DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM SHAINCHEISTEANNA RÍTHÁBHACHTACHA A THÉANN I GCION AR AN LUCHT SIÚIL

JOINT COMMITTEE ON KEY ISSUES AFFECTING THE TRAVELLER COMMUNITY

Déardaoin, 7 Bealtaine 2026

Thursday, 7 May 2026

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 12.30 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 12.30 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	**Seanadóirí / Senators**
John Connolly,	Maria Byrne,
Dessie Ellis,	Joe O'Reilly,
Tony McCormack,	Anne Rabbitte.
Séamus McGrath,	
Naoise Ó Muirí.	

Seanadóir / Senator Malcolm Noonan sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

The joint committee met in private session at 12.39 p.m., suspended at 12.40 p.m. and resumed in public session at 12.42 p.m.

Traveller Identity - International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination: Discussion

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Senator Malcolm Noonan): Apologies have been received from the Cathaoirleach, Deputy Lawlor, and Deputy Quinlivan. This meeting is to discuss the issue of Traveller identity with particular reference to the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, ICERD, and other related matters with the TraVision Foundation. Our witnesses are Mr. Bernard Sweeney, founder and director of the TraVision Foundation; Mr. Dylan Foley, archaeologist; and Professor Fergus Shanahan, microbiologist. They are all very welcome.

I ask anyone attending remotely to mute themselves if they are not contributing, so we do not pick up any background noise or feedback. As usual, I remind all those in attendance to ensure that mobile phones are on silent or switched off.

As the witnesses are within the precincts of Leinster House, they are protected by absolute privilege in respect of the presentations they make to the committee. This means they have an absolute defence against any defamation action for anything they say at the meeting. However, they are expected not to abuse this privilege and it is my duty as Cathaoirleach Gníomhach to ensure this privilege is not abused. Therefore, if their statements are potentially defamatory in relation to an identifiable person or entity, they will be directed to discontinue their remarks. It is imperative that they comply with any such direction.

Members are also reminded of the long-standing parliamentary practice that they should not comment on, criticise or make charges against a person or entity outside of the Houses or an official of the Houses either by name or in such a way as to make him, her or it identifiable.

I invite Mr. Sweeney to make his opening statement. We will then proceed with questions and answers.

Mr. Bernard Sweeney: It is good to be here. Before I begin, I acknowledge Senator Eileen Flynn, a fellow Irish Traveller. She was first nominated to the Seanad in June 2020 by the Taoiseach, Deputy Martin, and then went on to be elected by the people in her own right in 2025. She has represented her community with dignity in a space designed with Travellers not in mind and we are very proud of her.

I also acknowledge this committee. It has consistently asked the difficult, necessary questions about outcomes on the ground, implementation and where the money goes. That shows us that what we are talking about today is not only a community concern, but something this committee has already recognised and has asked why the current system is failing.

I wish to introduce Mr. Foley who is an archaeologist. His research shows exactly how the architecture of the colonial era and land management evolved directly into modern policy. It provides material evidence that our exclusion is a deliberate structural legacy, not a modern accident, even if it now operates at a subconscious level.

I also introduce Professor Fergus Shanahan, one of the world's leading clinical microbiologists. In partnership with Cork Traveller Visibility Group, his important work led

to the groundbreaking discovery of a distinct Traveller microbiome. His pioneering research demonstrates how forcing populations with non-industrial lifeways into settled environments fundamentally disrupts biology over generations, altering the microbiome and driving chronic inflammation.

Ms Mags Casey from the Tipperary Traveller Project sends her apologies that she could not be here today. I am the director of the TraVision Foundation. We work across healing, decolonisation, detraumatisation and bringing together history, archaeology, trauma science, psychology and biological research into a single framework using an arts-based approach. I am currently engaged with a number of projects, including mental health and science, and I hope later this year to give our presentation to the United Nations.

What we are presenting today is a fundamental shift in perspective and a change in paradigm based on objective truth. If the current framing of a problem is incomplete, even a great deal of hard work can still produce harmful outcomes. It is like teaching the wrong lessons and expecting people to come up with the right outcomes. If the wrong diagnosis is made, the best medicine in the world will not help. We are here to suggest that the issues affecting Travellers today, such as land rights, legal and political representation and health inequalities, are not just administrative failures but ongoing colonial issues. When the State came into being in 1922, the legal administration structures already in place remained largely intact. For the majority of the settled Irish population, political change brought a new national framework, but for Travellers the systems of governing land, mobility and institutional control have changed very little to date. In areas affecting habitation, surveillance and legitimacy, the old assumptions persisted. We continue to live under the architecture of a colonial framework and many of these laws and policies still affecting Travellers today can be traced directly to those colonial origins.

As Ireland was the first laboratory for England and the blueprint for western colonialism, the methods used to restrict mobility and control here were later exported globally. This gives this State and this committee a unique moral opportunity to be the place where these inherent systems can finally be understood and potentially a benefit to a global population. We say this not to be controversial, but to finally understand the root cause. We feel Dublin is now ready for this. To see this clearly, we only need to look at the State's own baseline of internal colonialism, the report of the Commission on Itinerancy launched on 8 August 1963. Even with its limitations, at that time Travellers were living in physically difficult conditions, as much of the country was. Yet, the report does not describe a physiologically broken people. On the contrary, it records that Traveller children were no less intelligent than the average child in the settled community and no less apt than other children. It also states that Travellers did not consider themselves inferior to the settled population and had no discernible inferior complex. When the initial barrier was overcome, the commission described many Travellers as intelligent, frank, cheerful and engaging. In relation to crime, the report states plainly that itinerants as a body did not constitute a criminal element in the population and had no predisposition to crime. It also acknowledges that Travellers were often blamed for more crimes than they committed and for crimes they seldom committed.

If we compare that with the present day, we have a greater infrastructure, consultation and statutory engagement. The State frequently uses the language of the inclusion and yet the outcomes are devastatingly worse. Life expectancy remains severely reduced. Chronic health

inequalities persist. Travellers remain over-represented in the prison system, over-represented in the graveyards, under-represented in political life and, too often, failed by the education system. Exclusion from land continues and land rights remain unresolved. Most tragically of all, our children and young people are dying by suicide.

Let us be clear, there can be no celebration of progress when our children are in the graveyards. The proof that this inherent system is colonial is not just in the history books; it is in those graveyards. Central Statistics Office figures show that the average age of death in 2023 was 58.5 years old for Irish Travellers, compared with 78.6 years old for the settled Irish. That is missing a generation.

For the past 60 years, much of the institutional understanding of Traveller life has been through sociology, social policy and service delivery models. That works documented disadvantage, counted exclusion and described crisis.

However, on its own, it was not enough. It did not fully explain the long-term effects of colonial governance. When one discipline dominates, it narrows the field of vision, and when the field of vision narrows, the solutions narrow with it.

Travellers are often described as being researched to death. What that usually means in practice is repeated, deficit-based, trauma-heavy research focused on depression, anxiety, psychological distress, suicide, exclusion, discrimination and social difficulties, which are usually explained almost entirely through a social and service delivery lens. Much of that work documents crises over and over again. Far less often does it ask what protects Traveller life, what strengths exist within the community, what continuity has survived, what our biology can tell us or what resilience might look like across generations. Too often, the same problems are studied again and again, in the same way, and that starts to pass for the whole story.

That is why a multidisciplinary approach is essential. We need input from various disciplines, including science, history, archaeology and microbiology. Professor Shanahan's work suggests that forcing populations with older, non-industrial lifestyles into settled environments alters biology over generations. It disrupts immune regulation, causes inflammation and even affects mental well-being. We strongly encourage the committee to pursue this line of inquiry further because the implications are profound. Professor Shanahan might further explain these points.

