



The Use and Abuse of Terror

*The construction of a false narrative
on the domestic terror threat*

PETER OBORNE

CENTRE FOR POLICY STUDIES
57 Tufton Street London SW1P 3QL
2006

THE AUTHOR

PETER OBORNE IS political editor of *The Spectator*. He writes a weekly column for the *Evening Standard* and is a presenter for *Week in Westminster* (BBC Radio 4). He is the author of *Alastair Campbell, New Labour and the Rise of the Media Class* (Aurum Press, 1999 and, with Simon Walters, 2004), *A Moral Duty to Act There* (CPS, 2003), *Basil D'Oliveira: cricket and conspiracy* (Little, Brown, 2004) and *The Rise of Political Lying* (Free Press 2005).

The aim of the Centre for Policy Studies is to develop and promote policies that provide freedom and encouragement for individuals to pursue the aspirations they have for themselves and their families, within the security and obligations of a stable and law-abiding nation. The views expressed in our publications are, however, the sole responsibility of the authors. Contributions are chosen for their value in informing public debate and should not be taken as representing a corporate view of the CPS or of its Directors. The CPS values its independence and does not carry on activities with the intention of affecting public support for any registered political party or for candidates at election, or to influence voters in a referendum.

ISBN No. 1 905389 22 1

© Centre for Policy Studies, February 2006

Printed by 4 Print, 138 Molesey Avenue, Surrey

CONTENTS

Foreword

A Recommendation by Anthony Barnett

1. Introduction	1
2. The politicisation of terror	4
3. How the Prime Minister misled the nation	16
4. Ricin	21
5. Old Trafford	26
6. Conclusion	29

Appendix 1: what has happened to the 12 Point Plan

Appendix 2: the Police statement of 6 January 2003

Appendix 3: chronology

FOREWORD

I HAVE WRITTEN THIS PAMPHLET to accompany the Channel 4 documentary, “Dispatches: Spinning Terror”. It is the product of long conversations with patient and very generous interviewees. Many thanks go out to Crispin Black, Martin Bright, Charles Clarke MP, Gill Crossley, David Davis MP, John Denham MP, Baroness (Kishwer) Falkner of Margravine, Osman Karim Fatah, Mark Fisher MP, Margaret Gilmore, Dominic Grieve MP, Professor Alastair Hay, Julian Hayes, Gerald Howarth MP, Chief Constable Ken Jones, Lord Lloyd of Berwick, Alastair Lyon, Mark Oaten MP and Haras Rafiq. One of our interviewees was a Kurd who had been held on suspicion of terrorism over the non-existent plot to bomb Old Trafford stadium. For entirely understandable reasons, he asked to remain anonymous. In parts, I have drawn heavily from Dr David Morrison’s superbly researched essays, “What became of Blair’s ‘several hundred’ terrorists?”; “Blair forced to change spin”; “Blair’s pre-holiday package”; and “House of Lords says NO to detention without trial”. These essays can be viewed in full at www.david-morrison.org.uk/counter-terrorism.

I would also like to thank executive producer Eamonn Matthews and film producer/director Dai Richards, with both of whom I have tested to destruction many of the arguments put forward in this pamphlet, and from whom I have learnt a great deal. Assistant producer Anna Ewart-James and researcher Waleed Ghani have worked brilliantly on this project and I have mercilessly pillaged their hard work. Waleed has also kindly read the manuscript, prepared the appendices and has saved me from

THE USE AND ABUSE OF TERROR

some embarrassing errors. Matthew Grimshaw very kindly read the pamphlet and made valuable observations. Needless to say any remaining errors of judgement and fact remain my own.

Finally, I am indebted to Dorothy Byrne, Head of News and Current Affairs at Channel 4. It was her idea to make the film and she has been an inspiration throughout.

Peter Osborne
February 2006

A RECOMMENDATION

Anthony Barnett

I RECOMMEND THIS PAMPHLET to everyone who is concerned about the fate of Britain and how it is governed.

