

Teaching for **SOLIDARITY**

July 7th 2005 – the aftermath

'Overnight it turned me, a young boxer from Bolton, into a political figure. I became a spokesman for Asian youth. Like me, three of those lads were of Pakistani descent. One of them, Hasid Husain, was exactly the same age: eighteen. It was mad... What did I know about politics? How should I know why four young lads would want to kill themselves and loads of innocent people?... Those people did not represent me. They were wrong. Brainwashed... You couldn't class them as British... Culturally I was linked to them but in reality I had more in common with the victims. Like the majority of those who lost their lives that day I was a British citizen going about my business.' (*Amir Khan – A Boy from Bolton: My Story*)

The attacks of July 7th 2005 had a devastating effect on the lives of many, many people. Most profoundly on those who lost family and friends that day. Hundreds are still coping with the physical and psychological pain. Women like Gill Hicks, for example, who 'lost' both her legs and has become an ambassador for the charity Peace Direct.

"Perhaps if, like September 11th and Madrid, it had been carried out by foreigners, it might have been easier to take in. But the fact that it was perpetrated by four ordinary, British lads, from respectable families... made it harder to comprehend and left us uncertain about how to react. The government's fear of home grown terrorists had finally been realised... Terrorism is a social and political phenomenon that needs local roots to take hold. Our Muslim communities suffer some of the worst indicators of deprivation, discrimination and social exclusion, and many are deeply unhappy about aspects of the government's foreign policy towards the Islamic world, which they feel constitutes a 'war on Islam'. Cheap international travel, satellite television and continuing links to family and friends in countries of origin provide a vital bridge between those personal and global grievances' (*Bringing it Home – community based approaches to counter-terrorism, Demos, 2007*)

For many Muslims in the UK, life got more difficult from that day. There was a rise in reported attacks on Muslims (a 6-fold increase in the 3 weeks after 7.7) and more fear and stereotyping, 'I feel sometimes like England's pushing me away. I hold my hand out to it, an open hand, but it turns its back on me. It's worse since 9/11 and the London bombings. People look at you differently. There's fear in their eyes, like you're dangerous or something, just because of the colour of your skin. I want to shout at them, "I'm English, just like you!" Yeah I'm a Muslim, yeah my skin's brown, but I'm English. I was born here, I live here. Let me feel like I belong where I want to belong. If you don't, what am I supposed to do? Where am I supposed to go? Who can I be?' (Wasim, Derby Moor Community School, 2007 from a play by Paul Whitfield and the young people of Derby)

Sarfraz Manzoor remembers those early days, "I returned home on the first weekend after the bombing. It was a tense time. Police were patrolling the Underground and stopping and searching anyone whom they thought looked suspicious. As I boarded the train at King's Cross I made sure I left my holdall unzipped so that anyone

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suspecting me could see that I only had some clothes, my ipod and my copy of the *New Yorker* inside. I felt I had to prove that I was not a 'bad Muslim'. Some used humour in the face of hostility. T-shirts appeared saying 'Don't freak, I'm a Sikh.' And comedian Paul Chowdry said,

'I never used to be able to get a seat on the train. Now I get the whole carriage. Sometimes the whole network.' (*The Independent* 12.8.05).

Reflecting on the attacks, Manzoor wrote, "What most maddened me about the attention given to these Muslim extremists was the feeling that my claim on this country, my right to call myself British, was being wrenched from me. And yet I was never convinced that there was really was a clash of civilizations between Muslims and the rest of the world; the clash was between people of all religions – those who were moderate and reasonable – and extremists. How did one person become a moderate and another extremist? The most common explanation was that the policies of the British and American governments has helped radicalise a generation of young British Muslims. But if that was true, why were there not Pakistani Americans exploding bombs on the New York subway?"

The shock of discovering that the bombers came from 'home' led to much soul searching and a need to understand why, what had gone so wrong? What to do about it? The government set up a Task Force and talked to those they called Muslim leaders. Seven community-led working groups were set up under the banner of 'Preventing Extremism Together' (PET) to develop practical recommendations for tackling violent extremism. Government ministers visited nine towns and cities with large Muslim populations to discuss how government could work in partnership with them to prevent extremism. 1000 British Muslims took part in these consultations, which were fed back in to the community-led working groups. The working groups published their report in November 2005 and made practical recommendations around these themes:

- Engaging with young people
- Providing a full range of education services, in the UK, that meet the needs of the Muslim community
- Engaging with Muslim women
- Supporting regional and local initiatives and community actions.
- Imam Training and accreditation and the role of Mosques as a resource for the whole community.
- Security - Islamophobia, protecting Muslims from extremism, and community confidence in policing.
- Tackling extremism and radicalisation

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While recognising responsibility of society as a whole to tackle extremism, scores of recommendations focused on the needs of UK Muslim communities including a specialised media unit, exhibitions, Muslim 'beacon centres', resources to promote good practice in mosques, leadership opportunities for young Muslims, curricula on respect and diversity in Islamic centres. Millions of pounds has been spent on community projects to develop dialogue between communities and devise education programmes focusing on non-violence.

