



# 'Gypsy Eroding Liberty is Gorgio Eroding Liberty': Making Europe More Equal from the British Romani Rights Movement

*European History Quarterly*

2022, Vol. 52(4) 634–655

© The Author(s) 2022



Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/02656914221097013

[journals.sagepub.com/home/ehq](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/ehq)



**Carolina García Sanz**

University of Seville, Spain

## Abstract

This paper explores the capacity for political agency of the British Romani Civil Rights Movement, assessing its particular connections with the construction and application of laws in the UK and Europe during the late 1960s and the early 1970s. A dual perspective will be adopted in order to trace and bring into dialogue the pressure brought to bear by Romani activism on both the Ministry of Housing and Local Government (MHLG) and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) in the United Kingdom following the historic Recommendation 563 of the Council of Europe pertaining to the situation of Gypsies and other Travellers. Based on FCO sources, this study highlights the performative power of 'Gypsy diplomacy' while negotiating political spaces in the United Kingdom.

## Keywords

Romani Civil Rights Movement, Gypsy diplomacy, identity politics, United Kingdom, Council of Europe

## The Romani Struggle: Preliminary Considerations for a Particular Case Study

Already, linked by the International Romany Council in Paris, there is the possibility of uniting more than 3,000,000 of us in Europe. And it will not be long before the representatives of the Romani communities in a dozen countries come together to hold a World

---

### Corresponding author:

Carolina García Sanz, Departamento de Historia Contemporánea, C/Doña María de Padilla S/N, 41004 Sevilla,

Email: [cgarciasanz@us.es](mailto:cgarciasanz@us.es)

Congress. Then our voice will be heard—and Romanies will take their rightful place among the peoples of the world.<sup>1</sup>

This was the exciting roadmap of the British Gypsy Council in 1970 as described by its Secretary General, Grattan Puxon, in the organization's magazine, *Romano Drom*. English-speaking activists played a key role, both in the preparation of the First World Romani Congress, held in London in 1971, and in the subsequent launch of the International Romani Union (IRU). The arrival of Labour in power in 1964 provided the impetus for legislation against racial discrimination in the United Kingdom and this happened just as the organization led by Puxon was taking off.<sup>2</sup> In a political climate of ethnic conflict regarding migratory flows from former colonies, the discourse on the international protection of human rights was one of the distinguishing features of the emerging Roma movement: 'Gypsy eroding liberty is Gorgio eroding liberty'.<sup>3</sup> This political strategy made it possible to universalize the cause for collective rights and to look forward to a horizon of supranational cooperation with majority society.

Given this background, the following pages explore the historical connection between momentous discursive practices and tactics of Romani activism in the United Kingdom and institutional processes that were occurring simultaneously in Europe in the late 1960s. More specifically, this study addresses the Gypsy Council's strategies of bringing the British government's non-compliance with the Caravan Sites Act of 1968 to the notice of the Social Affairs Section of the Council of Europe.<sup>4</sup> At that time British activists would be able to Europeanize the Romani rights issue by using the human rights discourse which had been emergent after the Second World War. Indeed, the paradigm of supranational human rights had been one of the distinctive features of Romani activism from its inception. Ionel Rotaru, founder of the *Communauté Mondiale Gitane* (CMG) (World Gypsy Community) in France in 1959 and a reference point for the movement in post-World War II continental Europe, had already used it in his landmark speech on the identity of groups discriminated against by the State.<sup>5</sup>

The advantages and disadvantages of the use of the human rights paradigm linked to contemporary minority politics have been argued strenuously by scholarship.<sup>6</sup> The

---

<sup>1</sup> Grattan Puxon, 'Where Do We Go From Here?' *Romano Drom* (April 1970), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Race Relations Act (1965–1976) See *Parliamentary Archives*, HL/PO/PU/1/1965/c73, <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/private-lives/relationships/collections/1/race-relations-act-1965/race-relations-act-1965/>, last accessed 2 July 2020.

<sup>3</sup> *Romano Drom*, *Gypsy Newspaper* (First issue), 1970, 3.

<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1968/52/contents>.

<sup>5</sup> María Sierra, 'Creating Romanestan: A Place to be a Gypsy in Post-Nazi Europe', *European History Quarterly*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (2019), 272–92. Rotaru himself had participated in UNESCO seminars against racism in 1962.

<sup>6</sup> Patrick Thornberry, 'Minority Rights, Human Rights and International Law', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (1980), 249–63.

so-called ‘double jeopardy’ or dilemma between the discourse of ethnic exceptionalism aiming at minority groups’ recognition and their rights protection split unsettled political, sociological and juridical debates.<sup>7</sup> Not only space limitations prevent an extensive discussion here on the unsolved ‘dilemma of difference’ but also the approach and object of my research. Tackling difference issues requires a long-term and structural approach to both the articulation of Roma activism and ethnopolitics against a myriad of national and supra-national contexts. But this is a study of political negotiations between Romani activists and the British State at historic British and European junctures.

Despite the fact that the case study selected is one of the most widely discussed and known, I would like to highlight two aspects of the analysis that would contribute to the existing literature on the subject. The first is its concrete historical focus. It deals with the very imagining of the so-called ‘Gypsy Power’, assessing how it was projected on spaces of social struggle aiming at dialogue and cooperation with non-Roma political actors and institutions. With that purpose, the study intentionally sets aside processes whose outcomes were unforeseen in the late 1960s and the early 1970s. Secondly, it takes a distinctive interest in the three main lines developed by the available studies, largely from sociology and political science: (1) the genesis and subsequent political development of the movement, with special emphasis on its organizational framework and all the problems, fragmentations and disappointments that would eventually be experienced until the present; (2) the very nature of the relationship between the Roma and the State; and (3) the political treatment of the ‘Romani question’ by the European institutions.<sup>8</sup>

The case study presented here revolves around British Romani activists’ resourceful political choice of an idea of Europe, as a powerful symbol of rights and legal protection. Furthermore, this work looks for an interconnection perspective, which cannot be separated from the study of activist groups’ networks and the cooperation between them on the continent, in the UK, and even outside Europe. In fact, Europe would mean for them much more than a territory and a promising legal space for protecting their civil rights, it was a Janus-faced symbol deeply linked to their collective history

---

<sup>7</sup> This has been subject to extensive discussion, for a general approach on minority rights in the international system, Kristin Henrad, *Devising an Adequate System of Minority Protection: Individual Human Rights, Minority Rights, and the Right to Self-Determination* (The Hague 2000), 1–15. For a recent discussion on this split, Corinne Lennox, *Transnational Social Mobilisation and Minority Right: Identity, Advocacy and Norms* (London 2020). See also, Joseph Marko and Sergiu Constantin, eds, *Human and Minority Rights Protection by Multiple Diversity Governance: History, Law, Ideology and Politics in European Perspective* (Abingdon 2019).

