
THE TABLET

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HARD QUESTIONS FOR THE POLICE

The reason for having confidence in the police is not that they never make mistakes but that they admit them and learn from them. Clearly the raid by 250 officers on the home of a Muslim family in Forest Gate, London, in which a young man received a non-fatal gunshot wound, was a mistake. The police have apologised for the hurt they caused. But they have their defenders, including the Prime Minister, who have pointed to the dilemma they faced on receipt of credible intelligence that some in the household were about to mount a terrorist attack. Tony Blair must have recalled his own dilemma on receiving credible intelligence that Saddam Hussein was manufacturing weapons of mass destruction. As in Forest Gate, the intelligence was acted on and nothing was found.

In the Iraqi case the intelligence services learned a painful lesson. But it is not clear that the Metropolitan Police have been equally critical of their own thought processes. Descriptions of the raid by the victims indicate a police mind-set presuming guilt, not an effort to see whether the intelligence they were acting on was true or not. The tip-off could have been spiteful, or it could have been an attempt deliberately to increase the alienation between the police and the Muslim community. The officers taking part do not appear to have been briefed about such reservations, nor about the risk of angering the Muslim population once accounts of their behaviour started to circulate. Breaking into houses in the early hours looking for weapons, smashing and assaulting all before them, is the pattern of heavy-handed anti-terrorist work the world over. Before it realised its mistake, this was where

the British army went wrong in Northern Ireland and where the American army is still going wrong in Iraq.

It would be catastrophic for the Metropolitan Police to go down the same road. In the 1970s, crass police tactics against the IRA treated anything or anyone remotely Irish as guilty until proved innocent. Some of the most notorious miscarriages of justice from that period involved faulty intelligence, which the police were too inclined to believe because their minds were prejudiced. Forest Gate suggests precisely the same mistake. The targeted family were indeed conservative Muslims and the menfolk wore long black beards. A more intelligent use of intelligence would have suggested that real terrorists rarely correspond to the stereotypical images of popular culture, and indeed a successful terrorist would go out of his way not to look like one.

This is not just a Muslim problem. It concerns the whole community. The antidote to Muslim alienation is to make the Muslim population know it is not alone, and all other communities stand alongside it. On the key question, however, of whether the police could have ignored the information they received, Muslims themselves would have to admit that the dilemma was a real one. Events in London last July still throw a long shadow. Intelligence services failed to react when the leader of the four suicide bombers first came to their attention. Faulty intelligence cost Jean Charles de Menezes his life when he was shot dead by police on a London tube train. The police are going to need a great deal more of the other sort of intelligence, namely prudence and a sense of proportion, if this pattern of mistakes is not to be repeated.

OUR FRIENDS' PROBLEMS

One of the misfortunes of the Church of England is that the present Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, has been preoccupied with crisis management and unable to give enough attention to what he is best at, the convincing exposition of the case for Christian faith. Morally he may lean to the liberal side, but doctrinally he is orthodox with an unusual ability to present familiar truths differently and attractively. A thorough renewal of its grounding in doctrine would have been good for the Church of England, which is no doubt one of the reasons he was appointed. But he was soon mired in controversy over his intention, eventually abandoned, to elevate a gay but celibate priest, the Revd Jeffrey John, to the rank of bishop. It marked the point at which conservative evangelicals in the Church of England and elsewhere in the Anglican Communion seemed to declare war on him, manoeuvring to frustrate his every effort. The internal split in the Communion over gay bishops (and female bishops, to an extent) has sent things from bad to worse.

One voice leading the chorus of critics has been that of his immediate predecessor, Lord Carey. It is no secret that he did not welcome his successor's appointment, having blocked him from becoming a diocesan bishop a few years earlier. In his most recent speech he said that when he left office in 2002 the Anglican Communion was in good heart. But he went on: "It is difficult to say in what way we are now a Communion. Bitterness, hostility, misunderstanding and strife now separate provinces from one another and divide individual provinces."

An open letter is currently circulating among senior clergy in the Church of England, calling on Lord Carey to desist. He has three questions to face. Is he aggravating the very disunity he is dismayed by? Wouldn't the problems that are besetting Dr Williams' leadership have arisen whoever was archbishop? Is it fair to undermine Dr Williams' authority when the job of being foremost primate of the Anglican Communion was becoming almost impossible anyway?

Internationally, the threat to Anglican unity is from gay bishops. Nationally, it is from women bishops. The Anglo-Catholic Forward in Faith movement is demanding a semi-breakaway church of its own, called a Third Province, in order to have no truck with female bishops. If it does not get what it wants, as seems likely, some of its members may decide that the time has come to depart for Rome, as many of their colleagues did after 1992's decision to ordain women priests. But they should not count on too warm a welcome if that is their only reason. Catholicism is for those who believe in it, not those who are fleeing a practice in another Church that they find unacceptable.

The Church of England's loss is not automatically the Catholic Church's gain. A weaker Anglican Church would be a weaker Christian partner for it across a whole range of issues. The Catholic Church, looking on from one side, and Lord Carey, looking from the other, ought both to see that the failure of Dr Williams' difficult balancing act, leading to a serious formal break-up into two or more parts, would be an historic calamity.