

CPGB: Centrism, Vacillation and Capitulation

Ian Donovan

Author's Note: The following article, replying to political attacks on the author in the *Weekly Worker* (14 October), was submitted to that journal but denied publication. Given that *WW* publishes all kinds of lengthy and often esoteric material when it judges such material useful to its publishers, readers can judge for themselves whether this material is, as the editor maintains, "unsuitable for publication", or whether this is a cynical break with *WW*'s proclaimed policy of openness and claim to be "champions of political debate".

PETER MANSON'S letter in the 14 October *Weekly Worker* illustrates perfectly the kind of contradictions in logic that characterise the CPGB today, the tortured reasoning that bedevils its attempts to engage with Respect. Comrade Manson pooh-poohs the idea that there is anything "Islamophobic" in the CPGB's attitude to Iraq or Respect, and selects recent material on Iraq to supposedly illustrate that the CPGB majority position on Iraq has always been no different to my own: that of unconditional but critical support to all mass-based indigenous Iraqi armed formations that are engaged in armed conflict with the US-UK coalition armed forces. Today, the CPGB claims to agree with this concretely over Fallujah, perhaps a helpful step. In the 21 October issue it writes that "Communists stand unequivocally with the working class of Fallujah in their daunting struggle against imperialism, while at the same time criticising the brutal and counterrevolutionary politics of groups like Tawhid and Jihad".

This sounds rather like "unconditional but critical support" to me. I have no differences whatsoever, not even a "nuance", with this position. It is exactly what I have been arguing inside and outside the CPGB ever since the uprisings in April. It appears that the CPGB has found itself under a degree of political pressure from my external criticism on these questions and has shifted over to a more correct position.

Good! It only goes to show that public ideological criticism has impact. However, would comrade Manson care to explain the difference between this position, and this passage from a

draft article that I wrote in May this year:

"The demand for troops out now is an important test of any socialist or communist tendency in this period of brutal military occupation of Iraq. Indeed, the armed opposition in Iraq has now broken out of the murky 'phoney war' phase that existed in the early stages. No more does it primarily consist of shadowy forces engaging in scattergun, spectacular actions that as often as not targeted not merely the imperialist occupiers, but also the Iraq people themselves, or formations like the Red Cross that really are not legitimate or even intelligent targets. Now that substantial sections of the masses have become embroiled in a national revolt, it is absolutely obligatory for socialists and democrats in the West to offer their fullest solidarity with these Iraqi masses."

In the published article, as edited by the editorial team, the crucial last sentence was amended to read "Now that substantial sections of the masses have become embroiled in a national revolt, it is absolutely obligatory for socialists and democrats in the west to call for the defeat of their 'own' side" (*Weekly Worker*, 13 May).

This is rather a significant change. Can Peter tell me what is the difference between the formulation "stand unequivocally with the working class of Fallujah in their daunting struggle against imperialism", and the statement that "Now that substantial sections of the masses have become embroiled in a national revolt, it is absolutely obligatory for socialists and democrats in the West to offer their fullest solidarity with these Iraqi masses."? Tell us Peter, what is the difference????!!

The reason that this has significance is that the former draft article from May not only had its correct demand for “solidarity” with the Iraqi masses in Fallujah and Najaf edited out, but was the occasion for a mini heresy-hunt in the CPGB. At a meeting of the Provisional Central Committee on 20 May every single other PCC comrade made clear their strong disagreement with my position of favouring “solidarity” with the masses of Fallujah and Najaf. As comrade Marcus Strom falsely maintained in a written exchange on this very question when I protested against the attribution to myself of a “solidarity with Al-Sadr” position that I never held:

“... your theses on Iraq only mention broad ‘solidarity with the Iraqi masses struggling against imperialism’. It does not pin-point solidarity with al-Sadr and the specific political leadership as you later tried to do in subsequent articles. (Which was *edited out* of your articles by Peter and John.)” (email, Strom to Donovan, PCC internal list, 18 June, emphasis in original. The “theses” comrade Strom referred to were published in *WW* on 29 April)

