



Security in Government Conference Breakfast speech on

“Learning Lessons the Hard Way”

Anzac Hall
Australian War Memorial
Canberra

Tuesday 27 November 2007

Ladies and gentlemen,

It's often said 'those who fail to learn the lessons of history are condemned to repeat it'. And so it is with terrorism.

The British people have learned our lessons the hard way.

We did not choose to bring terrorism into our lives, but we can choose our response to it. The lessons of history strengthen our resolve not to see it repeated.

A brief history

For us, that history goes back a long way – the Gunpowder Plot was the most brazen attempt to wreck democracy (such as it was in those days).

In recent times, the British people have endured terrorism on our own soil since the 1970s.

Back then, it was the IRA. They believed bombings and shootings would bring about a united Ireland. They were wrong. The future of Northern Ireland is now where it has always been – in the hands of the people.

As one threat receded, another emerged. Since the September 11th attacks, there have been 16 known terrorist plots in the UK. One succeeded, three failed, the rest were foiled.

Compared with the IRA, Islamic terrorism differs markedly:

- With the IRA, we knew where most of them came from. But the tentacles of Islamic extremism spread across the Middle East, Africa and Asia.
- With the IRA, the more intricate the plot – the greater the danger. But with Islamic extremism, the primitive can be as deadly as the intricate.
- For the IRA, the threat of terror was the key weapon. That explains the coded tip-offs. In contrast, the goal of Islamic terrorism is mass murder.
- And with the IRA, there was always the hope that pragmatism would prevail over fanaticism. But with Islamic terrorism, the ideology is extreme; it will never accept the legitimacy of other views.

In 2005, this extreme ideology struck at the heart of British life. 52 people were killed in the London bombings. Hundreds more were injured.

Today, the Security Service – or M-I-5 – knows of more than 2-thousand individuals who pose a threat to national security and public safety. We also know children as young as 15 are being groomed for terrorist activity.

Some of the lessons from Northern Ireland have been useful in our fight against Islamic extremism – the importance of vigilance is one; the value of resilience is another.

But some of the strategies we employed successfully in Northern Ireland would be quite useless today. The most obvious is dialogue. It is pointless to reason with Islamist extremists because a peaceful, tolerant society is one in which they have no stake.

So, what lessons can we turn to our advantage?

Security

Success lies in a multi-faceted response to terrorism – one that includes tighter security, closer co-operation and stronger cohesion. I'll explore each of those, starting with tighter security:

The clear lesson Britain has learned is that good security does not come at mates' rates; you get what you pay for. The British Government is now spending 3-times more on security than we did 6 years ago.

In 2001, MI5 employed fewer than 2-thousand staff. That figure will rise beyond 4-thousand, with a quarter of them outside London. Increasingly, MI5 recruits from our ethnic communities.

More foreign citizens are being deported on national security grounds, while around 4-thousand foreign prisoners have been deported so far this year.

In policing, we now have regional counter-terrorism units with more than 2-thousand officers and support staff. They investigate terrorist recruitment and incitement in the community.

We now have more counter-terrorism security advisers, providing business with the latest advice.

In the coming months, owners of crowded places and public festivals will get specific advice on identifying suspicious behaviour, as well as improving CCTV coverage and evacuation drills.

Further measures are on the way:

- Better security at railway stations, including more screenings of passengers and bags.
- To deter car-bombers, we'll have more robust barriers as well as vehicle exclusion zones and blast-resistant buildings.
- We're investing more in chemical and biological protection – decontamination units, stockpiles of medical equipment, gas-tight suits for firefighters and extra training for thousands of police officers.

Extra facilities by themselves will not keep us safe. We need better co-ordination, both at home and overseas. Let me give you just one example of how we're doing that:

Our customs and immigration teams will come together to form a new government department called the UK Border Agency. So the officer who checks your passport wears the same uniform as the officer who checks your bags.

Bringing our expertise under one roof will give us:

- Better targeting of high-risk passengers and freight
- Less duplication of effort, so travellers will benefit
- And a clear, identifiable presence to reassure genuine travellers and deter those who wish us harm.

Stopping terrorists at the border is not enough. There are more than 200 million passengers entering the UK every year – imagine the entire population of Canberra arriving in the UK every six hours.

So wherever possible, we ‘export the border’. More activity ‘upstream’ eases pressure further ‘downstream’. We do that in several ways:

- Airline liaison officers have powers to cancel a visa when necessary – before the passenger gets on the plane.
- Immigration staff will have wider powers to detain people on suspicion of terrorism – not just immigration offences.
- Biometric visas make it harder for terrorists to hide their true identity. Within months, all visa applicants – including those in Australia – will have to lodge their fingerscans at a British consulate.
- The same technology will be used in ID cards for foreign nationals from the end of next year, making it harder for someone to live in the UK under multiple identities.

Wider still, we constantly look for new ways to improve our counter-terrorism links with other countries.