I ask you to put aside all your usual prejudice for the 30 minutes or so it takes to scan its content and consider its implications and arguments at face value.

Perhaps you might be persuaded to do so because Peter Osborne is a man of the right and I am from the left and we are such an unlikely combination that it might give pause for thought, in an age when such pauses are all too rare and valuable. It is for this reason I agreed to write this recommendation.

Two issues bring us together, Tony Blair and terrorism. First, terrorism. There is an extremely remote but not totally inconceivable possibility that fanatics bent on martyrdom could get hold of nuclear weapons and, having done so, would be unable to overcome the difficulties of transporting them to America and would explode them here.

Everything to prevent this that needs to be done should be done. The basic steps are clear: we need a cool, tight focus; very good intelligence; a determined effort to isolate terrorists from the communities that might sympathise with them, not least because these communities are the best source of such intelligence; grown-up communication with all citizens by the authorities; and on a world as well as domestic scale, policies that are just, honest and honourable and do not inflame people to take revenge (or to sympathise with those who call for revenge) against our government.

THE USE AND ABUSE OF TERROR

Second, Tony Blair. We both feel, I all the more so after reading Osborne's pamphlet, that Britain's Prime Minister has done the opposite of all this. He has lost his cool, amplified tabloid prejudices, called for measures that are likely to widen support for armed opposition to his policies, proved himself unable to communicate with the population in an adult fashion and committed British forces to operations that are dishonest.

Perhaps this strikes you as unfair. But Osborne assesses the evidence of an important moment, intended to be a defining one, when the Prime Minister hijacked Britain's anti-terrorist policies on 5 August, a month after 7/7. Within weeks of the atrocities, a careful cross-party agreement on new measures had been concluded. Blair shattered it. An account of this can be found in the pages that follow. Here I simply ask, did the Prime Minister communicate this grave development in cool, clear and adult language?

Here is part of what he said:¹

Let me just say this to people very, very clearly, this is the beginning of, and there will be lots of battles in the months ahead on this, let's be quite clear because of the way that the law has been interpreted over a long period of time, and I am prepared for those battles in the months ahead. I am also absolutely and completely determined to make sure that this happens.

It does not make sense – although the Prime Minister when speaking has a mesmeric capacity to convince his listeners into believing that he is lucid and they understand him. Against whom is he pitting himself in this hyperventilated image-battle? Osborne shows how the Government had had a bad headline day. Blair was determined to put it right. This he did, for the day after his speech the *Sun* screamed: VICTORY FOR SUN OVER NEW TERROR LAWS.

¹ From his Press Conference www.number-10.gov.uk/output/Page8041.asp

A RECOMMENDATION

I had not known this and was shocked. What I had known, for I shouted at the television when I heard the Prime Minister suddenly announcing this on the news clip, was that he said:

What I'm trying to do here is, and this will be followed up with the action in the next few weeks as I think you will see, is to send a clear signal out that the rules of the game have changed.

The *whole point* of defeating terrorism is to defend and preserve our rules, not overthrow them. For example, not jailing people without a fair trial, or the presumption of innocence. These are our rules, this is our game, and, to be focused, such rules are necessary to defeat terrorism. Who is this person who on 5 August thinks he can suddenly declare that our rules have changed and then go on holiday?

Well, we know what sort of person he is. He is someone whose judgement cannot be trusted on central issues of war and peace.

Here I think the argument should be widened briefly as essential background to the pamphlet. Osborne shows how Blair and his officials at first denied there was any connection between the 7/7 terror attacks on London and the Iraq war, and then denied that they had denied it when their denial could no longer withstand scrutiny.

Why did they want to deny the obvious in the first place? In part because they wanted to generalise 'the threat' and live off the politics of fear. But also because they did not want to talk about Iraq.

The more important argument, perhaps, concerns George Bush's Washington and Blair's relationship to it. But let's just stick to British domestic politics.

