

Newsnight, BBC 2, 10.30pm, Thursday 19th August 1999
[does not include all ums and ahs]

Presenter: Good evening. The Home Secretary has done it again. An interesting choice of words to describe travellers. And now he's being accused of racism and stereotyping.

Jack Straw: Many of these so-called travellers seem to think that it's perfectly okay for them to cause mayhem in an area, to go burgling, thieving, breaking into vehicles, causing all kinds of other trouble... [excerpt of interview on Radio West Midlands, 22nd July 1999].

Presenter: Do we want our leaders to say what they think, or is that exactly the kind of comment that leads to institutional racism?

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Presenter: The Home Secretary, Jack Straw, has been accused of being racist. The police have even been asked to investigate whether he's breached the Public Order Act. It's all because he had a go at travellers, who he says masquerade as traditional Gypsies, and are prone to crime. Is this straight-talking, or prejudice? Mark Mardell reports.

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(Plays song 'Gypsies, Tramps and Thieves' by Cher).

Mardell: The image of Gypsies as darkly dangerous, lawless tricksters has been building up in the Western imagination for at least five centuries. Jack Straw's thoughts are hardly original, even with his little caveat.

Jack Straw: [from WM interview] There are relatively few real Romany Gypsies left, who seem to mind their own business and don't cause trouble to other people, and then there are a lot more people who masquerade as travellers or Gypsies, who trade on the sentiment of other people, but who seem to think that because they label themselves as travellers that therefore they've got a license to commit crimes and act in an unlawful way that other people don't have.

Mardell: This small plot of land in the shadow of an electricity pylon on a smashed-up office block, is home to one family of South London Gypsies. Nobby Penfold says the Home Secretary should have been more specific, but you get used to the abuse after a while.

Nobby Penfold: (Chair, National Gypsy Council) We're pretty thick-skinned, we can take it, but you do get the hump at times from continuously hearing it. I mean, why do they want to keep saying it? We thought we were living in a community today where you're innocent until proven guilty.

Mardell: Gypsies do have this reputation though, is it deserved at all?

Penfold: I should say 60 per cent of the genuine Gypsies are not that innocent, but, I mean, for instance, my wife, she's never thieved or stolen a thing in her life. But, you don't go round, just jumping on and saying "they are thieves, vagabonds" or whatever you like to call us.

Mardell: These people feel that they are perhaps the last group it is acceptable to be racist about in modern, polite society.

Young man: It's rubbish really, because if it was Indian people or someone else, do you know what I mean, they wouldn't say it about them because there'd be a lot of trouble, wouldn't there.

Mardell: Is there any truth in it?

Young man: No. It's a load of rubbish, innit?

Mardell: So what do we have here? Is it a rare case of a politician saying what they think, and what many other people think as well, or is it a case of New Labour descending to sub-Alf Garnett levels of prejudice? Or is it perhaps both?

It was a big police operation four weeks ago around a travellers wedding in Coventry that sparked all this. Police were worried about a feud getting out of hand. Mr Straw was asked on local radio if an expensive crackdown was necessary. He replied that you had to get a message through to people living on the margins of society.

Straw: [from interview] Many of these so-called travellers seem to think that it's perfectly okay for them to cause mayhem in an area, to go burgling, thieving, breaking into vehicles, causing all kinds of other trouble, including defecating in the doorways of firms, and so on, and yet can get away with it, then their behaviour deteriorates.

Mardell: One pressure group, the Travellers Advice Unit, has urged the police to prosecute the Home Secretary, for words likely to incite racial hatred.

Susan Alexander: (Co-ordinator, Friends, Families and Travellers) We have to highlight the kind of prejudice that the traveller community experiences, and also the fact that government ministers, being in such prominent positions, need to be responsible for their words and their actions. It does highlight some institutional racism at the highest levels of government. Whether it was intentional or not, it will have had a very negative effect, and we feel that government ministers and other people in prominent public positions should be responsible and take care about what they say and the effect that their comments will have.

John Prescott: (Deputy Prime Minister) I've known Jack Straw for an awful long time and there's not a racist sinew in his body. He is tough on crime, wherever it's committed and by whom, but that's what the country wants.

