**BELFAST TELEGRAPH**

**DEBATENI**

**Jeff Dudgeon**

**19 November 2013**

**Migration to Belfast**

Last week, former Labour Home Secretary, David Blunkett, said "We have got to change the behaviour and the culture of the Roma community, because there's going to be an explosion otherwise. We all know that."

He called on those in his Sheffield constituency to change aspects of their "behaviour" such as congregating on the streets and dumping litter, which was "aggravating" local people.

Later, Nick Clegg, a LibDem MP in the same city, described the Roma as sometimes "intimidating" and "offensive" adding, "We have every right to say if you are coming to live in Britain…you have got to be sensitive to the way that life is lived in this country."

If either of these politicians had said this only a year or two ago they would have been hounded off the airwaves and grilled mercilessly by the BBC. If a Tory MP had said it their career would be over.

So it is worth reviewing what happened four years ago in South Belfast. A number of such immigrants’ homes had their windows smashed and around 100 Roma took refuge in a local church. They were flown home. The world and the PM condemned the actions of a very few young men who had also attacked a left-wing solidarity demonstration.

Was Belfast exceptional? Apparently not, it would seem from Blunkett and Clegg’s febrile views.

In truth, those families filtered back to Belfast. They had not been driven out permanently and seem to have settled down to lead regular lives here. The community around them has become used to, and tolerates, their presence, without aid or assistance from the state or the Socialist Workers. Locals will get no praise or recognition from those whose income level ensures they will never become neighbours of a new immigrant family on the breadline.

The unspeakable truth is that the less prosperous are expected to cope with rapid demographic and cultural change, even though it is not explicable to many older people and tests younger men and boys. South Belfast has been managing and indeed coping with the accelerating number of arrivals, particularly lately of Somalis from other EU countries. About such drastic adjustments, people are of course not consulted.

Over 10% of primary school places in South Belfast are now filled by children for whom English is not their first language. This is a testing process but teachers, parents and fellow pupils are handling it well. The city has tholed the transition and matured.

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I refer to only the Roma below and my own experience.   
'In truth, some of those families filtered back to Belfast.'   
A slight understatement. They were flown home to Romania or wherever, courtesy of the taxpayer and then most miraculously reappeared into our schools and streets 3 weeks later. Why? If South Belfast had been so terrible would anyone have returned?   
'They had not been driven out permanently and seem to have settled down to lead regular lives here.'   
Regular lives?   
Not begging in the streets then, under the pretext of selling Ireland's Big Issue- in order to get a work permit and claim benefits?   
Making an effort to integrate into local communities like other minority groups do? I don't think so.   
Making an effort to learn English? Little evidence of this in the school I taught in, where Roma children when they did bother to attend, only mixed with their own group while talking away in their own language. Often specialist staff were laid on to teach them only for them not to come in that week!   
As a result most do not speak more than broken English.   
When 'parents,' arrived up at school they demanded and had interpreters provided. These interpreters are not cheap. Naturally they are paid out of school budgets for their services. As a teacher I was never actually sure if these Roma 'representatives', who arrived at school were even parents of children attending. One thing they did know was exactly which forms the could get to access all the benefits going.   
From my experience absenteeism from school is endemic amongst Roma children of Secondary school age. This is largely ignored by the various Boards of Education because it is simply too difficult to 'police'. It is extremely difficult in their closed community to check up on or trace trace children as they all have similar sounding names and communication is so difficult. In my experience Roma children seem to be able to come and go like the wind with seemingly no questions asked by anyone in education. In fact the Roma appear to be a law unto themselves.   
Someone with personal experience tell me that I am talking nonsense and that I am a bigoted old ghoster. ps I do understand that under EU regulations we do have freedom of movement within the Union.

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I'd hardly call the presence of our (still tiny) Somali population a 'drastic adjustment'. There's a weird tone to this article. Down with this sort of thing!