exploitation potential) of the “search for the true Gypsy.”

This phenomenon is, of course, familiar to sociologists, and has been labelled the “scapegoat mechanism” (Acton, op cit). It is used both by society against the Gypsies, and by Gypsies against each other. Thus a traveller will inform a perfect stranger that the people in the “trailer” next to him are not “real” Romanes, should he for reasons of his own (comparative wealth, status) wish to disassociate himself from his neighbours. This is of course confusing, and many so-called Gypsy “experts” have been led up the garden path in this way.

For reasons which should now be clear, it is here maintained that the only practical way to begin to solve those social problems with which Gypsies are associated, is to accept a modified functional definition—“those who travel.” The modification is necessary because of the existence of house dwelling Gypsies who clearly also have problems. (It is, however, freely admitted that most Gypsies themselves prefer ethnic or, more accurately, supposed ethnic, self-definations.)

Put another way, this means that attempts made to assist the Gypsy must be pre-
mised upon the belief that that assistance will fail, if it is claimed that there are those who can legitimately claim help and those who cannot. Attempts to make such distinctions cannot stand the practical test. This is not to deny that there are people living in caravans who are demonstrably of house dwelling stock; it is to say, however, that the numbers of those falling into this category are so insignificant that to focus attention upon them would be to lose sight of the problem.

Local authorities who have engaged in the “search for the true Gypsy”, either by way of sincere enquiry or cynical excuse, have done precisely this; they have lost sight of the problem.

population and social characteristics

In the 1960s, various attempts were made by government, both national and local, to conduct censuses of “resident” Gypsy populations (for example, Ministry of Housing and Local Government, Gypsies and other Travellers, HMSO, 1967). These indicated that the traveller population of Britain was probably about 25,000. Many non-Gypsies working with the travellers suspected that this figure was extremely low. Gypsies are notoriously elusive, and, for understandable reasons, not likely to supply government officers with reliable returns.

The suspicion that this figure represented an underestimate has recently been confirmed by a count of the numbers of Gypsy children not receiving regular schooling in five West Midlands counties (see below). These new statistics, using techniques less likely to be inaccurate than those previously employed, would suggest that the total population must now be closer to 60,000, perhaps more. Fertility rates are high, and even this figure is thus likely to be increasing at the rate of perhaps 2,000 per year.

It is interesting and informative to compare these statistics with their European equivalents, amplifying as they do the earlier remarks made about Gypsy migrations. The bulk of the European Gypsy population is concentrated in the communist countries. In 1970, it was estimated that there were no less than 650,000 Gypsies in Yugoslavia, with a further 540,000 to be found in Romania, and 114,000 in the Soviet Union. The British absolute figure is therefore comparatively small, less than its equivalents for Poland, West Germany and Italy, and substantially less, apart from the three countries already mentioned, than the figures for France, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Hungary and Spain. (The British figure is also small when expressed as a proportion of the total national population, compared for example with France—190,000 per 50 million—and Spain—500,000 per 29 million.) The composite European Gypsy population statistic was estimated at just under four million (Garratt Puxon, Rom: Europe’s Gypsies, Minority Rights Group, 1973).

Travellers in Britain are united by their experiences on the road. (In Europe on the other hand, up to 80 per cent of the Gypsy population is non-nomadic.) There are of course differences amongst British travellers. Generalised assessments of these differences should be made with extreme care and the following sociological observations should not be regarded as water tight.

Gypsies do not recognise boundaries (although they may frequently know much more about them than might be apparent). This non-recognition applies equally to the nation state and to the parish map. It represents an attitude which contrasts sharply with that of the average local anti-Gypsy lobby. Here, the first objective is generally to “get them out of town” to remove them from a given area of responsibility. Experiences of non-Gypsy officialdom have not, unsurprisingly, been based upon mutual sympathy. The municipal bureaucrat (the “public nuisance man”) and the policeman loom large in the travellers’ gallery of undesirables, a sentiment which rests upon reciprocated ill will. The “gavver” is there to be eluded and deluded at every possible opportunity if not, when possible, actually “poggered” (beaten up). Students constitute perhaps the only category of non-Gypsy to whom
naturally friendly approaches are entertained. This good relationship has been established as a result of the travellers' appreciation of the solidarity which students have frequently demonstrated in eviction situations.

This is not to paint a picture of irredeemable unsociability, for it is very possible to earn the firm friendship of most Gypsies. It is however, to give an indication of the effects of generations of petty conflict upon a harassed people.

The prejudices of the travellers' antagonists are largely rooted in myth or at least in superficial thinking. It is, for example, a myth that the crime rate amongst Gypsies is higher than amongst the rest of the population, with the possible exception of misdemeanours or minor offences committed in relation to the owning of motor vehicles. (Illiterate adults experience some difficulty in applying for driving licences, motor insurance, road tax and so forth and consequently many travellers do not possess these papers.)

It is superficial to accuse the Gypsy of undue uncleanness, when the fact of the situation is that most local authorities refuse to provide even established sites with skips or alternative refuse arrangements. Despite this, few Gypsy sites are as messy or as unpleasant as Brighton beach in the aftermath of an August bank holiday.

Cleanliness and its implications for public and private health is indeed a matter treated by Gypsies with importance, in detail, probably more so than by most non-Gypsies. A bowl used for washing eating and drinking utensils for example, will never in most "trailers" also be used for washing dirty underwear. Likewise, the concept of communal toilets is anathema to many Gypsies, and an offence against their particular code of decency. (This reality has nevertheless been ignored by most planners when designing Gypsy sites.)

The extent to which these and similar precautions seem frequently to be violated is only the measure of the failure of those responsible to provide adequate facilities—facilities which many of us would regard as a sine qua non of civilised living. So often the critic wants it both ways; he is disgusted by the filth, but he will not look beyond it, will not in other words take the necessary steps required to remedy it. And if this is to make excuses, then it is perhaps time a few excuses were made on this side. The Gypsies know well enough that excuses have repeatedly been made on the other. The need to be defensive on these matters has been dictated by a climate of wilful and aggressive misunderstanding.

There are, however, the positive virtues. Many of these are derived from the enormous importance which the family holds in Gypsy social structure. The extended family remains the dominant fact of Gypsy social organisation. In practice this means the supremacy of the male and the subordinate status of the female. Most Gypsy boys acquire the capacity for both physical and economic self-reliance at an early age. Many Gypsy girls are competent to look after five or six siblings at the age of ten. Through all this runs the theme of family interdependence and independence, notably in relation to the state. Travellers for example look after their own elderly, preferring this means of demonstrating care and respect to the expedient of obliging the aged to depend upon state sponsored benefits. The family thus has an all pervasive and real meaning for Gypsies, a meaning which has elsewhere been sadly lost.

Not that it is by any means easy for travellers to apply for state aid should they be in need of it. This is but one area of activity and aspiration which is severely limited by the implications of illiteracy. Social security literature would be a strain upon the comprehension of many of us.

A word must be said about the Romani languages. Again, this is specialist territory, but a few brief notes can be sketched in here.

Most Gypsies of all extractions are bilingual. Romanes, Cant (Scottish) and Shelta (Irish) are still used, although all
travellers can speak and comprehend English and use it as a first language. Romani tongues today serve the purpose of secret communication, a formidable and baffling form of defence in tight situations. Whilst the necessity for such tactics exists (and there is little sign of it disappearing), Romanes, Cant and Shelta are assured of linguistic survival. An increasing amount of written literature in these languages is now available, prepared by a small though fortunately growing number of sympathetic scholars.

The influence of wider social and cultural developments (or in the case of Gypsies their non-influence) over the past two hundred years has been of great significance for the relationship of travellers to non-Gypsy society in general. It is perhaps the non-influence of these changes in the context of the Gypsy which has served most to alienate him from his non-Gypsy contemporaries in the twentieth century.

The travellers have been almost completely bypassed by advances in scientific method and rationalist thought and analysis. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the sphere of politics and social organisation. Gypsies have no conception of democracy or representation. It is in fact, absurd for anyone to claim in a meaningful and technically democratic sense to "represent" the Gypsies on anything. The mechanics for establishing such representation, and those attitudes and experiences which are necessary preconditions for their establishment, quite plainly are not to be found amongst any but a handful of travellers. This near complete absence of democratic assumptions is important, both for the way in which Gypsies relate to each other, and for the way in which they relate to the non-Gypsy establishment.

This poses real problems for local authorities and central government alike. It is difficult to ascertain exactly what the travellers want in, for example, the context of education (not that this should be used as an excuse for not even making the attempt). Of perhaps greater importance for Gypsies, however, there is the problem posed in the question of their own internal organisation. The Gypsy Council, created in the late 1960s as a pro-Gypsy pressure group, has consequently managed extremely well to develop for itself a large acceptance among the Gypsy community. There have been awkward moments, as recently witnessed by the setting up of a separate Romany Guild (a difference now largely patched up). Whatever successes can be claimed, the Gypsy Council cannot be said by any means to have been universally accepted, and is, moreover, regarded with open hostility by some. Above all, the Council has not been able to introduce any mechanism for ensuring what, to politically articulate non-Gypsies, would pass as an adequate, democratic basis for decision making. This has led to perpetual internal disunity, accusations of cliquishness, regional and personal infighting and even physical violence. The Gypsy Council has survived all of this, and must continue to do so if progress is to be made on any of the fronts suggested in this pamphlet.

Internal disunity has, of course, been exacerbated by pressure from without, as well as being confused by the interference of well meaning but misguided maternalistic sympathisers. These are real difficulties which have to be overcome.

the threat and the romantic myth

To conclude this chapter, a word about the underlying implications of non-Gypsy attitudes to Gypsies.

Prejudice against Gypsies manifests itself in a number of ways, some of which were referred to above. This prejudice is itself a symptom of something more fundamental—a basic feeling of insecurity in the face of such blatant flaunting of the values of sedentary, semi-detached life. The Gypsy is viewed—if perhaps subconsciously—as a threat to the settled code.

This point has been well illustrated by Judith Oakley in a radio broadcast on travellers. The existence of threat was defined in a number of ways, with reference, for example, to the implications of
scrap collecting. Gypsies deal in rubbish, in the cast-offs of our materialism, in our “disorder”, and this offends against, if not actually overturns, our scale of values. The significance of this has in recent years been magnified by the vogue interest in pollution, and middle class discomfiture has correspondingly become more and more accentuated.

This feeling of unease has perhaps been rendered even more acute by the knowledge that this trafficking in material rejects is immensely profitable on occasion. Scrap dealing is also economically valuable in the increasingly relevant context of recycling in terms of the gross domestic product. In this sense there is a symbiotic relationship between the economic activities of the travellers and the industrial process as a whole. Non-Gypsies are familiar with the visible evidence of this, but in general unaware of its significance.

This necessarily potted sociology of scrap may suggest just one of the many possible explanations for the non-Gypsy feeling of threat. It is nevertheless a useful illustration for the present purpose, as it highlights another general point about non-Gypsy attitudes—that is the discrepancy between the traditional non-Gypsy image of the Gypsy, and the twentieth century reality of Gypsy life. The plethora of popular songs still in existence still merrily making allusions to supposed numbers of Gypsy queens testifies sufficiently to this point. It is essential that George Borrow be updated in the popular imagination if there is to be a chance of coming to terms with real Gypsies and real Gypsy life.

The romantic myth and the sense of threat do co-exist strangely enough, though their coexistence is only maintained by the existence of a curious duality of perception. Both thoughts are dangerous, though the former perhaps particularly so, for as long as the public continues to expect romantic heroes, then for so long will it be disappointed. It will only discover “imposters”—and what happens to real Gypsies then?
2. Gypsies and civil rights

Councillor: "How far does it come in your mind before you can say 'I have done everything I possibly can and I will help the broad mass of the people, but there are some I can do nothing for whatsoever.' Then doesn't the time arise in one's mind when one has to say 'Alright, one has to exterminate the impossibles'. I know all that leads to in one's mind. Nazism, who is next, the Gypsies, the tinkers, the Jews, the coloured man, but I don't accept that really, on these particular...". Interviewer: "I don't think... 'exterminate' is a terrible word, you can't really mean that?" Councillor: "Why not?

This semi-coherent and frightening exchange took place on BBC radio in 1964. The Councillor concerned was a former leader of the Birmingham Labour group. Seldom can the socialist concept of the brotherhood of man have been at a greater discount in the Labour Party than in this recorded public statement.

