



POLIS public discussion

Rioting and Resilience: How should progressives respond to social disorder?

Stella Creasy MP
Member of Parliament for Walthamstow

London School of Economics and Political Science

Monday 28 November 2011

Check against delivery

<http://www.workingforwalthamstow.org.uk/?p=957>

Thank you to Polis and the LSE for organising this discussion.

For the first time in 13 years of living in Walthamstow I felt a real sense of real fear this summer – I stood just 50 yards from my own home and watched cars pull up and people stream through our town centre, running in small groups across the open spaces chased by police around the back roads and all the time shouting, screaming, laughing. I stood with young men I knew who lived on a nearby road – gathering, talking through what they would do if the rioters came to their road, ready to go and fight, me pleading with them not to do so in case the looters were armed with knives.

There then followed a week in my life I will never forget. The following nights kids played cat and mouse with the police and each other and our TV screens and Facebook were full of scenes of escalating destruction. The tears and fear as the town centre was shut down by a rumour midweek and parents ran to drag their children from nurseries and playgrounds having been told ‘they would be next’. Our decision to run a fully fledged pop up canteen serving the extra police on our streets. The determination of residents anxious to restore pride in their community.

That week both challenged and reaffirmed the support for the police and public services amongst my constituents. It made friendships between neighbours who worked together to salvage Walthamstow’s sense of order. And it generated an outpouring of offering of help for our young people.

Alarm about social disorder was not just on the streets. It was also in Parliament as politicians tried to grapple with explanations. Four months on discussion about pure criminality or anger at public service cuts has given way to a quest for a deeper understanding.

This has been helped by the decision to set up the National Riots Panel and to take seriously the need to understand more what happened and why.

There is also now some evidence to dispel myths about who was involved. As of October only 2000 – mostly men – have appeared before the courts. It is a small minority of all involved. Most are under 20 – although this varies with places like Salford seeing a much smaller percentage of juvenile offenders than other areas. The ethnicity of those involved reflects Britain's young people – but of those involved caught so far two thirds had a special educational need and 76% had a previous conviction.

As one MP said to me 'if you think there is one cause or consequence of that week move on'. Talking to those on the ground it's clear different activities took place in different areas over the course of that week – from concerns about the death of Mark Duggan and how police responded in Tottenham, to the coordination of criminal activity and looting across London on the following evenings and then the police response as unrest spread in towns and cities across England.

Many make distinctions, arguing some were there to attack institutions – public and private – some were there to acquire goods and some were there to attack each other. The charge sheet so far reflects this with 45% of people being charged with burglary and 26% violent disorder.

And then there is the elephant in the room. The list of areas first affected by disorder reads like a roll call of poverty – Brixton, Croydon, Walthamstow, Hackney, Lewisham, Peckham. So too as the disturbances spread across the country it was not to well-heeled Witney or the leafy Tatton but to Manchester, Nottingham and Birmingham. Even in the more affluent areas where rioting took place – in Ealing and Clapham Junction for example – the evidence is that the rioters themselves were largely from poorer areas.

But to say these events are a symptom of poverty offers more heat than light, not least because many areas with similar levels of poverty were not involved; it doesn't explain why places like Glasgow, Newcastle, Poplar or Sheffield did not see the same types of disorder.

Poverty makes the circumstances that individuals and institutions face much more challenging, but it does not determine outcomes. The majority of people who live in the affected areas and

who did not take part in such activities deserve much more respect than to suggest otherwise. As David Lammy has highlighted only a few hundred people caused chaos in Tottenham – where 40000 young people live.

The police have explained many of those arrested have been in previous contact with the law – with 20000 hours of footage left to view and potentially many more offenders to catch. This recognition factor played a part in shaping the first set of presumptions about role of gangs in the disorder that have now been reassessed. Whether in six months time with more evidence processed by Operation Withern the profile of those charged will have substantially changed is something none of us can predict.

