# Who would give up a seat?

*Bernard Sweeney on Traveller representation and the call for a State apology*

I was sitting beside two Travellers I knew and respected in the public gallery of Dáil Éireann on 1 March 2017. The gallery was packed. There were Travellers all around me and settled people among us. Down at the gates, families who had come from across Ireland were waiting in the rain to hear the Taoiseach recognise Traveller ethnicity. Among them were people who had spent thirty years campaigning for the words he was about to say.

I said to a few of our people that surely some of the settled visitors could give up their seats. I remember passing the suggestion to Bríd Smith of People Before Profit. What Bríd did next is on page 460 of the Dáil record. She had spent half an hour at the gates and reckoned there were between 150 and 200 Travellers outside. From the floor of the Dáil, she asked settled visitors in the gallery to give up their places. She asked whether another room could be opened. Then she offered to forgo her own speaking time and help usher people in.

I know Bríd personally. We've met many times, at meetings and elsewhere. I think she's a wonderful human being and an even better politician. That offer to give up her speaking time is one reason why. She was prepared to miss her turn in the Dáil if it meant another family could get in. From where I sat, I saw no settled visitor stand up to give a Traveller their seat. Some of the people I recognised had worked alongside Travellers for years. I think of those seats whenever somebody asks me what I mean by the settled saviour complex. Bríd understood exactly who had come to hear the speech and what one seat was worth to them.

The news of the sitting reached me at what felt like overnight notice. Some people had more warning. Ruth Coppinger told the House she had submitted names about thirty-six hours earlier. Gerry Adams said Aengus Ó Snodaigh had raised the matter the previous Thursday. The Ceann Comhairle explained that there were too few staff to manage the crowd safely. I wondered then whether there was more interest in getting the announcement made than in giving our families time to be there. The speech went ahead with Travellers still at the gate.

When Enda Kenny finished, I called down to him. "Taoiseach, offer an apology on behalf of the State to the Travellers." The Irish Times printed those words that evening.

## What I had been asking since I was young

Around 2001 or 2002, I remember saying that the Government ought to apologise to us. Another Traveller said the Government was there to help us. Why should it apologise? A settled person explained why an apology might be due, and the Traveller reconsidered. I was young enough to be puzzled by how little the argument had changed in the time it took to pass from my mouth to somebody else's.

I got involved in politics early. In 2004 I was one of the founding members of Mincéirs Whiden. I wanted Travellers to be able to assemble, decide what mattered to us and elect people to carry out those decisions. In spring 2009, *Changing Ireland* reported that more

than 750 Travellers were registered as members of our Assembly. The Assembly elected the Council. An ordinary member had a vote. To me that was the most important thing about it.

A voluntary organisation can elect its board. A member of the wider Traveller community may have no vote in that election and no means of replacing the person who goes before a minister on their behalf. I have been asking this since I was a young man. If someone says they represent me, when do I get to vote?

In 2010, Mincéirs Whiden called for a State apology, an intervention Silvia Brandi recorded in her 2013 doctoral thesis at University College Cork. An invitation to another Assembly meeting survives from September 2013. It gives the address on the Headford Road in Galway and the hour the meeting would start. In 2019 Dylan Foley and I put a further proposal for an elected Traveller assembly before the Seanad. I also remember helping set up a Facebook page called Traveller Assembly. At a protest in Dublin, a man from the Irish Traveller Movement asked me what we wanted the assembly to do. I said we wanted Travellers to have some influence over the organisations that represented us. As I remember his reply, what struck him was how much control the organisations might lose. It was a short conversation. We had each heard the other describe the same transfer of power.

## What the Taoiseach recognised

There is a sentence from Enda Kenny's speech that deserves to be read alongside the one everyone applauded. He said recognition would "create no new individual, constitutional or financial rights". He explained that Travellers already held rights under the Constitution and Irish law. He believed recognition could change relations between Travellers and the wider society. I understand why people who had fought for that acknowledgement stood and applauded. I also heard the limit the Government had placed on its own announcement. My call from the gallery was for something else the State could do that evening. It could acknowledge what it had done to our people.

The law helps explain why I still raise the question of language. Irish equality legislation already named membership of the Traveller community as a protected ground before 2017. International minority rights also reach beyond protection from discrimination. Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights protects the right of people belonging to ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities to enjoy their culture, practise their religion and use their language together.

