

Off The cuff

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“It’s the Bradford Spring!”

MOST PEOPLE will know by now that George Galloway won the Bradford West by-election last Thursday. His victory surprised just about everybody. It certainly stunned the local Labour Party and, perhaps most of all, it shattered Ed Miliband’s hopes for a decisive reversal in his party’s fortunes. How could it be that a tiny party like Respect did not simply defeat the Labour Party in a ‘safe Labour seat’, but actually beat them by ten thousand votes?

By all accounts, Galloway’s principal opponent, Imran Hussain, was as lacklustre as they come; he was no match for Respect’s determinedly charismatic approach. I’m told that Imran was politically indecisive and simply unable to cope in debate with Galloway’s silver tongue; he skulked about far from the election hubbub whipped up by Respect, spending a lot of time talking to Labour stalwarts, and more or less ignored the large cohort of new voters. In complete contrast Galloway put enormous energy into mobilising young people and ensuring that first time voters were fired up to back Respect on the day.

Bradford Labour Party was neither agile nor go-getting. According to the *Guardian’s* Helen Pidd it is steeped in horse-trading between the family and friends of the deputy leader of the council, none other than Imran Hussain. Pidd reports that for years the Labour council in the city has been in the hands of a close-knit network of men who hale from the Kashmiri town of Mirpur. They are widely perceived as incompetent and self-serving, if not actually corrupt. Consequently, the town hall’s recent cuts of £67 million and a thousand job losses, have strengthened the view that the council, and Imran Hussain, are more concerned with handing out favours to insiders than meeting the needs of the wider community. They are simply not seen as offering a chall-

enge to the Tory-led coalition or the treachery of the Liberal Democrats.

On the other hand, it seems that Galloway is popularly regarded in Bradford West as his own man, a person who says what he means, and means what he says. He is not beholden to the big party bureaucracies and is not implicated in the process in which the 'two Eds', Miliband and Balls, advocate 'austerity-lite' in answer to Cameron, Osborne, and Clegg's fulsome attacks on living standards. Respect insists, quite rightly as it happens, that Labour has no answer to the crisis, other than to agree with the Tories and the Liberal Democrats, on the need for welfare and education cuts, pay restraint, tax hikes, and unemployment. Not surprisingly, Galloway's explanation for his victory is "widespread disillusion with mainstream politics". He insists that Respect's success in Bradford West is a direct product of the Labour Party's treachery in turning its back upon its traditional socialist policies and getting itself involved in foreign wars.

It is at this point that Galloway's history starts to get a bit shaky. Long before Tony Blair - the left's villain-in-chief - was prime minister, Labour leaders, secretly inaugurated Britain's nuclear weapons programme without consulting Parliament, and sent British conscripts to wars in Malaya and Korea. In 1956 Labour's front bench and the left's leader, Aneurin Bevan, were outraged by the Egyptian government's barefaced cheek in nationalising the Suez Canal. Bevan denounced Colonel Nasser as, among other things, 'Hitler', 'Mussolini', and 'Ali Baba and his Forty Thieves'. In a deft piece of footwork Bevan opposed the Anglo-French invasion of Egypt while calling for the 'internationalisation' of the Canal as a 'peaceful' means of depriving Egypt of sovereign control of her own territory. Labour was fully on board with vicious colonial repression in Cyprus, Kenya, and Aden, and deeply implicated in the attempt to sustain Protestant domination in the North of Ireland by military means. Indeed, the Labour Party has a long tradition of supporting British military adventures of one kind or another. Incidentally, the party has also been deeply committed to the stability of British capitalism; Labour

ministers have been at the forefront in advocating wage restraint and in reining in 'trade union power' on a number of occasions in the past.

So it's difficult to see what exactly Galloway finds so appealing about the Labour Party before Blair - perhaps it was simply that Blair called the left's bluff, and made it more difficult, if not entirely impossible, for them to pose as the socialist opposition within a 'workers' party'. Blair made explicit what Labour leaders had always known, that Clause IV of the party's 1918 Constitution - the commitment to take most of British industry and commerce into public hands - was never ever going to be implemented. Socialism was not, and never was on offer; something that Galloway would surely have known during his eighteen years as a Labour MP.

However, the illusion that the British Labour Party was something other than a party committed to the survival of British capitalism was essential for left-wing politicians who knew that outside the Labour Party and the mainstream of British trade unionism they had no chance whatsoever of being elected to anything. The dismal record of the Communist Party, which even in its hay day during the forties, could win no more than a couple of seats for one term, was warning enough - without the endorsement of the Labour Party the Left was nowhere. Consequently, all the principal left-wing groups were either full members of the Labour Party, or if they were prevented from joining or affiliating to the party, they always advocated voting Labour - *with* or *without illusions*.

Neil Kinnock and Tony Blair shattered these illusions, and in doing so, robbed the left of its safe haven in the Labour Party. By driving out the Militant Tendency, by ditching Clause IV, by making the Labour Party fit for the new age of deregulated Thatcherite Britain, both men earned the undying hatred of socialists both inside and outside of the Labour Party. No longer could the left plausibly argue that Labour was anything other than an explicitly pro-capitalist party.

