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Investigating the 7/7 London Bombings: Suspects; Victims; Human Beings

Leeds Case Study

Alistair McFadyen

The Case

I was asked to present a case study drawing on my policing experience in what Prof Dahlgrün referred to as an 'interesting social context'. Indeed, the city of Leeds is certainly that. As a policing environment – even in its everyday, routine forms – it can be immensely challenging and, for precisely that reason, also richly rewarding. For the purposes of our case study, however, I thought it would help clarify issues and sharpen analysis not to focus on one of the more everyday incidents and threats that police routinely respond to. I chose instead a case that might more readily be recognised as deserving the adjective, 'evil'; one that presents us with the complexities involved in confronting and overcoming evil without succumbing to it: the 7/7 London bombings in 2005.[1] Although 300 km distant from Leeds, a significant aspect of the investigation was conducted in Leeds. It was in any case an incident that has affected the whole

[1] In my rather junior position in West Yorkshire Police, neither a direct role in nor knowledge of the investigations that form a case study. What follows draws on the official report (2006. Report of the Official Account of the Bombings in London on 7th July 2005. London: The Stationery Office.)) and other discussions in the public domain. I am profoundly grateful also to the generosity of retired temporary Chief Constable John Parkinson, who led the Leeds investigations and who kindly agreed to speak with me in preparation for this case study. Of course, I am to blame for any inaccuracies, misinterpretation or misunderstandings. I should also point out that these are my personal views and interpretations and do not necessarily represent those of West Yorkshire Police.

nation and indeed continues to shape (and mis-shape) us in many ways. That is, perhaps, one measure of evil: the extent to which evil is not merely inherent in the immediate event, but has capacity to engender prolonged and deeply traumatising consequences through a whole society as it seeks to absorb, understand and respond to it. This is the kind of traumatic event that significantly reshapes our social world, not only in consciousness – in patterns of interpretation and thought – but also materially: in how we structure and organise ourselves; how we institutionalise behaviours and how we work within new or recalibrated social structures and institutions. In the immediate aftermath, a traumatising event's ripples can make it very difficult both to discern and to act on the good in ways that are genuinely healing, that seek genuine justice and truth, in ways that are neither imprisoned by nor therefore the vehicles of the dynamics of the evil both in and unleashed by the event.

First, I shall give a brief, factual outline of the bombings themselves, mindful that those not British or too young to remember them may not be familiar with the circumstances. That leads quite naturally into the heart of this case study, where I briefly present several aspects of the situation that required sensitive decision-making. Then I share the reflections of the participants before sharing with you the decisions actually taken and the operant considerations that led to them. (If you wish to adopt a case-study approach in your reading of this chapter, you may wish to break off after this to consider your own response to the decisions outlined there, subsequently to review both your decisions and the values that informed them by comparing them with the values and decision-making tool provided in a footnote.)

At approximately 8:50 AM on the morning of 7th July 2005, three bombs were simultaneously detonated on three crowded trains in the tunnels of the Underground train network in central London, travelling east, west and south respectively from King's Cross station. A little under an hour later, a fourth bomb was detkonated on the top floor of a double-decker bus in Tavistock Square, central London. The four bombs caused at least 756 casualties, including 56 fatalities.

The initial investigation by London's Metropolitan police quickly established that this was the UK's first suicide bombing. It was also the first terrorist attack committed by British-born Islamists. Their identities were established about a week after the attack (three were second-generation Pakistani-heritage British Asians; the other, born in Jamaica but brought up in the UK, converted to Islam at 15, soon after his mother did so): Mohammed Siddique Khan; Shehzad Tanweer; Hasib Hussain (all from Leeds) and Jermaine Lindsay (who had lived most of his life in Huddersfield – 30 kms from Leeds – but in 2003 had moved to the town of Aylesbury, 60 km to the north-west of London).

