



An open letter to Chris Harman of the SWP:

Break with Galloway and the communalists!

Dear comrade Harman,

I know you of old and hope, or would like to believe, that you still hold to the basic socialist ideas which you and I shared in the past. I wrote you a first open letter in June 2004 (*Solidarity* 3/54) urging you to register that the Respect turn was a betrayal of all that was good about the political tradition you used to hold to.

The rift between your organisation, the SWP, and George Galloway should say a great deal to you, as to me, about the nature of the alliance which the SWP and Galloway have had for the last five years. Stop and think for a moment about the astonishing degradation of your organisation.

What have you now fallen out about? Has your SWP Central Committee belatedly understood that your association with Galloway is demeaning and befouling? Do you now find yourselves suddenly realising what you have got into, with the shock of someone who wakes up to the realisation that he has been sleep-walked into a disease-ridden stream of sewage? Have you suddenly realised whom you've been holding hands with?

With a man who was for a decade the ally in Britain for the fascistic Ba'thist dictator of Iraq, Saddam Hussein. Who has publicly admitted to promiscuously taking money for his political activities from a wide range of Arab and Islamic governments, from successive Pakistani administrations through the United Arab Emirates to Saudi Arabia. Of whom the parliamentary inquiry report in July this year said "it is reasonable to presume that what the documents [published in the *Daily Telegraph* in 2003] say is true" and "that some of his activities in support of the Iraqi regime may have been financed through an oil-related mechanism"?

No, none of that is news to you. You have known all that about Galloway at least as well as we did, possibly better. Why have the SWP and Galloway suddenly fallen out, then?

It seems that Galloway wants to go deeper into the ethnic-sectarian politics that have given its peculiar political flavour and odour to Respect, and that the SWP has not entirely abandoned concerns to influence the labour movement.

Galloway has objected to the concentration of Respect resources on the Organising for Fighting Unions initiative and on having a presence on the Pride march.

Your SWP colleague John Rees retorts that "the constant adaptation to what are referred to as 'community leaders' in Tower Hamlets is lowering the level of politics and making us vulnerable to the attacks and pressures brought on us by New Labour. It is alienating us not only from the white working class but also from the more radical sections of the Bengali community, both secular and Muslim, who feel that Respect is becoming the party of a narrow and conservative trend in the area". Why has it taken him - or you - four years to realise that?

Galloway, it seems, also objects to Respect being heavily controlled by the SWP machine. He claims that the SWP in Respect has behaved as we saw you behave in the Socialist Alliance and in other fields where your organisation operates. I don't have independent knowledge of the internal affairs of Respect; but I do know that SWP machine control - for example, steamrolling Respect conference to reject motions in favour of

secularism which only a few years ago would have been uncontentious in any left-wing meeting - has on all the big issues served Galloway's politics, not the socialist ideas which you came into politics with.

Think about it. The leaders of the SWP have made enormous ideological and political concessions to Galloway and the communalist and sectarian forces who make up Galloway's "constituency", in and around Respect.

You have, as John Rees now points out, four years late, allied with Muslim "community leaders", businessmen who have little in common with socialism.

You have appealed for votes on the basis that Respect's candidates are the best "fighters for Muslims".

You have supported the forces of bigotry and social regression, in demanding the suppression of the Danish cartoons of September 2005, which became the target of Islamic clerical-fascist muscle-flexing as not so long ago certain images of Jesus Christ were targeted by Christian bigots (remember the court case in 1977, when *Gay News* was found guilty of blasphemy?).

Your SWP Central Committee colleague Alex Callinicos, whose ability to write "Marxist" rationalisations of almost anything you must know well by now and perhaps privately despise, has retrospectively repudiated the the SWP's earlier, better self, for having supported Salman Rushdie against the Islamist bigots who wanted to shed his blood for writing with "disrespect" of Muhammad in his novel *The Satanic Verses* (*Socialist Worker*, 11 February 2006).

