On the Road to Recognition: Irish Travellers’ Quest for Ethnic Identity

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ABSTRACT:

This paper explores and defends Irish Travellers’ efforts to push the Republic of Ireland to recognize them as an ethnic minority group under law. Irish Travellers are a small indigenous minority group who have lived primarily in Ireland for centuries. They rank at the bottom of Irish society in rates of poverty, unemployment, life expectancy, infant mortality, health, education levels, political representation and access, and living conditions. Much like the Roma, with whom they share a nomadic tradition, Irish Travellers are in the midst a movement to improve living conditions, fight widespread discrimination, and gain recognition as an ethnic minority group. Such recognition has important implications for their treatment under international and national law. In this paper, I compare the legal status of Irish Travellers under the laws of the Republic of Ireland with their status in the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland. Then I consider the history of Travellers’ legal status in the Republic’s domestic policies and Travellers’ efforts at recognition through international law documents. Finally, I discuss the challenges and opportunities Irish Travellers’ rights activists face in the continued movement for recognition.

ON THE ROAD TO RECOGNITION: IRISH TRAVELLERS’ QUEST FOR ETHNIC IDENTITY

I. INTRODUCTION

When many Americans think of Ireland, they first remember the terrible poverty caused by the Irish Potato Famine, but the Ireland of the 1990s and early 2000s was a financial powerhouse, fueled by rapid economic growth over the previous two decades.¹ With the onset of recession in 2008, the so-called Celtic Tiger has slowed considerably.² During Ireland’s period of extreme prosperity, not all of the Irish benefited from the economic boom; among those were many Irish Travellers who existed in the midst of riches, yet lived in abysmal conditions. With the Irish economy in the dumps, Irish Travellers find themselves even more vulnerable.

Irish Travellers make up an indigenous minority with their own language and traditions, whose existence in Ireland dates back several centuries. They once roamed the country in caravans of horse-drawn wagons, setting up camps as they went. In those days, Travellers primarily made their livings from horse and donkey trading, entertaining, and tinsmithing. Today, many Travellers continue their life on the road, but mobile homes and trailers have replaced the horses and wagons. There are fewer stopping grounds now, and society’s changing needs have eliminated many of the jobs that once supported a culture on wheels.

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3 At approximately 25,000 people, Travellers only represent .5% of the Irish population. However, there are estimated to be around another 25,000 Travellers living in the UK or the United States. Irish Traveller Movement, About Irish Travellers, http://www.itm trav.ie/irishtravellers (last visited July 28, 2010). Scholars differ on how long Travellers have existed in Ireland. Some have found reference to Travellers as far back as the 12th or even the Fifth Century. NATIONAL CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE ON RACISM AND INTERCULTURALISM, TRAVELLER AND ROMA COMMUNITY, http://www.nccri.ie/cdsu-travellers.html (last visited July 28, 2010). Others argue that there was never a point without Travellers: “…Settled people…emerged here ‘more than 800 years ago’ and ‘began settling.’” MARK DONAHUE, ET AL., MISLI, CRUSH, MISLI: IRISH TRAVELLERS AND NOMADISM, 16 (2005). The 1551 ‘Acte for tynkers and pedlers’ was Ireland’s first anti-nomadic law, and an example of early anti-Traveller sentiment. PAVEE POINT TRAVELLERS’ CENTRE, ASSIMILATION POLICIES AND OUTCOMES: TRAVELLERS’ EXPERIENCE 12 (2005).


5 PAVEE POINT TRAVELLERS’ CENTRE, ASSIMILATION POLICIES AND OUTCOMES: TRAVELLERS’ EXPERIENCE, supra note 3. Tinsmiths were so prevalent among Irish Travellers that the terms Tinker and Irish Traveller were used interchangeably. Today, Tinker is one of many derogatory terms for Irish Traveller. NATIONAL CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE ON RACISM AND INTERCULTURALISM, TRAVELLER AND ROMA COMMUNITY, supra note 3.

6 The Pavee Ceilidh Website, Accomodation, supra note 4.

7 See, MARK DONAHUE, ET AL., supra note 3 at 18 (discussing the ways in which Travellers are adapting to changing economic and political forces).
Travellers share history, language, values, customs, and traditions that differentiate them from the mainstream settled population. Their most distinguishing trait is their nomadism. While Irish Travellers are native to Ireland, they share with European Roma (commonly referred to as Gypsies) a nomadic tradition, the prevalence of extended family living, and a history of prejudice from majority communities.

In every significant way, Travellers are suffering the burdens of disadvantage. They are at the bottom of Irish society in regard to rates of poverty, unemployment, life expectancy, infant mortality, health, education levels, political representation and access, and living conditions, among others. As the Economic and Social Research Institute concluded, “[T]he circumstances of the Irish Travelling people are intolerable. No humane and decent society, once made aware of such circumstances, could permit them to persist.”

For these and other reasons, Travellers have begun to mobilize, building organizations and creating the foundations for a small but vocal movement. The Traveller movement is composed of a patchwork of individual Traveller activists, organizations

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8 Irish Traveller Movement, Traveller Legal Resource Pack 2- Traveller Culture, http://www.itmtrav.ie/keyissues/myview/20 (last visited July 28, 2010). They also have their own language called Cant, Gammon, or Shelta. Id.
9 National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism, Traveller and Roma Community, supra note 3.
10 John O’Connell, Pavee Point, Travellers in Ireland: An Examination of Discrimination (January 1998), http://www.paveepoint.ie/pav_irerac.html (last visited July 28, 2010). Approximately 50 percent of Travellers die before age 39. Eoin Burke-Kennedy, 50 percent of Travellers die before age 39, The Irish Times, June 6, 2007. Data from Ireland’s 2006 Census—taken at the height of Ireland’s economic prosperity—demonstrated that, relative to the national population, Travellers had lower levels of educational attainment, shorter life expectancy, and a higher unemployment rate (75%, compared to 9%). Micheal Mac Greil, Emancipation of the Travelling People (2010).
11 O’Connell, supra note 10.
that aim to provide direct service to meet Travellers’ needs, and a few NGOs who seek to marry direct service work with political and legal advocacy.\textsuperscript{12} One of the most important issues for the Traveller movement is the effort to secure recognition as an ethnic group under national and international law.

