

# Is real resilience attainable?

The concept of resilience – the ability to withstand or recover from adverse conditions – has come of age in the wake of the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001.

Politicians, emergency planners and others talk of the need to “build”, “engender”, “improve” or “enhance” resilience in society. **Bill Durodie** examines what is being proposed and the extent to which real resilience is achievable in today’s conditions.

According to the UK Cabinet Office Draft Civil Contingencies Bill, resilience is the ability to handle disruptive challenges, characterised as emergencies, that can lead to or result in crisis. In particular: “The aim of building resilience is to reduce susceptibility to challenges by reducing the probability of their occurrence and their likely effects, responding effectively and efficiently when they occur and building institutions and structures in a way as to minimise the possible effects of disruptions upon them.”<sup>1</sup>

The bill suggests that the level of resilience in the UK is already high due to the experience of Irish terrorism, which established a capability within government, and an awareness among businesses and the public. This strong position is also held to be due to a long-standing tradition of effective planning and response at the local level. This is being supplemented, at an organisational level, by Regional Resilience Teams located in government offices throughout the country, and Regional Resilience Forums to bring together the key players.

The draft bill indicates the UK government’s approach to the resilience agenda which, in summary, consists of:

- improved horizon scanning;
- increased investment;
- an enhanced counter-terrorism framework;
- improved business continuity arrangements; and
- new civil contingencies legislation.

Unfortunately, by framing the discussion in the fashionable language of ‘risk’, an element of passivity has been built in from the outset. This is because, as sociologist Frank Furedi has indicated elsewhere, the concept of risk nowadays is increasingly connoted in an external and reactive sense, whereby people are designated as being ‘at risk’ from certain hazards or

influences. Thus “risk becomes an entity in its own right, only minimally subject to human intervention”.<sup>2</sup>

It is in this relatively passive sense that the Cabinet Office uses the term in much of the proposed bill. Hence it states that “risks of disruptive challenge must where possible be identified”. This suggests that risks are inherently and implacably ‘out there’, waiting to be spotted and acted upon.

And, even though the document indicates that, in some circumstances, “it is possible to prevent disruptive challenges occurring by taking action at an early stage”, the language used makes it clear that this is merely a case of anticipating what are considered to be inevitable challenges. Thus: “This cycle — anticipation, prevention, preparation, response, recovery — is at the heart of resilience.”

The notion that it may be possible to shape conditions or set the agenda, with a view to obtaining desirable outcomes independently of external forces, is not considered.

The Cabinet Office is not alone in this mode of thinking. Many leading officials have referred to the fact that, in their minds, it is “not a matter of if, but when” a future terrorist attack will occur. Similarly, the head of the UK security service recently advised an audience in London that it was “only a matter of time”, before a crude chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear weapon was launched on a Western city.<sup>3</sup>

Such rhetoric presumes to be challenging an assumed complacency towards the issue of terrorism. It is perceived of (and presented as) resolute and robust. But it reveals an almost resigned air of fatalism towards future events — a sense that risks are simply coming to us. It also runs counter to the spirit of the speech made by Tony Blair on 11 November 2002 at the

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Lord Mayor's Banquet in London, in which he countenanced against actions "on the basis of a general warning", which could lead the UK to "doing [the terrorists'] job for them".<sup>4</sup>

In February 2003, the US Department of State issued the Bush administration's *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism*.<sup>5</sup> This noted that the best form of defence is offence. But the very terms used in its comprehensive four-'D' strategy — "defeat", "deny", "diminish" and "defend" — reveal a remarkable defensiveness. At best, what is being put forward is a series of reactions to the assumed actions of others in the war on terror.

Beyond passing references to "freedom" and "democracy", the *National Strategy* provides no sense of what the US stands for as a society, or how it hopes to promote this to the rest of the world. Rather, it is a reiteration of what the US is opposed to. It is precisely this responsive mode that undermines the real meaning of resilience, which is not just to anticipate and respond, but to orientate and build.



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*Tony Blair believes that the mentality of reacting "on the basis of a general warning" would be doing the terrorists' job for them.*

The idea that it may be possible to put forward a positive vision for society is rarely entertained. Yet surely it is by establishing one's aims and values, and then pursuing these, that one stands the most chance of winning the battle for hearts and minds, both on the domestic front and further afield. It may accordingly be possible to convince those who are disaffected to co-operate in future.

**Technical fixations**

Within the discussions that emerged after 11 September 2001, in addition to a reactive mode and the assumed urgency those events demanded, there was a proclivity (which still remains) to put forward technical solutions to the issue of resilience. The usual list consists of:

- better surveillance and intelligence;
- effective models for predicting behaviour;

- new detection equipment and protective clothing;
- alternative modes to impart appropriate information; and
- new structures of government and integrated response systems.

These solutions still suffer from being responsive in outlook, focusing on means rather than ends. It appears as if the whole point of being alive has been narrowed down to merely staying alive. All we need do is keep safe and remain alert. Yet surely those who risk their lives fighting fires, or dealing with other emergencies, aspire to more for ensuing generations, including their own children, than simply that they should be able to do the same again?

The technologies we introduce to handle our fears are inevitably shaped by our vision of the future. If this is a narrow, apocalyptic one, rather than an ambitious, future-oriented one, then we are likely to constrain ourselves with it. Ironically, this may impact adversely on our ability to handle crises. Indeed, our obsession with improbable dangers may distract us from more mundane yet plausible risks, and lead us to divert social resources accordingly.

