

Some reflections from before and after 11 September 2001



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

On Saturday 8 September the OPUS management group in their regular meeting discussed their current preoccupations about the world they were in. They seemed resigned to living in a society that was in various ways thought to be failing. On Tuesday 11 September, it is said that the world changed for ever. This account records first the feelings of Saturday, and then some of the observations these same people made in the aftermath of the terrorist attack on New York and Washington.

A. 8 September 2001

What's going on?" (Marvin Gaye) There is a state of mind, described by Julie Burchill, aged 42, that has the sense that things are not going to get better. 'Autumn has never approached with more resonance and foreboding, and never seemed so bleakly befitting, for we truly seem at last a country in the autumn of its life.' (Guardian 8.9.01) We see evidence in the failure to manage the foot and mouth epidemic; and then again in the giving up of a sense that the NHS will ever cope with the need, so that there are plans to send patients to France or Germany - a new category of medical migrants. The sense that things will not get better is experienced as an absence of a thoughtful leadership.

The idolisation of Sven-Goran Ericsson is of the thinking foreigner. The laddish xenophobia of English football support means that we project the capacity for psychological understanding into the idealised other with an accent. We contrast this with the failure of the business leader, George Simpson at Marconi, taking a million pound pay off from the company now worth 3% of its value a year ago.

Those of us who took holidays in Europe this summer may come back with a sense of how narrow and marginalised Britain is in relation to Europe. As if other countries did not have the equivalent social and economic problems to our own.

The intransigence of the political stand-off, the two communities in Ardoyne, contributes to a sense of impotence. Though we may hope that there are negotiations going on behind the scenes - that there is some thoughtful leadership - we do not see the evidence.

An example of a shift from the search for understand to a wish to react is that the investigation of rail accidents has transferred from the safety executive to the railway police. This is happening in the wider context of a blame and compensation culture, where policy is led by the undisciplined thinking of Jamie Bulger's mother or unthinking reactions of Portsmouth housewives (in the case of paedophilia). Thinking towards a

policy of vaccination was apparently stymied by the short-term self-interest of farming leaders.

Such is our disillusion that we think that reflective analytic journalism is more likely to be found abroad, in the New York Review or Figaro than in our own press. Has there been a shift of emphasis from analysis to instant reportage?

Of course, in these comments, we may also be saying something about our own ageing, exhausted by the youthful enthusiasms of an over-stimulated world and the seeming frenzy of young people.

Anyway it is not surprising if we observe a wish to run away from complexity and the stay with a surface appreciation of the big issues. An effect of increased complexity is that our egos are under pressure. Antony Giddens has observed a rise of fundamentalism, when traditions get defined in a traditional way and that is experienced as a radical thing to do. We may observe in ourselves that the books we read as children remain for us the best children's books. We look for continuity, in the history of the places where we go on holiday, that we can no longer find in our work or home environments.

In the end we have to accept that Tony Blair and his government do not match the exploits of Biggles and the Famous Five.

B. After 11 September:

1. The questioning of all our allegiances. We are exploring our capacity to live with vulnerability and uncertainty.

"My feelings have changed over the last 24 hours. I am appalled, saddened and shocked by what has happened but I now find myself becoming enraged (and I am surprised by the strength of the feelings) by the reactions from our 'leaders'. If I hear one more reference to 'the civilised and democratic world' I will scream!"

2. The need to find an enemy - to understand and accommodate that appalling need in our individual and group psyche.

"The capacity not to name, to remain in dread, seems a psychological leap almost impossible to make."

3. Not having confident alternatives. In northern Ireland and South Africa, processes of peace and reconciliation may have left those societies facing increasing disorder and fragmented hate. But there is a fear also that America will follow the Israeli example in responding to terrorism.

"So where is this uncivilised world then? In Iraq, where children are dying because of sanctions led by the US and ourselves? In Afghanistan where women and most ordinary men live in terror most of the time because of a regime that came into being largely because of the tactics of the old Soviet Union and the US (not to forget the CIA use of Osama bin Laden) or maybe in the Palestinian

refugee camps where people suffer from thirst while the settlements divert all the water to themselves."

War is hate that is integrated. Who is not for us is against us. We have to support the Americans, even when we fear for their reactions.

Democracy is fragile in the west.

"The democratic world is led by the country where the president achieved power last year by the disregarding of the votes of some of the poorer and back communities of Florida."

We are uneasily aware that democracy is not power to the people; it is a non-violent way of managing a succession of leaders - eg, by the manipulation of elections rather than assassination, coup, civil war.

Is it possible to distinguish wisdom from weakness, and strength from stupidity?

"The cultural isolationism of the US where most people don't seem to me to really believe that anything differentiated exists outside N. America is a component of fundamentalist mentality; allied to the actual reality of Bible Belt culture, it starts to add up. They (we?) always think the fundamentalists are elsewhere."

"Are we so trapped in our own fundamentalist beliefs that we cannot recognise the belief in the goodness of their cause held by the Muslim extremists?"

The challenge of globalism is the giving up of boundaries and the living instead with networks, where we become away of our relatedness to our enemies.

"I feel a profound sense of anxiety because I realise that a part of me is dancing in the streets. All my anger at America's militaristic intransigence comes to the surface. I feel that America is a country, blind with arrogance, that invited the catastrophe it met."

What terrorists do is turn the strengths of the powerful against themselves. The attacks on 11 September used the artefacts of western civilisation, so that aeroplanes become bombs, and skyscrapers an imploding tomb. It is said that bin Laden does not use a computer and communicates by mule train. Intelligence services do not know how to counter that.

Hence these reactions:

"What are we to make of, or think about today's terrifying events in America. Beyond disbelief, the events themselves as they unfolded live on television which I happened to be watching, and then stayed mesmerised and horrified. But what of the future? Can a Bush led America hold back from a retaliatory strike against the alleged or presumed or imagined perpetrators. The whole world system feels a good deal less stable tonight."

"The extreme paranoid schizoid splitting that is taking place is frightening, no less because I can at times sense myself being pulled into it, simply by virtue of how I react against it. The capacity for thought has never felt so important whilst being so difficult to access."

"The messages from Bush and Blair simplifying issues in terms of good and evil and the fight for democracy, make me feel sick with horror at what might be going to happen. This is splitting and denial at its most extreme."

What references do we find helpful?

"I read over the summer VS Naipaul on Islam, an old book by now, but it made me anxious about the degree of fundamentalist and absolutist belief"

"I have been reading Hanna Segal this afternoon, a paper she wrote in 1995 called from Hiroshima to the Gulf War and after."

*"Bion distinguishes between pride and arrogance:
' where life instincts predominate, pride becomes self-respect; where death instincts predominate, pride becomes arrogance.' (Second Thoughts, p. 86)"*

Meanwhile people are talking.

"This very strong desire to make contact, to draw together the threads of personal relationships, is shared by many. It is a need distinct from the very real one of wanting to know what has happened to family and friends who were actually at the scene of the disaster. It is a bit like the feeling at a funeral - the need to confirm in the responses of others that one is alive and that life itself goes on."

So we may think of this as a global funeral, where we have to come together because we are related, whether we like it or not.

Tim Dartington
17 September 2001