

Britain: How should the Cumbria massacre be understood?

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In the aftermath of the June 2 rampage during which taxi driver Derrick Bird shot and killed 12 people, and injured 11 more, in the mainly rural area of west Cumbria, the British media has made little attempt to examine the broader implications of the tragedy.

After killing his twin brother David, his solicitor, and a fellow taxi driver, Bird drove his car through villages and remote areas in west Cumbria (in northwest England) and killed nine other people, seemingly at random. Then, pursued by an armed police unit, he drove into woodland near the hamlet of Boot and took his own life.

Such mass shootings are a rare occurrence in Britain. The massacre is only the third such event since World War II. The two others occurred in the market town of Hungerford, England in 1987 and in the similarly sized town of Dunblane, Scotland in 1996.

Describing the events, the *Daily Mirror* referred to the “trigger-happy maniac tearing through streets and country lanes as he satisfied his lust for blood”. Such sensationalist commentary contributes nothing—and is not meant to. In any event, it fits uneasily with the fact that many who knew the 52-year-old Bird—a divorced father of two who had recently become a grandfather—remembered him as sociable, happy-go-lucky and usually mild-mannered man.

However, there was another side to Bird. According to a number of witnesses, he took regular trips to Thailand with a group of taxi driver friends. There he would allegedly visit bars in red light areas to pick up prostitutes. By all accounts he drank heavily.

On one occasion he was reportedly deported back to England after being involved in a drunken brawl at an airport while awaiting a connecting flight to Thailand. An anonymous acquaintance told the *Daily Telegraph* that his friends had “never seen him flip before and it really shocked them. He must have had a lot of stress just bottled up”. According to the *Telegraph*, the group then “shunned Bird, who did not join them on their next Thai holiday in February”.

Reports have also suggested that he became infatuated

with a prostitute he had met in Thailand. According to a *Telegraph* report, Bird met the woman in 2007. Over the next three years he kept in touch with her via “texts and letters ... The pair met in 2007 and she had agreed to move to Britain to live with him”.

Another friend said Bird had given the woman a gift of £1,000 this year before she ended their relationship via a text message last month. A friend told the *Telegraph*, “Derrick said he’d been made a fool out of, he couldn’t believe it. He had a lot of problems in his life, money worries and a fall out with his family and he said the fact that he had this woman in Thailand and had someone to go to see out there gave him reason to be hopeful”.

Pieces of the picture emerge: “a lot of problems”, “a fall out with his family”, embarrassment, feelings of betrayal—all bound up with “money worries”.

Bird, in fact, lived an increasingly unstable existence. He resigned from a job at the nearby Sellafield nuclear plant in 1990, while facing disciplinary proceedings over what police described as a “relatively minor incident of theft”. He was given a suspended 12-month prison sentence.

After losing his job he took up taxi driving and was badly beaten on several occasions by passengers. Just as importantly, his financial situation was gradually worsening.

Speculation is widespread as to precisely what “triggered” Bird’s killing spree. Reports suggest that the previous evening he had been involved in what was the latest row with fellow drivers. With increased competition for dwindling business, Bird was angry at losing fares to drivers engaged in “queue jumping” at the local taxi rank in Whitehaven. One of the drivers said that Bird had told them as he departed, “There is going to be a rampage”.

The day before he killed 12 people, Bird also visited his eldest son and gave him an “unspecified but large sum of money”. Before driving off he said only that it was “for the baby”.

In the days following the killings, details began to emerge about the financial difficulties that must have fed his anger and frustration. Bird is said to have owed tax on an

undeclared £60,000 to the Inland Revenue. A friend said Bird had told him the Inland Revenue had begun an investigation of his financial affairs and that he was very fearful of going to jail.

A conflict had also apparently emerged within his family regarding his mother's recently drawn up will. Bird was understood to have argued with David, his twin brother, just 48 hours before the killings. By all accounts, David was the more successful of the two. He lived in a farmhouse worth considerably more than the small terraced house Derrick owned.

Determining fully what set off the murderous events June 2 is a complex matter, which would require an intimate knowledge of Bird's psychological state and history. Many people feel severe, even crushing financial and other personal burdens, without resorting to homicidal violence.

Nonetheless, the inevitable, self-serving comments by the media and politicians about "senseless" crimes that are always, in the end, "inexplicable", also need to be dismissed. A major tragedy like this must say something about the society in which it takes place.

Bird was clearly an angry, troubled man. He had reached a point in his life where he was bitter over his fate, and in despair. He ended by taking his own life (his rampage was a type of suicide from the beginning), but not before he vented his rage against those he perceived had conspired against him, as well as the world at large.

There are reports that Bird had engaged in self-injury, evidenced by cuts on his arms. One press account cited a friend who said, "Bird had gone to West Cumberland Hospital in Whitehaven and told staff he was suicidal but was turned away as 'he needed to go through his GP for that kind of thing'". This was a man who was clearly at breaking point and had been for some time.

It is an uncomfortable truth that, in this at least, Bird's condition was far from unique. The economic and psychic hardship he experienced is the lot of many. He lived in a region with the second-highest suicide rate in Britain. In the last 12 months, 56 people in the country have committed suicide and incidents of self-harm are 26 percent above average.

Cumbria as a whole is testament to the social and economic problems that blight many regions of the country due to the loss of industry and social cohesion. The area had the slowest growing economy in Britain between 1995 and 2005, with average household earnings significantly below the UK average. Around 2,000 19-34 year olds were recorded as leaving the county each year.

During the 1990s, 11,000 jobs were lost in the nearby Barrow-in-Furness naval shipyard. The west Cumbrian town of Workington has lost all of the former coal and steel

industries on which it was based. The Sellafield nuclear complex is the area's last large employer and accounts for nearly a quarter of west Cumbria's jobs. But the plant is set to be decommissioned, threatening the loss of two-thirds of the site's 12,000-strong workforce over the next 10 years.

This doesn't account for Bird's mental disintegration, but it helps place the sense of individual hopelessness in its grim social surroundings.

Here was a man who had "failed" at whatever he had tried to do. He had no stable employment and was struggling to make a living, under conditions of a slump, as a taxi driver, and accumulating debt. He had no fulfilling and lasting personal relationships. In a society so starkly divided into "winners" and "losers", he had already been cast as a hopeless "loser". His problems were piling up and his future was bleak.

Bird grew to maturity in the 1980s, a time when Thatcherite economic nostrums and her famous dictum that "There is no such thing as society" began to hold sway. His own biography suggests that he was susceptible to such views. In any case, he apparently had no social or political compass with which to understand that "his problems" were in fact larger problems. Nor was there any obviously available means through which these difficulties could be addressed collectively. The Labour Party, the trade unions are rotten to the core, assailing him and millions of others with the message that the grotesque wealth of the few is the just reward for merit and enterprise—and in Bird's case helping fuel his sense of grievance.

Whatever subsequently emerges about the particular circumstances that led Bird on his terrible path, it must be seen as a symptom of a profoundly dysfunctional society.



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