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Britain - Debate on militant left

The SWP takes a step backwards

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Of all the words written about the split in Respect, the least important are those dealing with who did what at some meeting or other. Of much more interest are those articles attempting to provide some political explanation of these events.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/salmayaqoob.jpg>]

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Two recent articles from Martin Smith and [Chris Harman](#)[1] attempt to provide this political explanation. What I propose to do here is to address three aspects of this debate. Firstly, the SWP's echoing of attacks once the preserve of those more known for pandering to Islamophobia than challenging it. Secondly, the SWP's crass understanding of the dynamic of race and class inside the Muslim community, and the conclusions they draw from it. And thirdly, how best to protect the political integrity of the newly emerging Respect as an entity rooted in opposition to war, neo-liberalism and racism.

A spectre is haunting Respect?

Leading members of the SWP are conjuring up the spectre of reactionary religious forces on the march inside Respect.

In his article in the December 2007 issue of Socialist Review, SWP National Secretary Martin Smith quotes, with apparent approval, an opponent of Respect as saying: "The split will strengthen the weight of the Islamists in Respect Renewal, some of whom have links to Jamaat-e-Islami [Pakistan's largest religious party]. I don't think that's going to make the party very hospitable to socialists." [2]

Chris Harman echoes the theme, but goes for a double whammy, invoking two apparently sinister organized forces at work inside Respect: "...some of Galloway's allies in the Islamic Forum of Europe have connections with the Bangladeshi group Jamaat-i-Islami...It was involved in the military suppression of the Bengali liberation movement in 1969, before developing separate Pakistani and Bangladeshi wings, both of which still use force to drive the left from university campuses" [3]

This argument could not be clearer: conservative Islamic organisations are organizing inside Respect against socialists. It is an argument that we have heard time and time again from those who most viciously opposed Respect from the start, as part of their pro-war agenda. That the SWP now echo these arguments is astonishing.

To ascertain whether there are conservative Islamic religious forces exercising their weight inside Respect, it is first helpful to evaluate whether they are emerging in broader British society. Writing about this nearly two years ago my estimation about Muslim radicalism, - those engaging in political activism from a self consciously religious perspective - was as follows:

"...the dominant character of Muslim radicalisation in Britain today points not towards terrorism or religious extremism, but in the opposite direction: towards political engagement in new, radical and progressive coalitions that seek to unite Muslim with non-Muslim in parliamentary and extra-parliamentary strategies to effect change...the existence of this new and progressive radicalism is a sharp break from those who would lead British Islam into confrontation with all levels of British society." [4]

As evidence I pointed to increasing Muslim participation in an array of campaigns and initiatives, from the anti-war movement to the European Social Forum, from political alliances with the Mayor of London's office to the emergence of Respect.

Two years later that process has deepened. The decision of the MCB to end their boycott of Holocaust Memorial Day[5], the comments from its chair Mohammed Bari that discrimination on the basis of sexual preference was 'obnoxious',[6] and the growing relationship between the MCB and the Trades Union Congress represents important progress. Reactionary and conservative religious radicals certainly exist, and their influence has to be continually countered. But the general political trajectory of Muslim radicalism is still towards progressive politics.

That general trend is much more dramatically pronounced inside Respect, which has gathered together a significant grouping of Muslims who combine their Islamic faith with a commitment to the struggle for social justice.

One indication of which way the wind is blowing has been the complete absence of any serious dissent inside Respect over the kind of secular/religious fault lines that run through wider society. This includes issues such as abortion law, homosexuality, gender equality or faith-based schools.

For many people these are matters of personal morality and religious belief. For that reason we would be wise to deal with them with some sensitivity[7]. But these issues, of course, have a wider political and social significance that we cannot ignore. In this context, an argument about the importance of the right to self-determination, freedom and equality is very powerful. I have argued on many occasions that if Muslims demand respect for their beliefs and lifestyle, then the same tolerance and respect for the rights and choices of others is obligatory.

What we have achieved is the creation of an alliance which emphasizes universal themes of justice and equality. Within this there will be all sorts of ideological (and theological) views. But they are united by the defence of the rights and freedoms of all. It is an alliance that has advanced support for progressive social causes.

