Select Committee on Home Affairs Written Evidence

19.Memorandum submitted by the International Centre for Security Analysis

The following submission seeks to inform policy-makers and emergency-planners of the significant lessons to be learnt from the growing body of literature examining human behaviour in a disaster. These point to the paramount need for professionals to incorporate community responses to particular crises within their actions, rather than seeking to supplant them as ill-informed or less productive. This is because emergencies offer society an important means to reaffirm fundamental human bonds that have been particularly corroded over recent times. Actions that enhance the benefits of spontaneous association, as well as developing a sense of purpose and trust across society are, at such times, of equivalent if not greater importance than effective, technical responses.

AFFILIATIONS

The lead-author to this contribution is currently the Director of the International Centre for Security Analysis (ICSA) based in the War Studies Group of King's College London (KCL). This is a 5* research assessment exercise accredited department within one of the UK's leading research institutions.

Much of the analysis derives from a two-year study into the "*Domestic Management of Terrorist Attacks*", which was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), as part of its "*New Security Challenges*" programme. A final report on the research undertaken is due to be delivered to the ESRC by the end of October 2004.

The specific aspects explored in this submission derive largely from the work of Professor Frank Furedi, of the University of Kent, into the sociological aspects of human resilience within contemporary society, as well as that of Professor Simon Wessely, of the Institute of Psychiatry at KCL, into the psychological consequences of terrorism.

CULTURAL MEANING AND SOCIAL RESILIENCE

How we, as a society, respond to a crisis, depends only in part on the nature of that crisis or the agent causing it. This cultural or social element is what explains our different and evolving attitudes to disaster across time and in different societies.

Why is it, that at certain times and in certain societies, a widespread loss of life—such as that which occurred in the London smog of 1952, or that which happens on an annual basis upon our roads—can fail to become a point of discussion, whilst at others, even a very limited loss—such as the loss of only seven lives aboard the Challenger spacecraft in 1986, or the four lives lost as a consequence of the Hatfield train crash in 2000—can become key cultural reference points?

In his work, Furedi has pointed to the evolving context and framework of cultural meanings to explain such variation. Broadly, this suggests that emergencies take on a

differing role dependent upon what they represent to particular societies at particular times, rather than solely on the basis of more objective indicators, such as real costs and lives lost.

The loss of the Challenger spacecraft represented a low-point in our cultural assessment of our own technological capabilities. It was a blow for the assumption of steady scientific progress that no number of everyday car accidents could replicate. On the other hand, Hatfield became represented as the paradigmatic example of why we were right to mistrust politicians and "profit-seeking" corporations.

In their own ways, both these examples point to the growing disconnection of ordinary people in the contemporary world from the professional elite, whether political, corporate or scientific. In turn, this reveals the extent to which once taken-for-granted, core social bonds and affiliations have been eroded in the course of little more than a single generation.

It is this incoherent cultural outlook that represents by far the greatest problem in developing our responses to the possibility of terrorist attack. How the public would respond, is shaped far more by its underlying assumptions and allegiances prior to, and subsequent to, any emergency, than the specific aspects of that emergency itself.

Yet, the standard way of dealing with disaster, is one that prioritises pushing the public out, beyond the yellow-tape perimeter, and subsuming their initial actions to those of the professionally-trained emergency services. This is despite the fact that the public themselves are the true first responders in any such situation.

Effectively, we deny people any role, responsibility or even insight into their own situation at such times. Yet, any examination of the existing historical literature on human behaviour in a disaster, readily points to the central importance of ordinary human action. People are at their most social and rational at such times and this behaviour should be encouraged and developed rather than subsumed.

Disasters, including terrorist attacks, destroy physical and economic capital. On the other hand, they present a tremendous opportunity for the creation and enhancement of social capital. It is this that the authorities and professionals should be alert to and wary of displacing, in their haste to put forward more meticulous and technically competent solutions.

In the aftermath of the Sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway in 1995, many of those affected were ferried to hospital in private cars. As a chemical attack, professionals might argue that this presented a risk of further contamination, but in the eventuality it did not, and only 11 people lost their lives due, in part, to the spontaneous actions of concerned citizens who acted when ambulances were not available.