That brings us directly to funding, accountability and representation. Committee members have already asked where the investment goes. Mr. Brian Harvey’s 2021 report, The Traveller Community and Homelessness, highlighted a long pattern of underspending, estimating that HSE health services returned large proportions of Traveller health funding unspent, sometimes at a rate of up to 48%. What was the cost of money not used and support not delivered? I am not sure we have ever heard it clearly stated before this committee that during a suicide crisis, allocated Traveller mental health funding is being returned unspent. We are familiar with local authorities engaging in similar practices or having done so. Questions must be asked. If the money was not spent on Travellers, how exactly was it spent and on whom? What are the implications of allocated funding not being used? Questions arise as to whether there was malpractice or failure in the State's duty of care.

There is another issue worth mentioning. Traveller organisations have often been working within the same framework as the State. Many of them have done valuable work under real

constraints. However, funding is often circulated within a relatively small circle of heavily family-orientated organisations. Over time, this inevitably can create gatekeepers, making it difficult for other Traveller organisations to participate and new ideas and approaches to emerge. I say this not to attack or lay blame. However, if the underlying paradigm is too narrow, everybody inside that framework is limited by it. We are not suggesting a single cause of the outcomes we see today but we cannot exclude the possibility that systemic limitations across funding, policy and representation have contributed to the situation we now face.

There is also a legal point that must be stated clearly regarding special measures. In its recent periodic report to the United Nations, the State repeatedly used the term "special measures" in reference to Travellers. However, it did so without clearly specifying under which legal articles of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination those measures are grounded. Under that convention, specifically Articles 1.4 and 2.2, special measures are designed to secure the equal enjoyment of rights. The difference here from what happened in the past is crucial. The State once applied special treatment to Travellers in a coercive and assimilationist way, which is evident in the report of the Commission on Itinerancy. Special measures under international law are the exact opposite. They are corrective, rights-based, time-bound and judged by outcomes. The State's current language lacks specific legal grounding, which means it remains completely unclear what timelines apply and what success might look like in real human terms. Without that clarity, there is a risk of legal language being applied to old, failing approaches.

This presentation is not all negative. We come here today with a great deal of hope. We believe that Ireland today and the current political institutions in Dublin are more mature, more empathetic and more capable of engaging than ever before. We believe this committee has the capacity, courage and maturity to hold this conversation. There are tangible solutions. "Decolonisation", as we use the word, is not a buzzword. It is a genuine process of identifying inherited systems, with the understanding that they shape outcomes, and ensuring evidence-based outcomes. By moving away from a reliance on a single discipline and embracing a multidisciplinary approach, we have a pathway towards meaningful change. However, to walk that path we must face the truth that this is a colonial issue and, as such, it is not only a Traveller issue but a human issue. Indeed, it is a global issue that connects us to indigenous peoples around the world. The work of healing begins here.

I have three questions for the committee. What is needed? What is required from us? What must we do, together, to finally break this cycle? Our foundational goal is to detraumatise and decolonise. If we are serious about saving lives, we must be willing to change the framework. We come before the committee today in the hope it will help us to answer those questions and lead that change. We welcome any questions, particularly to Professor Shanahan on scientific aspects and to Mr. Foley on the historical foundations of what we have presented. I apologise for taking so much time with my statement but we have waited 709 years to give it, which might count for something. I thank the committee.

An Comhchathaoirleach (Senator Malcolm Noonan): Gabhaim buíochas le Mr. Sweeney for his very powerful statement. The work of this committee since its inception in this Dáil term has been very much focused on the granular day-to-day challenges, in health, education and otherwise, facing the Traveller community. Mr. Sweeney's presentation offers a much bigger picture in terms of our approach, for which I thank him. I will now take questions.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: I thank Mr. Sweeney for his introductory statement. The committee has been dealing with many of the issues facing the Traveller community, including suicide, accommodation and discrimination. We constantly meet those issues. It was interesting to hear Mr. Sweeney dating them back to pre-colonial times. I am a little puzzled on that point as my reading over the years has suggested that a lot of families in Ireland during the Cromwell period were pushed out of their homes and ended up living off the land. I do not know whether that is a correct interpretation. I am curious to hear if there is anything correct in saying the Traveller culture developed from that period in this country. I would have thought it went much further back than that and I am curious to hear from the witnesses on that point.

Mr. Bernard Sweeney: The culture is approximately 4,800 years old.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: That is what I thought.

Mr. Bernard Sweeney: It is an indigenous Gaelic culture. When Cromwell was putting people off their land, he was putting them out of a Gaelic world. There were not necessarily roads back then. He was pushing them off their land and into another area. Professor Shanahan might talk about the ancient microbiome that is retained within Travellers, comprising millions of bacteria and fungi and which, as far as I can gather, is very healthy for settled people. We would say that is the non-industrial microbiome.

Then industrialisation came along. Industrialisation included the likes of Cromwell coming to create an industrial world and a settlement. We would once have been the majority culture. Cromwell and English colonisation broke it down over many centuries by creating English settlements. This is from where the term "settled Irish" comes. The English would have called them the "Lloyd settled", while in Dublin, the term was the "settled Irish". This is recorded in the commission report. We were called Travellers, tinkers, itinerants, nomads, vagrants and vagabonds, all of which are colonial labels. Our people go by their surnames.

We are talking about the last of the indigenous clan-based system. What we are looking at today are the unchanged colonial systems from Cromwell's time, which continued beyond 1922. I am sure everyone here knows from their history that David Lloyd George said there would be no change in the systems or else there would be a terrible war within 36 hours. We had to adapt, we had to live with those systems and we all became a certain kind of Irish, except for Irish Travellers. Of course, there were others sections of society, such as native Irish speakers, people in the west of Ireland and the Irish in the North, who also suffered. This is not to cast blame on Dublin. Those were difficult times. Decisions had to be made and sustainability had to be brought to the island. At the time, I probably would have done the very same thing and would have agreed with those who made those decisions.

The Deputy is not far off. Cromwell would have put many of our people onto the so-called roads.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Obviously, in Europe, there was a similar trend, where you have the Roma people. I assume that followed suit in a similar way. When the industrial period started, that created problems in other indigenous populations in Europe.

Mr. Bernard Sweeney: Before I hand over to Mr. Foley, who is an archaeologist and has studied this period of history, there is this conflation and confusion between Travellers and Roma. We are two different cultures with two different origins. They come from north India

and are connected to empires and their eventual breakdown, but I will let Mr. Foley take it from there.

Mr. Dylan Foley: Is the Deputy asking if it is a similar process with the Roma?

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Yes, I am curious. I understand the Roma and Travellers are different cultures, but I am curious whether something very similar happened in Europe with the Roma.

Mr. Dylan Foley: No. It would not be quite the same in the sense that Roma populations have been traced, as far as I understand it, all the way back to north India, where the origin of the population would be. If you go far back, which is beyond the scope of what we are talking about, they would probably be from Indo-European populations as well. However, their journey is documented as being from northern India and into Europe and Egypt, where they became nicknamed gypsies and things like that. They then gradually moved into central Europe. They would have moved in as a nomadic population among a European population at the time. That is quite different from Ireland, where we have an indigenous Gaelic culture, which all people in Ireland would have been involved in at various levels. It would have had diversity in itself because it was not a centralised culture, but all the way from western Scotland and down to the south of Ireland we would have had a Gaelic world.