There is no evidence of any Muslim bloc inside Respect seeking to give our political agenda some Sharia flavour. There is no evidence that members of Jamaat-i-Islami or any other Islamic organization are on some 'entryist' mission inside Respect.

There is no evidence of the SWP raising concerns about undue religious influence in all the time I have been Vice Chair. And there is no evidence that such forces are about to emerge in the absence of the SWP. Quite the opposite, in fact. When we were organizing the Respect Renewal conference the Islamic figure our Bengali councillors in Tower Hamlets wanted to speak was Tariq Ramadan, the most progressive exponent of a modern European Islam.

The SWP allegations are groundless. They are driven more by the dynamic of a faction fight in which they are grasping around for ideological cover to mask what is in reality sectarian manoeuvres to entrench their control. The danger for the SWP, in repeating arguments which first emanated from the so-called pro-war 'left', is that in so doing they allow the waters of Islamophobia to lap at their feet.

Are Muslims in retreat from the struggle against war and racism?

The SWP have suggested that there is a retreat from engagement in radical politics by Muslims, and that George Galloway was adapting to this reversion to conservative community politics. They locate this retreat in the impact of

the 7/7 bombings. This claim is wrong.

There is no evidence that Muslims, radicalised by the impact of war and Islamophobia, are falling in behind Home Office attempts to incorporate establishment figures on the basis of softening opposition to British foreign policy or to their campaigns of demonisation against Muslims. The handful of Muslim figures who have taken such a view patently do not have the support of the wider community. Any political benefits the Labour party have gained from the 'Brown Bounce' have very much disappeared. While there is fear and concern over new government threats to our civil liberties, there is simply no evidence that the Government's agenda is substantially weakening the anti-imperialist or anti-racist consciousness among any significant layer of Muslims in Britain today.

The SWP attempts to justify this argument with reference to a decline in the numbers of Muslims attending anti-war marches. This is far too simplistic. The inability of the anti-war movement to prevent the invasion of Iraq inevitably had a certain demoralizing effect, across all communities, undermining a belief in the power of social movements to make a difference. It was not just Muslim participation on anti-war protests that subsequently declined.

But the anger over the war on terror has not gone away. It re-emerged over the Israeli attack on Lebanon, and would undoubtedly emerge again in the advent of any new escalation like an attack on Iran. Furthermore, events organised by coalitions of Islamic institutions such as the Global Peace and Unity conference and Islam Expo have continued to grow after 7/7 and have continued to develop a critical, radical edge. These attract tens of thousands of participants.

It is a mistake therefore to conflate a dip in Muslim involvement in a single set form of activity – a Stop the War demonstration – with a major political regression to community politics.

Does Respect pander to community leaders?

Does Respect pander to 'community leaders i.e. small businessmen'[8]?

Related to this mistaken analysis, is a crude understanding of the appeal of Respect inside the Muslim community. The SWP states: 'This logic of electoralism has led Galloway and his supporters to be drawn into making alliances across the whole Muslim community', wherein, George Galloway, myself and others will become increasingly dependant upon 'community leaders' i.e. small businessmen'. [8]

It is true that Respect does have an appeal across the whole Muslim community. There are two possible explanations for this. One, traditionally favoured by the ultra-left and now by the SWP, is that Respect has consciously courted the support of community leaders/small businessmen, at the price of politically compromising ourselves. Again, no actual evidence is produced to substantiate this, nor is there any explanation as to why sections of the Muslim business community would think their class interests are best served by hitching their wagon to a fringe political party.

Another explanation lies in an understanding of how racism impacts on all Muslims. This racism affects all Muslims, although of course it is mitigated by class background.

Firstly, though, one must be clear about the nature of Muslim communities in Britain today. Muslim communities are dominated by disadvantage and poverty [9].

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• Around 69% of Muslims live in poverty.

• 35% of Muslim households have no adult in employment – double the national average. Overall, they are 3 times more likely to be unemployed than the population as a whole.

