

Comment

The Price of Peace

Visitors to the City of London have been pleasantly surprised this summer. What was once a busy, crowded, traffic-filled, polluted square mile is now an agreeable townscape. Cars no longer jam its narrow streets frustrated by the medieval road plan. Calm pedestrian areas have now been opened up. The crammed pubs, which are a feature of lunchtime in the City, now have space on the pavements to accommodate their customers at tables more reminiscent of other European cities than London. It is possible to drink a glass of wine, a pint of beer or a cup of coffee, outside without being crushed, or suffocated by carbon monoxide. There is perhaps a price to be paid for all of this, or so you might think. Tourists, strollers, well-heeled city types carelessly slinging their handbags over the backs of cafe chairs offer an overwhelming temptation to pickpockets and petty thieves. However, crime appears to be on the decline in the City; that is to say non-executive crime is falling. The City is a safer place now than it has ever been. Who is responsible for this?

On 10 April, 1992, a 1,000 lb bomb exploded at the Baltic Exchange in the City. Three innocent passers-by were killed and 91 were injured. A few hours later, another bomb exploded at Staples Corner at the beginning of the M1. Both incidents caused millions of pounds worth of damage. The explosion on the M1 brought traffic chaos to most of North London and provoked further huge financial loss by making people late for work and ensuring that freight transport be re-routed at greater expense. The bomb in the City, apart from causing outrage at the tragic and wicked attack on human life, shook the confidence of all of the major financial institutions in the ability of the police and anti-terrorist squads to guarantee the safety of their workers and the security of their property. Noises were made about withdrawal from London. In April 1993, a lorry bomb exploded in Bishopsgate. Again the innocent suffered. One man who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time was killed. This explosion caused £1 billion of damage.

Walking around the perimeter of the bombed zone soon afterwards was an odd experience. It seemed that war had come to London. Scenes which were more associated with Beirut were now linked with the City. It was clear that something had to be done. The already shaky insurance market could not sustain further losses. Since the devastation of manufacturing enterprise, Britain is now more than ever dependent on financial services. Further outrages would have increased the pressure. Needless to say, the IRA was responsible for all of these incidents.

It is very difficult to defeat terror. Most governments opt for containment, hoping that in a war of attrition, those with the greatest resources in money and manpower will win through in the end. After the Bishopsgate bomb huge sums were invested in making the City of London secure. Now surveillance cameras are mounted in its streets. Many roads are closed to through traffic, such restrictions having the beneficial effect of speeding the passage of buses which are exempt from the proscription. The vast security operation is monitored from a central control room which ensures a twenty-four watch on the lanes and streets of the City. Many magnates and city-operators doubtless sleep easier in their beds at the thought of how well-protected they now are. The cost of the installation and maintenance of such security measures does not bear thinking about. So, if we look behind this pleasant city-scape we do not only see the hand of planners and architects, we see terror; carefully planned and ruthlessly executed terror.

In a recent interview a woman from the North of Ireland, whose husband had been killed in act of random terrorism by Loyalist paramilitaries, was asked if she had any hope as a result of the recent declaration of a ceasefire by the IRA. She answered that she had, "because everybody has had enough". When the Argentinian foreign Minister was asked what he thought the attitude of the British government would be to recent proposals by the Argentines for the resolution of the dispute over the Falklands he answered that he did not know, but that one of the factors influencing its decision would be the vast cost of maintaining a garrison there. In a country which is desperately short of cash such arguments are powerful. The changing political situation in the world has diminished somewhat the IRA's sources of supply. In some ways both sides seem to have fought each other to a stand still. Diplomacy is now beginning to succeed military strategy. Is there place for Terrorism in diplomatic negotiations?

It is now clear that the British government will withdraw from Ireland as soon as it becomes politically feasible to do so. The clause in the "Downing Street Declaration" proclaiming the lack of British strategic interest in Ireland is easy to decode. Public opinion in Britain is largely in favour of withdrawal from Ireland. However, any overt sign that the British Government has capitulated to terrorism could just as easily sway public opinion the other way forcing British politicians to trim their policies accordingly. The British government must now perform a skillful high-wire act; on the one hand negotiating with Sinn Fein whilst on the other still claiming that it does not negotiate with terrorists and that terrorism will not win out.

Sinn Fein is now in a strong position, a position which its support for

the 'armed struggle' has gained it. British officials may claim that Sinn Fein represents a minority in a minority. However, this minority is not negligible. It has secured a hearing with the Vice-President of the United States and it is only a matter of time before the President himself will meet Mr Adams (Mr Clinton seems to be in the business of collecting islands at the moment). Sinn Fein may publicly proclaim its distance from the IRA, and the British Government may assert that it never gives in to terror, but things are looking a little different now.

In the midst of all of this where are the Unionists? The official Unionists have been keeping very quiet. They realise that they have very few cards to play. They have few if any powerful allies abroad and not many more on the mainland of Britain. They realise that the economy of Northern Ireland is devastated and, without a settlement, can only decline into oblivion, with all that entails for social disorder. They cannot in any way publicly associate with Loyalist paramilitaries, they are forced to rely on whatever the British Government can secure for them. In the end economic and political realities will weigh much more with British Governments than any concerns for a minority within a minority in the British Isles. The Ceasefire gives some cause for hope, but not everybody will be satisfied. Some compromises will have to be made. A new story will be written, but it is a story which must include three-year old Jonathan Ball and twelve year-old Jonathan Parry, as well as Ian Gow, Lady Tebbit, the victims of the Enniskillen bombing and many thousands of others. It is not only Republican patriots who have suffered and died for Ireland. If Ireland is to have peace that should not be forgotten.

AJW

The Profession of Conversion

A Sermon preached at the Solemn Profession of Brendan Slevin OP by Fr. Malcolm McMahon OP, Prior Provincial, at Blackfriars, Oxford, 10 September 1994

Brendan,

I am sure that you are here only because of God's mercy. It is what you seek but it is also that which motivates you and has brought you to this point in your life, and our lives. What you are about to do is to make public your conversion. That which in most of us is a slow process of becoming aware of the God who is at work in each us. Making