

Britain's Riots: A Society In Denial Of The Burning Issues

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Britain saw its third consecutive night of widespread burning of properties and looting as riot police failed to contain gangs of masked youths marauding several parts of the capital, London.

There were reports too of violence fanning out to other cities across Britain. And some commentators were even suggesting that the British Army might have to be redeployed from Northern Ireland to help restore order. Armoured police vehicles are now patrolling London streets amid calls in the media for the use of water cannons and plastic bullets.

Politicians, police chiefs and the media have reacted to the chaos by labelling it as the result of "mindless criminality" that has seemingly sprung from nowhere. 'The Rule of the Mob' declared the rightwing Daily Telegraph. 'Mob Rule' is how the more liberal Independent put it.

Home Secretary Theresa May stridently denounced "unacceptable thuggery". London Metropolitan Police Commissioner Tim Godwin vowed that culprits would be tracked down and brought before the courts. He appealed to Londoners to identify individuals caught on CCTV and amateur video footage.

Nearly 500 arrests have been made so far and police numbers in the capital have been tripled overnight to 16,000, with officers being drawn in from other parts of the country.

Although the arson attacks on commercial and residential premises do have an element of criminal spontaneity by disparate groups of youths, it is simply delusional for Britain's political leaders, police forces and the media to claim that it is all a matter of law and order.

The burning issues that need to be addressed to explain the outburst of arson, looting and rioting are endemic racism endured by Britain's black community and, more generally, the deepening poverty that is increasingly racking British society.

Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron cut short his summer holiday in Italy by flying home to London to hold a special "emergency security" meeting with other Cabinet members.

Speaking outside Downing Street today and visibly vexed by the unfolding chaos, Cameron condemned "pure and simple criminality that must be defeated". The government, he said, stands with "all law-abiding citizens".

Opposition Labour party leader Ed Milliband and the Conservative Mayor of London Boris

Johnson are also making hasty returns to the capital from abroad to deal with a crisis that seems to be spiralling out of control. The British Parliament is to be recalled from its summer recess later this week so that “all parliamentarians can stand together” to face down the sudden disorder.

The disturbances – the worst in almost 30 years – began last Saturday in the rundown north London inner-city area of Tottenham. That followed the shooting dead two days earlier of a young black man by police officers.

Mark Duggan was fatally shot by an armed police unit as he sat in his car. Police claimed that the man was threatening to use a gun. However, family and friends of the 29-year-old victim strongly denied that he was armed or involved in any criminal activity. The death is the subject of a police inquiry, but it has emerged that only two shots were fired in the incident, both by police officers.

Sinisterly, BBC news reports on the killing have invariably showed what appeared to be a family photo of Duggan taken before his death in which he is seen holding up his hand up in mock gangster style.

Angered by what they saw as a gratuitous police shooting and lack of immediate answers from authorities, the mixed black and white community in Tottenham held a vigil for the victim on Saturday. With tensions running high in the area, the peaceful rally turned into a riot against police, and several properties, including police cars, were attacked and set alight.

Since then, similar disturbances have now spread to other parts of the capital, including Peckham, Brixton, Hackney, Lewisham and Clapham. A Sony factory was reduced to a charred shell in Enfield in north London. In the outer south London district of Croydon – several miles from Tottenham – there was a huge blaze last night after a large commercial property was torched. Even the affluent, leafy borough of Ealing in west London saw upmarket boutiques and residences attacked and destroyed by fire.

The distraught owner of the razed family business in Croydon struggled to comprehend why his 150-year-old furniture shop had been targeted. Nevertheless his few words of disbelief had a ring of truth that the politicians and media commentators seem oblivious to. “There must be something deeply wrong about the [political] system,” he said.

Police forces are seen to be struggling to contain the upsurge in street violence, with groups of youths appearing to go on the rampage at will, breaking into shop fronts and stealing goods. A real fear among the authorities is the spreading of disorder and violence to other cities, with reports emerging of similar disturbances in the centre of Birmingham in the British midlands, and further north in Nottingham, Liverpool and Manchester.

Inner-city deprived black communities in Britain complain of routine heavy-handed policing that is openly racist. Community leaders tell of aggressive stop-and-search methods by police that target black youths. The community leaders say that racist policing is as bad as it was during the 1980s when riots broke out in 1985 after a black woman, Cynthia Jarrett, died in a police raid on her home in Broadwater Farm, London.

In the latest spate of violence – on a much greater scale than in the 1980s – there is no suggestion that subsequent street disturbances to the initial Tottenham riots are racially

motivated. The growing number of areas and youths involved in arson, rioting and looting do not appear to be driven merely out of solidarity for the young black victim of police violence last week, although that may be a factor for some. Many of the disturbances in London and elsewhere seem to be caused by white and black youths together and separately.

But there is one common factor in all of this that the politicians and media are studiously ignoring: the massive poverty, unemployment and social deprivation that are now the lot for so many of Britain's communities.

Britain's social decay has been seething over several decades, overseen by Conservative and Labour governments alike. As with other European countries and the United States, the social fabric of Britain has been torn asunder by economic policies that have deliberately widened the gap between rich and poor.

The collapse of manufacturing bases, the spawning of low-paid menial jobs, unemployment and cuts in public services and facilities have all been accompanied by systematic lowering of taxation on the rich elite. Britain's national debt, as with that of the Europe and the US, can be attributed in large part to decades of pursuing neoliberal policies of prosperity for the rich and austerity for the poor - the burden of which is felt most keenly in inner-city neighbourhoods.

David Cameron's Conservative-Liberal Coalition government has greatly magnified this debt burden on the poor with its swingeing austerity cuts since coming to office last year. Ironically, only days before the latest burnings and riots, British government spokesmen were congratulating themselves for "making the right decision" in driving through crippling economic austerity measures that have so far spared the United Kingdom from the overt fiscal woes seen elsewhere in Europe.

But as thousands of Britain's youths now lash out at symbols of authority/austerity, breaking into shops to loot clothes and other consumer goods that they wouldn't otherwise be able to afford, the social eruption may be just a sign of even greater woes to come for the Disunited Kingdom.

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