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Terrorism and the power of fear

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Fear is a visceral human emotion with the power to overwhelm and subsume all other feelings and rational thoughts. Terrorism seeks to coerce political and social change by threatening extreme and indiscriminate violence against the community. But the real power of terrorism is not the capacity of zealots to threaten or undertake violence but its ability to catalyse an extreme and disproportionate reaction from the state, effectively perpetuating and magnifying the community's fear and changing the nature of society. Terrorism relies for its enduring impact on the state (over)reacting in ways that permanently transform perceptions of national security. By responding to terrorism in expedient, oppressive and inhumane ways the state can erode its own democratic principles and moral authority, ultimately weakening social cohesion.

Terrorism has a unique capacity to undermine democracy by eliciting a militaristic response that suspends or compromises a number of the important conventions and principles of civil society, including democratic accountability. This is because the secrecy that invariably surrounds national security makes it virtually impossible for the community to determine whether counter-terrorism actions are justified and proportionate to a real (rather than exaggerated) threat, and to hold elected representatives to account.

Almost thirteen years ago a small group of terrorists hatched an audacious and improbable plan to take spectacular violent action that they hoped would be a catalyst for change in the course of human history, not unlike the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand in 1914 that ignited the Great War. Against virtually insurmountable odds terrorists managed to strike at global symbols of Western civilization by crashing commercial planes into several iconic buildings in the United States, igniting a war on terror.

The immediate tactical goal of the terrorists was to damage and humiliate the world's sole superpower. Their longer-term strategic goal was to catalyse fundamental social change by increasing community insecurity and engendering a disproportionate war-like response. The terrorists could only dream of triggering an enduring transformation of national and global security priorities with a shift towards an authoritarian and utilitarian approach in security-related policy, the militarisation and privatisation of civilian functions, and a realignment of the balance between national security and individual and civil rights.

In the period since 9/11 the terrorists have succeeded in achieving these strategic goals beyond their wildest dreams. Several wars have been undertaken at enormous human and financial cost. A large covert paramilitary apparatus, unconstrained by the laws of war, has been established with the capacity to strike virtually anywhere in the world. Billions have been spent on security measures world-wide, including developing the technical capability to monitor anyone and everyone, anywhere.

Human rights are increasingly defined by national citizenship, with certain classes of "non-citizens" no longer entitled to the protection of the rule of law.

Inexplicably, many of our political leaders tacitly participate in the continuing distortion of the threat of terrorism, and the perpetuation of the myth of the paternalistic state. They do so through their implicit acceptance that "national security" is inviolate and the security sector can and should be trusted to operate beyond the bounds of democratic oversight and accountability. Few leaders are apparently willing to publicly discuss and question the paradigm shift that has occurred in national security over the last decade, with the extension of the secret state with implications for many of the institutions that are central to a robust and progressive democracy.

Why have otherwise advanced, sophisticated and civilised societies responded to the actual threat of terrorism in these extreme and sometimes undemocratic ways? One possible explanation is that developed states actually need an existential threat to maintain their own identities in the face of an increasingly diverse and heterogeneous global community. In the period since the end of the cold war a number of developing nations have flourished, transforming geopolitical dynamics and challenging the West's economic and military hegemony. The interdependencies created through globalisation are progressively breaking down traditional distinctions between nations, challenging centuries-old concepts of sovereignty, national identity and Western exceptionalism.

Another possible explanation is that, post 9/11, the interests of a now extensive and resurgent security sector have become deeply entrenched and highly influential. The end of the cold war precipitated a progressive shift of resources and power away from the defence and security sectors as countries increasingly focussed on competing globally in a relatively stable world. At the same time many countries reduced state secrecy and increased transparency, reinforcing civil liberties and adopting a broader objective risk-based approach in determining national security priorities. After 9/11 the defence and security sectors moved quickly to reassert their preeminent role as the unquestioned protectors of the state, and secrecy displaced transparency as the default position in public oversight and disclosure relating to national security.

There is great irony that there is an alignment of the interests of terrorists threatening indiscriminate violence with those whose mission is to defend the state's security, both of whom benefit from the community's ongoing fear and insecurity. In the altered post 9/11 security environment Australians have been willing to tolerate a range of exceptional security measures including the extension of video and electronic surveillance; the blurring of the roles of civilian, policing and military functions; increasing the powers of the security agencies; the removal of the right to legal recourse for some non-citizens; and the criminalisation of associations rather than activities. More recently border security has been militarised, with the covert deployment of paramilitary forces to protect against the perceived threat of drugs, guns, pests and asylum seekers.

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