

A Year of Political Drift

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The first anniversary of the London bombings marks a year of political drift and squandered opportunities, with a lack of bold and imaginative leadership on all sides, writes **Yahya Birt**.

The New Labour project is beginning to run out of steam. It suffers the fate of all long-lived governments of popular ennui, discontent and cynicism. For a few months after the London bombings, the Prime Minister, trusted to be tough on terror, regained his personal approval ratings of old. But that proved to be shortlived. The Blair-Brown saga has eroded the PM's authority, and the party has grown restless in the face of Cameron's "compassionate Conservatism". And although much of Blair's twelve-point plan, announced last August, to tackle terrorism was not implemented, a watered-down version of the "glorification of terrorism" bill was passed. The proscription of Hizb ut-Tahrir remains pending, but what the criminalization of around 7-10,000 sympathisers and members can positively achieve remains unclear. Three further "plots" have been foiled by the security services since 7/7, and the numbers of Islamic radicals under observation has quadrupled from around 250 after 9/11 to about 1,000 today.

But after the Forest Gate shooting, and the revelation that Muhammad Siddique Khan was on the intelligence radar prior to 7/7 but was never picked up, British Muslims are unsurprisingly sceptical that the right people are being watched, and worry about their status as the "new Irish" of the twenty-first century. Even if the scale of our suspect fringe is miniscule, its impact upon the general future prospects and well-being of all British Muslims is massive because of this new "suspect" status. Al-Qaeda is patently not the IRA: it has no serious political wing in Britain or elsewhere, so cooption is not on the table.

But like the early 1970s in Northern Ireland, widespread stop-and-search, the internment of political prisoners, shoot-to-kill, house raids and hostile and malign press coverage might strengthen this fringe – tied this time to a globalised politics of dissent – who can connect, and thus exploit, this heavy policing at home with the wider war on terror against Afghanistan, Iraq and now possibly Iran. The irony here is that the best counter-terrorists may be the civil liberties activists, who – by standing up for the underdog – manifest a Britishness that disenfranchised young Muslims can identify with, which explains the popularity of the anti-imperialist left in the form of Respect. Integration incorporates traditions of dissent too.

The leeching of the traditional Labour vote to Respect and the Liberal Democrats in Muslim areas and to the BNP in some white working class areas has focused the mind of the political classes. The myth of a Muslim bloc vote seems stronger than ever now that Muslims are less and less a one-party community, as politicians sense that this vote is more up for grabs than ever before. Gordon

Brown is now being assiduously courted by Muslim leaders, but the degree to which he would differ from Blair is still unclear. If the Conservatives get in next time, Muslim leaders might have to get used to the term “attention deficit disorder” – and recall the hostility of the Thatcher years or the indifference of the Major ones. Despite his talk of inclusion, Cameron’s one lengthy intervention on the war on terror, prior to his surprise ascension to the Tory leadership, replicated neo-conservative rhetoric from across the Atlantic with talk of “Islamofascism”.

The government is currently caught between the impulse to prevent atrophying Labour support and a reluctance to flout secular mores by endorsing religious identity politics through its engagement with the Muslim communities. This has been manifested as infighting between the Home Office and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office over the scope and nature of this engagement. The Home Office has regarded foreign adventurism abroad as undermining the management of Muslim integration at home. The FCO has thought Marsham Street parochial and unimaginative in its engagement with Muslim communities, unaware of the opportunities presented by the ethnic and religious global connectedness of British Muslims.

The Home Office, which spearheaded last summer’s taskforces initiative, was keen to get an endorsement of the existing tools of integration policy (allowing as well for the capacity building of a small faith voluntary sector), and the encouragement of a measure of community-level initiative in tackling cultural conservatism and “extremism”. The problem areas that the Home Office identified back in 2002 under Lord Filkin were imams, women, youth and students; the taskforce initiatives allowed it to mandate and tackle these concerns through community networking and self-regulation. Its lead proposal of the self-regulation of imams and mosques looked set to fail until the initiative was saved by bringing in the partnership of the MCB, BMF, MAB and the al-Khoei Foundation. However, as this example shows, the tying together of the counter-terrorism and integration agendas in one department of state has caused significant political difficulties, and one does hope for greater clarity of purpose now that the Communities Directorate handling integration has moved to Ruth Kelly at the newly-formed Department for Communities and Local Government.