<sup>8</sup> To avoid a jumble of quotations, I refer to authors and reference works in each of the three thematic areas indicated, which have, to a large extent, served as a basis for subsequent literature: (1) Thomas Acton, *Gypsy Politics and Social Change: The Development of Ethnic Ideology and Pressure Politics among British Gypsies from Victorian Reformism to Romany Nationalism* (London 1974). For the associative network at the European level, see I. Klímová-Alexander, ‘The Development and Institutionalization of Romani Representation and Administration. Part 3b: From National Organizations to International Umbrellas (1945–1970)—the International Level’, *Nationalities Papers*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (2007), 182–3; (2) David Mayall, *English Gypsies and State Policies* (Hatfield 1995); (3) Jean Pierre Liégeois, *The Council of Europe and Roma: 40 Years of Activity* (Strasbourg 2013).

and memory impacted by the Nazi persecution and genocide.<sup>9</sup> This article consequently emphasizes the relationship between law, space and Romani activism.

Modern cross-national regulations narrowed the boundaries of citizenship by placing Roma outside their protection, while they were ‘othered’ by legal distinctions between ‘natives’ and ‘aliens’, ‘citizens’ and ‘strangers’. It was the law that ruled Roma’s relationship to space as well as the lack of rights that were ‘bundled’ with them. It also should be noted that the law ‘is something of an arbitrary contrivance irregularly and inconsistently invoked’.<sup>10</sup> Historically, the Roma have had first-hand learning of that upsetting paradox in Britain and continental Europe, since ‘power is a relationship and Gypsies and Travellers are never *powerless*; their independence and tactics and strategies bear this out. The point is that they are on the wrong side of an unequal power balance’.<sup>11</sup> As it has been established by scholarship Jurisdiction engages ‘a material technology, a built environment and a discursive intervention’, ultimately producing ways ‘of understanding the social world, and one’s own place in this world’.<sup>12</sup> That sense was precisely behind momentous Romani activism in the late 1960s while British and European law spaces became both target and opportunity.

Last but not least, in this introductory section, I would highlight the use of two sets of primary sources, which are combined in such a way as to capture the views of both Romani activists and the British administration, the two main strands of the study: firstly, those specific to Roma activism (academic writings, technical reports, interviews in mainstream media and articles in organs of expression such as *Romano Drom*) and secondly, evidence produced at ministerial level (Ministry of Housing and Local Government (MHLG) collections) and, more particularly, the largely unpublished evidence in this type of study from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) demonstrating the degree to which Romani activists could effectively use the Europeanization of the Romani rights issue as a domestic political weapon.

## ‘Gypsy Diplomacy’ on the Move in the British Isles

The relevant fact about the History of the British Isles and above all of England is separateness in a political sense from the history of continental Europe. The English have never

<sup>9</sup> The first Romani memoirs of the Holocaust were published coinciding with the rise of international Roma activism and responding to the need to open the social debate on the persistent anti-Gypsyism in Europe. See María Sierra, *Holocausto Gitano. El genocidio romaní* (Madrid 2020); María Sierra, ed., *Philomena Franz. Entre el amor y el odio. Una vida gitana* (Zaragoza 2021), 157–69.

<sup>10</sup> For a very interesting approach regarding law, space and social control see Philip Howell, ‘Sexuality, Sovereignty and Space: Law, Government and the Geography of Prostitution in Colonial Gibraltar’, *Social History*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (2004), 444–64, quote at 447.

<sup>11</sup> Ryan Powell, ‘Understanding the Stigmatization of Gypsies: Power and the Dialectics of (Dis)identification’, *Housing, Theory and Society*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (2008), 94

<sup>12</sup> Richard T. Ford, ‘Law’s Territory (A History of Jurisdiction)’, *Michigan Law Review*, Vol. 97 (1999), 843–930, available at: <https://repository.law.umich.edu/mlr/vol97/iss4/2>. Identity interpretation quoted from Issachar Rosen-Zvi, *Taking Space Seriously: Law, Space and Society in Contemporary Israel* (London 2017).

belonged to it and have always known that they did not belong. ... The whole subsequent history of Britain and the political character of the British people have taken their colour and trace their quality from that moment and that assertion. It was the final decision that no authority, no law, no court outside the realm would be recognised within the realm.<sup>13</sup>

These words about British legal exceptionalism were uttered by the English ultra-nationalist politician, Enoch Powell in January 1972, as he contemplated the prospect of the United Kingdom's entry into the EEC in 1973. In April 1968, he had delivered his 'Rivers of Blood' speech to a Tory group in Birmingham, encouraging white England to rebel against being dominated by other races, supposedly spurred on by the protection afforded them by the new Labour anti-discrimination legislation. In a climate of obvious ethnic tension, Powell and his Conservative followers in the Midlands had first spoken out against the passing of the Caravan Sites Act in 1968, then called for its repeal by advocating treating Romani mobility 'through the laws of nationality and immigration'.<sup>14</sup> Irish Travellers were in the far-right sights.

In June 1966, an official study on the Roma population in England and Wales, which included 34,000 and 15,000 families respectively, had established that only 19 per cent of them had lawful places to stop or live in.<sup>15</sup> The bill leading to the Caravan Sites Act attempted to address the shortcomings of the 1960 regulation on mobile homes. Since the previous legislation dealing with the new phenomenon of mobile leisure accommodation vehicles had ignored the itinerant Romani population and its needs, the 1968 law not only set out the first legal definition of the term 'Gypsy' as 'persons of nomadic habit of life, whatever their race or origin', but also placed the responsibility for providing them with decent accommodation solutions at county and district level.<sup>16</sup> The lack of commitment – if not open resistance – to the application of the new law on the part of the boroughs soon translated into evictions, cheered on by the extreme right, particularly in the West Midlands. Indeed, the principle that 'these people should be settled, but not near us' had, for some time, sparked heated discussions in the House of Commons. In the 1950s, the Labour MP for the Dartford constituency in Kent, Norman Dodds, had been a prominent advocate for change in government attitudes towards the Romani way of life, and in the 1960s, the debate on the issue was taken to the next political level.<sup>17</sup> In May 1964, it was left to the Minister of Housing and Local Government, Sir Keith Joseph, to remind the Conservative members of Parliament of

<sup>13</sup> Richard Ritchie, ed., *Enoch Powell: A Nation or No Nation? Six Years in British Politics* (London 1978), 33–4.

<sup>14</sup> *The Times*, December 12, 1970, cited in Acton, *Gypsy Politics and Social Change*, 213.

<sup>15</sup> Pleas of Department of Social Security, 1964–67 (Norman Dodd's pleas), 'Vagrancy: The Gypsy Problem', AST 36/672, Kew London: The National Archives (TNA).

<sup>16</sup> 'Gypsy': 'persons of nomadic habit of life, whatever their race or origin, but does not include members of an organized group of travelling showpeople or persons engaged in travelling circuses travelling together as such'. Caravan Sites Act 1968, Section 16 in *Gypsy and Traveller Sites: Thirteenth Report of Session 2003–04*, Volume 1, House of Commons, 21.

