

The London bombings: Why did it happen here?

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The response of the Labour government to the July 7 bombings in London has been a mixture of hand-wringing and hypocrisy.

We are told repeatedly that four, and possibly more, young British men from immigrant families were prepared to blow themselves up simply due to an irrational hatred of Western civilisation inculcated by Islamic fundamentalism. No reason is offered for why these and hundreds more Asian youth are attracted to religious extremism and are prepared to kill and be killed. To even raise the question of the role played by Britain's participation in the Iraq war in fomenting anger amongst Muslims is to invite denunciations of being an apologist for the terrorist atrocities.

But to explain is not to condone. The emergence of Islamic fundamentalism and terror bombings is a manifestation of a deep-rooted disease in society and the body politic. Bitter denunciations will do nothing to change this reality. It must be understood.

It is obvious that the London bombings were a response to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the ongoing occupation of those countries. It did not require a great deal of social insight or immense powers of political foresight to anticipate that acts of terrorism would be one of the responses to Britain's participation in a predatory and illegal war.

The toxic combination of Blair's alliance with the White House-Pentagon militarists and his foully hypocritical invocations of democracy were bound to have lethal consequences within this country. Only those such as government spokesmen and official apologists for the war would deny this. But to point out the anger generated by the war amongst British Muslims is only the beginning of an explanation.

There is no direct and inevitable connection between even the most intense outrage against the war and the decision to commit a terrorist act directed against the civilian population. The emergence of suicide bombers within Britain is an indication of a pathological state of social relations within this country.

We are not dealing here with psychotic killers, where a family tragedy or some other individual life experience can be shown to play a part in the development of a personality disorder. The three alleged bombers originally identified were students and a family man, who acted out of religious conviction.

Shehzad Tanweer, 22, was born in Bradford but lived most of his life with his parents in the Beeston area of Leeds. He was a good student and a sports science graduate. His Pakistani father owns a chip shop and is a respected member of the local community.

Hasib Hussain, 18, a college friend of Tanweer, also came from

Beeston. His father works in a local factory.

Mohammed Sadique Khan, 30, from Beeston, was married with a young daughter. He worked in a caring profession, as a primary school mentor for children with learning difficulties. His father worked in a foundry. His estranged wife is a neighbourhood environmental officer. Last year Khan's mother-in-law, Farida Patel, was a guest at a Buckingham Palace garden party, where she received an award for her work as a teacher specialising in bilingual studies.

The fourth alleged bomber, a Jamaican-born resident of Britain in his thirties, Lindsey Germaine, was named only yesterday.

These young men are alleged to have planned and carried out a truly horrific deed. Consider what it would take to board a tube train or a bus and look at the faces of those around you—men, women and children who bear absolutely no responsibility for the actions of the Blair government. And then to detonate ten pounds of high explosives, knowing the bomb will kill all those around you.

An act of this character expresses an extraordinary level of social alienation. It is all too easy to attribute this to "brainwashing" or the "perverted and poisonous" doctrines of Islamic extremism, as Prime Minister Tony Blair did in Parliament on July 13. Such declarations evade the real questions. Why were four educated young men attracted to the millenarian visions of a heavenly paradise for the martyr peddled by the fundamentalists? How have such reactionary doctrines taken hold and won support?

The ability of groups sympathetic to Al Qaeda to win influence is connected to significant social, economic and political changes within British society itself. Even as we employ the term "British society," we are obliged to recall that it was the former Tory leader Margaret Thatcher, in support of her dog-eat-dog political and economic philosophy, who insisted, "There is no such thing as society."

She declared, "I think we've been through a period where too many people have been given to understand that if they have a problem, it's the government's job to cope with it. 'I have a problem, I'll get a grant.' 'I'm homeless, the government must house me.' They're casting their problem on society. And, you know, there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families."

The coming to power of Thatcher's government in 1979 marked the definitive break by Britain's ruling elite with the post-war policy of securing social consensus by maintaining a welfare state.

