

# No Gods, No Masters:

## how the churches and politicians failed to help the Roma in Belfast

When the attacks on Roma homes in South Belfast finally ceased after a week, it wasn't because of the actions of eager politicians or earnest church representatives. However when the Roma made the final decision, 6 days after the first attack, to leave their homes, politicians were in for the photo ops, and the churches weren't far behind in using the crisis to promote themselves. News broadcasters worldwide took an interest in a sanitised humanitarian 'flight' story, but had been pretty reluctant in the previous days to cover the racist attacks.

Supporters and anti-racist activists were scapegoated by the media, either for provoking an attack on the anti-racist protest on Monday 16 June, apparently 'bringing it on ourselves', or for allegedly sealing the fate of the Roma by standing side by side with them, at their request. But these charges levelled at anti-racist protestors only serve to deflect blame for the abject failure that was the response of the police, statutory bodies and churches to respond when it mattered.

While it was several days before anti-racists were aware of the situation, it was only when anti-racist activists drew attention to the attacks on the Roma, that politicians, the media and churches 'intervened'. Once statutory agencies became involved, rather than providing practical solidarity in defence of the Roma's homes, the intervention in reality became the start of a repatriation process. The politicians and media then had on their hands a palatable 'humanitarian crisis', which allowed them to 'help' the Roma, without getting their hands dirty tackling racism or the social/economic problems that have fuelled it.

Belfast Mayor Naomi Long only took an interest on the day the Roma finally vacated their homes. Had the situation not been so grave, it would have been amusing that when she arrived, she hung around for an hour looking concerned, only to miss a BBC News crew, and a juicy PR opportunity, by minutes, as she was chauffeur-driven off in her mayoral car. Other politicians were 'quick' to join Naomi in seeking photo opportunities. The Romanian ambassador posed for the cameras with First and Deputy First Ministers Robinson & McGuinness, and paid lip-service to anti-racist sentiment, however, at the makeshift 'refugee camp' in the Odyssey Leisure Centre, he accused the Roma of bringing these attacks on themselves, and told

them that they had made him 'ashamed to be Romanian'.

In the case of the Roma, the churches involved, and as far as individual members may have been sincere, also exploited the situation to attempt to bring people 'back to the church'. The pastor at the church where the Roma were temporarily housed seized the moment to indulge in some self-aggrandizement, talking up the church, "my office now is like the stable at Bethlehem". Self-satisfaction oozed from every word, and barely a thought was given to what actually happened to the Roma people, less than 10 minutes from his church. When interviewed on BBC Radio 5 Live on the night of Tuesday 17 June, the pastor didn't even know what had happened, he didn't know there been an impromptu assembly of over 200 people against racism only minutes from his church the previous night, nor that attacks had been going on nightly for the best part of a week. But boy could he talk about how great it was what he was doing, and how pleased God was.

This complete detachment from what was really happening in 'their community' was exemplified by another church member, who characterised the generally patronising and self-congratulatory tone of the church, while saying: "I believe God's hand was in the timing of this event." This Christian do-gooder, like the pastor, remained blissfully unaware of what had actually occurred. "our pastor, received an emergency phone call from his wife who relayed a message that racial riots against Romanians had escalated to the point that about 130 Romanians were attempting to pack themselves into one home to achieve safety in numbers in response to threats from their neighbors. A member of our church who works with a relief organization asked if we could take these families in for the night at our church building... [the pastor] agreed without hesitation" These attacks had happened less than ten minutes from the church and had been all over the national news, yet an ill-informed do-gooder was calling this 'racial riots', completely oblivious to the fact that these were not riots, but a series of orchestrated and consistent cowardly racist attacks on one of the most vulnerable minorities in Belfast. She continued: "This evening illustrated tremendous human compassion and a battle against racial tension, but for the Christian community, it signified much more. The relief and care provided to the Romanians depended

# Pumped Up Vigilantes?

Derek Hanway's article in the July/August issue of Fortnight magazine, among other inaccuracies and distortions, accused anti-racist activists of being pumped up vigilantes who's actions were counter-productive. He isn't alone in that attitude, it is a position which has been whispered by many, from the voluntary and community 'sector', church 'leaders', bureaucrats and politicians and more publicly by the police.