At present, the Republic of Ireland\textsuperscript{13} does not recognize the Travellers as an ethnic group that can experience racism, which limits the protection available to Travellers under national, European and International law.\textsuperscript{14} Rather, Ireland defines the Traveller community as a ‘social group’ that experiences discrimination and poverty.\textsuperscript{15} According to the Irish Human Rights Commission, the government’s position is troubling because it may place obstacles in the way of Travellers accessing all the protections of CERD [Convention for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination] and other international human rights conventions. The lack of recognition may also have implications for the application to Travellers of the EU Directive of June 2000 on Equal Treatment between Persons Irrespective of Racial or Ethnic Origin (the Race Directive).\textsuperscript{16}

This lack of recognition does not just lead to lack of legal protection; it also fosters and maintains the popular view of Travellers as a socially maladjusted group, instead of a group of people with a legitimate, unique culture.

\textsuperscript{12} The two most significant Travellers organizations in Ireland are Pavee Point, which was founded in 1986, and the Irish Traveller Movement, begun in 1990, however, there are several other organizations that aim to serve or lobby for Travellers.  
\textsuperscript{13} I use the terms ‘Republic of Ireland’ or ‘Ireland’ as distinguished from ‘Northern Ireland.’ While for many Irish people, the terms ‘the north’ and ‘the south’ are preferable as a means of expressing pan-Irish unity, the official titles offer the most clarity for a primarily American audience.  
\textsuperscript{14} GOVERNMENT OF IRELAND, FIRST NATIONAL REPORT ON THE FRAMEWORK CONVENTION FOR THE PROTECTION OF NATIONAL MINORITIES (2002).  
\textsuperscript{15} Id.  
\textsuperscript{16} GOVERNMENT OF IRELAND, IRISH HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION, TRAVELLERS AS MINORITY ETHNIC GROUP UNDER CERD: A DISCUSSION PAPER (March 2004).
II. A LONG AND WINDING ROAD: THE CONTEXT OF THE CAMPAIGN FOR TRAVELLER ETHNIC RECOGNITION

A. Race and Ethnicity

In order to legitimize colonialism, Europeans developed the concept of biological race to justify the subjugation of people in Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Racial categories were defined by externally visible traits, especially skin color, hair texture, facial features, and the contours and size of the head and body. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries scientists theorized that humans possessed racial essences that flowed through blood and determined physical, psychological, and cultural racial identity.

Despite common beliefs about race and racial identity, modern science demonstrates that “any significant biological differences between racial groupings are illusory.” Thanks to the vast expansion of scientific knowledge, we now know that “human populations are not unambiguous, clearly demarcated, biologically distinct groups.” Additionally, scientists today agree that there is greater diversity within a supposed “racial” group than between groups. “Races, in the sense of genetically homogenous populations, do not exist in the human species today, nor is there any

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18 Id. at 38.
19 Id.
22 Zack, supra note 17 at 39.
evidence that they have ever existed in the past.”

Neither can we say that races are simply something we track by continental origins, as people have been in the process of mass migration throughout history. To classify people by geographic origin is simply to start the clock at an arbitrary date.

Whereas the term ‘race’ historically has connoted biology, ‘ethnicity’ has traditionally been understood as a social construct, which “acquires meaning only in the context of a particular set of social relationships.”

In the legal world, racism has come to mean more than just illicit preference for people on the basis of biology. For instance, Article 1.1 of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) defines racism as:

Any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life.

The term ‘ethnic origin’ is not defined, but the context of its use in addition to ‘race, colour, [or] descent,’ suggests that ‘ethnic origin’ is intended to encompass people who are distinct from national majority populations because of characteristics other than biological ‘race.’

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24 Id.
25 Yang, supra note 20 at 401.
27 Both the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) and the UN Human Rights Committee have emphasized the importance of self identification in determining ethnic minority status. Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, General Comment No. 22 (1990), U.N. Doc. HRI/GEN/2/Rev.6, https://undocs.org/A/25/26 (last visited May 23, 2010).
B. Prosperity, Immigration and Race in Ireland

Ethnic identity and race recently have moved towards the forefront of Irish political discourse, thanks to a massive increase in immigration to Ireland. Ireland’s economic growth during the 1990s led to previously unknown prosperity and helped to convert the nation into a “country of immigration.”

For the first time in its history, Ireland faced a considerable inflow of migrants - both workers and refugees or asylum seekers - from outside the European Union.

These migrants, particularly those from Africa, posed a challenge to existing Irish conceptions of race and ethnicity. The increased cultural diversity in Ireland sadly has been accompanied by growing racism and xenophobic sentiment in media and public opinion.

The backlash has had its most visible impact in the area of government policy towards citizenship. In January 2003, the Irish Supreme Court removed the automatic right to permanent residence for non-national parents of Irish-born children.

Then in June 2004, the public overwhelmingly passed a referendum eliminating an Irish-born child's automatic right to citizenship when the parents are not Irish nationals.

These developments reflect a growing debate over the meaning of Irishness.

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Discrimination, General Recommendation VIII: Identification with a particular racial or ethnic group, A/45/18 (1990); Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 23: The Rights of Minorities (Article 27), CCPR/C/21/Rev. 1/Add.5 (1994), at para. 5.2.