The government set up enquiries into community cohesion and the teaching of citizenship and diversity in schools.

The focus of policy tends to see: radicalisation as a disease spread by rogue preachers who prey on young people to indoctrinate them; those who join extremist groups as fantasists looking for identity and meaning in their lives and that there is an element of rebellion in joining extremist groups. The Terrorism Act was strengthened in 2006, making it illegal to plan an act of terror; encourage or glorify terror; disseminate literature calling for terror or give or receive training to become a terrorist. Police powers of search and arrest were extended, which was met with protest by those concerned about protecting civil liberties. At the same time, governments were faced with a mandate to protect their citizens.

The organisation Demos led research into community-based approaches to counter terrorism in 2006 – 7 and found much dissatisfaction with the government's attempts to engage Muslims in policy making. The government was criticised for making rushed decisions, with too many short term initiatives, not talking to the right people or enough people at the 'grassroots' and of being reluctant to discuss some of the real grievances around foreign policy for fear they might be acknowledging the terrorists have a just cause. Demos suggested that the government's response alienated the very communities it needed to engage and made them feel pliant and subservient. The report called for: dialogue with more local level individuals and organisations; more recognition of how varied the UK Muslim communities are; a need for more open dialogue and decision-making; more unity to combat the problem; more education; less segregation; more interaction and more awareness.

However, the government has its supporters. People such as Irfan Chishti, an Islamic scholar and teacher who teaches in a madrasa in Rochdale and supported the government campaign to combat radicalism. He talked about the "Real dilemma – the pain, anguish and frustration about what's happening around the world and the suspicion of government policy in Palestine, Chechnya, Afghanistan and Iraq. People want to act immediately and their passion is exploited by extremists. If you don't have a true, deep understanding of what Islam is all about, there is a vacuum which can be exploited.'

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"While the government refuses to acknowledge its foreign policy is a source of radicalisation it has little hope of winning the battle for hearts and minds." (Dispatches, Channel 4, August 2007)

Thousands of British Muslims have made their total horror at the use of terror very clear. Yasmin Alibhai-Brown is one of the most outspoken:

"As they wake up to news of the foiled car-bomb attack on Glasgow Airport, I know what millions of my compatriots - atheists, Hindus, Sikhs, Jews and Christians - will be saying, their Sunday ruined by yet another alleged Islamicist plot: "What's wrong with these crazed Muslims?" "Why the hell are they here if they hate it so much?" "When will we be rid of the lot of them?" "What do they want?" "Other minorities also have a hard time, they don't blow up nightclubs and airports".

What these aggrieved Britons don't realise is that exactly the same conversations are taking place in most Muslim households too, with many more expletives flying. Sane, ordinary British Muslims are even less forgiving of such nihilists, whose barbarism undermines our fundamental right to belong to this country as absolute equals. These are hobby terrorists with screwdrivers and screwed heads; they appropriate legitimate concerns, turn them into excuses on their own violent reality shows, sure to be broadcast again and again on screens around the world.

With no politics, no aim, no dreams, no noble imperative, for these Islamicists and their ideological masters, the means is the end. They are at once satanic abusers of our faith and social misfits unloved by all except their own reject band of brothers. Scorned by those they claim to defend, the dreaded sociopaths now seem determined to wound fatally the social contract made between this country and Muslim citizens. Only each assault deepens our sense of nationhood. We still rail against racism and unethical government policies - and I do so incessantly, as you know. Unlike self-righteous neocon liberals, we see how our young are profoundly affected by Iraq and Palestine. However, when bloodthirsty Islamicists strike, we experience a collective intensification of our attachment to Britain. There is no place like this home for us, the only place we want to live and die in."

Yasmin Alibhai-Brown: *Sane, ordinary Muslims must stand up and be counted*

The Independent 2nd July 2007

Discussion:

Amir Khan writes, "Overnight it turned me, a young boxer from Bolton, into a political figure. I became spokesman for Asian youth. Like me, three of those lads were of Pakistani descent. One of them, Hasid Husain, was exactly the same age: eighteen. It

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was mad... What did I know about politics? How should I know why four young lads would want to kill themselves and loads of innocent people?...Those people did not represent me." Suddenly he went from feeling like an individual to a representative of a group. More specifically, he says he became a "political figure." What do you think he means by this?