- Britain has repatriation agreements to send terror suspects back to Jordan, Lebanon and Algeria – and we’re looking for more.
- We’ll work with foreign governments to seize the assets of terrorists.
- We’re planning joined-up databases across Europe, so police can access criminal records in other countries.
- The same goes for immigration files

The relationship between Australia and Britain is a model for others to follow. The head of the Met’s anti-terrorism unit was here recently, and there is a constant exchange of expertise in counter-terrorism – as many of you know.

Cohesion

Co-operation brings me to another crucial lesson we have learned in fighting terrorism: social cohesion.

Too often, we have seen counter-terrorism only through the prism of ‘hard security’. We need to engage a ‘softer’ side as well.

Containing fanatics works on the same principle as containing cancerous tumours – you must restrict the lifeblood that sustains them. For Islamic extremism, that means tackling radicalisation in the community, stripping away the support base that terrorists need.

To do that, our strategy is simple: accentuate the positive, eliminate the negative. That’s easier said than done but it must be done, and that’s why the Department of Communities and Local Government is integral to the strategy.

There are many ways we are doing this:

- Faith leaders can study for a new qualification in citizenship and community cohesion

- We have roadshows for young Muslims, where scholars guide youngsters away from extremist interpretations of Islam
- We're helping imams to improve their English
- There's more help for local authorities to handle the integration of new arrivals more effectively
- We no longer assume that information should be translated into community languages – instead, we're spending more on English language classes
- We fund projects that empower women, and give leadership opportunities to young Muslims

Schools can be a catalyst for understanding and tolerance:

- We're helping Britain's madrassas to stress the importance of life skills and citizenship – not just theology
- There are graduation ceremonies when children pass their citizenship exams
- There are linking programmes for schools across the country, where exchange visits can either be actual or virtual (in other words over the internet).

In our experience, the more we bring our communities together, the harder it is for extremists to drive a wedge between us.

Single Narrative

Restricting the lifeblood of Islamic extremism includes confronting the single narrative.

The single narrative is a powerful brand that draws on Muslim discontent. It paints the West as anti-Islamic through a long selective history of supposed 'wrongs' going back to the Crusades. It promises rich rewards for those who try to re-attain some mythical caliphate.

We cannot 'firefight' every absurd claim, but we can be swifter and more coherent in our response. So how do we do that?

- It starts with a more nuanced approach to our audience – what will have the greatest impact on them? For instance, Britain wants a two-state solution in the Middle East – just as much as the Palestinians, so let the Muslim world hear that
- In challenging the single narrative, let's try 'playing the man' instead of the ball. For example, we can discredit extremists by linking them with crimes that harm their own communities
- The message should be more targeted – opinion-formers, entrepreneurs, scholars, sportsmen, entertainers...
- We should be more open to working with credible groups in the Muslim world – even if we don't always agree with some of their conservative views
- Let's also promote the successful Muslims in our own community – in Britain, there are many to choose from.
- And let's keep the message simple. The fact that the Foreign Office in London has a prayer room, and that we help British Muslims on their Hajj, would impress many Muslims elsewhere.

Then we can exploit the full range of tools for getting our message across. These are just a few employed by the British Government:

- There is funding for a BBC Arabic channel and a Farsi channel for the people of Iran
- We use podcasts to reach tech-savvy youngsters
- Young British Muslims attend special events overseas, such as a recent music festival in Cairo. The message from singer Sami Yusuf was “Proud to be a Muslim, proud to be British.”
- And the Foreign Office has trained some of our spokespeople to give media interviews in Arabic, Urdu and Farsi.

Business

What are some of the other lessons we have learned?

Money talks. Capitalism may be a target for Islamic terrorists, but it can also be part of our strategy against it.

One of the strongest images from the dust of the London bombings in 2005 was of London doing what London does best – getting on with the job. The more we show that our way of life will prevail, the less incentive there will be for terrorists to persist.

The truth is we need business to function in the wake of a terrorist attack. So Business Continuity Plans are an essential part of our counter-terrorism strategy.

CEOs no longer leave health & safety in the hands of specialists; the same applies to counter-terrorism. The definition of corporate security – things like fraud and breach of confidentiality – is being widened to include terrorism and electronic attack.

Investment talks. Britain has learned the importance of bolstering political agreements with hard cash:

As Northern Ireland embraced devolution earlier this year, the British and Irish Governments were ready with billions of dollars worth of investment – a tangible sign of our confidence in the future.

Indeed, the first joint decision by Gerry Adams and Ian Paisley was to seek an urgent meeting in London to ask for even more – that was one delegation the Treasury was very happy to receive!

Trust

So far, I’ve talked about practical measures. But there is another crucial element in counter-terrorism – one that’s harder to put your finger on. It is the importance of trust between government and the people.

The head of MI5 put it like this: “The relationship of mutual trust which we have with the public is now paramount.”

Trust is not bestowed; it is earned. For Britain’s front-line services, that means opening up to public scrutiny...

Trust: Reviews

Within days of the London bombings, government departments and emergency services came together to learn the lessons. It was called the London Regional Resilience Forum.

The aim was two-fold: to improve our response to future attacks, and – through honesty and transparency – to engage the public's trust.

