

PANIC IN THE STREETS

BILL DURODIE wonders what makes us all so anxious

A survey released just over a month ago by the US-based, nonpartisan Council for Excellence in Government, revealed that nearly three-quarters of all Americans felt anxious or concerned about terrorism. This is despite the fact that the 'War on Terror' has now been waged for two and a half years. There has been a war in Afghanistan to topple the Taliban and a war in Iraq to depose Saddam. Thousands of public buildings have been expensively fortified and millions of travellers passing through airports have undergone endless security checks. Americans have also had a brand new Department of Homeland Security in place for over a year. All in all, over \$200 bn has been expended on their safety. But still they feel insecure. What does this tell us about the world today?

It certainly seems to suggest that there is little connection between the actual security measures taken and people's sense of security. It is almost as if the moves to assuage public concerns actually increase anxiety. The authorities are clearly conscious of this dilemma. Those in charge of maintaining security now seem to favour the term 'alert', rather than 'alarmed', in their descriptions of the appropriate mood which should be adopted by the public.

But this is mere wordplay. If we want to understand the anxiety currently pervading America and other western countries we need to go back well before the events of 11 September 2001. Accordingly, if we fail to grasp the real roots of this crisis we shall fail to redress the situation.

A good starting point is our changing attitude to risk. The sociologist Frank Furedi has pointed to a significant shift from the classical notion of taking a risk, to the more recent sense of being at risk. Taking a risk involved an active engagement with the world, which allowed for positive, as well as negative, outcomes. Being at risk presumes a more passive outlook: risks are just out there, heading

our way. (It was this formulation which Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Sir John Stevens, appealed to recently when asserting it was now inevitable that London would suffer a terrorist attack.)

This shift in our attitude to risk appears to go hand in hand with a general decline in political debate and participation across society over the same period: a move from an active engagement to a more passive detachment. In turn, this has helped shape a mood of resignation, and an attitude of mistrust and cynicism towards all forms of authority, whether political, corporate or scientific. People are now more inclined to assume the worst and suspect a cover-up, even before the onset of any real emergency. This has widespread implications for how we ourselves behave, and how we expect others to behave.

'If your town is not on Osama bin Laden's hit-list, then it cannot be a place worth visiting'

In a world that stresses human vulnerability, rather than human resilience, we find the growing assumption that individuals cannot cope without professional support in a crisis. Constant reassurance is required to stave off severe anxiety.

This ensures that whatever steps the government, security and emergency services take, there is still an appetite for more. No serious local authority can afford not to have revised its emergency procedures in the light of these developments. Indeed, it almost seems that if your town, city or region is not assessed as potentially being on Osama bin Laden's hit-list, it cannot be worth visiting. This is a bizarre badge of honour that could readily become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

In earlier times — times, for example the Blitz, when the public showed a remarkable capacity to cope with con-

stant danger — morale was understood to depend more upon action than upon words. Any senior official suggesting events were inevitable, that the next bomb could have your name on it, would probably have been sacked for undermining public confidence. The authorities also sought to preclude the emergence of any kind of bunker mentality, any hiding away from the world, by encouraging a focus on normal life. There was, they insisted, more to life than the immediate crisis. In other words people had a clear sense of what they were for, rather than simply knowing what they were against.

This sense meant that despite terrible general losses and individual tragedies, with few exceptions, people struggled and got by. The assumption that they might not be able to do so, or that life's challenges could leave deep psychological scars, is a modern-day presumption.

This is not to deny that there were many gripes and resentments against those in authority who were held to have let particular communities down. But, by and large, communities faced with adversity discovered and developed their own means of support, tapping into deep reservoirs of social purpose, meaning and experience. In contemporary society, such autonomy from well-meaning outside professionals is rarely provided, and rarely sought. Indeed, the dust had hardly settled from the twin towers when a veritable army of counsellors, psychologists and other assorted therapists descended on New York.

It was not too surprising, given their professional predilections, that these experts found that nearly one in five of the population was displaying symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This was so even among those who had been exposed only through the medium of television. (PTSD was not even listed in psychiatric manuals until the 1980s).

As Tel Aviv based psychiatrist Avi Bleich has suggested, such figures are



extraordinarily high, especially when contrasted to the significantly lower incidence among an Israeli population which has suffered terrorist attacks on an almost daily basis.

So, what is to be done? Well firstly, there is an urgent need to reassert the importance of a human-centred outlook to world affairs. While this may sound self-evident or commonsensical to readers of this journal, it is the case that the idea of human beings as a positive influence on the world has increasingly been displaced in modern times. Books such as Michael Moore's *Stupid White Men* and John Gray's *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals* reflect a growing rejection of, and self-loathing for, contemporary society, portraying humanity as a problem rather than a solution. It is this very nihilism that terrorists now reflect.

Secondly, we need to identify and counter the widespread exaggeration of risks that is increasingly used as political tools in contemporary life. Fear of the consequences of going to war in Iraq were

played upon just as much as fear of the consequences of not intervening, by either side in the run up to war last year. Yet the consequences for society of the absence of a positive and principled political agenda and debate are precisely the lessons that all should learn from the recent electoral debacle in Spain. The politics of fear serves to undermine our confidence in humanity and downplays our significant achievements.

Finally, it is ironic that a society that has become so risk-averse also continually seeks to restore trust in its social and public institutions. But, at its heart, the very notion of trust is dependent on letting go, or taking a risk. Accordingly, a society obsessed with regulating risk pre-

The theme of this year's Reith Lectures, presented by Nobel prize-winning playwright Wole Soyinka, is 'The Climate of Fear'. They can be downloaded from the BBC website at:
www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/reith2004

cludes the granting of trust. If freedom is to be a value we uphold as an inherent part of a progressive society, we must reaffirm that real freedom means allowing people to make their own mistakes, as well as encouraging the spirit to explore and experiment that has been curtailed in our age of anxiety.

There is no panic in the city. Our emergency responders are probably better equipped and better trained than at any other time in history. That we feel concerned as to what may happen tells us more about a crisis of confidence in authority, as well as in ourselves, than the objective conditions. Of course, such fears may end up encouraging others to have a go. The way around this is to remind ourselves that there is more to life than terrorism. But if we seek to defend, or better still promote, our values or our way of life, then it is time we gave flesh to such concepts and debated where it is we are heading as a society. ■

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