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Britain - Debate on militant left

The SWP's ever-increasing welter of allegations and distortions

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Chris Harman claims that his article *The Crisis in Respect* is an attempt to locate the politics behind crisis in Respect. It is nothing of the sort. It is a continuation of the method the Socialist Workers' Party (SWP) has employed in the debate around the issue from the outset, which has been to bury the politics behind an ever-increasing welter of allegations and distortions mostly, but not only, about George Galloway and Salma Yaqoob.

[<https://npa31.org/IMG/jpg/alanetcrln.jpg>]

Alan Thornett, left, with George Galloway and Salma Yaqoob

To the extent that [he does deal](#) with the politics it is an attempt to defend the indefensible i.e. the 'loose coalition' model of organisation which the SWP insisted on for Respect and the way the SWP leadership reacted to George Galloway's letter at the end of last August.

Harman claims that the crisis was precipitated by a series of attacks on the SWP. It was not. It was precipitated by the astonishing over-reaction of the SWP leadership to George Galloway's letter, which called for some rather modest changes in the way Respect was organised and run. The letter did not imply a crisis or a split in Respect. It did, it is true, add up to a critique of the SWP and the way it ran Respect. But it was impossible to criticise any aspect of Respect without this being the case, since the SWP were running it from top to bottom. Respect was, in effect, by then, a wholly -owned subsidiary of the SWP. That was in fact the nub of the problem the letter was trying to address.

Harman also claims that the letter was designed to shift Respect to the right. It was not. There was absolutely nothing in the letter to suggest such a shift. The issues Harman singles out in an attempt to establish this are the questioning (in the context of financial administration) of the decision to spend £2,000 on the hiring of an expensive float for the 2007 Gay Pride at a time when Respect had no money, and the resources put into the Organising Fighting Unions conference (OFU) and the subsequent £5,000 loss. There can be different views on these issues but they were both legitimate questions to raise and neither of them held any water at all as examples of a move to the right.

In fact Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) rights are an unfortunate subject for Harman to pick to attack the letter, given the SWP's dubious record on the subject inside Respect. There have indeed been clashes with George Galloway over this issue in Respect. Whilst Galloway supports LGBT rights, and has a record of doing so, he has controversially argued on several occasions for the issue to be given a lower profile in Respect material. The problem for Harman, however, is that the SWP have, on each occasion, supported Galloway over such proposals against Socialist Resistance (SR) supporters, and others, who have argued for a higher profile.

This was the case at the first two conferences of Respect, where SR supporters were denounced by SWP leaders for raising resolutions highlighting LGBT rights. It was also the case with the first draft of the Respect manifesto, which I wrote, where George Galloway was also supported by SWP leaders when he argued for reducing the profile of this issue. Whether it was right or wrong to suddenly spend a lot of money on an intervention into the 2007 Gay Pride parade, when previously SR supporters had to campaign to get a leaflet produced for Pride, can be discussed. But it was not a shift to the right. It was what it was: the questioning of particular expenditure at a time when Respect had no money for an election campaign or anything else.

There was always a legitimate question to be asked about the way the OFU conference was built and resourced through the Respect office and full-time staff. I was opposed to the way it was built from the start, and declined to be a part of the organising committee as a result. I had argued for a conference organised jointly with sections of the trade union left, and if possible with the Communist Party of Britain (CPB), with the aim of strengthening the links

between Respect and the trade union left and other partners in the project. This approach was rejected on the Respect officers' committee in favour of a conference called and organised by Respect itself - with the main aim of getting the maximum attendance. In the event, the conference, although quite big, did nothing whatsoever to strengthen the relationship between Respect and the trade union left. It was perfectly legitimate for George Galloway to criticise the resources put in by the Respect office, and the £5,000 loss incurred.

Gay Pride and OFU, however, were side issues in the Galloway letter. In any case, Harman himself argues elsewhere in his article that the shift to the right is an intention behind the letter, rather than in the text of the letter itself. What Harman fails to take up is the central issue of the Galloway letter: the state that Respect was in. The stark reality was that the membership of Respect had declined from 5,500 two years earlier, to 2,200 by August 2007: something which would normally be seen as a crisis. Not only were many of Respect's branches moribund or inactive, but Respect was politically narrower, since the bulk of those who had left had been independent activists. It had financial problems and it was in no position to face a general election. There were problems with its decision making process, the functioning of its elected committees, and the undemocratic top-down control exercised by the SWP. These were the real issues which provoked the letter.

