

# Truth struggling

In all the coverage of the bombing of London, a truth has struggled to be heard. With honourable exceptions, it has been said guardedly, apologetically. Occasionally, a member of the public has broken the silence, as an East Londoner did when he walked in front of a CNN camera crew and reporter in mid-platitude. “Iraq!” he said. “We invaded Iraq and what did we expect? Go on say it.”

The Scottish MP Alex Salmond tried to say it on BBC radio. He was told he was speaking “in poor taste . . . before the bodies are even buried.” The Respect Party MP George Galloway was lectured by BBC television presenter that he was being “crass”. The Mayor of London, Ken Livingstone, said the diametric opposite of what he had previously said, which was that the invasion of Iraq would come home to our streets. With the exception of Galloway, not one so-called anti-war MP spoke out in clear, unequivocal English. The warmongers were allowed to fix the boundaries of public debate; one of the more idiotic, in the Guardian, called Blair “the world’s leading statesman”.

And yet, like the man who interrupted CNN, people understand and know why, just as the majority of Britons oppose the war and believe Blair is a liar. This frightens the British political elite. At a large media party I attended, many of the important guests uttered “Iraq” and “Blair” as a kind of catharsis for that which they dared not say professionally and publicly.

The bombs of 7 July were Blair’s bombs.

Blair brought home to this country his and Bush’s illegal, unprovoked and blood-soaked adventure in the Middle East. Were it not for his epic irresponsibility, the Londoners who died in the Tube and on the No 30 bus almost certainly would be alive today. This is what Livingstone ought to have said. To paraphrase perhaps the only challenging question put to Blair on the eve of the invasion, it is now surely beyond all doubt that the man is unfit to be prime minister.

How much more evidence is needed? Before the invasion, Blair was warned by the Joint Intelligence Committee that “by far the greatest terrorist threat” to this

country would be “heightened by military action against Iraq”. He was warned by 79 per cent of Londoners who, according to a YouGov survey in February 2003, believed that a British attack on Iraq “would make a terrorist attack on London more likely”. A month ago, a leaked, classified CIA report revealed that the invasion had turned Iraq into a focal point of terrorism. Before the invasion, said the CIA, Iraq “exported no terrorist threat to its neighbours” because Saddam Hussein was “implacably hostile to al-Qaeda”.

Now, an 18 July report by the Chatham House organisation, a “think tank” deep within the British establishment, may well beckon Blair’s coup de grâce. It says there is “no doubt” the invasion of Iraq has “given a boost to the al-Qaeda network” in “propaganda, recruitment and fundraising” while providing an ideal targeting and training area for terrorists. “Riding pillion with a powerful ally” has cost Iraqi, American and British lives. The right-wing academic, Paul Wilkinson, a voice of western power, was the principal author. Read between the lines and it says the prime minister is now a serious liability. Those who run this country know he has committed a great crime; the “link” has been made.

Blair’s bunker-mantra is that there was terrorism long before the invasion, notably 11 September. Anyone with an understanding of the painful history of the Middle East would not have been surprised by 11 September or by the bombing of Madrid and London, only that they had not happened earlier. I have reported the region for 35 years, and if I could describe in a word how millions of Arab and Muslim people felt, I would say “humiliated”. When Egypt looked like winning back its captured territory in the 1973 war with Israel, I walked through jubilant crowds in Cairo: it felt as if the weight of history’s humiliation had lifted. In a very Egyptian flourish, one man said to me, “We once chased cricket balls at the British club. Now we are free.”

