

LIFE & TIMES **MEN**

Viva Galloway

A British politician, author, journalist and broadcaster tells **Aneeta Sundararaj** how he started Viva Palestina, a humanitarian organisation in London

On a happier note, he tells of the time when his father would wake up in the middle of the night to watch a Muhammad Ali fight on TV. While there seems nothing strange about this, Galloway explains: "You must understand that this was a time when white society hated Muhammad Ali. He was a smart, uppity black man who didn't take no for an answer."

When he speaks of his mother, his voice softens. "She always said I was an unusual boy. When I played cowboys and Indians, I was always on the side of the oppressed and downtrodden Red Indians."

Listening to these stories, and to those of anti-Irish bigotry he and his family faced, it is no wonder he views many things through the prism of his hatred for any form of colonialism, oppression or marginalisation. This is precisely why, today, he chooses to champion the cause of the people he believes are the most marginalised in the world: Muslims.

"Islam is under full-scale ideological demonisation which is a necessary concomitant to the endless war against the Muslim world and its people. In Britain, and more so in France and countries like the Netherlands, it has become part of the lingua franca. A Muslim leader is usually referred to as 'mad' or Hitler, Hitler Of The Tigris, Hitler Of The Nile and soon. People like to read that Muslims are primitive and misogynistic. Find a Muslim to write a book rubbishing Islam and you have a best-seller."

After a pause, he quotes from George Orwell's novel, 1984: "We've always been at war with East Asia."

He explains that, in his opinion, there is "a war psychosis" which allows the West to perpetuate a fear of Islam and continuously wage war against it.

It is his belief that if there's no peace in Palestine, there will be no peace in the Middle East and thereby, none in the world. After the bombings of the Gaza strip by the Israeli Defence Forces in 2008, Galloway started a humanitarian organisation in London called Viva Palestina. The aim was to bring aid to the people in Gaza as "action speaks louder than words."

After three weeks traversing 8,046kms, the convoy arrived in Palestine, "bloodied, but

BY his own admission, George Galloway has one vice: He smokes cigars. Then, he makes a seemingly incredulous statement: "But I don't drink alcohol."

To dispel disbelief, he explains: "I never have. My father never allowed it. He never drank and neither did my grandfather."

With a twinkle in his eye, he shows how this worked in his favour: "On nights out, I drove everyone home, but saved the prettiest girl for last."

Born in Dundee in 1954, Galloway spent his childhood and youth in Scotland. By the age of 20, he was already an office bearer in the Labour Party in Scotland. His rise was rapid and, by the time he was 26, he was chairman. For a while, he was the Member of Parliament for Bethnal Green and Bow, but has since left, insisting that "there's more politics outside Parliament".

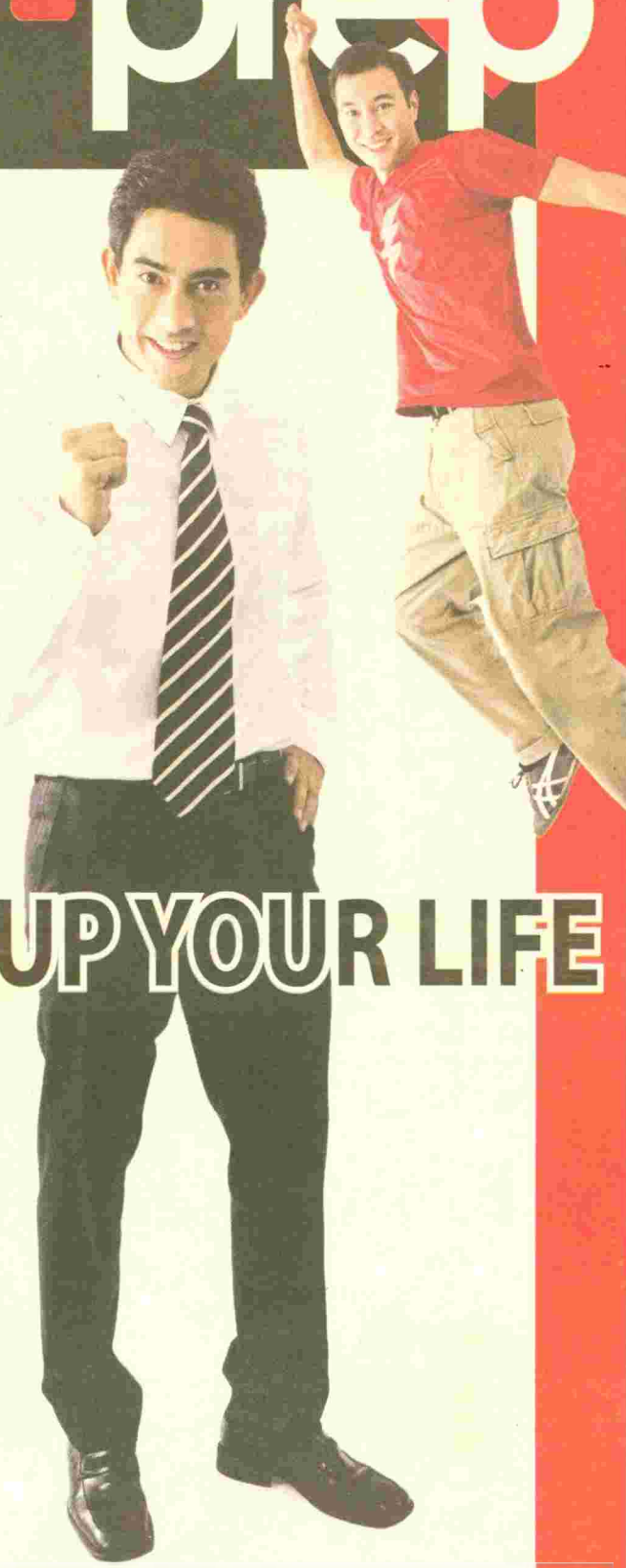
His childhood, though happy, was full of challenges with the main one being poverty. "I always remember that sense of humiliation at being poor," he says. "One day, a man from the electricity board came to cut off our electricity because we had not paid the bill. He saw my sister and me and couldn't bear to leave two children in the cold. He exercised his moral right not to cut off the electricity that day, even though he had every legal right to do so. I was grateful to him. He searched his conscience. That made me aware that everyone knows the difference between right and wrong. We may dismiss it, but we know it."



