

Viva Palestina

George Galloway MP

*George Galloway,
Member of Parliament for
Bethnal Green and Bow,
dissects the Charity
Commission's obstruction
of his remarkable efforts
to provide help for Gaza.
We reprint his open letter
in full.*

To the Charity Commission,

I have been travelling for many weeks in North Africa and the Middle East, Europe, and North America. I have returned to a London address I seldom visit to find a blizzard of correspondence from you. Your correspondence, when read together, as I have just done, seems to represent a wildly disproportionate and inappropriate reaction to our recent delivery of aid to the suffering Palestinians in Gaza, and must raise the question: Why?

The peremptory letters from you, and by you I mean the Charity Commission, are full of bluster and threat, issuing absurd deadlines to people it does not seem to occur to you are not even receiving your letters, either because they are working abroad (Ms Razuki and Mr Al-Mukhtar), travelling abroad on high profile political business (myself), or you are writing to them at the wrong address.

In my own case, Easter Saturday opened with your, latest, threat to go before a High Court judge in a bid to force me to appear before you. That will not be necessary. I look forward to telling you to your faces what I think of you. Which is this.

I have become increasingly concerned about the abuse of your powers displayed in your brazenly obvious political double standards. About your attempts, under the guise of regulating British charities, to police the democratic efforts of political activists in Britain in a way never envisaged by Parliament. About your preparedness to waste large sums of public money in political stunts, either at the behest of others or in the hope that you are properly anticipating their wishes. And above all, in the context of this

issue, your almost laughably obvious prejudice against the Palestinian cause, and against Britain's two million-strong Muslim community.

Just one example will suffice for now, although I have more, much more.

During Israel's 22-day attack on virtually defenceless Palestinian civilians in Gaza – condemned by virtually everyone in the world from the United Nations to the Pope and including the British government – an organization, The Zionist Federation, took out a full page advert in the *Jewish Chronicle* on 9th January asking readers to send 'care packages' to 'our [i.e. Israeli] soldiers fighting on the front line' in Gaza, and to send charity vouchers to a British registered charity, Operation Wheelchairs Committee (charity number 263089), for the same purpose.

Although this was immediately drawn to your attention, you appear to have done absolutely nothing at all about such an abuse of charitable status. The Zionist Federation is presumably not a registered charity, any more than Viva Palestina was. The Zionist Federation appeal was for money for 'care packages' with donations possible online to www.zionist.org.uk, and to the charity Operation Wheelchairs Committee. By the logic of your actions towards Viva Palestina, surely you should have immediately declared the Zionist Federation to be a charity with all that that entails. But you did not do so. Why? In any case, the Operation Wheelchairs Committee is a charity, soliciting for funds in this advert to support a foreign army involved in a widely condemned military action, in which thousands of civilians were killed, maimed and orphaned. Yet the Charity Commission did nothing. No freezing of bank accounts, no press releases, no carefully briefed 'concerns', no threats of High Court judges.

It will only take the reader (I am publishing this letter as widely as I can) a moment's thought to imagine what the Charity Commission's attitude would have been if a British – Muslim – Charity had taken a full page advertisement in a different British newspaper, raising money for 'care packages' for 'our [i.e. Palestinian] soldiers fighting on the front line' in Gaza.

Not only would you have gone into overdrive and immediately begun freezing their assets; the hue and cry in the press you would have fed, would have seen the charity's trustees under arrest.

This is an incontestable example of your persistent bias. Because, in contrast to your inaction on a British charity raising money for the Israeli army, and in the absence of such a hypothetical Muslim charity, you have launched this hysterical campaign to try and wreck the work of Viva Palestina instead.

Without any knowledge of the intentions of Viva Palestina, and on the basis of press reports, you pronounced, as is your wont, that we were in effect a charity, to give yourselves locus in our affairs. You misunderstood – I believe deliberately – the structure of our Gaza convoy, purporting to believe that we – the subscribers (whatever that means) – were holding more than a million pounds about which you expressed ‘concerns’, when, in fact, as you have been told but continue to ignore, this was never the case.

You first frightened the banks into refusing our attempts to open a bank account. When we finally found a bank which would allow us to open an account, you intimidated them into freezing it, I believe exceeding your powers. You then began procuring documents – possibly illegally – about us from the Islamic Bank. As a result of your press briefings about your ‘concerns’, newspapers began to refuse to accept advertisements from us, donors turned away, and the public were encouraged to believe that Viva Palestina was something to be avoided – conjuring-up an undisclosed but lurking suspicion about it.

In all this you acted not as the public would expect a Charity Commission to do, but rather as a self-appointed state policeman of the activist sector, a mission-creep towards a style of work which simply must be contested.