28 MARTIN RUHS, CENTRE ON MIGRATION, POLICY AND SOCIETY, IRELAND: A CRASH COURSE IN IMMIGRATION POLICY (October 2004).

29 Id.


31 Id.

32 Id.
It is not clear what impact this new racial paradigm will have on Irish Travellers’ efforts at ethnic recognition. The growth in discussion and awareness about race in Ireland could provide an opportunity for Travellers to position their goals at the center of public consciousness. Additionally, the increase in organizations dedicated to combating racism could help provide political support by creating a broad coalition. On the other hand, the rapid growth of an immigrant population could mean that Travellers’ concerns will be drowned out in public discourse. The new prevalence of non-white residents might reinforce perceptions of Travellers as mainstream Irish, which could have the positive impact of reducing discrimination against them. However, it seems likely that even if some discrimination is aimed elsewhere, Travellers will continue to be targets, and the net effect could be to harm Traveller efforts to be recognized as ethnically distinct.

C. Anti-Traveller Discrimination

"The single most discriminated against ethnic group is the "Travelling People," according to the European Parliament Committee of Inquiry on Racism and Xenophobia. No Travellers’ signs in taverns and stores are still around today," according to the European Parliament Committee of Inquiry on Racism and Xenophobia. ‘No Travellers’ signs in taverns and stores are still around today,'

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35 Robbie McVeigh, ‘Ethnicity Denial’ and Racism: The Case of the Government of Ireland Against Irish Travellers, Translocations (Summer 2007), http://www.translocations.ie/volume1issue2-6.htm (last visited July 28, 2010). While my research uncovered reference to modern day written signs only in the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland, in 2002, the publicans of County Mayo came together to implement a blanket ban on the sale of alcohol to all Travellers in direct defiance of
reminiscent of the separate black and white establishments that were common in the American South before the Civil Rights Movement. With each new move Irish Travellers face the possibility of evictions from hostile local councils. Traveller children are bullied and teased in school, residents are openly antagonistic to them, and media scare stories promote prejudice and racist attitudes. According to a poll, 70 percent of Irish citizens would not accept a Traveller as a friend.

Travellers are also subject to harassment and violence. Individual Travellers often experience verbal or physical abuse because of their identity. Traveller encampments are easy targets for attack by angry members of the settled community. Anthropologist Jane Helleiner described a 1986 attack on an Irish Traveller group wherein approximately 100 non-Travellers dragged five caravans with tractors out of a field in which they were parked. Such mob activities are not uncommon and continue today.


36 See, e.g., Conor Kane, *'Breach of Rights' as Traveller Family Evicted*, THE INDEPENDENT, January 29, 2009.

37 Dympna Devine et al., *Naming the 'Other': Children's Construction and Experience of Racisms in Irish Primary Schools*, RACE ETHNICITY AND EDUCATION 369 (2008).

38 Brendan I. Koerner, *What Is an Irish Traveler?* SLATE, Sept. 24, 2002, http://www.slate.com/?id=2071456. Additionally, in a recent study, over 79% would be reluctant to buy a house next door to a Traveller, 41% would be unwilling to employ a Traveller, and a significant minority of 18.5% would deny Travellers Irish citizenship. MICHEAL MAC GREIL, *supra* note 10.

39 NATIONAL CONSULTATIVE COMMITTEE ON RACISM AND INTERCULTURALISM, THE IMPORTANCE OF RECOGNISING TRAVELLERS AS AN ETHNIC GROUP SUBMISSION TO THE JOINT OIREACHTAS COMMITTEE ON HUMAN RIGHTS (March 2004).


This kind of discrimination has a well-established history. Irish Travellers “have so long been associated with uncleanness, vagrancy, and petty crime that they are still sometimes perceived as pathologically unfit for Irish citizenship.”\(^{42}\) However, anti-Traveller racism extends beyond Ireland. Since the 1600s, progress-oriented Western ideology has systematically encouraged sedentarism over nomadism, “denigrat[ing] nomadism *both inside and outside Europe,*” and promoting the view of nomadism as characteristic of “‘barbarous,’ underdeveloped, and ‘uncivilized’ societies.”\(^{43}\) Thus, the historic discrimination towards Irish Travellers is only one part of a larger bias against nomadism.

**D. Traveller Ethnicity**

Despite this discrimination, the Irish Government has been unwilling to take the step of declaring Travellers to be an ethnic group. In the July 2003 Draft First National Report by Ireland to the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, the Irish government explicitly stated,

> In regard to the scope of the report it should be noted that Irish Travellers do not constitute a distinct group from the population as a whole in terms of race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin. However, the Government is aware that members of the Traveller Community suffer discrimination on the basis of their social origin.\(^{44}\)

Furthermore, the government argued that the “separate identification of Travellers in equality legislation guarantees that they are explicitly protected.”\(^{45}\) The governmental

\(^{42}\) Jim Mac Laughlin, *Nation Building, Social Closure, and Anti-Traveller Racism in Ireland,* 33 SOCIOLOGY 129 (Feb 1999).

\(^{43}\) *Id.*

\(^{44}\) GOVERNMENT OF IRELAND, DRAFT FIRST NATIONAL REPORT BY IRELAND TO THE COMMITTEE ON THE ELIMINATION OF RACIAL DISCRIMINATION (July 2003).