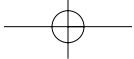
Some academics and social commentators have suggested that we now live more isolated lives in an increasingly disaggregated society compared to previous generations. Indeed, the more networked we seem to have become, with all the new gadgets at our disposal in a narrow, technically fixated way, the more we seem to have fragmented at the human or social level. As the eminent Cambridge philosopher Onora O'Neill recently remarked; "There is no shortage of information today, but how much of it is two-way"?<sup>6</sup>

Many proposed technological solutions seem to make the problem worse rather than better. This is because encouraging us to be suspicious of others accentuates the trend towards social atomisation, effectively pushing us further apart. Real resilience requires bringing people together by engaging them with a common purpose, thereby enhancing their sense of confidence and spirit of camaraderie.

Resilience may be a function of technique and competence, but ultimately real resilience is about attitude or will. Engendering such an attitude requires a cultural focus that has rarely been discussed since the events of two years ago. It is a qualitative shift that cannot be quantified in financial terms. Indeed, if we are not careful, the vast sums being poured into the resilience agenda may simply feed a new bureaucracy, as well as making us more isolated and insecure.

**Real resilience**

Real resilience has four key components: knowing, judging, engaging and acting. However, these are not as unproblematic as they might appear within



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the context of contemporary society.

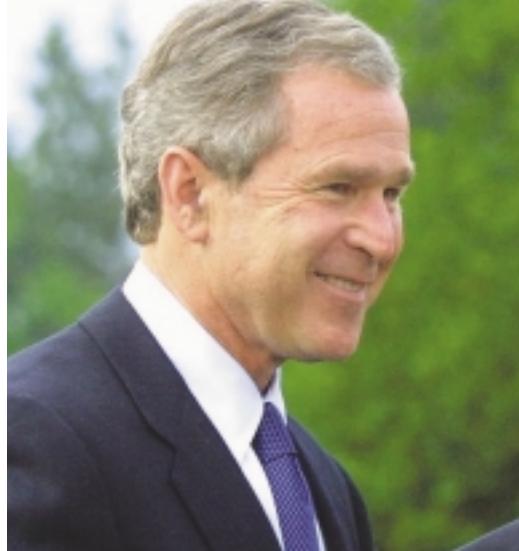
The pursuit of knowledge has, in certain circles, become assumed to be both impossible and a distraction from more immediate, vocational or practical orientations. Social scientists suggest that there is no single 'truth' but rather many 'truths'. At best, one can aspire to know oneself, although this too has been problematised. To know where one is and seeks to be going, let alone aspire to do so for the whole of society, is often seen as positively dangerous.

As a result, we live in remarkably non-judgmental times. Indeed, not to judge the circumstances, actions and motivations of others is held to be a positive virtue. Yet the creeping inability to discern, and be able to say that one thing is better than another, may ultimately disarm us in our search for real resilience. It is also a remarkable form of self-denial and self-deception. We live by judging what we do against the alternatives on offer. Judgment remains the basis for acting as moral, conscious beings. It allows us to push ourselves and others to improve — succeeding in our aims by transcending or overcoming circumstances and limitations.

Engagement in the contemporary world is noticeable by its absence or its very limited scope. Participation rates in all manner of formal social institutions appear to be in terminal decline, while at the informal level one can no longer assume a common bond with others.

Critics of the UK government's approach to civil protection have been quick to remark the extent to which the public appear to be taken as passive beneficiaries of enlightened and benevolent state protection. Yet, the solution offered — to engage more representatives of differing 'stakeholder' groups — falls far short of the active engagement of the population that the Second World War witnessed.

Finally, the will to act is not as strong as one might hope. Indeed, action is increasingly seen in a nega-



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*The Bush administration has published a National Strategy for Combating Terrorism.*

tive light today. It is held to lead to unforeseen or unintended consequences. Thus even when societies do act, as they did in the recent conflict in Iraq, this is usually based upon a narrow risk calculus that seeks to weigh up the unforeseen consequences of not acting against the unintended consequences of being too decisive.

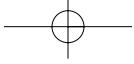
This mode of thinking has been formalised through the advent of the so-called 'precautionary principle' that, despite its origins among the liberal-left in relation to science, has been adopted by those of a more hawkish persuasion in government and the military. These now speak of the need for pre-emptive action to deal with the dangers of 'unknown unknowns' with all the alacrity of the environmental movement.

However, without restoring the centrality of knowing, judging, engaging and acting, real resilience will remain a distant dream. This is not an abstract, philosophical imperative — it is the role and respon-



*Providing protective clothing for the civilian population may prove useful once an attack has taken place, but it is a more reactive than proactive method of dealing with the problem.*

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sibility of all who claim to lead. Clarifying and winning the argument for a common social project and setting about achieving it would necessarily build real resilience, which comes from engaged action and outward orientation rather than reaction and retrenchment.

For all the above reasons, we stand a long way from achieving or establishing real resilience in society. Indeed, such an attitude and outlook cannot be established, only nurtured. It requires a significant degree of freedom and engagement on the part of the wider population, and an identification with and support for the values promoted by their leaders.

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#### NOTES

1 Consultation Document, June 2003, Executive Summary, p5

2 'A sociology of health panics', in Mooney and Bate eds., Environmental Health: Third World Problems — First World Preoccupations (Butterworth-Heinemann 1999)

3 Speech by Eliza Manningham-Buller at the 'Countering Terrorism: An International Blueprint' conference, Royal United Services Institute, Whitehall, London 17 June 2003

4 <http://www.number-10.gov.uk/output/Page1731.asp>

5 <http://usinfo.state.gov/topical/pol/terror/strategy/>

6 Speech made at the 'Communicating the War on Terror' conference, Royal Institution, London, 5 June 2003

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