None of these were new problems. Some of us had been raising them for several years. The Respect Party Platform (RPP) - had tried to raise them at the Respect conference in October 2006 and had been roundly slapped down by John Rees (Respect National Secretary and a leading SWP member), with the support at that time of George Galloway. The declining membership was blatantly covered up. In fact, falsified membership figures were presented to the conference by John Rees. These were designed to give the impression that Respect had grown when it had declined. All protests about this manipulation were ignored.

The conference was told that, in any case, membership figures were not the best way to measure the strength of Respect: that there were a lot of Respect supporters who were not prepared to join, but could be called upon in important campaigns like elections. This was an oblique - but revealing - reference to SWP members and the way the SWP saw Respect. This was that it did not need to be a real organisation, with real members, because there were plenty of SWP members who could be drafted in as foot-soldiers as necessary. It meant that Respect was not a real organisation at all but a front for the SWP! It did not have any internal political life of its own because it did not need an internal life. It was an extension of the SWP: a device to be used at election time. SWP member after SWP member went to the rostrum to denounce us and to claim that their Respect branch was vibrant and expanding, that there was no crisis and that it was malicious to suggest otherwise. The following is an extract from the RPP assessment of the conference, published soon after:

"The real situation inside Respect was the elephant in the room which must not be mentioned. How, following major electoral gains winning a seat in Westminster and then 16 councillors in the local elections was Respect smaller and politically narrower at the time of the conference than at any time since it was founded despite the gains in East London.

"According to the annual report, as discussed at the National Council prior to the conference, Respect had lost a third of its members over the past year, down from just over three thousand to just over two thousand, and many of its branches are in bad shape. Yet far from using the conference to discuss this problem and how to tackle it, the whole thing was covered up. The version of the annual report given to the delegates had even been altered, and all the membership figures removed. A carefully worded formula was inserted in place of the figures which gave the impression that the membership had gone up. It was smoke and mirrors. A declining Respect becomes an expanding one. George Galloway in his opening speech not only claimed that everything in the garden was absolutely rosy but that Respect had just recruited 10,000 students! Respect was, said Galloway "the fastest growing party in Britain". John Rees insisted that Respect was "bigger this year than last year"."

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All proposals we put forward at the conference to address this disastrous situation were also slapped down by an SWP majority. The implication was that since there was no crisis - other than in the heads of a disgruntled minority - there was no need for any solutions either. We were successfully isolated and defeated.

This was the real background to George Galloway's letter. What was new was that they had now been reflected in a poor result in the Southall Parliamentary by-election, there was a general election in the offing, and George Galloway had now raised them. The letter was an attempt to tackle this situation. It made proposals for a much-needed membership and fund drive and a modest reorganisation of the leadership structures of Respect, to bring a bit of plurality in at the top. If the SWP had been prepared to discuss the issues politically and make some compromises, to show that they were prepared to take other people's views into account, there could have been a positive outcome. John Lister (the other SR member on the Respect NC) and I issued a statement welcoming George Galloway's letter as far as it went, but calling on him to go further, particularly over the democratisation of Respect internal procedures and structures, and on accountability.

Harman says rather patronisingly that those from the left like me, John Lister (and Ken Loach and others) who supported the letter and eventually supported Respect Renewal were confused! But there was never any doubt where we would stand on the letter. It was pointing to problems we had been raising and changes we had been proposing for a long time. Nor was there any chance from the outset that we would support the SWP leadership once it was clear that they were opposing the letter in favour of an unacceptable status-quo. If the fiction of a left/right divide was calculated to draw us into the SWP camp, it was never going to work.