Here are the facts. Accept them and save the public purse a lot of money it can’t afford. And get off the backs of Britain’s Muslims and the Palestinian people.

I am not a trustee of Viva Palestina. You say I am a ‘subscriber’, though you do not say what that means. I have nothing to do with Viva Palestina’s finances, I am not a signatory to its frozen bank account. I will attend the meeting with you, because I intend to launch a parliamentary campaign, and take it to the country, to put you back in your place.

I did inspire the creation of Viva Palestina, and I am very proud of that. If those running it listen to me, they will refuse to take anything off their website at your behest. The example you cite of an item which should be taken down, could just as easily have been any one of a hundred items. And would become so, once your right to dictate the activities of a political campaigning organisation was conceded.

For that is what Viva Palestina was, and is. Its constitution – its actual constitution, not the one you wish it had – makes this abundantly clear. So does everything it says and does. If all that renders Viva Palestina not eligible to be a charity, then that’s fine. Let me emphasise this as strongly as I am able. Viva Palestina does not want to be a charity.

It is you, for transparently political reasons, who insisted that charitable status should be sought. You registered Viva Palestina as a charity in record quick time, and without the great bulk of the information you normally require. And then you froze the record-quick new charity's bank account so that it could not operate. These are police state tactics, entirely inappropriate and without any basis.

Viva Palestina simply provided a focus for an aid convoy from Britain to Gaza. It was de-centralised. Each participant was responsible for raising their own money, bringing their own vehicles, filling their own vehicles with their own aid, making their own donations in Gaza. You have been told this, but continue to misrepresent the position. The money raised by Viva Palestina itself – a much smaller amount – was publicly declared to be intended as a donation to a British charity for work in Gaza – Interpal, with which you are depressingly familiar, having harassed it for years on repeatedly debunked smears.

The vast majority of the participants in the convoy, and the vast majority of those who helped them with money and aid, were British Muslims.

Having exerted that mighty effort, those British Muslims now find that their peaceful democratic response to the crisis in Gaza has been criminalised by you, and their aid confiscated. This all follows the high-profile police raid on vehicles from the Muslim community in the North West, heading to join the convoy the night before its departure. This raid, blazed across the media, saw the arrest of ten Muslims headed for the convoy. All ten of them were later released without charge, but not before sowing the seeds of tremendous bitterness in the communities from which the men came.

This is dangerous as well as foolish. There are extremists on the edge of the Muslim community even now saying 'I told you so' to those who had been naïve enough to think Britain was still the kind of country where efforts like ours could be appreciated and, at least, be free from the kind of arbitrary and unjust actions taken by you. These actions undermine the confidence of British Muslims in the democratic system in Britain, and are therefore dangerous and against the interests of our country.

I understand from my colleagues that you have now frozen more than £100,000 intended to help the suffering Palestinian people. Shame on you. I suppose it is too much to hope that you might have that on your conscience. But be sure I intend to let as many people as possible know, here and abroad, what you have done.

Viva Palestina's work has effectively come to a halt since your

intervention in its affairs, and in my absence. This was, I'm sure, your intention. Viva Palestina has not spent any money improperly. It would not do so. Indeed, it could not do so. It has spent hardly anything at all – thanks to you. But it intends to get its money back from you. Viva Palestina have instructed lawyers to deal with you, and a barrister will accompany us to the meeting with you. If necessary, we will start a new organization, free from your wrecking efforts. But we want this money back, please be sure about that. There are Palestinians dying as a result of the malignant, sinister, cynical actions taken by you. Trust me, you'll be hearing more about this.

Yours faithfully,
George Galloway MP

Lions led by BBC donkeys

'The BBC Trust's report on Jeremy Bowen's dispatches from the Middle East is pusillanimous, cowardly, outrageous, factually wrong, and ethically dishonest. But I am mincing my words. The Trust – how I love that word which so dishonours everything about the BBC – has collapsed, in the most shameful way, against the usual Israeli lobbyists who have claimed – against all the facts – that Bowen was wrong to tell the truth ... And this, remember, is the same institution which said that to broadcast an appeal for medicines for wounded Palestinians in Gaza might upset its "neutrality" ... How do we solve this problem? Well I can certainly advise viewers to turn to Sky TV's infinitely tougher coverage of the Middle East and – I admit I contribute to this particular station – I can recommend the courage with which Al-Jazeera English covers Gaza and the rest of the Palestinian-Israeli war. I can well see how BBC executives will say this article of mine today is "over the top". Jeremy Bowen may indeed think the same. But the First World War metaphor would be correct. For Bowen and his colleagues are truly lions led by BBC management donkeys.'

Robert Fisk, The Independent, 16 April 2009