



Looking back in anger

by Mark Iddon

A suicide bomber, later identified as Salman Abedi, managed to detonate a bomb in the foyer of the Manchester Arena on 22nd May 2017, as young music fans were leaving following a concert by the American superstar singer Ariana Grande. The bomb killed 22 people, injured many more and will be an evening that anyone connected with the events will never forget.

Abedi was born in Manchester, 1994, the son of Libyan parents who had fled to the UK to escape the Gaddafi regime. The Manchester Evening News put together a report on the [backg round of Salman and the Abedi family history](#) and their connections with Libyan dissidents which is useful background reading.

I confess that I had not heard of Ariana before the news of that awful evening but she is a rising star since she played in a Broadway musical in 2008, and went on to make 3 successful albums. It was her latest album 'Dangerous Women' that she was touring and promoting in Manchester that night.

Although I wasn't familiar with the work of this artist, the atrocity was too close for comfort for me as an older music lover. I have attended many memorable concerts at the Arena and I'm friends with someone who was working that evening who, as a first aider, witnessed some horrific sights that will stay with him forever.

Manchester is a resilient city and within a short time there were messages of condolence and unity as people vowed that we would never be deterred by terrorism. A tribute concert was arranged within 2 weeks at Old Trafford Cricket ground, with big name artists making an appearance along with Ariana where the audience of the first concert had first refusal of the tickets. No matter how defiant we may feel I am sure it would have taken some nerve to attend a similar event in such a short space of time after that horrible evening in May.

Flowers and wreaths were laid in St. Ann's square and vigils were held to remember the 22 who had been killed and countless others who had suffered injury. A moving poem by Tony Walsh, called '[This is the place](#)', was read at a vigil and went viral on social media as Mancunians declared their strength and unity. The symbol of the bee has a long standing affinity to Manchester, representing the worker ethic of the mill workers of the industrial revolution. It is now featured on signposts and litter bins around the city but it became more prominent as featured in murals, tee shirts, car stickers and tattoos as a ubiquitous symbol of solidarity with Mancunian spirit.

At the end of one memorial service a lady started to sing '***Don't look back in Anger***', which had been a hit single for Manchester band Oasis back in 1996. This triggered a chord for many who thought this an appropriate reaction to the events and the Single was re-released with all profits going to the

We Love Manchester
charity.

This jarred with me as it seemed to suggest 'keep calm and carry on' rather than condemnation of the murderous act, or any attempt to understand what is going on with Islamic extremism. We have a problem with many barbarous acts committed in the name of Islam from the killing of Fusilier Lee Rigby, 4 years to the day of the Ariana concert, to the killings on Westminster Bridge days after the Manchester Bomb.

I understand that Islam is a peaceful religion and I support the right of people to follow and practice religion according to their own conscience, but we have to concede that the religion has been hijacked by extremist butchers who are morally unhinged. We need to ask some questions about why they hate freedom and liberty, and also why there is such a half-hearted defence of freedom and progress in Western Society.

There is a reluctance to ask awkward questions for fear that they may be considered Islamophobic or racist. There are organisations which purport to be anti racist but focus on the banning of speech that may cause offence, often referred to as hate speech. The restriction of speech and thought will only result in a censorious climate which itself breeds resentment.

If we really want to tackle terrorism we need free and open debate, where all manner of questions can be asked and all ideas held to account.

There are many and complex reasons why Salman carried out this barbaric attack and we may never know the full story. However, it is clear that there is a cultural divide between the ideal of a free society and those that fear that there is too much licentious and immoral behaviour that needs to be stopped by any means necessary.

The fact that our freedom has come under attack by terrorists should make us angry to respond in defiance of illiberal or repressive practices, and to make a stand for greater freedom of expression and open dialogue in a free society.