<sup>17</sup> Norman Dodds, *Gypsies, Didikois and other Travellers* (London 1966).

the legal implications of some of their proposals regarding the so-called ‘Didicois problem’:<sup>18</sup>

It may make a good sentence in a speech to say that no more of these people should be allowed into this country, but really, we have to face the fact that this is a free society. This is not a police State, and I do not see how we could go about stopping people coming to this country by means that are legitimate, and then immediately or later, becoming didicois. What we have to do is to make sure that a stable form of life is available to those who make the decision, for one reason or another, to be unsettled in a settled world.<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, as Labour MP James E. MacColl observed, when countering the arguments put forward by another Conservative MP, Victor H. Goodhew, public representatives should be the first to avoid stigmatizing population groups in order to avert dangerous social conflict:

One should start by not generalising too much about a whole group. Once we label people, whatever the label is, we tend to make it more difficult to get public opinion to accept them and more difficult to deal with those who can be settled. ... The didicoi were performing an economic function. ... Certainly, they are not the only people to earn money without paying tax. If we are to condemn them for that we should have to condemn a very large section of the community.<sup>20</sup>

It is interesting to note the inclusion of an ‘economic function’ in the discussion of ‘didicois’. Later on, a number of general public statements made by Harold Wilson’s new Labour government about the ‘Gypsy problem’ and its possible solutions would provide glimpses of opportunities for the opening up of a political negotiation space with the Roma as a whole. With this prospect in mind, Grattan Puxon, a young activist who had taken refuge from military service among the Irish Travellers, set in motion what he called ‘Gypsy diplomacy’. In September 1965, he wrote to Jacques Dauvergne (Vanko Rouda), who was reorganizing the movement after the CMG was banned in France and formed a new *Comité International Tzigane* (CIT) (International Romani Council). Puxon involved him in the new direction that his Romani rights activism would take in the United Kingdom. To begin with, he would give up his role as ‘public enemy number one’ – a reference to his ties to Republican extremism in Ireland, which had already caused him serious problems with British justice – because he had decided to ‘cross over the critical line between being rebels and being accepted helpers of the

---

<sup>18</sup> Among the names assigned to the itinerant population group in the United Kingdom, the ‘didicoi’ or ‘diddicoi’ refers to those whose nomadic lifestyle is determined by the exercise of some economic activity, but who do not correspond to the Gypsyologist definition of a ‘true Gypsy’ or Romany.

<sup>19</sup> Diddicois Problem, Parliamentary Questions, 15 May 1964 11.40 a.m., AST 36/672, TNA.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

Government's and Church's plans to rescue the Travellers'.<sup>21</sup> The new strategy also involved taking a certain pragmatic line of action with regard to Ireland:

I have argued for many hours about this 'Truce' because I believe that the very fact that we are asked to 'cease-fire' shows that we are hitting the target. But I have come to the conclusion that if we are to penetrate the Establishment and make the travellers' voice heard we must make this bargain. ...

First National Convention of the Irish Travellers' community goes 'underground' and is conducted in secrecy and without publicity. My plan will achieve all the aims of the Convention but without raising the bad humour of the Establishment or breaking the Truce.

...

Your presence will show that we, the temporarily anonymous Irish Travellers' Community, are affiliated to the World Romany Community and have, as demonstrated in the past, effective support in other countries capable of making press publicity about the bad conditions of the families on the road – this in turn is damaging to Ireland's image as a member of the U.N. and a land of tourism.<sup>22</sup>

As a result of previous activism in Ireland and the Midlands in favour of respect for Romani mobility and the provision of caravan sites, an organization to fight for their rights in Great Britain was officially constituted in December 1966. The new organization, the British Gypsy Council, paved the way for the projected talks with the Establishment. Its core was made up of Romani activists, such as John Connors and Tom O'Doherty, and non-Romani activists, such as Thomas Acton and Donald Kenrick. Activists from the continent, such as Vanko Rouda, his brother Leulea, and the Algerian, Anton Santiago, attended its founding ceremony in London.<sup>23</sup> Richard Hauser, a Jewish scholar and philanthropist, author of *The Fraternal Society*, also played a key founding role in the organization.<sup>24</sup> Their frenetic work schedule after that led to numerous public campaigns, and a multitude of complaints to the Race Relations Board about police repression in evictions, labour discrimination affecting workers with identifiably 'Tinker' surnames,<sup>25</sup> and segregationist behaviour in pubs and public places, with admission signs that read 'No Gipsies'.<sup>26</sup> Even so, their strategy was cleverly geared to attract maximum publicity, so that what was

<sup>21</sup> Acton, *Gypsy Politics and Social Change*, 157.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 158–60.

<sup>23</sup> Grattan Puxon, 'The Romani Movement: Rebirth and the First World Romani Congress in Retrospect', in T. Acton, ed., *Scholarship and the Gypsy Struggle: Commitment in Romani Studies* (Hatfield 2000), 100.

<sup>24</sup> Acton, *Gypsy Politics and Social Change*, 161.

<sup>25</sup> 'Tinker' is another of the derogatory terms given to the Traveller populations in the United Kingdom and Ireland that does not correspond to the gypsyologist ideal of the 'true Romany'.

<sup>26</sup> Puxon, 'The Romani Movement', 100.

happening, reflected in the headline ‘People Nobody Wants to Know’, became news in many local and national media.<sup>27</sup> In 1967, a report commissioned by the Labour government concluded that the legislation passed in the country in the previous three decades was tantamount to a “virtual outlawing” of the Traveller way of life.<sup>28</sup> In May of the same year, the Gypsy Council took part in a media protest event in front of 10 Downing Street, organized by CARD (The Campaign Against Racial Discrimination). Months later, the Caravan Sites Act was passed in Parliament. By the end of 1968, the Romani organization had filed more than 300 complaints alleging flagrant violations of the 1965 and 1968 Race Relations Acts.<sup>29</sup>

Romani expectations that the new 1968 legislation would be the answer to the group’s historical demands for a healthy environment to live in, protected under the law, soon gave way to disenchantment. Part II of the law, the most important for the allocation of new sites, did not come into force. The sites requested were not provided, and the evictions and violence against those who resisted leaving existing sites intensified in the following months, especially in the Conservative stronghold of the Midlands. Beyond what appeared to be mere wishful thinking on the part of Labour, the British administration proved unable to make the law binding and ensure the basic minimum for this population to enjoy decent living conditions. For the leadership of the Gypsy Council, however, this was not just a failure of the system. The political implications were more far-reaching than that: the welfare state, the pride of the nation, outrageously and deliberately excluded the Romanies from its benefits and not only were they discriminated against, but their human rights were also grossly violated. The United Kingdom was not living up to the standards of the political philosophy of post-World-War-II Europe. In a publication by the National Council for Civil Liberties (NCCL) on the occasion of Human Rights Year 1968, Grattan Puxon invoked Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights: ‘no one shall be subjected to inhuman or degrading treatment’.<sup>30</sup> This fundamental principle had been adopted by the Council of Europe in 1950, inspired by the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In December 1965, the UN also adopted the ‘International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination’ (resolution 2106 a (XX)). Two years later, a committee of experts from UNESCO declared, at its headquarters in Paris, that racist theories had no scientific basis whatsoever.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>27</sup> In addition to the experiences reported by Puxon himself, we refer to the press report by Geoffrey Moorhouse, ‘Gypsies on the Move’, *The Guardian*, 10 December 1966, and news items in the press in March 1967 included in the MHLG dossiers, specifically regarding an episode that occurred in St Mary Cray, Kent: ‘Ejected Gypsies Protest to Racial Board’, 6 March 1967; Christine Mackinven, ‘People Nobody Wants to Know’, Brenda Holton, ‘Where their Caravans Rest... A Council Promise on the Gypsy Problem’.