\(^{45}\) *Id.*
position was also confirmed by a parliamentary question in October 2003, which restated this view.\textsuperscript{46}

Such a hard line position was new for the Irish government, which until that point was non-committal about recognizing Travellers as an ethnic group.\textsuperscript{47} This was reflected in the Equality legislation (1998 and 2000), where although Travellers were not included under the ‘race ground’ for protection from discrimination, Traveller status was recognized as a separate ground for such protection.\textsuperscript{48} The Irish Government has not set out any detailed rationale for its shift, nor has it made clear what policy implications such a stand may have. However, for those in the Traveller movement, this position seems an express denial of their culture and community, and many are afraid that the government is sending a message that it is now less sympathetic to Traveller concerns.\textsuperscript{49}

It is possible to argue that this is merely a debate about terminology. It is true that differences in wording do not guarantee differences in the practice, experience, or

\textsuperscript{46} National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism, , The Importance of Recognising Travellers as an Ethnic Group Submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Human Rights, supra note 39.

\textsuperscript{47} Id. Ireland’s unwillingness to grant explicit recognition to Travellers as a minority ethnic group seems contradictory to its implicit recognition of Travellers through, for example, the involvement of Traveller representatives in the co-coordinating committee for the European Year Against Racism (1997), the National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism, and the Know Racism national public awareness program. Id.

\textsuperscript{48} Equal Status Act (2000)(Ir.) Travellers are defined as a separate category in under the Equal Status Act, so they do not come under the racial protection ground. They are defined as “…the community of people who are commonly called Travellers and who are identified (both by themselves and others) as people with a shared history, culture and traditions including, historically, a nomadic way of life on the island of Ireland.” This is a first step on the road to cultural recognition but again falls short of full recognition of Travellers as an ethnic group.

\textsuperscript{49} National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism, The Importance of Recognising Travellers as an Ethnic Group Submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Human Rights, supra note 39.
recognition of exclusion. Yet, language is meaningful: how Travellers are identified in policy and legislative texts affects their treatment, the way settled people view them, and how they view themselves, and particularly, their ability to seek redress under international law.\textsuperscript{50} 

“[B]ecause officialdom stops short of clearly applying the terminology of ethnicity and racism to Travellers and issues affecting them, they remain in a sort of provisional niche where they can easily become minimised or forgotten.”\textsuperscript{51} Policies and programs that respond to needs will only be effective to the extent that they take into account the culture and identity of the group concerned. Recognition would be a first step towards fighting both individual and systemic racism.

The Irish Human Rights Commission, a commission that has engaged in ongoing efforts to secure official government recognition of Traveller ethnic identity, succinctly describes the high stakes:

The Human Rights Commission…believes that the refusal to recognise Travellers as an ethnic minority for the purposes of CERD suggests a lack of understanding of the importance to Travellers of recognition of their culture and identity. It also, in the view of the Commission, raises concerns that sufficient weight may not be given in policy making to the need to respect and promote that culture, while the lack of recognition may place obstacles in the way of Travellers accessing all the protections of CERD and other international human rights conventions.\textsuperscript{52}

\textsuperscript{50} \textsc{PAVEE POINT TRAVELLERS’ CENTRE, ASSIMILATION POLICIES AND OUTCOMES: Travellers’ Experience, supra} note 3.
\textsuperscript{51} \textit{Id}.
\textsuperscript{52} \textsc{GOVERNMENT OF IRELAND, IRISH HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION, supra} note 16. The IHRC was created under the Human Rights Act 2000 “to ensure that the human rights of all people are promoted and protected in law, policy, and practice.” The IHRC is Ireland’s national human rights body, recognized by the United Nations. Ireland Human Rights Commission, About Us, http://www.ihrc.ie/about/ (last visited July 28, 2010).
III. THE ROAD MORE TRAVELED: TRAVELLER ETHNIC RECOGNITION ABROAD

A. United Kingdom

Other jurisdictions provide examples of how Traveller identity could be understood differently. Most notably, in *O'Leary & Others v. Allied Domecq & Others*, an English court dealt with the issue of whether Irish Travellers constituted a distinct ethnic group. In the 2000 case, the Central London County Court heard from a number of Irish Travellers who claimed discrimination under the Race Relations Act (1976) after they had been refused service in a number of public houses in northwest London. The allegation of discrimination was based on their status as Irish Travellers rather than their Irish heritage, since one of the pubs in question almost exclusively served Irish expatriates. The court proceeded to determine whether Irish Travellers constituted an ethnic minority group under the Act.

In making its decision, the court relied on a 1983 English case, *Mandla v. Dowell Lee*, wherein a court considered the meaning of the terms ‘ethnic origins’ and ‘ethnic group’ and laid out the essential and non-essential characteristics needed for a group to be considered an ethnic group in the United Kingdom. The court in *O’Leary* determined that Irish Travellers met the “essential” criteria for an ethnic group under *Mandla*:

(1) a long shared history, of which the group is conscious as distinguishing it from other groups, and the memory of which it keeps alive; (2) a cultural tradition of its own, including family and social customs and manners, often but not necessarily associated with religious observance.

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53 *Id.*
56 *Id.*
57 *O'Leary v. Allied Domecq*, supra note 54.
The court also held that Irish Travellers have several other relevant, but non-
optional characteristics of an ethnic group, including “a common geographical origin, or
descent from a small number of common ancestors,” as well as a common language.\textsuperscript{58}
Though the Irish Travellers do not have a common written literature, the court deemed
their shared oral tradition significant. The court added that Travellers are “undoubtedly a
group which suffers disadvantage, discrimination and prejudice.”\textsuperscript{59}

B. Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, Travellers’ status as a ‘racial group’ is enshrined in the law
through legislation. According to Baroness Denton, the Minister responsible for the law,
the Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 explicitly included Travellers, because
“of considerable lobbying during the early consultation period …. In the response to the
proposal for a draft order there was a great urging that the legislation should make clear
the status of the Irish traveller [sic] community as a separate ethnic group.”\textsuperscript{60} Under the
Race Relations Order,

‘racial grounds’... includes the grounds of belonging to the Irish
Traveller community, that is to say the community of people
commonly so called who are identified (both by themselves and by
others) as people with a shared history, culture and traditions
including, historically, a nomadic way of life on the island of
Ireland.\textsuperscript{61}

\textsuperscript{58} Id.
\textsuperscript{59} Id.
\textsuperscript{60} McVeigh, supra note 35.
\textsuperscript{61} Id.
Thus, Travellers are accepted as an ethnic group in both Northern Ireland and England by all major actors, including the government, a path that the Republic of Ireland has not followed.

