

Stop beating about the bush



Photography: PA

CAN GOOD come out of evil? President Bush claims that it can, and that the tragedy of 11 September 2001 can be converted if the people of America learn how to live in the light of what has happened.

A popular claim since the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre is that "the world will never be the same again". There is so much that is fundamentally wrong we would hope world leaders will initiate a democratic discussion about reforms.

We need not take our cue from terrorists who blaspheme even as they cause the deaths of thousands of innocent people. Osama bin Laden protests about the values of the West even while sanctioning the use of violence that deprives his words of moral authority.

In fact, his fortune – which rests on the extraction of land rents from the holy cities of Mecca and Medina – reveal him as much a cause of the world's problems as anybody else. The tragedy is that it should take the evil actions of his terrorists to awaken Western leaders to the realisation that the world needs to redefine the rules under which civilisation operates.

Some liberal commentators in the US, who criticise the bombing of Afghanistan, argue that it would be better if the US administration spread abroad the \$1.4 trillion which it is returning to rich citizens in the form of reduced taxes. But the conventional response of helping others with foreign aid has a history of failure. It is rooted in a doctrine of dependency that is one of the sources of discontent with the Western model.

The surfacing of this discontent in the form of fundamentalist creeds (which are as evident in the US as in the Middle East and Asia) is prima facie evidence of a process that deprives people of their cultural identities and personal dignities. Addressing this is not a capitulation to the sort of terrorists who gassed people on the Tokyo metro.

Redefining the rules of the social game needs to begin with fundamental questions, some of which require serious introspection. For example, Laura Bush, the US President's wife, says that 11 September dispelled a "self-indulgent" complacency among the people of America, and that a new, kinder mood is evident.

What is it that made Americans self-indulgent? What was it that restrained them from being kind to strangers before 11 September? A comprehensive answer is required, if policy-makers are to develop strategies that will improve both the quality of people's lives in the US and in the rest of the world.

If the US President does not wish to beat around the bush he needs to come to terms with the primary cause of social discontent. Wars are fought for supreme control over territory. Nation states seek land so that they can extract the rental surplus to pay for their armies, bureaucracies and the privileges of political elites. Civil exploitation of one group by another is driven by the desire to acquire a disproportionate share of the rental surplus generated from land and natural resources.

Sharing the resources of earth on the basis of a philosophy of justice is the challenge we all face. When we have the answer, it will not be necessary for US soldiers to be deployed; nor will it be necessary for oil sheikhs to invest their petro-dollars in US real estate.

A principled division of income based on a socially fair sharing of the resources would deliver healthy communities.

It would be churlish to ask President Bush why it took a terrorist attack before the political class could ask itself whether the people needed to address the question "how should we live?" But the answer would surely be the finest memorial to those who died in the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001.

The Editor

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