This was, of course, an extreme expression, but regrettably, not more than an extreme formulation of a frequently expressed sentiment, especially in the West Midlands of the late 1960s. Such attitudes in high places, have in some cases directly initiated, and in others ensured that a blind eye was turned towards, actual discrimination against Gypsies. It is this discrimination in social practice, together with discrimination at law which has been responsible for the maintenance of a situation in which effectively Gypsies are without civil rights. That is because of official antagonism towards Gypsies, and the travellers' own lack of familiarity with legal and semi-legal procedures, it is in practice rarely possible for them to benefit from the theoretical existence of such rights, where they do actually exist.

the law

To what extent has the law contributed towards this state of affairs? The government report of 1967 answers this question eloquently (Gypsies and other Travellers, HMSO). From this official source we read the following: "... the Public Health Act of 1936, the Town and Country Planning Act of 1947, the Highways Act of 1959, and the Caravan Sites and Control of Development Act of 1960 have all been used to prevent the setting up of camps... this amounts to the virtual outlawing of his way of life..." (emphasis added). Many individual examples could be cited of cases in which one or more of these and other pieces of legislation have been used by the authorities to prevent Gypsies from carrying on their traditional way of life even, on many occasions, when the land concerned was owned by the Gypsies themselves and situated far from the nearest houses (see, for example, Thomas Acton, op cit). The important point here is that we are dealing with something much more than the refusal of planning permission for conventional reasons: in other words, a projected site is often too isolated to be deemed offensive within the usual planning terms of reference.

The quotation cited above by no means exhausts the list of legislation which can broadly be described as anti-Gypsy in application. In addition, there are laws which, if applied, would further seriously impede the carrying out of the Gypsy's daily work (for example the registration provisions of the 1954 Scrap Metal Dealers' Act) but which are so impractical as to be virtually ignored. The 1967 Civic Amenities Act provides an additional example of employment-related legislation potentially damaging to the travellers' means of gaining a livelihood (for more detailed discussion, see Robert Zara, Travelling People and the Law, West Midlands Travellers School, 1974).

It is in this context of legislative hostility that the celebrated Caravan Sites Act of 1968 must be seen. This Act, part one of which was largely the work of Lord Avebury (then Eric Lubbock) and part two of which was pushed through by the then Labour government, was widely thought of at the time of its formulation, as offering substantial possibilities for progressive change, after a decade of sometimes fierce conflict between the Gypsies and the host society. For this reason, it was sup-
ported by the Gypsy Council. Briefly, the Act required that county councils, county boroughs and London boroughs should “... so far as may be necessary... provide adequate accommodation for Gypsies residing in or resorting to their area...” There were to be two grounds upon which exemption from the Act’s provisions could be obtained. Any authority claiming such exemption would have to demonstrate either that there were no Gypsies residing in or resorting to their territory, or that land available for development in this way simply did not exist.

The most obvious point to make about the Caravan Sites Act seven years on is that it has been remarkable for the success of attempts made by local authorities simply to ignore it. Provision under the Act has been quite painfully slow—so slow that it has been argued that given the present rate of progress, no more is being achieved than to keep pace with the natural increase in the size of the travelling population. Thus no inroads are being made into the problem which already exists. By the summer of 1974, just over a hundred sites (including temporary ones) had been completed, catering for an average of 15 caravans each, and this to meet the demands of a total population of possibly over 60,000. Put another way, we now have something like 1,500 pitches for more than 10,000 families. In short, there seems no reason at present to revise the assessment of the situation made by the National Council for Civil Liberties in June, 1972: “the site-building programme must be seen as more than a failure—it is a national disgrace” (Gypsies and Civil Liberties, 1967-72, NCCCL memorandum, 1972). This dismal absence of compliance with the law’s demands on the part of local government is in marked contrast to the use made by council officials of legal procedures when it comes to the effecting of an eviction. Most of these officials have shown themselves to be completely hypocritical in their exploitation of the concept of legality.

Quite apart from the issue of the slowness with which sites are being built, however, in retrospect it is now possible to see much more clearly certain fundamental weaknesses in the 1968 Act. There are three major points to be made here.

Firstly, there is the question of numbers. The Act was so framed that the authorities were “... not in any case required... to provide accommodation for more than fifteen caravans at a time”. This meant, as has subsequently been pointed out, that those authorities with a high Gypsy population had only the same responsibility for provision as those authorities with low populations. Granted that most councils were, and are, eager to get away with the minimum provision, this was bound to contribute substantially to a shortfall in places provided. In addition, any authority which has complied with the Act to the extent of creating a site for fifteen caravans, can legally enforce a policy of exclusion against further travellers attempting to enter the area, supposing it has claimed and obtained the status of “designation”.

This brings us to the second point, the meaning and significance of “designation”. What follows is a simplified account of this. “Designation” can be claimed by any local authority which has provided its site of 15 pitches, enabling the council concerned subsequently to pursue the exclusion policy to which reference is made above. Quite apart from the numbers objection already stated, this aspect of the 1968 Act would seem to be offensive in a broader race relations context. In effect, it is allowing for the creation of isolated and controlled pockets of “Gypsy territory” surrounded by miles of land to which fellow Gypsies are simply not to be admitted.

On the positive side, “designation” can be used to oblige a council to bring its sites up to standard. Newham did have to agree to provide individual toilets and to re-house Alec Smith plus dogs before it could be granted “designation” status. But the general objections still stand.

There is a technical possibility that “designation” could be resisted under
part two, section twelve, subsection two of the 1968 Act, under the terms of which the minister responsible shall not grant designated status “unless it appears to him either that adequate provision is made therein for the accommodation of Gypsies residing in or resorting to the area, or that in all the circumstances it is not necessary or expedient to make any such provision”. The possibility is only technical in the sense that effective opposition can only traditionally be by the MP for the area concerned, or by a Lord. Little success has been achieved in this direction; definitions of “adequacy” and “expediency” tend to differ.

