



Irish Traveller Movement in Britain

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Submission from the Irish Traveller Movement in Britain for the Police and press relationship phase of the Leveson Inquiry

Gypsies and Travellers

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About ITMB: The Irish Traveller Movement in Britain (ITMB) was established in 1999 and is a leading national policy and voice charity, working to raise the capacity and social inclusion of the Traveller communities in Britain. ITMB act as a bridge builder bringing the Traveller communities, service providers and policy makers together, stimulating debate and promoting forward-looking strategies to promote increased race equality, civic engagement, inclusion, service provision and community cohesion. For further information about ITMB visit www.irishtraveller.org.uk

Introduction

In phase two of the Inquiry, Lord Leveson is considering whether the sometimes symbiotic nature of relationships between the Press and the Police act in the public interest. The Irish Traveller Movement in Britain would like to bring to the attention of the Inquiry the increasingly prejudicial content of Police press statements and conferences regarding Gypsy, Roma and Traveller criminal investigations.

“Though Travellers are not a large group in Britain their treatment in the media is appalling. A measure of the real ability of our media to reflect the fact that we are a multiracial society is its treatment of Travellers.”

Hugh Harris, 1998 Deputy Chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality

“Sexed up” Police press statements driving prejudicial and racist reporting.

The Irish Traveller Movement in Britain (ITMB) are alarmed at the sensationalist and prejudicial nature of the Police press briefings and statements about Gypsy, Roma and Traveller criminal proceedings. We believe that these briefings are encouraging reporting that both prejudices criminal trials of Traveller defendants and stirs up racial hatred towards the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. We believe that the cause of this is the press’s need to deliver sensationalist stories interacting with the Police’s need to justify their particular operation by provoking media interest and coverage. This interaction – between the Police seeking publicity and the press seeking sensationalist stories – is driving a ‘race to the bottom’ and means that a police statement or briefing will seek to ‘tick’ news values and pander to the media’s need for moral panics and folk devils. This, we believe, has a disproportionate affect on the Traveller community, as most media organisations will always splash criminal proceedings involving Travellers.

The media’s constant public lynching of the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities was picked up in 1998 by Hugh Harris, the then Deputy Chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality:

“Though Travellers are not a large group in Britain their treatment in the media is appalling. A measure of the real ability of our media to reflect the fact that we are a multiracial society is its treatment of Travellers. The use of racist language, prejudicial images and stereotyped coverage of Travellers endorses the principle of prejudice and so gives to those members of the public who it may influence the suggestion that racist attitudes to others are an acceptable and rational approach.”

Hostile media coverage of Gypsies and Travellers has also been acknowledged by the UN Human Rights Councils in its 2008 Universal Periodic Review of the UK. The Council noted:

“that negative and inaccurate reporting by certain media has contributed to hostile attitudes towards, in particular, gypsies and travellers, asylum-seekers, migrant workers and Muslims.”

http://lib.ohchr.org/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session1/GB/A_HRC_8_25_United_Kingdom_E.pdf

Unfortunately, the British Police collude with the media and are increasingly part of the lynch mob.

We understand that a law already exists to protect defendants from published reports that prejudice live trials. The law is prosecuted by the Attorney General. However, we posit that the case-studies in this submission show that when prejudicial information is coming from the police, this law, and the NUJ/Editor's Society guidelines on reporting on criminal investigations, is too often ignored.

We have three case studies we would like the Inquiry to consider. The first is Bedfordshire Police's press conferences, statements and subsequent reporting regarding the recent Irish Traveller 'slavery' raids in Leighton Buzzard. The second are the press releases surrounding the Metropolitan Police's Operation Golf, which targeted people-trafficking and criminality amongst Roma resident in the UK. The third focuses on the police and resulting media branding of the Roma community as being responsible for all metal theft in the UK.

Case Study 1: Bedfordshire Police and the reporting of the Irish Traveller 'slavery' raids in Leighton Buzzard.

On the 12th September 2011, The Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire Police – as part of Operation Netwing – raided a mixed Romany Gypsy and Irish Traveller caravan site in Leighton Buzzard. The raid took place shortly before the eviction of Irish Travellers at Dale Farm, near Basildon, which was attracting a lot of popular public support and international media attention. The timing of the raid couldn't have come at a better time for Essex Police and Basildon Council, who were facing a groundswell of popular support for the Dale Farm Travellers and an increasing number of supporters were turning up at Dale Farm to resist the coming eviction. Coincidence or not, as a result of the aggressive police briefing of the national and international media, the huge raid on the Leighton Buzzard site descended into a media circus with journalists from all over the world milling around the site, taking pictures of residents, caravans and chalets and interfering with what are key witnesses and even defendants in the forthcoming trial on the 17th April, 2012. The Bedfordshire Police themselves had to finally warn the press to stop approaching witnesses still living at the site.

