

According to Michael Howard, Gypsies and travellers receive special treatment. Well, he is right. They do.

Nine out of ten planning applications by Gypsies and travellers to set up legitimate camps are refused by councils - a rejection rate that would make any conventional developer shut up shop. They are forced into illegal camps because there are far more Gypsies and travellers than there are official pitches - thanks to an earlier Tory government initiative which removed an obligation on councils to provide travellers' sites.

The combined effect of the Tory approach to Gypsies and travellers is to outlaw a way of life - and I cannot accept this. Today it's Gypsies, which minority group will be next on the Tories' hit-list? Of course, Gypsies and travellers are let down by people in their midst who leave illegal sites in a disgusting state or who offer rip-off drive re-surfacing and tree surgery only to fly-tip the waste. But bad behaviour isn't confined to Gypsies and travellers. There are plenty of cowboy builders who live in houses and even ex-Tory councillors can be caught fly-tipping as one was recently in Hampshire.

As a young journalist, I had to speak to Gypsies who had moved onto an illegal site. I was very glad to have a photographer with me as I warily knocked on the door of the first caravan to ask: "Err, excuse me - what are you doing here?" But I was offered a cup of tea and invited in to the cleanest front room I have ever been into - no mean feat for a family living in the middle of muddy field.

How do you equate a family who acted and lived like that with those families who leave fields strewn with dirty nappies and rotting food? The answer is that you can't. You can't tar all of Gypsies and travellers with the same brush.

My gran was not given to any sentimentality, but she told me that Gypsies used to be seen as sort of aristocrats and were welcomed. How much has changed! Settled communities and Gypsies and travellers can't even speak to one another now, but dialogue is and always has been the only way forward.

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Labour's response to the school dinner debate is to create yet another organisation. This one will help parents change the menu at their child's school. I expect most parents would rather the government did this for them. Healthy food should be served in every school - not just those with articulate parents with the time to argue their case.

And this touches on an issue that has not been raised in this debate on healthy eating - how much time do parents spend cooking? Not a lot - because every parent should be out of work, according to Labour. So pizza and chips tonight - and tomorrow - and the night after that.