

AFTER THE RIOTS

An analysis of alternative policies

INTRODUCTION

The riots that began in Tottenham on 6th August and spread to other London Boroughs and major cities over the following three nights have raised profoundly serious questions about the state of the nation. Parliament was recalled from recess to debate the causes and consequences of four nights of criminal rampage that left four people dead and homes, shops and offices looted, burnt down or wrecked. Teenagers and young adults did most of these criminal acts, though older people joined in the looting. The social media were used to organise the rioters and small, mobile groups moving from one incident to another before they could be apprehended hampered the police response.

A peaceful demonstration in Tottenham about the shooting by the police of a local man appears to have been the epicentre from which the first night's disorders radiated out. The riots that followed in inner city London boroughs and then in Birmingham, Manchester, Leicester, Salford, West Bromwich and Wolverhampton had nothing to do with the Tottenham issue. No political slogans were expressed by the rioters, nor were the rioters from one particular racial group. So what were the riots all about?

The Prime Minister was in no doubt, "It is criminality pure and simple. And there is absolutely no excuse for it."¹ He attributed this criminality to delinquency – "people showing indifference to right and wrong, people with a twisted moral code, people with a complete absence of self-restraint"². He identified moral neutrality and relativism as the underlying problem and said that political leaders had been "unwilling for too long to talk about what is right and wrong". He used the language of 'Broken Britain', characterised by irresponsibility, selfishness, behaving as if choices have no consequences, children without fathers, schools without discipline, reward without effort, crime without punishment, rights without responsibility and communities without control.

Whilst not defending the criminal element of the riots, the Leader of the Opposition offered a wider perspective. "Its not the first time we've seen this kind of me first, take what you can culture" pointing to greedy bankers, MPs fiddling their expenses and journalists hacking phones. He advocated an independent commission of inquiry to investigate why people rioted, looted and smashed their own communities. The Prime Minister initially preferred leaving this to the Home Affairs Select Committee but acquiesced after talks with Nick Clegg and Ed Miliband. The commission would look beyond academic sociologists to hear the views of young people who might better understand why their peers behaved as they did.

THE POLICY AGENDA

1. POLICING

The Government's first aim was to reclaim the streets and restore law and order on them. They called for a stronger police presence, with more police on the streets and

¹ D.Cameron, Statement to the House of Commons 11th August 2011

² D.Cameron, Speech in Oxfordshire 15th August 2011

fewer in offices shuffling paper. The Government rejected Opposition calls for the proposed cuts in police budgets to be cancelled, noting that the Metropolitan Police Authority had been able to increase the numbers of officers on the street from 6,000 on the first night of the riots to 16,000 by the third night. Ed Miliband is not convinced and intends to force a vote in the Commons designed to block any reductions in police numbers when the House sits again in September.

Demands for more robust policing led to discussions about the use of rubber bullets, water cannon and even bringing the army onto the streets. The police have the option to use rubber bullets but the Home Secretary was not in favour of this. A water cannon from Northern Ireland was made available at 24 hours notice but it would only be effective against large crowds of rioters, as in the Province during 'the troubles'. It would have been ineffective against the small, mobile groups active in these riots. Neither the politicians nor the police are keen to see troops on the streets of England because of the image this would send round the world, especially in the period before next year's Olympics in London.

The perceived weak police response to the riots was attributed to inadequate numbers, rectified by day three when 16,000 were out there. The other factor in their initial response was to treat it as a public order situation rather than a criminal one. Given previous criticisms of heavy handedness in policing demonstrations and the lack of sufficient quantities of riot gear, commanders ordered officers to intervene only to save life. Orders were changed and more robust policing followed. More police officers will be given riot training in the future and the Police Inspectorate will issue new guidance about handling this type of incident. Larger questions about police recruitment and leadership are on the table for review and the appointment of a new Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police may reveal how far the Home Secretary and London Mayor have taken this on board.

The Prime Minister has called for an 'all out war' on street gangs. This is much more than a policing matter and we must wait to see the outcomes of the committee of inquiry to know how this 'war' will be conducted.