Instead, Thatcher refashioned Britain as a cheap labour platform for the major transnational corporations by mobilising the full might of the state against the working class.

Thatcher's contempt for the fate of ordinary working people and the cultivation of extraordinary wealth for a select few began a quarter century ago. It has resulted in the disintegration of all the complex social arrangements and institutions that once gave people a connection to a broader community. The elevation and glorification of the powerful individual—the billionaire businessman, the fabulously rich “celebrity”—as the epitome of success has been accompanied by the impoverishment of millions in Britain and all over the world.

The four alleged bombers may not all be from the most impoverished layers, but in their social being they reflect conditions affecting broad sections of the working population that have developed in Britain over the past decade-and-a-half. They live in a part of the country, Yorkshire, that has been devastated by the mass closure of mines, textile mills and factories. A small number may have prospered, but most new jobs that have been created offer only low-wage employment in the service sector.

Beeston is an example of the type of urban deprivation that has been created. A July 2004 report by Leeds City Council states that Beeston has “failed to benefit from the growth in the economy of the city, leaving wide gaps between the ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’.”

Immigrant communities make up only 22 percent of the population. Most residents are poor whites struggling to make a living. Unemployment stands at nearly eight percent, and only a third of the total population are in full-time employment. Nearly one in six residents suffers from long-term illness. Two-thirds of residents rent rather than own their homes.

This social polarisation has been accompanied by the growth of all manner of social and intellectual backwardness, of which the growing influence of religion and its most apocalyptic variants, in particular, is one manifestation.

To explain this, one must identify the other key factor leading to the extreme alienation from society of many young people—the disintegration of the labour movement and its disappearance as a significant force in British society.

It is not necessary to repeat here the criticisms made by the Marxist movement of the reformist programme advanced by the Labour Party and the trade unions. Despite their extreme and ultimately fatal limitations, these mass organisations reflected, even if inadequately, the sense of class solidarity and the socialist aspirations that were deeply felt by millions of workers, and even significant sections of the middle class. There existed a genuine confidence that capitalist oppression was on the way out, and Britain and the world would be made anew. It was not a question of if capitalism would be replaced, but how and when. The youth responded to this optimism, and flooded into socialist organizations well to the left of the Labour Party.

Within such an intellectual and social climate, disaffected youth seeking a better Britain and a better world turned to a study of Marx and embraced the most advanced philosophy ever devised—one characterised by optimism, human solidarity and the highest idealism.

This was still true as late as the mid-1980s. It took an unbroken

series of betrayals by the Labour Party and the trade union bureaucracy, beginning with the miners' strike of 1984-85, followed by a massive propaganda campaign proclaiming the “death of socialism” after the collapse of the Stalinist regimes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, to change this.

Today, the Labour Party is a bastion of political reaction. Its prime minister is a mouthpiece of the Murdoch media empire. In the name of “New Labour,” Blair imposes the economic philosophy pioneered by Thatcher in Britain and recommends it as a model for Europe and the world. He portrays war and colonial conquest as the West's great civilising mission to bring “democracy” to the peoples of the Middle East and Africa.

As for the trade unions, these spineless and impotent organizations are no longer taken seriously.

The younger generation is offered no means of influencing and changing society. Every avenue for doing so has been closed off.

In February 2003, more than one million people marched in London to oppose the plans of the US and Britain to invade Iraq. The response of Blair to this unprecedented display of opposition was to declare that the essence of democratic governance was the willingness of political leaders to defy the popular will.

Contemporary Britain is a deeply troubled and dislocated society. In the course of 25 years of political reaction, the festering and neglected social contradictions of the country have assumed a malignant character.

The cure can be found only in politics, but of a very different character than that which prevails today. Only through a resurgence of genuine socialism can a way forward be found out of the present impasse. The great principles of internationalism, social equality and genuine popular democracy will act as a powerful antidote to religious obscurantism, and provide the basis for uniting all workers and youth in the struggle for a better future.



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