A similar scenario was witnessed at the recent and terrible hostage crisis in Northern Ossetia in Russia. When the siege was eventually broken, the authorities were largely unprepared. Most of the injured were taken to hospital by car.

After the recent episode of flooding in Boscastle, Cornwall, as with the Lynmouth flood disaster in Devon of 1952, it was inevitably ordinary people who were both first on the scene and first to take appropriate and supportive action.

After the Bali bombing of October 2002, many steps were taken by local responders on the ground to deal with the injured and indeed, begin the process of organising to have

them flown to special burns units in Australian hospitals. By the time the professional emergency responders arrived much of this work was well in hand. Indeed, the disaster plan that these latter then worked to created new problems that had already been addressed. Scrapping the actions of local responders, many of the injured were ferried to hospitals where there were no specialist units to help.

The point here, is to identify the extent to which pushing people out at such times may appear logical and professional, but in actuality it can be counter-productive, failing to capitalise upon the spontaneous social bonds and behaviour that emerges in these situations.

TECHNICAL FOCUS VERSUS CULTURAL RESILIENCE

Many of the counter-terrorist measures put in place since 11 September 2001 can, at best, be described as largely technical in character. Apart from specific, security service related actions, these have included discussion about the need for greater surveillance, better intelligence, new protective clothing for the so-called "first responders", along with new gadgets to detect chemical, biological or radiological agents, concrete blocks and fences around many public buildings, endless checks at airports and stockpiles of vaccines, amongst many others.

The problem with all of these, is that by seeking to secure society from the outside by such means, we fail simultaneously to engage society from the inside with a view to winning a debate as to what we are actually for as a society.

Much research points to the fact that, in addition to the need for technical means to protect oneself in an emergency, by far the most useful tool is a clear sense of mission, purpose and direction. If we were to broadly caricature resilience as the ability to pick oneself up after a shock or emergency, and to keep on going, then the primary task is surely to have a clarity as to who we are, what we are for and where it is exactly that we are heading.

Yet, such political debate as to cultural values and direction, is most noticeable by its absence. Instead, as indicated above we seek to secure ourselves from the outside. Ironically, this preponderance of technical means and purported solutions—for we have yet to see whether many of them truly work—simply encourages an already existing sense of social suspicion and mistrust.

We are encouraged to be "alert" as to the activity of our neighbours, or those sat opposite us on any public transport. But rather than bringing people together as the times demand, such approaches simply serve to push people further apart. In that regards at least, we truly are "doing the terrorists' job for them".

SOLUTIONS

Handling social concerns as to the possibility of a terrorist attack is no easy feat. In part, this is because social fears today have little to do with the actuality or even possibility of the presumed threats that confront us. Rather, they are an expression of social isolation, cynicism and mistrust.

In that regards, any real solution needs to be conscious of the need to build up social bonds, rather than undermining these. The public need to be included and engaged. But they need to be included and engaged well before the emergence of any particular crisis, and they need to be included and engaged in matters pertaining to far broader social

issues than merely fears about terrorism, or indeed any fears.

The starting point for any effective solution is to put the actual threat posed by terrorism into an appropriate context. Outside of the events in New York, Washington and Madrid, there have been no terrorist attacks in the developed world. To suggest otherwise is both alarmist and disingenuous.

What's more, what attacks there have been consistently fail to point to any serious capabilities amongst terrorists in the specific area of chemical, biological and radiological weaponry the public fear most. Yet, to read the debate over the last three years one would be forgiven for thinking otherwise. Certain terrorists may wish to develop and deploy such weapons but, given their current capabilities, this remains very much an aspiration rather than a possibility.

Above all, if as a society, we are to ascribe an appropriate meaning to the events of 11 September 2001—one that does not enhance fear domestically, encouraging us to become even more dependent on a limited number of expert professionals, who will tell the public how to lead their lives at such times—then we need to promote a far more significant political debate as to our aims and purposes as a society.

Surely, those who risk their lives fighting fires or fighting wars do so, not so that their children can in turn go on to do the same in the future, but rather because they believe that there is something more to life worth fighting for. It is that "something more" that contemporary society appears to have lost sight of. And it is a loss we ignore at our peril.

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