

Introduction

The skill of intelligence services or the bravery of the army and police when dealing with actual threats of terrorism is widely recognised. The temptation is to think that more of what they are doing will “win the war”. Not only is this untrue, as recent history has shown, but even worse it may well increase the recruits to terrorist organisations and lead to an increase in acts of terrorism. The general public as well as politicians need to understand the causes of terrorism.

TERRORISM – CIVIL LIBERTIES OUR BEST DEFENCE

- The reasons for terrorism are easy to understand – dead easy
- Terrorism is easy to predict – dead easy
- The reactions of governments are predictable – even easier

By ignoring the lessons of Northern Ireland, Palestine and many others, our Government's actions are likely to lead to more, rather than less, terrorism.

Pyramid of Despair

The first lesson is to realise that nearly all terrorism is the almost inevitable outcome of what I call a “pyramid of despair”.

The base of the pyramid is a community, or nation or other grouping which is dealt with unfairly; it faces discrimination and feels oppressed. Any reasonable person can see this to be true and unjust and can also see that very little is done to combat it. This discrimination often leads to poverty but does not lead to terrorism.

The second tier of the pyramid is unjust law or illegal acts by government. It may be internment without trial, an illegal war, seizing of land. They are a display of the superior force of the oppressors. These acts can be seen by any reasonable person to be unjust and are obviously aimed at the particular oppressed group. These illegal acts may lead to protests, perhaps even violent protests, but rarely to terrorism.

The final tier of the pyramid is the killing of innocent people, summary execution in the street, shooting protesters, deaths of tortured prisoners, campaigners who “disappear”. These are deaths that any reasonable person can see could and should, have been avoided. Predictably few, if any, of those responsible are punished through the Courts for the severity of their actions.

It is the completion of these three tiers of the pyramid that ignites terrorism. There is a combination of injustices, which any reasonable person can identify, together with an absence of reasonable means of redress. The underlying frustration within that community boils over in a few individuals and leads them to commit terrorist acts.

The Iceberg of Support

It is vital to our understanding therefore to realise that the terrorists are the tiny tip of a very large iceberg. Whilst the vast majority of the oppressed group will not support terrorist actions, it is their fears, their experience of discrimination and injustice and their compassion for victims of injustices that makes the terrorists think that their actions are legitimate.

It also moves some who would usually be regarded as good citizens into a position of knowingly turning a blind eye to evidence related to terrorism. In other words they ensure they do not “know” what they very strongly suspect.

There will also be a very widely held view that, whilst the terrorism was wrong, it did give back “some of their own medicine” to the oppressors for the deaths and torture they had inflicted. This feeling is largely unspoken, rarely publicly acknowledged and can only usually be picked up from oblique references in interviews or from things that are unsaid. It is however the largest part of the iceberg.

The terrorists therefore are dependant on a very wide feeling of injustice to both legitimise their actions (in their own minds) and to escape detection much more effectively than a criminal such as a bank robber.

Terrorism and Religion

Whilst the terrorists often turn to their religion for support, and there may be some fundamentalists within their religion who encourage them, the pattern is so consistent over so many incidents of terrorism that **it is false to claim it is the prerogative of any one particular religion**. Whilst all major religions have a commitment to peace, they all also contain a history of martyrdom.

Governments' Responses

The responses of governments are as boringly predictable as they are dangerous.

Firstly, the beliefs and culture of the particular community or nation is blamed, usually in ways that are obviously bigoted. Even when some of the “moderate” members of the community are patronisingly consulted, the inference is still that the violence has its roots in their particular beliefs. It is their culture, or at least parts of it, which is seen as the problem. What this does is re-emphasise the first tier of the pyramid, the feelings of unreasonable treatment and oppression.

Often great play is made of some criminal mastermind who is the key behind it all. This analysis owes more to watching too many James Bond films than any analysis of what is happening. It also clearly shows the oppressed community that their widely held and genuine frustrations, the base of the pyramid, are going to be ignored.