2. FAMILIES AND PARENTING

Large numbers of juveniles rioting, looting and some even committing arson inevitably raises questions about what their parents were doing to control them. One Judge asked, "Why don't the parents even turn up when their children are in court?" In his book on Britain's gang culture³, Patrick Regan paints a picture of youngsters often without fathers, experiencing little love and support at home and joining gangs for friendship and respect. One in two children under the age of 16 (48%) experience the breakdown of their family. Sometimes this is the result of domestic violence, sometimes the father just leaves. This can be distressing to the children as well as the adults, leading to a high incidence of under-achievement at school, loss of an important role model, and, too often, to drug abuse or alcoholism in later life. Lone parents may well struggle to cope financially and relationally.

³ Patrick Regan with Liza Hoeksma, *Fighting Chance – tackling Britain's gang culture*, Hodder and Stoughton 2010

Time is the currency of relationships. In low-income families, even when the parents stay together, they may have to work long hours and weekends to pay the bills. This can mean they are not at home when their children are out of school⁴. Moving people off benefits into work may be good for the economy but detrimental to stable family life. Increased mobility has isolated many nuclear families from grandparents and other relatives who might act as a safety net. It is no wonder why some youngsters turn to their peers for what their family and parents cannot give them, but with the companionship often comes involvement in crime, drugs and alienation from the values of the wider community and society.

Poverty is part of the problem but not the only part. Changing attitudes to long-term stable adult relationships is another. This is not to judge those whose relationships fail but it is to highlight the effects on the children of those failing relationships. It is at this point that David Cameron diverges radically from the other party leaders. He stresses the value of marriage because those who marry are more likely to stay together, or at least stay together longer than those who cohabit or positively choose to form a single-parent family. Whilst all the parties recognise the value of children being raised by two parents in a stable relationship, both the Labour and Liberal Democrat parties are against offering incentives in the tax or benefit systems to encourage couples to stay together. In this they clearly reflect trends in public opinion influenced by individualistic values.

The particular focus of policy makers will be the dysfunctional families to which the rioting youngsters belong. The Prime Minister made them a prime target of the 'social fight back' but was light on detail. He suggested that 120,000 families with multiple social, health and economic problems need help and he set a target of turning around these families by 2015. However, family intervention projects have existed since 2006. 7,300 families have been helped since then but the projects have to be funded and are not cheap. Formerly they were part-funded by local authorities but their budgets have been reduced and ring fencing removed so these projects may become unsustainable. One estimate is that they need £100m per year for the next four years.

Nick Hurd, the Minister for Civil Society, has launched 'social impact bonds' in five trial areas, to help poor families to break out of destitution. Better off people, charities and voluntary bodies will be invited to buy these bonds and the money will be used to help the most needy households. City Life, a Cambridge based organisation, pioneered the idea, more than a decade ago. In their scheme the bonds were interest free for five years. 80% of the income was lent at interest to Housing Associations and the balance was given as grants to help unemployed people start a business or take training that might lead to a job. At the end of the five years the 80% plus interest was repaid and the bondholders got their money back. We wait to learn how closely the Government's social impact bonds follow this model.

Trying to help today's troubled families is only one strand of what is required. It is surely also necessary to prevent recurrence in the future. How can couples be helped to make their own relationship sustainable and prepare for parenthood? Many will reject the idea as 'nanny state' thinking and it is easy to caricature it as belonging to a totalitarian state. That would not be true if courses were voluntary and provided by

⁴ The Relationships Foundation, Weekend Workers: Part-time Parents? 2009

churches and third sector organisations. Well-run courses, such as the HTB Marriage Course and non-religious alternatives, would attract participants as word of their relevance and value spread. Local advisory services that offer parents counselling in times of crisis, offered on the same voluntary basis, would also be worth considering. Citizen Advice Bureaux have demonstrated that this kind of initiative works.

Punitive measures against irresponsible and uncooperative parents have been suggested. These include the loss of benefits and even eviction from social housing. These are extreme measures and it is to be hoped that they are only applied in the rarest of cases. Where there are innocent younger children in the household, loss of home and any income could do more harm than good. Parents handicapped by learning disabilities would be in the same category. Proportionality is an important value and making a family homeless and destitute would seem disproportionate except in the most extreme cases. However, receipt of welfare benefits could be made conditional on the attendance of both of a child's parents at the assessment of need to encourage fathers to accept and fulfil their parental responsibilities. It has also been suggested that priority in the allocation of social housing could be given to families with two parents in a stable relationship whilst single teenage mothers could be offered warden assisted accommodation rather than a house on their own. Fathers could also be required to attend antenatal clinics with their partners to emphasise his role in the care of the child. Enforcement will not be easy, especially where a mother or prospective mother wants no further contact with a potentially violent father.