Galloway believes there can be no peace in Palestine unless there's peace in the Middle East

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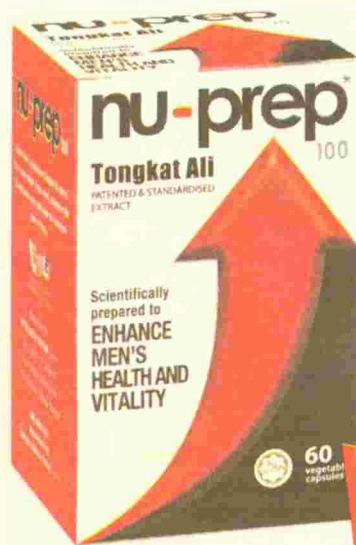
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"To those who are critical of Malaysia, it's really one of the best places to live. Many countries would love to have what you have."

George Galloway

unbowed" to deliver aid worth US\$10 million.

"We were able to demonstrate that there was a siege on Gaza and that the Arab dictatorships were part of it. In a very small way, we were able to contribute to the subsequent downfall of the oppressive regimes in Tunisia and Egypt. People were able to see the real and ugly face of dictatorships," he says.

Don't make the mistake of assuming that being totally against the state of Israel and a staunch supporter of Palestine means that Galloway is anti-Jew — it is a fine, but very firm, line that he draws between them.

"Zionism is the ideology and Judaism is a religion. In our convoy in Viva Palestina we had staunch and orthodox Jews with us. Most religious Jews are against Zionism," he says.

"It is like South Africa. I hated apartheid,

but that didn't mean that I wanted to see the whites leave South Africa. I wanted apartheid to end and for everyone to be treated equally.

In the same way, I would like to see one state from the river Jordan to the Mediterranean. I

don't care if you call it Israel or Israel-Palestine or Palestine-Israel or Palestine. It should be just one country where Jews, Christians and Muslims are equal citizens. There should be democracy with protection and guarantees for the safety of minorities."

Galloway was the special guest at the inaugural three-day Kuala Lumpur Palestine Film Festival which concluded last month. Impressed with Malaysia's progress, but unwilling to comment on domestic politics, he says: "There's always room for improvement. To become a mature democracy, it is necessary to 'share the limelight' from time to time."

iPad users win light-powered watches

NOTHING beats a first-thing-in-the-morning phone call and a friendly voice that says: "You're a winner!"

That's exactly what happened to Wong Chin Chuen, 28, and Siow Chee Han, 37, two of seven winners of the NST-Citizen contest. The contest, carried through the newspaper and its iPad edition was held over December.

The eight prizes — two each week — were watches from Citizen's popular Eco Drive series, timepieces that are powered by light and need no batteries. Week Four's winner won watches for a couple.

Wong, a customer support staff at an e-commerce company, won a Citizen Eco Drive stainless steel watch. He says this is

his first-ever win although he takes part in all kinds of contests all the time. "This was fun and easy to do, and winning feels really good. My first win!"

Siow, a network engineer with an IT company, won a Citizen Eco-Drive stainless steel watch as a consolation prize. He says he's a watch enthusiast and thinks Citizen's Eco-Drive series is the coolest thing. He became an NST iPad subscriber soon after it was launched nearly a year ago. "It's a great way to read the paper," he says. "And I like the user experience."

The other winners are Aizzamil Rushaidir, Yeung Sze Sheun and Ow Mun Hoe. The consolation prize winners were Faris Muliz Othman and Geraldine Atau.



Wong (right) and Siow show off their Citizen watches

PHOTO BY SURIANIE MOHD HANIF