

Unity At All Costs: David Edgar and the left's alliance for good causes

DON MILLIGAN, MAY 10, 2008

David Edgar's article about the current crop of intellectuals who have moved from left to right sets off in a generous frame of mind.¹ He opens by explaining that "intentionally or not" these former lefties gone bad "are undermining the historic bond between progressive liberalism and the poor". This tendency towards desertion and betrayal is not, of course, new: in the past "a surprising number of Thatcher and Regan's key advisers were former communists". Likewise, many influential writers, who in the past were left wing, are now "supporters of the war on terror abroad and opponents of multiculturalism at home". In fact they have, sad to say, become renegades capable of the bizarre mistake of "bracketing communism with totalitarianism".

Ignoring idiotic observations of this sort, what is most intriguing about David's account is the strange way in which he appears to have forgotten both the language of the past, its register, and the kind of politics and analysis, which informed it. The left in the sixties and seventies were not identified by their support of "progressive liberalism" or by their support

¹ David Edgar, 'With friends like these . . .' *The Guardian*, April 19, 2008. Link available under 'Other Articles' on *Reflections of a Renegade* at www.donmilligan.net.

of “the poor”. The left in the sixties and seventies supported workers and peasants. The poor in those days were not figured as defenceless or excluded. On the contrary, the impoverished and the oppressed were the subjects of history, capable not merely of emancipating themselves, but of leading the whole of society towards liberation. It may be embarrassing for David Edgar to remember this but the word “progressive”, in the two decades after 1960, alluded to progressive “forces”; nothing liberal was intended by the revolutionary socialists, Euro-communists, Maoists, Stalinists, Trotskyites, feminists, black militants, or gay activists who may have used the term.

It is true that there were liberal Home Secretaries and some progressive social policies were pursued by the mainstream of the Labour Party, but these policies were the subject of relentless attack from the left for their wretched timidity or their “objectively reactionary character.

This lapse of memory in which the left are remembered for their championing of “the historic bond between progressive liberalism and the poor” reveals a further difficulty with David’s account: his attempt to lump very different trends and personalities together. For example, Tom Hayden² and Danny Cohn-Bendit,³ no matter how far they have travelled from their youthful communist and anarchist days remain “faithful to their previous ideals”. This claim reveals

² Tom Hayden is an American politician, a former member of the California State Assembly (1982-1992) and of the California Senate (1992-2000). During the sixties he was president of Students for a Democratic Society (1962-63) and a prominent leader of opposition to the American role in the Vietnam War. He is now engaged in animal rights and environmental campaigning, a supporter of Barack Obama, and a leading light in the Progressive Democrats of America.

³ Danny Cohen-Bendit became famous as *Danny le Rouge* in France during the May events of 1968, a prominent anarchist activist in his youth he is now a German politician and co-president of the European Greens – European Free Alliance in the European Parliament.

how diffuse and elastic these ideals have become in the memory of those attempting to insist upon the virtues of consistency; one can almost here the phrases “I’ve *always* thought . . .”, and “I *always* believed . . .” being dusted down by those enraptured with their own loyalty towards the ideas and commitments of their own young selves. This is why David Edgar has had to press concepts like ‘progressive liberal’ and ‘supporters of the poor’ into service. People like Hayden and Cohn-Bendit, despite having ‘moved on’ from their communist and anarchist pasts, are apparently not renegades. Absurdly, (even from his own point of view) David Edgar cites members of the current Labour Cabinet as “pursuing a drastically revised version of the same, socially progressive agenda” as when they were “in or about the Trotskyite far left”.

Ken Livingstone, the former Mayor of London, has articulated what this might mean by explaining that it is necessary to reject the choices of moving to the left or the right by calling for a “progressive alliance that can solve the problems facing the country”.⁴ What he means by this is an alliance between Labour and the Greens (and possibly the Liberal Democrats) around a strategy of positive engagement with big business, together with large scale state investment in the country’s infrastructure and services in a manner, which seeks to be socially inclusive and environmentally sensitive.

