



JOHN SLOBODA AND PETER COLEMAN

# Taking a stand

**W**E have recently proposed that the Society's Council should take various initiatives to respond to the psychological consequences of the recent military interventions in Kosovo and Serbia. These range from publicly deploring the bombing of civilian targets undertaken by NATO during its 78-day campaign, to sending a fact-finding mission both to meet with psychologists working among people dealing with the aftermath of the bombing and to discover how the British psychological community can help. Council has responded with sympathy to some elements of our proposals and has referred the matter to its International Committee for a detailed response.

We sense that the Society in general, and Council in particular, is somewhat unused to, and unprepared for, discussions of this sort. We wonder whether lessons can be learned about how the Society can become more responsive to national and international events with a psychological dimension. It is instructive to examine the range of reactions that our initiative has provoked.

Some of the objections are non-trivial. Among those sympathetic to some form of Society action, the commonest reaction is

'Why single out the Balkans?' Our reply is based on three unique features of this case: (1) our own democratically elected government directly caused massive civilian death, injury, and damage through participation in the bombing; (2) our actions were not mandated under the UN Charter, and there are persuasive arguments that they had no other justification in international law; (3) we have a range of well-established professional ties with

---

**'silence...cannot be taken as anything other than complicity in the actions of the government we pay our taxes to'**

---

psychologists working in the region, who are also themselves professionally organised, and who are telling us directly and unanimously that the bombing campaign was an unmitigated disaster. These three conditions are not met in any other recent conflict involving UK military forces.

Other objections are based on the proposals being 'too political'. There is a fear that some of our proposals, if

officially adopted by the Society, may be outside the remit of our Charter and Statutes as a registered charity. Yet many charities issue strong condemnations of the actions of their own governments and work to reverse the damage done by particular policies and actions. Several relief agencies have criticised the EU for failing to lift sanctions that hinder humanitarian relief being given to the victims of the bombing. Other charities, for example universities, are not slow to criticise the government for its internal policies. We would argue that if it is right for the Society to do something, then ways should be found of getting round legal restrictions, rather than such restrictions pre-empting action.

Some psychologists may simply disagree with us about our assessment of the value of the bombing and the sanctions that superseded the bombing. We would wish to ask how it is possible to uphold the Code of Conduct of the Society at the same time as supporting the deliberate shedding of civilian blood on a massive scale, and the withholding of humanitarian aid.

We feel that the burden of proof is on those who disagree with us to show how support of NATO and EU action is consistent with valuing 'integrity, impartiality and respect for persons and evidence and...the highest ethical standards' (Code of Conduct, para.1). We would further argue that silence on this matter cannot be taken as anything other than complicity in the actions of the government we pay our taxes to, and is not a signal of Society neutrality on this issue.

A final objection is that there is nothing specifically psychological about what we propose. In making pronouncements on such matters it is felt by some that we step beyond our competence as psychologists. In response, we would point to the psychological literature on such phenomena as conformity, stereotyping, scapegoating, post-traumatic stress and bereavement. All of these have been exemplified in tragic proportions by the events leading up to and following the

### A consortium of Greek scholarly bodies managed to co-ordinate a joint public response to the NATO bombing within days

bombing of Yugoslavia. Appreciation of such literature not only sharpens our perceptions, it provides tangible strategies for ameliorating at least some of the effects. If we cannot be simultaneously concerned citizens and professionals of integrity in situations such as this, then we are placing severe, and possibly fatal, limits on the development and application of the discipline that we so cherish.

What do we expect to gain by a Society initiative? We have one answer specific to this case, but a broader answer relating to a range of other issues of this type that the Society might be asked to respond to. Specifically, psychologists in the Balkans will experience the profound relief and encouragement of knowing that their situation is understood and recognised, at least in part, by their professional equals

---

### **'boldness will do the Society more good than harm'**

---

elsewhere. We have already seen the disproportionately morale-boosting effects of communicating our personal concern to individuals and groups within Yugoslavia. Mutual exchange and assistance can only benefit all parties.

More broadly, if bodies such as the Society are prepared to 'whistleblow' in cases where 'national interest' can so often

be misused as a means of stifling internal debate, then our democracies stand more chance of survival and health in the future. If we turn away from dissent, in caution or ignorance, then sooner or later we will find that our democratic institutions have become mere puppets for the unfettered operation of the vested interests that seek to control the creation and distribution of wealth.

It is telling that multinational corporations, weapons manufacturers, and drug barons, are among the groups who may have profited most from the Balkans misadventure in both the short and the long term. For instance, Kosovo has now become a 'smugglers' paradise' supplying up to 40 per cent of the heroin sold in Europe and North America (*The Guardian*, 13 March 2000). By our silence and inaction in such situations, we tacitly endorse their freedom to exploit and enslave the human spirit.

What is the mechanism by which the Society can make appropriate and timely responses to issues of national and international moment? In the Balkans case it could be getting on for two years after the event before the Society finally makes any kind of cautious move that has even a minimal impact outside its own committee structure. Contrast this with a consortium of Greek scholarly bodies that managed to co-ordinate a joint public response to the NATO bombing within days. We feel it is

a quite reasonable expectation that the Society should also be able to respond on this kind of timescale to events of national and international gravity.

We would like to propose that a mechanism is created allowing the President to issue public statements on behalf of the Board of Directors. These statements would not be binding on the Society as a whole, nor would they represent Society policy (they could not do so until they had been approved by Council). They would, however, demonstrate that the Society is engaged in public affairs and that its leadership is prepared to take strong positions, even if these have to be modified at a later date.

In such matters we believe that boldness will do the Society more good than harm. Many outsiders see the Society as cumbersome, bureaucratic, over-cautious and more concerned with its own internal workings than with the outside world. This is not the image we want for the Society in the 21st century.

■ Professor John Sloboda is at the Department of Psychology, Keele University, Staffordshire ST5 5BG. Tel: 01782 583381; e-mail: j.a.sloboda@psy.keele.ac.uk.

■ Professor Peter Coleman is at the Department of Psychology, University of Southampton, Highfield, Southampton SO17 1BJ. Tel: 023 8059 4602; e-mail: pgc@psy.soton.ac.uk.