Hanway betrays his lack of knowledge about the situation when he says anti-racist activists' presence outside Roma homes, which had been attacked, attracted unwelcome attention.

"Anyone with a knowledge of Roma people would have known about a general reluctance by Roma to attract attention," the director of An Munia Tober Travellers Centre said.

"While the Roma families were still in their damaged homes, they were being 'protected' by anti-racist activists. I witnessed many acting like pumped up vigilantes, some bringing cider carry-outs to the garden of one home. This response strengthened the Roma families' sense of fear and attracted more unwelcome attention to their homes."

True, 3 or 4 punks brought a couple of tins of beer while they sat-down outside the home, but they were very much a minority of those at the home, and were told that doing so was inappropriate. That said, they were among the few people who did bother to stay with the families all night on the Monday. Hanway can say what he likes, but he was not there helping these people defend themselves, and his ill-informed comments read like he did nothing more than drive by in a car. He clearly did not speak to the Roma families, who overwhelmingly welcomed the support from local residents, anti-racists and anti-fascists. They brought cups of coffee out to supporters and made

on a community of believers working diligently as one body with many parts. I saw each member find his or her own way to serve, a glorious example of individual gifts knit together to offer compassion of Christ... What unified us all to press on through exhaustion and hunger was the knowledge that together we were sharing the love of Christ and hopefully bringing glory to Him... I remember the sacrifice that Jesus made for me and that no matter how much I do, I can never truly pay Him back. The beauty of that is that He doesn't expect me to!!!! Therefore, as Christians, we serve out of love, not obligation. I am also mindful that it shouldn't take a crisis to jolt me into action. I was bought with a price, I am His. Victory over death has been won, and until I am with Him, each

abundantly clear that they very much welcomed the showing of solidarity demonstrated by locals and activists. Hanway ignores the fact that there had been no publicity surrounding the attacks before Monday 15<sup>th</sup> June. The only unwelcome attention being visited upon the Romanian families was that of the racists who had persistently carried out attacks in the absence of any protests, defence or publicity.

The Socialist Party were right when interviewed by the BBC, that "The Roma families were extremely supportive of the stance that we took and if Mr Hanway was there he would have seen the hospitality we received from the families." The supporters only stayed with the Roma families as long as they were asked. When some supporters thought about leaving after repeated hassle from the police about the crowd outside the house, the families politely asked us to stay, and help them defend their homes.

It should come as no surprise that the only nights the houses were not attacked were those when a physical presence was visible. Hanway also bemoans the fact that the police did not realise the "damage" anti-racists were doing, wishing that they had acted to remove those acting in defence of the Roma families. Gary Mulcahy of the Socialist Party, who were central to the organisation of support for the families points out in their response to Hanway's article that:

*On Channel 4 News a representative from the PSNI was unable to defend their inaction and admitted that the PSNI did not respond appropriately. The most effective defence of the homes was not to rely on the police; it was by organising local residents to be present outside of the homes. This approach, combined with the protest and publicity, succeeded in stopping the attacks.*

It was the intervention of the authorities, church groups, liberal 'do-gooders', the political establishment and the Northern Ireland Executive who began a process of 'repatriation', encouraging the families to return to Romania. In doing so they are guilty of handing a victory to the racists.

A 'Vigilante'

*day of my life should be a sacrificial tribute to God's glory. We are His ambassadors, the aroma of Christ... may the world open their hearts and breathe us in.'*

We don't need guidance from religious headcases, nor can we appeal to them to tackle issues related to the existence of racism or the inequalities of class-society. Under capitalism, racist divisions will always be used to divide the working class, and particularly during a recession, tensions are pushed, so anyone conveniently perceived as 'different enough' can be blamed for the deficiencies in our lives, be they lack of housing, lack of jobs, or generally poor living conditions.

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