

LSE Government Department The HotSeat Videocast

Professor Tony Travers discusses the recent London riots and their impact on the upcoming Olympics.

Ariane Sparks: Hi. I'm Ariane Sparks; welcome to the HotSeat. With us today to discuss the recent London riots and the impact on the upcoming Olympics is Professor Tony Travers. Thanks for being with us, Tony.

Professor Tony Travers: Thank you.

Ariane Sparks: There has been a lot of discussion about the cause of the recent unrest. Can you tell us what you think caused the riots?

Professor Tony Travers: I think what's interesting about these riots is that they were entirely unexpected and nobody had predicted that they would happen and I think that gives us a clue as to the complexity of the underlying reasons and why I'm sure it's right to have some kind of enquiry. What we saw in the immediate aftermath of the riots was commentators, right and left, rushing forward and pinning their own personal views of the world onto the riots as this being the thing to explain it. So some right of centre commentators were saying it's a breakdown of authority and families and we're all too liberal and we need a more repressive approach. And then on the left you had people saying it's all about the cuts and inequality and their view. Now that's not to say that there isn't something in some or all of those rationales, those reasons, but I think the idea that any of us know immediately why the riots happened is probably simplistic. It seems to me that this was such a violent outpouring of feeling, not only in London but in other British cities, it's hard not to infer from it that it's the result of twenty or thirty years of something, failed social policy possibly, inequality growing possibly, attitudes to authority conceivably, the way the police behave in particular circumstances possibly; it could be any of those things and more. So I think that nobody really knows why these riots happened and that's why they were so shocking. I think in context, nobody in Britain, even now, really knows why and, of course as time moves on, we're now a few weeks away from the riots themselves, there's always a risk that people will lose interest so that's why I think a review, with academics and others, explaining why they think these things might have happened is important. On the second morning of the riots, I went to the sitting room and looked at all the books on the bookshelves and I had at least five books on my bookshelves which had titles like riots in London so we can't be ahistoric here either. Big cities will, from time to time, either for political reasons or reasons of the unfair treatment of groups within society or whatever, there will be civil disturbances more than, for obvious reasons, in rural areas. So we mustn't make the impression that something's happened here that's without parallel but that doesn't mean we shouldn't, of course, investigate why it occurred.

Ariane Sparks: Do you think the police handled the unrest well or are there lessons to be learned?

Professor Tony Travers: Well, I think the police, and again, there is an interesting story with the police. The police in Britain are responsible for all operational decisions so the metropolitan police commissioner in London, the chief constables outside, they decide how policing is delivered. The politicians set the laws and the money; but the chief constable in the London, commissioner decides how the resources are deployed. So it was fascinating to

see the mayor of London, Boris Johnson, and actually Ed Miliband, who's not Prime Minister and doesn't run anything, and some other politicians went out on the streets, people heckled them immediately afterwards. So clearly there was an expectation that the politicians should have done something to stop all of this. Well, actually, in the British system, it's the police who decide on policing and they of course then, later on, said well, we deployed more police officers and we stopped the riots. So there is an asymmetry in the way in which the policing and the attitudes to policing and, indeed, the way the system of policing operates in Britain which is that the politicians got the blame but the police, in the end, claimed credit for having stopped the riots. Nobody actually blamed the police for the riots or from the early hours of them. Now, to answer your question, I think that there is some evidence that the police, at the beginning of the riots, were under-staffed, didn't have enough resources and were not quite sure whether to contain the riots or protect property or what. And, of course, it took two or three days and an enormous growth of public opinion about this to produce a mass, effectively, of police from all over Britain coming onto the streets of London and that killed off all the riots, all the disturbances almost instantly by the Wednesday of the week when they started on the Saturday. So I think there will be lessons to be learned about policing and, of course, the whole thing was triggered by an incident in Tottenham at the end of the previous week before the riots started when a young man was arrested and there was an incident where he was fatally shot and then the independent police complaints division was brought in and messages got confused as to who was to communicate with the family, was it the police or the IPCC and all of that. So I think, again, in the cooler, grey light or morning some weeks onwards, some weeks further on, there is a need here, too, to unravel what happened, in order to understand where the policing could have been more effective. But, having said all this, in fairness to the police, I do think that the police in Britain find themselves with a complicated task in the sense that earlier riots in the 1980's were clearly significantly caused by very poor relationships between the police and, particularly, minority ethnic communities, partly because the police at the time included a number of officers whose attitudes to minorities were clearly, how shall I put it, not good. Now, as we move on to today, the police have hugely cleaned up their act in that sense; they are much more community oriented, much more tolerant. But, nevertheless, they are expected to impose the law and imposing the law is always going to mean trying to stop some people doing some things they don't want to so getting the balance in complex inner city communities between being seen to be repressive and over-repressive but, on the other hand, ensuring the streets are safe is a very complicated one for the police. And the commissioner responsible for operational policing, not a politician, which is the way we've decided to do it here, I think that puts a great deal of pressure on the police which, normally, you'd expect to be handled by politicians and that, again, I think needs to be looked at as well.

Ariane Sparks: What are the implications for the upcoming Olympics?

Professor Tony Travers: There is no doubt that the riots in London and other cities this summer were unexpected and they have alerted the police and the government, and the authorities more generally in London, to the fact that the Olympics, they'd been concentrating on the Olympics particularly in terms of what you might call traditional terrorism. That is it was all seen through the eyes of police officers and others, perfectly reasonably, expecting some form of terrorist attack. What they hadn't really thought about was the idea of classic civil insurrection or civil disturbances so what this has, I think, jolted the authorities, particularly the police, towards doing is being aware that they need to concentrate not just on the Olympics but on the unknown unknowns, the unexpected unexpecteds, and whilst there is inevitably going to be a suggestion, and there has been in

the media more recently, that perhaps next year gangs will use this as an opportunity to have more riots well, we can't know that. But I think what it will have done is to tell the police and the government and the city authorities that they mustn't just think of the Olympics in terms of one potential form of threat but that it's possible in a huge city like London that other things can happen and they have to prepare on that assumption. But, having said that, I suspect that even so the overwhelming concentration of the police to do with the Olympics is going to be about the threat of terrorism more than about the kind of things that happened this summer.

Ariane Sparks: Alright, we'll leave it there. Professor Travers, you are off the HotSeat. Thank you for being with us.

Professor Tony Travers : Thank you very much.

Ariane Sparks: And thank you for being with us. Please tune in next month for our next edition of the HotSeat.