Indigeneity raises a further question about the relationship between a people, their territory and the authorities that came to govern them. The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples speaks of self-determination in Article 3, of representatives chosen by the people through their own procedures in Article 18, and of lands traditionally owned, occupied or used in Article 26. A people can be both Indigenous and an ethnic minority. Those are international standards. A claim to a particular piece of land in Ireland would still have to be established under the law that applies to it.

I understand Travellers as Indigenous Gaels. When I argue for that description, I am asking Ireland to examine what happened to our relationship with land, how decisions over our lives passed into other hands and who has the authority to speak for us now. The 2017 recognition left those questions open. Over the years, raising them has often

earned me a reputation for giving out. I have become reluctant to attend meetings where I know how much of my time will go on defending my right to ask.

## When the schoolbook says “we”

In a lecture on how nations come into being, the historian Timothy Snyder described what happens when a national story reaches the classroom. “The nation takes over the state, the state takes over the education, the education takes over the kids.” He was speaking about how a nation comes to claim the past. The question it leaves me with in Ireland is a small one. When the schoolbook says “we”, who does a Traveller child understand that to mean?

A settled child and a Traveller child can sit beside one another learning the date of Irish independence. How often does either get to ask which laws the new State kept, or what they meant for the family living in a wagon a mile from the school?

> “A school may teach Irish national freedom while giving children little account of Traveller lives or the policies directed at them.” — *More Than Sorry*, chapter 4, p. 29.

In my paper *How the Irish Became Settled (and the Travellers Remained Indigenous)*, I ask how people with very different family histories came to be called the settled population. A Gaelic family could stay on the very same ground while a grant gave somebody else authority over it. Centuries later, a child can learn about that Gaelic past as part of Ireland’s inheritance and hear a living Traveller family described as people who still have to fit in. The Gaelic past belongs to this island. Anyone who wants to learn about it should have the chance. I remember the Traveller historian Michael McDonagh making the point that you could tell the history of Ireland through Travellers’ lives, and that to understand our lives you had to know the history of Ireland.

What strikes me is that anyone had to bring a Bill before the Oireachtas to make room for that history in school. Travellers have always told our own stories. The *Traveller Culture and History in Education Bill 2018* asked something of recognised schools. It proposed that they should promote knowledge and understanding of Traveller culture and history. Four years after our evening in the gallery, Bríd Smith came back to that question in the Dáil. On 1 July 2021, during the Second Stage debate, she thanked the people who had brought the Bill forward. She wanted it passed. Then she asked the House to consider why Irish schools needed legislation to teach children about the Travellers they shared this island with.

> “Why do we have to do that? Why do we have to … pass legislation to do that?” — Bríd Smith, Dáil Éireann, 1 July 2021.

Bríd went on to ask the State to investigate its own treatment of Travellers. That is what brings her question back to the apology for me. If a Traveller child and a settled child are to understand what a Taoiseach is apologising for, both deserve the chance to learn what happened.

On 23 October 2026 I wrote on behalf of the Foundation to the Department of Education and Youth and to the Houses of the Oireachtas Service under freedom of information. Eight years after the Bill was introduced, I wanted to know what had happened to it. Leah Hensey, the Oireachtas FOI officer, checked with the Journal Office. On 28 October she told me the Dáil had put the Bill back on its list of business on 1 May 2025. The office

could find no record of it being sent on to a select committee in the current Dáil after that. She had answered the question about referral, and I agreed to close that particular request.

I also wrote to the Joint Committee on Key Issues affecting the Traveller Community. Its chair, Deputy George Lawlor, replied to me himself on 29 October. The Bill predated his election to the Dáil and his time as chair. He thanked me for drawing it to his attention and committed to helping it through. I appreciated that reply. On 2 November I wrote back to ask what the next step would be.

I would put this history on the curriculum of every school in Ireland. That is part of what decolonisation means to me. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment already offers teachers material on Traveller history and culture. Here is a lesson I would add. Give pupils the State's instructions to the Commission on Itinerancy. Beside them, give them the account of the Traveller families from Ballyfermot who asked to be heard. The Government wanted families to settle. The families wanted to know where they could go when they were moved on. Let the class hear the difference between those two questions.