• 73% of Pakistani and Bangladeshi children live in households below the poverty line – compared to 31% for all households

• 32% of Muslim households were overcrowded, and generally Muslims have poorer housing conditions, and are more reliant on social housing

• 28% of young Muslims are unemployed

• 20% of Muslims are self-employed – frequently in marginal and insecure occupations

These are the communities where we have won our strongest support – in some of the poorest wards in the country. Our support does not come primarily from the small, or not so small businessmen, seeking to advance their interests. It comes overwhelmingly from those who experience poverty and disadvantage.

But, in tandem with this poverty and disadvantage, is racism. Irrespective of their class background, Muslims are constantly aware of the discrimination and prejudice they face. It is no less real for the self-employed taxi driver, or the owner of a small grocers shop. There is anger throughout the community at this racism, compounded by anger at the blatant double standards of Western foreign policy.

A consequence of this system of disadvantage and exclusion is the pitifully poor political representation imposed on these communities. For many years this has been dominated by the Labour Party, happy to rely on the large votes from Muslims, but desperate to retain control over them.

So when politicians come along who articulate the feelings of the community, they will get respect, whether they are Muslim or non-Muslim. One of the biggest reasons why Muslims say they support me is that I make them feel proud of who they are, even to the extent of thinking I am a role model for their children.

This sense of pride and community loyalty applies to Muslims who are unemployed, it applies to Muslims who run corner shops, and it applies to our handful of more wealthy backers.

There are Muslim businesspeople who live in million pound mansions in leafy suburbs, while operating businesses in our communities paying low wages and delivering poor conditions for their workers. But I have not yet found these people to be natural supporters of a fringe left-wing party. There are other businesspeople who both live and work in our communities, and who retain a close connection with the community they come from, and who have the same interest as their brothers and sisters in confronting racism, opposing war, and seeing good representation for the disadvantaged areas they live in.

Respect's base is among the poorest sections of our communities. And the experience of anti-Muslim racism, and disgust at imperialist war, motivates some small business people in those communities to join us. The roots of our cross community support do not lie in right-wing, anti-working class politics. They can be found in a commitment to oppose racism and war, and the significance of a political party being seen to speak out in defence of that community's interest.

Running through the SWP's analysis is a crude reductionist attempt to read off all political actions from some supposed economic interest. If this is too simplistic in trying to explain Respect's support from some people who own small businesses, it is even more so in relation to people seen as community leaders. The single biggest reason such individuals acquire weight and influence is not wealth, it is reputation.

South Asian communities are built on the basis on migration. New immigrants settle where they have already family or personal links. As a result, most of Birmingham and Tower Hamlets Muslim communities live in areas with others of a similar background. That background invariably lies in common village roots in Pakistan, Kashmir and Bangladesh, with ties reinforced through marriage. These strong community ties bring real benefits. They have provided an indispensable leg-up to newly arrived immigrants from rural areas as they navigate their way around their new country.

The value of such support is incalculable, and is not readily forgotten. And on the basis of their records in doing such work, certain individuals can acquire prestige and influence. It is insulting to our voters and supporters to reduce the prestige which certain individuals in the community have, to some form of patronage or favour they dispense.

Of course this influence can be, and often is, abused. Family and clan loyalties have allowed influential figures in the community to claim control over blocks of votes that can run into the hundreds. This system can stifle genuine political debate, and at its worst can lead to corruption of the electoral process.

But the existence of such loyalties is a reality that cannot be wished away. Family or clan loyalties are not an invention of ‘community leaders’. They originate in the social structures of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, and persist because of the experience of migration and the importance of mutual support and interdependence in the daily lives of South Asian communities in Britain today.

This social reality can be both a strength and a weakness. And it leads to real pressures which we have to resist by asserting the primacy of principled politics.

Our campaigns to end the postal vote have to be seen in this context. It is for the reasons that biraderi (extended clan) networks can exert undue influence that we have been campaigning vigorously in Birmingham against postal votes. Women in particular have been disenfranchised. Postal votes are filled out in the “privacy” of one’s own home. But it is not private when family members, candidates or supporters, can influence - subtly or otherwise - the way you complete your vote. Community leaders may claim to be able to yield significant voter blocs, but no one can interfere with the secrecy of the polling station. A secret ballot means that loyalties to family and friends can be maintained in public, but political arguments can still win out in the real privacy of the voting booth.

