SUBMISSION FROM A GYPSY/TRAVELLER WOMAN IN HER 60s

BASED ON AN ORAL INTERVIEW WITH MECOPP AND TRANSCRIBED BY THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT OFFICIAL REPORT

Had you heard about this questionnaire before today?
The only time I heard was when Michelle Lloyd telt me aboot it.

How long have you been living here?
Twenty-nine year.

Where were you staying before here?
On the road.

How did you come to be staying here?
Well, it’s a long story. I was living on my mother’s driveway in Forfar, and my mother was getting eviction notices and notices frae the Forfar council to get me off her driveway. It was December and January, and I had nowhere to go. I approached Forfar council and asked if they had some place to put me. I had a home—my caravan was my home—but the local authorities had nowhere to put my home. They offered me a house, but I didnae want a house. Forfar council Gypsy liaison officers must have got in touch wi Perth and Kinross Council even though I was staying in Forfar. A bit came available in Perth and I’d naewhere to go, so I said I would try it.

And 29 years later, you’re still here.
Then again, I’ve been on the road every summer since. I used to go on the road in the summer times, but still the same thing—nowhere to go, nowhere to stay, harassed on the road. Double Dykes was a winter base when I first came on it—it was what they called a winter base. That is what the Government needs—winter bases for Travellers that are on the road.

How satisfied are you staying here?
Put it like this, I could leave it tomorrow.

Why’s that?
Because it’s nae home.

Okay.
Home was when I was on the road. Home’s nae being permanent in Double Dykes; home was when I was on the road. I could leave Double Dykes tomorrow and go back to my own way o life if I can get a place to live it.

Is there a house, site or roadside camp where you have been happier or more satisfied? Where was this and why were you happier there?
Do you mean the camps when I was on the road? There used to be camp sites which were regular stops. Travellers didnae have one camp site; there was nae such a thing as a base when you were on the road—you travelled round. If you were from Forfar or Angus, you left that side of the country and maybe went to Fifeside
Aberdeen, Inverness and maybe down as far as Berwick-upon-Tweed. You travelled—you didnae stay in the one place—but you had to find some place for the winter time.

A lot of Travellers had certain areas that they did like to stay in because maybe the people were nicer and they felt mair at home, mair settled. That’s the places they tried to stay in for the winter, from November to February or March. That’s where they would stop as a winter base. You kannae tow caravans in the snow and hard frost and nae get stopping. They tried to get a place for the winter time and whatever area they liked the best, that’s usually the camping site they liked to stay in. Then, when February or March came, they moved on again.

Where would you like to see your children/grandchildren living and why?
My children? I’ve got one still on the road but I’ve got one settled and she doesn’t like it. She doesn’t like where she’s living. If she got peace to go on the road, she would go on the road, but she’s got three small children. She lived in a camper van for, I’d say, roughly a year and a half, travelling the country and getting moved here and there. She was offered a house, so she’d to take it because she’d to roam all round the country with this camper van to get some place to settle.

What things have affected where you ended up staying—family, shops, environment, site manager, safety, et cetera?
You’re safer here. As I said, you kannae stay on the roadside now. There’s been so much media and things on the television, more so down that Dale Farm, that they can be moved. That’s given the perspective that, if a Gypsy Traveller stops beside another person, that’s the way they’re gonnae treat them, because they can get them moved. They’ve got laws saying that they can move them—they havnae got the rights or equal opportunities because Dale Farm was closed. They were living their life and wernae bothering anybody, yet they closed it down. Would they dae that wi a housing estate? Would they actually tear a housing estate down if squatters went in it and they were living there? Would the Government actually tear down a housing estate if there were squatters or they bought the houses on that estate? Would they actually tear the hail estate doon? I don’t think so.

