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Political tunnel vision is today's real terror

In retreating from the world and politics, we all become more vulnerable – as the people and politicians of Spain have learnt, writes **Bill Durodié**

The defeat of the People's Party in the Spanish general election was not a consequence of terrorism, but was rather an expression of the failure of principled debate and public engagement in contemporary political life. This failure affects all parties, in all countries, around the world. It looks set to have a far more destabilising impact upon international affairs than terror ever could. Yet, despite this, the trend expressed by the outcome, for a retreat from the public and the political to the private and the personal, continues unabated. Instead of trying to shape the world, an exaggerated sense of insecurity encourages people and politicians everywhere to hide away from it.

Many political commentators have long been pointing to the growing absence of substance in politics nowadays. This has been matched by a steady decline in electoral participation rates. Accordingly, politicians concerned as to their legitimacy have sought numerous means to enhance turnout and have repackaged themselves as societal risk managers. But these more limited aspirations – to promote voting by anyone, for anyone, and to micro-manage the economy, focusing particularly upon education and health – have not inspired a new generation of voters. Nowhere was this pattern more evident than in Spain in the run-up to the recent elections, when all were rudely awakened by the blasts in Madrid.

It was this longer-term political failure by José María Aznar, the prime minister, to project and fight for a bold and engaging vision for Spanish society that left him exposed to people's more immediate preoccupations with their personal safety in the aftermath of the bombings. Promoting some positive principles and values would have militated against this emotional response to an extraordinary incident. But, like politicians of all hues in most countries, all sense of public mission had gradually been replaced by pandering to private concerns. The instability that ensued in Spain should act as a wake-up call to leaders everywhere.

No doubt the Spanish electorate was angry to discover that the perpetrators of these atrocities might have been al-Qaida rather than the Basque separatist group Eta, as they had initially been assured. But at the time of the vote the available evidence for this was far from conclusive. In different times, tapes, arrests and claims of responsibility would have been treated with due scepticism. But in the contemporary climate, characterised by mistrust and cynicism for all forms of authority, there is a general proclivity to assume the worst and presume a cover-up. This mood has been facilitated by governments that, directly or indirectly, play on people's fears to justify their own agendas. It allows urban myths and rumours to hold a devastating sway over world affairs.

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It is true that the Spanish people had largely opposed their government's support for the war in Iraq a year earlier, but the issue had hardly featured in the general election. Assuming the attacks were retribution for this military role – a belief raised only in retrospect by those laying claim to the attacks – conveniently ignored previous incidents such as those in Indonesia and Morocco, whose armies had played no such role. What's more, the form that opposition to the war took – concern as to the unforeseen consequences for Spain of participating in it – is itself quite revealing as to the self-oriented politics of our time.

In the past, anti-imperialist groups would have opposed the principle of intervention, irrespective of whether it was sanctioned by the United Nations or any number of legal experts. More significantly, they would have highlighted the consequences of war for the people of Iraq rather than focusing so narrowly on themselves. This shows the extent to which the opposition, too, was not averse to playing the risk game at home and points to why the government was able to trump their fears with that of leaving Saddam alone. Thus it was that, in the absence of principled political argument by both sides and despite huge demonstrations, when the war actually started the protests largely disappeared.

It is an interesting phenomenon in the world today that events that appear public and transformative in form are actually private and limited in character. Rather than expressing any broader sense of cohesion and direction, protests are now often an expression of isolation and insecurity. This 'age of insecurity' or 'culture of fear', as some have coined it, long predated the events of September 11 2001. It is manifest nowadays in almost all social and political discussions, which increasingly take the form of how best to protect society from certain assumed external risks. This approach breeds cynicism in authority and is met by quiet resignation or childish anger (think of the 'BLIAR' slogan on protest signs), rather than determined action or constructive and mature criticism.

Ironically, this absence of principled debate is reflected back at us in the form that terrorism takes in the modern age. In the past, groups fought national liberation struggles, and targeted their attacks on the authorities with a view to winning over a wider constituency. Today, the acts of terrorists, unrestrained by any sense of moral purpose, are increasingly nihilistic in character. Terrorism has become a petulant lashing out against modernity that draws encouragement from the broader self-hatred evident in the West. In this regard, giving it a name, such as al-Qaida, rather misses the point. Its perpetrators are as likely to be found at home as anywhere else. They include Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma bomber, and the Aum Shinrikyo cult in Japan.

In this context, people and politicians have understandably become fixated on the presumed enemy beyond. But this fails to recognise the extent to which political and cultural corrosion at home is the driving force, both encouraging an exaggerated sense of insecurity and encouraging potential terrorists, as well as loners, hoaxers and other cranks. The sight of western societies prioritising the supposed threat to civilisation posed by al-Qaida is an immensely dispiriting one. Not only does this continue to avoid the necessary political debate as to what exactly we are for, but it also leads to an encroachment of all manner of technical barriers supposedly designed to make us feel more secure.

Sadly, the focus on surveillance, protection, information and warnings really will have unintended consequences. These encourage more mistrust, suspicion and concern, accentuated by senior officials suggesting that it is simply a matter of time before terrorists strike. This tends to push people farther apart from one another at the very time when they need to be drawn together in a sense of common purpose. It is also the case that advertising campaigns exhorting us to be more vigilant are likely to prove about as effective as erecting a totem pole against evil spirits on a village green.

Realising that real resilience is an attitude rather than a technology, Tony Blair recently indicated his resolve to defend 'our way of life' in a speech to his Sedgefield constituency. But he failed to spell out what that means. Accordingly, such assertions, like those of others who have waxed lyrical about defending freedom and democracy of late, come across as shallow platitudes. A Martian visiting the UK recently might be forgiven for thinking that 'our way of life' consists of advising people what to eat and how much to drink.

This phenomenon of focusing on lifestyle issues is itself a consequence of the paucity of political debate today. Political leaders across the world have seen how incredibly divisive the war on terror has turned out to be. It appears less problematic to launch an even more intrusive war on behaviour. Instead of expanding their horizons as the times demand, and reminding people that there is more to life than life itself, they feel more comfortable digging in. So on the very day the government announced its deployment of rail marshals to wade through rush-hour carriages identifying suspect bags and packages, the same authorities, who clearly assume drunkenness to be as 'inevitable' as terrorism, revealed plans to train an army of alcohol marshals to patrol our pubs and clubs drumming out aberrant behaviour.

An exaggerated sense of insecurity, a proclivity to prioritise the personal over the political and a cynical mistrust of all forms of authority, including other people, is driving world politics. Civilisation can never be bombed out of existence by terrorists. It can, however, be seriously corrupted and corroded from within. The reluctance of political leaders everywhere to define what they are for and project a sense of mission for society may save them from the embarrassment of losing some political arguments, but it could also ensure that they go down with a sinking ship. By limiting their remit to security, they leave society incredibly unarmed as they fail thereby to win and cohere a resilient society.

Focusing down rather than up has encouraged the advent of a war on behaviour at home to match the war on terror overseas. Soon, marshals will be telling us where to place our bags and when it is time to go home. None of this will make things any better. Unless we assume some political responsibility to reject the narrow politics of fear that have brought us to this juncture, we all face an unpredictable and insecure future.

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