The Deputy mentioned Cromwell's time. It might be helpful to think about it in these terms. It is not that Cromwell was dispossessing people or that Travellers were coming into existence then. You could look at it like that a little bit but you could also say that colonialism was creating the world we now know, where people are settled and the modern infrastructure of roads, houses and towns that we understand now as being normal were only coming into existence then. For most of the country in the 17th century, for example, stone houses like cottages and things like that would have been called English houses. They would not have been recognisable to the vast majority of people, once they were outside certain districts in the east, for example, where there was heavier English settlement. For the vast majority of the country, people would have lived in more temporary dwellings, if that is clearer.

The conquest and that time the Deputy is talking about - the 17th century - is pivotal in the creation of settled people. We still have and use the term from that era. They called them wild Irish and civil Irish. We call them settled people and Traveller people. I suggest that is exactly the same thing.

Deputy Dessie Ellis: Going back 30 or 40 years, there were Travellers in Dunsink Lane. In Finglas, we used to have many people camping out in different areas. I used to be up with them, sitting down with them and having a chat. However, I have noticed massive changes since then. Even in that period, life has changed dramatically. You have more of a settled Traveller community in the sense that we have halting sites and different things. We do not have what we had in those days, where you had a lot of continuity and people travelled different places. They had places where they dropped off and stayed but, from what I can see, that culture has changed tremendously over the last number of years. I am curious about the witnesses' opinions on the way society has moved, particularly the Traveller community. Do they see that as advancement or as taking a bit from the Traveller culture?

Mr. Bernard Sweeney: I am going to put this one to Professor Shanahan for the simple reason that he will explain it in a scientific way, such as the biology of Travellers versus forced assimilation and what the benefits are and if that culture changes, whether that biology or

microbiome goes away and if it does go away, who is at a loss and what the consequences or implications of that are.

Professor Fergus Shanahan: I grew up in the same area and used to go up to Finglas. I know that area very well. As a settled community person, I have always been interested in the Travellers and thought I knew a lot about them. I made the same observation; you could not miss the fact that things have changed. It is evident even in paintings from around the same time. Markey Robinson was painting Traveller campsites and the same kind of thing we would have seen in Finglas.

I want to tell the committee a story. I went away to America and then came back. I always wanted to study the Travellers in some way, but we found something completely unexpected when we did study them. This is a story of completely unexpected results. When you find something unexpected, that is often dismissed as an outlier, something usual or a curio, but it could be used as something to learn a lesson from and to challenge conventional thinking. I am here to ask the committee to think differently about Travellers.

Growing up in the Finglas area, it was always us and them; the settled community and the Travellers. In everything you fund and think about for Travellers - members mentioned racism, suicide, poor health, and that they are not even surviving as long as the rest of us now - there is a lot of motivation to do something about it. However, those things are not just relevant to that 1% of the population. They are relevant to all of us. There are lessons to be learned here for everyone, but I will tell you one that really brings it home.

We decided to engage with the Travellers about ten years ago. It took me a long time to get people like the Deputy to introduce me to Traveller groups in Cork and north Cork, which is where I work, although I am from Dublin. After we got through the system and met the committees, we convinced them we were not just fly-by-night or that we were going to do a bit of research and disappear. We were going to do some engaged research. By engaged research I mean getting the Travellers to do the research with us. We did not do it on them or about them. We did it with them and it truly was that. They changed the way in which we asked the research questions. That is lesson number one. If the committee is going to do anything on Travellers, please be sure that they are not just consulted but are full square in the centre because they know best how to do it and we have tangible evidence of it.

Our work has been published in some of the big journals, like *Nature*. You cannot get anything more prestigious than that. If we tried to publish it in an Irish journal, we would have struggled. We got it published in an international journal because they were fascinated by the work. We worked on the microbiome, which is just a big word and collective term for all the bugs, bacteria, viruses and fungi that live on all of us - Travellers and the settled community. There was an unexpected finding. Normally with research, you would see somebody is a little bit different from someone else. You might have groups that have blood pressure that is a little higher than others or some of these graduate changes. We found something that was like black and white. We excluded Roma from this and we only looked at Irish Travellers who were genetically Irish, so there is no doubt about this. Members would not be surprised if I told them that some migrants who came to Ireland had a different microbiome, when you look at all the microbes, because of their background. However, they would be shocked to hear there is a section of the Irish population who have microbes, that is, bacteria, viruses and fungi, living on them that are completely different from the rest of the Irish. I do not mean slightly different.

I mean black and white - completely different. We found microbes there that we had never found in any of the other Irish.

We compared about 100 families of Travellers in Cork with 400 native Irish and 3,000 people from the western world. We found that the Travellers have what is called a non-industrialised ancient microbiome. The rest of us have a modernised industrialised microbiome. Why is that important? It is important for your health. Microbes influence your immune system, your gut health and even your mental welfare. They help your digestion but they are critically important for health. It is the hottest story in science. The committee must hear everyone on all the talk shows talking about the microbiome these days. However, this is a story of the Traveller microbiome that is relevant and should be getting traction in the settled community because the Traveller microbiome has microbes that are beneficial for health.

If we look back, there is no doubt Travellers have a shorter lifespan.

There is no doubt but that they suffer from various manifestations of exclusion, poverty and racism, and all those things that, when you live on the margins of society, affect your general health. However, they had microbes that were conferring resistance to certain diseases such as multiple sclerosis, inflammatory bowel disease, ulcerative colitis, Crohn's disease, severe asthma and bad eczema. They have microbes that confer a resistance. That should be motivation. What is it about that? Should not get the settled community be getting the benefits? How can we get some of that in a modern world? What are the determinants of that? We moved on. We could not have found this if we had not worked with them. They told me the questions to ask before we ever knew the research. There is a thing called the "case report form". You collect all these questions. You do your piece of research and then relate it back to the questions you asked the volunteers. It turned out that three things were important and determined that unusual microbiome. The first was sibling count and the number of siblings in a Traveller family. Who would have thought it? I have done 40 years' worth of research. If you go into any hospital in Ireland, do doctors ever ask about the number of siblings you have? They ask about family history, all right, but they do not ask how many siblings are in your family. You might get that information from the census report but you do not get that in a history. Travellers told us we needed to ask about that because that is a way in which they are different. We did ask, and that came out as the number one determinant. The number two determinant was accommodation and living in close quarters. The third was exposure to animals in childhood, particularly horses. They came out sky high.

This would have been an ordinary publication in any ordinary journal and forgotten about if not for one fact, which shows the value of working with the Travellers and not doing something about them without them. They told me about the housing Act 2002, which was the culmination of a lot of legislation. Committee members know more about this issue than I do. That Act put Travellers off the road and into halting sites and State-sponsored housing. It removed nomadism. It is not nomadism that gave gives you the microbiome but it is the circumstances of your life that are necessary when you are nomadic. You are living together. You are often sleeping in the same bed. You are living in close quarters. You are sharing the microbes. The Deputy got his microbes from his mother, I got my microbes from my mother and we all got them from our mothers. However, you share them. You transfer them among your siblings. The census tells us that the average sibling count in Ireland is between one and two per family. If you are rattling around in a nice big house with one to two siblings, you are

not sharing very many microbes. Ten was the average sibling count in our study. If you are living among ten, you are sharing those microbes. You are sharing them with animals and the circumstances you are in.

We were able to get a longitudinal perspective. There is something very sad about this. That microbiome, the one thing that the Travellers have that is good for their health, is being eroded. It is diminishing and vanishing as their culture is vanishing. Why do I say that? We were able to study Travellers who had been nomadic in childhood. The story is that if you were nomadic in childhood and are now in a halting site - not a house, but a halting site - you have largely retained your microbiome. You have an ancient ancestral microbiome. The opposite is the case if you were in a house as a child and are still in a house. You have an industrialised microbiome, like me and all of us in this room, other than Travellers. There was, however, an intermediate group. If you were nomadic in childhood and are now in a house, you are losing your microbiome. That is the group that is losing its microbiome. We have absolutely tangible evidence that as we erode their culture, build houses and put them into conditions that are not culturally sensitive, they are losing this microbiome. It is the very thing that the Deputy and I observed in Finglas.

