

George Galloway on “Celebrity Big Brother”

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George Galloway’s appearance on Britain’s “Celebrity Big Brother” is inexcusable.

Galloway is a hate figure for the Labour government of Prime Minister Tony Blair, the Bush administration and their apologists because of his opposition to the Iraq war. It is why he was popularly elected as an MP as head of the Respect party in May 2005 and why many progressive people have defended him from right-wing attacks.

He won justifiable praise internationally for his blistering rebuttal of charges that he had received kickbacks from the United Nations oil-for-food programme also in May last year, while appearing before the US Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations on Capitol Hill.

The decision to appear on “Celebrity Big Brother” degrades Galloway, undermines the political positions with which he is associated and does damage to the antiwar movement and the workers and youth who looked to him to provide leadership.

Galloway justified his appearance as an opportunity to speak to a mass audience of young people “about racism, bigotry, poverty, the plight of Tower Hamlets, the poorest place in England ... about war and peace, about Bush and Blair, about the need for a world based on respect. Some of it will get through.”

“I believe that politicians should use every opportunity to communicate with people.... I’m a great believer in the democratic process. Big Brother is watched by millions. More young people vote during Big Brother than in the general election. I hope they’ll all be voting for me over the next few weeks.”

His comments betray a profound lack of understanding about the development of political consciousness. Politics is not simply about speaking to the greatest numbers. It is about the views you seek to

impart and choosing an appropriate medium to do so.

It is the responsibility of socialists to raise the intellectual and cultural level of the working class and of its younger layers in particular. The opposite is achieved by lending any legitimacy to, let alone participating in, a programme that deliberately appeals to the worst aspects of the human personality—petty sadism, voyeurism, and a delight in mutual degradation.

The show’s contestants are filmed 24 hours a day, as they go about their daily routines and occasionally perform demeaning “tasks” in order to win food, cigarettes and other luxuries. Periodically they are called on to nominate each other for eviction, telling “Big Brother” in a filmed interview their invariably petty reasons why someone else should be booted out. Public humiliation of those incarcerated in the Big Brother House for weeks on end is one of the show’s central aims—and is how it is sold to its target audience.

It should be noted that one of the reasons why Galloway’s appearance before the US Senate had such a positive impact was his exposure of its pretensions as a democratic institution and his denunciation of the subcommittee’s chairman, Republican Senator Norm Coleman, as a “lickspittle.” Yet now he portrays “Celebrity Big Brother” as a major expression of the “democratic process.”

Nothing could be further from the truth.

Galloway’s appearance on “Big Brother” certainly attracted a great deal of public attention, but not because of his politics. Instead there was massive media coverage of every embarrassment heaped upon him by the show’s organisers.

Whatever he said politically was edited out by playing birdsong over the show’s delayed broadcast—something he should have been aware of. But Galloway went onto the show without consulting anyone, not even his own party. He showed scant

regard for the views of its members, many of whom find “Celebrity Big Brother” nauseating, or those of his constituents in Bethnal Green and Bow.

John Rees, a leading member of Respect and the Socialist Workers Party, was forced to admit, “We didn’t know that George Galloway was going to go on the programme until 24 hours before it happened. We didn’t agree with the idea, but by that stage the die was cast and the contract signed.”

Galloway, like any leader in the workers movement, should have been answerable for his actions to those he purports to represent. That he was not shows a remarkable lack of respect for others—and even an absence of self-respect. It betrays an orientation not to the more advanced workers and youth, but to the least politically educated and the sickest and most disoriented layers in the middle class.

Those most obsessed with the antics on “Celebrity Big Brother” are those whose view of humanity is already jaded—cynics, amongst whom can be found both embittered former radicals and inveterate right-wingers, who revel in seeing others brought down to the lowest level.

The glee with which the media reported on Galloway’s performance in the house and the attempt by the Labour government to utilise his public self-abasement is testimony to the politically unforgivable decision he has made and the confusion it has generated.

The Labour Party clearly feels politically strengthened by Galloway’s actions. It has been able to attack him for deserting his Bethnal Green and Bow constituency for three weeks and missing a vote in Parliament during a debate on a new rail link through his constituency. And various MPs have promised him a rough ride when he returns to parliament.

Most seriously, timed to coincide with the day of his eviction from the house, the Serious Fraud Office said it was examining documents provided by US authorities concerning alleged payments to individuals and companies in Britain from the Iraq oil-for-food programme to decide whether Galloway should be prosecuted. Additionally Sir Philip Mawer, the Parliamentary Standards Commissioner, said he hoped to resume his inquiry into complaints that the MP had received money from Saddam Hussein—charges that he has repeatedly refuted.



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