Behind my back, I was branded by the PCC “mainstream” as a deviant and a political supporter of Muqtada Al-Sadr. Comrade Strom wrote a special “Party Notes” column as a supposed “corrective” (*WW*, 27 May) to this putative pro-Sadr “deviation”, from which was derived an alternative set of theses containing the following formulation: “Any ‘alliance’ with the likes of Muqtada al-Sadr and his militia must be episodic. Yes, his blows against the occupiers weaken our common enemy, but they do not build working class, democratic and secular forces.” This hunt against pro-Sadr “deviations” was taken to the CPGB membership in a whispering campaign, and for example was reflected in the minutes of the London non-PCC CPGB cell, in which the following highly revealing remarks were minuted: “Anne liked Marcus’s Party Notes column, it is good to quote Ian Donovan’s articles back at him” (30 May).

Comrade Strom’s theses were subsequently passed, along with a rather opaque set of theses by Mike MacNair, at the CPGB’s aggregate in July, which I was too ill to attend. I earlier attempted to analyse at length comrade MacNair’s very convoluted and opaque theses (see *WW* for 17 June, for instance), but their real thrust was summed up by comrade MacNair in his reported motivation of them at the aggregate: “Comrade Macnair said the occupation of Iraq can have no progressive role. He disagreed with those on the left, particularly the Alliance for Workers’ Liberty, who are, to say the least, ambiguous and uncertain about this. Communists are for the defeat of our own state. However, we are proletarian internationalists, who believe the creation of socialism

is the role of the working class movement worldwide. Therefore, we should be in solidarity with the Iraqi workers’ movement, but not with the Islamist or Ba’athist militias who are fighting the occupation, as these are not working class forces” (27 July).

So, as it appears from the vote of the July aggregate, the CPGB is not in favour of “solidarity”, in any sense of the term, with forces fighting the occupation that it deems “reactionary”. What this rejection of “solidarity” means is not made clear, according to Marcus Strom it could allow “episodic” alliances with some of these forces; according to comrade MacNair, who subsequently elaborated on his total rejection of any “anti-imperialist united front” in theory as well as practice in polemic with the Alliance for Workers’ Liberty, such “alliances” seem to be pretty much ruled out. But they both seem pretty much at odds with outright support for the people of Fallujah, hardly under the command of “working class” forces, against the coalition occupiers in the current, escalating onslaught. After all, would that not involve an “anti-imperialist united front” with “reactionary forces”?

So is Paul Greenaway, the author of the piece that calls for “unequivocal support” to the people of Fallujah (*WW*, 21 October), destined to be falsely accused of being a supporter of Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi and the minuscule and psychotic “Tawhid and Jihad”? Will he be so accused in the same viciously Islamophobic manner in which I was accused of being a supporter of Muqtada Al-Sadr and the (more mass-based and rational) Jaish al-Mahdi when I raised politically identical demands in May? I think the CPGB membership, and the readership of the *Weekly Worker*, should be told.

Peter wants to pretend this is all about “nuances”. It is not. It is about political honesty in the conduct of political debate, and maintaining some level of programmatic consistency. The behaviour of the CPGB leadership over the past period has been classically centrist, zig-zagging wildly from roughly correct positions to wildly wrong, Islamophobic ones as reflected in the heresy-hunt this spring-summer against “pro-Sadr” deviations. Knowing the comrades as I do, I have little confidence that the correct position represented by Paul Greenaway’s article in the 21 October issue represents anything other than another zig, this time in a left-wing, anti-imperialist direction. If this is not to be succeeded by yet another zag back to the right, there must be a proper accounting of all these questions, and a break from the centrist method that gives rise to these wild vacillations.

