



Japan Local Government Centre, London

Monthly Report for September 2011: London Briefing –UK Riots

Background

The August 2011 UK riots were arguably the single greatest national emergency since the 7/7 London bombings of July 2005 and certainly the biggest crisis faced by the Conservative-led coalition of David Cameron since its formation in May 2010, as evidenced by the recall of Parliament during its summer recess.

The initial Tottenham disturbances of August 6 were triggered by the death of known gang member Mark Duggan, who was intercepted by an armed police unit and lost his life in the ensuing detention. However, in the event of any death involving police, the investigation is handed to the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC), who routinely refuse to release information until initial forensic inquiries have been undertaken. Members of the local community marched on the local police station in Tottenham to demand answers from a senior officer, but were refused information on account of the on-going investigation into Duggan's death (and the wounding of a police officer by friendly fire). This then turned to anger as the protest dispersed into the night and police vehicles were attacked and although police tried to contain the situation, the unexpected flare-up saw them ill-equipped as protests spread and turned to looting of shops. Over the course of the next few evenings, riots spread to other parts of the capital and other English cities such as Birmingham, Bristol, Manchester and Liverpool saw looting and arson, with five deaths as a result and £200m damage to property.

Reactions to the riots

The disturbances were notable for the use of social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook by which those involved were quickly able to instigate trouble, not least the now infamous Blackberry Messaging service which enable gang members to discuss activity securely in an encrypted forum. This also heightened the public mood as worried residents were able to read in real-time activity planned or being carried out in their locality, with 24 hour news coverage also fuelling copycat behaviour. As such, the delayed return from summer holidays by Prime Minister David Cameron and London mayor Boris Johnson, who initially refused to return until the third night of riots, saw public outrage at their perceived insensitivity.

Political messages in the period that followed saw the riots linked directly to criminal behaviour rather than any legitimate grievances, whereas a number of commentators had claimed that young people were angry over austerity-led government spending cuts, particularly to education and welfare. Some wryly noted the warning by Deputy Prime Minister and Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg during the 2010 general election campaign that spending cuts brought in by a

minority Conservative government could lead to “riots in the streets”. However, most damage inflicted was actually against communities themselves (such as the working class and immigrant families who lost their homes when shops below were torched). Equally, the looting was aimed at consumer and sports goods rather than basic essentials. At one event, former chair of the Metropolitan Police Authority (and former leader of the council in Tottenham) Lord Harris said that the riots were as a result of rising material aspirations among the young against a backdrop of diminishing respect for authority, which appears to be a more accurate reading of events. It is also notable that criminal gangs were able to cash in on the events by robbing looters after they had entered shops. A post-riot briefing by the independent expert City Security and Resilience Networks suggested that while criminality was the major factor, recent cuts to youth services could not be ignored.

A number of criticisms were leveled at the Metropolitan Police for their slow handling of the initial phase, which saw outnumbered officers stand by as youths torched buildings and looted businesses. Police chiefs hit back at the suggestions of incompetence and by the third evening a surge in officers available, thanks to deployment of back-up from the regions under mutual aid arrangements (which then led to under-resourcing outside London and weak police responses in those cities), quelled further disturbances. A number of commentators called for water cannon and baton rounds, routinely used in Northern Ireland, to be made available on the mainland. However, police chiefs countered that such tactics were only suited to situations where crowds were static, while the riots and looting had taken place rapidly and moving from place to place.

In the immediate aftermath of the riots, justice was swift and punitive. Special courts sat through the night to process the 2,700 people charged with disorder offences and maximum sentences were handed out, for instance four years for inciting a riot on facebook. Despite the media perceptions of those involved being young black males, only one quarter charged were juveniles and the rest came from all walks of life, communities and ages.

The local authority response

The central government response was led initially by the Home Secretary Theresa May and then by Prime Minister David Cameron on return from his holiday, who coordinated police movements from the COBRA Committee for national emergencies.