Notwithstanding these concerns, there is one shared experience. Social boundaries – what to expect of other people's behaviour – broke down that week and because they did, the institutions on which the public relied to restore them were tested – and for many found wanting.

We should be under no illusions that police numbers were incidental to stopping the social disorder that followed. On the Tuesday night there were 16000 police officers on the streets of London – the same number who will leave the service in England and Wales between 2010 and 2014. The ability to surge the numbers of police patrolling the streets – and the lack of police in turn in other areas – had a direct effect both on stopping crime and fuelling the presumption anything goes. Surging to 16000 on patrol put an exceptional strain on the Met – that's why we are right to question how a reduction in officers will affect the service's ability to maintain order and to challenge those who dismiss these concerns.

So too the public have to have confidence that the justice system will act to reinforce messages about the consequences of transgression. Talk of heavy sentences generated a quick recalibration of behaviour as stories spread of those who had stolen bottles of water or held shutters for others to enter shops being imprisoned. There are anecdotes of shoplifting and vandalism dropping in the following weeks too as many feared an enthusiastic judiciary.

But there is also a need to understand a lack of disorder is not the same as peace and order for all. If we want the police to be able to prevent crime and not just tackle it they need to be able to work with every citizen. Following this summer's events David Lammy has rightly called for us to re-examine the concept of policing by consent.

Peel once said 'the police are the public, and the public are the police'. On one estate in Brixton alone 120 arrests were made following tip offs from residents about looting. If we choose we can

all play a critical role in encouraging acceptable behaviour – or not. One of the less commented aspects of that week was the vigilantism that appeared. In some areas police were able to manage these groups, but in others they in themselves became a further part of the disorder to be dealt with.

The dislocation and diminution of police from communities they serve challenges their ability to both promote order and secure confidence in their work. Cuts to Safer Neighbourhood teams will mean fewer police to build trust with those who they protect as well as gain the local intelligence that helps them tackle crime. Community policing in places like Tottenham and Brixton has improved beyond recognition since the 1980s. However, as Lammy argues the problem in August was the police response to Mark Duggan and the riots was directed centrally from Scotland Yard, not by local officers with knowledge of the community.

Recent research shows in 2010 only half of all Met police officers lived in a London borough, with few able to live in the inner city. The cost of living, the closure of subsidised accommodation and changes in postings have contributed to this pattern. This dislocation isn't just geographical – still only one in ten Met officers are from ethnic minorities. Halting recruitment will do little to help create and sustain a police force that can connect with the diversity of Britain. The same can also be said of our courts.

But stopping cuts to police and tackling the way in which our justice representatives are employed is only half the answer. We should not believe we can police or imprison our way out of these problems – and if we wish to prevent such events from happening again, enforcement is not enough. We need to understand why some areas and some people were more affected than others – and the importance of redressing this to social justice. Today I want to offer a way of doing that, setting out the challenge this presents of how to build and sustain civic resilience in modern Britain.

Resilience is a term used in different ways – David Cameron launched Demos' 'Character Inquiry' in 2009 that saw resilience as a character attribute. The UK Resilience Unit at the Cabinet Office assesses risks and our 'preparedness' to deal with them – for example around problems caused by winter weather. The previous government described community resilience as the ability of groups to resist less tangible risks – in particular as part of the prevent agenda concerning the risk of violent extremism.

These perspectives see resilience as about managing risk. I come at this concept from a slightly different tradition – that of the psychology of personal resilience. This is the study of the factors that allow an individual to not just ‘bounce back’ under pressure but to adapt and thrive.

Dr Michael Rutter has identified what he termed ‘protective mechanisms’ that help children grow and progress. These include personal qualities such as confidence but also the relationships you have with those closest to you such as family, and institutional factors such as good schools and the community in which you live. Crucially for the point I want to make today Rutter’s work is about how it is the interplay of all these factors that determines outcomes for children. Thus to develop children need a range of opportunities, not just personality, to do well in life.