IV. LONELY ROAD: TRAVELLER ETHNICITY IN THE REPUBLIC’S DOMESTIC POLICY

In the early 1960’s, a combination of Irish Travellers and settled people sought to create a radical Travellers movement, based on grassroots tactics, seeking civil rights and self-determination through direct action, rather than legislative reform. Gratton Puxon, a settled English person who grew to strongly identify with Travellers and Gypsies, was the most famous spokesperson of this controversial movement. However, when Puxon was arrested on explosives charges in 1963, he left for England and set up the Gypsy Council there, effectively ending the radical movement. The same year, the government issued its first explicit response to Travellers’ concerns in the Report of the Commission on Itinerancy. The Commission explicitly denied that “itinerants” constituted an ethnic group, and sought "to promote their absorption into the general community. . ." There is no indication that the Commission sought out the views of the

62 Id.
64 Id.
65 THE EQUALITIES REVIEW, EQUALITIES IN BRITAIN, 1946-2006, 87 (March 2007).
67 EQUALITY AUTHORITY, TRAVELER ETHNICITY (2006), available at http://www.equality.ie/getFile.asp?FC_ID=263&docID=556 (last visited April 8, 2008). According to the Equality Authority, this denial may actually have been an attempt to combat the racism that was so prevalent. “The Report does not explain – other than what is in this paragraph – what prompted the reference to ‘ethnic group’ here although it might have been intended, at least in part, as a counter to the wider community’s outright rejection of Travellers as despised and racialised inferiors.” Id.
Travellers themselves in creating this policy.\textsuperscript{68} In fact, the next two decades suggest the contrary, since the government interventions were typically described as top-down operations that were “for, rather than with, Travellers. Travellers were frequently referred to as being in need of charity rather than rights.”\textsuperscript{69}

Traveller rights activism led to a change in the government policy by 1983, when the Irish Government issued the Report of the Travelling People Review Body, which eliminated the use of the word ‘itinerant’ for ‘traveller’ and rejected the policy of total ‘absorption’ that the earlier Commission on Itinerancy had endorsed.\textsuperscript{70} However, despite the involvement of settled and Traveller activists,\textsuperscript{71} the Review Body determined that anti-discrimination legislation was too complicated because the Review Body perceived ambiguity in Traveller group identity:

The desirability of having special legislation enacted to outlaw discrimination against travellers as a minority group was examined by the Review Body. It became apparent from this examination that implementation of such legislation would be fraught with many difficulties, especially in the absence of a precise legal definition of ‘traveller’.

Accordingly, the enactment of anti-discrimination laws is not sought.\textsuperscript{72}

In 1984, responding to the Review Body report, the Irish Government created a Monitoring Committee, which from the outset called for legislation to combat discrimination against Travellers and repeated the call in each of the six reports it issued before it was dissolved in 1993.\textsuperscript{73} Others joined in the chorus, including the National

\textsuperscript{68} See O’CONNELL, supra note 10.
\textsuperscript{69} Id.
\textsuperscript{70} GOVERNMENT OF IRELAND, TRAVELLING PEOPLE REVIEW BODY, REPORT OF THE TRAVELLING PEOPLE REVIEW BODY, 31 (1983).
\textsuperscript{71} O’CONNELL, supra note 10.
\textsuperscript{72} GOVERNMENT OF IRELAND, TRAVELLING PEOPLE REVIEW BODY, supra note 70.
\textsuperscript{73} EQUALITY AUTHORITY, supra note 67.
Council for Travelling People, an organization representing Traveller settlement communities. The National Council adopted a Charter of Rights of Travelling People in 1984, which it presented before the Seanad (Irish Senate). The Charter listed twelve rights, the first of which was the right to recognition of their distinct cultural identity: “Travellers as individuals, and as a group, have a right to realisation of their own cultural identity, indispensable for their dignity and free development as persons.” In 1985, the Seanad passed a motion in response to the Charter, which welcomed the document, and “call[ed] on the Government to introduce, as a matter of urgency, the administrative and legislative reforms demanded by the Charter.”

Despite the Review Body’s unwillingness to seek legislation without a definition of ‘traveller,’ Ireland’s parliament passed multiple laws that mentioned Travellers without clear definition. These included the 1988 Housing Act, the 1989 Prohibition of Incitement to Hatred Act, and the 1993 Unfair Dismissals (Amendment) Act. The first, the 1988 Housing Act, was passed in response to the Government Statement of 1984, which in turn was an answer to the Charter of the National Council for Travelling People. The Housing Act’s section on the ‘Provision of sites for travellers’ defined

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74 Donald Kenrick, The Travellers of Ireland, PATRIN, http://www.geocities.com/~Patrin/ireland.htm (last visited April 8, 2008).
75 EQUALITY AUTHORITY, supra note 67.
76 Id.
77 Id.
78 TRAVELLING PEOPLE REVIEW BODY, supra note 70.
80 EQUALITY AUTHORITY, supra note 67.
Travellers vaguely as “persons belonging to the class of persons who traditionally pursue or have pursued a nomadic way of life.” 81

