

How to tackle terrorism is a political question

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The Manchester attack should be a pivotal political moment. Not because of the shock. And not because of the appalling and wholly unjustified loss of life. It should be pivotal instead because it should give rise to questions about how we as a society should be protected by the state and what we are being protected from.

Let's not for a moment pretend these are not political questions. They go to the very heart of the role of the state. and they reflect just what the society we want to live in might be. And for that reason it would be negligent, and even disrespectful, to those who have died and to those who will survive with scars for the remainder of their lives not to ask how the risk of this happening again can be minimised.

As a Quaker who is dedicated to peace and abhors all violence but who is a reluctant non-pacifist because there is a real need for defence I make clear I come to this discussion with a bias towards removing the causes of conflict.

That is why I innately feel that troops in the streets are the wrong practical and political response to what has happened. It is obvious that a soldier would not have prevented Manchester, or Westminster before it. As a police officer on patrol said to me last night, the only thing he could do to protect me from a terrorist attack was to put his body between me and the threat. And that, I suggest, is too much to ask of him. And that is what we are asking of soldiers and it is too much to ask of them too.

So what can we do? And what have we got wrong? Jon Snow hit two targets entirely appropriately [on Channel 4 last night](#) when interviewing Mucahel Fallon. He laid two charges against him. The first was that that last two governments, and maybe Labour before that, had been negligent in reducing police numbers: 19,000 police officers have gone since 2010. The number of armed police has halved.

This, Jon Snow suggested, is why we have troops on the street. Government cuts have forced us to the situation where people untrained for the task are now protecting key installations from attack. This, he rightly said, represents a failure of government to undertake its most basic duty.

He also questioned the UK's role in bombing Libya, which was yet another occasion when the use of force solved nothing, largely because no politician engaged in the process appeared to have the slightest idea what they might do when the short term goal of toppling Gadaffi had been realised. The hole, physical and political, that was left when the Tornados had done their job was the political failing. We don't know that is what radicalised a young man in Manchester. To exclude the possibility must be as wrong as bombing without the intention of supplying support for an alternative for many years to come might be.

Of course both viewpoints are contentious. I am sure Jon Snow did not raise them lightly (any more than I am writing this without more anxiety than usual). But these suggestions, and the fact that troops on the street looks like a political play during an election by a prime minister desperate to deflect attention from long term failings, have to be raised.

Terrorism of the sort we have seen is always unjustified. But what we have to accept is that terrorism exists in riven societies. This does not justify it. But it does not mean we should not ask why societies are so riven that extremes attract and violence is embraced by a few. It may be uncomfortable to do so, but that does not mean it should not be done.

And let's not pretend we are not a divided a society. Divisions of income, wealth and opportunity result in real differences in health, life chances and perceptions of justice. This, I stress, is true in all communities. Populist politics has already taught us that alienation is one of the strongest themes in UK politics now. Cultural alienation will add to that for some, right across society. A few, wholly inappropriately, turn to violence as a result.

I do not believe that the division that leads to riven societies is necessary. But that requires that society is recognised. It requires that a commitment be made to it. This demands that there be common wealth. And the expectation must be that this wealth be used for mutual good.

I think Jon Snow was saying that this action for the common good was absent when police were cut. Austerity, he implied, was an attack on our collective wellbeing that had consequences for our protection, but also for our identity. Austerity was very obviously not about all being in this together. And as a result when a real need has arisen we simply don't have the police we need to face the challenge, Troops on the street are by this criteria a measure of failure for all to see.

And they are only one such measure. The same stress that the police are under is also seen in education, the justice system, in community work which councils simply cannot afford, and amongst people left feeling at risk because of their own inability to cope. There is alienation everywhere. You do not need to divide suppliers and users of services; both are suffering and it takes a special form of blindness not to note.

I am well aware that I will be unpopular for making such associations. But let's not pretend that alienation isn't an issue. It is. And if we aimed for a society where alienation was itself the enemy and a politics where the rhetoric of division was not commonplace - as it has been in recent years - then tensions would be diffused, our capacity to cope would be much enhanced and the risk of the perverted thinking that leads to terrorism much reduced.

I repeat, nothing justifies terrorism. But let's not say that politics - our politics - has nothing to do with it either. Defeating terrorism requires a commitment to peace that requires care for each other that has been all too absent from our political discourse for too long. It is appropriate to ask how that can be delivered. And that is a political question. Let's not pretend otherwise.