<sup>28</sup> Specifically, the 1936 Public Health Act, the Town and Country Planning Acts, the 1959 Highways Act and the 1960 Caravan Sites Act. Becky Taylor, *A Minority and the State: Travellers in Britain in the Twentieth Century* (Manchester 2008), 192.

<sup>29</sup> Acton, *Gypsy Politics and Social Change*, 166–70.

<sup>30</sup> Grattan Puxon, *On the Road: Report on Gypsies and Civil Liberties*, published by the National Council for Civil Liberties as part of its contribution to Human Rights Year 1968 (London 1968), 10.

<sup>31</sup> Thomas A. Acton, ‘Scientific Racism, Popular Racism and the Discourse of the Gypsy Lore Society’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 7 (2016), 1189.



In general, public condemnation of racism as a state ideology was amplified by a deep sense of ethnic conflict in those years as a result of what was happening in Africa, where the Rhodesian and Biafran questions were directly tarnishing the prestige of the United Kingdom. The climate, therefore, seemed favourable for raising the Romani cause internationally and making it one of the focal points of the communication strategy of the British branch of the Romani organization. The first issue of *Romano Drom* in 1969 focused on the systematic failure to comply with the Caravan Sites Act while Westminster was risking its image in the eyes of Western Europe whose economic bloc it was seeking to join. Its editor, Ronald Lee, a Canadian-Romani activist also criticized Whitehall for its hypocrisy in condemning the apartheid regime in Africa while trampling on the civil rights of the Roma within its borders: 'Our rights, as a minority, are guaranteed under the United Nations Charter. It makes a mockery of this charter when Britain fights for the rights of people in other countries and neglects a minority group that has lived for 500 years in this island'.<sup>32</sup>

### 'Gypsies Appeal to Europe Against Oppression'

This was the headline on 16 January 1969, when Pat Healy, the Strasbourg correspondent of the *Times*, reported the impressive presence of Romani organizations from all over the continent in the French border city.<sup>33</sup> The main objective was to provide evidence of their respective national situations of exclusion to Council of Europe parliamentarians. Several delegates from the British Gypsy Council had come to be heard by members of the Council's Social Affairs sub-committee. Alongside Puxon were Donald Kenrick, Romani activists, such as the Irishman Jimmy Hanrahan and his wife together with Manfred Wood, Tom O'Doherty and Charles Douglas. In addition to a 200-page dossier on evictions without court orders carried out with extreme police brutality in England, they supplied abundant graphic material filmed in Walsall by Granada TV (ITV). Vanko Rouda, who was absent from Strasbourg for health reasons, had taken part with other members of the International Romani Council, such as Charles Reinhardt and Jacques Gaslian (CIT), in gathering testimonies in that hot spot in the Midlands.<sup>34</sup> As Healy made clear in the *Times*, the British group had initially chosen to refrain from taking part in the Council of Europe initiative to study the living conditions of the Romani population, launched in September 1967 by the Swedish parliamentarian, Daniel Wiklund.<sup>35</sup> The Gypsy Council would change its position, however, when the British Treasury stopped the order to implement Part II of the 1968 Act and justified it as part of the policy of public expenditure cuts. In his statements to Healy, Graham Puxon insisted that, if the development of the Act was not followed through, the legislation 'out-lawed Gypsies in Britain'. He also highlighted the arbitrary use that the administration

<sup>32</sup> *Romano Drom*, 1 June 1969, 1

<sup>33</sup> Pat Healy, 'Gypsies Appeal to Europe Against Oppression', 17 January, 1969, consulted at AT 25/101 TNA.

<sup>34</sup> Puxon, 'The Romani Movement', 102–3.

<sup>35</sup> Session 1967, 19th Session, Second part, Doc 2290 [<http://www.assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-DocDetails-EN.asp?fileid=2579&lang=EN>]

made of available resources that were intended to improve the Gypsies' living standards, but were being used instead to evict them:

[T]he Gypsy Council claims that local authorities are spending about 100,000 pounds a month during the winter on evictions – more than the cost of providing licensed sites. Some councils[,] with the aid of the police, are said to have carried out raids at dawn and removed caravans in which women and children were sleeping. There have been some accidents.<sup>36</sup>

What is certain is that the presence and media impact in January 1969 of the programme of that group of Romani activists in Strasbourg caught the British government off guard, particularly, the Foreign Office and its representation in the European city. Indeed, the latter generated extensive correspondence through formal and informal channels between the Western Organization Department-FCO and the MHLG as the area responsible for, and interlocutor with the Gypsy Council at the national level. The discussions between the Romani representatives and the Secretariat for Social Affairs of the Council of Europe would be private and there was no possibility of controlling them in any way. Hence, the main concern of the departments involved was the 'likely impact, both domestic and international, of the party of English Gypsies appearing before the Social Committee of the Consultative Assembly of the Council of Europe'.<sup>37</sup> The impression of those working with Lord Chalfont, who was a minister at the FCO at the time, was that such a meeting would not arouse much interest in the press. One indicator was that the News Department had not received any questions from journalists. The MHLG officials however were familiar with Puxon's tactics and warned that he would take 'every possible opportunity of publicising his case in the press'.<sup>38</sup> For this reason, they attached press clippings for the representation in Strasbourg to see prior to Puxon's trip there, as well as the transcript of a radio interview that the activist had previously given to John Tidmarsh on BBC Radio 4 on 6 January. However, Puxon had expressed himself in 'reasonable terms', by not so much condemning the Labour government as the adverse effects of the strategy of delaying full implementation of the Caravan Sites Act.

In the wake of the events in Strasbourg and their possible impact on the media in Great Britain and France, Lord Kennet – second only to Anthony Greenwood at the MHLG – took an interest in a letter, as yet unanswered, that Vanko Rouda sent to Minister Greenwood about the problems of the Romani community in the London Borough of Hillingdon. The Ministry would end up ostentatiously sending its reply through the official channels of the British Embassy in Paris.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, the competent local authority in

---

<sup>36</sup> Healy, 'Gypsies Appeal to Europe Against Oppression'.

<sup>37</sup> Council of Europe, Commission on social questions Gypsies, Register File, Reference Number 266/69. Departmental countryside. Subject Matter: Appearance of Gypsies before Social Committee of the Consultative Assembly of the Council of Europe. Commences 10/01/69; Concludes 14/01/69, AT 25/96 TNA.

<sup>38</sup> A. Oates, Reference K/PSO/266/69, 14 January 1969, AT 25/96, TNA.

<sup>39</sup> File C.2/LW/160 attached, reference K/PSO/266/69, AT 25/96, TNA.

Hillingdon would be contacted to receive assurances from them that they would deal ‘more sympathetically with gypsies’. Despite the MHLG communication strategy, the Strasbourg issue continued to get press coverage. *The Guardian* also showed an interest in the subject and that was just the beginning.<sup>40</sup> Puxon’s communication strategy caused considerable discomfort in parts of the FCO over the following months, which were dominated by the agenda of the Council of Europe’s Social Affairs Committee. The discomfort was not only passed on, but also placed the MHLG in a compromising situation, as can be gathered from the exchange of correspondence between Lord Chalfont and Lord Kennet during 1969. The two visits made to the United Kingdom in April and June by Marc Sand, the Swiss Secretary of the Social Affairs Committee, to verify in situ the living conditions of the Romani population revealed the fragile state of the MHLG’s talks with the local associative network. Its inability to control the proactive approach of the Gypsy Council in this unexpected situation created tension between the departments. In March, the FCO had already given advance notification that it was the role of the MHLG to act as host during Sand’s visit, not Puxon and the Romani organization:

We learn from our delegation at Strasbourg that this Committee is engaged in collecting material about Gypsies for an ultimate Recommendation to Governments. They are not, however, themselves in any sense conducting enquiries, least of all in terms of a visit to Walsall and Mr. Puxon has no mandate to conduct any investigation either on the Council of Europe’s behalf or on behalf of the Committee.