Ultimately, however, we have to stick to principles and lead by example. Last year in Birmingham Sparkbrook we came under considerable pressure when we selected a candidate whose family were originally from the same village in Pakistan as the sitting Lib Dem councillor. It was alleged we were splitting the biraderi vote. And that we could not win by so doing. We resisted those pressures, just as we resisted pressures when the same people said we could never win by standing a women candidate. And we were proved right on both occasions.

The SWP’s allegations that we are in thrall to ‘community leaders i.e. small businessmen’ are as ignorant of the communities they profess to be knowledgeable about as they are misleading about the actual activities of their critics.

Respect: the politics of ‘Tammnay Hall’ and ‘pocket members’?

The SWP claim that following the outcome of selection meetings in Birmingham and Tower Hamlets the character of Respect changed, and there was a move ‘away from the minimal agreed principles...towards putting electability above every other principle’.[10] They also claim that ‘Tammnay Hall’ politics i.e. the buying of ethnic voter blocs in

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return for political favours, have now corrupted Respect.

These are about as serious a set of allegations as can be made.[11] You would expect therefore that the SWP to produce evidence to substantiate them. You would expect them to be able to point to how the political programme of Respect has been subsequently watered down; or to cite examples of our elected councillors pandering to a pro-war, neo-liberal agenda; or to give a single instance where our councillors have abused their elected positions or brought Respect into disrepute. Yet no evidence is forthcoming.

The SWP's attempt to evoke an analogy between Respect and the practices of the Democratic Party machine - known as Tammany Hall - is particularly ludicrous. For decades, Tammany Hall politics played a major part in controlling politics and carving out ethnic voter bases in cities like New York City and Chicago through patronage, bribery, kickbacks. It was first and foremost based on the use and abuse of power – a real power which, by any definition, is lacking among Muslim communities in Britain.

There is no parallel between the Tammany Hall system and the attempts by disadvantaged and excluded minority communities in Britain to organize themselves to exert influence over the political system. The former is a colonial-type operation to keep politics in the hands of big business. The latter is a struggle for justice and equality by those kept out of the corridors of power. One would have thought the SWP could tell the difference between the two.

All sorts of groupings organise to maximize their influence in society. I see no reason – other than ignorance and prejudice – why the organization of minority communities should be singled out for particular hostility, particularly when representatives of those communities do not wield significant political power in our society.

Of course, pressures exist and have to be countered. We have seen allegations, over many years, of ‘pocket members’ bought and paid for by individuals with the sole intention of influencing selection meetings.

These undemocratic practices can be dealt with. Membership rules can be tightened, or in extreme cases a national party can intervene if a local organization is bringing it into disrepute. Prior to the split I am not aware of the SWP either proposing new measures to tighten membership requirements or raising at a national level their concerns about selection processes inside Respect.[12]

Instead they overplay the outcome of a few selection meetings where their preferred candidates did not get selected. There is more than a touch of double standards here. The SWP complain about candidates encouraging their supporters to ‘pack’ a meeting.[13] Yet the SWP goes through the same process every time it approaches a contentious meeting or conference. It will have its full-timers ensuring that the membership details of its supporters are up to date - no doubt in some cases using SWP district bank accounts to speed the process. And when their side wins, they congratulate themselves on a ‘good mobilisation’. When the other side wins, they cry foul about meetings being ‘packed’!

The SWP, with a half a century of political existence behind them, came into Respect as a well-organised party, with an apparatus staffed by full-timers and an extremely top down and centralised decision making culture. With a familiarity of operating in committees and party political structures that the vast majority of Respect's new supporters and members did not have, the potential for an organised political grouping having an influence wholly disproportionate to its social base among Respect voters, was very real.

As it became clear that Respect's strongest voter base and elected representatives came from within sections of the Muslim community, where the SWP had virtually no influence, so they increasingly resorted to bureaucratic manoeuvrings and control to exercise influence. By packing a committee with their members, by acting in committee

meetings to a prepared plan and in a disciplined manner, they could lockdown the decision making structures in their favour. New Respect activists learnt the only way to challenge this was to outplay the SWP at their own game, and 'pack' meetings better than they could, which they duly did.

