

The division of Respect

DON MILLIGAN, 13th February 2008

The Respect party – *The Unity Coalition* - was not a broad coalition of the left. Founded on 24th January 2004, it included no trade unions, few prominent trade union or community leaders, no independent campaigning organizations, nor any significant left wing political organization or grouping.¹ No networks of women’s groups, gay campaigns, or black organizations, joined the coalition. No Labour MP’s opted to jump ship in Respect’s favour;² the left within the constituency Labour Parties stayed home, while socialists around *Red Pepper*, the Green Party, and other anti-capitalist groups and groupings remained studiously aloof. It was essentially a coalition of a few narrow strands of socialist opinion, including the Socialist Workers Party, the International Socialist Group, George Galloway, and his more populist allies within the Muslim communities in Birmingham and East London. Despite these shortcomings the Respect Constitution declared that:

¹ Mark Serwotka, General Secretary of the Public & Commercial Services Union, supported Respect, as did Ken Loach and Harold Pinter; supportive organisations also included the Muslim Association of Britain, the Muslim Council of Britain, the Socialist Unity Network, Socialist Resistance, the Communist Party of Great Britain and the Revolutionary Communist Party of Britain (Marxist-Leninist). However ‘support’ could range from active membership of Respect towards simply being prepared to express broad agreement with some of its objectives. For example, it is highly unlikely that there was ever much support among members of the MAB or the Muslim Council for one of the cornerstones of Respect’s programme: “common ownership and democratic control” of the economy. Their support for Respect centred upon the Party’s attitude to the War and immigration and not much else.

² Councillor Abdul Aziz, Aston Ward, Birmingham, defected from the Liberal Democrats to Respect in December 2006 and Councillor Wayne Muldoon, Lemyngton Ward, Loughborough, defected from the Labour Party in February 2007.

The aim of Respect is to build a broad-based and inclusive alternative to the parties of privatisation, war and occupation. We will do this by intervening in elections at national, local and European level, building Respect as a campaigning organization, involvement in trade union and workplace struggle, and by building local branches of Respect which are rooted in local campaigns and in the local labour movement.

However, the Party was never able to become broad-based or inclusive. Nor was it ever capable of mobilising large numbers of people, despite being able to win hundreds of thousands of votes in England and Wales. In truth, it was an intrinsically unstable alliance hastily constructed around opposition to the invasion of Iraq. Of course, it's prime movers and members hoped to develop a more rounded political programme capable of mounting a broad electoral challenge to the Labour Party. But, in the event, it could only capitalise upon disenchantment with Labour in largely Muslim wards and constituencies.

George Galloway was returned to Parliament as the MP for Bethnal Green in 2005; Respect also won a number of local elections in East London, Preston and Birmingham. However, despite these considerable achievements the party failed to attract *any* electoral support or much interest beyond inner city Muslim communities. And, although the SWP was able to use its national network of branches to establish a constitutional majority in Respect, it could not turn this into electoral support for the unity coalition.

George Galloway, despite the sustained community activity of an important figure like Councillor Salma Yaqoob, could not move seriously beyond the oleaginous demagoguery for which he is so rightly famous. Hailed by many as a 'brilliant orator' it is clear

that the colourful rhetoric and the rich metaphors that he delights in (because they sound compelling and lyrical when translated into Arabic) are never going to establish much ground for trusting him across large swathes of the black and white working class in Britain. For people whose first language is English *Gorgeous George* is more likely to sound like a charlatan than a steady or reliable leader.

The SWP suffer from similar difficulties, which of course, arise from very different sorts of limitation. As a small revolutionary party, committed to the development of a highly centralised organization capable of providing disciplined and incorruptible leadership for the *British Working Class*, in the context of some future revolutionary crisis, sustained local activities in the here-and-now, and detailed engagement with the practical day-to-day problems of working people in their neighbourhoods and workplaces has not, and is unlikely to become, an important feature of their activity. For the SWP the *workplace* is a terrain for the stimulation of disputes and the organization of strikes, not a site for the resolution of problems. A neighbourhood is the arena for sales of *Socialist Worker* and promotional activities aimed at *building the Party*, not a place for strengthening a plurality of autonomous groups and initiatives.

