The day we put colonialism on the table in Leinster House

By Bernard Sweeney, TraVision Foundation

How many brothers and sisters do you have? An Irish hospital will ask about your family's medical history. Who thinks to count the children? When researchers in Cork set out to study the Traveller gut microbiome, Travellers told them to put that question on the form. Professor Fergus Shanahan told the committee that the number of siblings turned out to have the strongest association with the distinctive pattern of microbes his team found.

That exchange gives some idea of why I wanted Fergus and the archaeologist Dylan Foley beside me in Leinster House on 7 May 2026. The Joint Committee on Key Issues affecting the Traveller Community had invited us to discuss Traveller identity. I went there with a question about Ireland itself. When this country took responsibility for its own affairs, what became of the colonial assumptions about land, movement and who had the right to live where? From where I stand as a Traveller, that is the most fundamental issue the committee could take up.

Dylan and I had tried to get a hearing seven years earlier. Our proposal for an assembly elected by Travellers is submission No. 9 in the 2019 Seanad public consultation. We were never called. By the time we got through the door, a Traveller woman had made history in the very institution we had written to.

I opened by acknowledging Senator Eileen Flynn. Nominated to the Seanad in 2020, she became the first Traveller to serve in the Oireachtas. Later that year she was elected to chair the committee examining issues affecting our community. In 2025 she won her Seanad seat in her own right. I know what it took for us to get one afternoon to give evidence. Eileen took on the work of chairing those hearings, deciding what to ask and listening to the answers. She has represented our people with dignity. I wanted our pride in her on the record.

Dylan put two dates before the members. One was 1847, the year of the Vagrancy (Ireland) Act. The other was 1963, the year the Irish State published the *Report of the Commission on Itinerancy*. More than forty years into independence, the commissioners could still turn to a law dating from the Famine when considering how Traveller families should live.

How could people who travelled lose their land?

Senator Joe O'Reilly put the question plainly. "Surely if they were nomadic people, they would not have land, per se." Earlier, Deputy Dessie Ellis had raised an account familiar to some Traveller families, that Cromwell's army had put our people off their land. He wondered whether Traveller culture began in that upheaval or went back further. My answer was that the people driven off were already living in a Gaelic world. If we say Cromwell put people off their land, surely the next thing to ask is where they had been living, and on what terms, before the soldiers came.

I spoke about Gaelic families moving within territories they knew. Senator O'Reilly followed the thought himself and asked whether people went to different parcels at different times of year. That gets much closer to it. A family might take cattle to summer grazing and come back down for the autumn fair. Shut them out of the summer pasture and they have lost something, even if their house is still standing when they come home.

There were other reasons to travel. Gaelic poets went on circuits to visit patrons, and some bardic families held substantial lands. Take Tadhg Dall Ó hUiginn, the sixteenth-century Sligo poet. We have poems he addressed to lords across Connacht and Ulster. We also have records naming him as his father's heir and identifying his family lands at Dougharane and Coolrecuill. Gaelic lords themselves made an annual round of visits to households that owed them hospitality. Nobody would look at a chief on circuit and conclude that he had no country. Why should a family on the move be presumed to have had no claim on the places it returned to?

Dylan asked us to consider who had done the describing. To an official looking out from the Pale, *nomadic* could stand for several ways of living beyond it. To a family, it mattered whose cattle could graze a hillside and who could cross the ground to reach it. The Cromwellian surveys measured estates for confiscation and redistribution. Suppose you know who received an estate. Where on that map would you find the people who used the land?

There was another word I wanted us to examine. Who first called the settled Irish *settled*? It wasn't a name we Travellers gave the rest of Ireland. As I argued at the hearing, the language came through the people and institutions organising settlement. A Gaelic family could live for generations in one place. What took centuries to establish was the authority to say that everybody ought to live that way. By 1963 the State could speak of absorbing Travellers into the surrounding population as though that population, and the conditions under which it had come together, needed no explanation.

Essential reading. I followed that question through plantation, land purchase, schooling and independence in our Traveller-led paper. To Be Settled or to Be Unsettled? The Historical Formation of the Settled Population in Ireland

Where would a Traveller family look?

We pursued that question after the hearing. On 24 October 2026 I asked for records of how the Irish Land Commission divided estates after independence. Could we trace Travellers as tenants, occupiers, applicants or holders of grazing rights? I asked about refused applications too. In a separate enquiry to the Records Branch, I suggested starting with Sligo. Could an independent researcher consult an estate index or an allotment register for one county?

On 27 October, the Records Branch explained that the papers still help establish title for the people who received allotments and are closed to general research. The Department gave our Freedom of Information request the reference FOI.26.427. The National Archives also offered to discuss a narrower request. We asked which indexes we could start with. For now we can tell a family where some of those records are kept. What the records might say about their people remains an open question.

What an archaeologist sees from the road

Senator Malcolm Noonan, who chaired the hearing, asked Dylan what an archaeologist actually finds when a new road cuts across the Irish landscape. Dylan had worked on those excavations. The churches and castles survive in stone. For the homes of the people around them, he described traces of huts and the use of wicker. A dwelling that looks temporary to somebody excavating it centuries later could have been home to the people who built it. When Dylan spoke about seasonal herding, the chair immediately thought of the Burren.

Dylan would like settled Irish children to know this history too. How are they to understand the country their families came from if the buildings left standing are taken to tell the whole story?

Deputy John Connolly recognised the Clare case Dylan mentioned. In 2022 the McDonagh family challenged an order to remove their caravans from council land. Mr Justice Gerard Hogan held that the caravans were dwellings under Article 40.5 of the Constitution because the family lived in them. The council owned the ground. The family still had a home whose loss the court had to weigh.