At the time of the attack, world leaders were gathered at the G8 summit elsewhere in the UK (Gleneagles, near Edinburgh) and it is possible that the attack was timed to coincide symbolically with that meeting. Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that the original plan had been for all four bombs to be detonated underground, presumably simultaneously. The Tavistock

Square bus detonation might well have been out of time and out of place. The last bomber (Hussain) can be seen on CCTV leaving the underground system and purchasing a battery in a shop in the concourse of King's Cross overground station before, after some apparent vacillation, boarding surface public transport. We know that, at the time the other bombers boarded their trains and Hussain was himself in King's Cross underground station, there were delays on the Northern line. It is therefore possible that the original plan had been for Hussain to detonate his device to the north of the others so that together they would form a symbolic (burning?) Cross, but was frustrated either by a battery failure or the delays on his planned route, or both.

Investigation established that the Leeds-based bombers had driven to Luton train station, close to Aylesbury, where they met Lindsay who had driven there in a separate car. All then boarded the train to London King's Cross in high spirits and carrying heavy rucksacks. One of the cars left in the station car park contained unused explosive devices, other bomb-making materials and a handgun.

The bomb factory itself was identified at 18 Alexandra Grove in the Headingley area of Leeds, heavily populated by students alongside a significant British Asian Muslim population, and about 1 km from the University where Professor Muers and I lecture in theology. Unused materials were found in the factory, alongside the equipment used to make the bombs.

Although the identities of the four bombers were established in this early stage of the investigation, it was still unknown whether there were other members of the plot still at large (although subsequent investigation found no indication whatsoever of the involvement or support of anyone else). In the immediate aftermath, however, both witness accounts and initial interpretation of CCTV capture suggested there might have been a fifth bomber. The unused devices found in the car left at Luton train station might also reasonably have supported suspicion of an additional plotter who for some reason had not joined the others on the day. The equipment left in the bomb factory similarly left unanswered questions about whether other collaborators might have been tasked with their removal. None of those suspicions proved to be accurate. I mention them here to provide a sense of the context of uncertainty concerning the possible existence of supporters and active collaborators in which the Leeds investigations were conducted. It would be in Leeds that questions concerning the bombers' motivations; their acquisition of technical competence; knowledge of or support for the plot amongst family, colleagues, friends and other contacts; whether others in the family wider community might also be at risk of radicalisation would have to be explored.

In the planning and conduct of that investigation, the police faced a number of complex issues, both tactical and human. To start you thinking about the latter, I invite you to revisit the casualty figures I gave you above and to ask yourselves who you expect to be included in those figures. More specifically, whether you expect the four bombers to be included or excluded in the number of fatalities and whether there is any sense in which you might regard the bombers as also

themselves victims. The four bombers are, in fact, included amongst the fatalities. Please pause for a moment before reading further to consider how you feel about that and what your answer is to the question about regarding them as victims in some sense.[2] Please also consider why you (perhaps instinctively) answer in the way that you have done: what seems to be at stake in the bombers' inclusion in the tally either under the more neutral heading 'casualties' or the perhaps more freighted term 'victims'?

To some extent, that question had immediate bearing in relation to body recovery (which, in these circumstances, is also recovery of body-parts and their reconstitution). Especially in the earliest stages of the investigation, that process of recovery was part of the forensic examination of the scene that helped to establish where the bombs had been detonated and whether their position suggested they had been in the possession of specific persons, detonated remotely or by fuse. Beyond the forensic, investigative interest, however, there remains a question whether, how and why you treat human bodies and body-parts differently from the way you treat other fragments and debris of evidential value. Beyond the interests of the investigation, families of victims will have expectations and interest in the way in which those remains are handled, identified and collated. As part of their grieving process and coming to terms with the reality of what happened, they are likely to want to know some detail about where their loved one was, why and how they died and they will likely be comforted by knowing that the process of body recovery and examination was conducted in a way that respected the dignity and humanity of their loved one. At the most basic level, the bereaved would have a right to expect that as much of the body of a loved one has been recovered and that what has been presented as there remains have been accurately identified.