But then, under your own editorship, *Socialist Worker* tried to excuse the Taliban's treatment of Afghan women (1 October 2001)!

Last Sunday, 7 October, you gave the official endorsement of Respect to the "Al Quds day" demonstration called by Islamists in London to continue a tradition inaugurated by Ayatollah Khomeiny in 1979 and sponsored by the Iranian government since then.

Your press has limited itself to the mildest criticisms of the Ahmedinejad regime in Iran, and enthusiastically welcomed the coup by Hamas in the Gaza Strip. You have marched with the slogan "We are all Hezbollah".

You had your student members join the Federation of Student Islamic Societies in walking out in protest when an Iraqi socialist feminist addressed the National Union of Students conference.

In the unions, your members have lined up again and again with officials who are left-wing in words but not in action, in the cause of trying to entice them into Respect or at least onto the platforms of Stop the War, Unite Against Fascism, and similar.

The SWP has done all this in tandem with Galloway - only to get slapped and rebuked by him, now that Respect has lost momentum and gone into unmistakable decline.

Galloway may well be angling to get the rump Communist Party of Britain into Respect, to give him more solid backing for his Stalinistic politics; his next step after that could be to dump the SWP altogether, leaving him with the Respect name and the CPB's assets such as the *Morning Star*. And yet the SWP is still in retreat.

The entire Respect episode was, is, and, if it continues, will be a sordid political manoeuvre in which the SWP leaders, with the casual indifference of a dog raising his hind leg against a lamp-post, has (to put it in basic English, so you will understand me) pissed on secularism, on international working-class solidarity, on liberalism in the good sense (opposition to religious bigotry and defence of civil, social, and intellectual freedom), and most of all, perhaps, on rational socialist politics.

This whole foul chapter of political adventurism grew, first in the heads of the SWP leaders, out of the anti-war movement - out of your desire on any terms to turn that movement into solid ongoing "assets" for your organisation. In pursuit of that goal, the SWP pumped up the Muslim Association of Britain (British offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood: prior to the SWP's sponsorship, a small and frail group), and had an MAB leader running as a Respect candidate although he openly avowed that "his religion" taught him that there "would always be rich and poor".

Now you are less concerned, perhaps, with conciliating Galloway and his allies. Why? Because you know that with Britain's progressive withdrawal from Iraq, the rump "anti-war movement" is winding to its end? Because you want to try to cash in some of your "winnings", and make a tactical retreat from the "excesses" of "Islamicising" over the last five years?

You must realise that the SWP has gained very little in terms of what matters to you most - recruits, "building the SWP". You know that inside Respect, it hasn't been the SWP winning over Muslim youth drawn in by Galloway, but Galloway winning over former SWP organisers, members, and sympathisers. Even inside the SWP, the SWP Central Committee's efforts to put up a firm front against Galloway at first elicited opposition from members "soft" on Galloway, more internal opposition than the SWP has seen for many years.

From where AWL stands it looks as if the SWP has had only a derisively small level of recruitment of young (or any) people of Muslim background, and that a large segment of the SWP and SWP periphery are bewildered and demoralised.

Even in narrow terms of SWP "gate receipts", the whole exercise has been a grotesque series of ideological and political self-betraysals and self-disavowals which have produced none of the political blood-money you thought to gain.

But you can claim "revolutionary virtue" for opposing the Iraq war? None of the things the SWP has done in the last four years, which can all be summed up in the one word "Respect", were a necessary part of opposing the war. AWL opposed the war - but we have also bitterly opposed most of what the SWP and its allies have done since the invasion of Iraq.

To oppose the war and to fight Blair and Bush, it was not necessary to turn yourselves into "reactionary anti-imperialists", the "anti-imperialist" equivalent of the "reactionary socialists" whom Marx and Engels denounced in the Communist Manifesto.

