
What's behind the UK riots?



By Nigel Roberts

With less than a year to go before the London Olympics, the August riots in Great Britain raised concerns over their impact on the Games, while others claimed this unrest signalled the end of Western civilisation altogether. A former BBC-CNBC reporter shares his three decades of experience from behind-the-lines.

What happened in the UK this past August? Was it a Western version of the Arab Spring? Violent fury over extreme cuts in social spending? Race riots? Outright criminality?

As a young BBC reporter in 1981, I had seen at first hand how gangs of disaffected youth morphed, within a few humid days of summer, from aimless groups hanging round street corners to a violent mob looting and torching property in Mosside and Toxteth in the North of England.

Back then, the damage was limited to a small local area, but the recent riots tell a different story – spreading throughout the country and costing more than £100 million. But if the newspaper headlines are to be believed, the damage to Britain's reputation could be far greater. Consider the Olympic Games scheduled for next summer in London.

Hugh Robertson, the UK Sport and Olympics Minister, in a public statement just after the riots said that anyone sceptical about security arrangements for the Games would be "very wrong. All the evidence shows this trouble is low-level criminality driven by messages on social networks and not some new, emerging security threat." Nevertheless, some serious reassessment of police and security budgets during the Olympics is now rumoured to be taking place in Government and within the Metropolitan Police.

For many of the rioters, the 'power and opportunity' of instant messaging gave an unprecedented logistical impetus to the riots, which enabled the unrest to spread beyond the initial flashpoint in Tottenham. This, more than anything, helped to remove the "glue" holding together British society for a few hot days in August and is cited by officials as one of the reasons why the riots were more widespread and savage than anything I reported back in 1981.

Pointing the finger of blame

Nevertheless, the scale of the damage led many right-wing pundits to conclude that this was "a slow-motion moral collapse" and the beginning of the end for Western society. Left-wing pundits laid the blame squarely at the feet of David Cameron's conservative coalition government whose savage cuts in social spending had created what Kenneth Clarke, the Secretary of State for Justice, called a "feral underclass" who were rising up to take back what they considered was their right.

UK Prime Minister David Cameron was very clear about what he believed caused the rioting. Hot foot from the COBRA emergency committee (a Government committee normally convened to take control in times of war) he declared that this was "criminality pure and simple. And it has to be confronted and defeated."

Craig Smith, INSEAD Chaired Professor of Ethics and Social Responsibility, doesn't believe that this is the beginning of the end for Western society, and says that there needs to be a more nuanced and complex look at the causes of the riots. "There is some genuine economic grievance at the core of the riots, combined with mostly blatant criminality and some poor policing. There's also an element of race in there, too. Criminality for David Cameron is a more appealing explanation than people reacting to cuts in public spending."

The roots of the riots

The riots in August, 2011 started in Tottenham – an inner city area of London with high levels of social and economic deprivation and a large Afro-Caribbean population. It then spread to other parts of London and then to other major cities. The flashpoint was an initially peaceful demonstration over the killing of a local man, Mark Duggan, by a police marksman a week earlier. Mr Duggan's family and community leaders in Tottenham have roundly condemned the violence that followed their peaceful demonstration.

In Tottenham and other areas, relations between the police and the black community have been difficult for some time. Smith, however, believes that “there is some genuine grievance with the police at the core of the disturbances. The protest in response to excessive and lethal force by police was not without cause. But what happened subsequently does not flow from that. This is not the lid being blown off race-based riots like Mosside, Toxteth and Broadwater Farm, but blatant criminality.”

This view is supported by a breakdown of the figures for those people charged in the wake of the rioting. According to Home Office Figures, 83 percent of the people charged and arrested were known to the police, 75 percent had criminal records and only 10 percent were in gangs. That certainly seems counter to the Marxist notion of a politicised and downtrodden proletariat rising up to take the material goods that they consider their right.

According to research by the Financial Times, two-thirds of all the suspects arrested live in below-average income neighbourhoods. Smith believes this is an important counterpoint to the argument that this is just about criminality. “Social deprivation and rising disparities in income also played a part as causes of the rioting.”

A Western-style Arab Spring?

Smith also believes that these protests are not a UK version of an Arab Spring where a popular protest movement managed to subvert the existing system: “This is very different to what has been happening in the Middle East or even the recent student protests in the UK against increased university tuition fees. In the Middle East they had very clear grievances and even though some fringe elements did manage to hijack the recent UK student protests, the majority took to the streets to protest, not to loot.” Smith

believes the August riots were not politically motivated. “They have more in common with the riots that took place in Vancouver earlier this year, when hockey fans rioted after the home team was beaten.”

Paul Polman, the CEO of consumer products giant Unilever, was rescued from the Taj Hotel in Mumbai in November 2008, during the terrorist attacks that left 178 dead. He also witnessed some of the recent rioting at close hand when he saw a Hugo Boss store being trashed in the West End of London.

Polman feels that the disengagement of the young generation is threatening the “glue” in UK society. He told the Daily Telegraph: “Obviously there are criminal elements in there; there is desperation, there might have been people sucked in. But at the end of the day, what we have to watch is that – as Europe and the United States go from a serious meltdown to a period of slow or no growth as old-world economies – how can we still ensure that there is social cohesion? Otherwise the issues are even greater.”

Unity in the wake of it all

But one unintended consequence of the riots was a backlash of social solidarity from local communities affected by the rioting. Reeves furniture business in Croydon, south of London – burned to the ground by rioters – was back in business within days, in no small measure due to the support of the local community. People all over the country seized dustpans and brooms to help local shopkeepers tidy up. And there are countless stories of people contributing money and resources to prop up small local businesses hit by the riots. That never happened after previous riots.

The consensus seems to be that the 2011 riots were not the beginning of the end of Western society as we know it. But at the very least it provides a warning of some serious fault lines that could widen as the global economy continues to stagnate and social media creates the conditions for a ‘perfect storm’ of lawlessness.

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