The question whether we regard the bombers also as victims is one way of answering other question: how are their bodies treated? what happens to them after the investigation? But also: how are their families approached, engaged with, their needs identified and

[2] in what seems to me to be a related and parallel intuition, in the days and weeks after the attack, British newspapers published the names and often also the photographs, together with details of movements on that day but also of their lives. This was done without any explicit comment or explanation. Yet it seemed to me at the time (as it still does) to be an act of resistance to the dehumanisation and de-individualisation of victims in a mass-casualty terrorist attack of this sort. Victims are not chosen on account of who they are, what they believe in, not even what they represent. In a strict sense, they are not chosen at all, they are simply there in these locations at that time to be used instrumentally towards the immediate goal of killing and maiming as many people as possible and whatever more ultimate purpose that was intended to serve. In relation both to terrorist purpose and their acts, they have lost already their humanity and individuality. To their great credit, British newspapers seems to understand the signal importance doing what they could to recover and present the humanity and individuality of the victims to the public – especially at a time where, inevitably, there was widespread coverage of the bombers' life-stories, their identities, formation the values and beliefs, their movements and their relationships.

met? Regarding the bombers as victims and not only as suspects is one pathway towards recognising that, like other victims' families, the families of the bombers are also bereaved; indeed, if – as proved to be the case – they were completely unaware of the plot or of the bombers' radicalisation, likely to experience a very complex form of grief. Like other families, that grief would likely be affected by the delay in the release of bodies for a funeral due to the demands of the investigation – a delay religiously and culturally significant for Muslim families.

Clearly, there was a need to conduct investigations within the families and the wider community in areas of Leeds where the suspects either lived or had links to, all of which have significant Asian and Muslim populations. These investigations included forensic search of several premises, including of course the bomb factory, but also homes of family and associates and some buildings of religio-cultural significance. Negotiating tension between investigative needs and the human needs of families and the wider communities to which they belonged mirrors the question I have already raised regarding the perpetrators themselves: can they be treated as victims as well as (sometimes and for a time) potential suspects?

The question takes a slightly different form regarding families: notwithstanding the need to ask questions of them, should families be regarded primarily as survivors, traumatised and bereaved? That same consideration might be extended towards the wider Muslim communities in Leeds, especially those to which the suspects belonged – they were also traumatised and confused. Locally and nationally, Muslim communities faced questioning by the media and others trying to understand the bombers' motivation and its continuity or discontinuity with the values, perceptions and interpretations of Islam and sense of British identity held more widely. In Leeds, the scale of media interest and the nature of such questioning could sometimes be experienced as intrusive by a community that generally had little preparation or training to give the kind of account of themselves that was being sought.

Muslim communities also faced significant increased hostility locally and nationally as racist and Islamophobic agitation increased after the attack (especially after a further Islamist bomb attack on London's transport network on 21 July 2005 – an entirely independent conspiracy, where none of the devices detonated properly).

We have now arrived at the point where I can more clearly state the issues to be addressed in this case study. There are three foci:

- the families;
- local Muslim communities;
- the bombers' bodies, especially in view of the risk that a funeral service might attract Islamophobic attention will provide the opportunity for Islamist display; similarly, any grave might become a site either for the celebration of martyrdom or for desecration.

I invite you to ask:

- what should happen?
- Why should it happen?
- How might it be achieved?

Either before you develop your own ideas and proposals in relation to this case study, or else when you review them afterwards, you may wish to refer to several of the documents listed in the bibliography for this case study: especially the National College of Policing's Code of Ethics (2014a)2020</access-date></record></Cite></EndNote> and its supporting documents (2014b), together with the National Decision Model (2013) used in all police decision-making in England and Wales and against which all police decisions have to be justified. The principles attributed to Sir Robert Peel, founder of the Metropolitan police, are still regarded as both foundational and expressive of the distinctive spirit and culture of British policing (2012).