This was the reaction of almost all the non-SWP members of the NC. It was a remarkable situation. The SWP leadership managed to alienate themselves, within a few weeks, from virtually all of the active non-SWP members of the NC: people they had been working with for three and a half years. There were 50 members of the NC, of which about 44 were actively involved. At the time of the letter, the SWP had 19 members of the NC. By the time of the split, 19 NC members supported Respect Renewal and 21 supported the SWP, of which 17 were SWP members (several others declined to take sides).

Among those supporting Respect Renewal are Linda Smith (the National Chair of Respect and leading member of the Fire Brigades Union), Salma Yaqoob (National Vice-Chair and elected councillor in Birmingham), Victoria Brittain (a well known writer and playwright), Jerry Hicks (leading industrial militant and member of the SWP at the start of this crisis). There was also film maker Ken Loach, Abjol Miah (the leader of Respect on Tower Hamlets Council), Yvonne Ridley (also a journalist), and Nick Wrack - the first national chair of Respect and a member of the SWP when the crisis broke.

One feature of the SWP Respect after the split is that the ratio of SWP members to independent activists on its National Council elected on October 9th is even greater. SWP members are seventy percent of the incoming NC. It will be difficult to have much of a coalition on that basis.

Harman claims that the SWP did its "utmost" to reach a compromise to prevent a split. It did not. In fact it was the SWP's total refusal to compromise which set a split dynamic in train. Far from making concessions, the SWP went totally in the opposite direction. They took the letter as a frontal attack on the SWP and launched a nation-wide tour of SWP districts vilifying George Galloway and scandalously calling him and Salma Yaqoob (amongst many other things) "communalists", with its divisive connotations for those from the Sub-Continent, of brutal colonial pogroms and imperialist divide and rule. They also characterised his letter as a part of a right wing attack on the left in Respect.

The charge of communalism was particularly outrageous in the case of Salma Yaqoob, who, far from being a communalist, had a high profile and exemplary record in combating it in Birmingham - which she convincingly

outlined in her reply to the SWP Challenges for Respect.

There may well have been examples where Respect focussed too much on building in one single community or worked too much through community networks in a particular area. The SWP are seriously wrong, however, in describing this as communalism and Harman continues with this dangerous line. Of course, the task is to resist relying on such networks and especially where, which is often the case, they are male-dominated. Unlike The Labour Party, however, we need to fight for transparent processes, as has been the case over postal voting. If there have been concessions to these practices, the SWP have to show what they did about it at the time not just claim, without any evidence, that it was all down to George Galloway. Salma Yaqoob covers some of these things a lot more adequately in her excellent reply to Harman - A Spectre is Haunting Respect?

At each of the SWP's internal meetings the attacks on George Galloway became more frenzied. A minority which emerged inside the SWP in opposition to all this, and which argued for the SWP to make compromises before it was too late, was brushed aside and some were later expelled. In hindsight, is it probable that once the SWP leadership had gone down the road of whipping up their members against Galloway in this way, it was already impossible to prevent a split. It was very difficult to pull back from the kind of allegations which were being made and the bitterness engendered. So SWP leaders, finding themselves in a hole, kept digging. In fact, the kind of language used then continues in Harman's letter. In it he not only claims that there was a witch hunt against the SWP, but that it reflected the tone of the Cold War of the 1950s and the purges of Trotskyists in the Labour Party in the 1980s! At another point it compares us with the leadership of Rifondazione joining the Prodi coalition.

It is worth noting that the George Galloway the SWP were now vilifying was the same George Galloway that the SWP had repeatedly shielded from criticism from ourselves and others ever since Respect was founded: not just on the profile of LGBT rights, but other issues as well. They now denounced him for unaccountability, yet at the time of the Celebrity Big Brother debacle they fought might and main to protect him against any degree of accountability at all. They successfully blocked any of criticism of his decision to go on the programme being expressed by Respect. Harman repeats the crassest arguments deployed by the SWP at the time to defend their actions. For example: that George Galloway's appearance on Big Brother was not as bad as invading Iraq as Blair and new Labour had done! So that's alright then! On that criterion he had a completely free hand!