Now, whether or not policies consonant with this kind of strategy are good or not is not, for the moment, at issue. What is important for the discussion in hand is the reality that whatever they are, they are not ‘left’ wing or socialist in any manner, which would be recognisable to the radicals and revolutionaries of

⁴ Ken Livingstone, ‘Yes, I lost. But still Labour must learn from London’, *The Guardian*, May 9, 2008.

yesteryear. The suggestion that people who were formerly communists, radical socialists, revolutionaries and anarchists, are pursuing the “same ideals” by the espousing the sort of progressive alliance spelled out by Livingstone or the (admittedly less coherent) one alluded to by David Edgar is plainly delusional.

It is as delusional as attempting to figure Ed Hussain as a renegade to be bracketed with the renegades who have broken from their former left wing commitments and loyalties. Ed Hussain, who over half a dozen or so years during the early nineties, moved from being an Islamist to become a moderate Muslim, is a renegade despite, so far as I am aware, never having thought of himself as a man of the left at all.⁵ In the world evoked by David Edgar renegades are those who disagree with the current agenda of people he identifies as being progressive. What they are renegades from appears to be of secondary importance. Consequently, I suspect that David Edgar does not think of Ken Livingstone as a renegade despite his having ‘moved on’ from the red rhetoric of the past.

Quite different personalities and political histories are rolled together in order to represent those historic friends of the poor, the “progressive liberals”. Similarly, there are the renegades who have, despite their diverse biographies and manifest political differences, become reactionary enemies of progressive liberalism, and hence, despite all *subjective* intentions, are now *objectively* the enemies of the poor.

Consequently, radically different figures, Nick Cohen, Martin Amis, and Melanie Phillips are rolled together with Max Eastman and John Dos Passos to synthesize the figure of the defector and the renegade in a manner which permits further generalisations and assertions, assertions which move us further and

⁵ Ed Hussain, Mohammed Mahbub Hussain, author of *The Islamist* and Deputy Director of the Quilliam Foundation.

further away from any accurate or truthful account of the trajectory of left wing politics or thought. Indeed, David Edgar in creating an amalgam of both his friends *and* his enemies is engaging in a procedure, familiar to anybody with a history on the left, which leads him, perhaps inevitably, from half-truths to outright lies. Here, David Edgar is attempting to identify Nick Cohen's political position:

Despite his defence of women's and gay rights against Qur'anic scholars, a distinct strain of hostility to the sexual gains of the 60s runs through Cohen's *What's Left?*: he blames the anti-racists and sexual reformers of the 60s for dissolving "the bonds of mutual support", dips more than a toe into the *Daily Mail's* critique of the welfare state (breaking up families, privileging immigrants), and blames the Respect party for Pakistani and Bangladeshi unemployment.

Now, while this is said to be *objectively* the case, it is not literally true. Nick Cohen is not *literally* an opponent of the legislative and social gains made by women and gay men. He is not *literally* an opponent of immigration or an enemy of immigrants, and he does not *literally* argue that, high levels of unemployment suffered by Bengalis in East London, is caused by the Respect Party. These *lies*, for this is what they are, are employed by David Edgar to make the case that those who challenge the present concerns and alliances favoured by the "progressive liberal" friends of David Edgar and the poor are, in fact, also resolute enemies of equal rights and social solidarity.

This is because, despite all historical evidence to the contrary, David Edgar in common with most men and women of the left, want to claim equal rights and social solidarity as distinctively left wing and progressive

values. In this knockabout the left, more or less exclusively, represent the forces of political equality, social solidarity and progress, while the right represent inequality, the defence of privilege and the conservation of the past.