Yet just as *Respect Renewal* (Galloway & Co) can point to the excellent campaigning of Cllr Salma Yaqoob in Sparkbrook Ward, Birmingham, so *Respect* (SWP & Co) can point to the work of Cllr Michael Lavalette in Town Centre Ward, Preston.³ Both these figures and their style of committed local activity

³ Michael Lavalette was elected in Town Centre Ward, Preston, initially as the 'Socialist Alliance Against the War' candidate before the formation of Respect. This label was calculated to earn him considerable support in a ward with over 40% Muslim voters.

which attempts at its best to break out of the historic limitations of the radical left's approach to electoral politics in England and Wales is being used by either side as a justification for their own particular stance. The truth is, of course, that these remarkable figures, doing perfectly ordinary things like working for community harmony between diverse and troubled communities, or holding surgeries for their ward constituents, are only remarkable on the radical left. Everywhere else in England and Wales where local political control is contested, where the control of the town hall by a particular political party is in jeopardy, the activities engaged in by Councillors Yaqoob and Lavalette are entirely unexceptional. That the work of these two figures is so emphatically emphasised in the speeches and articles of either side reveals how peculiar this kind of work is to most people on the radical left; it reveals how unfamiliar both sides of this dispute are with the stock-in-trade of local electoral politics in Britain.

The SWP, while it could probably work co-operatively within a large and well-established party of the left, is surely incapable of building one. George Galloway and his allies could also probably work well enough within a big party of the left – but they simply do not possess the range of contacts, alliances, or the spontaneous sympathies, which would enable them to rally a wider range of people to such a party's ranks. The elements that make up the fragments of Respect desperately need a broad-based party of the left to work inside, but they evidently need *other people* and *other forces* to establish it for them first.

Galloway and his allies wanted to build a populist electoral opposition, broadly to the left of Labour, but have found themselves unable to appeal much beyond Muslim communities, where their focus upon the war which Britain and America are said to be waging upon

the *Ummah*⁴ – the global Muslim community – has earned them significant votes. The SWP, on the other hand, has never been able to win elections of any kind, for any reason, which is why the Party has so often rejected the idea of fighting elections by condemning any attempt to win votes as mere *electoralism*. Neither side, neither *Respect* nor *Respect Renewal* has the skills or experience necessary for building the kind of broad-based pluralist alliance they both describe as the prime object of *The Unity Coalition*.

So when all the sectarian *argy bargey* is cleared away the division of *Respect* into two organizations, *Respect* and *Respect Renewal*, is the product of the incapacity of either side to break out of their particular mold – their mutual incapacity to move beyond their *natural* or *habitual* constituencies. Galloway and his allies, including his socialist allies, were unable to appeal to a wide national audience – and they blamed this failure on the SWP’s constitutional and organizational preponderance within *Respect*. On the other hand, the SWP blamed Galloway & Co. for restricting the appeal of *Respect* to voters in Muslim communities.

In an important sense both sides in the dispute are broadly correct in their analysis of each other. The SWP cannot build out much beyond its own periphery without experiencing insupportable problems relating to its need to maintain a high level of control over its members and branches. Similarly, *Respect Renewal* is unable to move beyond the range of concerns which cohere the organization’s support within the largely Bengali and Pakistani communities in which *Respect* has won elections.

In attacking each other both sides are responding in their own way to their collective failure to build an

⁴ *Ummah*, *ummat al-mu’minin*, the community of believers – the whole Muslim world.

effective leftwing opposition to the domestic and foreign policies of the Labour Party. Consequently, it is unlikely that their acrimonious divorce will produce anything but two unsuccessful rumps: *Respect* and *Respect Renewal*.