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Stop vilifying Roma refugees

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Something dangerous is happening in our public debates about immigration and refugee policies. In a recent video segment vulgarly titled “The Jew vs. the Gypsies,” conservative media pundit Ezra Levant went on a diatribe about Roma refugees in Canada.

“These are gypsies,” he tells us, “a culture synonymous with swindlers. The phrase gypsy and cheater have been so interchangeable historically that the word has entered the English language as a verb: he gypped me. Well the gypsies have gypped us. Too many have come here as false refugees. And they come here to gyp us again and rob us blind as they have done in Europe for centuries... They’re gypsies. And one of the central characteristics of that culture is that their chief economy is theft and begging.”

If this were just an isolated eruption of ignorance and xenophobia, it would probably best be ignored, left to decompose in a heap of ignominious publicity grabs. Unfortunately, however, such attacks on the Roma community in Canada are becoming all too common, and they increasingly come from public officials, from whom we can — and must — demand more.

Minister of Citizenship and Immigration Jason Kenney never misses an opportunity to rail against what he calls “bogus” refugee claimants from Hungary — the vast majority of whom are Roma — who, in his view, come to Canada to take advantage of generous welfare and health-care programs.

Or consider former Conservative MPP Toni Skarica, an Ontario Crown Attorney who, speaking at a parliamentary committee, said Roma refugees from Hungary come to Canada because “we have the most generous welfare package for refugees in the world. That’s why they’re coming here, because they get the best deal here.” When NDP immigration critic Jinny Sims objected to a representative of Ontario’s attorney general castigating all Hungarian Roma refugees as welfare cheats, the chair of the committee, Conservative MP David Tislon, overruled her objection saying that this type of comment was to be expected: “It’s the joy of sitting on a committee.”

Last month, news surfaced of Canada Border Services Agency documents reportedly recommending that Canada detain Roma refugee claimants while their claims are being processed. If this is so, it represents a Canadian government agency suggesting that civil liberties be distributed along ethnic lines.

In this atmosphere it is perhaps not surprising that Gina Csanyi-Robah, executive director of the Roma Community Centre, reports that “the Roma community has been nothing but shamed and
humiliated across Canada for the past three years. We have been characterized as a collective group of criminals . . . Across Canada, we have been looked at as people who come to take advantage of the welfare system."

There is, of course, nothing wrong with having a vigorous debate on immigration and refugee policy or on crime and criminal justice. People can disagree in good faith about how to address these complicated issues, including how best to respond to refugee claims made by Roma from Central Europe. These claims are difficult: some succeed, while many do not, and many are withdrawn or abandoned before a decision is made. But nothing about these difficult debates warrants — or is served by — calling an entire group of people swindlers, fraudsters, welfare cheats and criminals.

Talking about crime and immigration issues in terms of ethnic tendencies and cultural habits is more than just a lazy way around hard issues — though it is certainly that. Ethnic vilification and stereotyping are historically proven evils that are harmful and dangerous for the targeted communities and degrade the society that allows such views to take hold. Such stereotyping is an easy and rhetorically powerful way to draw attention and excite political passions. That it does so at the expense of not only reason and deliberation, but also of the vulnerable and the innocent, is one of the reasons that, left unchallenged, this way of speaking about whole groups of people has led to so much harm and suffering.

The vilification of the Roma community in Canada must stop.

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