Furthermore, by associating Nick Cohen with the *Daily Mail* a host of connections and attitudes are insinuated: those who oppose the left, those who oppose passive acceptance of reactionary religious practices and priorities, are said to be guilty of endorsing the desert island economics and mean spirited politics of dog-in-the-manger nationalism. (This is, of course, not even true of people like Melanie Phillips who actually write regularly for the *Daily Mail*.) Yet, it is clearly implied that Nick Cohen and others, in opposing some of the left's current concerns and alliances, are warming to the kind of outlook promoted some years ago by Norman Tebbit: rants about immigrants, political correctness, layabouts and prisoners living off the fat of the land while the poor bloody infantry slog along paying ever higher taxes to keep town hall bureaucrats, corrupt councillors and metropolitan intellectuals in bloody luxury.

David Edgar is of course not wrong in supposing that such attitudes are widespread and influential. However, he along with many on the left appears to have no answer to Tebbitism and what might be called the *fascist sensibility* of which it is an expression. David Edgar does not want to dwell upon his own or the rest of the left's manifest political failure other than to attempt to tar all his opponents with the same brush. This is why he and many other people on the left have recourse to broad amalgamations, guilt by association, and colourful inventions and elisions regarding socialist history and the left's intellectual traditions.

David Edgar's outlook and that of many of his comrades rests on the contention that it is those associated with the left who are the stalwart friends of

political equality and social solidarity. It is a contention sustained over many decades by highly selective accounts of social development and irate leftish assertions regarding the 'leading role' of the left in everything from extensions of the franchise to working men, to the struggle against slavery, the establishment of old age pensions, the battle for the political and legal equality of women, desegregation, anti-racism, contraception, gay rights, and so on. While it is undoubtedly true that the left has made notable contributions to many of these causes they are by no means exclusively (or even mainly) the achievement of socialists, communists, or more broadly, of those on the left.

The struggle for modes of social solidarity founded upon religious tolerance, political equality and deepening the capacity of all sections of society to be able actually to exercise the rights to which formal equality entitles them has been a struggle waged across a very broad front as bourgeois or capitalist society has developed, requiring the entrenchment of the rule of law and the strengthening of civil society. Indeed this has been the context in which trade unions and social democratic parties have been able to contribute to the strengthening of social solidarity and to engage in broader struggles for political and social equality.

Insofar as the left has participated in these democratic struggles within bourgeois or capitalist society the left has been able to help matters forward. However, wherever the left has achieved exclusive or predominant power within any society social solidarity has been radically undermined or fragmented by the destruction of free trade unions, independent political parties and campaigning groups, and by the suppression of free newspapers and publishers.

David Edgar alludes to these realities as "Kronstadt moments" when people repelled by the violence, authoritarianism and lies deployed by the left's revolutionary forces, turn their backs on the verities of the

left and head instead towards a fulsome defence and active support of bourgeois democracy and bourgeois democratic institutions and practices; these are the renegades. And they are, according to David Edgar's account, renegades either because they have simply become middle aged or old and biologically and socially resistant to the discomfort inherent in change and upheaval, or because they are *faint hearts* disillusioned after discovering that the poor are neither saintly nor strong.

The stalwarts of the left are, by contrast, recognisable by their deep understanding that the poor are neither saintly nor strong. Men and women of the left – those who shun the easy road taken by defectors and renegades – have continued to be prepared to live with the contradictions and messy reality of supporting the poor and the weak. This is, after all, what enabled them to support Mao's dictatorship, this is what sustained them through the forty nine years of Fidel Castro's uninterrupted leadership of the Cuban people, this is what enabled them to turn a blind eye to the tens of thousands who set out in small boats fleeing from the shores of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Clear sightedness, toughness and a determination to live with lies and contradictions are vital qualities for those wishing to avoid the shameful fate of the renegade.

David Edgar believes that those of us disillusioned by left wing politics and left wing causes have simply been disillusioned either by the authoritarianism of some left wing regimes or by the failure of the poor to live up to our expectations. He appears to have no other explanation as to why people move from broad endorsement of the left, and causes and attitudes associated with the left, to a broad endorsement of bourgeois democratic causes. He cannot see why the renegades think that political equality and social solidarity are better served by rejecting the left and it's

current alliance with insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan and apologists and supporters of Islamism at home.

