

Five minutes with George Galloway: “The West is guilty of deep, laughable hypocrisy over Crimea”

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George Galloway is a long-time anti-war campaigner and Member of the UK Parliament for Bradford West, having won a 2012 by-election as a member of the Respect Party. In an interview with Stuart Brown and Joel Suss, editors of *EUROPP* and the *British Politics and Policy* at LSE blog, he discusses events in Ukraine, the future of UK foreign policy, the Snowden revelations, and Scottish independence.



How would you describe the events which have happened in Kyiv?

Undoubtedly, a coup is the best thing you can say about it. You can otherwise characterise it as a foreign financed invasion of the sovereignty of Ukraine. But no matter, it's happened. In foreign policy you must deal with the power that exists not the power you would like to exist. The power that exists now has trashed the Ukrainian constitution and installed a right-wing government filled with ultra-nationalist figures, even placing five explicit anti-Semitic fascists in top positions. We'll all reap the harvest from that in years to come.

Having supported a coup which set fire to the presidency and drove the president out of the country, we can no longer claim that the current Ukrainian government has untrammelled, unmitigated authority over the autonomous republic of Crimea. The people of Crimea have a conditional right to remain in Ukraine and they decided to wield it.

What do you make of the UK's stance on the Crimean referendum in light of its position on other issues, such as Scottish independence and the Falkland Islands?

Not only do English people not have a vote on Scottish independence, I as a Scottish person don't have a vote on whether Britain breaks up or not. So how can you say you can't have a referendum in Crimea because the whole of Ukraine has to vote, when you're actually holding a referendum in Scotland where the rest of Britain doesn't have the right to vote?

We recognised a referendum in the Falkland Islands – indeed the foreign office gave a full 21 gun salute. We are ready to go to war in the Falklands in order to assert our sovereignty over the territory, but Russia cannot accept a democratic decision of the people of an autonomous republic to enter the Russian federation.

Kosovo is the most absurd example of all. It declared itself independent of Serbia, and Britain and America have recognised that. Under the Serbian constitution Kosovo has no right to declare itself independent, but we have recognised that and are right to do so. Kosovo is never going back into Serbia. There are some realities you just have to accept. If the Kurdish area in Iraq decided tomorrow that that it was now an independent state, who's going to stop that? Even though under the Iraqi constitution they have no right so to do.

The West is guilty of deep hypocrisy, laughable hypocrisy over Crimea, and the truly spooky thing is the Western leaders don't even laugh when they're saying these things. They don't appear to realise the contradictions.

What would you say to those who are troubled by the speed at which the Crimean referendum has been brought about, and by allegations of unfair implementation?

The speed of it is the child of the speed of events in Ukraine. After all Ukraine had a constitution, had a president, had a government, had ministers, and they were all overthrown very quickly. So in a revolutionary situation all sorts of things happen very quickly.

There's no reason to doubt, and I haven't heard a serious or credible voice yet doubt that the huge majority of people in Crimea wanted to leave Ukraine. The great majority of people in Crimea are either ethnic Russians or Russian speakers, and half the Tatars voted for Russia according to their own leader. So I don't think there's much of an argument that the plebiscite wasn't held properly, or that the result that's been announced is somehow not really the feeling of the people of Crimea. That's what counts.

The vote in Parliament last summer against taking action in Syria was a landmark in UK foreign policy. How do you see the UK's foreign policy evolving?

Not since Lord North, in a small matter involving American colonists, has a British Prime Minister been defeated in the House of Commons on any matter of war and peace, so the Syria vote was definitely historic. I do think it is a direct result of ten years of our work in the anti-war movement, as well as events of course. The events themselves have been so self-evidently, disastrously negative. But our work played a part in that; MPs were either moved or persuaded or afraid to vote in the way David Cameron wanted them to vote.

One of the unintended consequences of the great blunder that Tony Blair made in invading Iraq was that Britain will actually be less able to participate in imperial adventures abroad. It won't stop them doing so rhetorically and multilaterally, as they are doing today *vis-à-vis* Russia. They still have a big voice even if that's the only thing big about them.

The revelations by Edward Snowden regarding state surveillance have been a big story, but arguably more so in America where there's been more of a public debate. What are your thoughts on the lack of debate here in the UK?

America's bad in many respects. But in some respects, of course, it's very good. And one of the things that it's very good about is that people hear more about their government's behaviour than British people seem to. American lawmakers hold their government to account more. They're forever saying you're breaking this article of the constitution or this amendment and so on. We don't even have a constitution to break.

Snowden's revelations have had tremendous repercussions in the United States. Google and Facebook are at war now with the US administration. Heads are rolling. People are promising reforms and so on. Whether they'll come to pass is another matter, but at least they feel the need to propose them. Whereas in Britain only *The Guardian* has covered this story, and even they filtered a lot of very good stuff out.

And their computers were broken...

Their computers were smashed! Imagine in the 21st century, by policemen. But more fool them for allowing it. Alan Rusbridger [editor of *The Guardian*] should have laid across the machines and forced them to arrest him before allowing them to break their machines. But at least you must give them the credit that they made the running on this story. But by and large it's been utterly ignored by the rest of the British media, and therefore the mass of the British people don't actually know, not only that all this has been going on from the NSA, but that the GCHQ has been doing most of the heavy lifting in this regard. Therefore there's no pressure in parliament and so on.

What are your views on Scottish independence?

I think that breaking up a small English speaking country for no good reason would be a bad thing for working people on both sides of the border. I'm glad to say the way the polls are looking, most Scottish people agree with me.

But you wouldn't join the Better Together campaign?

No, because it's a Unionist campaign, because it flies the Union Jack. I hate the Union Jack, I hate flag wavers. My flag is red. I don't stand under national flags, if I can help it. And I would never work with Tories. I hate Tories. With

every beat of my heart I hate them more, so why would I campaign with them? I've got my own campaign that is now being joined by more and more Labour MPs and Councillors because they see the crowds that I'm drawing. Thousands of people have paid £10 each to come and hear me speak on this subject. Most politicians couldn't draw enough to fill a telephone box, even for free.

You said you hate Tories, but what about people who vote for the Tories. In Bradford West there are certainly people who vote for the Conservative Party...

Not many. Well of course I live in hope of persuading every Tory to see the wisdom of socialist ideas. And of course I don't hate people who vote for the Conservatives. The Tories themselves, the party, are, as Nye Bevan famously said more than half a century ago: "lower than vermin".

Finally, what are your thoughts on the 2014 Budget?

This is a continuation of austerity for the many and prosperity for the few. The small nuggets that were thrown hither and tither were all carefully chosen to appeal to a certain demographic which they feel is under pressure from UKIP. Thus absurdly the price of alcohol was lowered in a country where alcohol is one of our biggest problems. The price of bingo was lowered when gambling is one of our biggest problems.

That tells you all you need to know. Not that George Osborne would ever be found drinking a pint of beer, even with a penny off it, or playing a game of bingo. But they imagine that there are votes to be had in this. But it will do nothing for the 50 per cent youth unemployment in my constituency. It will do nothing at all for the city of Bradford and other cities like it. I hope it will doom the Tories to electoral defeat in 2015. I'm sure that David Cameron is living now on borrowed time.

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Note: This article gives the views of the interviewee, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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About the interviewee

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