What the Cork families knew to ask

Fergus and Deputy Dessie Ellis both remembered Traveller camps around Finglas. Years later, when Fergus wanted to study the microbiome in Cork, he needed people who could tell him what he had missed seeing those camps from the outside.

I want to give particular credit to the Traveller women of Cork. Helen Casey, Anne Burke and Chrissie O'Sullivan founded the Traveller Visibility Group when families on unofficial sites lacked water, electricity and toilets. The organisation those women built went on to help shape research published in *Nature Medicine*. The paper acknowledges the group's Health Unit and Travellers of North Cork. A university team could have collected every sample and still missed the significance of brothers and sisters if the families had been brought in only after the questions were written.

The gut microbiome is the community of microscopic organisms in our digestive tract, together with the genes they carry. Some gut bacteria break down fibre our bodies cannot digest unaided. They produce substances that nourish the cells lining the bowel and help regulate immune responses. What happens to those microbes when the conditions a child grows up in change?

Fergus and his colleagues found that some Traveller participants had a gut microbiome with features more often seen in less industrialised societies. Family size, accommodation and childhood contact with animals, particularly horses, were among the factors associated with the pattern. As Fergus put it, "we are the ones who have diverged". He meant that industrialisation had changed the microbiome of the settled majority. Our families had retained something that science could learn from.

Senator Maria Byrne asked whether the findings differed between people living in houses and people living on halting sites. They did. Among the people studied, those who had travelled as children and were now living on sites tended to retain more of that microbial pattern. Fergus wanted the plumbing and sanitation families had been promised. He also wanted them able to keep their animals and live close to one another. Both belong in a conversation about what makes a good home. So do the people who thought to ask about brothers and sisters in the first place.

Senator Anne Rabbitte described a horse project in Clondalkin where occupational therapists worked with children. She wanted a project in Tuam. Fergus said that a study of contact with horses should include settled and Traveller participants. Knowledge from Traveller families could be of use to children whose families had never kept a horse.

When the discussion turned to depression, Fergus was careful about what biology could explain. He spoke about what it costs a person to have their culture taken from them. I raised the work of Dr Tracy Westerman, an Aboriginal psychologist in Australia. She told a Western Australian parliamentary inquiry that a strong sense of cultural identity can help protect young Aboriginal people against suicide. The UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues has also examined how dispossession and the loss of cultural ties bear on the well-being of Indigenous young people. Here in Ireland, our families are entitled to ask what helps a Traveller child grow up with a sense of belonging, and to have that question taken as seriously as the figures collected after another death.

The question I hope we come back to

Senator O'Reilly came back to our proposed assembly. What would it decide? Travellers could choose who came into rooms like this to speak for us. To me, that is one practical meaning of decolonisation. Another is giving families a real say in where they live and whether they can keep the people and animals they depend on close by.

I also raised money allocated for Traveller health that fails to reach families. Senator O'Reilly asked me to supply the evidence behind the figures we discussed. I welcome that question. Our hearing concerned the international convention on racial discrimination. Where the State describes a programme as a special measure to secure equal rights, families should be able to find out what was promised, when it was due and what was delivered.

I want to thank the members who stayed with us through an unfamiliar argument, and Senator Malcolm Noonan in particular. His years as a minister with responsibility for heritage showed. He could follow Dylan from a road excavation to a summer pasture. Then he asked whether our research could inform the Traveller heritage strategy and how an approach led by the community could take hold. I thought he was a brilliant chair. He gave people time to think aloud. Some of what the members heard together that day may have been new to them. To the families who have lived it, it is an old story.

A follow-up hearing is overdue. I would like the committee to bring the Cork Traveller researchers back with Fergus and give them time to set out what the science already tells us, what still needs testing and what that means for accommodation decisions being made now. Alongside them, let families say what changed for their children when they had to move away from grandparents, cousins or animals they had helped to rear. A council making the next placement ought to have the benefit of both kinds of knowledge.

Seven years passed between our submission and our hearing. A child who was five when we wrote to the Seanad was twelve by the time we were heard. For families worried about a child's health, or grieving someone they have lost to suicide, the timetable matters. I left Leinster House believing the members understood that. I hope they call us back soon enough for what we learned together to make a difference to the children growing up now.

Reading and sources

Read the hearing of 7 May 2026. In the printed Oireachtas record, see p. 6 for Deputy Ellis's question, pp. 9–14 for the microbiome, pp. 15–17 for land and representation, and pp. 22–24 for the chair's closing discussion.

Read submission No. 9 by Bernard Sweeney and Dylan Foley.

Read the Cork microbiome study in *Nature Medicine.

Dr Tracy Westerman's evidence on culture and identity, discussed in chapter 4 of the Western Australian parliamentary inquiry.

UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, discussion paper on self-harm and suicide among Indigenous youth.

Marc Caball on Tadhg Dall Ó hUiginn and his family's landholdings, Dictionary of Irish Biography · Patronage networks and poetic circuits in Gaelic Ireland.

Megan Edwards Alvarez on annual hospitality rounds in Gaelic Ireland · The Cromwellian land surveys, Virtual Record Treasury of Ireland.

Clare County Council v McDonagh, Supreme Court judgment, 2022 · Malcolm Noonan on his heritage responsibilities.

TraVision Foundation correspondence on Irish Land Commission records, 24 October–6 November 2026, including the Records Branch reply of 27 October and Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine reference FOI.26.427.

The women who founded the Traveller Visibility Group · UCC's account of the community research partnership.

Eileen Flynn's election to chair the committee in 2020 · Her 2025 Seanad election.

Review of dietary fibre, gut microbes and immune function.