# Calling Home: On the Bali Bombing

The shock wave from the car-bomb outside the nightclub on Kuta Beach in Bali went all the way to Australia in a matter of minutes. As soon as the young Australian survivors stopped trembling long enough to touch one button at a time, they were calling home to say they were all right. But there were some young Australians who did not call home, because they were not all right. The Australian casualty list is lengthening even as I compose this opening paragraph, and by the time I reach a conclusion the casualty list will be longer still. I owe it to my dead, wounded and bereaved countrymen to say straight away that I have no clear idea of what that conclusion will be. This is no time to preach, and least of all from a prepared text.

Some of Australia's commentators on politics might already be realising that. Now they, too, must feel their way forward: the bomb has done to their certainties what it did to the revellers in the nightclub. Before the bomb went off, the pundits had all the answers about the attack on the World Trade Centre in New York. In the year and a bit between September 11th 2001 and October 12th 2002 they had, from the professional viewpoint, a relatively easy time. One didn't question their capacity for sympathy: Australian journalists pride themselves on being a hard-bitten crew, but most of them could imagine that being trapped hundreds of feet up in a burning building was no fit way to die. What one did sometimes question was their capacity for analysis. A prepared text was rolled out, and went on unrolling.

According to the prepared text, the attack was really America's fault, because of its bad behaviour elsewhere in the world. For insular Americans, the attack was a salutary illustration of what the Australian pundit Janet McCalman called their "lowly place in the affections of the poor and struggling". Australia, unashamedly America's ally, was effectively an oppressor too. If you took into account the behaviour of the Australian government when faced with the crisis engendered by the arrival, or non-arrival, of a Norwegian container ship full of Afghan refugees, Australia was even more guilty than America. Australia (perennially a racist country as John Pilger's historical researches had incontrovertibly proved) was a flagrant provocation to the wretched of the earth. Imperialist America was not only treating the helpless Middle East as its personal property, America had racist Australia for its lackey. No wonder Al-Qa'ida was angry. On Christmas Eve, in the Melbourne Age, another pundit, Michael Leunig, called for a national prayer for Osama bin Laden on Christmas Day. "It's a family day", Leunig explained, "and Osama's our relative." It is not recorded whether the aforesaid Osama, sitting cross-legged beside his Christmas tree somewhere under Afghanistan, offered up a prayer for Michael. He might have done: after all, they were on a first-name basis.

The prepared text kept on unrolling. Bob Ellis, with whom I was once at university in Sydney, is famous in Australia as an engagingly erratic commentator still carrying a torch for the old Australian Labor Party, the one that cared about the welfare of the workers until Bob Hawke re-educated it to care about the welfare of Rupert Murdoch and Kerry Packer. Though Ellis's torch is a jam-tin nailed to a broomstick and fuelled with household kerosene, he carries it with a certain shambolic panache. The Australian descriptive term "rat-bag" is often used of him even by his friends, but nobody doubts that his heart is in the right place. Certainly he doesn't. He was easily able to discredit President Bush's "war on terrorism" by pointing out that terrorism is everywhere, and is especially prevalent in the allegedly civilized Western democracies. A letter from a creditor, explained Ellis, can be a terrorist act. (Considering what it must be like for a creditor trying to get Ellis's attention, this might even be true.) A concept basic to the prepared text was that there could be no end to all this deplorable but understandable Islamist outrage until the Palestinian matter was settled: a settlement which was in America's power to bring about just by picking up a telephone and instructing Sharon to back off. There was one conspicuous reason, however, why America would never do this: John Howard was Prime Minister of Australia. John Howard, sustained in his post by nothing except a majority of the Australian electorate, was a fascist in all but name. The mere presence of John Howard in Canberra, instead of in his local gaol, was overwhelming evidence of America's global power to crush the hopes of the poor and struggling.

Such was the consensus before the nightclub in Bali turned into a nightmare. Consensus might be too large a word. There are publications in Australia that dissent from the standard view: the magazine Quadrant is only one example, and so prominent a newspaper as the Sydney Morning Herald carries the opinion of several commentators who sing a different tune. Though they might enjoy promoting themselves as lone voices, the lone voices add up to a considerable choir. But they must get used to wearing a sticky label: Right Wing. The consensus considers itself to be left wing in the best sense. The appellation is one that an old stager like me is reluctant to grant, because the consequence of granting it, and then expressing dissent, is to be classified as conservative. In my own case, the main thing I want to conserve is the welfare of the common people: in that regard I am plodding in Bob Ellis's zig-zag slipstream as he carries his ramshackle torch.

But let us allow for the moment that the mass outcry against American hegemony is the voice of the true, the eternal and the compassionate left. Allowing that, we can put the best possible construction on its pervasiveness. Not just the majority of the intellectuals, academics and schoolteachers, but most of the face-workers in the media, share the view that international terrorism is to be explained by the vices of the liberal democracies. Or at any rate they shared it until a few days ago. It will be interesting, in the shattering light of an explosive event, to see if that easy view continues now to be quite so wide-spread, and how much room is made for the more awkward view that the true instigation for terrorism might not be the vices of the liberal democracies, but their virtues.

