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Did 9/11 change everything?

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Dr Chris Allen

“The sheer magnitude of that one day makes it near impossible to respond to such a simple yet deeply profound question. Suggesting that 9/11 changed everything cannot adequately be communicated without resorting to exaggeration; suggesting that it did not, sounds little more than flippant or dismissive.

But 9/11 did bring about change. Change that was rapidly conceived but which has left a legacy that, to do this day, continues to shape and impact on how we think, act and see ourselves. This can be highlighted by focusing on two incidents.

The first occurred a day or two after the attacks on the United States when the Los Angeles Times published an editorial which declared that the ‘next big thing’ would be fear. Frank Furedi, in the preface to his book, Culture of fear: risk-taking and the morality of low expectation, explained how, in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the defining feature of this fear was the belief that the West – and all that it stood for – had been confronted by a destructive force that would threaten its very existence. The front page of the Guardian newspaper a day after 9/11 being emblazoned with the single word ‘Armageddon’ appeared to bear witness to this reality. In the days that ensued, our collective fear continued to feed itself, creating the disposition to speculate and exaggerate about ever greater fears and threats that appeared to be lurking just around the corner.

The second took place on the 20 September 2001. At a joint session of Congress to consider the response to the 9/11 attacks, George W. Bush told the gathered Congress men and women – and indeed everyone else in the world - that "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists". In one statement, the landscape was set where no middle ground and no shades of grey were able to exist. The world had become a place where it was ‘us’ against ‘them’. Any voices that questioned or doubted were seen to be weak and pandering, affording ‘them’ some sort of victory for the atrocities they had committed.

Combine the two and within a fortnight of the attacks, a climate had been established where our escalating fears had become transformed into unquestioned realities. ‘They’ were ‘our’ enemy even if we didn’t really know who ‘they’ were.

It was not difficult to identify who ‘they’ were. Islam and Muslims became equated with the actions of a handful of violent terrorists. Islamophobia grew with anti-Muslim and anti-Islamic attitudes and sentiments becoming increasingly normal and taken for granted.

More real though has been the impact on ordinary Muslims. As my research has repeatedly shown, in this country and elsewhere, Muslims are routinely and regularly called names, have headscarves pulled from their heads, and have their mosques and homes vandalised and firebombed. In the national political spaces, small pieces of material worn across the faces of a tiny minority of Muslim women have been described as a ‘barrier to integration’. Election campaigns entitled ‘Islam Referendum Day’ and ‘Islam Out of Britain’ have resulted in the British National Party being the first far-right political organisation to become the official party of opposition in a council chamber in British history. From the more explicit discourses of the English Defence League – a movement that wouldn’t exist without 9/11 – much of this is underpinned by the belief that Muslims and Islam are not, and never will be, a part of who ‘we’ are. For many, this is now an unquestioned reality that has had, and is continuing to have, detrimental consequences.

Where do we even start in trying to challenge these unquestioned realities? A start point might be right under our very noses. In Birmingham, like many other towns and cities across England, its city centre was marred by gangs of rampaging youths in the recent riots. These events ended with the tragic death of three young Muslim men who had taken to the streets with numerous others, not to riot or loot, but to protect their communities. From the chaos that was unfolding elsewhere, the quiet but dignified voice of Tariq Jahan, whose son Haroon Jahan was one of those murdered, emerged. From this Muslim voice, someone from a community that had for the past decade been vilified and seen to be against ‘us’ came a message of respect and reconciliation. As he put it, “We live together and we can stay together”.

And maybe that is what is needed then for the second decade after 9/11. Maybe now is the time for quiet and dignity. From ten years ago when you were either with us or against us, maybe now is the time for all of us to live together and stay together. Maybe now is the time for courage rather than fear. "

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