On 9 September 2002, to prepare the public for war, the British Government published its assessment of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction.² Known as the September dossier, it was personally introduced by the Prime Minister who endorsed the claim which led the headlines the next day that Saddam Hussein

² See www.fco.gov.uk/Files/kfile/iraqdossier.pdf

THE USE AND ABUSE OF TERROR

had weapons of mass destruction that could be ready for use within 45 minutes. (I was told that in so far as there might be any actual source for this story, it was possibly a reference to CS gas grenades, but I think the true source of the story was a desire for a tabloid-friendly frightener.)

The dossier also included more serious statements, for example a section of its executive summary reads:

As a result of the intelligence we judge that Iraq has:

- *continued to produce chemical and biological agents*

These are extremely toxic substances which, of course, Saddam had made and used before the 1991 war with Kuwait. But then he lost that war and the UN entered the country and destroyed both his stockpiles and his factories.

The person who led the team that did this, who met and assessed the people who made the chemical WMD and who knew the nature of Iraq's technology, was Ron Manley. He was living in Cornwall after his retirement but continued to work part-time for the Ministry of Defence. Manley was *not asked* to assess the intelligence.

openDemocracy managed to find and interview him after the invasion.³ He explained that the technology for producing the chemical WMD agents in military quantity involved building facilities that had to be ventilated for their workforce to survive; and that this could not have been done without being observed.

Manley hated Saddam Hussein and had assumed he had somehow kept back some WMD for what he calls a "panic attack", but added:

My view has been all along that they didn't retain any militarily significant quantities of chemical weapons... The point is that production of these materials on a large scale really is not something you can easily hide. You could hide the individual items of equipment or the raw materials in, say, Saddam's massive palace complexes. But

³ To hear the interview, see www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-iraq/article_1351.jsp

A RECOMMENDATION

when you actually start to build a plant and manufacture chemical agents it's a whole different story.

In other words, experts knew at the time that the dossier was plain wrong.

When put under pressure to explain himself to the Labour Party Conference, Tony Blair said that he was sorry the intelligence was wrong but he was not sorry he had helped overthrow Saddam Hussein. Isn't there something disingenuous about this? Does a Minister bear no responsibility for the assessment of the intelligence and information he or she receives?

Had the Prime Minister said, "Go and find the best person to help us assess this threat to Britain from Iraq's WMD", which is what he should have done, why then Ron Manley would have been asked.

And *was* Blair so "sorry" that the intelligence provided was wrong, when afterwards he promoted the person responsible for it to become head of MI6?

How has he got away with misleading Britain over the reasons for going to war with Iraq?

This question lies at the heart of Peter Osborne's pamphlet. He himself provides part of the answer: the media. But can it be that it is the headlines and not the people's representatives that matter?

In his conclusion Osborne asks us to consider what it means when the Prime Minister of the day throws his full weight behind the police to demand a measure they consider to be vital to our national security – and then Parliament comfortably defeats him.

He laments the loss of trust that is involved. But I asked myself, and I think the reader should ask, after such a parliamentary reprimand, *why didn't he have to resign?*

Anthony Barnett
10 February 2006

Anthony Barnett is the Editor-in-Chief of openDemocracy.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

THE FIRST TIME I ever spoke to Tony Blair was by telephone at about 8.30am on 10 March 1993. I was then a junior political reporter on the *Evening Standard*, while Blair was shadow Home Secretary. He rang me up in an anxious frame of mind. Labour was preparing to announce that it was keeping up its opposition to the renewal of the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA).

Tony Blair told me that the Labour Party was committed to fighting terrorism. “We are suggesting nothing,” he said, “that in any way inhibits the police and security services from doing their job.”

The youngish ex-barrister, who in those days still lived in Islington, told me that it would be disgraceful to accuse the Labour Party of being soft on terrorism simply because it opposed the PTA. He suggested that, on the contrary, Labour was courageously holding out against knee-jerk politics. I can remember an implication in our conversation of how easy it would be to pander to the right-wing press, yet how wrong to do so. He was adamant that there was no contradiction between respect for civil liberties and security against terrorism.

