

Interview with Bruce Kent

The CND, September 11 and the imperialist warmongering

Mehdi Kia: How do you see the events of September 11? Where do you place it? Was this a terrorist attack on the same level as the other terrorist attacks of the last decade, or as the US authorities claim, an event of a different order, an act of war and a declaration of war?

Bruce Kent: This was a major crime. A massacre. We have previously had mass murders. In the bombing of the Pan Am airline over Lockerbie approximately 400 lost their lives. Although the numbers were less the principle was the same. To me that was a non-state terror by an organised group against a specific country. The way to deal with it is also the same as you would with any murder.

I have to add that if we were to compare it with the record of states, including the United States, then as a terrorist act it is relatively moderate. God knows how many people lost their lives when America went into Panama to capture Norriega, or died at the hands of the Contras in Nicaragua or Pinochet in Chile. Therefore terror did not start with September 11. It is only now, however, that they have realised that those who do not have state power can also retaliate.

War of civilisations?

Mehdi Kia: Some believe that the events of September 11 opened a new chapter in the thick book of violence and gave terrorism new dimensions. They believe that this move is an expression of ethnic hatred and the war of civilisations. What are your views on this?

Bruce Kent: There is no doubt that this attack has polarised the Islamic world. Ninety percent of Muslim youth in the UK believe the bombing of Afghanistan is an attack on Islam. I see it as a moment in history when even the most stupid can understand that you are not totally immune from attack no matter how many weapons you hold. We need to build a world where the law, healthy structures, healthy relations, and economic justice allow six billion people to live alongside one another. It amazed me that the first reaction of the Americans was to enhance the Star Wars project which is precisely to enhance what I call out of date security. That you create a security umbrella that is ineffective instead of addressing such issues as justice, and global organisations which I believe are vital. Therefore I believe that this event has brought us to a moment in history when persons with any depth of thinking have arrived at new understandings on the issue of security. And this is very important.

Mehdi Kia: What are the roots of this affair? Why do a number of people take part in a suicidal attempt and kill thousands of people whose nationality, and religion and even their political and cultural leanings they do not know? Where does this hatred, anger or whatever you like to name it come from?

Bruce Kent: I think partly a religious base that promises paradise. But beyond this a burning feeling of injustice. That people they see as their own people have been abused and betrayed for decades. And they want revenge. They target the centres of

military and economic power in America, and if they could, they would have hit the centre of political power too. This was a burning feeling against the injustices of our world. And above these was a belief that the doors of paradise will open to those who fulfil these deeds. The letters that came out afterwards bear this out.

Mehdi Kia: Which injustice?

Bruce Kent: Our world is rich in injustice. 15 million children die every year from hunger or easily preventable diseases. Such is the economic structure of the world. Eight or ten billionaires have an income equivalent to that of the whole of Africa and India (or something similar). Clearly the world can be organised more equitably economically. There is enough to sustain us all in the planet. But it seems natural for some people that it has been organised in such an unjust way. That the USA can spend 300 billion dollars annually on arms which is over 1/3 of the total global expenditure on arms. We don't need to underline the injustice of this world. We need just look at the injustices brought on the Kurds and Palestinians who have no place under the political sun. Clearly there is injustice even within the UK. But I come from a country where even the poorest can stay alive – no one dies on the streets. There are countries where there are no systems to protect the aged, no social security of any kind. They see the world's wealth on their television screens and compare it with their own lives. If I was in their place I would be angry.

Mehdi Kia: It is interesting that you alluded to the eight billionaires. Data published by the UN showed that the 225 richest people own the equivalent of 47% of the world's population, that is 2.5 billion people. Never in history have we seen such concentration of wealth.

Bruce Kent: Yes, and they claim it is natural. It is called the free market. When the cold war ended I was shocked because they immediately started speaking of the free market. I asked myself what have these two to do with one another. Then I understood that the question is precisely that. They wanted to destroy the Soviet Union through economics, by imposing an armaments war that was truly stupid. The Soviet Union should never have acceded to this. They became broke and now we have an open market throughout the world. What a disgrace that drugs that can prevent the nasty effects of HIV are taken to court in South Africa, with the support of the UK government, so that the price of these drugs can be kept up. Outrageous! Of course they ultimately lost. But that they actually went ahead in the first place is truly amazing.

Mehdi Kia: You earlier alluded to a series of atrocities in Nicaragua and other Latin American countries. I can perhaps add the death of half a million Iraqi children. One can make a long list. How is it that they can speak of terror and totally ignore this aspect?

