On Monday October 9 Parliament held a debate on the motion put forward by Alok Sharma, the Minister of State for Communities and Local Government (DCLG):

**That this House has considered Gypsies and Travellers and local communities**

After reminding MPs that, in his opinion, Britain is maybe the most tolerant country in the world, he went on to explain:

*“I want to focus on four main themes. The* ***first*** *is the impact on settled communities when a small minority does not show respect for the rule of law. The* ***second*** *is the remedies that are available to the police and local councils to deal with illegal behaviour. The* ***third*** *is the Government’s response to date in addressing matters related to the Traveller community, as well as what, in concrete terms, we intend to do further. The* ***fourth*** *is what the Government are doing to improve the life chances of the Traveller community, most importantly the young”.*

The full debate makes worthwhile but, in the main, depressing reading. Most of the MPs who spoke, were intent on amending and increasing existing legal powers to remove unauthorised encampments faster and cheaper. They were also intent on preventing private unauthorised developments. Most took care to point out that they were only talking about the minority of Gypsies and Travellers though in some cases their intolerance was only thinly disguised.

After almost three and a half hours Marcus Jones Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State (DCLG) brought the debate to a close, stating:

*“I am, therefore, very pleased that, today, we have signalled our intention to seek a call for evidence to review the way in which existing powers are enforced and to understand what more can be done to tackle many of the issues raised in the debate”.*

A number of MPs including David Linden, Andrew Slaughter, Kate Green, Tony Lloyd, Laura Pidcock and Paul Williams made strong speeches. These restored some balance into a debate that had seemed to focus on criminality ignoring the originally announced main themes three and four. They raised important matters such as health, education, the Ministerial Working Group commitments, the removal by the government of accommodation needs assessments and the availability of sites.

Laura Pidcock was perplexed at the emphasis and subject of the debate. She pointed out:

*“The* [*Minister*](https://www.theyworkforyou.com/glossary/?gl=35)*’s speech positioned Gypsies, Travellers and local communities, but they are one and the same. Gypsies and Travellers are part of local communities and are our constituents if they reside in our constituencies. There should not be an othering of those communities. I know that this may be a controversial point, but imagine if there were a general debate on black people and local communities. We can hear how nonsensical that would sound to an outside observer”.*

Andrew Slaughter concluded his speech by saying:

*“Let me end by speaking to those in the Gypsy and Traveller community, because they do watch these debates. I praise organisations such as Traveller Law Reform Project, The Traveller Movement, Friends, Families and Travellers, and the London Gypsy and Traveller Unit, who admirably represent those communities. There are, notwithstanding some of the speeches they will have heard today, many parliamentarians, past and present, who have done their best to represent Gypsy and Traveller communities. I particularly pay tribute to the late* [*Lord Avebury*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lord_Avebury)*, who introduced the* [*Caravan Sites Act 1968*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caravan_Sites_Act_1968) *and was an advocate throughout his parliamentary lifetime;* [*Tim Boswell*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tim_Boswell)*, who is now in the* [*other place*](https://www.theyworkforyou.com/glossary/?gl=129)*;* [*Richard Bennett*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Bennett) *from the* [*Local Government Association*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Local_Government_Association)*;* [*Julie Morgan*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julie_Morgan)*, who used to run the all-party group; and* [*Rodney Bickerstaffe*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rodney_Bickerstaffe)*. I will end by quoting from his obituary in* [*The Guardian*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Guardian) *this week, which said:*

*“At one time his mother’s family were so poor they lived in a Gypsy caravan in a field. Unsurprisingly, given his unstinting championing of the underdog, Bickerstaffe was one of the few public figures to loudly champion the cause of Travellers over the years.”*

*I wish that more Members of this House would emulate Rodney’s example”.*

Follow this link to read the full Hansard report of the debate.

<https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2017-10-09/debates/E1DC6872-5335-41CC-A5DE-991D06FE9B3E/GypsiesAndTravellersAndLocalCommunities>