Overall, the Forum's assessment was very positive:

- Our hospitals coped well, with more than a thousand beds opened within hours. Most casualties were discharged the same day, and only 3 people died of their injuries.
- Train stations were open by lunchtime, and the underground trains were running the next morning.
- London buses were back on the roads by mid-afternoon – remarkable when you consider one of the bombs went off on a bus.
- A temporary morgue was taking victims within 24 hours.
- And the Charitable Fund for victims disbursed grants within a fortnight, and became a model for similar funds around the world.

But we did learn important lessons from the Forum:

The first was the danger of relying too heavily on mobile phones. Managers were trying to reach off-duty staff but couldn't get through. Some staff didn't have special SIM cards, so they couldn't use mobiles even when the network was reserved for emergency workers in the Aldgate area.

As a result, we're quickly upgrading our police radios, buying more pagers, and working with phone companies to reduce the technical quality of phone calls during emergencies – thereby giving more people access.

In other lessons:

- We need a simpler grading system for alerting the public about the terrorist threat
- We need a better system for telling hospitals if chemicals were involved in an attack. In July 2005, hospitals were duplicating tests that firefighters had already done
- Some staff, with the best will in the world, applied the data protection laws over-zealously, which caused distress for families
- Some injured victims found the compensation process overly bureaucratic, so we're making improvements to ensure victims only recount their experience once.
- The media will join in future exercises – including foreign journalists who, in some cases, wandered into hospitals and got in the way.
- Fatigue was also a problem. When the bombings happened, off-duty staff instinctively went into work. But that meant fewer people were available in the following 12, 24 and 36 hours.
- We're also improving the telecom facilities at the Casualty Bureau Call Centre. At its peak, the Centre took 43,000 attempted calls per hour. Those who couldn't get through might have benefited from recorded information instead.
- In future, there will be more stockpiles of medical supplies at train stations.

- And finally, we're giving employers better guidance on coping with post traumatic stress among their staff.

Meanwhile in Westminster, the Intelligence and Security Committee reviewed the role of MI5. The committee found that, yes, we might have prevented the attacks if surveillance had targeted some individuals instead of others. But hindsight is a wonderful thing, and the committee agreed those decisions were understandable at the time.

By having these open reviews – like the Resilience Forum – we are better-placed to earn the trust of the public.

Trust: Strategy

Earning the public's trust also requires a clear, long-term strategy for counter-terrorism – not knee-jerk responses to newspaper headlines.

As Jonathan Evans, the head of MI5, put it: “the strategy of Al-Qaeda is long-term, but electoral cycles and media deadlines are much shorter. If we only react tactically when our enemies plan strategically, we shall be hard put to win this.”

So we need measures that will endure. Since 2003, Britain's counter-terrorism strategy has been based on 4 themes – prevent, pursue, protect and prepare:

- Prevent – by tackling radicalisation, challenging the ideology of extremists, and weeding out discrimination and disadvantage in our communities.
- Pursue – by disrupting terrorist networks in universities, mosques, youth centres, libraries, prisons – wherever they are.
- Protect – by strengthening our infrastructure and improving our border controls.
- And prepare – by having clear, well-rehearsed contingency plans.

Trust: Police

Our police have a crucial role to play in earning the trust of the public.

Successful prosecutions give police and intelligence services a ‘moral licence’ to pursue terrorists, and to impose necessary burdens on the public to enable them to do so.

And I'm pleased to report that, since 9/11, there have been more than 200 convictions for terrorist involvement in the UK.

Trust and accountability are two sides of the same coin – and the Metropolitan Police learned that lesson the hard way following the shooting of a young Brazilian man. The lesson for us all is this: get the facts straight then engage the media, not before.

Talking of media relations, the first message during an emergency must be a clear, authoritative, re-assuring voice from a single source. The public wants to know that one person is in charge – not that several people are doing the best they can.

The public's trust can be won – and lost – in a single interview.

Trust: Legislation

When it comes to trust, the greatest burden is on our legislators.

In Britain, it is now an offence to incite or glorify terrorism, or to disseminate terrorist publications. And anyone who gives or receives training in terrorist techniques can now be prosecuted.

Some people say “the rules of the game have changed”, but Britain is not convinced they have. That’s why we opposed Guantanamo Bay; that’s why we need proportionate security measures.

Britain’s Home Office minister Tony McNulty spoke candidly about this. He said: “The more these things are tackled normally, with some little exceptions on top, the better.”

We learned in Northern Ireland that knee-jerk laws can be counter-productive. For instance, the ban on Sinn Fein leaders being interviewed on television was derided when actors were used to substitute the voices.

New laws must be balanced and sensible, consistent with our long-term strategy. There are some tough dilemmas for Parliament: should MI5’s intercept evidence be admissible in court? Should police be able to hold terror suspects for more than 28 days without charge?

Trust is paramount. We are most effective when we are working with the grain of public opinion, not against it.

Conclusion:

And trust is a good place to conclude this morning.

Counter-terrorism is about more than remaining true to our way of life; it’s about remaining true to our values.

These values have prevailed for centuries, enshrined in Magna Carta and passed down through generations.

As long as we learn the lessons of history, strengthen our resolve, and place trust at the heart of our counter-terrorism strategy, we can move forward with confidence.

Thank you.