I think of the Traveller child who hears a remark about their family and then has to decide whether to answer it in front of the class. The teacher can take some of that weight off the child by knowing the history and teaching it to everybody. A settled classmate gets to understand where the remark came from. A Traveller pupil gets to open a schoolbook and find their people there on an ordinary school day. That could make it a little easier to feel you belong. When I talk about healing together, one of the places I hope it can begin is in that classroom.

## A Westminster law on an Irish desk

Take a horse that strays into a farmer's field. Who answers for the damage? In 1963 an Irish commission looking at that question reached for a law Westminster had passed in 1851. On printed pages 97–98 of the *Report of the Commission on Itinerancy*, the commissioners recommended keeping section 8 of the *Summary Jurisdiction (Ireland) Act 1851* for cases outside a new offence they proposed, and raising its maximum penalties.

The new offence would apply to a person with no fixed abode. If their horse or vehicle was on someone else's land, the proposal put the burden on them to prove the owner had given permission. In 1985 the Law Reform Commission pointed to a case any farmer would understand. A farmer's animals could stray into the next farmer's field too. It proposed a rule that would apply to both owners. What had the first man's address to do with the harm to the crop?

> "This is what I mean by a colonial inheritance. More than forty years after independence, an Irish commission chose a law passed at Westminster, proposed heavier penalties and set those proposals within its policy of absorption." — *More Than Sorry*, chapter 3, p. 22.

The commissioners were making recommendations. There is also an example you can read in an Act the Oireachtas actually passed. Section 20 of the *Local Government Act 1925* applied the nuisance provisions of the *Public Health (Ireland) Act 1878* to homes including tents and vans where their condition or overcrowding met the statutory test. The words

of the Irish Act point you straight back to the older law. For a family with no water where they stopped, it mattered whether the council came to provide a supply or to inspect the home itself.

## Who gets remembered when an idea is accepted?

In October 2022 the Irish Traveller Movement convened its members in Athlone to discuss a State apology. Its account acknowledges that Travellers had already called for one. Its headline identifies an assembly on that specific subject. Its opening sentence calls the gathering the "first ever national assembly of Travellers". I welcome the members' vote for an apology. I take issue with the word *first*. What happens to those 750 Assembly members when a reader meets that sentence? In February 2026, ITM director Bernard Joyce brought the call for a formal apology before an Oireachtas committee. There is room in the public record for his contribution and for the people who raised it when there was little prospect of a hearing.

There has been a cost to speaking about this. I remember being called mad, anti-settler and anti-NGO. I feel I lost twenty-five years of my life to the struggle to be heard and to the exclusion that came with it. Other Travellers have spoken to me privately about their experiences. They can decide when and whether to tell those stories. I know from my own life why a person might weigh the price before speaking in public.

Dr Sindy Joyce described one aspect of gatekeeping in her research with young Travellers. Even a trusted organisation, acting in good faith, can limit who is heard if it chooses which individuals a researcher meets. Her answer was to let organisations advertise the study and young people volunteer directly. I recognise the word from my own experience. In a thesis, people can discuss what a gatekeeper does. When I used it about political representation, I found myself having to answer for my attitude. I would like the same freedom for Travellers in political life. We should be able to bring a question to the State ourselves.

There is a version of this in the universities too. In Australia, sociologists Maggie Walter and Kathleen Butler examined what sociology students were taught about the country's First Peoples. At a later workshop led by Butler, participants described Aboriginal scholars doing the early work while white sociologists' books received the attention. They spoke of conferences on Indigenous issues where Aboriginal scholars were passed over for the main speaking invitation. The reader of the textbook and the audience at the conference might never know whose work brought the subject before them.

The writer Teju Cole called a related habit the *white-saviour industrial complex*. Writing about outside interventions in Africa, he asked what right people had to decide what others needed without consulting them. *Settled saviour complex* is my name for the Irish experience. I think of the young Traveller I was, making a case for an apology that another man could dismiss until he heard it from a settled person. I think, too, of Bríd asking her fellow settled people to make room. What matters to me is whether, after somebody offers their help, Travellers have more say over what happens next.

Organisations understand something about this pressure themselves. In a 2024 Irish Council for Civil Liberties study, 37% of respondents said they had curtailed advocacy, campaigning or communications for fear of what might happen to their funding. My question is what happens one step further down. If an organisation weighs the risk of

speaking frankly to its funder, what does a Traveller weigh before speaking frankly to the organisation?