More than that, resilience research also shows if you change the opportunities available to them, most children will flourish. That the odds of doing well in life are not fixed at birth nor the outcomes guaranteed by good genes. A good teacher can help fast track a curious child’s learning potential just poor parenting can limit their creativity. A good society works not only to minimise the risk of exposure of a child to poor parenting. It also seeks to maximise the chances of a child securing the tuition that will realise their potential.

The parallel I want to draw is that just as with children so too we can foster resilience in communities and countries to help secure better outcomes. We can make them locations that not only withstand crises such as social disorder but also be settings for shared progress.

Civic resilience is not just about the ability to bounce back but also the ability to bounce forward. The bounce comes from the mix of economic, social and cultural assets communities have. Factors like housing, jobs, schools, social networks and a commitment to each other that combine to create an environment which raises the chances people will not only survive the ups and downs of life but succeed.

Social stability is the foundation for the relationships of trust and cooperation between the public that unlock these resources. That is why we should see effective law and order as a crucial element to tackling social injustice – those areas affected by the summer’s events need this security to be able to work on strengthening their resilience the most.

Many have expressed concern that work in the areas affected by the riots so far has focused on buildings not building relationships. That whilst welcome, financial pledges for capital projects to reconstruct burnt out shopping parades in places like Croydon or Tottenham needs to be

matched by investment in the people who live in these areas. Furthermore, in those areas that did not see mass destruction of property, we need to ask how best to invest in their people too.

This investment should be as much about 'soft factors' such as confidence and empowerment as it is access to financial help. To simply blame the riots on 'moral breakdown' or 'single parents' is – as another MP put to me – meaningless to the point of negligence, just as it is to pretend poverty doesn't make it harder to thrive. Of course family relationships matter – they are key to how young people access these resources for resilience and a lack of these relationships makes it harder – but not impossible – to progress.

But those who focus too rigidly on family structure by default write off those who don't fit a particular format. Fostering resilience requires us to look for more than evidence of a relationship. Family intervention projects and services like Surestart are at their most effective when they build a child's confidence or help a parent get work because they develop the resilience of all of those involved. The truth is that it is values of family life – the attitudes and aspirations being part of a close group teach you as well as the resources they give you – that make all the difference.

Building civic resilience also means extending this principle beyond the narrow confines of the nuclear unit. Those areas less affected by disorder didn't all have more means, but many had a blend of assets that fortify their residents – whether through incomes, geography, community networks or public services. Focusing on promoting resilience for both people and places means rethinking how we secure that mix of resources this requires for all of Britain.

Too many of those so far identified as involved in the riots have had multiple contact with agencies – whether through school, social care or in their communities – often with varying results. In Government we cut the numbers of first time youth offenders by 43% and the numbers of youth offences overall by a third in the last parliament. But maintaining this trend is about more than the role of our criminal justice system. Early intervention should not be about the age of the person involved, but the point at which we step in and how.

Collaboration also makes for good value government – and it costs us more if we don't. For example, the abolition of behaviour and attendance partnerships will make it harder to get schools to work together with each other, the police and community representatives to promote good behaviour in a locality as well as identify children who need support to address conduct before it becomes out of control.

And it is difficult to reconfigure services in this way if those who can build these relationships are under threat. Aside from the cuts to social care or welfare services, in many areas of the country we're looking at 70% or more cuts to youth provision and a demolition of the voluntary youth sector. The recent U-turn on the fate of the Youth Justice Board is welcome, but YOTs are also facing cuts – despite the key part they play in being able to offer community punishment that is both proportionate and effective.