Some of it is good. If we follow through, give them education, properly plumb and sanitise the halting sites, deliver on the promises we made to them and keep those promises, some of that would be good. Of course Travellers want proper sanitation. However, they still need to be able to pursue the culture they have had.

We have found with the microbiome that just because you cannot see, it does not mean it is not important. Public health policies have continually used words such as "assimilation", which means, in other words, make the problem of this 1% go away by making them life the rest of us. Put them into our schools and into houses, and make them look like us. Give them all these things, forget about their culture and make them like us. In that, we are eroding something. Even if we cannot see it, a big determinant of their health is being eroded.

I believe the microbiome is just one example of the adverse effects of these kinds of policies, which are damaging their health. If you are losing your identity and culture, you are probably losing an awful lot more than just your microbiome. My bigger point is that this is an issue that is of relevance to the settled community. I am interested in this because I would like the benefits. The non-industrialised microbiome that the Travellers have has lower antibiotic resistance genes in it and is better suited to digestion of things such as dietary fibre. It gives resistance to a whole variety of immune-mediated diseases that were never even questioned in the all-Ireland Traveller healthy study of 15 to 20 years ago. They told us all about suicide, longevity, cancer and all these other things, and they are important. However, they never studied the things to which Travellers are resistant. That is an important side of the story. It should be motivation enough. If committee members have any influence over funding, I would ask them to put Travellers at the centre to influence the way the study is done or even to conduct the study themselves. The Deputy mentioned that Travellers are being researched to death. They have research fatigue. The reason it took me so long to win them over is that they had to get to know me and trust me. They did the study for us. I did the bit in the laboratory but they gave us the pearls of the data to convince the editor of *Nature* to publish our study. It has been circulated all around the world now but, curiously, it has not got much traction in Ireland.

Senator Maria Byrne: I thank the witnesses for their presentations. I am the chairperson of a community centre where the Limerick city Traveller health network is based. We have regular contact with the people who work there. They often bring us into some of their briefings if they have visitors. It can be very interesting.

There are a few things that frighten me in the report. The first is that even to this day, longevity in the Traveller community is quite low. Did I understand from Professor Shanahan that the comparison is between people living in mobile homes on halting sites and people in houses or is it right across the Travelling community? He spoke about a multidisciplinary approach. In his opinion, what would that look like? Those are my two opening questions.

Mr. Bernard Sweeney: There has been a lot of research done globally - Tracy Westerman comes to mind - on the link between Aboriginal children and colonialism around identity and giving rise to child suicide. What I mean by "multidisciplinary" is that for the past 40, 50 or 60 years, just one discipline has ruled over our community, and that has been sociology. While it has shown to be useful, it does not incorporate everything. The particular one we are talking about was born out of a former nun and a former priest who happened to get married and open an old Protestant church. For the next 40 or 50 years, she never removed herself from a position of power. Community development principles are about engagement, empowerment and working where the community is. This became a preaching thing rather than a practice thing. A multidisciplinary approach means archaeology, microbiology, geneticists, psychology, psychiatry and all of these and other disciplines that have never really been incorporated. How do people with one of the healthiest microbiomes in the western world, much healthier than the settled population, end up with the worst psychological problems of any people in Europe, if not the world? If we take our statistics and compare them to all the other indigenous people around the world, we will find almost identical outcomes, including high levels of suicide, chronic psychological issues, addiction issues and crime issues. We believe a lot of that is related to colonialism and a decolonisation process is most certainly required, but above all else, positive research is required. We believe that. Even telling other Travellers about the microbiome would give them a lift and sense of, "Wow, we have a microbiome that is really healthy", rather than asking about their siblings committing suicide and destitution and so on.

Professor Fergus Shanahan: The Senator asked whether it was in halting sites or in different places. Very briefly, you can have two opposing things. You can have something happening that is bad for one aspect of your health and something happening that is actually beneficial. It turns out that the people who scored the best in what we call the best microbiome, the most diverse and the most non-industrialised were actually the people in the halting site. We did a WHO wellness assessment on all the Travellers. The people who scored the happiest were actually the people in the halting site. A lot of us would look at the halting site and say it does not have proper sanitation and it is overcrowded. That is true, but what it did do is allowed people to resist the modernisation and the erosion of their culture, and it allowed them to keep their animals. It may have been overcrowded and all the other things but it gave them something that helped them. They were the ones who retained that. If I were blindly to pick where I would like to find a Traveller and be sure I could tell you they had a non-industrialised gut microbiome, I would go to a halting site, not to someone who has been in a house.

Senator Maria Byrne: To pick on something else, Professor Shanahan said that when the WHO did the test, it was shown that the microbiome was coming from animals, whether it was horses and the close proximity to them.

Professor Fergus Shanahan: They are not getting it from there. What happens is that animals allow you to transfer. It goes from human to animal back to another human. That is the way it works.

Senator Maria Byrne: Yes. If the animals were being treated properly through veterinary products, say to do with whatever is growing on their skin or whatever else, would that help?

Professor Fergus Shanahan: It is just access to the animals. There has been a small study in Italy - picking up on our work, actually - taking urbanised children and bringing them to a place. They called it a pet zoo but it was just horses. They got the children to pet the animal in a structured way and then learn how to ride the animal, but just being exposed to horses actually changed their microbiome.

Senator Maria Byrne: Horses, dogs and the whole lot have always been a tradition within the Travelling community, and in many communities. Many people have them in their own homes or farms. When the professor is talking about a multidisciplinary approach, is he saying the animals need to be looked after as much as the human in terms of passing on different things living on people's skin and that he is therefore looking at a wider picture?

Professor Fergus Shanahan: Correct.

Mr. Bernard Sweeney: In one of the situations, I had written a bit of a paper and sent it to Professor Shanahan last year about a horse health farm run by a Traveller. Both of them go together. It is part of biology - Traveller and the horse. They are one shared microbiome. To have a health farm which would be open to all members of the community, particularly settled children and in housing states where industrialisation has cut them off from their natural diverse microbiome, would be very beneficial to all people.

Professor Fergus Shanahan: Yes. To some degree settled people know about this. Young kids who go to a crèche may come home with runny noses and all the viruses but they get beneficial microbes as well. They tend to have lower risk of allergies. All those things are good for them. Mixing humans at an early age, but particularly mixing them with and exposing them to animals is good. It is good for mental health as well. It is good for children to see life and death of animals. It is good in all kinds of subliminal ways that we cannot necessarily measure but we know are correct. I should also have said at the beginning that we are the ones who have diverged. The Travellers with their non-industrialised microbiome is the ancient microbiome. We have seen in other countries all around the world that as people undergo modernisation and industrialisation, they start to get diseases that were once rare but it correlates with the change in their microbiome. When people have studied ancient stool or faeces that has been stored in either desiccated, salted conditions or in permafrost, those microbiome are actually very like the microbiome to be seen in modern hunter gatherers or in Travellers. However, Travellers are unique. They are very distinct from the settled community in the western world but they are also differently different from hunter gatherers in Africa and in Mongolia. They share the fact that they are different, but they are differently different. There is a uniqueness about the Irish Travellers.

Senator Maria Byrne: I thank the witnesses for their thought-provoking research.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: I welcome the witnesses here and thank them for their presentation. It is all fascinating. Even at an academic level it is fascinating. Of course, our job is to try to apply it to real life, but it is a fascinating discussion. I would like to read more of it and understand it better on a purely intellectual academic level, but our function here is to see how we can bring that to affect lives for the better.