During discussions leading up to the Prohibition of Incitement to Hatred Act 1989, legislators considered and ultimately rejected the possibility of defining Travellers as an ethnic group. 82 Among legislators and activists at this time, there was widespread agreement that Travellers experienced discrimination, but individuals disagreed about whether Travellers would be protected by the Prohibition of Incitement to Hatred Act’s reference to protection on the basis of ‘ethnic origins.’ 83 The Minister for Justice stated that he believed that the courts ought to decide, but that he considered Travellers to be protected. 84 The Minister’s unwillingness to assure Travellers that they would be protected as an ethnic group spurred some to argue successfully for the inclusion of ‘membership of the travelling community’ itself as a protected category of identity. 85 The Traveller Support Movement, a Travellers’ rights organization, had actively campaigned for their inclusion in the legislation and was the key reason for the explicit mention of Travellers in the law. 86 The organization had argued for several years that Travellers constituted an ethnic group subjected to racism, yet in this instance, were only able to manage a separate category for Travellers. 87

81 Id.
82 McVeigh, supra note 35.
83 Id.
84 Id.
85 PROHIBITION OF INCITEMENT TO HATRED ACT, supra note 79.
86 McVeigh, supra note 35.
87 Id. “Ironically, the inclusion of Travellers within the Republic’s 1989 Incitement to Hatred Act gave weight to the arguments for their inclusion in the Northern Ireland Race Racial Order which in turn influenced how they were defined in the equality legislation in the Republic. Ideally in the equality legislation the grounds of ‘race’ and the ‘Traveller community’ would have been combined in a single ground more properly named the
Another public policy milestone for Travellers’ attempts to achieve recognition as an ethnic group was the publication of the Report of the Task Force on the Travelling Community in 1995. While it did not officially urge the Government’s recognition of Traveller ethnicity, the report devoted a full section to the issue of discrimination, reflecting the past decade of Traveller activism about discrimination, as well as the growing media consciousness of the issue. The report itself made reference to the growing tide of awareness of Travellers’ ethnicity:

Academic debate and various international fora focus attention on the link between racism and cultural difference, particularly in scenarios of unequal power relationships. The forms of prejudice and discrimination experienced by the Traveller community equate with racism in the international context.

The report also urged combating discrimination with legislation, recognizing the surge of public attention towards Travellers’ rights.

The Task Force report led to policy initiatives that acknowledged Travellers, such as the Equal Status Act of 2000, which contains a definition of the "Traveller community." Under the Act, ‘Traveller community’ means the community of people who are commonly called Travellers and who are identified (both by themselves and others) as people with a shared history, culture and traditions including, historically, a ground of ‘racism’ – with Travellers named amongst the range of issues and categories covered.”

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89 Id. The report recognized that the discrimination against Travellers could be direct and indirect, intentional and unintentional. Id.
90 Id.
91 Id.
92 Equal Status Act, 2000, Sec. 2 (2000) (Ir.).
nomadic way of life on the island of Ireland.” However, once again, this recognition fell short of full acceptance of Traveller ethnicity, since “traveller community” was listed separately, rather than under the heading of racial or ethnic group. The Traveller Support Movement, which had argued forcefully in support of Traveller ethnicity, was, however, satisfied since Travellers would be protected by legislation without the need for a test case to establish ethnicity.

In 2003, the Irish government established the High Level Group on Traveller Issues, an inter-departmental group aimed at ensuring high quality and efficient service delivery to Travellers. Unfortunately, the group included no Travellers.

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93 Id. Interestingly, this definition is very similar to the characteristics that the British court in *O’Leary v. Allied Domecq* looked to in order to determine Irish Travellers’ status as an ethnic group: (1) a long shared history, which distinguishes it from other groups; (2) a cultural tradition of its own.

94 Id.

95 McVeigh, *supra* note 35.

96 GOVERNMENT OF IRELAND, REPORT OF THE HIGH LEVEL GROUP ON TRAVELLER ISSUES (March 2006).

97 PAVEE POINT, TRAVELLERS CULTURAL RIGHTS: THE RIGHT TO RESPECT FOR TRAVELLER CULTURE AND WAY OF LIFE, 14 (November 2008). The Advisory Committee for the Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities expressed their disappointment with this fact in their 2006 Second Opinion on Ireland in 2006, as did Thomas Hammarberg, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights. In a report on his 2007 visit to Ireland, Hammarberg wrote that Travellers are under-represented at all levels, specifically noting the absence of Travellers in the High Level Group on Traveller Issues, and suggested the creation of a reserved seat for a Traveller in the Seanad (Irish Senate). COUNCIL OF EUROPE, ADVISORY COMMITTEE FOR THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE FRAMEWORK CONVENTION FOR THE PROTECTION OF NATIONAL MINORITIES, SECOND OPINION ON IRELAND ADOPTED ON 6 OCTOBER 2006, (2006); COUNCIL OF EUROPE, REPORT BY THE COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS MR. THOMAS HAMMARBERG ON HIS VISIT TO IRELAND (2008).
V. ROAD TO NOWHERE?: TRAVELLER EFFORTS AT ETHNIC RECOGNITION THROUGH INTERNATIONAL LAW

A major reason that Travellers’ rights activists have sought the Irish government’s recognition as an ethnic group is to gain the ability to challenge their treatment under international law documents, many of which offer special protections to ethnic groups and their members.  

Traveller ethnicity needs to be recognized to ensure that Travellers can enjoy the protections and benefits that flow from these agreements alongside other ethnic groups. One key way that Travellers advocates have sought to raise awareness is by submitting shadow reports to some significant international agreements that describe substantive ways in which the Irish state has failed to meet its obligations and specifically argue for recognition of Traveller ethnicity.