Do you get any harassment where you’re staying now? If yes, what kind and from whom?
We dinna get any harassment oot here because we’re in the middle of an industrial estate. You’re nae in the centre of town, you’re nae at the edge of a town. I would say the nearest person living here is about 400 yard along the road. We’ve been here that long—29 year—so, they’ve accepted us here. We’re nae directly looking into anybody’s property cause, as I said, the next-door neighbour’s maybe 400 to 500 yard away—I don’t know, but I’d say approximately that. We’re nae looking into their face—they’re nae seeing us every day—so we’re nae affecting their lives. We’re nae destroying their properties, we’re nae going in their places—which we get blamed for a lot, but we dinna. The people round here are used to us and, because we live on an industrial estate, we havnae really anybody to bother.

What would make you decide to move on?
If there was proper places for to stop in. Every major town in Scotland should have a stopping place—I’m nae saying villages, but major towns—if you’re coming fae north, as far as Dingwall, Inverness, Aberdeen, Stonehaven. There’s one in
Montrose. Every town, whether it was a six base or a 10 base. Some of them, if you want to stay in the winter—they would be empty anyway, cause some people winna stay in that area—if it was empty, let them stay the winter and then in summer let them move.

**Do you have enough space where you live now?**
Breathing space or living space? [*Laughter.*]

**Both.**
I dinna hae the breathing space. The living space—we’ve got these chalets, but I feel like I’m hemmed in. Maybe people think it’s ridiculous, but I’ve lived in a caravan all my life and I’ve been three or four year in the chalets and I feel like I’ve become a prisoner cause I canna see oot the same. In a caravan, you’ve windows all around. You can walk and you can see all around—it doesn’t matter where it’s parked—but in the chalets I feel like I’m hemmed in. The only time I get air is when I open the door. I’m used to going oot for everything.

I can understand when people get old or disabled and they havnae got the facilities. If they’re living in a caravan on a site, they should adapt the facilities so you can get frae the caravan to the toilets—like lean-tos? They’ve got the roofs and the sides like what you put a car in, an open garage. That’s what they should have from the caravans to the toilets for those that’s in the caravan sites now that are disabled. They havnae got chalets—this is the only site in Scotland that’s got chalets. There are Travellers staying on sites that are old, disabled and canna get to the toilet. How are they supposed to get from the caravan to a shed—cause it’s just a shed—where the toilet, the water and everything’s stored? If there’s snow on the ground, how’s an elderly person of maybe 70 or 80 going to get from their caravan to the shed? They’re living on a bit on their own. There should be like a roof thing with walls so that there’s that area where they have safety to go to the sheds.

They’re nae thinking about older people on these sites. They should have a sit down with some Travellers and find out how and why life would be better when they’re nae putting chalets on them and they’ve to live in their caravans. They prefer to live in their caravans.

**If you are currently living on a site, how did you get your pitch? How long did it take and who helped you get your pitch?**
As I said for the other question, when I was living in a driveway—

They dinna like mixin, but the way society is now, the younger generation have to, to be accepted.

**Do you think that is what it is, then?**
That is what it is. They have to blend in. I have seen a lot of people changin over the years—young folk changing their way of life, changing the way they talk, changing the way they act to fit in.

**Are more young people living in houses now?**
Aye, I find it. They’ve nae place to go.
So it is not because they don’t want to live on sites.
No, it’s because they’ve nae place to go. So they go into housing and they change to fit into society and you can see the changes. Personally, I can see the changes in the young generation of Travellers because they have to fit in. They even talk different. They dinna come oot with their own normal language because they have to fit in. You’re an outsider. It’s nae that you dinna want to talk your own language. Put it like this—it disnae matter what the ethnic group is, they’ve got their own language. If you’re standing here and you’re English and there’s two different ethnic groups doing their own language, you feel awkward. People feel awkward. In society now, a person mebbe thinks that they’re talking about them in their ain language, but it’s just they feel more comfortable using their own language. In society the day, people think, “Oh, they’re making a fool out of us; they’re speaking about us.” Minds just run havoc. Years ago, that didna happen, but it does the day. So you fit in; you talk English so that this person feels comfortable. You shouldn’t have to change your way of life to feel comfortable. You’re comfortable in the way you are and the way you live, but you come oot your comfort zone to please other people, and it shouldnae be like that. As I said, it should be a free world.