## How other peoples put the question

In Canada, Sharon McIvor and Gail Stacey-Moore went to court with the Native Women's Association of Canada over who would sit at the constitutional talks that led to the Charlottetown Accord. The federal government had funded four national Aboriginal organisations to take part. The women had taken part in a parallel consultation. They wanted their own association at the negotiating table, with equal funding, because they wanted Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms to protect women under any new system of self-government. In 1994 the Supreme Court of Canada held that the government had no such duty on the evidence before it. Think about what was on the agenda. Canada was discussing whether to write a right to Aboriginal self-government into its Constitution. Indigenous women had to go to court to argue over who would speak for them in that discussion.

There is an older Canadian case that makes me think carefully about my own argument for elections. At Six Nations of the Grand River in 1924, the federal government imposed an elected council. Police locked the traditional chiefs out of the council house. I have spent years asking for Travellers to be able to elect our representatives. The words *to be able to* matter. The first decision belongs to the people who will live under the arrangement.

In Aotearoa New Zealand the question came down to who could negotiate historical Treaty claims for all Ngāpuhi. In 2015 the Waitangi Tribunal found that the Crown had recognised a negotiating body without clear evidence that the hapū, the kin groups whose claims were at stake, supported its mandate. Two Māori bodies then worked on a proposal together. One sentence is worth bringing home to Ireland. "Hapū will decide who will represent their interests." When a revised proposal was ready to go to a vote in 2018, Te Kotahitanga representatives Pita Tipene and Rudy Taylor said it was time for Ngāpuhi to have their say.

In India the question was whether a mountain could be mined for bauxite. The Dongria Kondh people of Odisha worship in the Niyamgiri hills and depend on the forests there. In 2013, twelve village assemblies heard the proposal. All twelve rejected it. Three years later, when the state government sought another round of meetings, Dongria Kondh leader Lado Sikaka and others petitioned the governor. The villages had given their answer. Why should the people have to keep assembling to give it again? The study *Representing Indigenous Sacred Land* also examines how campaigners at home and abroad described the Dongria Kondh to win support. You can read that account alongside what Sikaka himself said when the government wanted another vote.

In the United States, Vine Deloria Jr. asked what American Indians got out of all the anthropologists who came to study them. A researcher could leave with material for a book and a career. What could the people who supplied the knowledge take home? Deloria also worked with scholars willing to take their lead from Native people. Grant Arndt's study of his exchanges with anthropologist Nancy Oestreich Lurie shows what that meant in practice. Lurie used her position inside anthropology to press colleagues to

take up the struggles Indigenous people themselves had identified. I would welcome that kind of working relationship here.

In Australia in May 2017, just weeks after our evening in the Dáil, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander delegates issued the Uluru Statement from the Heart. They asked for "the establishment of a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution". Those delegates chose their proposal, in their own terms, after regional dialogues. These peoples have different histories and have reached different conclusions about the institutions they want. What speaks to me in Ireland is their insistence on deciding the matter themselves.

## The words and the money

Nine years before I called down from the Dáil gallery, another parliament had filled to hear an apology. On 13 February 2008 Kevin Rudd apologised on behalf of the Australian Parliament to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, especially the Stolen Generations. Children had been taken from their families under the laws and policies of successive governments. Survivors had waited years to hear their country acknowledge what had been done to them.

In the days before the apology, the Aboriginal lawyer Noel Pearson put his finger on what the government had left out. As the Aboriginal journalist Amy McQuire records it, he said, "Blackfellas will get the words, the whitefellas will keep the money." He was talking about compensation. The apology itself offered none. I hear his question in Ireland when I read Enda Kenny's words about financial rights. Recognition meant a great deal to the people beside me. It still left a family who had suffered under State policy with the whole business of seeking a remedy ahead of them.

## What a family carries

> "A boulder at the entrance to a stopping place could close a route between relatives as effectively as it closed the road to a caravan. A reduced school day cost a pupil teaching time that the rest of the class received. A police record could attach suspicion to a family member from infancy. Each decision belonged to a particular authority. Families had to live with their combined effects. Losing regular contact with relatives matters all the more when those are the people you turn to after a death." — *More Than Sorry*, chapter 16, p. 101.