Whilst we would not presume to advise the Corporation on Mr. Puxon’s demand we think he has put a foot wrong in invoking the authority of the Assembly.<sup>41</sup>

Before the FCO, the MHLG was not satisfactorily doing its job as interlocutor for the Romani activists at home. The problem for the British administration was not so much that it put ‘the Gypsy problem under the microscope’, as the London *Evening Standard* headline expressed it locally, but that the whole country was under examination.<sup>42</sup> In this particular context, Puxon’s skill in taking on the MHLG and also winning was highlighted. On 13 March, he wrote to Sand’s assistant, the Dutchman, Johannes de Jong, to find out the details of the April visit. A week later, Sand replied to him personally, informing him of the dates of his trip to London between 16 and 18 April, and also making it clear that he was open to any possible programme of visits that Puxon might suggest for those days, mentioning his specific interest in learning about Frederick Wood’s *Romano Drom* school project.<sup>43</sup> In return, he asked of Puxon only that those meetings with the Romani community in London be carried out discreetly, and above all, away from the media spotlight. None of that happened. Sand’s tour of East London, which

<sup>40</sup> ‘Gypsies Taking their Case to the Council of Europe’, *The Guardian*, 9 January 1969.

<sup>41</sup> C. Dresser, Western Organization Department-Foreign and Commonwealth Office to Miss A. S. Mitchell, Ministry of Housing & Local Government, 6 March 1969, AT 25/96, TNA.

<sup>42</sup> ‘London Gypsy Problem Under the Microscope’, *Evening Standard*, 17 April 1969.

<sup>43</sup> Marc Sand to Grattan Puxon, Strasbourg, 24 March 1969, AT 25/96, TNA.

was comprehensively covered by all types of media, was set against a backdrop of barricades of cars with slogans such as ‘Gypsies Unite and Fight’ and ‘We Shall Not Be Moved’.<sup>44</sup> Puxon’s strategy was an intelligent one, selecting two sites representative of how Romanies in England were living, or rather, how they could live if the MHLG showed the necessary political will. First, they visited a group of families at the Forest Road site, one of those that offered the best conditions for parking. With a rent of £2.10 per week, it had communal facilities for laundry, sanitation and rubbish collection. Sand would after have the opportunity to witness the crude reality of the daily life of the less fortunate who could not live on sites like Forest Road:

The Swiss visitor also saw the other side of the coin – where gypsies are shunned by society and shunted from one unauthorised site to another by local authorities. He viewed with horror an example of this on the Barking by-pass where 50 gipsy families live in insanitary, filthy conditions ...

Secretary Mr Grattan Puxon said: ‘We are angered by the fact that despite legislation and recommendations from the Ministry of Housing and Local Government, many local authorities are not providing permanent sites for gypsies’.<sup>45</sup>

That two-day tour of London was followed with astonishment and exasperation in the FCO and the MHLG. The MHLG officials in particular responded angrily and in no uncertain terms to describe the way that the Secretary of the Social Affairs Committee had gone about things during his stay in London:

Mr. Sand’s actions were certainly silly, if he wanted to get a balanced account of the facts, and a breach of protocol. Wonder, however, if on balance it will help us to get a formal complaint made to the Council of Europe about it. The harm is done, in that a complaint to the Council will not undo the effect of the one-sided publicity that his handling of the matter produced.<sup>46</sup>

Their irritation with Sand was palpable on more than one occasion in the weeks that followed. On 22 May, Lord Chalfont wrote to Lord Kennet, informing him that Sand would be visiting London again, this time representing the Population and Refugees Committee of the Consultative Assembly of the Council of Europe. This afforded a new opportunity to make amends for the mistakes made and mitigate the possible damage of events in April. At the request of the FCO, Sand agreed to meet an official from the MHLG to have a ‘constructive’ discussion about the situation of the Romani population and the UK government’s policy on this issue.<sup>47</sup> The priority of the MHLG, however, was to ascertain what conclusions had been drawn from his previous

---

<sup>44</sup> Puxon, ‘The Romani Movement’, 103.

<sup>45</sup> Sue Wood, ‘Report Will Spotlight Gipsy Site’, *Redbridge Recorder*, 24 April 1969.

<sup>46</sup> Follow-up minute to file K/PSO/266/69, 24 April 1969, AT 25/96, TNA.

<sup>47</sup> Lord Chalfont to Lord Kennet, 22 May 1969, AT 25/96, TNA.

visit, although, as Lord Chalfont had hinted a few days earlier, little could now be done about this:

On the wider question of policy, I know you will be the first to agree that our membership of the Council of Europe and the full support we give to its activities inevitably means that we must sometimes expect our own national treatment of social problems to receive international attention of this kind.<sup>48</sup>

The proposed meeting finally was arranged to take place on 5 June, with Sand, de Jong and two officials from the MHLG, Mr. L. Goodman and Mrs. A. S. Mitchell, in attendance. An article entitled 'Britain Must Help Gipsies' had been published the day before in *The Guardian*, drawing attention to Europe's call for 'Britain to devote more money to 'restoring the human rights' of its gipsy population'.<sup>49</sup> Sand's statements about the Gypsy Council came as a surprise, possibly because he was annoyed with Puxon for what had happened in April:

I have made it clear to the Gypsy Council that they cannot expect the world just to turn around them. The life of perfect freedom, which Gipsies enjoyed in the days when America was being discovered, is no longer practical ... they must comply with certain rules.<sup>50</sup>

Puxon, who was aware of Sand's second visit and the meeting with MHLG officials arranged by the FCO, asked the Greenwood ministry for a preliminary meeting before that one took place. The meeting was held on 2 June in the departmental offices in Queen Anne's Mansions in Westminster. Five MHLG officials attended, including Goodman and Mitchell. Apart from Puxon, Frederick Wood was also there to represent the Gypsy Council. Vanko and Leulea Rouda and the Canadian activist Ronald Lee attended as CIT delegates. Since the repercussions of that informal meeting were of particular concern in the press, Goodman requested that someone from the Press Office should be present 'as Mr. Puxon always makes some statement to the Press'.<sup>51</sup> Following the line of the grievances presented by the Romani activists on 2 June in Queen Anne's Mansions, the main theme of the meeting with Sand on 5 June was the implementation of the deferred Part II of the Caravan Sites Act. Indeed, faced with Sand's questions, Goodman and Mitchell had to strike a very fine balance between defending departmental management and being transparent about the details supplied. Nevertheless, they managed to persuade De Jong to agree, as a 'courtesy' between civil servants, to unofficially share a copy of the draft report – which would be voted on after the summer – with Goodman. Later Lord Kennet, expressing satisfaction that it 'all came smoothly back onto the rails', admitted that criticism of the British government for not implementing Part II

---

<sup>48</sup> Lord Chalfont to Lord Kennet, 16 May 1969, AT 25/96 TNA.

