

16 September 2001

The Rt. Hon. David Lepper MP
John Saunders House
179 Preston Road
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Dear David,

The attacks on the US and their consequences

It occurs to me that following the shocking events of Tuesday you may now feel you have an easy way of answering my letter of 17th June. You could say: 'That is why we need the draconian anti-terrorist legislation which my party passed, and which you criticise.'

On the contrary, I believe that Tuesday's events show how dangerous a one-sided anti-terrorist approach to this problem is. We, the West, have been humiliated, so the argument goes, and so we must strike back to restore our pride, and to teach the terrorists a lesson. This may not always be what people say; it is, I believe, what many think. But wasn't that precisely what the terrorists themselves were trying to do, to teach *us* a lesson, to say: 'If you continue to support an unjust world order, we will find ways of fighting back; this is just a taster'? Evil thinking, you may say, but is it fundamentally more evil than supporting Israel in its colonial enterprise or starving hundreds of thousands in Iraq, or stirring up a hornets nest in Afghanistan over the years, or imposing an economic world order which condemns a large section of the world to abject poverty?

And is our lesson better than theirs because 'we' are democracies, while 'they' are 'terrorists' living in countries which are 'tyrannies'? If I were a Palestinian whose land had been stolen and who knew that the whole weight of American 'democracy', with Britain's active or tacit support, was being used to ensure that I could not fight back by legal means, I would greet such an argument with a wry smile. Why does our government, your government, have such difficulty in speaking plainly and without equivocation on these matters, instead of cow-towing to the Americans all the the time? Is there something we don't know? Are there secret agreements which bind us helplessly to the US? I guess if there were, you wouldn't know it anyway.

I am not trying to justify the horrific attacks on Tuesday. I want to live in a peaceful world where the threat of war, in whatever form, has been banished and where we can all live without the danger of being wiped out. What I *am* saying, as I did in the *Argus* and *Leader*, is that the much heralded ‘new world order’ makes such terror more and more likely. There is a need to start redressing the power imbalance between the West and the Third World. The US, which to a large extent means the multi-nationals, is unlikely to give up any power unless it is obliged to do so. This means that the rest of the world needs to think how to avoid catastrophe by reclaiming its power. This is not anti-Americanism, just as my position in relation to the Palestinians is not anti-Jewish-Israeli (though I must say I *am* against the concept of the state of Israel). Without some levelling out of power, the Americans, and Jewish-Israelis, are in mortal danger – and that danger is unlikely to leave us untouched in this country.

The contract between populations and their leaders continues, as in feudal times, to offer security from one side in return for an agreement to accept the status quo on the other. Obviously this arrangement breaks down if the population senses that leaders can’t ensure security. This is why terrorism is so damaging to leaders and why they tend to think that any action against possible perpetrators is better than doing nothing. But it seems to me that populations could be educated to recognise (if they don’t already understand it) that terrorism is evidence of a breakdown of the political contract in the wider global context. The US stands as the only superpower and not surprisingly, like Britain before it, persuades itself that it acts in the interests not only of its own population, but also on behalf of all ordinary decent people in the world. This is arrogant and disingenuous in the extreme. The reality is that the US, which to a large extent represents international capitalism, seeks to maximise its own benefit at the cost of others. It would be surprising if it were not so.

The problem is that America’s much vaunted democracy is not for export. In the world at large it prefers tyrannies. They are easier to control, and they ensure that the legitimate aspirations of their populations are kept under control. Hence America’s support for the hideously unjust Saudi oligarchy, for example, not to mention their sponsorship of Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Ladin until they became nuisances. The United Nations, for all its intrinsic structural faults and like the League of Nations before it, was intended to ensure a degree of world democracy, and the opportunity for representatives of states to speak out on behalf of their populations. Of course sponsoring tyrannies was one way of

ensuring that those who spoke at the UN were *not* representative of their populations, but even this degree of power redistribution was intolerable to the US which has simply taken to ignoring the world organisation, no doubt following Israel's lead.

How, then, are the oppressed populations of much of the world to express their dissatisfaction? What voice do they have in the exercise of power? How can they view the US, or more generally the West, as their protectors? Is it, in these circumstances, surprising that extremist groups attract a sufficient number of supporters to enable them to carry out the kind of atrocity we saw on Tuesday. Fundamentalist Islam provides a rallying point; it is not the source of the problem. Simply trying to crack down on terrorism is treating the symptom, not the cause. I suspect you would say that Tony Blair's statement on this subject was intended for international public consumption, and that behind the scenes much wiser counsels are prevailing. But if this is so, surely we, the people, should know about it otherwise our country will be dragged along by the weight of its own public rhetoric.

I realise that this whole subject must be an extremely difficult one for you. Whatever your private views, you have to exercise caution in your public statements otherwise you risk finding yourself out on a limb and without the influence you might have over the present fast-moving events. I am not, therefore, asking you to reply to this letter, or indeed to that of 17th June. I want you to know what I think, to reflect on how much you agree, and to consider how you can use your position, as a back-bencher, to positively affect the debate which must be going on both in this country and in the US. I would welcome the opportunity to talk to you sometime, but I guess you are very busy at the moment, and I feel this is not a suitable subject to bring up at your regular surgeries.

Yours sincerely

Francis Clark-Lowes
(Chair, Brighton & Hove Palestine Solidarity Campaign)