Whichever side 'wins' in these sort of contests, it has to be admitted that the process brings with it an unhealthy dynamic into our internal life. The coalition model that Respect was founded upon had its merits. In the future, however, I am convinced that we need to organise much more along traditional party political lines. We need to be clear that we are building a political party, and not making some form of temporary agreement between rival interests for electoral purposes.

Conclusion

I see nothing that has happened in the last year or so that fundamentally challenges my view that the political foundation upon which Respect rests; opposition to imperialism, neo-liberalism or racism, is anything other than solid.

Those in the leadership of the Renewal wing of Respect are implacable on all these three fundamental issues. Likewise, the bulk of our members and supporters have essentially old Labour values, given backbone with anger at war and racism. Our members feel pride when they hear Respect leaders like George Galloway articulate their concerns with his trademark eloquence and uncompromising anti-imperialism and anti-racism.

Many come from backgrounds in the South Asian sub-continent where they are all too familiar with the reality of political corruption, and certainly in inner city Birmingham, they will have seen similar practices replicate themselves in the behaviour of the Labour party. By contrast they see us as embodying political principle. This is what our reputation rests on. But we can't take it for granted. We have to work hard to protect it.

We must create a more rounded and extensive political culture so that our members absorb through a variety of means our fundamental principles, and where new leaders and candidates are moulded out of our traditions. That is a process. It will require determination and consistency on our part. To that end the production of a Respect newspaper is one important step in the right direction. More steps will follow. However I am confident of the political direction we are travelling. I am also confident that Respect is emerging reborn and renewed from its recent difficulties.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1 Martin Smith, 'Where next for Respect?' Socialist Review December 2007
Chris Harman, 'The Crisis in Respect', document sent to IST members, December 2007.

2 Smith opt cit.

3 Harman opt cit.

4 A point George Galloway repeated in his letter to the SWP concerning their attempt to brow beat Muslim councillors into participating on a Gay Pride float.

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5 Salma Yaqoob, 'British Islamic Radicalism' in *Islamic Political Radicalism: A European Perspective*, editors Raymond Tallis &, Tahir Abbas, Edinburgh University Press, 2006

6 <http://www.muslimnews.co.uk/paper/index.php?article=3299>

7 http://www.tuc.org.uk/the_tuc/tuc-13179-f0.cfm

8 John Molyneux, 'On Respect: a reply to some points', SWP pre conference discussion bulletin 3, 2007.

9 <http://www.nya.org.uk/Templates/internal.asp?NodeID=92837>

10 Harman opt cit.

11 For somebody who allegedly prides himself as a practitioner of a scientific Marxist method, the paucity, anecdotal and one-sided nature of Chris Harman's evidence is striking. The fact that in order to substantiate his claims about Birmingham Respect he is reduced to reproducing a comment from a friend's sister, who apparently happens to live in Birmingham, and who allegedly thinks Birmingham Respect is 'communalist', has more than a touch of desperation about it. Nobody that I know has ever heard of the source he quotes, for all I know she might not even be a Respect member. And if she is, she is certainly not an active one. It is revealing he can't find any members from his own organization active in Birmingham Respect to publicly reiterate and substantiate the 'communalist' charge. They certainly have never made any such charge at any Respect meeting that I have attended.

The only other piece of evidence Harman produces in relation to Birmingham is a disputed selection meeting held last year. He cites the fact we selected seven Asian male as evidence of succumbing to conservative patriarchal pressures from inside the Muslim community. He conveniently ignores the fact that the most high profile Respect figure in the city is a Muslim woman. He also ignores any reference to [my request to the SWP](#) that they come forward with female candidates for the outstanding 33 uncontested wards:

The bigger question SWP members should be asking themselves about the Kings Heath selection meeting is why, in a catchment area that included Birmingham University and a 6,000 plus student population, the SWP could not recruit even half a dozen of so students to support their candidate, Helen Salmon.

