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Communities — *Debate*

3:05 pm

Lord Noon (Labour)



My Lords, I am very honoured to be making my maiden speech today and to follow the eloquent maiden speech of the noble Lord, Lord True.

I thank the noble Baroness, Lady Newlove, for introducing this very important debate. Her contribution in this area is significant. Her maiden speech greatly moved this House, and I am sorry that it was born out of such a great personal tragedy. I commend the noble Baroness on her most excellent report, *Our Vision for Safe and Active Communities*. I hope that I can do justice to the wisdom of that report as I talk about my experiences and understanding of how we can make safer, stronger and more active communities.

I take this opportunity to thank my noble friends Lady Jay of Paddington and Lord Sainsbury of Turville for having introduced me on the Floor of the House in January this year. Since my arrival here I have been most graciously and respectfully received by everyone. I have been made to feel most welcome. I acknowledge and thank the officials of the House for their courtesy and their time.

It was only a few years ago that I was made to think that I might not be here today to make this speech. I am of course referring to the night in November 2008 when I was trapped in the Taj Hotel in Mumbai while it was attacked by a group of terrorists. So I have had my own close encounter with terrorists, which made me realize how quickly life can be taken away. On that November morning in 2008 I woke up in my hotel bed as a businessman. By nightfall I was a hostage of a terrorist cell.

I had taken a small trade delegation from my parent company, Kerry Foods. The terrorists were hunting down British and American nationals, which we all were. We sat in the dark room listening to the sounds of grenades and bombs exploding in the building. Smoke soon poured in from under our door and we panicked. Had I known then what I was to learn later—that the terrorists were in room number 360—then we would really have panicked. For, you see, we were in room number 361, right next door, separated by only one wall. It was the longest night of my life.

Next morning, in the light of dawn, we saw the fire brigade on the street below. My suite was on the third floor. We frantically waved to the fire brigade. They sent their long ladder up to our balcony, broke the glass and hoisted us on to a platform. The TV images of our rescue went round the world as it was happening. The handlers of the terrorists were also watching TV and directing their foot soldiers by mobile phone. As we were coming down, they shot at us from inside the hotel. We were lucky that we all escaped with our lives, but 176 others who died in the Mumbai attack were not so lucky. The terrorists attacked two hotels, a railway station and a tourist café, as well as targeting a Jewish centre. The victims were all ordinary people minding their own business and were killed randomly. These matters go to the very heart of our debate today. If we are to have safer communities, we must deal with all the forces that seek to harm us and threaten the very fabric of our society.

Just a few days ago we got the news of the death of the terrorist mastermind who had dedicated his life to murder and mayhem. The religion of Islam has been hijacked by such people. Let me say here what I believe Islam stands for. My beloved mother, Bilquis, instilled in me the Islamic values of peace and tolerance. I grew up in a household in India where we were on very friendly terms with people of other communities. Our neighbours were non-Muslim. The community was fully integrated and it seemed to us the natural way to live. It was a cosmopolitan society.

London, too, is a cosmopolitan city and this great country gives its people many benefits. Britain provides its citizens great freedom to worship, to educate and to work, and let us not forget our compassionate National Health Service. There is also the benefit of retiring with a state pension. The citizen is given all these things by the nation. In return, we owe the community, society and country our allegiance. We all have a moral obligation to fulfil our duties as citizens. We must live with honour. The freedoms we enjoy in the UK, including the freedom of religious belief and practice, are given freely. However, with freedom comes responsibility. It is our responsibility to be active, to take part and do what we can to make all our lives better. It is inevitable that there will be friction at times, difficulties of adjustment, but we are all the same under the skin.

On a personal level, I have worked hard to create a food industry and provide employment in Great Britain. I have even made chicken tikka masala our national dish. At the same time, I have not forgotten that I am a member of a greater society and have tried to pay back through my Noon Foundation, a charity personally endowed by me. Through our projects I have come across everyday heroes who work in hospices and community mentoring projects, the brave soldiers of our Army and many selfless people who make life worth while. In our democracy, we have the freedom to speak up, to comment and to criticise. There is room for every shade of expression. No matter what our origins, no matter what our faith, no matter what our culture and opinions are, we are ultimately stronger and safer in the community with each other. We are better off when we watch out for each other.

I thank your Lordships for listening to me. I look forward to taking part in many more

such debates.

Annotations

No annotations