

## **Reflections on the attacks in London on 7 July 2005**

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The significance of the attacks in London on 7 July depends on what happens next. The essential component in a campaign of terrorism is that it is a campaign, in other words that the violence that it perpetrates against civilians is more than isolated or even merely sporadic. The power of the IRA's interventions of this type, particularly in the 1970s, lay in the predictability of their occurrence; you could never be sure whether you would be the next passenger or restaurant user to be reduced to a bit of collateral rubble in the supposed fight for Irish freedom. The succession of suicide attacks in Israel in recent years has had exactly the same effect. The public is petrified by systematic terrorism, whereas one-off atrocities are more like fatal rail accidents or horrific motorway crashes, easier to cope with on account of their assumed unintentionality and (therefore) perceived unrepeatability.

Time will tell into which category the 7 July bombings fit. Unless the police catch those responsible or they have all died in the blasts, the odds at the moment must be in favour of repetition at some point in the future. The attacks are relatively easy to execute and there are of course a plethora of vulnerable targets, including but going far beyond transport facilities. However, the chances of no effective leads to the killers emerging from the crime scenes must surely be low. Despite the former Metropolitan Police Commissioner Lord Stevens's blood-curdling interventions in the popular press, it seems inherently unlikely that there are hundreds of persons within the jurisdiction lying low waiting for opportunities to emulate the bloody effectiveness of their London colleagues. Irrational killers of innocent people do not flourish in a country as multi-racial, tolerant and diverse as Britain for the most part has become.

Of the fact that the killings were unequivocally irrational there can be no doubt whatsoever. The wanton destruction of human life had no strategic purpose. It was an expression of anger not of political ambition, a demand that Londoners suffer merely because others suffer, or are assumed to be suffering. As the Prime Minister remarked on BBC radio on the day after the blast, the violation of human rights was all the more complete because innocent people were used as instruments of another person's rage - the ultimate abuse of human rights is to turn people into objects and this is what those responsible for this violence have done, both literally and metaphorically. Among the most fatuous comments to have circulated in recent days have been those which have sought to share the blame for the killings with the political leadership of this country and in particular to associate the deaths with the decision to assist US forces in the invasion and occupation of Iraq. Leaving aside the fact that political violence of this sort has been gaining momentum for many years, and certainly since long before the invasion, the assertion is an insult to those millions of people in Britain and abroad who have shown themselves capable of opposing that policy while at the same time managing to restrain themselves from the commission of mass murder. Were they to fabricate and then succumb to the temptation to kill, would that somehow then be someone else's fault?

Political and police leadership has been outstanding in the immediate aftermath of the attacks. The city has been brought back to life within a matter of a few days. Efforts have been made by all those in authority and the general public to reach out to minority ethnic communities and express solidarity towards them – learning the lessons of the treatment of the Irish in Britain in the 1970s, it is now clear to all that there must be no suspect communities in this country, their members tarred with the terrorist brush at a time of crisis. The route to capturing these mass killers may well lie via the community in which they are currently laying low, and it makes no sense at all to alienate these law abiding and law enforcing people with some stupid lashings out of state power. But the British state is now infinitely better at these things than it was thirty years ago: anyone who doubts this should read the Home Affairs Select Committee report published earlier this year and devoted entirely to the impact of terrorism law on ethnic communities.

Another gratifying dimension to the immediate aftermath of the attacks has been the widespread awareness that has been shown that our freedoms and liberties should not be eroded in a misplaced repressive reaction to the bombings. The Prime Minister has been especially impressive in this regard, pointing in his BBC radio interview to the fact that it was his first administration that had enacted the Human Rights Act and then going on to promise to adhere to that Act and the court rulings under it even where its provisions and the judicial decisions under it appear wrong or inconvenient both to him and his colleagues. His point was that the restraint he promises to show will be policed by great institutions of state as well as by his own conscience. We have already seen this attitude on display in the way in which the government acted to bring executive detention to an end after the negative Lords' ruling in the Belmarsh case decided in December last year.

It is devotedly to be hoped that the restrained and intelligent sense of critical distance shown by the Prime Minister in the immediate aftermath of the bombings is sustained in the months to come. There will be temptations ahead, principally to short-circuit debate on controversial issues such as identity cards and the proposed new terrorism laws by calling in aid the memory of the events of 7 July. It is exceptionally difficult to oppose such laws in an atmosphere that is so dominated by the politics both of the last atrocity and of the atrocity still to come, with past and future horror combining to drive out reasoned debate. But whatever about their presentational or propaganda value, terrorism laws in themselves do not prevent terrorism any better than the ordinary criminal law, properly enforced by diligent police action. What they do achieve is the creation of a climate of fear in which considerations of national security come to dominate and due process and political freedom move to the margins of our democratic culture, eventually dragging democracy itself onto the sidelines with them. There is already evidence of the terrorism laws of recent years and in particular the prevention of Terrorism Act 2005 having an effect of this sort. Of course the police must do all they can to bring those responsible for these crimes to justice: but we must never forget that British justice is that of the court of law applying fair procedures, not that of the detention cell or house arrest or the politically motivated ASBO.