Mardell: Perhaps it's one of the keys to New Labour's success that Jack Straw regularly comes out with opinions that sound more like some old colonel harrumphing in the saloon bar, than a progressive politician.

Judgmental Jack has ruled that the streets should be reclaimed from "the aggressive begging of winos, addicts and squeegee merchants". He had a go at Liverpoolians, declaring "You know what Scousers are like, they're always up to something". He said of teenage mums, "the ability of the mother to cope is misjudged by well-meaning but misguided people". Of children who should be under curfew, "I see them when I'm driving back from the Commons, and wonder where their parents are".

But has he this time crossed the line between being tough on crime, and just harsh for the sake of it?

Tom Bentley: (Director, Demos) He's trying to say that there ought to be common standards of behaviour which we can reinforce, in communities and in society. But the effect of the way that he said it is actually to reinforce prejudice which exists in relation to the traveller community quite strongly in Britain, and also to make it sound like scapegoating, which in the current atmosphere, particularly with the refugee crisis going on across Europe, is a very dangerous thing to do.

Mardell: Over the centuries, Gypsies have been accused of cannibalism, child abduction, and black magic. Many academic papers have been written on how societies strengthen their own cohesion by attacking such groups. But this bit of bother won't worry the Government too much. While it will further blacken Jack Straw's name in liberal circles, the voters Labour's most concerned about are more likely to be impressed than offended.

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Presenter: I'm joined here in the studio by Sylvia Dunn, President of the National Association of Gypsy Women. By Martin Linton, a Labour MP and member of the Home Affairs Select Committee, and by Darcus Howe, the broadcaster and writer. Good evening.

Sylvia Dunn, you are a Romany. Jack Straw made it quite clear that he wasn't talking about Gypsies, but he was talking about travellers. Why should you be upset?

Dunn: Do you think that the authorities are going to make any distinction? Because I know they're not. And Jack Straw had to attack the groups because of this book [*Gaining Ground*, to which many different groups of travellers have had an input]. He dehumanised us, he started saying the sort of the thing that the Nazis were saying in the 1920s and 30s, and that culminated in the Holocaust. 78% of the Gypsy population of Europe were murdered.

Presenter: But are you saying you felt personally frightened?

Dunn: Yes, personally I fear, I fear that this is going to put us back twenty years. We've been working twenty-odd years to get recognition and to have ourselves

accepted, and credibility, and just because there's a few people, perhaps, alleged to have broken the law...

Presenter: Martin Linton, whatever Jack Straw said, whatever context he said it in, there must be something wrong when people come away with that sense...

Linton: Well, I mean, if Jack Straw had said half the things that Sylvia said he said, or indeed some of the people on the programme were saying, I would be appalled, but, you know, I've had the opportunity to listen to the whole of that interview he made four weeks ago, and as far as I can see there isn't a single thing he said about travellers in general. When he 'most of these so-called travellers' he was being asked about the people who'd been to that wedding in Coventry where there'd been a death threat against the bride and groom, and where there'd been a heavy police presence. So he was talking about a very specific group of travellers that was...

Presenter: But he also referred to his own constituency, he made it UK-wide.

Linton: Well, he also talked about groups in his own constituency, yes, I mean, he referred to that as well but, I mean...

Presenter: It must have occurred to you that it was an extraordinary generalisation.

Linton: That's the point, there's nothing that he said that was actually a generalisation. Either he was talking about the specific incident, he was being interviewed on the day that that wedding had taken place, or he was talking specifically about those travellers who commit crimes, commit offences. At no stage did he make some generalisation about travellers as such, and frankly, you know, I would find it extraordinary if he had, I mean, this is the Home Secretary who set up the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry, this is the most anti-racist Home Secretary of modern times...

Presenter: For exactly that reason, given the Macpherson Report, the warning against institutionalised racism, isn't it incumbent on leaders to pick their words carefully?

Linton: Well, it is incumbent on politicians to pick their words carefully, and it's incumbent on journalists - I was a journalist myself - to report them fully. And here we have a story that, on the face of it, if you pick out a sentence here and there, it looks appalling, but if you read the whole of the interview I think it becomes clear that he was asking, being asked about, and answering about, specific offences and talking about those, he, talking about the travellers, when and if, they commit offences, not about travellers in general.