The consensus will die hard in Australia, just as it is dying hard here in Britain. On Monday morning the Independent carried an editorial headed: "Unless there is more justice in the world, Bali will be repeated". Towards the end of the editorial, it was explained that the chief injustice was "the failure of the US to use its influence to secure a fair settlement between Israelis and Palestinians". I count the editor of the Independent, Simon Kelner, as a friend, so the main reason I hesitate to say that he is out to lunch on this issue is that I was out to dinner with him last night. But after hesitating, say it I must, and add a sharper criticism: that his editorial writer sounds like an unreconstructed Australian intellectual, one who can still believe, even after his prepared text was charred in the nightclub, that the militant fundamentalists are students of history.

But surely the reverse is true: they are students of the opposite of history, which is theocratic fanaticism. Especially they are dedicated to knowing as little as possible about the history of the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians. A typical terrorist expert on the subject believes that Hitler had the right idea, that The Protocols of the Elders of Zion is true story, and that the obliteration of the state of Israel is a religious requirement. In furthering that end, the sufferings of the Palestinians are instrumental, and thus better exacerbated than diminished. To the extent that they are concerned with the matter at all, the terrorists epitomise the extremist pressure that had been so sadly effective in ensuring the continued efforts of the Arab states to persuade the Palestinians against accepting any settlement, no matter how good, that recognizes Israel's right to exist. But one is free to doubt by now — forced to doubt by now — that Palestine is the main concern.

The main concern of fundamentalist Islam is with moderate Islam, and especially with those Islamic states which, if they have not precisely embraced democracy, have nevertheless tried to banish theocracy from the business of government. That fundamentalism loathes the Western democracies goes without saying: or rather, it goes with a lot of saying, at the top of the voice. But the real horror, for the diehard theocrats, is the country with a large number of Muslims that has been infiltrated by the liberal ideas of the West. As a rule of thumb, you can say that the terrorists would like to wreak edifying vengeance on any predominantly Islamic country where you can see even a small part of a woman's face. Starting with Pakistan, you can see more and more of a woman's face as you move East. It was therefore predictable, after September 11th, that the terrorists would bend their efforts in the same direction. I only wish that I had predicted it straight away: we would all like to be blessed with as much foresight as hindsight. As things happened, it took me a few days.

A few days after the towers collapsed in New York, I flew East myself, from London to Sydney, thence to keep a speaking engagement in Adelaide. I flew by Malaysia Air, on a flight in which the crew outnumbered the passengers. The transit lounge in Kuala Lumpur was where I had my revelation. There was a prayer room for the faithful and an open bar for the rest of us. The two schools of thought were getting along fine, but it wasn't hard to imagine another breed of traveller who wouldn't stand for it. Here was an obvious target, and there were plenty more on the way to Australia, including the whole of Indonesia, where the fundamentalists were getting a lot better hearing than they were in Malaysia, but only because the Indonesian government was even more scared of what they might do.

My speech in Adelaide was supposed to entertain several hundred Australian businessmen, but I threw in a few sentences designed to register on a different kind of laugh meter. Making jokes about the Australian intellectuals is a dangerous business when your audience is anti-intellectual anyway, which, I think it fair to say, my audience was: there is too good a chance of flattering a prejudice. I had to make it clear that I was joking about my fellow professionals, not my enemies. But compelled by the memory of my revelation in Kuala Lumpur, I couldn't resist caning the Australian gauchiste commentators for their persistence in representing Australia as racist, exclusionist illiberal and immature. I did my best to make my message funny, but I also tried hard to make it clear. Australia, though it certainly had the tragedy of the Aboriginals to haunt its conscience, was one of the most mature, generous and genuinely multicultural democracies on earth. For that reason alone, Australia would be in the firing line.

Well, now it is, and sadly our best hope will be that some of our neighbouring countries to the North and West will draw most of the fire. Next month I have to be in Australia again, to deliver a speech in Sydney and Melbourne: a speech about libraries. In the speech, which I am composing now and have put aside to write this, I will propose, among other things, the founding in Australia of an Islamic library to which all the world's genuine Islamic scholars who are free to travel might come, there to continue the work of bringing a critical scrutiny to the sacred texts - the very work that was forcibly interrupted by the theocrats in the 19th Century, an interruption that led directly to the disasters of today. But to get there in time I will have to fly there, and I can't say I'm looking forward to the trip. I will be an old man soon, and the fact that I will be flying home through a long war-zone will bother me less than it would once have done, because I have had a life. But nobody wants his certainty of death pre-empted by a bunch of maniacs impelled by their certainty of Heaven, and the thought of all those slain or maimed young Australians, so full of life because they were too young even to realise what it means to be born and raised in a free country, will bring me home in despair.

(Guardian, November 16, 2002.)