In an era where local councils are frequently tarnished by government and media alike as ‘inefficient’ and ‘irrelevant’ to people’s lives, many local authorities were on hand to pick up the pieces following the riots and assist the emergency services during them. In London the London Resilience Forum coordinated local authority responses and the blue light emergency services, ensuring seamless working on a range of issues, including housing the homeless. Local authorities also provided CCTV footage from their own cameras in order to aid the police in apprehending those involved, as well as undertaking rapid street cleaning and repairs in order to ensure business continuity.

Following the riots, London Councils established a Recovery Coordination Group consisting of it, the Metropolitan Police, the Greater London Authority and the London Fire Brigade, to aid

recovery and provide funds and advice to affected businesses, as well as reducing red tape for those concerned.

Many councils also offered reduced business rates to those affected in order to alleviate their burden, while others organised street parties and memorials in affected areas to promote community solidarity. Several councils also launched legal bids to evict tenants from social housing if convicted of rioting, although this was widely criticised as unlawful, ineffectual and unfair on account of the effect on their families who played no part in the disorder.

The riots in context

The August 2011 disturbances follow several large scale public order incidents, the like of which have not been seen for decades (arguably since the 1990 Poll Tax riot in London's Trafalgar Square). In November and December 2010, organised protests against the coalition government's introduction of university fee rises saw successive weeks of disturbances in central London, with the first seeing outnumbered police unable to prevent the Conservative Party headquarters being vandalised. The next protests saw widespread damage to buildings and police vehicles in Whitehall, with attacks against the Cenotaph war memorial and even the official vehicle of Prince Charles and the Duchess of Cornwall while en route to a concert.

Historically speaking, community level disorder has tended to occur following significant flashpoints during recession and a breakdown of relations between the community and the police. The 1981 Brixton and Toxteth riots followed anger at the perception that the police were targeting and falsely arresting black youths. In the wake of the riots, the Scarman Inquiry led to a wholesale overhaul of policing methods, while the then Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher under Environment Secretary Michael Heseltine oversaw a number of urban renewal initiatives such as a 'Minister for Merseyside', Urban Task Forces and regeneration funds (as well as the International Garden Festivals, modeled on the *Bundesgartenschau*, which travelled between a number of other English cities). Heseltine's special treatment for Merseyside continued as part of government policy well into the 1990s (for instance, Merseyside had its own regional Government Office until 1998). In 1985, there were also riots in Tottenham on the notorious Broadwater Farm estate following the death of an elderly black woman during a police raid on her home, which saw the murder of one police officer dispatched to quell the situation.

Other notable disturbances in inner city England include the Meadow Well riots on Tyneside in 1991 (following the death of two joy-riders during a police chase) and Marsh Farm in Luton in 1995 (following simmering social tensions during summer and stand-offs between police and local youths). Both areas saw millions of regeneration funds invested, particularly by the European Union, to ameliorate living conditions for residents.

Following the August 2011 disturbances, the now Lord Heseltine (Chair of the Regional Growth Fund and Conservative Party adviser on cities) said that local council leaders had been invisible during and after the riots and said that more elected mayors could provide the kind of visible community leadership necessary to rally the community in such times of crisis. His claims were however denied by the Local Government Association Chairman Sir Merrick Cockell, also the leader of Kensington and Chelsea (London's most affluent borough).

Communities and Victims Panel

In the wake of the riots, on 16 August Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg announced the formation of an independent panel to investigate the causes of the riots and recommend actions for government. The panel will make its final report in March 2012, with initial findings by this November and is tasked with looking at what motivated those involved, why the riots happened in some areas and not others and what can be done differently in order to prevent or minimise future disturbances. It will also look at what motivated local people to come together to resist riots or undertake mass clean-ups in their wake.

The panel is chaired by Darra Singh, the outgoing Chief Executive of JobCentre Plus and the former Chief Executive of Ealing and Luton councils, as well as the former chair of the Commission on Cohesion and Integration set up by the last Labour government. He will be assisted by Simon Marcus, founder and chair of the Boxing Academy charity in Tottenham and Hackney which works to reintegrate troubled youth back into society; Heather Rabbatts, former chief executive of Lambeth and Merton councils, as well as board member of the BBC, Bank of England, Royal Opera House and the London School of Economics; and Baroness Maeve Sherlock, the former chief executive of the National Council for One Parent Families and the Refugee Council.