Comrade Manson, rather unconvincingly, attempts to defend the CPGB/Red Platform’s “Pregnant Galloway” graphic and article. This was

in reality a sectarian provocation designed to undercut any meaningful engagement with the Respect project. Indeed, in his efforts to justify this, Peter once again illustrates the inability of his current to deal with the phenomenon of Respect in a coherent manner. Peter asks: "Now, I can understand some male chauvinist bigot claiming that to be portrayed as a woman would be demeaning, but why would any progressive person, let alone a communist, be offended?" In making this point, Peter knows very well that comrade Galloway did object to the personal attack that this material represented – indeed he refused to be interviewed for the *Weekly Worker* the following week.

So we can take it as read, then, that Peter believes that George Galloway is not a "progressive", and in fact is, in his words, a "male chauvinist bigot". Peter is of course entitled to his opinion on this – though it is one I certainly do not share. But if this is his opinion, and that of the CPGB, then *why did the CPGB advocate a vote to Respect, and its best known public figure, comrade Galloway, in the June elections and subsequent by-elections?* Are the CPGB in the habit of advocating votes to "non-progressive" people (i.e. reactionaries) and "male chauvinist bigots"? Or is this, yet again, another piece of political schizophrenia, or more straightforwardly, rank hypocrisy?

What is also notable about this graphic and article, of course, is that comrade Galloway is the first, and so far the last, person who has been lampooned in this graphic manner in the *Weekly Worker*. Given the level of bourgeois hysteria against Galloway over the past two years, a hysteria that *WW* has not been shy of joining in with at times, it is remarkable that the only recipient of such "satire" is the MP the bourgeoisie seeks to brand as a "traitor" and worse, with the help of forged documents that *really* reek of McCarthyism at its worst.

The CPGB material that supposedly advocates "support" to Respect is often hardly supportive at all. It often reads similarly to outright *hostile* material, with an artificial phrase about "support" tacked on the end to preserve the most superficial of appearances. Thus at the meeting in early spring where Respect selected its slate for the European and GLA elections, the CPGB distributed a leaflet headlined "E for Equality, or Enrichment?", which carried the innuendo that comrade Galloway's involvement in Respect was motivated by hopes for personal gain, i.e. a form of corruption.

Again, if the comrades really believe this, then they should not be voting for Respect. The CPGB's material on Respect is replete with ritual denunciations of Respect "populism" – which if they really believed it would, again, dictate open non-support for Respect. Even the virtually *communistic* call for

a "society based on common ownership and democratic control" in the draft constitution is dismissed as mere "populism". Given this emphasis on alleged "populism", one could almost say that the CPGB's material in "support" of Respect has the flavour of the (probably apocryphal) story of the misspelled election leaflet for a "populist": "Vote for George, the people's *fiend*."

This has found reflection in *WW*'s coverage of the witchhunt of George Galloway over his supposed receipt of "Iraqi gold". The initial response of *WW* when this classic piece of 1950s-style secret police disinformation first erupted in April 2003 was to publish a back page article (written by a non-member – but obviously reflecting the knee-jerk reaction of the leadership itself) stating that Galloway was almost certainly guilty and "the left should lead the condemnation" (*WW*, 24 April 2003).

Almost immediately, realising that this article gave the distinct appearance that the CPGB *backed* the *Daily Telegraph*'s CIA-inspired witchhunt, they switched over to a more mealy-mouthed and legalistic position that Galloway was "innocent until proven guilty" and should receive "the benefit of the doubt" (*WW*, 1 May 2003). At the time these events broke, I was out of the country. On my return, I wrote a strongly Galloway-defencist article as a sharp corrective to this equivocation in the face of imperialist reaction (*WW*, 8 May 2003). This was the article that drove the AWL's Sean Matgamna to express his foul-mouthed rage in print (*Solidarity*, 14 May 2003).

It is notable that today, even after the exposure that someone (no prizes for guessing who!) has been forging documents to smear Galloway in this way, all that *WW* (14 October) can do is repeat the feeble mantra that Galloway should be given "the benefit of the doubt" regarding the report of the "Iraq Survey Group", which once again recycled accusations that Galloway received money from Saddam's regime. What is the "Iraq Survey Group"? A clue can be gained from reading the *Washington Post* (3 October 2003) which refers to it as "The CIA's Iraq Survey Group".

