The risks of terror

By Bill Calcutt
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Terrorism and the ominous spectre of a unitary "death cult" have featured prominently in national discourse in Australia in recent years. The graphic and confronting nature of indiscriminate barbarity has a unique capacity to engender visceral fear in many Australians, with powerful psychological and sociological effects. The shocking and sometimes bizarre nature of terrorism seems particularly effective in cutting through in a high-intensity 24-hour information environment. A lone extremist armed with a gun or knife can transfix a nation for weeks.

Like all phobias, terrorism relies for its enduring effect on sustaining and reinforcing irrational fear. Remarkably, terrorism co-opts credulous authorities who need to constantly dramatize the magnitude and imminence of the threat in order to justify exceptional government actions to protect the community. The reach and impact of the distorted "death cult" propaganda is reflected in the (absurd) characterisation of terrorism as an existential threat to civilised society. It is unimaginable to think that Winston Churchill would have gone into the British Parliament during WW2 to give credence and voice to Nazi propaganda.

One of the significant risks of terrorism is therefore its capacity to elicit an authoritarian response by zealous governments under the auspices of a new and more powerful (utilitarian) national security paradigm. By reacting in militaristic ways to misperceptions of the terrorism threat governments can damage the fundamental institutions and principles that are the foundations for a contemporary and cohesive liberal democracy, at the same time compromising the moral authority and legitimacy of the state and exacerbating the social marginalisation and radicalisation that governments are seeking to prevent.

Contemporary examples of terrorism's capacity to elicit expedient responses that damage long-standing principles and institutions include: diminishing public and parliamentary accountability (by drawing a veil of secrecy over an increasing number of government functions); undermining the Westminster separation of powers (by concentrating power in the hands of the executive); eroding the rule of law (by removing the right of citizens to be recognised before a court); shifting the balance between national security and civil liberties (through increased counter-terrorism powers and expanded surveillance); supplanting public evidence with intrinsically fallible secret intelligence as the basis for executive action; and giving authorities immunity from prosecution for illegality in special intelligence operations.

Ironically, Australian Governments have previously recognised the potential for alarmist, populist or reactionary perspectives to distort national priorities, and for a number of years authorities have applied an objective risk management approach to identifying and evaluating the relative risks to the nation's interest from a broad range of hazards. An all-hazards risk management approach examines and compares the

likelihood and consequences of a diverse range of actual and potential threats (from natural disasters to pandemics to terrorism), with mortality (deaths) being an important benchmark of severe harmful consequences. An all-hazards risk management approach can provide a transparent evidence-based process for determining national priorities and guiding where governments can and should allocate scarce resources to mitigate risks and minimise avoidable deaths.

A recent report from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare revealed that of around 140,000 deaths in Australia each year, around 130,000 are from "natural" causes (a variety of diseases). Of the remaining 10,000 people who die from fatal injuries, potentially preventable causes include accidental falls (3480 deaths), suicides (2247 deaths), transport accidents (1498 deaths), other fatal accidents (1355 deaths), accidental poisonings (1283 deaths), accidental drownings (290 deaths), homicides (240 deaths), and accidental thermal injuries (96 deaths).

These national mortality figures provide a useful objective context for evaluating the relative risks posed by terrorism compared to other potentially preventable life-threatening hazards. While any fatalities attributable to terrorism in Australia are not explicitly identified in these figures it seems likely they are included in the number of homicides. In the context of the many thousands of potentially preventable fatal injuries that occur in Australia each year, what would be a realistic and proportionate response to the risk of isolated "lone wolf" attacks on law enforcement officers? How would such a risk be compared with similar threats of violence that police officers confront regularly in mental health and family violence contexts?

Beyond the influence of propaganda-inspired fear there are a range of reasons why it is difficult to keep terrorism in perspective relative to other life-threatening hazards, and to successfully incorporate terrorism in an all-hazards risk management process. Terrorism threats will not translate into fatalities if covert counter-terrorism measures are effective in preventing attacks, one of the rationales for apparently limitless expenditure on such measures. Terrorism risks may be elevated because a goal is often to maximise civilian casualties, so that while the likelihood of an attack may be low the consequences in terms of fatalities could be severe. Finally, an assessment of the threats posed by terrorism is typically based on fallible secret intelligence produced by a specialist national security agency, advice that is not easily incorporated into a transparent evidence-based risk assessment process.

In the end it is virtually impossible for the community to objectively and independently evaluate the propriety, proportionality, cost and effectiveness of many of the counter-terrorism measures adopted under a new national security paradigm, primarily because of pervasive secrecy and a non-partisan convention to place national security beyond meaningful statutory and parliamentary oversight. The community ultimately has little option but to trust the assurances of its elected representatives, some of whom may have an interest in perpetuating an environment of fear for partisan political advantage, or the advice of public officials who may have an interest in sustaining the substantial and growing public funding for a burgeoning national security industry.

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