It was not necessary - indeed, it was discrediting, counter-productive, self-destructive - to back the sectarian, clerical-fascist "resistance" in Iraq, who are the mortal enemies of the renascent labour movement there, of all civil liberties, and of all women in the Iraq state.

It was not necessary to ally with Galloway, or with the MAB. It was not necessary, it was self-disabling, to develop the fantasy that large numbers of Muslims, as they are, without changing except in being roused as Muslims by opposition to the war in Iraq, could be won - to what? - by solidarising with them on their own political terrain and mimicking their politics and their "Islamism".

And what have you got from it? Nothing. Whatever happens now, the legacy of this episode in your organisation's history will remain one of immense political confusion and inevitably, leave an additional residue of cynicism.

For decades your organisation has followed the procedure of tailoring your "Marxism" to its organisational needs and desires.

Your organisation's "Marxism" was and is "apparatus Marxism" - not Marxism which guides your organisation, but "Marxism" which rationalises from what the SWP's leaders think will bring recruits and organisational advantage. A scandalous public example of what is usually done inside closed rooms and in the heads of SWP leaders was the "change of line" - twenty years after - on the Salman Rushdie affair.

Galloway did not cause any of what you have done. He bears no responsibility for the SWP, only for his own foul record and his own shameless self. Even so, Galloway is one of the prime symbols and embodiments of what the SWP has become - what you have let it become.

If you force a division in the SWP Central Committee and a break with Galloway - or, even more so, if the SWP rank and file were to push you into doing that - then that would be a possible start (no more, but a possible start) to a self-cleaning and self-regeneration by the SWP.

At least, that is what it would be if the SWP membership call you all to account - those who initiated this chapter in the SWP's history, and those in the leadership who weakly and short-sightedly went along with it. If they let none of you smoothly slide away from the resultant mess, throwing self-serving rationalisations and alibis over your shoulders.

If you won't fight to defend the principles of socialism, secularism, and rational politics - if you won't break with Galloway now, and honestly criticise and analyse the last four or five years - then what good are you as leaders, or as members, of a socialist organisation?

If you won't do it, SWP members should fight to make you do it. True, they have few democratic mechanisms to challenge the Central Committee. But they are not helpless.

They can talk to other members who are unhappy with the foul political and moral morass into which the SWP has been led. They can organise with them, secretly if they need to (they probably would). They can read the criticisms of SWP policy produced over the years by other socialists. They can break through the barrier of misrepresentation, demonisation, and slander which the members of the SWP Central Committee, including you, have erected to stop them even talking to people like ourselves.

Even if the conflict with Galloway comes to a break, what confidence for the future can SWP members have in those responsible for the last four years, including you, comrade Harman? The central SWP leaders today are people bred and raised to "leadership" by the SWP machine which you and others helped Tony Cliff build. Your typical methods have been political demagoguery, bureaucratic and manipulative organisational practices, eternal willingness to shed principles for perceived short-term advantage, and refusal to allow the SWP rank and file any real freedom of discussion or control over the leaders.

Even if, or when, a break comes with Galloway, the SWP will not simply revert to what it was five or ten years ago. Unless the break comes by the SWP openly renouncing Galloway and its own whole record for the last five years - rather than by Galloway, at his own chosen time, discarding the "Trotskyists" for whom he has never troubled to conceal his contempt - the downward political spiral will continue. At best it will only be reversed partially and temporarily.

Comrade Harman, the revolutionary politics which you spent most of your life working for are still worth fighting for! In the SWP they will have to be fought for against the leaders and their "theoreticians", such as you. Comrades of the SWP, the socialist ideas which the SWP claims to represent are worth fighting for! Break with Galloway!

Sean Matgamna

**More on SWP and Respect: www.workersliberty.org/node/7087.
First open letter to Chris Harman:
www.workersliberty.org/node/5719. Workers' Liberty, PO Box 823, London SE15 4NA. 14 October 2007**