It is a 1400-strong Anglo-US team of "experts" set up by the CIA to justify the invasion and occupation of Iraq. It was unable to come up with any data on alleged WMDs, since there were none and fabricating evidence of them would be an enormous political risk, but as you would expect from a CIA-initiated body, it nevertheless found other ways to strike back at left-wing opponents of the war with propaganda lies. For socialists, there should be no "doubt" that this *disinformation* about Galloway is the work of the world's biggest international terrorist propaganda network, and should be dismissed with utter contempt.

Peter claims that the CPGB “are champions of open, democratic debate”. This has been the case in the past. It has, however, atrophied in the recent period as real, serious differences began to emerge in the organisation over questions relating to Iraq, Galloway and Respect. Another petty example of this is in the same issue of *WW* as the “pregnant Galloway” caricature was run. On the page opposite Neira’s piece is my review of Galloway’s recent book, *I’m Not the Only One*. In the original draft of this review there was a sentence addressing comrade Galloway’s explanation of his notorious gaffe on his 1994 visit to Iraq where he seemingly praised Saddam Hussein’s “courage” and “indefatigability” in standing up to the imperialist onslaught.

Galloway’s explanation was that he was actually intending to praise the Iraqi *people* in this manner, in a televised speech in the presence of Hussein, but that errors of presentation and a badly delivered speech led to a misleading impression being given. I stated in my original draft that I saw nothing wrong with this explanation – but this was removed on the insistence of the core leaders of the CPGB, John Bridge and Mark Fischer. So once again, anti-Gallowayism rears its head, doubly so, as the running of a strident caricature of the man is accompanied by the censorship of more sympathetic views in the *same issue* of *WW*. This is not really the behaviour of “champions of open, democratic debate”. This is sect behaviour.

Centrist vacillation, programmatic instability and sect behaviour find their organisational reflections in bureaucratic deformations. In particular, we see Peter attempting the most craven wafer-thin justifications of the bureaucratic norms that have been introduced into the internal life of the CPGB with the advent of pre-moderation on their internal discussion list. Peter cynically responds to my point that this involves leadership control over non-public (i.e. in a sense private) debate: “What nonsense. Since when has debate in an official party forum been considered ‘private’? The email list is to facilitate disciplined discussion to advance the ideas of the whole, not a channel for individuals to engage in ‘private’ correspondence.”

If the CPGB’s internal list is no longer in any sense “private”, i.e. limited to members only, then why don’t they open it up so that the entire socialist public can observe the debates (or lack of them!)? Don’t hold your breath on that one. The hysteria that results when it is suspected that someone who is not a member or a favoured sympathiser might be reading the list shows how seriously the CPGB takes its “privacy”. But the use of the phrase “disciplined discussion” to describe what the leadership wants to see on their “private” list is very revealing.

As indeed is Peter’s bizarre analogy between the activities of a pre-moderator and those of a chair at a meeting in “keeping order”. No meeting chair has prior sight of all remarks to be made at a meeting – and the power to reject any he/she does not approve of. Maybe this is a power someone like Alastair Campbell might crave, but no communist leadership should need such a weapon, particular against their own comrades. This is treating members like children, and should be intolerable to a communist.

According to Peter, the list has to be pre-moderated so that the leadership can ensure that the discussion remains “disciplined”. The assumption being that in the absence of pre-vetting, the membership will be inclined to violate party “discipline” on the internal list. Quite how is not spelled out. But “discipline” appears to mean not engaging in a “slanging match” on the list – a “slanging match” being defined as something other than “serious business”. Peter has not defined what this “serious business” actually is – but it is possible to make some educated guesses as to what he means.

Manny Neira, for instance, was involved in “serious business” (serious for the CPGB, that is, in terms of loss of membership and support) when he was involved in organising a split from the CPGB to form a separate organisation, now known as the Red Party. There were some in the CPGB who suspected that this is what he was up to all along and said so. Such matters, the task of organising a split from an organisation such as the CPGB, as well as the counter-activities of those who suspect that such a split is being prepared, tend by their very nature to generate heat. Indeed, it is testimony to the discipline of the comrades who were opposing the incipient splinter faction that there were not raging “slanging matches” on the internal list.

