

We want the truth about terror attacks

Opinion

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In an age when international security is the most pressing problem facing governments, few would doubt that the war against terrorism is much more than an irritant which annoyingly raises its ugly head from time to time. It informs and influences both our domestic and foreign policies, on everything from last week's arrest of suspected al-Qaeda terrorists in southern England to the declaration of a holy war against British forces in Basra, Iraq.

Combating terrorism is also highly contentious, both from a political and policy point of view. For the government, it is a political minefield. In the event of a major attack they can be damned if they fail to take appropriate measures to safeguard the homeland, yet they are also damned if they release information which leads to scaremongering and the publication of sensationalist headlines.

Last week provided a good example of the dilemma facing the government in its handling of homeland security. The Pakistani authorities captured a laptop computer which provided important information about al-Qaeda's operations. This led to a flurry of intelligence activity on both sides of the Atlantic. The US response was to mount guards at key points in New York and Washington, a move which created substantial public panic. The British response was less dramatic. We instead released information about a possible, not a certain, al-Qaeda attack on Heathrow. There was also the arrest of 12 suspected al-Qaeda operatives.

Yet only later did it transpire that the information was up to four years old and, in the case of the Heathrow data, there was no specific threat identifying the airport, nor any specific target. The same was true of the supposed threats against targets in New York. Was this old info dressed up as new? And how could we decide on its veracity? To a public sensibly sceptical about the trustworthiness of so-called intelligence, any information following the episodes of now officially 'dodgy' dossiers on Iraq's non-existent weapons of mass destruction may seem to be another case of the government crying wolf, or at least attempting to scare us into submissiveness.

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Yet, as we make clear this week, there is no diminution of the threat posed by al-Qaeda. Its leader, Osama bin Laden, has declared a global holy war on the West and is determined that this will be waged without regard for the number of civilian casualties. Bin Laden has also made clear that his war will be waged until it has been won – by al-Qaeda.

The threat against Britain, therefore, remains very real, not least because of Britain's support for Bush's war in Iraq. Membership of the 'coalition of the willing' means membership of a coalition of the vulnerable. The security forces know a real threat exists and they have been, quietly, countering it. The government's insistence that al-Qaeda remains determined to mount a high-impact spectacular attack against a target on the British homeland is not open to question. After New York, Bali and Madrid the reality is that we are waiting not for a remote possibility, but for a certainty.

How this certainty can be mitigated, its horrors limited, in a way which manages to keep the country safe while maintaining individual liberties, is the task at hand. America's emotional response after 9/11 was the creation of a department of homeland security. The September 11 attacks gave the Bush government a broad remit to protect US domestic interests. The department of homeland security takes responsibility for issuing terror alerts and for establishing the level of the threat. This led its director, Tom Ridge, to issue last week's warnings and to put high-profile troops on the streets. Ridge insisted that his department does not 'do politics'. But cynical observers could not help noting that the terrorist alert conveniently distracted media attention from the Democratic Convention at a crucial time, when John Kerry needed to sell himself to the US electorate. Ridge's warnings looked like they could only benefit President Bush's re-election campaign by reminding Americans of the imminence of the threat to their country and therefore the need to maintain the political status quo.

Britain by contrast has no equivalent of Ridge's department and on the evidence of its recent performances it probably does not need one. That does not mean that there is no longer a need for some joined-up thinking and a greater transparency in explaining the actual threat to the British public. As things now stand, information tends to be given out on an ad hoc basis by the Home Office, the Ministry of Defence or the police. Even the Prime Minister can join in what looks like unco-ordinated warnings. While this may conform to the traditional British way in which the government reacts to crises instead of proactively countering a problem before it develops, this behaviour does not inspire confidence. It creates the impression that nobody in government has a firm grip on the terrorism issue. This has to change.

There is a now greater need for more openness in dealing with the public. Instead of long silences followed by alarmist warnings – a policy which leads to a climate of fear – the

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government should release sound, practical and straightforward information about specific threats. We do not suggest that the government compromises national security simply for the pleasure of a liberal openness. But we do suggest that a convenient editing of information to suit the government, rather than trusting the people at risk, namely the public, is not an ideal balance.

Following years of IRA terrorist attacks, the British public are capable of acting sensibly in the face of a terrorist threat. The trust, however, has to be two-way. The government still has a long way to go to rebuild trust with the public. The loss of trust has become so deep that almost any new revelation or warning of a terrorist threat is treated by many people as yet another hyped-up or 'sexed-up' claim. For ministers to be believed again on anything from hospital waiting lists and education improvements to al-Qaeda terror cells, they are going to have to radically rethink the way and manner in which they place information in the public arena. There can be little progress on believable terrorist warnings from our intelligence agencies given that the new head of MI6 is John Scarlett, Alastair Campbell's 'best mate' and the man responsible for drawing up the discredited WMD 'dodgy dossier' which Tony Blair used as his false prospectus for war. Who can trust the independence of the intelligence assessments he provides? That issue cannot and should not go away and we hope that the Liberal Democrat Sir Menzies Campbell continues to campaign for his appointment to be reconsidered. Against that there does seem to be some acknowledgement

among some ministers that maybe it is time to play straight with the public. Home Secretary David Blunkett finally moved to calm down the public's anxiety over the terrorist threat on Friday by reassuring us that everything is being done to protect British citizens at home and abroad, and promised not to overstate the threat posed by the arrest of the 12 suspected al-Qaeda cell members. We hope Tony Blair gives some thought to this matter over the summer and addresses the public's demand for a change in the way his government communicates and informs the public.

The Sunday Herald is published in Glasgow, Scotland.