12 The SWP proposed changes to membership only after they had elected to go 'nuclear' over George Galloway's letter and Respect was in the process of dividing into two.

Their proposal was that members should be restricted as to how many members any individual member could recruit in any one month, that the National Office should be able to ask prospective members for proof of their right to the concessionary rate and that new members had to attend a minimum number of meetings prior to voting for candidates etc.

The first of these proposals was clearly unenforceable but also bizarre in its demand that members should limit their recruitment aspirations. Respect's problem has not been too many members but too few. The second proposal promised a potentially racially inflammatory test of the veracity of members. Bangladeshi members in Tower Hamlets have already had plenty of experience of condescending white members demanding ID from them as though they were having to pass an immigration entry test. The third and most significant restriction however was clearly an opportunist device to keep control over selection of candidates and election of officers in the hands of those for whom attendance at political meetings was a way of life, this likely to be, of course, mostly SWP members. So much then

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for trying to create a new kind of organisation which would help to enfranchise those who had for so long been disenfranchised. Most extraordinary of all, these proposals also promised restrictions which are not to be found in either the Labour Party or the trade union movement.

The SWP proposals threatened to entrench the tendencies marked in many areas of making Respect an extension of the local SWP branch's campaigning activity rather than giving it a life of its own.

13 Rob Hoveman adds the following background information in relation to Tower Hamlets:

“In four years in Tower Hamlets, in the area where we have the biggest support for Respect electorally and where we have had an MP for almost three years, an examination of the membership of Respect in the borough revealed that the SWP had recruited virtually no-one white to Respect outside the SWP itself. This represents an abysmal failure. Moreover, according to their local organizer, a Tower Hamlets SWP branch meeting was told that 60% of the SWP members in the borough had not joined Respect and that they would, in the face of the “witch-hunt” the party was facing, now be trying to get them to join!

Much has been made about the process of candidate selection in Tower Hamlets for the council elections in 2006. What was most apparent in the run-up to the local elections, however, was, on the one hand, the lack of white candidates to put up for election and, on the other, the fact that the SWP candidates, most of whom were white, had had no real prior connection with or involvement in the Bangladeshi community which was inevitably going to be the major source of votes in the election.

Few, if any, of the SWP candidates in Tower Hamlets had serious roots in the wards in which they stood. Of no-one was this more true than John Rees. Although he had worked in the area for many years, as this was the site of the SWP national office until the last couple of years, he had not been involved in local campaigns and in fact lived in Hackney.

He wanted to stand in Whitechapel because this is where he thought he was most likely to get elected. A number of Bangladeshi activists thought this unlikely as no-one in the Bangladeshi community in Whitechapel had any prior knowledge of him. This was the one source of acute division at the candidate selection meeting in the Kingsley Hall, where the room divided almost but not exclusively on racial lines over his standing in Whitechapel. Although his candidacy was confirmed at that meeting by majority vote, he subsequently concluded that he could not win there and switched to Bethnal Green South as a more promising prospect. Even so he did not really start his local campaign until four weeks before the election and concentrated heavily on getting SWP members in to canvas by knocking on doors.

I was in favour of John Rees standing in the election but the tactics deployed to try to get him elected seem to me to have been fatally flawed. Throwing in wave after wave of canvassers in the last few weeks, when most psephologists will tell you most votes have already been decided, shows an incredible lack of understanding about how confidence, and therefore votes, are won amongst sections of the community. And hoping to ride the coat-tails of Bangladeshi candidates who do have roots and the connections betrays an electoral opportunism (unsuccessful in this as in other cases) entirely counter to the long-standing SWP position that SWP members need to build real roots in the community.

Finally, in relation to SWP claims about there being something underhand about new members being recruited before the candidate selection for Bethnal Green and Bow in November 2007, what they did not point out was that many of the new members who were being registered were being registered by SWP councillor Lutfa Begum in order to vote for her daughter Rania Khan to be the candidate. Rania Khan incidentally was the SWP's own preferred candidate for the nomination. There may well be nothing improper in Lutfa Begum encouraging new members to join in the run-up to a selection. But what is improper is the SWP's double standards when it comes to such actions.'

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