Like my colleague, the Leas-Chathaoirleach of the Seanad, Senator Byrne, I am going to focus initially on Professor Shanahan's work that suggests that forcing populations with older non-industrial lifeways into settled environments alters biology and affects this specific special microbiome he discovered. It affects immunity, etc. What was very scary from my point of view, because there were other compensatory elements in the settled life for some of that, was the depression. That is a very serious thing. Good housing could alter some of the other issues but the depression is a very disturbing one. In practical terms, for legislators, policy implementers, civil servants and whoever else, while this is all fascinating, there is not much we can do about it, is there? Perhaps the professor could answer two things. The question is not much we can do about it in reality. If we were to do what Pavee Point would ask if it were in next week, there is not much we can do. On the other hand, will Professor Shanahan focus in on the depression bit? That is very concerning. I hope I am making myself a little bit clear.

Professor Fergus Shanahan: I am not saying it is easy. Nothing is easy. We would not be here if any of this was easy.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: If Professor Shanahan is not saying it is easy, how would he do it if he were given the policy role in the morning?

Professor Fergus Shanahan: I have mentioned one thing. I would not just consult Traveller groups and it would not just be Pavee Point. In the same way that the settled community is represented by many different political parties at different times, the Travellers are entitled to have multiple organisations. That is not to make it more difficult; that is just a fact of life. Why should they not have? I would certainly have Travellers not just consulted but very much involved in the policy changes if there are going to be changes. We cannot just shrug our shoulders and say what can we do about it. I am reminded what John Hume said when he got the Nobel Peace Prize. He made the point that difference and diversity is the essence of humanity. We should not be trying to assimilate the Travellers and deal with the Traveller problem, so-called. We should actually be celebrating what a fascinating ethnic group we have that lots of other countries do not have.

I mentioned about migrants. It would not be unusual to find a non-industrialised microbiome in a migrant. We know from migrants that their health deteriorates when they come into an opposing culture. Here, we have a chance with 1% of our population, and maybe more than that, to try to make a difference. We always kept beating the same drum. Let us not repeat the mistakes of the past. Let us not keep talking about it as a process of assimilation. Let us find ways in which the Travellers can live in Ireland, juxtaposed with the settled community, but at least in culturally sensitive ways. I am not asking for the sun, moon and stars but there must be ways to allow them to have access to their horses. If we call it horse projects or whatever we want to do, there have to be ways to approach that.

There are other things that can be done. If they have a microbiome that is quite distinct from the settled community, what is normal? What do we call normal any more? What are the dietary recommendations for Travellers?

I will give an example from the migrant community. If you have a microbiome that is well suited to a situation in Africa where you are only sporadically accessing food and you are in a famine-torn country, you tend to have a microbiome that extracts the maximum amount of energy and calories out of the food you are able to get. If that person is transported with their microbiome into Ireland in an obesogenic environment, they will get all of the diseases we have had and even worse, much faster, because they have a microbiome that is not suited to that diet at all. Yet, we have one public health organisation that recommends only one diet and states that it is the diet suitable for everyone. There should be various diets for different people.

There is another example. There are diseases that Travellers are resistant to. We have enough bad stories about susceptibility to diseases. I am talking about diseases that will not kill you but are a scourge. Who does not have someone at home who has bad allergies, bad asthma, some sort of arthritis or some sort of immune-mediated disorders that Travellers are actually resistant to. Why are we not looking at that? They are things people can start to think differently about.

On the depression issue, I could spin a microbiome story and I have colleagues who passionately believe in them. There is a huge body of literature about the microbiome influencing brain health. There is no doubt that animals that are kept germ free - microbe free - have distorted and depressive-like behaviour. I personally think that if there was never such a thing as a microbiome, if you take away people's culture inadvertently and unwittingly, you remove their sense of identity. You will see the same thing in every culture, whether it be the Inuit in North America, Native Americans or those who have first nation status in other countries, who get the same kinds of depression and suicide issues.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: I thank Professor Shanahan for that fascinating answer. Before I come back to the idea of a democratic assembly for Travellers, I will run one or two factual things past Mr. Sweeney. He highlighted the allegation that local authorities are not spending money on Travellers. The committee had representatives of local authorities in last week, and in the absence of many of our Dáil colleagues here, when the Senators were left in the meeting, I put those questions to the local authority representatives. They were adamant that the money for Travellers is ring-fenced, that there is an auditor general and so on and that they are spending it on Travellers. I know Mr. Sweeney might argue as to how it is spent, which is another debate, but the local authority representatives are saying it is a false allegation that they are not spending it. Could Mr. Sweeney provide evidence to the contrary?

Mr. Bernard Sweeney: Absolutely, I believe I can. First, they have changed the system slightly. Before, they would allocate a particular sum of money to local authorities to draw down and spend on Traveller accommodation. This was contained in an article in the newspaper so it is in the public domain. I once asked the former TD David Stanton where the unspent money goes and whether it goes back to the Exchequer. He initially wrote an article in the newspaper stating that the unspent money goes into settled projects. Money that was not drawn down for Traveller accommodation went back into settled projects. I think the system has slightly changed now.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: Does Mr. Sweeney dispute the local authorities' contention of last week? He can look at the Official Report of the committee meeting of last week to see if I am understanding this correctly. Does Mr. Sweeney dispute their contention? If the representatives were sitting here with us today, they would say they are spending the money on Travellers. Mr. Sweeney might question how they are spending it, but they would say they are.

Mr. Bernard Sweeney: In the past, one thing I have witnessed is that the local authorities might have spent the money on evictions, bulldozers or JCBs. A lot of cases went to court over the years, particularly in County Mayo, through *pro bono* solicitors, and the council fought all these legal actions taken by farmers. Where did that money come from? In regard to the money that was not spent, where does it go to and who is it spent on? According to David Stanton, it goes back into settled projects.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: It might be very helpful to the committee if Mr. Sweeney could supply the secretariat here with evidence, if he has it.

Mr. Bernard Sweeney: I will take David's word, if he said it and put it in the newspaper. He is an honest guy so I would imagine he would not have said that otherwise.

Mr. Dylan Foley: Can I say something in relation to the Senator's comment that there is not much that legislators can do? I would suggest there is quite a lot they could do. One of the reasons we frame this in terms of colonialism is precisely not because it is irrelevant but because it is the whole thing. This is in the sense that originally, a lot of the body of law that came through and what we regard as norms, as Professor Shanahan was saying, come from a time in history, of which we are all aware, when the whole point was to assimilate the entire Irish population into a certain way of living and a certain type of system.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: That is exactly what my third question was about. Mr. Foley said we need decolonisation and that colonisation led to a lot of Travellers' difficulties. We are not discussing what it meant for settled people, but it led to many of the Traveller difficulties. It got rid of nomadism and so on. There is a contradiction, however. Is Mr. Foley saying land was removed from Travellers by colonialism? Surely if they were nomadic people, they would not have land, *per se*.

Mr. Bernard Sweeney: The term "nomad" is also a colonial label. Gaelic clans moved in tuatha in certain circles. Not all Gaelic clans wandered aimlessly around the place. As Deputy Ellis pointed out earlier, he understood that Cromwell put us off our land, but we must have been on land to have been put off land in the first place. In 1652, there was the settlement of Ireland Act, which was the commencement of creating English settlements that we later called the settled Irish. These are labels we did not call settled people. We did not call settled people "settled people".

Senator Joe O'Reilly: So, if they were nomadic before then, they were moving to different parcels of land at different times of the year.

Mr. Bernard Sweeney: This is something Mr. Foley studied.