As well as creating a Traveller related media feeding frenzy, right from the day of the raid, Bedfordshire Police Press briefings and statements directly encouraged an assumption of guilt in the media reports linked to the Operation Netwing raid.

A prime example of this encouragement of an assumption of guilt is Detective Chief Inspector O'Neil's press conference on the day of the raid following the arrests of a number of suspects. In the press conference, DCI O'Neil informs journalists – and by extension the public from which any potential jurors would be drawn for the defendant's trial – that the arrested defendants were from a large extended criminal family and had been keeping slaves with shaved heads in filthy conditions for forced labour. DCI O'Neil

also informed the press that the family had links to slavery rings in Scandinavia. This is astounding coming from a policeman who has just arrested four suspects and who would surely know the workings of the Contempt of Court Act and the effect that his allegations would have on the chances of a fair trial. But he got the 'coverage' – as they say in PR.

The press conference was recorded by a Telegraph cameraman and published on their website. The link is below:

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/crime/8757001/Slaves-discovered-living-in-filthy-conditions-in-Bedfordshire.html>

Nine of these 'slaves' later returned to the site that they called home. However, this is besides the point considering DCI O'Neil's press conference – the 'finale' of which was as much a planned media operation as a policing one – set the tone for what the ITMB later called "the public lynching of a whole community".

DCI O'Neil's statements were also widely published, for instance by Chris Greenwood at the Daily Mail. Many of the press reports reproduced the assumption of guilt and included pictures of what the police described as 'squalid' caravans 'with no running water', in which the 'excrement' covered 'slaves' had been kept captive. These pictures could only have been taken with the aid of the police themselves as they would have normally been part of a crime-scene and therefore evidence for any potential trial. The actual pictures themselves show fairly basic caravan accommodation that looks like it has just been turned over by a massive police raid. It's the quotes from the police that 'sex' them up for tabloid consumption.

Chris Greenwood at the Daily Mail was one of many reporters who repeated DCI O'Neil's claims in print and online and whose article contained a clear assumption of the guilt of the arrested defendants. A sample quote from Greenwood's piece reads:

"At 5am each day they were taken in vans to labouring jobs across Britain. Some were taken as far as Scandinavia for work. They had become used to existing on such meagre rations that police said it could be dangerous to suddenly give them a lot to eat and they will have to be gradually re-introduced to a proper diet."

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2036153/Bedfordshire-slavery-ring-Travellers-organised-crime-ring-running-family-business.html>

The BBC later elaborated on the Scandinavia link and broadcast a news piece that alleged that Irish Travellers had been running slavery rings in Scandinavia for a number of years. We believe that the BBC may have been provided with information from Bedfordshire Police or Serious Organised Crime Agency (SOCA) – as a Swedish Police report investigating Irish Traveller slavery and trafficking allegations doesn't actually back up the BBC's main claims. The ITMB is currently investigating this BBC news piece to gauge its veracity.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-16836065>

Directly after the BBC piece was broadcast, a regional newspaper, from the area in which the potential jurors for the trial of the Netwing defendants would be drawn from, linked the BBC documentary to the Netwing defendants. In this they were following the lead of DCI O'Neil and the Bedfordshire Police.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-16847561>

The ITMB is also concerned about the way Bedfordshire police has repeatedly issued press statements that dwell on the ethnicity of the defendants. They describe the location of the raid as a 'traveller site', when it is common practice just to give the address. We are also concerned about the sheer number of 'updates' published on their website; the latest of which was issued on the 12th February, 2012 regarding a minor case management hearing. Again we believe this is, in part, motivated by a perceived need on the part of Bedfordshire Police to garner media interest and keep the 'story' in the public eye.

http://www.bedfordshire.police.uk/about_us/news/news_2011/111206_-_operation_netwing_%E2%80%93_c.aspx

The ITMB has recently lodged a complaint to the IPCC and Bedfordshire Police, concerning how Bedfordshire Police handled the media during Operation Netwing. The ITMB hold this as an outrageous example of how the police trampled over the judicial rights of the defendants and the human rights of the rest of the residents by their eagerness to pander to the wishes of the press and garner publicity for the Operation Netwing brand. However, we believe that this is a problem that has arisen because of the *relationship between* the Police and the press, and we therefore believe it merits further consideration by the Leveson Inquiry.