Harman's answer to the charge that the SWP undemocratically dominated Respect - something which was so recognisable to non-SWP members - is to claim that it cannot be true because the SWP has a good reputation in campaigns such as the Anti-Nazi League and the Stop the War Coalition! Whether this claim holds water or not his answer reflects the scale of the problem. The SWP has indeed always treated Respect as a single issue campaign and sought to build it as such. This is the infamous united front of a special kind - when it needs to be something much more akin to a political party if it is to succeed. The level of democracy, of involvement of members, and of common political experience and development, is something very different in an organisation (whether you call it a party or not) which fights for political office than in a single issue campaign which is confined to a limited objective. Again this was the nub of the issue.

Harman claims that George Galloway and others have attacked democratic centralism and Leninist organisation. What has been challenged, however, is not democratic centralism as such, but the way the SWP operated democratic centralism inside Respect, and the effect this had on the democracy of the organisation. In other words, the SWP's bureaucratic conception of 'democratic' centralism and the way they applied it to Respect.

The objection was not that the SWP had meetings as the SWP. The objection was the relationship between its decision making processes and those of Respect itself. Many in Respect, who were not in the SWP, were becoming painfully aware as to what this involved. It meant the huge SWP delegations on the leading bodies of Respect acting under democratic centralist discipline as normal practice, with no attempt to limit the impact of this, or allow a genuine

process of discussion to take place. This made it a waste of time for others to attend, since all the important decisions were determined in advance. I had declined nomination for the officers group (the executive committee) after the 2006 conference for exactly this reason, because my attendance was pointless. The elected committees were not the real decision-making bodies at all. They were token meetings controlled by the parallel decision-making structures of the SWP. Decisions which were taken were only carried out if they corresponded to the SWP agenda.

It was this dubious mode of operation which required a top-down structure with the 'important leader' at the top running both Respect and the SWP. And it was this which was challenged by George Galloway's proposal to establish a national organiser alongside the national secretary, with equal authority. This also explains why this proposal was resisted so strongly by the SWP. It was seen as a direct challenge to John Rees and his ability to run things this way.

It was this issue rather than events in Tower Hamlets in East London which was the driving force of the split on the NC. After several hours of debate at two NC meetings - during which SWP delegates came close to driving George Galloway out of Respect - an agreement was reached on the appointment of a national organiser with equal status to John Rees. It was seen as a breakthrough by the non-SWP members of the NC. An officer's meeting then set this decision aside and referred the issue to the Respect conference. That decision took the crisis to a new level. It sent a message loud and clear that the SWP was going to defend their top-down conception to the bitter end, and that it was probably too late to save Respect in its original form. It was also this which brought the crisis in Tower Hamlets to a head and triggered a battle over conference delegates. If everything was going to be decided by a vote-out at conference, delegates became crucial.

There had been wider problems and conflicts in Tower Hamlets Respect, it is true. Many of them reflected genuine problems arising out of Respect's electoral success, however, for which nobody should apologise. Respect made a major breakthrough - unprecedented on the left - into impoverished working class minority communities in East London and Birmingham, amongst people who were outraged by the war. A large number of new members, many of whom had little experience of the labour movement or the traditional left, with different traditions of political organisation, came into Respect. But how those gains could be consolidated and built, and how the problems which would inevitably arise could be tackled (whatever new community was involved) was another matter.

It is true that Respect's appeal as an anti-war party had an impact right across the Muslim communities in a way which would not be the case in a white working class area, for example. There were - and are - restaurant owners who strongly support Respect again in a way that would not be the case in a white working class area. But this is a product of the position such people find themselves as migrants in British society, their political experience back home, and the nature of the so-called war against terror with its demonisation of Muslim people.

It would be a big mistake, however, to conclude that the several restaurant owners who support Respect Renewal determine the class character of that support. They absolutely do not. The bulk of Respect's Muslim supporters are amongst the most impoverished sections of the working class in Britain. It casts shame on the SWP that they are now resorting to arguments which previously came either from the right wing or the ultra left.