The European Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (European Framework) was ratified by Ireland in February 1995, and it came in to force

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98 These include the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the European Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and others. Human Rights Education Associates, The Rights of Ethnic and Racial Minorities, http://www.hrea.org/index.php?doc_id=360#instruments (last visited July 28, 2010). Ireland has a dualist legal system, which means that international human rights treaties are not considered binding national law unless they have been incorporated through a domestic law. Of the treaties considered in this article, here, only the European Convention on Human Rights, which was incorporated through Ireland’s European Convention on Human Rights Act 2003, is deemed binding legal authority. PAVEE POINT, TRAVELLERS CULTURAL RIGHTS: THE RIGHT TO RESPECT FOR TRAVELLER CULTURE AND WAY OF LIFE, supra note 97.

in September 1999. The European Framework is monitored at an EU level, and governments are required to submit a report every five years on how they are protecting and preserving the culture of national minorities. In 2002, the Irish Government submitted the First Report under the European Framework:

Their culture and way of life, of which nomadism is an important factor, distinguishes Travellers from the sedentary (settled) population. While Travellers do not constitute a distinct group from the population as a whole in terms of religion, language or race, they are, however, an indigenous minority who have been part of Irish society for centuries. The Government fully accepts the right of Travellers to their cultural identity, regardless of whether they may be described as an ethnic group or national minority.

Travellers’ rights advocates were hopeful that this statement meant that the government envisaged that Travellers would be entitled to protection under the European Framework Convention on National Minorities (and by extension Article 1.1 of CERD and the full protection offered by it).

In December 2000 Ireland finally ratified the CERD convention thirty-two years after signing it in 1968. State parties are obliged under Article 9 to submit a report within one year of ratification to the CERD Committee, which monitors the convention. Ireland submitted its report in time for review in March 2005.

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101 IRISH TRAVELLER MOVEMENT, TRAVELLER LEGAL RESOURCE PACK 2- TRAVELLER CULTURE, supra note 8.
102 GOVERNMENT OF IRELAND, FIRST NATIONAL REPORT ON THE FRAMEWORK CONVENTION FOR THE PROTECTION OF NATIONAL MINORITIES (2002).
103 IRISH TRAVELLER MOVEMENT, SHADOW REPORT AND COMMENTARY ON THE FIRST NATIONAL REPORT BY IRELAND TO THE UN CERD COMMITTEE, supra note 99.
104 Id.
In Ireland’s report, the government categorically declared that it did not count Travellers as an ethnic group. Indeed, rather than reporting on the treatment of Travellers in the main document, the Irish government instead only made specific report of the position of Travellers in the attachment of Appendix 1. The government provided very little supporting content for its rejection of Traveller ethnicity, making only footnote reference to a textbook primarily aimed at first year sociology students. The government did, however, include the caveat that it was “committed to applying all the protections afforded to ethnic minorities by the CERD equally to Travellers.”

Despite that assurance, Travellers’ rights activists saw this as a rollback of the broader recognition granted to Travellers in the 2002 submission on the European Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. In its shadow submission, ITM wrote that it supports the contention of the Irish Human Rights Commission (IHRC) that the only explicable reason for such defensiveness is an attempt by the State to exclude Travellers from the individual complaints procedure under Article 14 of the Convention and the requirement to take positive measures under Article 2.2.

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106 Government of Ireland, Draft First National Report by Ireland to the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, supra note 44.
108 Government of Ireland, Draft First National Report by Ireland to the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, supra note 44.
110 Government of Ireland, Draft First National Report by Ireland to the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, supra note 44.
112 Irish Traveller Movement, Shadow Report and Commentary on the First National Report by Ireland to the UN CERD Committee, supra note 99.
While the Irish government claimed that the definition of Travellers as an ethnic group would not entitle Travellers to any additional rights or protections, to activists the stakes of ethnic recognition were actually very high. In its shadow report, Pavee Point argued,

The continued lack of recognition of Travellers as an ethnic group and the lack of explicit acknowledgement that they experience racism… is a major contributing factor to the slow pace of change and the confused and sometimes contradictory policy approaches of government interventions relating to Travellers in recent years.  

The Travellers’ rights advocates seem to have had some success. The CERD committee took note of the status of Travellers, and expressed “concern at the state party’s position with regard to the recognition of Travellers as an ethnic group,” adding, “The Committee is of the view that the recognition of Travellers as an ethnic group has important implications under the convention.” The Committee further called on Ireland to ‘work more concretely towards recognizing the Traveller community as an ethnic group.’

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113 PAVEE POINT TRAVELLERS’ CENTRE, SHADOW REPORT AND COMMENTARY ON THE FIRST AND SECOND NATIONAL REPORT BY IRELAND TO THE UN CERD COMMITTEE, 7 (2005). This is a general theme that the Committee has addressed on a number of occasions. General Recommendation XXIV points out that “the application of different criteria in order to determine ethnic groups or indigenous peoples, leading to the recognition of some and refusal to recognize others, may give rise to differing treatment for various groups within a country’s population.” U.N. Comm. on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, Concluding Observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination: Ireland (2005).

114 U.N. Comm. on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, supra note 114 at paragraph 20.

115 Id.
Meanwhile, in 2005, the Irish Government submitted its second report on the European Framework.¹¹⁶ To activists, it represented a significant retrenchment from the statements made in the previous European Framework report.¹¹⁷ In it, the government responded to a specific request to provide comments regarding the issue of recognizing Travellers as an ethnic group/national minority.¹¹⁸ Ireland defended its decision not to include Travellers in the main body of its first and second CERD reports on the grounds that Travellers were not subject to protection from racial discrimination under CERD since “[did] not appear to constitute a distinct group from the population as a whole in terms of race, colour, descent or national or ethnic origin.”¹¹⁹ The government further stated that it was not providing a “lesser level of protection to Travellers compared to that afforded to members of ethnic minorities,” but that it was “not prepared to conclude that Travellers are ethnically different from the majority of Irish people.”¹²⁰