<sup>49</sup> 'Britain Must Help Gipsies', *The Guardian*, 4 June 1969, attached to file AT 25/96 TNA.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Copy Miss A.S. Mitchell 'Gipsies', 28 May 1969, AT 25/101 TNA.

of the 1968 Act was expected.<sup>52</sup> At the end of the summer, a series of interdepartmental consultations was organized to collect data from the Home Office, the Department of Education and Science, and the Ministry of Health that would help offset any more unfavourable aspects that might come out in the report. The responses, when they did not represent administrative silence, were slow in coming, and in the case of the Home Office, the question was settled by referring to the illegal nature of discrimination of the Romani population by virtue of the Race Relations Act.<sup>53</sup>

Finally, on 30 September 1969, the Parliamentary Assembly discussed and approved the text of the historic Recommendation 563 on the situation of Gypsies and other travellers in Europe. The British Administration, after discovering its content, was pleased, since it feared that the earlier report would have made it look much worse. As the *Sunday Times* had reported, it focused on the fact that families could not be evicted without a prior court order and where there were problems of schooling for children.<sup>54</sup> London considered that the political fallout from the issue had been neutralized. Nevertheless, neither the European Affairs Section of the Council of Europe, which recommended continuing along the same path of work and cooperation with the Romani community, nor Puxon's 'Gypsy diplomacy' allowed that to happen.

### **The Battle for the European 'Work Programme'**

On 5 January 1970, a telephone call was made from the offices of the MHLG to the FCO 'to find out what the work programme [was]'.<sup>55</sup> The decision of the Social Affairs Committee in 1969 to include the question of the situation of the Romanies and other travellers in their next work programme (1971–1972) came as an unwelcome surprise in London. The Council of Europe's proposal was to involve the Romani community's own network of associations as well as the relevant authorities with powers in the social, legal and administrative areas in each of the countries included in the roadmap. The British position swung initially between puzzlement at the proposal and facing the difficulty of finding arguments that could be used in public to oppose their inclusion in the European work programme for the next years:

If the subject is adopted by Ministers' Deputies a Committee of Experts will be formed, probably with 'experts' drawn from individual countries. The Committee would formulate conventions or principles to which member countries would be invited to subscribe. Obviously, we cannot forecast what these conventions will be or whether we are likely to subscribe but I think it would look odd if we appeared to deny the need for the study when our problem is so far off solution.<sup>56</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> Implementation of the Part II of the Caravan Sites Act, K/PSO/4732/69, 13 June 1969 AT 25/96 TNA.

<sup>53</sup> Mrs. Ward to Mrs. Mitchell, Minute, 12 September 1969, AT 25/96 TNA.

<sup>54</sup> 'New Deal Urged for Gypsies', *The Sunday Times*, 28 September 1969, AT 25/96 TNA.

<sup>55</sup> A.S. Mitchell P16 (b), 5 January 1970, AT 25/96 TNA.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

The programme would help the Romani movement's strategy in the United Kingdom. In the early months of 1970, regular top-level meetings were held between MHLG officials and the Gypsy Council. The minister, Anthony Greenwood, attended for the first time on 12 February. Apart from Puxon, also in attendance representing the Romani organization were the usual cast of characters who were on file at the ministry, namely O'Doherty, Kendrick, Wood and Jim Penfold. On that occasion, they would be joined by other charismatic leaders such as the evangelist preacher, Gypsy Earnest Williams, George Marriott, who had great moral standing in the movement owing to having been a prisoner at Auschwitz, and Dennis Marriner, who had very close links with Rouda and continental activism. The reason for that meeting requested by the Gypsy Council was to create a joint committee of experts to improve the legal, economic and educational standards of the Romani population at the national level. Puxon even proposed that the committee should have representatives from the Gypsy Council, as well as suggesting what the functions of the committee should be and furthermore that the travel and subsistence expenses of its Gypsy Council members should be paid by the administration whenever they had to travel to attend meetings.<sup>57</sup> The position of the MHLG as expressed by Goodman, on the other hand, was more in favour of exploring further existing mechanisms of cooperation between the Romani community and the local authorities. Meanwhile, Puxon was reminded of his prior unfulfilled commitment to draw up a 'member's handbook containing a "code of conduct"'.<sup>58</sup> Tabling that old request was a way of calling into question the capacity of the Gypsy Council to manage and control its representatives.

In reality, the priority of MHLG officials seemed to be nothing more than preventing the proposal to establish a national Gypsy Council committee from taking shape and being linked to the roadmap set out in Strasbourg. The next step was to consult with the FCO about the appropriateness of publicly undermining Puxon when he invoked the authority of the Council of Europe in connection with what the British Administration still considered to be a mere proposal draft in relation to a work programme:

Mr. Puxon refers in his letter to the 'recommendation by the Council of Europe' about the creation of such bodies. He must be referring to the report of the Committee on Social and Health Questions of the Consultative Assembly which examined the gypsy problem and included in its recommendation a reference to 'the creation of national bodies consisting of representatives from governments, gipsies and travellers' communities as well as voluntary organisations working in the interests of gipsies and other travellers, and to consult these bodies in the preparation of measures designed to improve the position of the gipsies and other travellers'. This recommendation has not however been addressed to Governments, and the Committee of Ministers 'being aware of the many aspects of the problem and of the importance of its examination at European level, has invited the Secretary General to make a proposal regarding the

---

<sup>57</sup> Note of Meeting of 12 February 1970, Ministry of Housing and Local Government Whitehall, AT 25/101 TNA.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

inclusion in the next draft Work Programme of the question of the situation of gipsies and other nomads in Europe'. It has thus been referred back for further examination within the Council of Europe. We have confirmed with FCO that there is no objection to Mr. Puxon being told this otherwise he might misrepresent the position to the press.<sup>59</sup>

The MHLG continued to stress the activist leader's ability to attract publicity by manipulating the content of work meetings, which the ministry continued to regard as informal. Various technical documents circulated internally with notes on the background and personalities of the leading members of the Gypsy Council. All of them warned of the risks involved in any negotiation with Puxon:

Grattan Puxon. He is non gipsy and took up the 'cause' after living for a short time in a caravan in Ireland and mixing with Irish travellers. In early 30s. Reasonably well educated, thought to have had some legal training. Was once a free-lance journalist. Unassuming and quiet in manner, with little sense of humour. Not a dynamic personality except when organising resistance to evictions which he has always personally led (lying underneath caravans, roping himself to them etc). A good negotiator, always appearing reasonable but with a devious turn of mind – has never yet failed to try to twist meetings with Ministers and officials to his own advantage to press home his own points and to try to obtain concessions or promises of one kind or another. His subsequent press interviews do not always entirely reflect what was said or agreed. Has a flair for publicity and invariably turns up with an accompaniment of press reporters and cameras.<sup>60</sup>

The way in which the Gypsy Council presented itself as the 'champion' of the Social Affairs Section of the Council of Europe pressing for its programme to be implemented in the United Kingdom created much discomfort. Puxon's strategic use of the human rights paradigm to denounce episodes of ethnic or racial discrimination had put the British administration in a difficult position on more than one occasion. In the April issue of *Romano Drom*, the European Convention on Human Rights was invoked as the defender of the actions of the movement. It championed the cause of the activist John Connors who was serving a prison sentence in Birmingham following his resistance to the evictions in Walsall. Connors had taken his case to the European Commission on Human Rights and, as the organ of Romani expression put it, his only crime had been to defend 'the right to a place to live and education for his children'.<sup>61</sup> Puxon presented two copies of that issue to officials of the MHLG at the meeting on 2 April. In May, the complaints of the Gypsy Council about the discriminatory treatment meted out by immigration officials to a group of Romanies from the continent were picked up by *The Guardian*, *The*

---

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Background note. *The Gypsy Council and its work. Personalities*, AT 25/101 TNA.