Presenter: Darcus Howe, his comments were broader, they were directed at people who broke the law. What's wrong with that?

Howe: I'll tell you right now in the Caribbean community, we have, and we are experiencing a great deal of violence, and guns, much larger, much more important, much more undermining, than any group of travellers. Jack Straw would not dare attack the West Indian community in the way he attacked those people. You know

why? Because we are suitably represented, and we can make interventions of a very serious nature if he does. What he's attacking is a small, marginalised group of people, and I'm not making an anti-Labour Party point. I'm talking about a man who is head of one of the most important institutions of state, the Home Secretary, intelligence, police, and so on, he's not a junior minister. And to target people who we all know are quite harmless, and maybe they are a little restless, but they are not undermining the security of Britain. And they are fair game now, for anybody, who has prejudices against them.

Do you know it reminds me of, this, finally? Enoch Powell. Even to the faeces and all. He includes defecating. You know, Enoch made that speech, he said, 'little piccaninnies' were putting filth through, faeces through doors and stuff. And I thought he lost it. He's lost it. I think he should apologise and nobody should defend it. Because he knows he's wrong. The Prime Minister should know he's wrong. And the entire Parliament should know that is not a statement for the Home Secretary to be making, some small group of people in Coventry.

Presenter: Martin Linton, what about that point, that he couldn't have made it about any other groups?

Linton: Well, I find it extraordinary that Darcus Howe can seriously compare Jack Straw with Enoch Powell, I mean...

Howe: I don't compare them, I compare the speech.

Linton: Yes, but, as I say, he was being asked about a particular wedding in Coventry where there were a hundred police there because they'd had information that there were threats...

Presenter: He very specifically, that was the reason he was asked about it, but he very specifically broadened it out, there is no doubt about that. He then added a caveat in terms of what he was saying about criminals, but he very specifically broadened it out to travellers across Britain.

Linton: Well, he said, specifically the quote you're using "many of *these* so-called travellers" and then went on "think it's perfectly okay to cause mayhem" and etc etc, he was talking about specific incidents that they'd had, not only in Coventry but in the West Midlands where there had been people, who happened to be travellers, who were causing a lot of mayhem. Now, he was not making a general point about all travellers, even less about Gypsies, and indeed, you know, the Government has already done a number of things to try and improve the legal situation for travellers and the Gypsy community. The Government has been, ministers have been to the national conference of the Gypsy and Travellers groups.

Howe: And now you undermine all of that. Let me ask you a simple question. Do you think if Jack Straw's asked, on a West Indian radio programme, about the guns, and so on, in the West Indian community, he would have made a statement comparable?

Linton: You're assuming that he has said something that is anti-traveller. The point I'm making is that if you read what he actually said...

[hubbub]

Presenter: Maybe he should say something about it, maybe this is the point, that maybe he should say something ...

Howe: I have said something about it.

Presenter: As far as travellers are concerned, well, as far as anybody's concerned, there is a criminal element, and his argument in this, he says what he's saying, is that they should be treated in the same way as anybody else.

[hubbub]

Dunn: There's no toleration of Irish travellers and travellers and the authorities are not going to differentiate between travellers and Gypsies. Gypsies and Roma are going to get just as much of the flak. We worked together for over a year, on this project, and we are together, he can't pull us apart. He's not going to divide and rule.

Presenter: Are you more worried about the message that he's sending, rather than what Jack Straw himself thinks?

Dunn: I don't know what the man thinks, I only heard what he said, and I'm terribly worried about the message he's sending out, because he's sent out a message that we can be treated, we've always been treated badly. Our children don't get health care like others, they don't get education and they don't get clean water. And they are abused, the Children's Act is never used when our children are evicted, and the officers just laugh at you when you ask them if they have used it.

Linton: That is exactly what the Government has been saying about evictions of, of, of Gypsy encampments, that common humanity must prevail, the police must not harass them ... they must have concern for the welfare of the women and children involved, and that is something that we set out in new guidelines last year ... that is the Government's policy on the subject.

[hubbub]

Presenter: We shall leave it there, Sylvia Dunn, Martin Linton and Darcus Howe, thank you all very much.