The third general point about the 1968 Act is that in discussing sites, it is talking about permanent sites rather than temporary sites, residential sites rather than transit sites. This is simply an expression of the government’s presumption in favour of a policy of “optional assimilation”. But how many travellers wish to live on permanent sites? This is hotly disputed. What is not in dispute however, is that there is a substantial demand for purely transit sites containing only the most basic facilities—that is, sites which are consistent with a nomadic way of life. There is no provision whatsoever under the Act for these and it could be argued that the concentration upon permanency in the Act has seriously distorted official perspectives as to the true nature of Gypsy preferences.

Very considerable attention has here been given to the question of the 1968 Caravan Sites Act because this issue is in the forefront of the minds of all involved in Gypsy affairs. There is much debate as to the Act’s desirability in the light of experience of its operation. Clearly, the provision of sites of some kind is crucial to the promotion of Gypsy civil rights. Without these sites, Gypsies are forced to live outside the law, making a mockery of any discussion of social justice. At least one prominent activist has already called for the repeal of the Act and its replacement by alternative legislation (Phil Scraton, “Towards Enforced Assimilation”, in Sibley, Roscoe and Scraton’s paper for the 1974 Gypsy and Travellers’ Education Council, North, conference). Many share this view, and are actively involved in preparations for parliamentary lobbying to this effect.

**other forms of social discrimination**

Discrimination against Gypsies is diverse, widespread and overt. All Fennan will be familiar with the practice of the landlords of Wisbech in barraging “troublesome van dwellers”. (In effect, this is a prohibition on all Gypsies.) The use of the word “Gypsies” itself in the context of public houses, denoting as it does racial origin, is forbidden by the operation of the Race Relations Act. That the spirit of this legislation is ignored with such ease in this way, is a comment upon the inadequacy of the Act.

Reports and remarks contained in the provincial press afford a more obvious indication of the extent of the prejudice which underlies such discrimination. Not that such accounts are never themselves the source of some amusement to those interested, although the fun is usually at the expense of the Gypsies. The following report is taken from the Wolverhampton Express and Star, 30 December 1972: “The High Court Sheriff, faced with the problem of moving more than 90 caravans from a Willenhall site, has appealed for army help. A spokesman at the Stafford High Court Sheriff’s department said he was awaiting a reply from the Home Office on a request for heavy army equipment. The department, which has four men and the same number of cars, will use an eviction squad of 200 men and 75 vehicles.”

It is somewhat less amusing however, to have to record that editors of local newspapers have often been guilty of fomenting the very worst kind of anti-Gypsy paranoia. They certainly, as a group, must take some of the blame for the widespread acceptance of the various “scapegoating” attitudes in popular circulation.

Applications for social security, the awarding and refusing of bail, and attempts to gain service in large supermarkets, provide further examples of day-
to-day social activity in which Gypsies are on record as having suffered from discriminatory practices. A further major cause for concern is the issue of the treatment of Gypsies by the police. There is much documentary evidence of actual police brutality against travellers, particularly in connection with evictions (Grattan Puxon, op cit). More recently, some police forces have been instructed not to take part in evictions unless it is to avert a “breach of the peace”, though again there are some problems of interpretation here.

There are those who are prepared to rush in where the policeman now fears to tread. The private army has made its appearance, as witness the role of Neville Tusin’s security firm during the large and violent Birmingham eviction of 1973 (where a Labour authority was responsible). This may well be an indication of a future trend; it is well known that many council employees are unwilling to engage in this particularly unpleasant kind of work and in some areas the National Union of Public Employees has actually blacked such activities in view of the general situation.

Taking the position as a whole, it cannot be denied that in 1975 the Gypsies remain a harassed community. Their right to civil liberties is constantly being denied. “The time has surely come to guarantee to Gypsies the freedom that is rightfully theirs” (NCCL memorandum, op cit).
3. Gypsies and education

“Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Education shall be compulsory ... Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children” (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, article 26).

There are two kinds of discrimination. There is discrimination at the bar of law, creating civil disability, and discrimination in social practice, resulting in various forms of deprivation. This chapter is concerned with just one aspect of this second category. To talk in terms of deprivation is necessarily to talk of comparative values. Thus it has rightly been observed (by David Smith) that to say that customs such as late toilet training and lack of privacy or living space in caravans amount to “deprivation”, would be to make a highly questionable value judgement. It is nonetheless valid to point out that many opportunities, such as to take advantage of formal educational provisions where desired, are denied to travelling children where these are much more available to non-Gypsy children. It is in this context of comparative opportunity that Dave Headley, formerly editor of Romany Drom, the Gypsy newspaper, has written that “the greatest deprivation the Gypsy suffers is from his lack of education”. Well over 90 per cent of Britain’s travellers are illiterate. Figures recently produced by Chris Beresford-Webb, applying comparatively reliable census techniques, show that in five West Midlands counties alone there are some 4,000 travelling children not receiving schooling. This compares with some 400 who are. Most Gypsy parents however, particularly perhaps the autodidacts, are eager to see the younger generation educated. The reasons for this are almost entirely functional. The ability to read and write is increasingly a utilitarian necessity. Without it, it is impossible to fill in driving licence application forms, to claim social security, to tell a genuine possession order from a sham or, in short, to cope in any sense at all with the paraphernalia of a means testing society. Literacy, therefore, is regarded as a skill, similar to a talent for dismantling engines, and not as the basic prerequisite for civilised existence. Gypsy communities value the “scholar” (the literate) for this reason. These considerations are gradually eroding the old suspicions, although there are still many travellers of the older generation willing to inveigh against the insidious influence of books.

There is then, a demand for the provision of educational facilities for Gypsies, and it has only been in recent years that serious attempts have been made to meet this. Since 1964, a number of different projects have been established, both inside and outside the state system, including caravan schools, Gypsy site schools, special classes in Education Authority schools, summer schools, playgroups, nursery groups and adult classes. The intensity of this campaign has been further enhanced since the setting up in 1970 of the National Gypsy Education Council (NGEC) which has tried to link up different projects, to start or encourage the development of new ventures, to keep a central record of local ties and contacts and to be a forum for educational ideas.