Indeed, the final confrontation between myself and Neira, representing opposite poles in a rapidly polarising organisation, took place *off* the list and *out of sight* of the membership, as Peter knows very well. So much for the poor “non-sectarian” members having to be protected from such “slanging matches” – they only found out about it when it was all over. This Peter knows very well, as does the entire CPGB leadership and most of the members. But then if an organisation goes through centrist degeneration, one sure symptom is when leading members begin to tell blatant untruths, as Peter is doing here. I’m sure Peter would agree, if he gives it a moment’s thought, that matters connected with splits in his own organisation are a very “serious business” indeed.

How did the CPGB leadership respond to this situation, which was largely of its own making? In two interlinked ways: by hiding its head in the

sand like an ostrich; and then by declaring a state of siege. It simply denied that anything untoward was happening in its ranks until it was far too late, and then decided that, when the split did happen, it was the fault of the people who made “inopportune”, “personal attacks” etc. on the leader of the splinter faction. This is the classic behaviour of an opportunist leadership, seeking to incorporate politically incompatible elements by making unprincipled concessions (in this case on basic norms of democratic centralism), and turning on the “nasty” elements in their own ranks who, in opposing such opportunist concessions, “drove away” the object of their affections.

The “discipline” Peter is talking about here is the “discipline” of centrist opportunism, of trying to force fundamentally incompatible forces, divided by issues of principle, to capitulate to each other in the name of a spurious unity. That is not the politics of Bolshevism. It is, however, strongly reminiscent of unprincipled combinations such as the August bloc that Trotsky was involved in during 1912.

Peter wants to talk about “discipline”. I am all in favour of a discussion of democratic centralist discipline, because I have some concrete points to make about the indiscipline of the CPGB leadership, and undisciplined and unprincipled concessions that were made to the anti-Respect, anti-Galloway, Islamophobic and social chauvinist Red Platform (proto-“Party”) during the May-June 2004 election campaign. Two CPGB aggregates voted to campaign for a vote for *all* Respect candidates in that election.

There are clearly defined norms in the CPGB’s version of democratic centralism, which I regard as (providing it is adhered to) the best version, indeed the correct version, of democratic centralism. These mandate that during a party action, minorities opposed to an agreed action may only publicly criticise and comment on the subject of the action concerned in a manner that does not disrupt the carrying out of that action. The concrete, authorised form that this “non-disruptive” criticism of the majority action was to take in the case of the “Red Platform” was their authoring of a discrete column, “Seeing Red”, in which they could put their case.

Fair enough. Except that this did not happen. Some concrete examples. In the 6 May *WW*, a prominent report was published of CPGB activities in Guildford Respect, written by Manny Neira. This was *not* part of the Red Platform’s column – indeed it was far larger than that column which also appeared. In this non-column article he boasted: “I was elected secretary, and my fellow CPGBer and also fellow Red Platform member, Jem Jones, was elected chair. We suspect we may be unique in being the only branch in the UK with a

CPGB/Red sympathising majority. We also suspect that [SWP] comrade [John] Molyneux may not have been aware of our local support when he called me – though, as a good democrat, I am sure he welcomes the diversity we bring.”

So comrade Neira is able to boast in the CPGB press about Red Platform activists taking positions in Respect, an organisation whose election campaign it does not support, and in the process of so boasting, is able to promote his own faction, a minority current that is supposed to be subordinate to the democratic centralist norms of the CPGB – which had voted not once but *twice* to support Respect. I have news for comrade Neira – as a partisan of Respect, I do not think Respect’s “diversity” should extend so far as to allow *outright opponents* of the Respect project to hold office in Respect branches. In fact, I would seriously consider supporting the *expulsion* of such people from Respect. Indeed, one does not have to believe in democratic centralism to tend to such an attitude – just elementary loyalty to *any* organisation or movement.

