

Letter from Scotland



Rising from Dante's Inferno – William Blake
(1757-1827)

At least William Blake's illustration of Dante's "Divine Comedy" shows mankind somehow wriggling our way out of the Inferno and eventually reaching Paradise. Right now though I feel we are deep in the inferno. Manchester may not be in Scotland, but we were all in Manchester this week.

The horror of that suicide bombing of innocent children at a pop concert stopped us all in our tracks. All thought of the election campaign went out the window. Instead, crowds gathered in George Square in Glasgow in sympathy for that other great industrial city. MSPs stood silent in Parliament. All of us wondered again at the cruelty of such a bomber and how we have come to this dreadful place. And how we are to get out of it...increased security, more surveillance, improving race relations, preventing radicalisation, fixing the source of the trouble in the Middle East.

Several Scottish fans were caught up in the attack, including two teenage girls from the Isle of Barra. One died and the other is in hospital with serious injuries. Seven "walking wounded" made it back to Scotland later that Monday night and were treated in hospitals here.

In line with the rest of the UK, the Scottish Government has stepped up security at possible targets because we appear to be dealing with a network of terrorists who could be planning future attacks. A dozen military and nuclear bases are being guarded by army patrols. Armed police will be seen over the weekend at the football Cup Final in Glasgow and at the Edinburgh Marathon. A visit to Edinburgh by former US President Barack Obama is also being carefully protected.

But along with the increased security, there is also defiance. The First Minister Nicola Sturgeon said at Holyrood : “Our best response now and always is to stand firm together, with determination and solidarity, and to make clear to those who seek to undermine our values, target our children and seek to destroy our way of life, that they will not succeed, not now and not ever.”

Scotland of course is not immune from terrorist attacks. Ten years ago, two Islamic extremists rammed their jeep loaded with petrol cans into the entrance to Glasgow Airport. Thanks to some quick thinking by staff, only five people were injured. One of the terrorists died in the attack.

The Justice Minister at the time Kenny MacAskill also became an expert on the Lockerbie bombing of December 1988. It was he who, in 2009, decided to release the only man ever convicted of bringing down Pan Am flight 103 and killing 270 people, Abdelbaset al-Megrahi.

It was a controversial decision, taken on compassionate grounds because Megrahi was dying of cancer. MacAskill has recently published a book giving his account of the affair and last week, as it happens, I went along to hear him talk about it. “Just because Megrahi showed no compassion to the innocent passengers on board that flight, does not mean we should not show compassion to him,” was his argument.

MacAskill has no doubt that Megrahi was guilty of playing a role in the bombing, but maintains that he was a small cog in a much larger wheel. He’s convinced that the plan to bomb Pan Am flight 103 was brewed up in Islamist terrorist circles in Iran in revenge for the Americans bringing down an Iranian passenger plane in July 1988 (even though that was almost certainly a mistake.)

Gaddafi’s Libya took on the task, having many a bloody bone to pick with “the West”, so a team of Libyan agents was

dispatched to assemble a bomb and smuggle it onto flight 103.

It's ironic, all these years later, that the Manchester bomber Salman Abedi was also Libyan, but born in Britain. MacAskill said in a newspaper article this week that we need to come to terms with the fact that "the threat now comes from within our own country..... not immigrants or refugees.....and it is fueled by a feeling of injustice among marginalised communities."

Sure, he says, the foreign policy of the Americans and the British has not helped but "the injustice at home needs to be tackled as much as the injustice abroad."

It's not an easy message to absorb, particularly when we are in the middle of the General Election which, up till last week at least, has been dominated by Brexit, immigration and nationalism.

So when we get back into the election campaign, older and wiser, let's hope we can scramble out of Dante's inferno and start climbing towards Blake's paradise.