

TRAVELLERS FACE WAVE OF RACISM

A Peace & Progress Briefing Paper

Grattan Puxon

Following Michael Howard's high profile re-election rant at Dale Farm, Basildon, where some 80 families face eviction on 14th May, Travellers have been experiencing a rising wave of hostility.

Already stoked up by articles in The Mail and The Sun, among the worst in the latter paper headed STAMP ON THE CAMPS, long-held prejudices have now reached a dangerous level and have already spilled over into vigilante action. Travellers in the Brighton area have been stoned and a petrol bomb thrown at caravans in Kent.

Howard was inaccurate when he labelled Dale Farm an "illegal camp". The settlement, consisting of mobile homes and chalets, as well as caravans, was given a two-year stay which has not yet expired. But, more seriously, he has blown up the Traveller issue out of all proportion - clearly playing the racist card for what he perceives as electoral advantage.

The fact is that Gypsies in the UK are a relatively small minority, perhaps 300,000 in the whole population. Of these not more than 50,000 are caravan dwellers and the number of caravans on illegal sites is only around 4,000.

Back in 1968 the Caravan Sites Act placed a duty on local authorities to provide caravan parks. Up until 1994 around 400 were built, meeting perhaps half the need. That year the Criminal Justice Act took away this duty and Travellers were advised to buy their own land. Many have since done so, preferring to use their own yards rather than live on council-managed sites.

The problem is that nine times out of ten, planning permission for private caravan parks has been withheld by local councils. Instead enforcement action has been taken and evictions carried out. Most disturbingly, a private company called Constant & Co., is offering its services as a "specialist" in this eviction work.

Over the past two years a number of caravan parks have been “cleared” by Constant & Co., involving the destruction of at least 200 much-needed individual plots, in addition to quantities of property. At least three caravans and a chalet have been burned and hundreds of children traumatised. For many, schooling has been brought to an end.

Some dozen human rights cases are in the course of preparation, against local councils, police and Constant, which is presumably one reason why Michael Howard plans to do away with the Human Rights Act.

The Government has been lobbied to re-impose the duty on local Councils - but to no avail. John Prescott has visited Basildon during the election campaign and faced questions over the future of families at Dale Farm which has thus become the focus of national attention; the test case as regards national policy, or lack of it.

Prescott says he has advised local councils on the need to allocate land for both private and council-owned caravan parks. But as matters stand, such allocation - easily evaded - will not come in time to save residents at Dale Farm and a dozen other privately-owned parks around the country.

Gypsies fear that the “witch-hunt” started by Howard will result in an escalation in the rate of evictions amounting to “ethnic cleansing”.

They are calling for a moratorium on further evictions until the issue of planning permission can be sorted out and land allocated. Where caravan parks cannot be legalized, owners have suggested a “land swap” involving relocation to another site.

Meanwhile, in a pioneering effort, residents at Dale Farm are in the process of setting up Dale Farm Housing Association. This could provide alternative mobile-home parks for extended family groups, drawing on funding from the Housing Corporation. It may be a model for others in future co-operation between Travellers and local councils.

But to succeed such schemes require an atmosphere of understanding and toleration. That is what Peace and Progress stands for. We must endeavour to de-escalate the dangerous racial hatred which has been whipped up for the purpose of this election and bring back a measure of calm and reason in which the needs of a small minority, who happen to follow a different life-style and culture, can be sensibly and sensitively met, to the benefit of society as a whole.