

"But it kind of helped in chasing girls," Galloway winks, "that you were part of the revolution."

"Sometimes I do pinch myself," says Galloway, "and ask if I'm really sitting here with Fidel Castro. Once I remember sitting in an anteroom – well, a room the size of a football stadium – with a carpet 12 inches [30cm] thick, and a sofa filled with goosedown, waiting for an interview with the then Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, who is now the king. And the hall was surrounded by black men with curved swords. And I thought to myself, how come a guy from a council housing estate in Dundee ended up here?" He smiles. "No, I do. My parents never left Britain till they were in their fifties, whereas I've been round the world more times than I can count and kinda wish I didn't have to travel any more."

To many, Galloway's projected self-image as a modern revolutionary was shaken to its core when he appeared on British television in *Celebrity Big Brother*, taunting ex-TV host and alcoholic Michael Barrymore and imitating a cat. He'd already claimed that, globally, he was probably the most famous of all the housemates, as most of the world's 1.3 billion Muslims knew him. Before entering the show, he'd said it was "a chance to show a large and different audience what I'm really like" and that he did it "for Palestine". The money he received was to go to his Palestinian charity, Interpal, and to pay for Respect office staff. Whatever the intention, broadcaster Channel 4 edited out most of his political statements and he was ridiculed in the press for his bizarre antics. Some of his constituents set up websites to complain about what they saw as a misuse of public funds (his MP's salary); by the end of 2005, he had participated in only 15 per cent of House of Commons votes since the general election.

In his defence, Galloway says he was doing no more than what many other politicians and celebrities do every year: clowning around to raise money for charities such as Comic Relief. "Other MPs might have been at the House of Commons, and some of them might have been propping up the bars. Other MPs might have been on exotic foreign trips, fact-finding in the Seychelles or the Maldives. I was trying something different," says Galloway.

On the wide Roman-straight expanse of Whitechapel Road – in Galloway's constituency – Amharic, Arabic and Bengali jostle for attention with English, Russian and a dozen other tongues. The Cockney pubs are locked, peeling worlds filled with sullen faces. Outside, young men crowd to buy *ladoo* (an Indian/Pakistani sweet) from the famous Ambala bakery, or dates imported from the Persian Gulf. BMWs and Lexus saloons cruise down Commercial Road, hip-hop and grime beats thumping from inside.

There is overcrowding and poverty here; gangs, drugs, rising tuberculosis rates and community elders still struggling with the English language. The perceived injustices of Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine and elsewhere lie close to the surface and soul.

This is Galloway's territory. Along these twisted East End streets live and work the collection of Islamists, social reformers, anti-war protesters and hard-left revolutionaries that make up the Respect coalition. This is also home to some of Galloway's most trusted lieutenants: Assad Rehman, the man who led protests against the killing of Jean Charles de Menezes, the Brazilian electrician mistaken by London police for a terrorist, and against an anti-terrorist raid in Forest Gate in which a man was shot in the shoulder; Abjol Miah, a stick-fighting champion reformed through faith; and Rasul, a young man who was once a "top shotta", a notorious drug dealer who ran protection rackets and was a "honkey basher", attacking whites and firebombing pubs. For men

Picture: AFP



Above: Galloway meets former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein in Baghdad in 2002.

"I FREQUENTLY HEAR PEOPLE SAY, 'I NEVER THOUGHT I WOULD AGREE WITH YOU'. THAT'S ALARMING FOR PEOPLE WHO BELIEVE THE OPPOSITE OF MY BELIEFS, BECAUSE THAT MEANS I'M DANGEROUS"

like Rasul, Galloway has become a powerful force for good.

If Galloway's working-class upbringing has bought him anything, it's an easy way with the underprivileged that's surely the envy of many a rival politician. He charms his way through his constituency, signing autographs for giggling girls who've seen him on *Big Brother*, walking into carefully selected shops, hugging Bengali elders with their henna-stained beards, a roadshow of oddball whites in tow ("d'ya wanna meet Jow-erge?" they screech), united in rage over housing privatisation. George is all "*inshallahs*" (God willing) and "*alhamdulillahs*" (praise be to God), making promises to solve each and every problem with an "*Assalam Alaykum* [peace be upon you], brother". Even if he has not "reverted" to Islam (despite what some Bengalis think), it seems he understands the language of the East End well enough.