The problems arising from all this, of course, were never discussed in Respect at the level of the NC or the even the officers group. Harman makes a series of allegations about Tower Hamlets Respect about non-left interlopers and the like. But why was none of this brought to the elected committees at the time? The fact is a conscious decision was taken by SWP leaders to keep them internal to Tower Hamlets and the SWP, since the elected bodies were not seen as the real leadership. That was the SWP. Instead of collective discussion, the problems, where they existed, were internalised and compounded. It was a big mistake. It was impossible for the elected leadership to take responsibility for such problems when they were not informed of the existence of them. Instead of discussion and debate around issues as they have arisen, the SWP's answer was lowest-common-denominator politics. It avoided

conflict but nothing was resolved.

The political framework behind all this was the 'loose coalition' conception - which the SWP had insisted on imposing on Respect - rather than building it as an all-round political party. With a loose coalition, the priorities were not political development and the establishment of collective political experience. These were seen as the preserve of the SWP itself, which is a logical approach with a united front campaign. For such a campaign or a loose coalition, the priority was to be able to deliver votes when they were needed. How the organisation itself developed was a secondary matter.

There were also implications for internal democracy. A loose coalition does not imply the same level of democracy or accountability as a party. Nor does it imply the detailed rules needed for standing for political office, policy making, membership status, selection procedures and accountability. Harman alleges irregularities in Tower Hamlets, specifically of large numbers of members joining at the unemployed rate - when some of them, he argues, must have been employed. It is hard to know whether there was substance in this allegation or not. But what is clear is that the SWP has an appalling record of overlooking such irregularities when it has suited them. This raises questions as to how such a situation, if it existed, was allowed to develop in the first place. Both the 2006 Respect conference and the SWP-organised 2007 Respect conference featured large numbers of student delegates who had no legitimate status at all. They were 'elected' from the lists of students who simply expressed an interest in Respect at a Freshers' Fair, but never joined, and in most cases were never seen again. It was one of the factors making the conference an undemocratic and unacceptable event which was no longer viable as a united conference. It would have been unlikely ever to get past the item 'endorsement of delegates' then breaking up, which would have done no one any good.

Harman makes no serious attempt to explain the SWP's dramatic switch - as far as George Galloway is concerned - from unquestioned leader to number one enemy of the left. It's true that Galloway is a maverick and is a controversial politician. But he was both of these things the day Respect was formed and he remained so the day it split. At the time Respect was formed, the SWP saw it as important to include someone like Galloway in a project like Respect, if it was to have a broad appeal. And they were right, at least in principle, even if they got it wrong in practice. You can't have a broad party including both revolutionary socialists and left reformists without any left reformists of any weight and influence. And Galloway is still the only left Labour MP to make a break with Labour, having been expelled from Labour over the war - and to have put his weight behind building an alternative. He is the best public speaker on the left, not an unimportant attribute, and was and remains a central leader of the anti-war movement. It is largely from these two factors that he has the biggest electoral base of anyone on the left outside of the Labour Party. He is left Labour in his politics, as he made very clear at the Respect Renewal conference. But it was this which he brought into Respect from the outset - a genuine component of left-Labour politics.

Nor is Harman right to draw a parallel between the Big Brother episode and Galloway's other media appearances - in particular his twice weekly Talk Sport show. This is a left-wing show and is a service to the left. It is used by GG to promote left-wing causes and left-wing ideas in front of an audience of half a million. It is hard to see and objection to that.

The degree of success achieved by Respect Renewal since the split is both an indication that the political conditions for such a party remain as strong as ever. Respect Renewal remains fragile and will only develop successfully to the extent that it is able to turn outwards towards the rest of the left. The strength of Respect Renewal, however - which was never the case with the original Respect under the SWP - is that it is serious about approaching other sections of the left, such as the trade union left and the CPB, about a wider regroupment of forces to tackle the crisis of working class representation. It is serious when it says that it does not see itself as the answer, but only one component of the answer. It means it when it says that if it is possible to move towards a wider regroupment, it would put no organisational preconditions in the way. Its only precondition would be that it would represent a step forwards in building the kind of new party the working class needs in order to respond to the betrayals of social democracy.

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All these issues could have been discussed in the framework of the old Respect had the SWP leadership acted differently. Unfortunately, that was not the case. In reality, there was resistance to this kind of approach. The task now, therefore, is to make Respect Renewal the success it has the possibility of being. It has made a very encouraging start; the task now is to build on this initial success.