3. MORAL VALUES

David Cameron sees moral relativism as a contributory factor in the riots. The churches argue that the moral consensus rooted in the Judeo-Christian heritage has been dumped but nothing has been put in its place. Everyone does what is right in his or her own eyes and too many young people are not taught at home and school about what is right and wrong. This is a real issue in relation to last week's riots but as Ed Miliband has observed it also applies to greedy bankers, MPs fiddling their expenses and journalists using information gleaned from hacking people's phones. Shaping the nation's moral values is not the Government's task alone, but if politics is about choosing the values by which we are governed, politicians do have a role to play. In so far as the churches and other faith communities have a contribution to make it will be one of social action that demonstrates the relevance of their beliefs and values rather than preaching to the converted. The Street Pastors initiative is an excellent example.

4. SCHOOLS

Schools have a central role in preparing young people for adult life and work but too many children underachieve and leave school handicapped by poor basic skills. For some school reinforces the impact of a troubled home life and truanting results. The labour market offers them low paid, unskilled jobs and low-level crime is more rewarding and less demanding. That is the worst case scenario and the best schools value even the poorest pupils and motivate them to learn and break out of their background of hopelessness.

David Cameron suggests that some schools fail to maintain an appropriate level of discipline. "We need an education service which reinforces the message that if you do the wrong thing you'll be disciplined, but if you work hard and play by the rules you

will succeed.”⁵ The Education Secretary has pledged to turn around the 200 weakest secondary schools and the 200 weakest primary schools and the Prime Minister urged a new sense of urgency about this. This raises questions about teacher recruitment, training and supervision as well as the governance and management of under-performing schools. The visit of Michelle Obama to the Elizabeth Garrett Anderson School in Islington comes to mind. She inspired the pupils to work hard and achieve and her impact was reflected in the GCSE results of those she met and inspired. How can children otherwise leaving school with limited basic skills and poor job prospects be motivated in a similar way?

5. COMMUNITY

The way the rioters trashed their own communities sent out the message that they felt no identity with and pride in their neighbourhoods. To some extent this can be seen as a consequence of their alienating experiences at home and school but there are other top down perspectives too. For decades government has been increasingly centralised in Whitehall and responsibility shifted from town halls, denying local people scope to make decisions about their own communities. This was done to standardise the provision of public services to treat everyone the same. The Coalition Government wants to reverse this trend and give local authorities a general power to do whatever is in the best interests of their communities. Planning rules are being changed to increase scope for local decision-making. The result will be less tidy as communities decide differently. Will this increase greater pride in one’s community or provoke resentment when some communities are perceived to do better than others?

The Prime Minister sees the creation of a National Citizen Service as part of the Government’s response to the problems exposed by the riots. It will offer 16 year olds an opportunity to serve their local communities and in doing so develop discipline and experience teamwork. This may work well for children from settled home backgrounds but how likely is it to attract the disaffected inner city youngsters locked into gang culture? The former Home Secretary, David Blunkett, supports the idea of a voluntary service but advocates paying participants a modest stipend of £4000 for a year’s involvement. The Chancellor may not welcome this additional expenditure but if it costs less than policing gang crime and dealing with riot damage it could be money well spent.

6. CONCLUSION

The riots, coming on top of a difficult economic climate and the need to substantially reduce public spending, pose searching questions about the moral, social and economic health of this country, or at least its English part. These questions have to be addressed to all of us, not just the Government and politicians. The parliamentary expenses scandal eroded our trust in the political class. In the same way, the hacking scandal undermined our trust in the popular press that is most people’s principal source of information and analysis. However, we the people know more about our communities than most of the politicians and journalists. The Government’s Big Society idea is that citizens should play a bigger role in deciding the sort of society Britain is and becomes. Now is the time for them to listen to what we have to say about the causes of the riots and the best way to build a society in which they don’t

⁵ David Cameron; speech in Oxfordshire, 15th August 2011

happen again. So, now is the time for us to speak up and invest in the well-being of our country and community.

Martyn Eden
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