The FCO has taken on a domestic mandate, treading on traditional Home Office territory, looking to engage British Muslims in foreign policy imperatives and has sought to garner the religious authority of the ulema and the Islamist movements to counteract al-Qaeda-type extremism. Its highest profile initiative, the imams roadshow, named the Radical Middle Way, has reached some 25,000 Muslims since December 2005, and provoked a counter-roadshow covering essentially the same themes. They have collectively succeeded in stepping up the theological engagement with extremism and the meaning of integration. But the roadshows have also reanimated sectarian divisions and their relative success cannot atone for the dozens of other taskforce initiatives that were shelved. In all of this FCO-Home Office infighting, Downing Street has sought a broader engagement

outside the Muslim activist circuit while attempting to keep the existing umbrella bodies on board.

The debate among British Muslims has shifted decisively away from the oppositional politics of the nineties; instead the argument today centres on the anxieties of integration. The new cultural and policy frontline will most likely focus upon the tensions between Muslim liberals and conservatives. Simply put, the liberals don't trust the conservatives with the integration agenda, and on extremism, conservative solutions centre either on theological or political engagement, whereas for the liberals, extremism is the direct result of too much religious conservatism in the first place.

Now that the British Muslim has definitively arrived in policy terms, the creation of a new post-Islamist faith industry, comparable to post-anti-racist equal opportunities in the 1980s, is now underway, staffed by a new pragmatist generation with managerial competence. The old guard, uncomfortable with all this, fear that this generation will give away too much politically and culturally. On the cultural and intellectual front, gender equality, sexual orientation, the meaning of integration, national belonging and citizenship, multiculturalism and pluralism, the nature of ummatic loyalty, religious authority, textual interpretation and the nature of personal and collective Muslim identity will take the centre stage in the contentions between liberals and conservatives.

The conservatives have not agreed among themselves about how to take on the radical fringe. This controversy has as yet been shrill and unmeasured, producing more sectarian heat than ijtihadi light. One approach has been the undertaking of theological reflection. But those with some ideological affinity with the violent radicals have sought to shift the blame outwards onto neo-imperialism and tough anti-terrorism measures and government interference in religious debate at home. Those on the other side of the dispute have called for more honest discussion about the consequences of recycled Islamism in the British context, but they have been less assertive in standing up on civil rights issues. In this regard, a proper public enquiry, even if nowadays deemed to be old-fashioned, might have done something to deepen this discussion.

Finally, the centre ground of national debate has remained largely stable, although its underlying fragility remains in question in the event of another successful terrorist strike. While multiculturalism is under attack, current discussions about national identity remain mostly muted and not triumphalist, but rather careful in tone. The weight of the argument still supports constructive inclusion and there are still anxieties about too much of a French assimilationist turn, a hesitancy that became more marked after the recent major riots in France. Similarly other European nations – like Denmark and the Netherlands – appear to be in meltdown about their Muslim populations, and such generalised panic is not yet perceptible in Britain.

But significant fraying at the edges can be discerned. There is a convergence of hostility against Muslims expressed as a crusade against their perceived illiberality, the cover that legitimizes cultural racism. From some on the right, there is some uptake of a fear of Muslim integration expressed as a cultural attack on Islam, with motifs like “Eurabia” and “Londonistan” gaining some attention. From the left, notably this year with the launch of the Euston Manifesto, a rejection of any alliance between Muslims and the left is expressed in terms of a supportive line on neo-imperial interventionism and a staunch defence of European Enlightenment values, which are felt to be in dire straits. The essential point here is to avoid the rigidification of a left-right narrative of British Muslim history that starts with the failures of multiculturalism and ends with 7/7, by which that most atypical and violent act comes to define all Muslim communities and the totality of their experience.

It is rather in everyone’s interest that the anxieties of integration are instead replaced by a sense of Muslim belonging with faithful integrity and the sense that some form of expanded “multicultural Britishness” is not an oxymoron.