There are now two national bodies in the field: the NGEC, operating largely through regional sub-groups, and the Advisory Committee for the Education of Romany and other Travellers (ACERT). This all represents an exciting and major advance. Yet the outstanding feature of travelling children’s education today is its paucity. The variety of attempts made by non-Gypsy sympathisers to co-operate with the travellers in the educational sphere have employed both the peripatetic and the traditional stationary classroom ideas. The West Midlands Travellers’ School is an interesting example of the former and the first of any significance, serving as it does an area notorious amongst Gypsies for its violent prejudices and intolerant municipal attitudes on matters concerning the travelling population (it was a Walsall councillor, the late Councillor Wainwright, who “articulated” perhaps the classic statement of anti-Gypsy paranoia in his reference to “liars and anarchists”).

The West Midlands School was first properly constituted in June 1970, operating
from a converted 4½ ton Commer Carrier in the Walsall, Wolverhampton and Dudley areas. The financing of a project of this size required outside assistance; volunteers working on a purely spare time basis could not hope to make substantial progress. The demands of the situation were met by a three year grant of £16,500 from the Bernard Van Leer Foundation, making possible the engagement of two full-time workers. Even so, in proportion to the size of the total task in the West Midlands, indicated by Beresford-Webb in the figures quoted above, achievement so far represents little more than a scratching of the surface.

Since 1970, there has been a gradual development of interest in the possibilities of all-the-year-round educational provision for Gypsies, on the part of local authorities. Hertfordshire amongst the county councils, and Redbridge amongst the London boroughs, were two of the first Education Authorities to recognise their obligations in this field (although admittedly, the degree of financial commitment in the latter case was slight). Liverpool is now spending £10,000 per annum on its on-site educational programme, paying six full-time teachers. Sadly however, even in 1975 such examples are the exceptions which prove the rule.

One of the most promising developments is the interest in Gypsy education now being shown by the Department of Education and Science, and its recognition of the special difficulties here, implicit in its decision to hold short training courses for intending teachers of Gypsy children. A full-term training project in traveller education is planned by the DES for sometime in 1975.

The most widespread development in Gypsy education in the 1970s, however, has been the expansion of the Summer School programme, largely co-ordinated and encouraged (but in general not financed) by the NGEC. Individual schools have varied enormously in scale, depending upon the availability of resources, both manpower and material, in the area concerned. Some organisers have been obliged to resort to the traditional jumble sale for funds, whilst the vast majority of volunteers have been unpaid. The duration of such schools has therefore usually been confined to periods of about two weeks, excepting projects where it has been possible to obtain substantial local Education Authority support, as in the case of the Wisbech schools, organised regularly since 1971 throughout August by the Cambridgeshire Gypsy Liaison Group.

In 1973, a total of 26 summer school projects took place, some NGEC linked, some ACERT linked, and others independent. This figure does not include schools where work continued on a more permanent basis (Thomas Acton (editor), Jinnemgros' Lilai, NGEC, 1973).

In many areas, the work being done by the summer schools is of a pioneering nature. It frequently represents the offering of a service where nothing previously existed at all. It is providing scores of teachers, both trained and untrained, with experience quite different from that obtained in conventional classroom situations. The summer schools therefore, are in every way an experiment. Everyone involved in Gypsy education is aware of this, and anxious to learn from the mistakes that, perhaps inevitably, are made. What can be achieved by such short exercises, and of what value are they beyond that of trial-and-error educational forays? Obviously, in terms of conventional educational objectives, even with teacher-pupil ratios in some cases of two to one—comparatively little. These schools are, however, invaluable on the level of socialisation, remembering that many of the younger children who attend (and some of the not so young too) are undergoing a structured educational experience for the first time. The greatest compliment that can be paid to the volunteers who give their time (and in some cases their cash) is that the travellers and their children are almost without exception enormously enthusiastic about the value of these schools. Many children have been known to keep their work from one year to the next, carefully preserving what for many is the only happy school experience
of their lives. This alone justifies the existence of the summer projects, though this is by no means their only achievement. It is quite possible, with good teaching ratios and a comparatively undisturbed environment, for notable advances towards literacy and numeracy objectives to be made, particularly with older children, for some of whom this is a last chance.

None of this is to say that summer schools provide any sort of answer to the general problem; they are, as has been clearly implied, only a beginning. They are important for the experience that they bring and because they have the approval of the travellers. They are happy places, unlike most state schools from the Gypsy point of view. They help defeat the argument that all schools are bad schools. What do summer projects mean to the people who work on them? The comments of the organisers of the 1972 Wisbech School are of both general and revealing interest in this context: “For the teachers there emerged a feeling of satisfaction mingled with frustration; frustration at the restrictions of time-scale, satisfaction from involvement with extraordinarily appealing, affectionate, intelligent and responsive children, unharmed by conventional methods and ideas, whose initial reaction made us suspect that they had felt unhappy in other more formal educational contexts; and a realisation of the success of methods based on family units, fluid structuring, and a mutual involvement of teacher and child.” The reference to “formal educational contexts” here is particularly instructive, for there are of course legal obligations upon parents to send their children to state schools in the absence of alternative arrangements. In many cases these obligations have been simply ignored, or at least largely dismissed for a considerable part of the school year (travellers have long been the bane of the Educational Welfare Officer’s existence).

Forced attendance at state schools is, of course, known. On occasion, the results are beneficial. This is generally a function of the degree of harmony or discord obtaining in the teaching situation between the Gypsy and the non-Gypsy children. Children are not naturally unkind to each other and in a co-operative climate real educational progress can be made. Nevertheless, enough has been said to indicate that such situations are exceptional. One village headmistress in Hertfordshire has noted that as soon as the existence of Gypsies in the locality becomes a “political” issue in the context of, for example, pressure for the construction of a site, then the harmonious atmosphere within her school rapidly disintegrates as expressions of anti-traveller hostility filter down into the school via the parents (just one example of the way in which social and political issues are inextricably bound up with the education question where Gypsies are concerned). The familiar taunt of “gypso” is soon heard in the classroom, creating severe emotional problems for the travelling child.

In this type of circumstance lessons can easily become a waste of time. It is not difficult to find in the state schools of England totally illiterate Gypsy children of ten and eleven soon, and quite erroneously, to be consigned to the category of ESN. The difficulties of operating within the system are therefore apparent where special provision is not made—and such provision is rare. Hence the preference of many volunteer workers for roadside or on-site teaching situations.