He said that Labour was adamantly opposed to the “exclusion orders” imposed by the Conservative Government, giving powers to restrict rights to travel. He expressed his concern about the PTA provisions which allowed suspects to be held for one week without a reason being given. “If you are a terrorist you should be under lock and key,” the future Prime Minister told me. “If you are not, you shouldn’t. If you are suspected of being one, you should be under surveillance.”

THE USE AND ABUSE OF TERROR

Looking back at the copy I filed that day I can see that the *Evening Standard*, though then a Conservative supporting newspaper, gave Tony Blair a fair crack of the whip. This is what I wrote:

On the day of the discovery of an enormous cache of explosives in London, Labour is aware its stance will appear to some as if it is supporting civil rights for terrorists. But shadow Home Secretary Tony Blair is determined Labour will carry on with its long-standing opposition to the Act on the grounds that it makes unacceptable inroads into civil liberties.

The purpose of this pamphlet is partly to examine why the Prime Minister no longer seems to believe that civil liberties and security are compatible. It will try and explain why, instead of holding out bravely against the tabloid press, he now appeases it.

This pamphlet will argue that the Government is fighting terror in the wrong way. It will show that some legislation is less designed to fight terrorism than to fight a publicity campaign. Too much of its activity is aimed at generating newspaper headlines. Too often Tony Blair's key target is less Osama Bin Laden than the editor of the *Sun*. The Prime Minister prefers the short-term gratification that comes for being praised for being "tough on terror" to the long-term slog of finding a solution. This false perspective has led to a series of serious mistakes.

This pamphlet will show how the Prime Minister does not tell the truth about terror. Rather than look the threat steadfastly in the face, the British public has been fed half-truths, falsehoods and lies.

It will also demonstrate that New Labour has set out to politicise terror, to use it for narrow party advantage. Both major opposition parties have repeatedly offered to join with the Government to confront the major terrorist threat that Britain undoubtedly faces. They were right to do so. Yet again and again, their offers have been spurned. Meanwhile those who stood up for civil liberties – as Tony Blair did in 1993 – are now accused of giving succour to the terrorists.

INTRODUCTION

The Prime Minister has promoted a false narrative on terror. He claims that only New Labour is ready and willing to face up to the terror threat. One way New Labour illustrates this point is through misleading statements and public scares, which in many cases turn out to be unfounded. At times, Ministers have been so keen to make political use of the terror threat that their public statements have risked prejudicing impending criminal trials.

It should be stressed that the Government is by no means solely responsible for this distorted public discourse on terror. The police and, to an even larger extent, the British media organisations have had a reckless attitude. Two key case histories – the “Ricin Plot” and the alleged terrorist conspiracy to blow up Old Trafford football ground – demonstrate the unreliability of both official statements and media reporting about terrorism.

A significant amount of press coverage in the two cases mentioned above was fabrication. But it should be stressed that this level of fantasy and invention was only possible in the first place, and sustainable over time, thanks to official prompting and collusion. Just as it suited Government policy that the “45 minute threat” should gain currency ahead of the invasion of Iraq, so was it helpful to Ministers that the British public should believe that Ricin had been found in a north London flat.

The experience of the past few years teaches us that what the Prime Minister, his Ministers, or the police say on the subject of terror must be treated with great scepticism. This is damaging: only a Government which possesses the trust of the British people is in a position to ask us to surrender our civil liberties. That trust has been forfeited.



This pdf only includes the first chapter of the pamphlet.

To order the whole pamphlet (60 pages), please contact the Centre for Policy Studies.

Price £10.00, inclusive of p&sp.

Centre for Policy Studies
57 Tufton Street, London SW1P 3QL
Tel: 020 7222 4488 Fax: 020 7222 4388
e-mail: mail@cps.org.uk Website: www.cps.org.uk

Credit Cards accepted