Mr. Dylan Foley: It would not be straightforward in the sense that what we now call nomadic would have been from the colonial point of view. If we imagine Dublin, the Pale or London, whatever way we want to look at it, they would have been looking out at a world beyond the Pale that they did not understand. They called whatever was beyond the Pale "nomadic"

whether it was or not. One of the reasons for that was that they would have used Roman law, which would have meant that if the land was inhabited only by nomads, it was legal to confiscate the land, under English law. Therefore, everyone was a nomad, even if they were not, if you see what I mean.

Senator Joe O'Reilly: I have a last question, very briefly, about the assembly. Maybe I will wait.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Senator Malcolm Noonan): Does the Senator want to ask it?

Senator Joe O'Reilly: I will go with it. It is in regard to the proposition of having an assembly. Would Mr. Sweeney just see that as a talking shop? What would be talked about there and what decisions would be made there? It is a good policy.

Mr. Bernard Sweeney: That leads into this. We are the only foundation, probably on the planet, that has brought this narrative together and the only way we could have done that was by using multiple different disciplines: genetics, microbiology, archaeology, psychiatry, political science and all of that. The Senator asked why we keep saying there is a lot that legislators can do. Ireland signed up to United Nations international law in 1968 and ratified that in 2000, so there are obligations on behalf of the State to create corrective measures to iron these issues out. They do not require special treatment. It is just to fix what is broken.

We believe there should be an assembly where Travellers have democracy. This State has shown that. Dublin has shown that. This committee has shown that; it has allowed us in the door, welcomed us here and allowed us to speak freely. That is very democratic and it is good of the committee to do that. We would say that because we have been governed by one discipline for a very long time, sociology, there is not really a process of democracy. We do not select or elect our people to represent us. They are hand-picked, primarily by settled people, who come in here and speak to the committee. That is the direction it has been going in for a long time. We would like to change that slightly and give ourselves fair representation. We do not believe in dismantling systems or tearing them down. We believe in building them up and making them better.

Deputy John Connolly: Senator O'Reilly has asked some of the questions I was going to ask, particularly about the assembly. It is very interesting. We felt we were dealing with 100 years of State legacy in the committee and that issues had arisen from the foundation of the State. To see they predate that nearly makes it more challenging for us because it is very difficult to undo history. I fully recognise the witnesses' stance, that some of where we have found ourselves is as a result of political bigotry. I appreciate that is the case. I used the term "undoing history". Obviously, we hope the State will not continue in that vein.

We hope that education and natural awareness of issues have made sure that going forward, it will be more aware of needs and inclusivity in its decision-making process. There is the issue, and Mr. Sweeney touched on it, of trying to generate the involvement or participation of members of the Traveller community in the political system. What is the greatest barrier?

Mr. Bernard Sweeney: This is a specialty around history. I would like to defer everything as much as possible. The Deputy is right that we cannot change history. We cannot go back in time but we can change how we think about history. If we continue to think of Travellers as

some kind of subculture or byproduct since the formation of the State, we have a false narrative. To think that Travellers are "ethnic" in the sense of being like Roma and other ethnic groups is not true. It is more accurate to say that we are an indigenous people. We are people born out of the land with a very natural biology to support that. This is not something that I feel or think; it is supported by science. The assembly would be about trying to incorporate as much as possible that is good about a bad situation. There is no blaming or pointing the finger. We are not blaming Dublin or settled people. This is a complex issue. Whatever we do has to be for the betterment of all people, not just Travellers.

Deputy John Connolly: Does Mr. Sweeney not feel we are at a stage – he made a point a moment ago about the us-and-them mentality, for lack of a better term - where we have overcome that?

Mr. Bernard Sweeney: I do not think that is evident in the State policies which have targeted Travellers since the 1960s. They had two censuses in the one year. They encouraged councils to maximise all force to keep Travellers moving until eventually they broke them down. They even talked about putting a yellow badge on us so gardaí could identify us, but they threw that out because they said it would cost too much in expenses. That report remains evident to this day. We have been the target of the state since the colonisers came. They call us Travellers now, but we were not always called Travellers. We have been Gaelic clans primarily. It is done systematically and subconsciously. Again, it is important for me to say that we are not blaming settled people. We do not believe anyone in Dublin gets up in the morning and presses a button to hurt people or drive children over the edge. We do not believe that for a second. It is systematic. We believe our foundation is in a good position to help to change that paradigm in a way that would benefit Ireland beyond imagination. This is a global story. Ireland was the first laboratory for English colonisation before it went to West Virginia, Canada, Jamaica, and 57 other places around the world. We hold a very unique knowledge in Ireland. If we come together, we could change global history.

Mr. Dylan Foley: To give a quick example of continuity, the 1963 report does not just talk about old English law or things like that. It invoked the Vagrancy (Ireland) Act 1847 as a law that was relevant to the situation and the policy that would be happening in the State from then on. That shows that the body of law carried through directly includes the attitude that these people are a problem, their way of life is an issue, and we would be doing them a favour if we change this and that. In terms of how to address these things, I am no legal scholar but I suggest that the decision referenced by Mr. Sweeney might be looked at.

Deputy John Connolly: Is that the Mr. Justice Gerard Hogan decision of 2022?

Mr. Dylan Foley: Yes. In a 2022 Supreme Court case, Mr. Justice Hogan gave a very interesting decision in solving a case that was being taken up between the council and Travellers in County Clare, over housing. He identified that most of the issue was actually the interpretation by the courts of what a "house" is. All he did was widen the interpretation of "house" to include the traditional way Travellers have lived. I suggest this type of thing, which allows for diversity to exist by recognising the origins of the law in the country, and how it was designed to interfere with ways of life older than the State, and for a remedy to be applied without much difficulty involved, is helpful.

Deputy John Connolly: On the core question of incentivising members of Traveller communities to become participants in the political process, what is the greatest barrier? What is the greatest thing we can do to generate that incentivisation?

Mr. Bernard Sweeney: The Deputy can correct me if I am wrong in my understanding that the initial idea of the Seanad itself was to cater for the Protestant minority at the time. I do not know how true that is. If we had an assembly, we would elect and select a Traveller, two Travellers or three Travellers who would be automatically co-opted into the Seanad and maybe the Dáil. That would be a fair representation of our community. If we go through the wider process, as the Deputy knows and has just touched on, the built-in prejudice and subconscious attitudes held against Travellers makes it an almost impossible task for a Traveller to get elected. This assembly would help a lot with that.

Professor Fergus Shanahan: I will add a small point to echo an earlier question about what simple things can be done. Reference has been made to the suggestion that a badge be worn by Travellers. No one wants a stigma. Travellers were given separate ethnic status in 2017. Have we moved on from that? Can we take advantage of it? Every time a person goes into an Irish hospital, he or she can be asked anything from whether they are a Caucasian, a red Indian or a Roman Catholic etc. He or she has the choice to ignore it or answer that question. However, there is no box for the Traveller to tick as a unique identifier. There is no box that asks you whether you are a Traveller. If it were there, obviously a person could choose to ignore it. By having something like that there, oodles of research could be done that would cost practically nothing. I spent a couple of years recently on research which revealed that after finding microbiome changes, it can be predicted that certain diseases will be less common in Travellers. It has taken ages, and lots of hard sweat, to get the data to prove that is the case. We got it, but it could have been done like a snap of the fingers if computer records had been available. If a little box could be ticked, we would be able to cross-check these diseases and find statistics on suicide and depression. All of these diseases have a number, and we could link them back. We can link them back to Catholicism, or whatever religion a person has. I can link them back to whether a person says he or she is Caucasian - this, that or the other, all of which is irrelevant - but I cannot link it back in an instance to Travellerhood. This simple change would be a logical extension of Enda Kenny's decision to give Travellers separate ethnic status. Simple little things can be done if people are being sensitive and thinking forward. They would not cost an awful lot - they might not cost anything - but they would save an awful lot of money.