They were not free, of course. The Americans re-supplied the Israeli army and they almost lost everything again. In Palestine, the humiliation of a captive people is Israeli policy. How many Palestinian babies have died at Israeli checkpoints after their mothers, bleeding and screaming in premature labour, have been forced to give birth beside the road at a military checkpoint with the lights of a hospital in the distance? How many old men have been forced to show obeisance to young Israeli conscripts? How many families have been blown to bits by America-supplied F-16s with British-supplied parts? The gravity of the bombing of London, said a BBC commentator, “can be measured by the fact that it marks Britain’s first suicide bombing”. What about Iraq? There were no suicide bombers in Iraq until Blair and Bush invaded. What about Palestine? There were

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no suicide bombers in Palestine until Ariel Sharon, an accredited war criminal sponsored by Bush and Blair, came to power. In the 1991 Gulf “war”, American and British forces left more than 200,000 Iraqis dead and injured and the infrastructure of their country in “an apocalyptic state”, according to the United Nations. The subsequent embargo, designed and promoted by zealots in Washington and Whitehall, was not unlike a medieval siege. Denis Halliday, the United Nations official assigned to administer the near-starvation food allowance, called it “genocidal”.

I witnessed its consequences: tracts of southern Iraq contaminated with depleted uranium and cluster bomblets waiting to explode. I watched dying children, some of the half a million infants whose deaths Unicef attributed to the embargo – deaths which US Secretary of State Madeline Albright said were “worth it”. In the west, this was hardly reported. Throughout the Muslim world, the bitterness was like a presence, its contagion reaching many young British-born Muslims.

In 2001, in revenge for the killing of 3,000 people in the Twin Towers, more than 20,000 Muslims died in the Anglo-American invasion of Afghanistan. This was revealed by Jonathan Steele in the London Guardian and was never news, to my knowledge. The attack on Iraq was the Rubicon, making the reprisal against Madrid and the bombing of London entirely predictable: the latter “in response to the massacres carried out by Britain in Iraq and Afghanistan ...”, claimed a group called the Organisation for El Qaeda in Europe. Whether or not the claim was genuine, the reason was. Bush and Blair wanted a “war on terror” and they got it. Omitted from public discussion is that their state terror makes al-Qaeda’s appear miniscule by comparison. More than 100,000 Iraqi men, woman and children have been killed, not by suicide bombers, but by the Anglo-American “coalition”, says a peer-reviewed study published in the Lancet, and largely ignored. In his poem “From Iraq”, Michael Rosen wrote: We are the unfound / We are uncounted / You don’t see the homes we made / We’re not even the small print or the bit in brackets . . . because we lived far from you, because you have cameras that point the other way . . .

Imagine, for a moment, you are in the Iraqi city of Fallujah. It is an American police state, like a vast penned ghetto. Since April last year, the hospitals there have been subjected to an American policy of collective punishment. Staff have been attacked by US marines, doctors have been shot, emergency medicines blocked. Children have been murdered in front of their families. Now imagine the same state of affairs imposed on the London hospitals that received the victims

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of the bombing. When will someone draw this parallel at one of Blair's staged "press conferences", at which he is allowed to emote for the cameras about "our values outlast [ing] theirs"? Silence is not journalism. In Fallujah, they know "our values" only too well. And when will someone invite the obsequious Bob Geldoff to explain why his hero, Blair's smoke-and-mirrors "debt cancellation" amounts to less than the money the Blair government spends in a week, brutalising Iraq?

The hand-wringing over "whither Islam's soul" is another distraction. Christianity leaves Islam for dead as an industrial killer. The cause of the current terrorism is neither religion nor hatred for "our way of life". It is political, requiring a political solution. It is injustice and double standards, which plant the deepest grievances. That, and the culpability of our leaders, and the "cameras that point the other way", are the core of it.

On 19 July, while the BBC governors were holding their annual general meeting at Television Centre, an inspired group of British documentary filmmakers met outside the main gates and conducted a series of news reports of the kind you do not see on television. Actors played famous reporters doing their "camera pieces". The "stories" they reported included the targeting of the civilian population of Iraq, the application of the Nuremberg Principles to Iraq, America's illegal rewriting of the laws of Iraq and theft of its resources through privatisation, the everyday torture and humiliation of ordinary people and the failure to protect Iraqis archaeological and cultural heritage.

Blair is using the London bombing to further deplete our rights and those of others, as Bush has done in America. Their goal is not security, but greater control. The memory of their victims in Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine and elsewhere demands the renewal of our anger. The troops must come home. Nothing less is owed to those who died and suffered in London on 7 July, unnecessarily, and nothing less is owed to those whose lives are marked if this travesty endures.