

Britain: Guardian journalist seeks to neuter anti-war movement

Julie Hyland, Chris Marsden
2 November 2001

Guardian journalist Gary Younge has presented his own political blueprint for the anti-war movement, designed to emasculate any opposition to the Blair government.

In an op-ed column, *Peace by precision*, on October 29, Younge advised that “the time has now come for the anti-war movement to build its own broad-based coalition” against the war in Afghanistan. Those campaigning against the US-led war had made a “promising start”, he writes, referring to a series of demonstrations, meetings and vigils that have taken place across Britain over the last fortnight. But to “rally the faithful is one thing; to win over the waverers quite another. It is a task that will demand attributes that sadly do not come naturally to many on the left: persuasiveness, pluralism, flexibility and sensitivity. The campaign has to start from where people are, rather than where anti-war activists would like them to be”, he admonishes.

This means several things, according to Younge. Firstly, the anti-war movement must continue to make clear its condemnation of the September 11 bombings. Secondly it must be as “broad-based and non-doctrinaire as possible. An anti-imperialist critique certainly informs opposition to this war; but it should not be demanded as a prerequisite for those who wish to see an end to it”.

Thirdly, “All alternatives to the current military action must be aired within it and articulated through it”—from those who advocate the handing of Osama bin Laden over to an international tribunal, through those who advocate United Nations military intervention into Afghanistan to the “few [who] believe only a root-and-branch reform of US foreign policy will work”.

And finally, the anti-war movement should embrace all of these proposals but adopt none of them! “It is not its job to be prescriptive about what course of action to take once the bombing has stopped. But to stop the bombing by exposing its futility and inhumanity and the sophistry of those who claim there is no alternative to it”, Younge

opines.

Just who is Gary Younge and what credentials does he possess in his role as self-appointed adviser to a nascent anti-war movement?

Younge first came to prominence in the *Guardian* through a “rites of passage” article popular in Britain’s liberal press, in which the author confesses to youthful indiscretion in having flirted with left-wing politics. Having learned better, those such as Younge, and fellow *Guardian* journalist Charlotte Raven, are rewarded with regular column inches and a fat salary. Such tracts almost always leave the reader feeling somehow soiled. Younge’s “Memoirs of a teenage Trot”, published February 19, 2000, in which he outlined his brief membership of the youth movement of the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP) in the 1980s, is no exception to this.

The air of world-weary cynicism he adopts, though obligatory in such pieces, seems particularly out of place coming from the pen of a 31-year-old. Compared to the usual list presented by most ex radicals, of the personal sacrifices and indignities they were made to suffer during their time in the socialist movement, Younge’s experience stands out only for its banality. Having joined the WRP in the first few months of the 1984-85 miners strike, and dedicating a mere nine-months fighting for the overthrow of the world’s oldest bourgeoisie, Younge wrote that the beginning of the end was when a WRP meeting took longer than expected and he was late home. At 16, he had “already outgrown the revolution”.

Younge went on to take a degree at City College London, and to write a book on race, based on his travels through the Deep South in the United States. His brief association with revolutionary politics, however, helped secure him a job at the *Guardian*, where he is being groomed as a rising young black radical, and it also boosts his credentials in Britain’s more aged radical fraternity.

Younge has participated in a personal capacity in meetings of the World Development Movement and Globalise Resistance, written for the radical/Green journal *Red Pepper* and rubs shoulders with various left groups and radical notables.

Whether he exercised a degree of personal initiative in penning his piece on the anti-war movement, or it was commissioned by his editor, Younge clearly believes he writes as a sympathetic insider in addressing anti-war movement activists. But the fundamental concerns he expresses are not for the effectiveness of an anti-war movement, as he claims, but his fear that anti-war sentiment could easily get out of hand and even threatens the survival of the Labour government.

On the prime minister's enthusiastic support for the US war-drive, Younge warns, the "consensus Tony Blair has built at home to support this war is as fragile as the coalition he has helped construct abroad." The longer the bombing campaign goes on, with the prospect of further civilian casualties and millions of starving refugees, the greater the possibility that it will begin to meet up with growing disaffection amongst British people at the state of the economy and of public services, he continues: As the recession continues to bite, people will increasingly question the value of spending millions on a murderous war with neither cogent objectives nor any clear timetable, when we could be breathing life into the health service and fighting poverty at home.

Given the volatile political climate Younge details, the political purpose of his prescriptions against being overly "doctrinaire" in linking anti-war sentiment with anti-imperialism are clear. No one should seek to mobilise political discontent *against* the government, he urges, or, more important still, against the profit system.

With virtually no outlet for anti-war sentiment within the traditional political structures, political and social discontent can rapidly develop outside the control of the Labour bureaucracy. Younge's anti-war blueprint, which he offers up in the form of advice to the various middle class radical groups, is not a call for democratic debate but for ideological surrender.

He calls for a peace movement that is ideologically subordinated to the tiny group of around a dozen Labour MPs who have registered their opposition to the conduct of the war. His article appeared just one day after the official launch of the "Labour against the bombing" campaign, which is restricted to calls for a temporary suspension of the bombing to allow the distribution of aid. Thus while acknowledging, "So far, nearly all of this

opposition has come from outside parliament," he reassures the war's opponents, "dissent among MPs is slowly growing and the larger the movement outside the Commons the more likely those inside will be to follow their conscience (or at least their commonsense) rather than their whips."

Under the cover of demanding that every voice should be heard, he wants anyone who is motivated by a socialist opposition to war to be silenced. Anti-imperialism must not be the axis of the new movement, he argues, because, "It is the 'stop the war' movement; not stop all wars". It is OK to voice criticisms of various aspects of the current military intervention, but this must not be allowed to develop into a critique of the social, economic and political system that breeds such conflicts.

Younge is far from being alone in holding these concerns about the long-term political impact of the war. His fears are shared broadly within the liberal and not-so-liberal establishment. Fellow *Guardian* journalist Polly Toynbee is so enthusiastically pro-war that she describes those who oppose after having seen "pictures of burned babies" as suffering from "moral dereliction, as if wincing at the surgeon's curing knife." As someone who has made Blair her political hero, she warned just two days after Younge's article: "Tony Blair has all but staked his political career on this [war], with no get out. It may be foolhardy, since success will bring him few dividends while a Vietnam will finish him."



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact