

The following document was written by Kevin Ovenden for the SWP's Pre-conference Internal Bulletin. Events have moved on since then, including Kevin's expulsion from the SWP. Kevin Ovenden works in George Galloway's office. He is the author of [Malcolm X: Socialism and Black Nationalism](#).

KEEPING A SENSE OF PROPORTION

by Kevin Ovenden

The debate inside the SWP, Respect and the wider movement sparked by George Galloway's letter to its National Council members on 23 August was always going to bring difficulties.

But I believe the response of the Central Committee has compounded those difficulties. In particular, the characterisation of the argument as the opening shot in a fundamental battle between "left and right" in Respect, with a right wing bloc supposedly attempting to crush or subordinate the socialist left threatens to widen divisions in the coalition to breaking point.

The CC indicated its response to the Galloway letter at a London caucus on 19 August - four days before anyone had seen it. The position was that Galloway's anticipated call for a national organiser in Respect was unacceptable if that person was to work alongside rather than below John Rees and that the unseen letter was an attack on the SWP with the aim of shifting Respect to the right. Six weeks later, party members joined everyone else on the Respect National Council in voting for a national organiser working alongside John Rees. At the same meeting George Galloway and Salma Yaqoob were part of the unanimous vote for a resolution (moved by the representative of the other revolutionary socialist group in Respect) which, among other things, stressed the left wing and socialist character of the coalition.

We have now agreed to Galloway's once unacceptable organiser proposal and the forces we say are attempting to subordinate the socialist left in Respect are cooperating more closely than ever before with those who emphasise Respect's socialist content.

Something is wrong the analysis of the past six weeks. We should change it. Doing so raises a range of questions about the party's work. They should be addressed in the course of the discussion period up to our conference in January. But in the immediacy we should recognise the mistaken course in response to Galloway's letter and change tack.

It is true that Galloway's letter, not the actions of the SWP, precipitated the argument. But there is no political value whatsoever in saying "he started it". We are a revolutionary socialist organisation

which should see further and operate more stably than our allies in any united front or area of work. But instead of keeping matters in proportion, the CC reaction, to what was admittedly a very difficult meeting with George Galloway, Salma Yaqoob and others on 4 September, was exaggerated.

Rapidly, the position the CC adopted and fought for in the party was that Galloway had made an electoral calculation that he needed "Muslim votes" and, with the possible imminence of the general election, he had formed a bloc with right wing and "communalist" (or soft on communalist) forces which necessitated him launching an attack on socialists in Respect and the SWP in particular. The argument is wrong and does not stand up to serious examination. The one piece of documentary evidence the CC produced for its interpretation was an article in the East London Advertiser, the local paper in Tower Hamlets. It was held up at the London aggregate on 7 September as an authoritative indication the Galloway's intentions were as the CC claimed. There is also reference to the article in the CC's written response to Galloway.

But the article was not authoritative. The journalist who wrote it got his steer from comments on a sectarian website not, as the CC intimated, via some briefing from Galloway's staff. The CC was provided with all the relevant evidence of this on 10 September.

Other false arguments have been very damaging. Galloway's letter criticises the fact that the trade union conference organised by Respect in November last year lost £5,000 (a shortfall reported at the time to the Respect national officers group but made good seven months later with an unsolicited individual donation in June of this year). He also said it was debatable whether the conference was the right overriding priority for Respect.

Now, these things are debatable. And debating them does not equate to attacking Respect's involvement in trade union work. Raising questions about a conference is not equivalent to downplaying working class politics. There are important figures in Respect with vast trade union experience who also raise questions about the Organising for Fighting Unions initiative. It would be absurd to claim they are anti-union or are moving away from class politics to appease petite bourgeois Muslim businessmen.

It's equally absurd to claim the same about Galloway. Before he wrote his letter to the Respect NC he was on the postal workers' picket lines; after, he wrote a letter - turned into a leaflet - cosigned by Lindsey German, Abjol Miah and Shaheed Ali, the leader and deputy leader of the Respect group on Tower Hamlets council, in support of the Metronet strikers who brought the tube to a standstill. Galloway has spoken out in

support of the prison officers walkout; he has had striking workers on his radio show; he has invited the deputy general secretary of the CWU and the general secretary of the POA onto the show; and more besides.

None of this deserves plaudits - it's what we should expect. But none of it is evidence of a supposed shift away from trade unionism in order to placate businessmen.

It is similar when it comes to Galloway's questioning of money spent on Respect's Gay Pride intervention. Questioning the amount spent and complaining about the failure to publicise the intervention having spent that money might be right or wrong. It is not, however, "pandering to homophobia". Before Galloway's letter to the Respect NC he wrote solidarity statements to the NUS LGBT conference and to the Student Pride demonstration in Manchester; after it, he has spoken out in defence of LGBT rights in the media and on his website.

The CC, however, highlights these parts of Galloway's letter and claims they betray a hidden motive or are subtle signals to socially conservative layers that he is distancing himself from the left for the sake of electoral advantage. It is an utterly specious argument and it is dangerous. The biggest danger is the underlying political assumption - that Muslims are disproportionately anti-gay and that attacking trade unions will reap electoral support in Tower Hamlets.

We have, rightly, over the last few years systematically resisted those on the "pro-war left" who have sought to use LGBT rights to provide a gloss for Islamophobia. We have done so in articles, in Respect meetings, at Marxism and by arming our comrades - and through them others - with the political arguments around homophobia and Islamophobia that are second to none. The misreading and exaggeration of Galloway's letter threatens to disorient all that.

Does any of this mean there are no political differences or tensions between the various forces in Respect or that the coalition - a successful electoral initiative - does not face electoralist pressures? Of course not. There have been differences since the formation of Respect and we should not expect otherwise. There were electoral pressures in 2005 in Bethnal Green and Bow which were every bit as real as those we face now. The point is not whether these things exist; it is how we characterise and relate to them. A sense of proportion is everything. Galloway's letter is a product of tensions in Respect and should have been dealt with at that level. It is not an attempt to subordinate or crush the socialist left. Claiming that it is will lead to us getting the tactics of how to deal with the very real differences and debates in Respect wrong.

There is, for example, a real and legitimate debate about Respect's strategy should there be a snap general election. Reading this through the prism of a supposed on going "right-left" battle in Respect will unnecessarily polarise the debate and produce exactly the deepened divisions the party wants to avoid. We should change tack. That means being more upfront about genuine political differences in Respect while at the same time doing everything we can to remove the air of factionalism that has developed.

Over the next three months and at conference we will be assessing the party's work and the perspective for the period ahead. There is much to discuss. I believe the period is favourable for us and for building what we have described over the last seven years as a strategic imperative - a radical left formation, a political expression of the radical movements, representative of working people and a tool to hasten the break up of Labourism.

Our approach in Britain and as a tendency in Europe has been to refuse the false choice between not seeking to build such a formation on the one hand, and dissolving revolutionary organisation into a broad party on the other. Nothing - Gordon Brown notwithstanding - has changed in nature of the period to invalidate that. Indeed, the neo-liberal offensive Gordon Brown is unleashing means that the prospects for building Respect are promising. But we need to learn from the last year and the last six weeks and get what we do right. We should look forward to working with wider layers of people which will require greater political clarity in the party, a deeper level of tactical and strategic discussion among ourselves and, as Lenin put it, a willingness to patiently explain.