Travellers’ rights activists appear to be having success in bringing international bodies to their side. In 2007, Ireland submitted its Third Periodic Report under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).¹²¹ Despite the fact that the Irish government made no mention of Traveller ethnic identity in its submission, the Human Rights Committee took pains in its Concluding Observations to point out their

¹¹⁷ Equality Authority, supra note 67.
¹¹⁹ Id.
¹²⁰ Id.
¹²¹ Government of Ireland, Third Periodic Report to the Human Rights Committee under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (September 2007).
concern that Irish authorities do “not intend to recognize the Traveller community as an ethnic minority,” encouraging Ireland to take steps to do so.\textsuperscript{122}

VI. DOWN THE ROAD: THREE MAJOR CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN THE STRUGGLE FOR ETHNIC RECOGNITION

A. Expanding the Movement Beyond Irish Borders

Travellers’ rights groups need to expand the movement beyond Ireland. The fact that Irish Travellers are regarded as an ethnic group in Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom suggests the possibility that international pressure could play a role in changing the Irish government’s policy stance on the issue. Travellers’ groups must realize how little public awareness exists on an international scale of Traveller concerns and attempt to raise consciousness.

One way to do that is for Irish Travellers’ groups in the Republic to form ties with sister organizations in Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom. Some of this work is already happening.\textsuperscript{123} Additionally, Travellers’ groups should reach out to Roma groups in Europe, who are working for the rights of nomads throughout the continent. While most scholars agree that Travellers and Roma do not share ethnic roots,\textsuperscript{124} they do share many concerns in common. Some possible joint goals for Travellers and Roma include setting explicit guidelines and standards for human rights and minority rights of the Roma and Travellers as granted by conventions and recommendations; creating mechanisms for their implementation; raising the issue of Traveller/Roma statelessness,

\textsuperscript{123} See, e.g., Irish Traveller Movement, ITM Network, http://www.itmtrav.ie/aboutus (last visited July 28, 2010). The ITM collaborates with Traveller groups in Britain and has member groups in Northern Ireland in addition to the Republic groups.
\textsuperscript{124} HELLEINER, supra note 4.
rights of asylum for Roma and Gypsies, and the needs Travellers and Roma in the context of cross-border migration. Again, some Travellers’ organizations are taking steps in this direction, but there is certainly more that can be done.125

Of course, these standards and guidelines must be reworked and implemented in accordance with specific national settings, and not every issue of importance to Roma will matter to Travellers and vice versa. Much of the work in ensuring that the social problems of Travellers and Roma will happen through national and local organizations challenging the internal affairs of a given state. However, there is still a need for communal international efforts to lobby governments to apply existing human rights standards to Travellers and Roma.

B. Winning Hearts and Minds

Travellers have an image problem. As mentioned above, most of the world is unaware of their existence, let alone aware of their struggles. The Traveller movement needs to build such a consciousness. The task of winning hearts and minds also requires that Travellers’ advocates instill the majority of Irish society with the understanding that the ‘Traveller problem’ is a problem of the larger society—a problem of racism. The deeply embedded stereotypes and prejudices against the Travellers that many Irish hold manifest in attitudes of rejection, social exclusion, and discrimination.126 Travellers are

and will remain a challenge to settled society's concepts of tolerance, equality, and identity.

This presents a quandary for the Traveller community: Since settled society rejects Travellers’ unique cultural experience and identity, Travellers who assert such identity while making demands for equality run the risk of fostering antagonism. However, the other option, assimilation, requires Travellers to alter or renounce their unique identity to gain acceptance and attain equal treatment. The goal for the Traveller movement must be to make settled society understand that Travellers desire for recognition as an ethnic minority is not disruptive at its core; on the contrary, it is a demand to be included in society. Travellers are asking to be included in Irish society as “a subject not as an object, having dignity, distinctiveness, and rights as human beings and as a group.”¹²⁷ Travellers provide a unique part of Irish culture, which should be recognized as a valuable component of a diverse—rather than homogenous—Ireland.

One potential pathway for Travellers to gain ground is to build coalitions with other minority groups in the country. With the support of a coalition committed to ending all forms of racism, Travellers may have the ability to influence policy through democratic institutions and procedures, such as national and local elections and participation in decision-making bodies.

C. Increasing Traveller Involvement in the Movement

There also needs to be a stronger presence of Travellers within Travellers' rights organizations. Most Traveller organizations in Ireland are not actually run by Travellers

themselves. Some scholars have asserted that this model is based on the dangerous notion that because Travellers have been deprived through discrimination of education and skills, settled people need to assist with tasks such as financial management and public representation. In fact, some have argued that this partnership model of Traveller activism actually recreates the dependency of Travellers upon settled people that the groups are trying to eliminate.

While it may or may not be feasible for Travellers to instantaneously become the major leaders of their own movement, in order to authentically argue for the worth of Traveller identity, Travellers’ rights activists must make efforts to involve more Travellers in the movement. Travellers’ rights groups ought to try to attain a legitimate representation that bridges the gap between the elite and often self-appointed organizational leaders and the inactive Traveller masses. One way in which this might be achieved is through a greater emphasis on democratic procedures that involve local representatives from Traveller communities.

Another area that organizational leaders should consider is the danger of assuming that the mere presence of Travellers in decision-making equates to a meaningful representation of Traveller needs and interests. It is quite easy to imagine that power imbalances because of educational levels and structural societal factors could obscure the desire of all for true partnership. Of course, Traveller ethnic mobilization is a recent phenomenon and needs time to mature; hopefully, time, commitment, and

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128 Alana Lentin, Anti-Racism in Ireland, in SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND IRELAND (Niamh Hourigan and Linda Connolly eds., 2006).
129 Id.
130 Id.
progress will help to bring about greater equality both within the Irish Traveller movement and in Irish society as a whole.