Deputy John Connolly: I thank Professor Shanahan. I have another question that our witnesses might be able to answer briefly. The submission referenced the poor outcomes from existing settled-Traveller interfaces. Are they concerned that such outcomes are going to continue?

Mr. Bernard Sweeney: I ask the Deputy to repeat that.

Deputy John Connolly: When Mr. Sweeney talks about the Traveller assembly as a means of strengthening the political representation of Travellers, he talks about the poor outcomes from existing, settled-Traveller interfaces.

Mr. Bernard Sweeney: It is fair to say that everything that has been tried up to this point - every infrastructure and funding project - has resulted in children dying. That is the outcome

we are left with now. It is a harsh reality. It is not because people are ill intentioned or anything like that; it is just that the paradigm and the way they were working within the existing framework was incorrect. We need to change that and give Travellers back their history, culture and identity. Even framing us as "Traveller and Roma" is confusing for young Travellers because we are not Roma. We did not come from north India. We do not go around putting Catholics and Protestants in the same group because they are all the one; it would not make sense. They have different cultures, origins, stories and so on. It sounds silly even to suggest these minor corrections, but they have a profound effect on self-identity.

Deputy John Connolly: Am I misinterpreting that Mr. Sweeney is critical of how the Government funds organisations which are intended to assist the Traveller community?

Mr. Bernard Sweeney: I am critical of the fact that one dominant discipline rules over Travellers. All of the Traveller organisations use the discipline of sociology and there is no input from archaeologists, historians, microbiologists, geneticists or those involved in linguistics. Our foundation has incorporated a multitude of different disciplines to come up with a rock-solid version. That is why the committee has never before heard people come in talking about ongoing colonial institutions. As a minor point of reference, one could easily argue that there was no formation of the State; it was a continuation of the colonial state.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: I thank the witnesses. It is a thought-provoking conversation we are having today, to be honest. I sort of disagree about some things. I think it is Mr. Sweeney I am disagreeing with. The reason I disagree – it is not wholeheartedly; it is to be taken in jest – is the witnesses talk about tiering the Seanad into the Dáil. I sort of disagree on that. There are plenty of parties and Independents. There is nothing stopping them. I came into politics because I hooked myself up to Fianna Fáil and I got elected. I am thinking "Why can't you do the same?". That is opposed to saying we need to have a certain number in the Seanad and a certain number in the Dáil. The witnesses had it well worked out there. I am just pushing back a little.

Mr. Bernard Sweeney: No, fair enough.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: I am from Galway, the same as Deputy Connolly. We have a very strong, vibrant Traveller community in Galway. They are very articulate in their viewpoints. Can they not join a political party and come out and get elected? We would be delighted to have more people joining political parties. I am not just talking about my own party – I am talking about them all.

Mr. Bernard Sweeney: I would not discourage Travellers from doing exactly that. I would say I think those systems are already in place – even in the Seanad. There are people who come through the universities or various other groups. Maybe even quotas.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: That is for women.

Mr. Bernard Sweeney: Sorry?

Senator Anne Rabbitte: That is for women.

Mr. Bernard Sweeney: We have Traveller women too.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: Exactly.

Mr. Bernard Sweeney: The Seanad selects people sometimes, I believe. Or the Taoiseach does.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: The Taoiseach nominates, yes.

Mr. Bernard Sweeney: There are processes in the community to help those who might otherwise be disadvantaged or excluded for some reason or another. Why do all those people not just join a political party and get elected that way? Why have that system at all? This falls under Ireland's legally binding obligations under international law to put in corrective measures to help people in a situation where every other avenue has been exhausted. As we know, Travellers have exhausted every avenue. When it comes to education, the language of segregation is now being used again in the form of reduced timetables. We are over-represented in the prisons. There are health issues. For a very long time, the only two Departments that were dealing with Travellers were the Department of justice and the Department of Health. If you were a settled person you could go to the Department of arts or elsewhere but we were always funnelled through those two Departments. That could be seen as a form of apartheid. Those things happen subconsciously sometimes and they become normalised. We are trying to break that cycle but we cannot do it alone. We need members' support and help.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: Absolutely, 100%. I would have advocated, and the Acting Chair will agree with me, on the health identifier. I have championed that since I came in.

Mr. Bernard Sweeney: I have heard the Senator talk several times. I was always impressed.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: I have absolutely advocated that because we should have it in order to track, identify and support. I am totally with Professor Shanahan on that. I see everything as an equal. Maybe I am looking through a different sort of glass. I think we need to have equal conversations and not segregated conversations. I believe in the whole integration of the system because if we can do it that way, it is a fairer society for all and not just for one cohort or another.

Mr. Bernard Sweeney: Again, it sounds sometimes as though what I am saying is separatist but I would look at where we are at now with the element of inclusion. We would ask "Integrated into what, exactly?", or "Included into what?". We are the only community in Europe that has got worse since the 1950s. In the report it said we had better mental health than the settled population. There were no Travellers in the mental institutions but there were lots of settled people. The Traveller children were just as able and intelligent as settled children. Fast-forward 70 years and we have some of the worst outcomes on the planet or certainly Europe. How does that happen? What caused that? There were good intentions, funding and infrastructure – all of those things - so how did things get worse? How does something that was framed to be good end up getting so bad? We are not trying to create separatist divisions. We believe in healing the divisions caused by the "Traveller" label and the "settled" label, both of which are colonial labels. They are born out of colonisation. Professor Shanahan would say that microbiology knows nothing about the "Traveller" or "settled" labels. It is a human situation we have.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: I will just finish on one point. It is a fascinating conversation and at a really high level. There are people other than us who need to understand this conversation. The witnesses were talking about the microbiome. I have a huge love of horses. I really believe in equine therapy, as the Acting Chair and Deputy Connolly know. I believe all people benefit

from interaction with a horse such as children who are non-verbal. The witnesses talked about horses as part of the culture of the Travelling community but at the same time it is also ingrained in the community. Clondalkin is a great example of a horse project. The horses in the Clondalkin project are part of the primary care integration team for children who need access to OTs, for example. It is the only place in the country where we have trained occupational therapists from primary care delivering interventions for children with additional needs. We see the value of the horses in Liskennett Farm. I am trying to get a horse project to Tuam for the simple reason that we have a large Traveller population living in Tuam, and the horse is the most natural but also what it can do for everybody, from a microbiome point of view but also from a domestic violence point of view. Huge studies have been done in the UK which showed that recovery among women or men who have access to horse therapy is far higher when they have that equine therapy piece. Perhaps they include people from the Traveller community as well. We agree on an awful lot. It is about how we can integrate the cultural piece into modern life. I am talking about health outcomes and early intervention but it is early intervention for everybody and not just one group.

Mr. Dylan Foley: We would agree. To mention it in terms of history, one of the downsides of what happened during the 1960s and other times was the blocking of the history of Travellers. The 1963 report said it would not look into history. That had a very bad effect because it is not just Travellers who were cut off. What happened was that the whole country was cut off from an awful lot of history. I agree with the Senator in the sense it would be beneficial to the whole country and to everyone in the country. Reconnecting all the history of the Traveller community and doing the research, like Professor Shanahan has done, will open a lot of our history to the whole population.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: I agree. Ian McDonagh, a Traveller from Galway who myself and Deputy Connolly know, went to the BT Young Scientist more than six years ago by now. He brought the history of the Traveller to the BT Young Scientist and got recognition for it. He was educating all other young people there about the history of the Traveller, the role of the tin and what the Traveller community did. He talked about his grandparents and parents. That is the cultural education and awareness we need. I have to compliment Merlin College for supporting him to get to that level. That might be another piece we have to look at or having it within the likes of flagship opportunities like the Young Scientist for telling the stories because they are very positive ones.