Each time a young woman approaches – and there are many – he smiles, his eyes sparkling and suddenly alive. There's something about the Scot that seems to attract women: attention he clearly revels in. He grins knowingly, winks and says: "Looking, but not touching, son."

In Respect's offices just off Bethnal Green Road, McKay has just fired off an angry letter to a newspaper. "I'm George's best friend. I can speak for him. We are of a like mind in just about everything."

A long-time journalist, he's known Galloway since they met in Beirut in 1977: he a young reporter for *The Sunday Times*, Galloway a rising star of the trade unions and Scottish Labour movement. "I was covering the revolution; he was fomenting it," McKay says laughing. He remembers how the locals wanted a game of football on the beach. "Fedayeen against imperialists," he chuckles. "We beat them, too."

Galloway might have turned down *Big Brother* had it not been for an expensive divorce or if the winnings from a libel battle with British newspaper *The Daily Telegraph* had come through sooner, McKay confides. "Aye, he thought he could reach through and out to the rest of the public. I did warn him not to."

Galloway's second wife, Palestinian academic and biologist Amineh Abu-Zayyad, is currently divorcing him. She's said she received a number of phone calls from women claiming to have had romantic links

with her husband. She adds that Galloway had tried to smooth things over by telling her it was a plot by an unnamed intelligence service to discredit him. "I should tell you," she says, "that when he told me his new party was going to be called Respect, I went upstairs and cried. How can he call it this when he doesn't even treat his own wife with respect?"

The British press, of course, lap up Galloway's antics and never miss a chance to exploit the polarising effect he creates. "I do like the guy," says Rania Khan, a young Respect councillor. "But I know how people can dislike him. He can create separation."

Galloway being Galloway, he takes full advantage of any opportunity to take the battle back to the media. Last March, he took great pleasure in exposing the "Fake Sheikh", *News of the World* journalist Mahzer Mahmood. The latter had tried to set him up in a sting operation, hosting a meeting with several Arab "businessmen" in a posh London hotel. But, Galloway says, he recognised the "heavy" serving as their driver. They made anti-Semitic statements and asked how they could give money to politicians. It seemed rather crude. Despite attempts by the paper to gain an injunction, Galloway managed to have a picture of Mahmood published.

Galloway has a theory about how he is portrayed. He is good at what he does, he reasons, and that makes him "dangerous" to the powers that be. "At the risk of sounding immodest, my belief is that they dog me because I'm better at it than the others. If I were a sandal-wearing, duffel-clad ineffectual protester with no ability to win hearts and influence people, they wouldn't attack me, they wouldn't dog me."

He takes a quick breath. "But as I've showed, especially in the last five years, I have the means – and by the grace of God, the ability – to persuade people. I frequently hear people say, 'I never thought I would agree with you'. That's alarming for people who believe the opposite of my beliefs, because that means I'm dangerous."

In this context, would he revise or reword his comment that he could see grounds for a suicide bomber to assassinate Blair?

"No, not at all, what I said I stand by," he says, sounding mildly surprised. "But what I stand by is what I said. What I said, not what *The Sun* said I said. [Journalist Piers Morgan] asked me if an Iraqi suicide bomber could construct a moral case for the assassination of the prime minister. Now, how long have you got? The case is endless. I merely said, if I was an Iraqi – whose country has been destroyed, whose family have been killed, whose brothers are in prison camps and living in a country where there's a foreign soldier on every corner – of course I could construct a case."

There is little doubt Galloway has a genuine and rare passion for his causes. Too often, though, the self-promotion seems to confuse rather than clarify his intentions: is his future in Respect and the East End, or elsewhere, in the world of media and celebrity?

His regard for Marxist revolutionary Che Guevara, a hero for Hong Kong's own high-profile rebel legislator, Leung Kwok-hung, or Long Hair, is revealing: "From the very earliest of times, as a teenager, I fell in love with the example of Che Guevara. I was in on the first wave of his supporters and I have watched with satisfaction as the icon that he represents became a global 'brand', if you like, for rebellion."

Does he see himself as another global brand for revolutionary politics, then? "If by that do you mean am I entertaining," he says, "I hope so. There's no reason why the devil should have all the best tunes. If I can draw an audience and make them laugh, as well as educate them, that's a good thing, no?" ■