

GEORGE GALLOWAY



Rumours have been running around parliament and the press that there will be a move to suspend George Galloway from the PLP. You don't have to be a signed member of George's fan club to know that displacing him over opposition to the war in Iraq would be both wrong and disastrous.

George has a turn of phrase that few can match; an ability to inspire and an ability to infuriate. Even his wildest claims should not cloud his record of standing up for justice issues in the Middle East over a long, long time. George was a critic of the regime in Baghdad when many of those who would expel him were its silent allies. Moreover, George raises issues that those in the pro-war camp cannot be allowed to sweep aside in a loyalty purge.

It is outrageous that we continue government pretence that cluster bombs are legitimate weapons in the sort of war that has been waged on Iraq. Cluster bombs have been used on civilian populations, and the hundreds of thousands of unexploded bomblets will claim further civilian casualties in the aftermath of war. Depleted uranium is no better and no more acceptable. Yet we continue to justify their use in circumstances we would have denounced if Iraq had used them against us.

The Sun and the rest of the Murdoch press are leading the clamour for a Labour scalp from the ranks of the anti-war movement. Through his ownership of Fox news, Murdoch has been the biggest cheerleader for the Bush war camp in the USA, and the sternest critic of its opponents. So why should Labour climb upon the Murdoch bandwagon?

George is right to have raised the question of war crimes, and not been alone in doing so. If the killing of seven women and children at the roadside checkpoint had been confirmed by British troops in Ireland, those troops would now be facing murder charges before a criminal court. The same would apply to the family of 15 killed by the pilot of an Apache aeroplane who bombed their truck. So why is it illegitimate to demand that American troops are subject to the same international rules that relate to crimes against civilians?

Any purge of war critics in the aftermath of war itself would be a misguided judgement about a peace that will not last. America will find itself locked into decade of internal conflict in Iraq as its military presence becomes the vehicle for protecting oil rights rather than human rights. It will be an even more precarious peace if Iraq becomes the platform for the next war of regime change in other Middle East states.

Those whose triumphalism denounces the anti-war movement for having 'got it wrong' over Iraq in the same war we were supposed to have done over Kosovo and Afghanistan would do well to reflect on the 'successes' they lay claim to. Kosovo has been ethnically cleansed of Serbs. It is a bandit country run by the mafia and the gun. For the rest of Europe, Kosovo has become a massive headache in the

international trafficking of drugs, guns and prostitution. Great success story.

In Afghanistan, the military presence keeps alive a transitional administration that seeks to preside over metropolitan Kabul. Beyond that the land has been returned to the warlords, Al Qaida has its own radio station and Taliban fighters have forced American troops to retreat from 5 of the 11 border stations they set up along the frontier with Pakistan.

These may be uncomfortable facts for proponents of the war cause, but they do illustrate the limited role that war plays as the answer to the problems of global justice. These are issues that MPs and their constituents are increasingly aware of. So too are local councillors. In almost every area involved in the May council elections, Labour canvassers are getting a hard time for the Leader's support for Bush's war. Say what you like about George but you have to recognise the enormous support he has within Muslim communities and the broader anti-war movement. Far from offering him a s a ritual sacrifice in the post war celebrations, the Party would discover it had killed off a purge on itself.

It may be unfair that local elections have become the mid-term judgements on national administrations, but it is part of the fate of local government. The most sensible strategy is to recognise and reflect the strength of the anti-war mood in the country, to echo the desire for a UN led return to diplomacy rather than militarism, and to make it clear that Labour will openly oppose moves to extend the war to countries in the region that are daily being added to the Bush 'hit list'.

My own experience is that those candidates openly identifying themselves as members of the Labour Against War are the ones getting the most sympathetic response at the doorstep. This is a time to build bridges between communities of different faiths and cultures, not to open to fresh divides to be exploited by the Far Right. It is a time to make connections between communities and trade unions around recognition that costs of war will be paid for in cuts in services.

These are the political consequences of the war we have been dragged into. We must see them against the backcloth of a budget that will try to pick up the costs of the global downturn that the war has distracted us from. It is a time to dispel disingenuous myths rather than expel difficult members.