In defence of these current left wing alliances and commitments he seeks to conjure up a kind of popular front in which “the alliance between British Muslims and the left” has produced “significant achievements”. The achievements are: the fact that Inayat Bunglawala⁶ now accepts that he was wrong to support the burning of *Satanic Verses*; that the Muslim Council of Britain finally decided to participate in Holocaust Day ceremonies; that Azzam Tamimi⁷ has criticised Hamas’s constitution and treatment of the Jews; that Anas Altikriti⁸ has pointed out that the Qur’an says nothing about homosexuality. These are, according to David Edgar the achievements of a policy of *positive engagement* pursued by the left.

He does not discuss, in this admittedly short article, that this *positive engagement* of Muslim organisations by the left is sustained by resolute left wing hostility to the existence of the state of Israel and by resolute support of the murderous and frankly anti-democratic insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan. The left, of course, is more comfortable associating these struggles with ideas of national liberation and national independence though, of course, it is actually known by all concerned that these multifarious and multi-layered insurgencies are committed neither to national objectives nor to liberation.

The days when the left could defend the objectively progressive rule of Stalinist tyrants or the dictatorship of an anti-imperialist “national bourgeoisie” have

⁶ Inayat Bunglawala is the Media Secretary of the Muslim Council of Britain.

⁷ Dr Azzam Tamimi is the Director of the Institute of Islamic Political Thought.

⁸ Anas Altikriti was a prominent activist and organiser of the Stop The War Coalition (2003), President of the Muslim Association of Britain (2004-2005), and is currently President of the Cordoba Foundation.

gone; the contemporary insurgencies which command their defensive apologies (or outright support) are neither progressive nor liberal and there is absolutely no prospect of the religious and tribal militias involved leading their societies out of poverty, backwardness and despair. They are, however, anti-American and this is enough to sustain most people on the left.

It has also been enough to justify the policy of positive engagement between the left and religious reactionaries in Britain and abroad. We are not dealing here with liberation theology or attempts to square obscurantism with aspirations for human emancipation, but with religious enthusiasts, war lords and clan patriarchs who oppose the equal participation of women in the social, political and economic life of society, and with people seeking to give legal force to religious judgements and clerical edicts within their own countries or communities or indeed internationally.

In place of dealing squarely with these issues David Edgar compares the current Muslim-left alliance with the Civil Rights movement and the movement against apartheid. He rightly argues that these mass movements were alliances of many different and often contradictory elements coming together to pursue some common goal. What he does not do is explain what the common goal is, which the left shares with Muslim organisations in Britain, in the Middle East, or specifically in Pakistan, Iraq, Iran or Afghanistan.

The basis of unity between the left and between Christians and Jews in the Civil Rights movement or in the struggle against apartheid was equal rights: political and social equality for people regardless of race, gender or creed. The basis of white feminist arguments with the Black Panthers was against the sexism of the male leadership of the Black Panthers – there was no fundamental conflict concerning the struggle of black men and women for civil and social equality.

Disregarding the arcane distinctions which some on the left would insist upon between 'popular' and 'united' fronts, it is clear that the positive basis for unity between the left and bourgeois liberals (whether Conservative, Liberal or Labour, Democratic or Republican) earlier in the twentieth century was always around the struggle against anti-Semitism, racism, and in defence of trade union rights and democracy. Consequently, the popular unity around Civil Rights or South Africa in which the left joined with conservative Christians and Jews was of a piece with the specific but largely unsuccessful attempts made in Europe during the 1930s to construct a broadly based opposition to fascism.

The renegades are right to believe that the only basis for left-Muslim unity is opposition to the existence of the state of Israel and support (active or implicit) for the armed insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan which the left seeks to colour as heroic and popular liberation struggles, while the Muslims argue for the right to apportion social and civil rights on the basis of gender, and for the right to deny religious freedom to members of their own community, while actively oppressing homosexuals, in the interests of the cultural independence and autonomy of Muslims.