<sup>61</sup> 'Test Case for Strasbourg', *Romano Drom*, April 1970, 1. Along with the condemnation of what had happened to Connors, mention was also made of a firearm incident in Ireland involving one of Ireland's representatives in the Council of Europe, the MP, Patrick S. Donegan, while removing a group of Travellers from his land in October of the previous year.



*Observer* and *The Daily Telegraph*. Their rights were reportedly violated at the border and they were treated differently because of their ethnicity.<sup>62</sup>

In contrast to the movement's expectations about the outcome of the talks at Queen Anne's Mansions, where regular top-level meetings were held between MHLG officials and the Gypsy Council in the winter of 1970, the MHLG was pulling strings in Strasbourg opposing the inclusion of the United Kingdom in the work programme and, failing that, reducing the Council of Europe's activity in that area. The representatives in Strasbourg were urged to explore these two possibilities in the spring of 1970. The response of the FCO in early March had not been very encouraging in this respect:

Our past acceptance of the work on gypsies would render it difficult to resist further work, but not impossible if we wanted to. We are in a stronger position now that we are bringing part II of the Caravan Sites Act 1968 into force and therefore need not feel vulnerable on that account.<sup>63</sup>

Also in March, MHLG officials asked to clarify the nature and organizational aspects of an international symposium on the topic scheduled for 1972 by the same European programme:

The UK representative in Strasbourg might be briefed that while the UK are to play their part in any necessary further Council of Europe consideration of gipsy matters we would like to be clearer about the agenda and purposes of the proposed symposium, and in particular to know whether it is envisaged that this would be a symposium of non gypsies about the gipsy problem, or a symposium of gypsies about their own problems, or a mixture of the two (all three possibilities presenting certain problems, but the first possibility presumably presenting less than the other two). He might be asked to try to ensure that pending further clarification there should be no firm commitment to this particular way of taking the matter further.<sup>64</sup>

At the end of April 1970, the MHLG received the terse message that it looked as though the Strasbourg agenda was being kept.<sup>65</sup> The MHLG's attitude towards the inclusion of Romani activists in the working groups and symposia promoted by Strasbourg turned out to be a telling reflection of its own view of the meetings taking place in London. In the July issue of *Romano Drom*, Ronald Lee, writing from Canada, asserted the mediating role of the Gypsy Council with the British administration by virtue of the 'promised support of numerous bodies such as the Council of Europe'.<sup>66</sup> Appearing on the same page as the article 'The Romany in Britain' was a section devoted to Romani

<sup>62</sup> Colin Smith, 'Foreign Gypsies Sent Back', *The Observer*, 11 May 1970; 'Gypsies from Germany Turned Back', *The Guardian*, 9 May 1970; 'The immigration officers were not satisfied they were bona fide tourists', *Daily Telegraph*, 9 May 1970, AT 25/101 TNA.

<sup>63</sup> P.D. Coates to Mr. Goodman, Council of Europe Work Programme, 11 March 1970, AT 25/96 TNA.

<sup>64</sup> P.D. Coates to Mr Goodman/Mr. Ward, 28 March 1970, AT 25/96 TNA.

<sup>65</sup> P.D. Coates to Mr Goodman, 24 April 1970 AT 25/96 TNA.

<sup>66</sup> Ronald Lee, 'The Romany in Britain', *Romano Drom*, July 1970, 2.

poetry, celebrating not only the international success of Romani artists, such as the French guitarist, Manitas de Plata, but also their political commitment to the cause. Lee contributed two of his poems in the Romani language, ‘Amaro tem’ and ‘O Drom Romano’, together with another two by the Spanish-born painter, Fabián de Castro, and Vanko Rouda. The latter contributed a composition entitled ‘I believed’, an interpellation of the universal paradigm of human rights that was intrinsic to the, not always reciprocated, efforts of the organization to create a cooperative working environment with non-Romani politics:

I believed

I believed...

I believed we were all brothers.

That every man had the same rights.

That each life has the same prize.

I have sold horses.

I have sold caravans.

I believed in the song of equality,

In the fragrance of friendship

In the magic of hands interlaced.

I no longer speak the language of my early years.

I have let the fires of tradition fade.

I believed you were sincere

When you spoke of the unity of the world.

When you said: Brother or Friend!

I have left Kourako, Burtéa and Vania.

I made tears come into the eyes of my father.

I believed that the moment had come.

To share the bread.

That must go to he who starves

That we were travelling on the same paths.

Gadjo, if you ignore that this is the solidarity

Let live my brothers in the shadow of your city.<sup>67</sup>

---

<sup>67</sup> ‘New Verse’, *Romano Drom*, July 1970, 2.

It was a universalist commitment to the concept of Romani rights, the magnitude of which had already been assessed in the first issue of *Romano Drom* in 1970 from the experience of their group in the iconic London area of Hampstead Heath:

Increasing numbers of Gorgios are turning up to help Gypsies fight off threatened evictions. And with the increasing popularity of Gypsy fashions and the return of Gypsies to Hampstead Heath, there does at last seem to be an awareness in Gorgios that the Gypsy with his wandering ways may be not someone to despise, but rather a person whose way of life is as valuable as his own and from whom he perhaps can learn things of value. Another factor in this is a more sinister one. Many Gorgios seem to be coming to realise the wider implications of the erosion of Gypsy liberty. IN THE THREAT TO GYPSY LIBERTY, THE LIBERTY TO LIVE A LIFE APART FROM HOUSES AND MATERIALISM, LIES A THREAT TO ALL OTHER MINORITY GROUPS AND HENCE TO ALL OF US. GYPSY ERODING LIBERTY IS GORGIO ERODING LIBERTY, FOR THIS IF FOR NO OTHER REASON, THE GYPSY FIGHT MUST BECOME THE GORGIO FIGHT.<sup>68</sup>

## Conclusion

Despite the lack of conviction, not to mention, resistance, of the British diplomatic machinery and bureaucracy towards negotiation with the Romani movement at the beginning of the 1970s, a new political approach towards the 'Romani question' did eventually prevail in Europe and, by extension, in the United Kingdom. With all the severe limitations of its scope and results, constrained by the mutable will of different administrations, Romani activism in the last third of the twentieth century became an agent in the political process geared towards alleviating structural injustice.<sup>69</sup> This case study demonstrates that the British administration was in the early seventies a step behind Romani activism in interpreting the sign of the times. In the European political framework, British officials expended more effort in raising problems than offering solutions. The new decade not only saw the introduction of the Race Relations Act of 1976 in the UK – the product of domestic racial tensions – but also supported the European route that was specifically linked to the cause of economic, social and educational rights for the Roma.<sup>70</sup>

However, after the initial enthusiasm that coincided with the meteoric rise of its organizational structure in the late 1960s, the role of the English-speaking Romani movement in the new European space of legal opportunity gradually faded. The following two decades were marked by ideological contradictions and power struggles, both within the Gypsy Council and the future IRU.<sup>71</sup> Following the euphoria of the London

<sup>68</sup> Original capitals, *Romano Drom, Gypsy Newspaper* (first issue), 1970, 3.