Group Discussion

There was significant discussion in all groups whether and why the bombers should be treated in some respects as victims themselves, what purposes that might either frustrate or serve. In the case study, this question was raised in relation first to the treatment of the bombers' remains; second, treatment of the bombers' families. In several discussion groups, however, consideration of this question was pushed further back to the presumably lengthy process through which the bombers' motivations were formed and shaped and to questions of free will. Broadly speaking, there was consideration of the various factors that might have so framed the bombers' worldview that conspiring to commit a terrorist act of mass-murder could be contemplated; indeed, might it also have come to seem an act they believe themselves compelled or required to commit? There was some discussion of the determining influences of the Koran, of specific traditions of interpretation that present themselves as the one true and pure expression of Islam, of global and local Islamist individuals and groups. Acknowledging that the case study had given insufficient detail to evaluate this question in relation to this particular group of terrorists, the discussion nonetheless seemed premised on the assumption that a terror group might be both perpetrator and victim. There was a widespread view that being subject to the powerful, shaping influence of an ideological expression of religion might be a form of victimisation to the extent that it suppresses free will, replacing it with a sense of command and obligation. Possibly underlying this approach to the question is the near incomprehensibility to us of an attack designed to

kill and maim a large number of strangers and to kill oneself. In some ways, it is easier to believe that this is the action of somebody either not in their right mind and capable of rational or moral thought or else subject to coercion, force or control such that the action is not properly theirs.

In following this line of thought, the discussion groups (without much relevant information to assist or guide them) were trying to come to a fuller and richer understanding of the bomber's motivations and actions and to resist any immediate impulse to dehumanise and demonise them.[3] In some of the discussions, there is at least the suggestion that the bombers could be regarded as victims to the extent that their action was not free, whereas culpability and guilt were correlated with free, moral agency. There is a risk here, which I think the discussion group realised and navigated well. If the attempt to understand the bombers' human situation leads us to believe that they were not thinking and acting freely and so are victims, then in an odd way we have stripped them of their humanity in the very act of seeking it. Significantly, we might then feel relieved of the difficult task of seeing their motivations and actions as human responses to their view of the world, not least how they see Britain in particular and the West in general. The more that we see what they did as mad or evil and therefore beyond comprehension and unworthy of our engagement, the less we seek to understand what they did as human (blameworthy, but human still) and to ask questions of them, but also of ourselves in order to understand how it is they came to see their country the way that they did.

This attempt to hold together being a perpetrator and being victim, blame and human understanding, was evident in other considerations raised in the same discussion group. In asking what should be done with the bodies of the bombers, the group paid careful consideration to the phenomenon of forgiveness as entailing judgement but without the kind of condemnation that leads in the direction of demonisation and dehumanisation. In particular, this group noticed (at least implicitly – this is my interpretation) both the importance of dignity in this regard and its reciprocal nature. They alluded explicitly to the adage that you know the character of the society by the way that it treats its prisoners and the biblical caution around exercising judgement, lest we too be judged. Extending these observations in considering what to do with the bodies, the group observed that in failing to accord them appropriate human dignity our own dignity and humanity would also be at stake. The participants decided, on this basis, that each of the bombers should be accorded a proper funeral. However, there was some can tingling debate in the group as to whether this recording of human dignity constituted forgiveness. But an unresolved issue seems to depend on whether forgiveness did involve an avoidance or refusal of judgement,

[3] Certainly in a few of the more recent convictions for terrorism offences, it does seem that some vulnerable individuals have been targeted and groomed by extremists in ways that suggest they might be considered victim as much as perpetrator, or at least that the question of their culpability is neither simple nor straightforward one. However, there is no evidence that would support this sort of phenomenon in this case.

that these things happened, they are evil, these people did them and are to blame for them, we judge them and their actions. Precisely the same unresolved tension was experienced in at least one of a group discussion as well.

One group focused on the way in which the attack threatened the cohesion of a diverse and plural society. This group noted two particular aspects of the dynamic of evil unleashed by the attack which, combined, appears to serve the global strategy of Al Qaeda very well. This discussion group noticed ways in which it could be said that Muslim communities in Britain were also victims of the bombing. It is possible that they were indirect targets of the bombing, expected to encourage others to radicalise and act out any disquiet and critique of the British state and its foreign policy in a violent, Islamist direction. Second at the same time, there was evidence of white radicalisation (sometimes making over use of claimed Christian identity, language and symbols) and a rise in significant levels of questioning, distrust and hostility from these and other quarters. This had potential to exacerbate Muslim communities' experience of marginalisation and of grievance, whilst at the same time making it harder to articulate such grievances or to articulate specifically Islamic perspectives on our life together in Britain and the world.