Neira was here not only trampling all over the CPGB’s democratic centralism – with the approval of the *WW* editors who allowed this article to be published – he was also pissing in the face of any genuine partisan of Respect. The editors who allowed this remarkable little piece to see the light of day in *WW* are as guilty as Neira himself of *concretely* undermining democratic centralism. That is, they are guilty of a gross breach of discipline.

Second example – the extremely shrill attack on George Galloway in *WW* of 13 May. Neira’s “Pregnant Galloway” party piece again plugged the Red Platform in Rabelaisian fashion: “Gorgeous George was pregnant ... the famous Armani suit has already been let out twice. They could not afford a new one, thanks to the Red Platform: an organisation she could not name without cursing.” Again, entirely separate from the Red Platform’s column – and much more prominent, with a cover graphic to advertise it.

There are, by the way, other examples – these are only the two most blatant ones.

By allowing Neira to plug the Red Platform’s politics in strident public attacks on Galloway and Respect, the CPGB leadership succeeded in temporarily transforming the *Weekly Worker* into virtually a publication of Manny Neira and the Red Platform. The tail was wagging the dog with a vengeance! When I challenged Neira internally over this flagrant act of contempt for party discipline, in which the *WW* editors were also of course deeply complicit, after a hysterical attempt to force me to apologise for the criticism (using the CPGB editors’ complicity and concurrent indiscipline to muddy the waters), the founder of

the Red Platform resigned from the CPGB to begin his splitting manoeuvre.

Of course, Neira may well believe, and is entitled to believe, that the CPGB's endorsement of Respect, despite such flaws as Galloway's conservative-Catholic views on abortion, justified the violation of democratic-centralist discipline. A pity he did not openly state this – then he might have been able to gain some “Respect” and lead a *principled* split. Though given that Galloway's abortion position amounts to an anomalous flaw on an otherwise strident (if left-reformist) opponent of capitalist and imperialist oppression, whereas Neira, who abhors Galloway above all for his “second campism”, has no trouble voting for imperialist institutions like the Euro, this was not on the agenda.

Neira's antipathy to Galloway always stemmed from liberal-imperialist moralism, not from any ultra-left impulse, despite Mark Fischer's tortuous attempt, riven with irrelevant citations from Lenin (and numerous inappropriate analogies), to excuse his own capitulations to Neira by furiously banging that particular square peg into the legendary round hole in the 21 October issue of the *Weekly Worker*.

One final point about comrade Manson's reference to Trotskyism and splits over matters of alleged nuance. Peter equates leaving the organisation over the CPGB's erratic behaviour over Respect with splitting over some abstract difference without consequence in the real world, such differences being “two a penny” in the Trotskyist milieu.

No, comrade Manson. When you are dealing

with Respect you are dealing with the party question in a very concrete manner. I see my leaving the CPGB over Respect as being fundamentally *similar* to my leaving the International Bolshevik Tendency over their refusal to engage properly with the early Socialist Alliance. I see Respect as having considerable potential *in itself* to lead to the creation of a new mass-based party of the working class in this country. If erratic CPGB antics threaten to damage that potential, or to undermine it, or even to constrain my ability to participate in it fully, then I have no more hesitation in leaving your pseudo-“vanguard” than I have had in leaving other such formations in the past.

When I left the IBT, I did not seek to create another sect, I published my views and got involved with the SA. I subsequently joined the CPGB because they were the most consistent exponents of the partyist logic of that project. For a whole range of reasons, most notably concerning the Iraq war and the emergence of new forces, the SA ceased to be viable and Respect came into being out of the anti-war movement. The complexities of how this happened are the subject of a future article – suffice to say I am developing an analysis that differs considerably from that of the CPGB. But I intend to participate fully in this project – and that requires a break with the “discipline” of the vacillating centrist CPGB. Only if the CPGB fundamentally breaks from its vacillation and frequent left-Islamophobia (which by the way is more analogous to Stalinophobia than to the anti-semitism Peter erects as a straw man) can this breach be healed. ■

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