<sup>69</sup> Aidan McGarry, *Romaphobia: The Last Acceptable Form of Racism* (London 2007).

<sup>70</sup> Liégeois, *The Council of Europe and Roma*, 51. This stage proved to be critical for the future shaping of a European anti-discrimination law, which bore fruit decades later in the different institutional framework of the European Directives (2000/43/EC).

<sup>71</sup> A detailed account of what happened to the movement in the following decades is given in Thomas Acton and Iлона Klímová, 'The International Romani Union: An East European Answer to West European Questions?' in Will Guy, ed., *Between Past and Future: The Roma of Central and Eastern Europe* (Hatfield 2001), 157–226.

Congress in the spring of 1971, which gave the movement its pan-national symbols (its own day, flag and anthem), the political centre of gravity of the umbrella organization of the international movement gradually shifted towards the Eastern European group. At the same time, actions taking place on the other side of the Atlantic became more prominent in the more specific environment of Anglo-American Roma activism. One of its highlights, in 1978, was its application to the United Nations in New York for recognition of the Roma people as a nation without a territory and the status of an NGO (Non-Governmental Organization). In the 1980s, Grattan Puxon even went to Washington to join the delegation of American Romanies to protest to the United States Holocaust Memorial Council that there were no Romani representatives among its members.

In general, the present-day perspective tends to highlight the opportunities that the Roma associative network wasted when talking directly to the European institutions.<sup>72</sup> In truth, though, if we return to the period of this study and ignore the historian's advantage of knowing the outcome of events, an assessment of the discursive strategies constructed from the requirements of the local British context suggests that it was a shrewd and imaginative universal route to claiming rights. The political demands of the British Romani movement for the full implementation of the Caravan Sites Act of 1968 cannot be interpreted only from a narrow national perspective; the demands were the expression of an internationally coordinated movement and can be considered a manifestation (or even a symbol) of a common struggle for the rights of Romanies in the United Kingdom, and on the European and American continents, for which the movement, and Puxon in particular, would provide a roadmap of overlapping politico-ideological and institutional spaces.

Despite the great deal of literature consistently positing the ineffectiveness of European-wide rights movements, given the continued dominance of the nation-state model, the opportunistic tactics deployed by Puxon and the Gypsy Council in the early 1970s may generate new questions on Romani understandings of liminal post-national citizenship practices.<sup>73</sup> The historical evidence that had been exposed here is only a piece of the unsettled and extremely complex puzzle of Romani mobilization processes and interest articulation.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, in two decades this same British path in search of points of convergence between moral and legal legitimacy would be taken up again, particularly following the setback that the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act of 1994 (illegal settlement automatically became a 'criminal offence') meant for the legal

---

<sup>72</sup> Aidan McGarry, 'The Roma Voice in the European Union: Between National Belonging and Transnational Identity', *Social Movement Studies*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (2011), 283–97; Cf. Galina Kostadinova, 'Minority Rights as a Normative Framework for Addressing the Situation of Roma in Europe', *Oxford Development Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (2011), 163–83.

<sup>73</sup> See for instance Aidan McGarry, *Who Speaks for Roma? Political Representation of a Transnational Minority Community* (London 2010); Peter Vermeersch, *The Romani Movement: Minority Politics and Ethnic Mobilisation in Contemporary Central Europe* (Oxford 2006).

<sup>74</sup> With regard to this, see the thought-provoking reflections on 'The discourse of national minority rights' in Peter Vermeersch, 'Ethnic Minority Identity and Movement Politics: The Case of the Roma in the Czech Republic and Slovakia', *Ethnic & Racial Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 5 (2003), 887–8.

protection of the collective.<sup>75</sup> Europe as a human rights space, once again, offered a wealth of solutions for the Roma associations to fight against exclusionary constructions of national status. The Human Rights Act (1998), which incorporated the European Convention on Human Rights into British law, would provide a new opportunity to legally demand Roma rights. According to the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights, Article 8 protected the ‘occupation of [a] caravan [as] an integral part of ... ethnic identity as a gypsy, reflecting the long tradition of that minority of following a travelling lifestyle’.<sup>76</sup> However, in June 2004, Charles Smith, England’s first elected Romani mayor, who was Chair of the Gypsy Council for Education, Culture, Welfare and Civil Rights at the time, went much further in talks with one of the departments that succeeded the MHLG:

The Gypsy and Traveller people cannot buy their freedom or rights by denying others their freedom. It is therefore important that others who wish to live in caravans, whether they are Gypsy families or not should be able to do so ... The Gypsy Council believes that the right to a reasonable choice of any type of accommodation, and the right to stable and secure family residence within cultural tradition are human rights that all people, regardless of ethnicity, should enjoy.<sup>77</sup>

### Acknowledgements

This article falls within the framework of the Grant PCI2019-103527 funded by MCIN/AEI/ 10.13039/501100011033 and by the European Union, framed in HERA Joint Research Programme ‘Public Spaces: Culture and Integration in Europe’ (2019-2022) and the author research on Romani history is also supported by the Project ‘Discursos y Representaciones de la Etnicidad: Política, Identidad y Conflicto en el Siglo XX’ Grant PID2019-105741GB-I00 funded by MCIN/AEI/10.13039/501100011033.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author received financial support for the research and publication of this article from the Grant PCI2019-103527 funded by MCIN/AEI/ 10.13039/501100011033.

### Author Biography

**Carolina García Sanz** is Associate Professor in Modern and Contemporary History (University of Seville). Her main field is International History. She is an expert on the history of Spanish neutrality

<sup>75</sup> Thomas Acton, ‘Conflict Resolution and Criminal Justice – Sorting out Trouble’, *The Journal of Legal Pluralism and Unofficial Law*, Vol. 37, No. 51 (2005), 29–49.

<sup>76</sup> ‘Gypsy and Traveller Sites’, *House of Commons ODPM: Housing Planning, Local Government and The Regions Committee*, 13th report, Session 2003–2004, 10–12.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

and belligerent interferences in World War I and identity politics in the twentieth century. She is currently part of the HERA Project 'Beyond Stereotypes: Cultural Exchanges and the Romani Contribution to European Public Spaces' and is Co-Principal Investigator of the research programme EtniXX 'Discourses and Representations of Ethnicity in the XXth Century: Politics, Identity and Conflict'. Recent publications include: 'Ronald Lee: Discovering Romanestan between Canada and Europe' in *European Roma Lives beyond Stereotypes* (2022); and 'Covert Wars in Spain (1914–1918): Belligerent Agents and Local Impacts' in *The Global First World War: African, East Asian, Latin American and Iberian Mediators* (2021).