Although this group did not identify specific actions, it did identify the building of trust as a key priority for police and for all agencies to work towards greater intercultural understanding. More generally, importance was underlined of acting in ways that avoided unconscious collusion with the dynamics of evil present in and unleashed by the attack; to uphold the values and the reality of a floral and diverse society. In particular, this group maintained that good could over overcome the evil by refusing to follow the logic of violence.

What did happen

An immediate decision was taken by the police to treat the bombers' families as they would those surviving and bereaved by the deaths of other victims, albeit with some variations. Due to the fact that they were the families of the bombers, they had specific safeguarding needs that others did not. Some family members had to move out of their houses or searches were undertaken (and were provided with hotel accommodation free of charge). There was significant potential that they might be targets of a revenge attack as the identities of the bombers were known; the potential that affected the rest of the community as well. Furthermore, there were specific cultural issues both in the families and wider community that needed nuanced understanding and careful navigation: family honour was threatened; there were intergenerational issues that could make it uncertain whether one generation of the community at full understanding of and could speak for others.

In England and Wales, families of those who have been killed in a road traffic collision, through suicide, as the result of a criminal act, mass casualty event or critical incident (e. g., kidnap) are routinely assigned a Family Liaison Officer (a FLO). This is a specialist role undertaken by police officers in addition to their normal duties following specialist training. It is a role that has been developed and more clearly defined in the years since 2005, which can combine investigative with welfare rolls. Designed to ensure both family and investigation benefit from a sensitive and compassionate single point of contact: to act as a conduit for communication from the investigation to the family and the other way around. Even where the dead family member is not a suspect, a significant part of the role is to gather and evaluate information and evidence from the family that might benefit the investigation and pass it on. At the same time (and in the case of 7/7, where the dead family members were suspects), the role is reassurance, welfare, the building of trust and confidence – not least in ensuring the family receive information from the investigation in a timely and appropriate manner. It can include signposting to welfare and support agencies as well as helping families understand and navigate investigative, coronial and criminal proceedings.

The senior investigating officer was open and transparent about the dual aspects of this role and established what he describes as positive relationships with families immediately. This led to an onion-layered approach to a safeguarding wrap-around the family but extended into the wider community. Close safeguarding relationships were established between the FLO and the neighbourhood policing teams responsible for the local areas in which families lived, local community leadership, local councillors and community leaders, the police independent advisory group (advising especially on how well police understand and navigate community issues and concerns), members of Parliament. All were engaged in positive and open engagement as appropriate within the limits of the needs of the investigation to ensure there was a general understanding of what is happening in the investigation, what the concerns, needs and threat to the community were perceived to be. A communication strategy was devised together with partner agencies such as the local council, designed to positively impact neighbours, the local Muslim communities and the wider communities in Leeds and across the UK.

In addition, the police engaged in some targeted and similarly open engagement with white communities perceived to be at risk of radicalisation in order to hear, understand and respond to their concerns and to ensure they were apprised of some of the early findings of the investigation, especially those that contradicted misinformation being circulated by some far-right groups who were agitating and planning activities designed to destabilise community cohesion. Some arrests were made amongst the membership of those groups in the course of their activities.

On the 16th July, The Khan family issued this statement; a statement that in part reflects the above strategy:

"Police engagement with the families helped establish trust and confidence. In particular, it enabled very open conversation about the potential risks and consequences of public burial as previously discussed above. All families agreed to conduct funerals in a manner and in locations that did not (and I believe it is true to say still do not) attract public attention, but did allow families to have aerials that allowed them to fulfil their obligations, despite the complexities of their grief and the mixed exaggerated shock about what had left to these deaths that had taken the lives of so many others."

"The Khan family would like to sincerely express their deepest and heartfelt sympathies to all the innocent victims and their families and friends affected by this horrific and evil act."

"We are devastated that our son may have been brainwashed into carrying out such an atrocity, since we know him as a kind and caring member of our family."

"We urge people with the tiniest piece of information to come forward in order to expose these terror networks which target and groom our [sic] sons to carry out such evils." (2015)

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