

Britain: Antiwar MP George Galloway suspended from parliament

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The ejection and suspension of George Galloway MP from the House of Commons on July 23 is the result of a witch-hunt aimed at intimidating and silencing all opponents of the Iraq war.

Galloway's sole crime was to defend himself against allegations assembled by the Parliamentary Committee on Standards and Privileges, first launched in 2003, which rehash previous failed attempts to prove that the antiwar MP was in the pay of Saddam Hussein.

For more than an hour Galloway attempted to refute the committee's charges against him, but was prevented from doing so as a result of 17 interjections by the Speaker of the House who ruled out any questioning of the political motives and legitimacy of the parliamentary equivalent of a kangaroo court.

All ten members of the committee—three Conservative MPs, five Labour, one Liberal Democrat and one Plaid Cymru—are political opponents of Galloway, who was expelled from the Labour Party for his opposition to the Iraq war. The overwhelming majority of the committee voted in favour of the invasion of Iraq, and all five Labour members have consistently opposed any investigation into how it was launched.

The committee's inquiry was suspended for more than two years during Galloway's successful libel action against the *Daily Telegraph* for its own claims that he had personally benefited from the proceeds of the United Nations oil-for-food programme, through the Mariam Appeal—a political campaign opposing sanctions against Iraq.

In addition to the *Telegraph* victory, a Serious Fraud Office investigation and an inquiry by the Charities Commission found no evidence of such wrongdoing by Galloway. Also, in Washington, Galloway had made a devastating rebuttal of similar accusations by a Senate subcommittee headed by Republican Norm Coleman.

However, the Parliamentary Committee has revived these discredited allegations, overruling the findings of all previous bodies in order to once again place Galloway in the frame.

It admits that it could find no evidence that Galloway had personally benefited from any monies raised by the Mariam Appeal. Yet it asserts that there was "powerful" circumstantial evidence that "a substantial part" of donations to the appeal made by its chairman, Jordanian businessman Fawaz Zureikat, "came from funds accrued via the oil-for-food programme, from the former Iraqi regime." Galloway was accused of "recklessly or negligently, and probably knowingly" allowing this to take place and so bringing Parliament into disrepute.

The inquiry was first convened on the insistence of Conservative MP Andrew Robathan, following the *Daily Telegraph*'s publication, in April 2003, of documents purportedly found by its reporter David Blair in the bombed-out and looted Iraqi foreign ministry building. These documents were part of a series of "finds" used to assert that Galloway and others critical of the invasion were Iraqi stooges.

In what Galloway's lawyer described as "one of the most unequivocally emphatic judgments," the libel judge had awarded Galloway £150,000 for the "seriously defamatory" charges made by the *Telegraph* against him. This judgment was subsequently upheld by the Court of Appeal, which ruled that the newspaper had alleged, "Mr. Galloway took money from the Iraqi oil-for-food programme for personal gain. That was not a mere repeat of the documents, which in our view did not, or did not clearly, make such an allegation ... the thrust of the coverage was that the *Daily Telegraph* was saying that Mr. Galloway took money to line his own pocket."

The legal issues involved, therefore, were never how the documents were found, or even their authenticity, but whether what they said was in fact true and whether they substantiated what the *Telegraph* had said of Galloway.

In returning to this issue, the committee determined that it was not necessary to prove the truth of what was stated in the documents, instead asserting that the question was whether to believe Galloway or Blair as to their provenance. It ruled: "The Committee has no doubt that Mr. Blair's account is to be preferred to Mr. Galloway's."

Stating that the documents "appear ... to be authentic," it argued that therefore, "there must in our view be some degree of presumption in favour of what they say being true."

The committee stated that its conclusions were based on the "balance of probabilities." But a judgment that Blair's account is more probable than Galloway's can only be based on political opinion or prejudice in the absence of substantive proof, which is precisely what he attempted to argue.

In another example of clearly political motivation, Galloway pointed out that the committee's findings were leaked to Rupert Murdoch's *Sunday Times* two days before by-elections that his Respect party was contesting.

The most extraordinary development in the investigation was the claim by its chairman, Sir Philip Mawer, to have received a transcript of an August 2002 meeting during which Galloway is

claimed to have personally thanked Saddam Hussein and Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz for monies given to his appeal. Mawer refused to answer Galloway's question as to how he came across this document, which the MP denounced as a fraud. This supposed discovery of a "smoking gun"—after years of investigations—is fortuitous to say the least, and opens the way for possible legal proceedings.