I mind that I had an incident in a caravan place. They had “No Gypsy Travellers; No Hawkers” on the sign. I’m nae a racist—far from it, because I’ve got an open mind, because I live different, and there’s other people live different. I asked to get in this caravan site. He says, “Oh yes.” I says, “You do realise I’m a Gypsy Traveller?” He says, “Will you have family with you?” I said, “What difference does it make if I have family with me?” He says, “Oh no, you won’t get on if you’ve got family with you.” I says to him, “You’re telling me, because I’m a woman on my own, even though I’m a Gypsy Traveller, you’ll let me on, but if I had my sons, daughters and whoever family and I wanted them to come on the site, you widna let them on.” He says, “No, because I’ve had problems wi Travellers drinking and fighting.” I says, “You’re a holiday park and you’ve got a heap o’ residential houses, but you’ve never had any bother wi holiday makers and their tourers or their residential homes here in the summer when they’re having their holidays? You’ve never had nae drinking, parties or fighting?” He says, “Oh yes.” I says, “So you’ll tolerate that, but you winna tolerate the Travellers?” “I’m not saying that.” I says, “You’ve got a sign up there which is prejudiced. You’re breaking the law on human rights and equal opportunities.” He says, “It’s been up there for over 40 year and it’ll stay up there.” “Oh well, then,” I says, “if that’s the way you feel,” but I made it get tooken doon.

And did you get on to the site?
No—they widna let me on.

So they didn’t let you on at all?
No, but I got the sign tooken doon. Now the sign’s got “No Commercial Vehicles”, which could apply to anybody—like nae vans or nae commercial vehicles. But if you says to him, “I’m a Gypsy Traveller,” and there’s a bay or place there, he’d have to let you on now. It just shows you it’s still oot there. People like me will force the issue but there’s other Travellers that just moves on—before they would cause a scene, they would move on.
Why do you think that is?
Cause they dinna want no hassle in their life. They accept what the policies is and people’s attitude, but I am the type that, because I suffered abuse all my life when I was younger, I would not tolerate it today. I dinna have to tolerate it today. I would go to court first, but young yins winna go to court. I would face a jail sentence, put it like that—put that in your dictaphone. I would actually face a jail sentence if I knew that I was in the right. Yes, there’s things like equal opportunities that applies nae only to my side—nae only to Travellers. I would stand up for any ethnic minority that I thought was being abused by the system, by the Government or by whatever services. If I thought any ethnic group, it disna matter where they come from, were getting abused in any manner, I would be on their side, because I have suffered the same as what they have. There’s less prejudice between Travellers and other ethnic minorities than there is wi anybody else—I’ve been there and seen it.

I was on a site which was abandoned down the Glasgow side. I’ve got photographs of it, and it was abandoned because there’d been fighting and cairryin on. I stood on it. It was beside an electric pylon that had the barbed wire roon it. It had a warden’s office right at the gate, and there was an electronic arm—he’d tae work it fae the inside. When the caravans was off it, it was just sheds and they were all derelict—just the sheds and the pitches. I looked at it—and this is the truth—and I says, “This puts me in mind of the Holocaust.” The Travellers were liberated. They had got their freedom out of this caravan site. It’s like they got liberated out of the site and they could go back on the road. It was like the Holocaust. It was like freedom to go back on the road and get oot of this site. It was like the Holocaust and the Jews when they were put into the prison camps. That was what it looked like—a prison camp. Because it had barbed wire roon it, there’s fence all the wey roon it, same as Double Dykes here has got a fence all the wey roon it, and it’s in the middle o no place. Am I right?
Yes.
Am I being honest noo?
Yes.
It’s got little sheds. If you imagine every caravan oot o here—well, they’re chalets the noo, but it was caravans—if you imagine all the caravans oot o here nae getting used and the Travellers all on the road wi their freedom, wi this shed starting to deteriorate, and you walked in here. You see the warden’s office and the barrier. You walk in and stand there, what would it look like?
Just what you described.
What would it look like?
A pen, I would say.
Like a prison, cause the warden’s office is there wi barriers. You dinna get that in a hoosin estate. There was the warden’s office and one of those barriers with the arms that goes up and down, like you were crossing the border. It was built where there was electric pylons and roon the pylons was the barbed wire fencing and roon the site was fencing, so you could imagine what it looked like.
How long ago was that?
Since I was in it?