Bruce Kent: In the American world, as far as I could observe in my travels, the people are truly innocent. They just do not know what the foreign policy of their country has been in the last decades. They truly see themselves as an international Father Christmas that is helping here and there. They would point to the food parcels being dropped over Afghanistan saying it came from America, so we must be good people. They cannot see that the Kissingers of this world, the Richard Parles and the

CIA of this world follow another agenda. Therefore it is partially naivety that they do not see. But Tony Blair is not a simple man. He knows precisely what is going on.

Mehdi Kia: But says nothing.

Bruce Kent: Of course not totally. He invited Arafat immediately here and emphasised that this madness has no relation to the Palestinians. What I don't understand is the fact that Blair has hitched his wagon so completely to Bush's star and in this way. He now believes that he is a great victor and is full of himself in Parliament.

What is terrorism?

Mehdi Kia: How do you define terrorism? September 11 brought much debate as to the nature of terrorism. The rulers of the US, UK and others have not only confined terrorism to a form of violence against citizens and non-military civilians by non-governmental groups and organisations, but also to include various forms of political struggle including civil disobedience. What has made Western democracies to give in to such views?

Bruce Kent: It fits their book completely. They can control the flow any way they want. They showed it in the anti-corporate globalisation demonstrations in Genoa. There only a small part of the large demonstration took to violence. But you would not have known it by watching the television screens which zoomed down on this minority. I asked myself if they were agent provocateurs or not. I don't know. Maybe they were. But people like [minister of overseas development] Claire Short and Tony Blair lumped everyone together as savages who enjoy these kind of things. They want to silence any voice of dissent, if they can.

Mehdi Kia: They pretend to be secure while at the same time passing draconian laws. Why? Do you think they feel threatened?

Bruce Kent: Yes. I think they do feel themselves threatened. When a corporate team like theirs puts its finger on a particular policy and accepts it as truth, then anything that threatens that policy will pull you down with it. If these bombing had resulted in the sending of large number of British troops to the field, and they suffered many casualties, Blair would lose his job and the government would collapse. He must know that he is walking a tightrope. For this reason any spread of the dissident movement in this country is unacceptable.

Mehdi Kia: The common enemy of the capitalist countries disappeared with the collapse of the Soviet bloc. One would therefore have expected that the civil liberties that have been consolidated through struggles from below over the last 40 years would be more secure in the more open atmosphere of today. But on the contrary we see them being undermined. How do you explain this?

Bruce Kent: This is the same idea that is we see in the US that if you can have a monolithic government you can do anything (and I have no doubt this is on their agenda). In his document on the Star Wars, [US defence secretary] Donald Rumsfeld writes that we will control the history of warfare for the next 500 years. If this is their vision of everything, then too much democracy challenges this programme. Of course

behind the curtain (and we should not underestimate this) are the immense influence of arms manufacturers and scientists, government employees, trade unions all of whom keep this business on its feet. If you place this astronomical figure of 350 billion dollars besides any other expenditure, such as the 30 or 40 billion dollars that is the contribution for holding society together, then the role of military expenditure in securing the US economy shines through.

Mehdi Kia: Do you think these new clampdowns, or to be more accurate these undoubtedly severe limitations in relation to civil liberties and citizens' rights, are evidence that we are moving into a new and qualitatively different political situation. Are we entering a new era? Are the new structures being erected temporary or likely to be permanent features of our political landscape?

Bruce Kent: Of course if you apply the clamps, after a while the people will get used to them. The poor horse after a while adjusts to the reins in its mouth. But I think we have many examples that these clamps were removed. Or more accurately were forced to be removed. In the UK we had draconian anti-terrorist laws, and we are now going to have another. These are not going to be for one or two weeks. The accused will be kept behind bars indefinitely, on the whim of the minister. God knows what will happen to refugees. There will be absolutely no sympathy for them. I don't think that once you have imposed a series of laws they will abandon them so readily.

Mehdi Kia: So in reality we have entered a new political landscape?

Bruce Kent: Unless it is opposed. I believe that on a global scale it is being confronted. And this too angers the rulers. When Indian peasants demonstrate against seed crops. When thousands of people march against this system of global corporativism in Genoa. After I got back from Italy there was a demonstration of 200 thousand people in a 30 km march against the bombing of Afghanistan. Yet the Guardian newspaper gave it two lines!

Logic of the Afghanistan bombing

Mehdi Kia: That they declare war against terrorism and then proceed to bomb a county – is this the way to fight terrorism? Is this sensible? Indeed how can one confront terrorism?