Gypsy children do have much to contribute to collective educational experience even in the most formal of classroom environments but seldom are they allowed the security, and hence the confidence, to enable them to make that contribution. There are more fundamental problems for Gypsy children to face in the average state school. Simple things such as large classrooms which do not move; these can in the first instance be quite alien and unnerving to the young, accustomed as they are to conditions of cramped mobility. A sympathetic assessment of the implications of this type of difficulty on the part of schools and their staffs requires considerable imagination.

Comparatively early maturity, particu-
larly in the boys, also poses problems of concentration and of educational content. Most Gypsy lads have two or three years' experience of the dismantling of real internal combustion engines by the age of eleven. Conventional levels of expectation in the context of conventional course content are, in other words, frequently out of place for travellers.

Underlying all these considerations—the enthusiasm of summer school pioneers, the hopes and the frustrations of everyone involved in Gypsy education—is what Chris Reiss has described as the "central dilemma facing educationalists and administrators" interested in minority rights throughout the world. Travelling children, Gypsies, nomads, migrants of all kinds, not only travel but have inherited living cultures that owe nothing either to conventional education or to literacy. Enforced participation in any system may necessarily entail the destruction of precisely those characteristics that help to define the individuality of the culture in question. Ought we therefore to insist on that part of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that demands that "education shall be compulsory" (quoted above) without making substantial qualifications? If the insistence is to be maintained, what safeguards can be enacted to prevent cultural destruction, to avert that aspect of the process of integration that may be described as wilful extinction?

The problem is real enough as far as the Gypsies are concerned; many are half aware of the dangers without themselves being able to articulate them. The suspicion is unmistakable. Take, for example, these remarks of Tommy Lee quoted in a recent book by Jeremy Sandford: "The young people today, the moment they sit down they've got a book in their hands. It's all wrong. I don't reckon that a lot of education is any good. If you've always got a book in your hands you ain't got time to do anything else. I've seen a lot of travelling children being educated, I've seen a lot of it. But I reckon they should be left alone. I reckon that if a Gypsy wants to be a Gypsy, he's going to be a traveller, let him be" (Gypsies, Secker and Warburg, 1973).

This is a clear expression of the "old suspicion" that, as was claimed above, is gradually being forced aside. And although there are probably more travellers now holding the contrary view (that this "non-interventionist" path also leads to extinction, that the literate non-Gypsy has to be fought with his own tools), the instincts of a man like Tommy Lee should not lightly be disregarded. These problems and contradictions are frequently highlighted in the classroom. Gypsy family discipline is at some points, traditionally severe. This conflicts with the implications of the "freer" teaching style now practised by many members of that profession. Again, travellers value the "3 Rs" as essential tools, to the general exclusion of the rest of the conventional syllabus, yet the classroom system of priorities which this implies has for some time been considered outdated by many teachers. Thus there is a large area where the expectations of the Gypsy parent tend not to be in accord with the likely methods and values of the teacher.

How are we to satisfy a demand thus identified without compromising our own convictions? Does the only way out lie in the application of double standards? The sole point of consensus here seems depressingly to be that there are no easy answers to such searching questions. The aim remains the provision of sufficient educational opportunities to enable Gypsies themselves to determine their own destiny (though to say this is to beg all manner of questions). That means giving the Gypsy child both the right and the opportunity subsequently to live the life of the non-Gypsy should he wish it, preserving equally the right to stay on the road where this alternative is preferred. At present, educationally speaking, there is no basis for the making of such a choice.

Someone has to find solutions to the big issues however. One answer to the "Gypsy problem" quoted above (the West Midlands Councillor) was extermination. Those involved with travellers in educational work and thus by implication engaging themselves in a different type of "solution" are knowingly walking the most uncomfortable of tight ropes.
Despite the threats posed in various ways by the demands of modern technological society, the Gypsy community is not yet entering the last throes of a final existence. The simple answer to questions about the future of Gypsies is that the Gypsies are very far from having reached "the end of the road". Nor is that "end" in sight. The extraordinary capacity that the travellers possess for simultaneously both resisting and assimilating change has enabled them to survive the twentieth century without making significant sacrifices of identity. A consciousness of this identity has, if anything, been enhanced in recent years. This is evidenced by the growth and vitality of the Gypsy Council in Britain since the late 1960s, and by the strength of the World Romani Congress as the voice of the Romani people of the world. The problems posed by the issue of the relationship between Gypsy and non-Gypsy peoples are not, of course, unique. The travellers are but one of several minority groups whose culture is at many points in conflict with that of the dominant social class. Neither is dissatisfaction with dominant cultural patterns confined to identifiable "minority groups". Many individuals, particularly of the younger generation, are acquiring both the theoretical desire and the practical ability to work out for themselves alternative value systems and life styles. Insofar as this leads to an increased awareness of cultural differences and an increased willingness to recognise the contribution that minorities can make towards the development of pluralist attitudes, this must be good for the Gypsy community. Thus whilst in no way wishing to minimise the possible dangers to this community outlined above (the danger for example of a presumption in favour of "assimilation" in the sphere of education) it is clear that the Gypsies have, at worst, as much of a chance to survive now as they ever did. This is all the more evident when we consider the demographic realities shown in chapter one. It will however have become clear from the preceding chapters that, in terms both of the law and of social practice, there are rights to be established and abuses to be rooted out. There is no unanimity about what precisely should be done, especially when it comes to a consideration of the 1968 Act and the sites question in general. The proposals which follow, therefore, are offered or reported as suggestions for action, and are intended to reflect the current preoccupations of those involved. They do not constitute a blueprint or manifesto.

The first and most obvious point is to ensure that agencies exist whereby the views of Gypsy communities can be communicated at a local level to the relevant authorities, the press and other interested parties. This is where non-Gypsy sympathisers can make their most valuable contribution, in the establishment and maintaining of liaison or support groups (a number of which are already in existence). Students are a valuable source of manpower in this respect, more especially as their flexible work schedules enable them to assist at short notice in the prevention of unjust evictions. Support groups should be as widely based as possible. In particular, it is essential that at least one member of such bodies understands in detail the workings of local authorities. It obviously makes excellent sense to cultivate the assistance of elected councillors.

To be effective as pressure groups, such bodies must be independent of public authority in status. Financial independence is desirable for the same reason. Most importantly however, support or liaison groups must constantly be going back to the travellers for guidance, lest they become isolated and self-appointed. The range of groupings and of individuals whose active sympathy can be engaged clearly differs considerably from area to area. Prominent in any list of "useful contacts" must be the recently established Community Relations Officers and their committees. The Quakers too have a long and proven record of active involvement and dedicated commitment.

