

A rebel's yell

Controversial politician George Galloway has garnered respect and loathing in equal measure for his outspoken stance on the war in Iraq and scathing criticism of British Prime Minister Tony Blair. He tells Nick Ryan about his far from private life.

“George f***** Galloway?” spits an apoplectic Brick Lane restaurateur of Bengali extraction about his local Member of Parliament (MP). “Oh my God, don’t talk to me about that man!” When told of this reaction, a councillor from Galloway’s tiny British political party, Respect – The Unity Coalition, says quietly: “George is an issue ... but something we can manage.”

Circumstances couldn’t have been more different from when I first laid eyes on Galloway, barely two years ago. There he was – “Gorgeous” George, a suave Scottish MP flanked by followers and adoring Asian elders. Cameras flashed and palms were pressed; he seemed every inch the star. At the time, *The Sun* newspaper was calling him “the most hated man in Britain”. But to thousands of young Muslims living in London’s East End, and to many more across the world, he was clearly a saviour.

Galloway is one of the most controversial political figures of our age. He’s known for his love of Cuban cigars, snazzy suits, interest in women, a controversial appearance on reality TV show *Celebrity Big Brother* and his impeccable oratory. Some even know him for his politics. He’s perhaps the world’s most famous anti-war politician, mistrusted by many for his relationship with deceased Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein and for the accusations that have been thrown at him by newspapers and rival politicians.

During a visit to Iraq in 1994, Galloway appeared to fawn over Hussein, telling him: “Sir, I salute your courage, your strength, your indefatigability.” (To be fair, Galloway, whom the media dubbed “the MP for Baghdad North”, maintains he spoke out against Hussein’s atrocities before anyone else and the “your” referred to the Iraqi people not to their president.)

His latest crusade began in October 2003, after he was kicked out of the Labour Party by the prime minister for calling the government “Tony Blair’s lie machine” and exhorting British troops to mutiny in Iraq. (More recently, Galloway has said he believes an Iraqi suicide bomber could find moral grounds to assassinate the prime minister.) Following huge anti-war marches by the Stop the War movement, which he helped found, he went on to set up the Respect party, binding together hard-left and Islamist elements into a unique coalition. This won him the seat of Bethnal Green and Bow in London in 2005 by the slimmest of margins, following a bitterly fought campaign against incumbent and “Blair babe” Oona King.

Then came Galloway’s thrilling performance in front of a US Senate subcommittee. Charged with receiving payoffs from the Iraqi regime in the form of oil concessions, Galloway went on the attack, describing his two accusers as a “pro-war, neo-con hawk and the lickspittle of George W. Bush”. He added, “I expect no justice from a group of Christian fundamentalist and Zionist activists under the chairmanship of a neo-con George Bush.”

He rounded on one senator with: “I know that standards have slipped in the last few years in Washington, but for a lawyer you are remarkably cavalier with any idea of justice. I am here today but last week you already found me guilty. You traduced my name around the world ... without any attempt to contact me whatsoever. And you call that justice.”

To top it off, after suing several British newspapers, he appeared on Al-Jazeera TV to call Bush and Blair “criminals ... responsible for mass murder in the world”, before launching a full-out assault on the “globalised capitalist economic system, which is the biggest killer the world has ever known”.

So just how did a school leaver from Dundee, the city in eastern Scotland he helped twin with the Palestinian town of Nablus, end up as the most loved, or reviled, politician in Britain?

A few days after returning from Cuba, where he met his old friend Fidel Castro, Galloway is holding court in Westminster offices. His newly published *Fidel Castro Handbook* lies on the desk. The stink of his Montecristo cigars hangs in the air. His ever-present aide, Ron McKay, is seated, pink-faced and gruff, watching from the corner.

Under his tan, Galloway looks tired. “Well,” he pauses, “luckily, I’m a man who doesn’t sleep much, works all the time ... but I intend to be in London more now. Last night I spent eight hours getting to Manchester to talk to 500 people. I spent 100 quid [HK\$1,500] in petrol ...”

“... plus hotel,” says McKay.

“... it’s too much,” continues Galloway.

Despite his fatigue, he’s more personable than you might imagine. When not on the podium thumping out oratory, he is softly spoken, choosing his words carefully, the odd archaic phrase slipping in.

“I was always the boy at school who knew who the president of Uganda was,” he says. “I always knew more about current affairs and politics than anyone else. That was the lingua franca around the breakfast table at my house.”

“I lived my first four years in an attic,” he adds, fixing me with that famous stare, “a one-room attic. There was no room for a cot. I actually slept as a baby in a drawer. With an outside toilet in a slum. When we moved to a council housing estate, with an inside toilet that wasn’t always warm from the use of all your neighbours, it was like moving to Beverly Hills.”

“I did some things I shouldn’t have done. I was a bit of a rough boy, a street boy. But I don’t recall a moment of unhappiness as a schoolchild.”

He recalls his first demonstration, when 100,000 Vietnam war protesters were charged by police outside the US embassy in London in 1968. He was just 14. “These were heady times. And I was drawn fully into them. At the age of 14, I knew more about Vietnam than I knew about my own country.”

He says he was more interested in chasing causes than chasing girls. “I did chase girls, too,” he says. >>

British MP George Galloway smokes one of his trademark Cuban cigars as he leaves the High Court in London last year, following his victory in the high-profile case against the *News of the World* newspaper.

Picture: AFP