

Short Cuts

CONTEST (HMSO, £28.50) is the third version of the UK's counter-terrorism strategy to be published. It draws on earlier Labour initiatives in the area – part pseudo-analysis of al-Qaida's current capabilities, part salesmanship of government plans – but the new document 'reflects the changing terrorist threat' and 'incorporates new government policy'. Its appearance also reflects, the introduction claims, 'the government's commitment to transparency' – though it would be more accurate to talk about a commitment to propaganda. With its talk of 'fundamental British values' and threats to 'our interests overseas', there's a neocolonial feel to the whole enterprise, as though somebody had dug out something written by Joseph Chamberlain and in place of 'civilising mission' and 'the pacification of the natives' had inserted 'human rights' and 'the rule of law'.

We learn that in 2009 'there were about 11,000 terrorist attacks around the world causing nearly 15,000 casualties,' with the attacks taking place 'primarily in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iraq'. There is no mention of why those places might be any more dangerous than anywhere else: they are simply 'failed or fragile states' which 'provide an environment conducive to terrorism'. All we get by way of analysis is: 'The grievances upon which propagandists can draw may be real or perceived, although clearly none of them justify terrorism.' The

year 2010 was just as bad, with 13,000 fatalities from 'over 11,500 terrorist attacks . . . the vast majority . . . still carried out by al-Qaida and associated terrorist groups' in the same places – and now in Somalia as well.

I was reminded by all this terrifying data of an interview I did with Paul Bremer when he was President Reagan's ambassador-at-large for counterterrorism (*sic*), long before he went on to infamy as the first governor of occupied Iraq. A huge graph behind him displayed the inexorable rise of terrorist incidents worldwide, with a large upwards spike in a different colour in the year just past following a period of decline. I asked him about this. 'Oh, that's when we redefined what we meant by terrorism.'

Much of the data in *Contest* comes from places with names like the Combating Terrorism Centre at West Point or the National Center for Counterterrorism, a US government body established by President George W. Bush in 2004 with the goal of leading 'our nation's effort to combat terrorism at home and abroad by analysing the threat, sharing that information with our partners and integrating all instruments of national power to ensure unity of effort'. *Contest* has many elaborate graphs tracking 'terrorist incidents', 'global stress zones' and the countries of origin of the now 47 'terrorist' groups that are banned in the UK. (I remember when even the IRA wasn't banned, so committed to freedom of association used the UK to be.) Al-Qaida is given different acronyms for its various local insurgency operations, AQ-AP (Arab

Peninsula), AQ-M (Maghreb), AQ-I (Iraq), AQ-KB (Kurdish areas) and so on. Attractive boxes set out nuggets such as the UK's Planning Assumptions 2011-15 (which amount to: 'geographically, vital countries for our counterterrorism work will continue to be Afghanistan and Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia and Nigeria'). Where would Britain be without international terrorism? Having lost one empire it has fortuitously found another, an 'evil empire' full of natives that still need subjugating.

There is a fifth column too, a war that needs waging on the home front, against natives who have made it to imperial HQ. The Tories and the Lib Dems made a large fuss about the erosion of freedom when they were in opposition and the smaller coalition party has needed some victories here. So instead of New Labour's control orders we are to have Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures (TPIMs) – control orders with a fancier name. Twenty-eight day detention without charge is to be abolished – unless there are 'exceptional circumstances'. Section 44 powers of stop and search will be abolished – to be replaced by what *Contest* boasts will be a 'more tightly defined power', a power it fails to define. There is to be an investigation into allegations of collusion in torture by British authorities, though with terms of reference now so blatantly emaciated that the pressure groups that pushed for the inquiry have decided to have nothing to do with it. And still the government refuses to allow the kind of intercept evidence into court that would make counterterrorism subject to the criminal process. The ease with

which Lib Dem anxieties about freedom have been seen off, turned into cul-de-sac discussions about surveillance cameras and local authority snooping, has been amazing even to those inured to the lack of fight in the Lib Dem political personality.

The *Contest* strategy is divided into four 'workstreams': 'Pursue', 'Prepare', 'Protect' and 'Prevent', the last of which – designed 'to stop people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism' – merits its own government booklet. *Prevent* (HMSO, £28.50) is targeted against speakers who disseminate 'the ideology associated with al-Qaida' and belong to 'extremist groups' which contribute to a 'radicalisation . . . process by which people come to support, and in some cases to participate in terrorism'. (Never mind that a report leaked last year that had been commissioned by the Communities and Local Government Department made a 'clear assessment' that individuals 'do not progress' to violence through such groups, that the 'thesis seems to both misread the radicalisation process and to give undue weight to ideological factors'.) Labour is criticised for having worked with Muslim groups: in his speech to a security meeting of European leaders in Munich in February, Cameron complained that 'organisations that seek to present themselves as a gateway to the Muslim community' had been 'showered with public money'; he went on to say that 'we've been too cautious frankly – frankly, even fearful' to stand up to the 'unacceptable views or practices' that 'come from someone who isn't white'.

The problem, then, as the government

sees it, is far broader than terrorism. It is with anyone who doesn't share our values. *Prevent's* remit is to tackle 'extremist ideas which are espoused and circulated by apparently non-violent organisations, very often operating within the law' and – again – those 'groups and speakers who deliberately and carefully stay within the law'. This must be one of the first government publications to make obeying the law seem like a new crime. We are being asked to believe that extremist groups 'just appear to be non-violent' by the subversive trick of 'neither us[ing] violence nor specifically and openly endors[ing] its use by others'. These 'extremist groups' which 'carefully operate within our laws, deliberately avoiding open support for violence' are the 'terrorist sympathisers' against whom we are warned we must be on our guard. Another phrase for them might be 'law-abiding'. So much for the law.

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