Did you stay in it?
No—it was derelict when I went in. That is why I went to look at it. I stood back and that is what I seen.

How long ago was that?
I would say aboot seven or eight year ago. I looked at it and says, “It’s like the Holocaust or Auschwitz.” That is what it looked like. There was just the sheds and the pitches where the caravans had been once. I stood and looked at the warden’s office and the bays and it was like they were liberated. They got back on the road and there was nae hassle. They got their freedom, and that was it.

So you’re happiest on the road?
Yes. Aye, it was like they were on the road. I’ve travelled around. I’ve been in England and Wales. I’ve been all around. I used to go picking apples and pears. All that’s done now. You used to get picking rasps and strawberries here, but the Polish does it now. This is a small country, but it’s a big world. You cannae accommodate everybody in this world, cause there’s nae enough jobs here and things for to accommodate who’s born here, who’s been raised here, generation after generation. You’ve got these asylum seekers, which I have nae problem wi, because it’s a big world and a hard world, but you canna take everybody. You can only fit so many into a bed, and then they start falling off the edge. You can give them comfort and sleep, but you can only fit so much in a bed, and what happens? They start falling off it. This country’s falling down because they’re putting too many in the bed and they’re starting to fall off the sides. This country’s falling down.

So what do you say the solution is?
The solution is to stop any more comin in. Accommodate what they’ve already got in, because you can’t put people oot—it’s already been done and I wouldna dae that. There’s children and things like that. But Poland isnae what you call a poor, poor country. Am I correct?

I would assume so.
I wouldnae say it was a poverty-stricken country like Africa.

No.
In Africa, they will survive in villages. I can understand giving them clean water, but you canna feed them all. They have to feed thirsels, so they have to learn to feed thirsels. This country must have been at some state like that at one time. There was poverty in this country before the Victorian time. There was poverty in 1600 and something. There was poverty all roond. There was Travellers then, and there was poverty, but they survive. You will survive, whether you go oot there and catch fish oot a river. There’s ways and means. Travellers survived. I learned how to guddle fish wi my bare hands oot a river. You will survive, but then again you have to put the effort in.

David Cameron speaks aboot work, work, work. Yes, he’s mebbe got the right attitude, but has he got the right system? He’s got the right attitude—work or want. If
there’s jobs oot there, you dinna curl your nose up at it. There was a wummin on the television this morning talking about getting offered a job at Poundland, but she was supposed to dae voluntary work for her money, but then again she’s sitting at hame daein nothing. I’ve had a hard life, so it disna bother me. If I was sitting on dole money and able to work, you’re better oot there, and you’re still getting your dole money, but you’re into society, you’re doing something wi your life. You’re nae sitting on a computer 24 hours a day on Facebook or whatever the case may be—I dinna dae Facebook. There’s a these things, but are you nae better gaein oot mixing wi society, seeing a bit of life, communicating with human beings instead of sitting in and getting depressed—then you’re on to doctors and mebbe taking drugs for your depression. That’s what leads to a’ this. Mebbe people disnae see it nowadays, but mebbe it’s cause I’ve had a hard life and I could see all the aspects o’ it, but I’d rather go and work in Poundland fur my dole money, because I feel I’ve done something to get it. It’s nae very much, but if that’s what the Government says you’ve tae live on, you canna mak a better o’ it, but at least I’ve done something to get it. I havnae had a hand-oot, I’ve went and done something to get it. Ken what I mean?

**Yeah—totally**

And you’ve been oot all day. You’ve been oot among the community. You’ve spoke to somebody all day instead of sitting in a lonesome place mebbe on your own, getting depressed— *[Recording cuts out]* 

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