We should reject youth provision that seeks simply to 'divert' children – midnight basketball programmes or talks on knife crime do not develop personal resilience in the same way that guidance, leadership training or peer mentoring schemes do. Empowering young people to be aspirational in their own right as well as be able to have compassion and commitment to others is the first step to helping them take up the opportunities society can extend and in turn contribute. So too role models do make a difference – both male and female – in helping young people picture what they could be and why. If we want to do more than contain social disorder but to build resilience then all who interact with our youth should be challenged not to mind them but mentor them towards achievement.

Above all, we have to develop the capacity for community involvement that nourishes resilience. Civic resilience cannot be bought in the marketplace or imposed. It is a joint and collaborative endeavour. Just as policing by consent requires participation by the public, so too we need services that work with, not just for communities. Strengthening civic resilience isn't about the state vs society, but committing resources where the two mesh.

To support that process, the left must not be afraid to have difficult and public conversations about the values and behaviours of modern progressive Britain – if we don't, there are others who will to the detriment of our civic resilience. During the riots there were some who tried to divide and exclude – we know in Birmingham, Eltham and Lewisham some attempted to do so on racial lines. Talk of elites or an underclass also undermines our ability to foster a shared desire to tackling inequality because it segregates some from contributing. In the aftermath of disorder many areas affected, and many that were not, came out to express commitment to their towns. This is not simply goodwill but a crucial resource that can be marshalled towards social justice. To inspire relationships of mutual benefit with those who we live with, the first step is action – whether this be neighbourhood social stability or supporting the progress of our children.

If we recognise the need to build our cultural resources for civic resilience we must not neglect our economic ones too. Many in the areas affected by the riots have identified the challenge of retaining employers – both big and small – in the aftermath and these times of economic

austerity. We may disagree about the longer term challenges, but I would hope we all believe getting the compensation promised to those affected by the riots is crucial to helping areas affected recover. That's why it's so worrying to find out today that little has been done to cut through the bureaucracy around providing that support to make sure that help is getting to where it is needed. Government can usefully play a coordinating role for that and so the lack of follow up on the Riots Act following the commitments made over the summer is deeply troubling.

Without local prosperity to bring jobs and growth to our cities, little wonder many of those in the affected areas are concerned about the impact of worklessness in increasing the risk of disorder. There are areas of Britain where working is not the norm and prospects are limited as a result. Three of the areas worst affected by the riots – Haringey, Hackney and Lewisham – are the three places with the worst level of unemployment in England.

Employment matters more than as something to lose if a person secures a criminal record. It brings money to a household budget, prosperity to a place, as well as a personal sense of purpose and identity. In turn we know growing unemployment has consequences well beyond family finances – whether the way it increases the risk of marital dissolution by 70% or the links to personal and mental health problems. Along with education it is a key resource in giving direction to that bounce forward. That one in seven young people are now NEET – not in education, employment or training- is a national crisis in itself. That these young people are disproportionately concentrated in some areas threatens the civic resilience of these areas directly. We can't turn the clock back in a global economy, but should not accept this means we can only hope the market shows mercy. Being champions for resilience tasks us with helping people and places adapt to thrive in these changing times as well as mitigate the risks.

Civic resilience is not about particular quantities of these individual factors alone but the interplay between them. Those areas more able to withstand economic or social pressure as well as help their residents adapt and achieve in Britain are those with the means and the mix that sustains resilience. In turn we can see how changes in one aspect of this mix not only affect service provision, but cumulative civic resilience. Policing is harder to do if a community is under pressure through a lack of work, or has a culture in which their role is under question. We should also challenge scattergun cuts to services not only because of the impact they have on provision but because of these cumulative consequences; where cuts to policing have knock on effects to not only street safety but the confidence of people and places to thrive.

No one can ever guarantee social disorder will not again come to Britain's streets. But instead of wringing our hands we should focus on building the personal and civic resilience required to

withstand pressure as well as promote progress. The real big society doesn't see this as a task for some more than others. It recognises that mix of resources is required to drive forward motion – and to secure social justice. The task of the left is not just to help Britain bounce back but fight for all communities and country to be able to bounce forward.

END