These developments set the scene for renewed left-wing attempts to cut the umbilical cord tying them to the

Labour Party. Throughout the nineties various 'Socialist Labour', 'Real Labour', and simply 'Socialist' groups were launched as answers to Kinnock and Blair's treachery. By a multiplicity of means numerous left-wing coalitions attempted to forge a path for themselves, which would be boldly independent of the Labour Party and its frank endorsement of capitalism. All these initiatives have, in one way or another foundered - some in court cases and scandals, others simply by their overwhelming irrelevance.

Meanwhile, Blair and his *eminence grise*, Peter Mandelson, famously became "intensely relaxed about people getting filthy rich". Following 9/11 things got worse; Labour endorsed the War on Terror, and supported the invasion of Afghanistan; then, to cap it all, in 2003 the massed ranks of Labour MPs voted in favour of the Iraq War. What was the left to do?

It was at this point that George Galloway MP was expelled from the Labour Party and began his search for a new home. A year later, in 2004, Galloway teamed up with the Stop The War Coalition and the Socialist Workers Party to found a new independent party called Respect - the Unity Coalition.

The first problem for this party was that no significant trade union joined them, no coalition of other broad left socialist groups signed up, no Labour MP's jumped ship. Respect was still born as an unhappy coalition of far left groupuscules, and the recently expelled George Galloway. "The aim of Respect . . . to build a broad-based and inclusive alternative to the parties of privatisation, war and occupation" faltered upon the left's traditional inability to break the stranglehold that the Labour Party has on socialist politics in Britain. Unsurprisingly, the Socialist Workers Party was unable to widen Respect's appeal, and Galloway could do no more than consolidate the popularity that he had already won with a number of British Muslims by his opposition to the overthrow of the Taliban, and his friendship with Saddam Hussain. Perhaps, inevitably, in late 2007 the Respect - Unity Coalition split - Galloway offloaded the Socialist Workers Party, and decided to concentrate all efforts on

his appeal to his Muslim base.

Consequently, Respect has only ever gained electoral success in wards and constituencies with large Pakistani, Bengali, and Kashmiri populations. Clearly, Galloway hopes to use this base as a springboard to wider success with wider sections of the population, but the problem is that the nature of his appeal to these particular communities revolves around policies and rhetorical flourishes that are frankly reactionary and antithetical to any genuine attempt to build up a socialist alternative to Labour. It remains to be seen if he can break out of religious particularism and communal politics, but his victory in Bradford West - the so-called 'Bradford Spring' - represents a consolidation of his place within a Muslim community, not a new point of departure for socialist politics in Britain.

One needed only to witness the street meeting, which Galloway addressed in Hanover Square on March 25th in the heart of Bradford's Muslim community, to realise the limitations of his appeal. In a speech littered with references to the Almighty he poured scorn on his Labour opponent for being a "Quote, Unquote, 'Muslim', a man that if you send him to Parliament will spend more time *in* the bar than *at* the bar." "God knows who's a Muslim" he assured the crowd. Then to widespread merriment: "Everybody knows, Imran's never out of the pub! What kind of Muslim is that?" As George warmed to his topic, he touched upon the subject of his own integrity, which is apparently guaranteed by his lively sense of "that final election, the Judgment Day of which I talk, when we must all answer for what we do and for what we have done."

George's peroration was equally grandiose, "By the Grace of God, I have a strong voice, I can fight for justice in Kashmir, I am known from the Punjab to Palestine, from Baghdad to Bradford!" Then came the promise that if he did nothing else he would do two things for his constituents, first, was to save the city-centre Odeon building, and second, to raise the fortune of Bradford City football club. This was accompanied by a sinister boast, "The Emirs and Princes are frightened of me"; we'll get

their “Sovereign Wealth Funds to help stop Bradford from sinking.”

This appeal to an oligarchic solution to Bradford’s problems is of a piece with Galloway’s populism, which is rooted in his ability to charm Asian shop keepers, and tour the Mosques in order to flatter the sensibilities of the bearded ones, *with his own beard*, and with assurances that he does not touch strong drink, or take the prohibitions of the *Quran* lightly. With student audiences and crowds of young people he can, in passing, attack unemployment and lack of opportunity, before reaching his principal subject, the wars and invasions in Muslim lands.

Galloway, like most of the British left, has fallen in with the mythological notion that there is a war being waged against the Ummah - the Community of Believers. “The Muslims” are apparently the singular target of a war being waged against them by the United States and its allies. While Tony Blair is regularly arraigned for “killing one million Iraqis” Galloway, and the left more generally, remain silent concerning the daily slaughter carried out by Islamist insurgents of one kind or another. Respect, the Socialist Workers Party, and many others on the left, have colluded with this peculiar notion of Muslim victimhood, and used it to explain away, ignore, or even, to justify, Islamist actions.

The problem that remains is that large numbers of young people in different inner-city Muslim communities in Britain, young people who undoubtedly experience high levels of disadvantage and discrimination, have been won over to the idea that populist campaigns about Palestine, Iraq, or Afghanistan, will in some way challenge their alienation, and the reality of their manifold oppression in British society. It won’t.

Galloway’s first Tweet after winning the by-election was “Long Live Iraq. Long Live Palestine, free, Arab, dignified.” Evidently, the MP for Bradford West, and the rest of the left, have waltzed their supporters up yet another blind alley for reasons that are much more to do with their own political bankruptcy than the emancipation of our young people from racism and unemployment.