

The Guardian and London School of Economics and Political Science conference

Reading the Riots

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Wednesday 14 December 2011

Introduction

I'm delighted to be able to address this conference today.

Last summer we saw scenes that were amongst the most disgraceful to occur on Britain's streets. Rioters rampaging through our cities. Louts looting local businesses. Thugs threatening the innocent. Buildings burning and shops smouldering.

The riots shocked us all.

The Evidence Base

And with such shocking events it is vitally important that we understand why they happened, that we address the causes and that we do all in our power to make sure they never happen again.

We now have a growing body of evidence about the riots.

The Independent Communities and Victims Panel has released its interim findings; the Metropolitan Police and the West Midlands Police have published reports; the Ministry of Justice has made available details of those who appeared before the courts; my own Department has published analysis of crimes committed and those arrested; and the National Centre for Social Research has studied the involvement of young people.

The LSE/Guardian report adds to this evidence base.

We now need to look at all the available evidence and to ensure we draw the proper conclusions.

Guardian/LSE Report

As rigorous social scientists, I am sure that the LSE authors of this report recognise that the rioters they interviewed might seek to make excuses for their actions. They would of course try to rationalise and excuse their inexcusable and irrational behaviour.

Nearly two thirds of those brought before the courts were charged with either burglary, robbery or theft — so we know that the vast mass of rioters weren't protesting, as they claimed; they were thieving.

There is another note of caution in the LSE report. Despite the fact that rioting occurred across the country, very few who were interviewed came from outside London — just 3 people from Nottingham, 7 from Salford — where some of the most violent rioting occurred - and only 16 from Merseyside.

There were no riots in Sheffield, in Glasgow, in Newcastle and in many, many other towns and cities which face similar issues cited by the rioters. Why did disturbances not happen there?

This report was inspired by a study on the Detroit riots in 1967, which 'compared the backgrounds, experiences and attitudes of those who rioted with a much larger group of local citizens that did not.'

But I note that this survey had no such control group.

I would be interested to know whether the second phase will include interviews with the law abiding majority, the innocent victims, and the local people who lived in fear throughout four long nights.

It is right that this research was done, and I welcome it. But I do think it's important to highlight the limitations of such a study, limitations that I'm sure you also all recognise.

And rather than listening solely to the rioters' stories, I think it's important that we take all of the evidence together and that we draw a more comprehensive and accurate picture of what actually happened this summer.

Because the riots weren't about protests, unemployment, cuts.

The riots weren't about the future, about tomorrow. They were about today. They were about now. They were about instant gratification.

Because "all the riots really come down to was money".

"It wasn't political, it was shopping."

Like the parent shouting after their child: 'get me a Sat Nav!'

'They were drawing up their shopping lists.'

'iPhones! Xboxes! Everything! You can get whatever you want!'

Real quotes, that reveal the real attitudes of the rioters.

Policy Implications

Stop and Search

So what are the policy implications of the evidence we now have?

Some have argued that as so many of the rioters interviewed in this report criticised the police, that somehow the police need to change their tactics — scale back on stop and search perhaps or change their community relations.

Now, I strongly believe that stop and search should be used proportionately, without prejudice and with the support of local communities. But if it is used properly - if people are treated with courtesy, if the police explain why stops are being made and why operations are happening - then it can be a valuable tool and it can be warmly welcomed by local people.

[And I have asked the Association of Chief Police Officers to look at best practice on stop and search.]

I am also an enthusiastic supporter of better community relations with the police. In fact, that's part of the reason why we are introducing directly elected Police and Crime Commissioners, to give local people a real say in how their area is policed. And it's why we strongly back neighbourhood policing.

So where there are problems with policing, we should address them. But let's look at this research and consider whether, in fact, there is a problem.

Nearly a third of those interviewed for this report said they had never been cautioned or convicted of an offence.

But I look at it another way — that means two-thirds said they had been cautioned or convicted of an offence in the past.

That's only a little less than the figure of 76% - or three quarters - of those who appeared in court in connection with the riots who had a previous caution or conviction.

In fact, on average each rioter charged had committed 11 previous offences.

In other words, they were career criminals. And these are the very people saying they feel harassed by the police.

Frankly, I'm delighted that career criminals don't like the police, that they feel the police are always targeting them and, as one said, that the police are always "causing them hell".

I would be angry if the police were leaving these people alone - they are exactly the sort of people the police should be targeting.

Every single one of these rioters is a self-confessed criminal. They committed very serious crimes in August. And we know that criminals generally don't like the police.

So of course these criminals talked of "payback" against the police. Payback, presumably, for the police not letting them get away with their crimes. Payback for the police doing a good job and catching them.

And should we worry that the rioters were eight times more likely than the average Londoner to have been stopped and searched, when the research found young rioters were 22 times more likely than their peers to have been convicted of a crime?

Are they really being stopped too much?

I don't think so.

Reoffending

But what is abundantly clear is that, if three quarters of the rioters had previous convictions, we need to do much more to break the cycle of reoffending.

That's why we're creating a proper culture of work in prison, with a working week of up to 40 hours.

It's why we're getting more offenders off their addictions to drugs and alcohol.

And it's why we're paying providers by results - so if they don't cut reoffending, they don't get paid.

But I am clear that proper punishment, that acts as a real deterrent, has to be part of the solution.

Fortunately, after the riots that is exactly what we got.

And the speed of the courts made sure that justice was fast as well as firm.

So now these criminals know what will happen. They know that their actions will have consequences.

Gangs

The final issue I wanted to talk about is gangs and youth violence.

I believe the fact that 1 in 5 rioters in London were gang members is significant.

The report says, gangs laid down their usual rivalries and cooperated to cause as much crime as possible. I believe that is significant.

More broadly, in London almost 50 per cent of shootings and 22 per cent of serious violence is committed by known gang members. That is significant.

If we are honest with ourselves, we need to accept that not enough has been done over the years to deal with this problem that we all knew existed and that we knew was not being addressed.

This government is committed to dealing with it.

That's why we produced a considered and evidence-based approach designed to deal with each and every aspect of gang culture and youth violence.

This long-term programme will involve intervention at each stage of vulnerable people's lives.

It will be a locally led approach, with agencies working together and sharing information.

And it will combine tough enforcement with work to address the root causes of gang and youth violence.

That programme will be supported by £10 million, which we announced on Monday will go to support an initial 22 local areas.

And we will invest at least £1.2 million of new resources over the next 3 years to improve services for the girls and young women caught up in gang related sexual violence.

Conclusion

What the LSE/Guardian report tells me more than anything is that the rioters still have not accepted responsibility for their actions.

They're still blaming others — the police, the government, "society". They're still making excuses.

But I don't accept those excuses.

Because it was their choice to riot.

And their crimes had consequences.

So let's not just accept their excuses and their explanations.

Let's consider the other evidence. Let's listen to the police; let's listen to the communities that were devastated; but most of all, let's listen to the victims.

Let's listen to the shopkeepers, many of whom had built their businesses from nothing - these rioters were directly responsible for destroying their livelihoods.

Let's listen to the homeowners and tenants, whose flats and houses were burned down — these rioters were directly responsible for taking away their homes, the places where they lived.

And let's listen to the families who lost loved ones.

Because it is the victims who matter most.

Thank you.

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