Bruce Kent: This was an insane response to the issue. It merely strengthens terrorism. Particularly as none of the terrorists involved in the September 11 attack had come from Afghanistan. It might have made more sense to bomb Saudi Arabia. I think this was an irrational wish to show that they were doing something. People kept telling me "but we have to do something". My reply was that if you see a fire, and there was no water at hand, you don't pour a bucket of petrol on it! How do we deal with terrorism? I believe this is a police matter. You arrest the suspect and interrogate them (indeed there are hundreds being interrogated today). These people could not have done what they did without a network in America, and this needs investigating. And then you set up an international court, that same court that the Americans have done their best to negate. This is a police matter. And it takes time. Remember the Lockerbie bombing took 10 years before the accused went to court. During this time the issue was diplomacy and police investigation, and definitely not the bombing of one of the poorest nations on earth.

Mehdi Kia: What aims do you think the US is following in this war? Did it enter the war because it felt obliged to make a move, or no, it has other aims in mind? And what about Tony Blair? He should after all know that this war is not going to uproot terrorism. On the contrary it will strengthen it. So what is he after?

Bruce Kent: As for Blair and the UK government, in the first instance he wants to come out of it as a world president. This is very pleasing for him. I am certain he has this feeling. And, of course, this is a natural instinct. Secondly we think that this “special relationship” (which incidentally is only one way, and is not reciprocated) has suddenly become enhanced. We have become important persons. We can strut the scene in this fashion. What sorts of pressures operate behind the scenes I do not know. Undoubtedly all sorts of economic pressures are applied. It is a mystery to me. Blair is not a stupid person.

From the US point of view, their plans are as follows. The UN is a nuisance and is only useful when there is a crisis of famine or of refugees. Nothing should impede the sovereign power of the USA. They are the main global power and people should do what America dictates. In a nutshell this is the core programme of America. Of course not all Americans. We have many American friends who disagree with this agenda. But the US government, whether Democrat or Republican, has chosen this road.

Mehdi Kia: It seems that the bombing was not as accurate as they claimed and there was extensive damage and casualties to the people of Afghanistan, particularly the poorest and most vulnerable. What is your estimate of the damage caused?

Bruce Kent: I don't know the real figures and see no reason to dispute the figures given out by the Taliban. The figures seem reasonable and not exaggerated. I don't know if the civilian deaths are one or two thousand. Clearly they are not on the scale of Hiroshima or Nakasaki. And I do believe that they did try to hit specific targets, but what kind of targets are there in Afghanistan to hit? A small poor country where even the airports are nothing special. I don't, however, think these are the real casualties and damage.

The real damage are the refugees. A frozen country without food, where they have to trek hundreds of miles, without food, with a baby in your arms. I think that hundreds would have died on this route. Paul Marsden, the Labour MP who broke the party ranks was recounting in a meeting a week ago how he witnessed a woman, with a baby in her arms, was crossing into Pakistan alongside hundreds of others. The border guards began beating them with sticks and beat the baby in her arms to death. This unknown child will never appear on any memorial stone anywhere. But is dead. This is the direct result of the dreadful bombing that we are witnessing.

In a war there is no need for bombs to hit you for you to be scared. I remember in the second world war I used to hide in a ditch when the rockets flew in the foggy London air. How did you know where it would land. So when you sit in Kabul and hear the noise above your head you do not turn round and say thank god these bombs are directed at specific targets. You wet yourself wondering where they will land. The experience must be frightening psychologically.

Go it alone

Mehdi Kia: It seems that from another angle the bombing is novel. In the case of the attacks on Yugoslavia or Iraq there were at least the veneer of UN support. But this time even the tacit agreement of the Security Council was not sought. It seemed that the US was determined to act alone and with force and marginalised to a great extent even its Nato allies. Why was this? Is this a new military empire and an imperialism of a new kind on the threshold of the new century?

Bruce Kent: They got to this point gradually. In the Gulf war, of course, they used a Security Council resolution which did not actually mention war but permitted the use of any “necessary means”. Once we got to Kosovo they did not even bother with this and did not even consult Nato. This time they went in totally alone. Even those countries who volunteered to send in forces, with the exception of dear England (which must always be in the shadow of Uncle Sam) were ignored.

I think what is very poor is that we are all so ignorant of the UN Charter to allow such misdeeds. The Security Council has no right to send in a military force unless according to Article 42 they had “examined, explored and exhausted every non military means to confront aggression”. But no one seems to be aware what Article 42 contains. Or article 51. The US says we have the right to self-defence. Well you only have that right until the time the Security Council is vested of the issue. So this is not an unlimited right. With all its faults, the UN is a necessary organ of international governance. We should build on it, make it more democratic and responsive etc.