Governments, or their armed forces, then impose unjust laws or actions that are quite deliberately aimed at the oppressed community. Frequent identity checks, body searches, destructive house searches, interrogation without a solicitor, imprisonment without trial become routine and the vast majority are of innocent people. This reconfirms the willingness to deal with that community unjustly and illegally. It therefore exacerbates the second tier of the pyramid.

The “James Bond” style war on terrorism, together with the inherent discrimination of the government’s approach, means that the army and police are incited to behave unjustly. The unjust laws seemingly give them a licence to be outside the law. All this, together with the fact that they are obviously frightened, means that they then kill or torture innocent people. The top tier of the pyramid is repeated.

Another round is completed, the pyramid reconfirmed, and more terrorism results.

The Choices We Must Make

We have a choice to make. We can stand shoulder to shoulder and have a firm and decisive “war on terror”, in the full knowledge that we are colluding in the war (which appears increasingly illegal) and the killing of innocent civilians and the certainty that (as with N. Ireland) it will inflame more terrorism.

Or we can attack the causes of the terrorism and dismantle the pyramid of despair. This will mean a greater commitment to civil liberties, not the abandonment of them. If our police or soldiers commit illegal acts they must be prosecuted, not have their crimes hushed up. Internationally our actions should be governed by international law and international agreements, not by the size of USA and our weaponry.

This is not rewarding the terrorists, what it does is recognise that the wrongs against that community are real and need to be remedied if we are to live together harmoniously.

Prevention of Terrorism

The first defence against terrorism is therefore a commitment to and legal basis for human rights, civil liberties and equal opportunities, both at home and internationally. In this way the first tier of the pyramid is prevented.

Secondly, laws must be just, and applied justly. Some searches of homes, stop and searches, arrests etc. are inevitable; however, where these fall disproportionately on one particular community, and where inevitably the vast majority are innocent, this does cause incredible resentment. Predicting this likely outcome is easy, as we have much experience from the “sus” law¹ which was used disproportionately against ethnic minorities, also from the troubles in Northern Ireland and from the disproportionate number of Asian people searched in recent times. Any such laws

¹ The “sus law” allowed the police to arrest anyone they suspected of loitering with intent to commit a criminal offence. It was abolished after the 1981 Brixton riots

should require the police to provide significant justification for using their powers. Such laws should also contain a review process, so that disproportional use is identified and corrected early on. In this way the second tier of the pyramid is prevented.

Thirdly the police and special services, army, prison officers etc. should be in no doubt that they will be prosecuted should they commit illegal acts. The covering up is the trigger that leads to loss of innocent lives. If this can be avoided then the top tier of the pyramid can be prevented.

Civil liberties, just laws, equality of opportunity both at home and abroad are therefore our first line of defence against terrorism. This is not the easiest of paths to tread. When there is an atrocity the natural reaction is to hit out or look for revenge. It takes moral courage to stand firm against cries for aggressive action.

It needs the maturity of a stable democracy to realise that aggressive, illegal and immoral actions will only escalate the terrorist actions and act as a recruiting sergeant for the terrorist organisation.

Defeating injustice, discrimination and oppression is the effective war on terrorism.

Appendix

Letter from 2003 confirms predictability of terrorism

The following letter was published in a small number of newspapers in 2003 before the Iraq war. (These included Swindon News, a Rugby paper and a free paper for Asians distributed in Birmingham)

First published on Tuesday 04 February 2003:

As war looms, terror is more likely

Government commitment to war is making terrorism more not less likely. The discovery of potential terrorists is proof that the process has begun.

The lessons, from Northern Ireland and other conflict areas throughout the world are that when ordinary people are threatened or attacked it increases the number of recruits who see terrorism as a response to the killing of innocents. Violence then escalates.

President Bush shows no concern for the well-being of the oppressed people of Iraq, merely the wish to be seen as an effective warlord.

Our government should be working to reassure the Muslim world that we wish them to be treated as fairly as all others.

By backing USA war-mongering our government is not giving that reassurance and is making our own citizens much more vulnerable to terrorist attack.

The USA were good friends when they criticised our invasion of the Suez in the 1950s it is time we repaid that friendship.

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Liberal Party Discussion Document