The *World Socialist Web Site* noted at the time of Galloway's appearance before the US Senate, "he will not be forgiven, either for his antiwar stance or his public humiliation of Coleman and [Democrat Senator Carl] Levin...."

"When asked whether Galloway had violated his oath to tell the truth before the committee, Coleman said, 'If in fact he lied to this committee, there will have to be consequences.'

"Under US law, lying to Congress can result in a year in prison."

Sure enough, immediately following the publication of Mawer's report, a spokesman for Senator Coleman said that he had drawn the attention of US law enforcement agencies to it. The spokesman told the *Telegraph*, "Senator Coleman takes misleading testimony very seriously and encourages these law enforcement agencies to review all of the evidence at hand, including the new evidence revealed in the report."

In his speech to Parliament prior to his expulsion, Galloway was forced to repeatedly insist on his right to respond to the charges against him by raising the political motives of his accusers. If prevented from doing so, he said, "It will not be possible for me to make the case that I have been treated unjustly." Whereas he had been accused of being dishonourable by the committee, he could not question its honourable intentions.

He ridiculed the committee's pretensions to impartiality and the right of parties who had supported the Iraq war to sit in judgment against him. He noted that Mawer had said "six times in his report, that, in the course of a four-year investigation described by the Committee as being of unprecedented length and complexity, he had found no evidence of any personal gain by me."

Querying the claim that he should have checked the exact origins of all donations made to his appeal, Galloway noted, "Being lectured by the current House of Commons on the funding of political campaigns is like being accused of having bad taste by Donald Trump or being accused of slouching by the hunchback of Notre Dame. This House stands in utter ill repute on the question of the funding of political campaigns."

Referring to the year-long police investigation into allegations that Labour had sold peerages in return for loans, he continued, "This Parliament is stuffed full of political parties who were in turn stuffed full of secret loans and donations from millionaires or billionaires. None of the parties here ... ever asked the millionaires and billionaires who gave and lent them money where they got the money from...."

"It is a question of a committee of politicians criticising me for political fundraising when they themselves are responsible for political fundraising on a gigantic scale, from the most dubious of sources, in which they never applied to themselves the standards that they seek to apply to me in this report."

Later, he pointed out that the instigator of the parliamentary inquiry, Robathan, had been a member of INDICT, a pro-sanctions

campaign group run by Labour's Ann Clwyd and funded by the US government.

Following Galloway's ejection for "disorderly conduct," Parliament agreed to the committee's ruling that he be suspended for 18 days for bringing Parliament into disrepute, without even a vote being taken.

The *World Socialist Web Site* has no brief for Galloway, whose soliciting of finances from various bourgeois Arab regimes flows from his opportunist politics. However, he is being targeted not because of his political failings, but because of his close association with the antiwar movement.

The charge of bringing Parliament into disrepute is made by a body that voted for war and has ever since blocked all attempts to censure those guilty of war crimes, such as former Prime Minister Tony Blair, who lied to the British people to justify launching a war of aggression—the very charge on which leading Nazis were prosecuted at Nuremberg.

Whatever protestations are occasionally made on the floor, by its actions Parliament is also culpable in all the atrocities associated with the occupation—the tens of thousands who have been killed and maimed; the torture of detainees at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere; internment without trial in Guantánamo and the rendition flights of the CIA.

It is Galloway's accusers who should themselves stand accused—of sociocide, the deliberate and systematic murder of an entire society. Instead, they presume to stand in judgment of someone who opposed this criminal course.

Parliament's hostility towards Galloway gives vent to the hatred of the political class, not merely to one of its number it considers to have broken ranks, but to the millions of working people who took to the streets in an attempt to prevent the illegal invasion of Iraq. Galloway's presence in the Commons is a constant reminder of this mass popular sentiment, which it is determined to expunge.

His ejection and suspension is a graphic demonstration of how Parliament has been sealed off as an avenue through which to oppose the Iraq occupation and the pro-business offensive being mounted against jobs, social conditions and civil liberties.

During the parliamentary debate, not one of the erstwhile Labour lefts spoke out in Galloway's defence—a measure of their readiness to go along with whatever is necessary in order to protect the government from criticism. Moreover, not a single newspaper considered it necessary to oppose Galloway's suspension as an infringement of democratic rights. In fact, the unprecedented scenes in parliament were barely reported. This must be taken as a stark warning of the need to develop a mass extra-parliamentary movement of the working class, in opposition to all the official political parties.



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