Professor Fergus Shanahan: I could not agree more with the Senator about integration and the horse projects. I have said to Mr. Sweeney that if we do a proper microbiome study in relation to horses, it has to be with the settled community and the Travellers. It makes no scientific sense to do it separately. There is a lady in Guelph in Canada who studies North American Indians and the whole issue of horses and mental health. She comes from a veterinary perspective and makes the point that there is something about the horse. Dogs are good - and cats, I suppose – but there is something special about a horse that has a greater benefit. She could not explain it but her data is very strong.

Now that I am this exalted position in this House, I may never get the chance again. We live in a country that gives tax abatement and tax incentives that have made some people multibillionaires in the horse industry. There are a few of them knocking around Ireland. We give huge tax abatement to the horse industry. Would it not be great if a small amount of that

went to the horse projects the Senator spoke about? It could benefit a lot of us in our mental health and, I believe, our microbiome as well. There is quite a disparity that we have struggled to get the funding for horse projects while a vast amount of money is being made in the horse industry otherwise.

Senator Anne Rabbitte: It is a fair point.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Senator Malcolm Noonan): I absolutely agree. I thank Professor Shanahan. I will ask a few questions. I apologise to other members - I let the conversation flow a bit. This has been absolutely fascinating. I have a specific question for Mr. Foley around archaeological excavations of nomadic and family settlements. What evidence is there of that across the landscape in Ireland? Are there differences in different settlements in the findings? I am sure in roads projects and so on, but also in urban settlements, that there must be evidence of nomadic peoples travelling across the country.

Mr. Dylan Foley: I worked on quite a few of those road projects years ago. What strikes you is the light touch a Gaelic culture had on the country. Probably almost up to the 19th century but certainly into the 17th and 18th centuries in large parts of the country, in particular the west and even close to Dublin in Wicklow and places like that, stone buildings were not the norm. There were stone churches and castles but the people did not live in stone buildings so we just do not see them. When we open massive road lines we see sites where there were huts and things like that but we do not see lots of stone buildings. In the areas of more continental or English settlement in the south east or east, there were more stone buildings earlier. Other than that, it is the classic ring fort and wicker. It looks like most of the population lived in what we would now regard as temporary housing but they did not see it that way. Nomadism, bringing cattle up the mountains in the summer-----

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Senator Malcolm Noonan): They still do it in the Burren.

Mr. Dylan Foley: Exactly, and they are brought them back down in the winter. Villages changed size throughout the year. In autumn they were full and there were fairs. As we said earlier, the population was more mobile in general but the full nomad thing was more of a designation by the government as that government started to change that world. That is a different thing.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Senator Malcolm Noonan): I am trying to wrap up the contributions from the TraVision Foundation and its members and trying to take in the rich findings and important work it has done. The Heritage Council was with us a number of months ago. It has a heritage officer working specifically with the Traveller community and is drafting the first Traveller heritage strategy. Is there an opportunity to use the TraVision Foundation's work to embed a greater understanding between Traveller and settled people and a societal understanding of these cultural issues in particular and how that could perhaps help to shape a different approach from what has been taken to date?

Mr. Bernard Sweeney: We have been at this for so long. The narrative for a lot of people seems relatively new but it is old for us because we have been working on it for a very long time. This is not just beneficial to Travellers in the situation we are in, which is an emergency, or just to Ireland; it is beneficial on a global scale because colonialism is a global human experience. If we are the origins of that and can overcome that ourselves and decolonise, it is beneficial for everybody. That is just awareness. It is not about pointing the finger. It is not

anti-English, anti-Protestant, anti-Dublin or anti-settled - that is colonial nonsense. This is about a human experience. When that is married with science such as microbiology it is then beneficial for everybody, not just Travellers or archaeology in understanding our roots and history. All of that is hugely beneficial. It does something. It is like I often say - knowledge is a psychological medicine. It gives you a framework, context and self-belonging. Travellers have lost that, as have a lot of settled people, and their sense of identity and roots. The beneficiaries are just endless. There is no downside where it is actually bad for one community or the nation. That does not exist. It is positive all around.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Senator Malcolm Noonan): Moving away from what we have had to date, which is a service-led approach, we lost the community development principles we had up to 2008 or 2009 when the Combat Poverty Agency and other bodies were abolished. Is there potential to get momentum behind this type of approach and embed it into a community development approach with the Traveller community?

Mr. Bernard Sweeney: It goes back to what we keep saying about a multidisciplinary approach. When we were linked in with microbiology, that was a game-changer. For the first time, we have 21st-century science that gives credence to what Travellers had been saying all along. Without that science, it was a case of, "Okay, that is nice but there are no facts, proof or evidence". Now there is. Linguistics tells us the language goes back to early Christian monastics. Archaeology tells us it goes way back in history. All of these different disciplines help to create a stronger and healthier understanding of who we are as a people. As I said, the terms "settled" and "Traveller" are colonial labels. In a Gaelic world, they do not exist. They only exist in a paradigm where it was created out of colonisation. There is a lot we can do collectively.

Professor Fergus Shanahan: The so-called settled community has lost an awful lot as well. We have gained a lot with modernisation. We have education, we have more free time and leisure time - lots of things - and we are living longer but we have also acquired more marginalised groups. It is not just Travellers. I would also say the elderly. There is more loneliness in settled society and loneliness and despair are growing problems. We hear younger people are living in an age of anxiety. I thought I used to be anxious but younger people are very anxious and it is hard to know what is going on. There are a lot of commonalities. They are not quite a severe as the Traveller experience, I have to say, but it seems there are lessons in hearing about one ethnic group which are not irrelevant to the settled community.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Senator Malcolm Noonan): With that modernisation comes technology-based living, a more sedentary lifestyle and all of the other challenges. Professor Shanahan spoke about older people but younger people are also losing a sense of direction. The opportunity to have an understanding of these broader colonial issues could be beneficial to all of us. From the work of this committee, it has been a fascinating afternoon of conversation. We spend a lot of time here talking about very difficult and heavy issues around health, welfare, well-being, crime and social issues. Today has been a revelation in terms of gaining a broader understanding.

Mr. Bernard Sweeney: We have kind of a built-in clause in our decolonisation that if you are racist, you are psychologically colonised because racism comes from colonisation. It wants to dehumanise other people. When people claim to be native Gaels and indigenous this and

that but they are anti-migrant at the same time, that has all the hallmarks of a psychologically colonised person. If you are racist, you are psychologically colonised and you need support.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Senator Malcolm Noonan): I agree. That is a good way to end. I thank all of the witnesses for their time this afternoon. It has been a really fascinating conversation.

I thank the members for their contributions. We will incorporate the witnesses' statements into our important work over the coming months.

Mr. Bernard Sweeney: We submitted in 2019 but never got called up.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Senator Malcolm Noonan): The witnesses got the call-up this time.

Mr. Bernard Sweeney: We did. It is interesting because the majority now comprises Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. This may be more interesting. It has been a really good experience.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Senator Malcolm Noonan): It is a good committee. It is very collegial as regards party-----

Mr. Bernard Sweeney: I have watched the proceedings of many of its meetings and have always been impressed, so well done.

An Cathaoirleach Gníomhach (Senator Malcolm Noonan): I thank Mr. Sweeney.

The joint committee adjourned at 2.10 p.m. until 12.30 p.m. on Thursday, 21 May 2006.