Settled families across this island also know what it is to grow up with somebody missing from the family and little explanation of where they went. When I speak of trauma passing between generations, I think of the questions the children inherit. Who made the decision? Where are the records? Who is still alive who might tell us? In this article I am asking what those questions have meant for Travellers.

The European figures are worth getting right. A report published in 2018 estimated that 18.5% of people in the Republic of Ireland had a mental health problem in 2016, compared with 17.3% across the then EU. That put Ireland among the highest overall. The figure covers several conditions, including depression, bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. It tells us how common those conditions were in aggregate. Why distress persists across generations is a different question, and that study did not investigate the effects of colonial rule.

Traveller researchers asked a question closer to home. In the All Ireland Traveller Health Study, adults were asked about days when their mental health had been poor in the previous month. Those who had recently lost a relative or friend, and those who reported more discrimination, were more likely to report at least fourteen such days. The study also found a gap in life expectancy at birth in the Republic. Its figures for 2008 put that gap at 15.1 years for Traveller men and 11.5 years for Traveller women compared with men and women in the wider population. Those losses give an urgency to the question I shouted down from the gallery.

## What I would want to hear in an apology

I want the State to name the decisions for which it is apologising. Take the *Report of the Commission on Itinerancy* (1963). On page 60 the commissioners recorded that local prejudice against Traveller parents and children had made life in housing intolerable for some who returned to the road. On page 103 they concluded that "absorption is the only real solution". I would like a Taoiseach to explain that decision in terms a family could recognise. The State knew what some children had met when their parents moved into houses. It still made settlement the aim for all of us. Mincéirs Whiden's 2026 Galway conference called for a formal investigation and ring-fenced resources for future generations. Families should be able to come back in a year and ask what was done.

Who will take evidence directly from families? Who will pay for the work that follows? Which minister will have to come back and account for it? I would want those arrangements in place by the time the Taoiseach stands up to speak.

> "Reparations are owed because some losses continue long after the original decision. An apology can acknowledge a separation. Opening the records can finally tell relatives who authorised it and why. Compensation can recognise lost earnings. Restoring access to a stopping place can give families the choice to live near one another again. The people who suffered the loss should direct that work and be able to hold the responsible public body to its undertaking. For some, receiving an honest answer after years of asking may bring a measure of closure. Each family decides what healing means in its own life." — *More Than Sorry*, chapter 16, p. 102.

I also believe some organisations owe Travellers an apology of their own. Where people were ridiculed for raising an issue the organisation now campaigns on, hear them. Where an account of an achievement has left out those who did the early work, correct it. I would like to see the earlier Assembly acknowledged by name. The people who did that work deserve to read their own history while they are here to read it.

## Who reviews the organisations?

I believe an independent, Traveller-led review of national organisations that speak on our behalf is overdue. Alnoor Ebrahim studied how NGOs account for their work. He found that they had developed stronger ways of answering to the people who fund them than to the people they serve. A department can ask for accounts before it releases the next payment. What can a Traveller family ask for when somebody has spoken to that department in their name?

Family ties have carried a great deal of Traveller organising, often through years when nobody was being paid for it. My concern is what happens when one family holds several

of the positions through which other families must pass to be heard. The review should examine who has held board seats and paid leadership roles, for how long, how vacancies were advertised and who made the appointments. Where relatives took part in a decision, the records should show how that interest was handled. Travellers outside the organisations should be able to give evidence directly and in confidence. Publish the findings and give each organisation a chance to answer them.

What I call the *Gatekeeper Federation* is the arrangement in which a Traveller has to be on good terms with the people already at the table to stand a chance of getting near it. That has to end. A family should be able to write to a minister, stand for election or dispute what a representative has said without first needing that representative's blessing.

Of all the things said in the Dáil that evening, I keep coming back to Bríd Smith offering to surrender her speaking time. She had listened to the people at the gate. She knew who was missing and what she herself could give up to make room. When the day comes for a Taoiseach to apologise, I hope the first question asked in planning it is one the families outside Leinster House could have answered in 2017. Who needs to be in that room, and who gets to decide?

*More Than Sorry: Travellers, the Irish State and the case for repair* is forthcoming. Ask the Foundation about the book.

## Reading and sources

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