Reading David Edgar's article one is driven back again to the question, what is the common goal that is supposed to unite the left with observant Muslims? Muslim organisations in Britain, and in the Middle East do not support the civil equality of women, they do not campaign for a single civil code to apply equally to all citizens regardless of gender or creed or sexual orientation. Indeed, by and large Muslim organisations would appear to be opponents of political and civil equality. Consequently, there is no parallel to be made between the unity established between diverse political and social elements in the struggle for Civil Rights or that against apartheid (or indeed that against

fascism), and the current “alliance between British Muslims and the left”.

David Edgar’s parallel with earlier left alliances is plainly fraudulent. Yet he concludes his article with a vacuous appeal: “It behoves those of us who have also been there and done that, not to defend the indefensible, but to protect the vocabulary of alliance that has done so much good in the past and is so necessary now.”

Nowhere in this article does David Edgar explain the purpose of this unity. If it were to fight racism, it would have prominently to feature unity with Sikhs, Hindus, Catholics and evangelical Christians. If it were to fight immigration controls it would have to encompass much wider circles than Bengali or Pakistani communities; left-Muslim unity would plainly be inadequate. If it was to be constructed around the fight for peace in the world it would have to tackle the fratricidal struggles taking place *between* Muslims in Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan – the daily wholesale massacre of Muslim men, women and children by those engaged in martyrdom operations – every bit as much as the struggle for peace in Palestine and Israel between Muslims and Jews.

The truth of the matter is, that the only legitimate basis for David Edgar’s vocabulary of unity between British Muslims and the left is around the question of defending the civil rights of members of Britain’s diverse Muslim communities and that can only be achieved by a mode of positive engagement between Muslim communities and the police and security forces in isolating violent Islamists who pose a physical threat to the lives and property of people throughout British society.

Increased surveillance within Muslim communities, arrests, and detention are an inevitable consequence of Islamist conspiracies to cause explosions at railway stations, airports and power plants, or on buses, trains

and aeroplanes. Instead of concentrating upon the need to combat poverty in many Bengali and Pakistani communities by promoting measures to improve the employment prospects of women and young people, the left's response has often been to canvas respect for cultural sensitivities regarding female employment and arranged marriages; the left's response has been largely to promote the idea that Islamists present no real or tangible threat – indeed Islamist terror where it does exist is said to be an understandable response to Western military interventions – but mostly it is a false alarm got up by the security forces to justify the repression of Muslim's around the world. Those on the left in Britain who adopt this line or something like it, give sustenance to the Islamist view that in increasing surveillance, arrests and detention, the British and the Americans are waging war against the Ummah.⁹

If David Edgar and his ilk want to promote the vocabulary of alliance let them first make clear what it is they want alliances and unity for.

The purpose of the left historically was either to forge novel and successful ways of running a new and fairer society or steadily to engage in the constructive endeavour to improve existing arrangements. This is plainly not what David Edgar and his allies are engaged in. Neither revolutionary nor reformist they appear simply to want, for a host of institutional, professional or biographical reasons, to continue to find a role for an exhausted and discredited politics, which has proved inadequate to the tasks presented to it by both the development of capitalism and of bourgeois democracy.

This bleak view is confirmed by “The alliance between British Muslims and the left” in which the left opposes the war on terror, campaigns against Israel,

⁹ *Ummah, ummat al-mu'minin*, the community of believers – the whole Muslim world.

and works with community leaders to defend the cultural integrity of Muslim institutions and neighbourhoods, while the Muslims continue to reject gender equality, homosexual rights, religious tolerance and freedom of conscience within their own communities. The left has repeatedly placed its prior commitment to equality and social solidarity on the back burner in order to form an alliance in which it can pose as a robust enemy of American imperialism without developing any coherent alternative to the logic of capitalist development or to the bourgeois exercise of power.

Deserters and renegades like Nick Cohen, on the other hand, want alliances and unity in furtherance of the struggle to deepen and extend democracy, political equality and social solidarity.