Mehdi Kia: By ignoring its allies has not the balance of power between the US and the rest of the world, and even its allies been altered?

Bruce Kent: Yes, that is right. I think they are particularly resentful allies today. Many were not even invited to Blair’s party. The smaller European ones had been previously resentful. Now even the Germans and the French are for being sidelined. Especially the French.

What is to be done

Mehdi Kia: Let us address the issue of what can be done. What can we do as citizens of this planet who oppose this warmongering and bullying.

Bruce Kent: Become active. Eighty percent of British people are not involved in any organisation or association. They go to work, they go home and they sit in front of the television. On Sundays they go out to play football or wash their car. They are not engaged in anything. Therefore in the first instance it is to become involved in some form of organisation which is active for a world of peace and greater justice. In this country in relation to the movement against the arms trade or nuclear disarmament or Amnesty or the World Development Movement. It is then that you will associate with like minded people and decide to do something, and occasionally you do really achieve something. I do believe that the real problem is not the negative pressure of governments but the apathy and impotence from the populations. And this point is sad.

Mehdi Kia: In the cold war CND stood up effectively against the policies of warmongers and rightly achieved an international reputation, such that it

became one of the most effective and popular of the new social movements. What role does it see for itself today?

Bruce Kent: CND was pushed to the forefront of struggle almost by accident. The main concern of CND is nuclear war and the fact that Pakistan is armed with nuclear weapons. This is country where a Taliban-like government is a distinct possibility. The danger is not over. Both India and Pakistan are armed with nuclear weapons and eyeball each other over Kashmir. What I think we are missing in the UK is a peace movement. You may not be aware that the National Peace Council went broke 18 months ago. We still do not have a national peace body. The most effective organisation in this field is CND and the Campaign Against Arms Trade. So what can be done?

We should increase the collective pressures. Write to newspapers. Mobilise MPs and the church. Get the local library to think along these lines. Use such occasions as the UN disarmament week to setting up local festivals to make people aware of what is going on. In this country the UN Association, which after the war had over 100,000 members now has no more than six thousand members, and most are as old as me.

Mehdi Kia: We know that CND was directly involved with nuclear weapons. But many people who were active in it were pacifists, and against war in general. Do you think there has to always be the issue of nuclear weapons to set a peace campaign going?

Bruce Kent: No. in many countries –such as Norway- there is an active peace movement without the country being armed with nuclear weapons. Similarly New Zealand. Each country has its own special trigger. In the UK the most effective campaign was against land mines which stimulated the imagination of hundreds of thousands of people. People were moved when they saw pictures of children without legs, which moved Diana and others emotionally.

But the most effective action, which took place behind the scene, was the project for an international court. This effectively forced the World Court to proclaim that the use of nuclear weapons were illegal in all imaginable circumstances. This truly placed governments in a awkward situation in an academic way in possessing nuclear weapons.

Of course when you say pacifist, I would say that in the CND about 20% were pacifist. The others believe in the tradition of a just war. Most will add that today a just war is almost impossible. People call this pacifist. But it is not. I keep saying, but excuse me but there are many people opposed to nuclear weapons, as I was when I came into the movement. I wasn't for disarming the armed forces. I thought nuclear weapons were immoral. I believe they are still.

Mehdi Kia: If the “anti-terrorism war” orchestrated by Bush and Co is global, should the anti war and anti-violence movement also not be global. And if that is the case, should what are the obstacles on its path?

Bruce Kent: Money! The peace movement has no real sources of funds. It cannot fly places. Of course it has good internet connections now and a good web site. We have the International Peace Bureau in Geneva which has about 250 member organisations from around the world. But we can't match their finances. The Ministry of Defence in the UK has just appointed a senior schools officer, at a salary of £47,000 a year, and

he is to build up a team of people to go into schools, representing the ministry of defence. A CND salary, at the most, would be £20,000 a year and many are on 13 and 14 thousand. It a different world. We need to win by telling the truth and not look on it as a job. We used to say “Caesar has all the power. We have got the word”.

Mehdi Kia: Are there any other barriers in linking up together?

Bruce Kent: yes. There are all the personal barriers. There are a whole lot of ego trips about. This organisation wants to be famous and that organisation too. We all carry these characteristics. I too don't mind appearing on the television screen, and everybody gets to know you. In the UK charity law is one problem. If you are a legal charity you get access to trust funds and similar sources. You are respectable. So charities are always nervous of getting involved with people actually concerned with ending warfare. So we see that in the case of Afghanistan, what the charities were calling for was a pause in the bombing. I thought that that was an almost immoral requirement. As if you could bomb at breakfast and bomb at supper but you feed them at lunchtime. I thought that was disgraceful. But they would not go any further. Because if they did they would be in direct conflict with their government which in a sense feeds them.