Case study 2: The Metropolitan Police and the press releases from Operation Golf

Operation Golf was, according to the Metropolitan Police, a UK/Romania police operation to "investigate, prosecute and disrupt a Roma Romanian based Organised Crime Network (OCN) operating in London, Romania and elsewhere, with a view to reducing criminality and minimizing the exploitation of victims. This OCN is responsible for trafficking into England and Wales large numbers of victims, being Romanian Roma children, where they are then used to commit crimes such as begging, theft and other offences."

http://www.met.police.uk/foi/pdfs/disclosure_2010/november/20101000002635.pdf

The Met Police claimed that 1,000 Roma children had been trafficked and forced to commit street crime in the UK. As a result of this £1.5 million Euro operation (67% funded by the European Commission), 130 Roma were arrested in the UK. Of these only 12 were charged with an offence and 8 were convicted of benefit fraud and related offences. The "trafficked" children were with their parents, of whom none were convicted of trafficking. Met Police press releases built an illusion that child trafficking was common among Roma.

http://www.met.police.uk/foi/pdfs/disclosure_2010/december/2010110004069.pdfThe

Newspapers such as the Daily Mail ran stories stereotyping Roma with child trafficking and begging. BBC's Panorama show 'Britain's Child Beggars' also disproportionately cast such a negative stereotype on all Roma. The Met Police provided content for both the newspaper coverage and Panorama broadcast. An example from the Daily Mail:

"Chief Inspector Colin Carswell, who was also part of Operation Golf, said one gang put the earning potential of a single child in London at close to £100,000 a year - from begging, stealing and being used for benefit fraud."
<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2051482/Child-beggars-young-making-100-000-year-gypsy-gangs.html#ixzz1myNyKRV9>

The Met Police also claimed to have "stopped an estimated £12 million in benefit fraud". Yet the UK convictions stemming from Operation Golf were for fraud of around £100,000, committed over a number of years.

All Roma children living in the UK of compulsory school age should be attending education. There possibly are isolated cases of child trafficking and exploitation, however, the context of the issue and the root causes are lost as a result of the Met Police's statements and the resulting media coverage. The Met did not choose to focus on the fact that the majority of the Roma are poor parents from another EU country who are allowed to legally travel to the UK to seek work but are not allowed to take paid employment or seek social benefits. In this context the Met Police's decision to cast an entire ethnic group as child traffickers is surely wrong.

Case study 3: The British Transport Police and 'Romanian metal theft gangs'.

Yet another case of the release of police information to the press that taints the whole of the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities by associating them to the alleged activities of criminal individuals or 'gangs' is the report in the Daily Mail on metal theft in 2011.

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2061171/Romanian-gangs-drive-increase-metal-theft-cost-plunder-hits-770m-year.html#ixzz1nlxiE6uN>

The report is headlined "Romanian gangs 'drive increase in metal theft' as cost of plunder hits £770m a year"

In the report a Detective Sergeant Steve Hearn is quoted as saying:

"These are Romanian gangs who have been based in the UK for some time. They have been behind the high street begging scams and other criminal enterprises and see this as a new opportunity to make money."

This link to begging by DS Hearn and the Daily Mail's use of a picture of a Roma child begging once again frames the Roma community as a criminal problem that needs to be solved.

Conclusion

To be blunt, with the active collusion of the police, sections of the press seem intent on creating a belief that Gypsies, Roma and Travellers 'are all bang at it'.

Not only does this deny the basic human rights of individuals from those communities or of those ethnicities, but it also damages social cohesion, disrupts integration and prejudices trials – in that the defendants are in danger of being tried on their ethnicity.

Ideally we would like the Leveson inquiry to formulate a set of restrictions that stops the above happening. The current OFCOM code – when policed properly – provides a good example that balances the right for justice and trial by peers with freedom of information and the public's right to know.

We also believe that it would be good practice for the police to apply these guidelines on reporting restrictions to themselves when releasing information to the press.

The ITMB would also like the Leveson enquiry to remind journalists that repeating quotes from police press statements and conferences does not protect them from the consequences of prejudicing a 'live' trial.

Statement of Truth

I believe the facts stated in this witness statement are true.

Signed,

Date *14/11/12*