Once established, the task of these support groups is to work with Gypsies locally, with local authorities wherever possible, with the Gypsy Council and the National Gypsy Education Council in
pursuit of certain objectives. The first of these relates to the question of sites.

Although some doubt has been expressed about the desirability of the Caravan Sites Act in its present form, and particularly about the concept of “designation”, (which the Department of the Environment has implicitly dropped by refusing all recent applications for this status) it is certain that this legislation can be used for the benefit of the travellers. It is equally certain that the level of provision so far obtained under it has been miserably poor. As late as April 1974, there were only 97 official sites in existence, and this number has increased very slowly. As of February 1975, a further 100 sites are at various planning stages, but even were these all to be completed immediately, there would still be a shortfall in supply of some fifty per cent of total demand. Far more sites additional to those already built or being planned are needed.

However, if the quantity of existing and planned sites gives some cause for concern, then so does their quality. Some have about them the appearance of concentration camps. Support groups should advise the relevant officers of the authority responsible at the planning stage. Certain minimum facilities must be demanded. A sympathetic warden in particular is essential to the smooth running of any site, be it of a residential or a transit nature. Washing and toilet facilities of some kind are generally provided; breaking areas for the treatment of scrap (including burning) and an adequate refuse service are frequently not. Finally, rents should be fixed at realistic levels. Most travellers are prepared to pay £3 per week for a high standard of amenity. A drive for the provision of sites on these lines and in considerable numbers is an urgent priority. Such provision is nothing less than the Gypsies’ right at law, and those local authorities pre-eminent in their attempts to evade the law in this respect, without due cause under the 1968 Act, should be pursued with all the vigour summoned up by those self-same authorities prosecuting when it is considered to be in their interests to do so (such as under the Highways Act or the Public Health Act). At present, in the situation concerning Gypsies and “lawfulness”, double standards are practised. This position should be brought to an end.

At the same time, some attempt should be made to modify or rewrite the 1968 Act, possibly with the intention of outlawing the concept of “designation”, inherently discriminatory as this is. Urgent consideration is being given to this project in 1975, following an initiative from Jim Penfold and Donald Kenrick. Dr Kenrick has drawn up for discussion a list of reforms which amount to a new Act. Amongst his proposals are the following: raising the figure of 15 sites in the existing Act to 30; provision of stopping places of a transit nature by local authorities, including special facilities for horse-drawn caravans; the mandatory provision of working space on or near sites; the tightening up of the effective local authority accountability to the demands of the law; equal treatment of Gypsy caravans and non-Gypsy tourist caravans under the law; repeal of the notorious section 127 of the Highways Act of 1959 (hundreds of travellers with nowhere to go have been prosecuted under this measure). These and other proposals are naturally open to debate and comment is welcome from all quarters.

Another group, the Joint Working Party on Gypsies in Essex, whose president is Stan Newens MP, is considering proposals for amendments to both the 1960 Caravan Sites and Control of Development Act, and the 1968 Caravan Sites Act. Local authorities in Essex and neighbouring London boroughs are represented in this group, motivated above all by a desire to bring about an end to the situation in which “tolerant” councils who provide sites are continually pressurised by evictions from areas nearby where there is no provision. Their complaint is essentially against the unevenness with which the burden is in practice being distributed.

The proposals of the Essex group include suggestions that (a) the provision of sites and temporary stopping places be made a mandatory duty of non metropolitan
District Councils and London Boroughs and that the present divided responsibility between district and county councils be ended (b) the present recommendation of 15 pitches for a statutory site be rescinded and sites planned according to potential need (c) the minister retain powers to exempt authorities from the need for further provision once their agreed target figure of pitches has been achieved (d) the Ministry of Defence be requested to relinquish any appropriate service camps made redundant under the defence review for use and conversion to sites. These proposals are open to debate. Some points (for example that of exemptions) are likely to be controversial. However, in general the work of the Essex Group is very constructive and provides positive evidence that some local authorities, operating as they are under extreme pressure where Gypsies are concerned, are prepared to be forward looking.

It is to be hoped that 1975 will see the agreement of a policy on Gypsy sites, based on rigorous discussion of suggestions like those of Donald Kenrick and the Essex Group, and that a change in the law will follow in consequence.

Not all efforts in the legal sphere should be directed at a national level. Gypsies have suffered equally from local bye-laws, particularly in respect of commons and fair rights, many of which have been alienated over the past century or more. The most recent attempt to deprive the travellers of such a right took place in 1965, when the great Appleby Fair was threatened with closure by local councils. In this case, the attempt was resisted by a deputation led by Gordon Boswell, a member of one of the oldest and most respected Gypsy families. This represented a significant victory, as the fair at Appleby is a major annual meeting place of travellers in Britain.

Every effort should be made to protect these rights where they do still exist and whenever possible (and this is feasible in many rural areas) attempts should be made to gain the restoration of traditional commons access, by an appeal for changes in the bye-laws if necessary. Implicit in all of these proposals is the realisation that many of the most long-standing of the ancient rights and privileges of the Gypsies have been eroded by legal and other means, and the suggestion that some of these processes might be reversed as a gesture of goodwill.

As will have become apparent from the previous discussion of the educational question, it is this area of policy that is most problematic when travellers and non-Gypsies attempt to construct programmes for joint action. Not surprisingly, it is the issue of education which has provided the focus for much of the internal dissension that has unfortunately taken place over the past two years. Differences in educational principle undoubtedly played a part in the split between the NGEC and ACERT in 1973, although perhaps a more important source of dispute was the issue of internal democracy (it would certainly be misleading to assert a direct correlation along the lines of “integrationists” and “non-integrationists” here. Questions of style and personality were also significant factors in the disagreement).

Nor is it surprising that the educational issue should give rise to such dissension. Clearly, educational decisions taken in the 1970s will have a substantial impact upon the entire future existence of the Gypsy community. The suggestions which follow inevitably beg certain questions. In addition, they are based upon a fundamental premise, namely the conviction of the writer that a majority of the travellers are now in favour of some educational provision for their children.