Mehdi Kia: Can the anti-war movement also be a movement against terrorism?

Bruce Kent: It must be. The anti-war movement is against violence. Not domestic violence particularly, although there are aspects of that also. But against violence on an international scale. And that is what terrorism is. We have a whole set of laws: the Geneva and Hague Conventions designed to protect innocent civilians. To me I don't care whether that is a state doing it, or the IRA or the Red Brigade or the al-Qaeda network or whatever. In the UK alone there must be over 300 different organisations. People have to do their own thing. You don't want people who are doing nuclear weapons, and the next moment they are going to talk about torture in Algerian prisons. They have to do their own thing and work together in sympathy. If you try do everything you end up doing absolutely nothing.

Allied to whome?

Mehdi Kia: You have many years of experience. When talking about the national or global campaign against war and terrorism, who are your allies? With which slogans? What forms of organisation? In short how, in your opinion, does one go about this business?

Bruce Kent: I wish I could have the answers to all your questions. You begin by finding who the people of integrity are, with whom you can work. They are politicians of that sort or doctors working in medical organisations or such like. You begin to know who you can work with, who are the consistent people. A lot people will come in for six months and there is a crisis and they disappear again. Many come back, as they are doing now with this new business. I don't think you want to set up unnecessary barriers. I think you ought to be civil and polite about people. You should be prepared to suffer, even be imprisoned. Fortunately this has never happened to me. I don't think there is a formula. All I can say that there is a visions and a lot of people trying to get there. And you must not put any obstacle in the way of their progress.

Mehdi Kia: You alluded that there are many individuals all with their own individual aims, yet all moving in the same overall direction. How can you organisationally link these groups?

Bruce Kent: I don't know if you have seen it, but there is the Peace Directory which lists all organisations dealing in human rights issues country by country. The big ones do communicate in this country on a friendly basis since most of them know who the leaderships are. We support each others campaigns. We publicise it in our newsletters and bulletins or on the net. We try not to cut each other's throats in political terms. We try not to offend other people. During the Cold War this was particularly difficult. Because there were all sorts of groups that took different views about the Soviet Union. And it was very important for us in the CND to be visibly independent of soviet influence - visibly. And so in some ways we were harder on peace groups from the Eastern Europe than we should have been in order to maintain our purity. I wish I had an answer to your question. If I had, I would be a Pope!

Mehdi Kia: Can we learn any lessons from the anti-globalisation, or as some would call it anti-corporation, movement. They appear to have been able to link quite dissimilar groups?

Bruce Kent: I prefer the second term, I am a globalist. What they mean is corporate globalism and what I want is something called democratic globalism, or justice globalism. They have really succeeded in attracting astonishingly diverse groups. I was astonished to hear that a remarkably quite Catholic bishop in the north of England had gone to Genoa with a large number of his parishioners to take part in the demonstrations.

Mehdi Kia: Do you think that this movement can address the peace issue?

Bruce Kent: It must do. It is a major cause of conflict, a major cause of poverty, a major cause of environmental damage, a major cause of inflation. You cannot just go about buying tanks and moping up the income as a result. The anti-global corporatist movement must at the same time be a movement for peace. But as I mentioned earlier, many of the environmental groups have kept well away from the anti-war groups. It is respectable to be seen to be keen on whales and to make sure the forests are alright and the oceans are not polluted. But once you start talking about nuclear weapons and so on then you go up the noses of governments.

Mehdi Kia: Might it be useful to name a day as World's Anti War day?

Bruce Kent: Very useful. It would be an extremely good day. But it I think we also have to build on what is already there. There is the first UN special session on disarmament, I think it was October 24, 1978. There are other days. Unfortunately the churches are all different. The Catholic church has one date in January and the other churches have another date at the end of the same month. We have a gathering every year in Tavistock Square on May 15. There is a big stone there in memory of conscientious objectors and people come with candles and flowers. It is becoming quite an international day. And then there is August 6, Hiroshima Day. So we must first of all build on what we have - there are actually three or four days, very good days, to rally round.

Mehdi Kia: are there any other points you want to raise?

Bruce Kent: I think we covered most the important points.

December 2001

Reverend Bruce Kent is an internationally known peace activist and former Director of Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.