Flexibility is of the essence. There can be no universally applicable blue print for such provision. Specific proposals have to be related to particular contexts. What is generally true however, is that the teacher of Gypsy children cannot hope to succeed without a detailed and sympathetic knowledge of the Gypsy situation (there is evidence to show that this is a far from readily accepted point of departure).

On-site and roadside educational provision is widely required, firstly because this
is the only way to guarantee the creation of a good learning situation for Gypsy children with no school experience, and secondly because many sites are, quite simply, too far from the nearest school. Local Education Authorities must be persuaded to recognise this need by giving ample financial and other assistance. Existing state schools can however also be used, more particularly where the children concerned do have school experience of a reasonably happy kind and where the headteacher and staff have a proven record of genuine and sympathetic concern.

Educationalists are now largely agreed that it is the early years that are the most important. Consequently, particular attention should be paid to the development of playgroup and nursery schemes. The Southern Gypsy Education Council is conducting research into the possibilities here. But the largest problem lies in the adult sphere (in the Gypsy context, this can be taken to mean travellers above the age of eleven, the vast majority of whom are illiterate). An intensive programme of on-site and roadside evening classes is required, necessitating the directing of large resources of manpower and finance towards fundamentally new objectives. The “newness” of this direction lies essentially in the need for the authorities and their staffs to go out to the travellers, not with fixed ideas but prepared to learn from their experiences. A mere line in the local newspaper will achieve nothing.

The provision of teaching materials will initially be problematic. The West Midlands Travellers School have developed reading schemes for Gypsy children oriented towards Gypsy culture. Unfortunately, virtually nothing exists along these lines for the instruction of adults and this is a serious deficiency.

The Easter and Summer school programme must be expanded and intensified. It is unlikely that the pioneering work being done in this respect will be rendered obsolete for many years, certainly not until the gaping holes in all-the-year-round provision have been filled. Winter school projects are also needed. It is undesirable to be more specific than this at the present time. So little has been done and so much more needs to be learnt. But present ignorance cannot be accepted as an excuse for further procrastination.

It was with the aim of injecting some sense of urgency into the situation that the NGEC in 1974 launched its FIRE campaign (Fresh Initiatives in Romani Education) financed by voluntary contribution. This is an attempt at a large scale public relations and conversion exercise, directed specifically at LEAS with a poor record of interest and provision of Gypsy education.

There are promising signs on the horizon. The increased interest of the DES is evidenced by its sponsoring of teachers’ instruction courses in traveller education, and its meetings with the NGEC to discuss the general situation. LEAS are beginning to appoint specially trained teachers to take on the work. Colleges of Education are beginning to take an interest. These and other comparatively recent developments are to be welcomed.

The aim must be progress towards a situation in which there has emerged a whole generation of travellers able to fend for themselves in a literate society. Only when that time comes will the concept of self-determination take on any real meaning for the Gypsies.

The non-Gypsy of course also to be educated, educated to understand that Gypsies, like other minorities, have something to contribute to the total experience of a tolerant and pluralist society. It is to be hoped that the idea of separate educational provision will rapidly phase itself out, but this can only come after a change in the attitudes of non-Gypsies.

The Gypsies are still on the road, and it is not assimilation that they are looking for. Society must not make this unreasonable demand of them. “The problem today is not to remove differences, but how to unite with all differences intact; when natural differences find their true harmony, then is true unity...” (Tagore).
appendix: Gypsy Council statement on the Caravan Sites Act

The following is a summary of a statement first issued on 7 May 1973. The general criticisms are as relevant now as they were then. Since the Caravan Sites Act was passed (April 1970) fewer than 40 new sites have been constructed in England and Wales. This figure is considered inadequate as the figures in the original census were a grave underestimate of the Gypsy population and that population continues to grow by about 1,000 persons each year.

Simultaneously with the failure by local authorities to provide sites, the number of pitches not on local authority land continues to decline as Gypsies are deprived of their traditional sites (by destruction of grass verges, closure of commons and so forth).

As well as being inadequate in number, these sites are lacking in the following respects: the rent demanded is too high and the facilities (for example toilets, play and communal areas) are inadequate; they are usually sited too far from schools, shops and places of employment and are frequently on unsatisfactory land near rubbish tips and sewage beds. In addition, few local authorities recognise that scrap dealing is now the basic livelihood of most Gypsies and fail to make provision for it. Gypsies on these sites are frequently harassed and often feel apprehensive that being on such a site makes it easier for the police to harass them. Local authorities providing sites have failed to liaise with the Gypsy Council despite such a government recommendation.

On the positive side, some local authorities have recognised the need for transit as well as permanent sites and the Gypsy Council has had six meetings with the Local Authorities Association.

However, it is the experience of the Gypsy Council that harassment continues and that some authorities have applied for exemption from the Act on grounds of having no Gypsies or suitable land while others have applied for designation on the grounds that adequate provision has been made. With a few exceptions, the Gypsy Council would oppose all such application as being in contradiction with the facts known to them.

The Gypsy Council also regrets that obstacles are being placed by planning authorities in the way of Gypsies who wish to acquire land for sites or develop land already owned by them.
The Young Fabian Group exists to give socialists not over 30 years of age an opportunity to carry out research, discussion and propaganda. It aims to help its members publish the results of their research, and so make a more effective contribution to the work of the Labour movement. It therefore welcomes all those who have a thoughtful and radical approach to political matters.

The group is autonomous, electing its own committee. It co-operates closely with the Fabian Society which gives financial and clerical help. But the group is responsible for its own policy and activity, subject to the constitutional rule that it can have no declared political policy beyond that implied by its commitment to democratic socialism.

The group publishes pamphlets written by its members, arranges fortnightly meetings in London, and holds day and weekend schools.

Enquiries about membership should be sent to the Secretary, Young Fabian Group, 11 Dartmouth Street, London, SW1H 9BN; telephone 01-930 3077.

Martin Smith, a Black Countryman, is currently a research student in modern British social history at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge. He was a founder member of both the Cambridge Organisation of Labour Students and the Cambridgeshire Gypsy Liaison Group. For the past two years he has organised summer schools for Gypsy children in Wisbech. A candidate in the 1973 District Council elections, he is now Political Education Officer of the Cambridge City Labour Party and treasurer of the Southern Gypsy Education Council.

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