

# JustComment

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A joint publication of Edmund Rice Centre for Justice and Community Education &  
The School of Education, Australian Catholic University

## Riots : 'the language of the unheard'

*Martin Luther King Jr*

### As the governing or

managerial elite of Europe and Britain were parked on their holiday sun-lounges – London was burning. In the scramble to comprehend London's August riots, almost every commentator opened with a ritual condemnation of the violence. There was no doubt that arson, muggings and lootings are ugly occurrences. But it just seemed too easy to dismiss it all as mindless and needless, opportunistic theft and violence, 'pure criminality', or the work of a 'violent minority'<sup>1</sup>. A reasonably objective view of Britain's political landscape and the civil unrest witnessed in Britain would suggest that the responsibility lay exactly where it always has since the beginning of 'civilisation': the leaders responsible for the society they have helped to create<sup>2</sup>. It is no coincidence that this violence in London takes place against the backdrop of a global economy poised for free fall. John Kenneth Galbraith<sup>3</sup> has set out the causes of recession: bad income distribution, a business sector engaged in 'corporate larceny', a weak banking structure and an import/export imbalance<sup>4</sup>. With no jobs and no sense of a future – a human catastrophe was waiting to happen!

**There is something that Governments care for far more than human life, and that is the security of property, and so it is through property that we shall strike the enemy. Be militant each in your own way. I incite this meeting to rebellion<sup>5</sup>.**

Warnings<sup>6,7</sup> were ignored as cities in England reap the fruit from a grotesquely unequal society: an ethos of grab what one can by any means. Valuing growth over equality has life-

diminishing results seen all around us. Inequality results in shorter, unhealthier and unhappier lives; increased rates of teenage pregnancy, violence, obesity, imprisonment and addiction; destroyed relationships between people born into the same society but in different classes; and drives consumption which depletes the planet's resources.<sup>8</sup>

A member of Parliament inferred that Britain has become 'a society of looters created with MPs and their expenses, bankers and their bonuses, tax-evading corporations, hacking journalists, bribetaking police officers, and now a group of alienated kids are seizing their chance.... Addressing inequality is the only way we can avoid a rerun of these riots'.<sup>9</sup> Another MP said: 'If this government implements bigoted policies of social exclusion – deliberate creation of unemployment, ending of education maintenance allowances, dumping of Sure Start, attacks on social housing tenancies et al – then a small but violent minority of those excluded may turn to other ways of being noticed. And the huge police cuts mean that the riots are even more difficult to deal with'.<sup>10</sup> In the end, we know who will be held to account. The leaders must take a major share of the responsibility for the society they have helped to create.

As Amanda Tattersall<sup>11</sup> said recently, 'What's happened in London reminds us of the importance of building strong bonds across communities in the city, including the young, the old and different cultural groups... 'The patient building of relationships is the only



long-term solution to easing tension.'

On almost every index of quality of life, or wellness, or deprivation, there is a gradient showing a strong correlation between a country's level of economic inequality and its social outcomes. Japan and the Scandinavian countries, almost always, are at the favourable 'low' end, whereas the UK, the USA and Portugal are, almost always, at the unfavourable 'high' end, with Canada, Australasia and continental European countries in between.<sup>12</sup>

Not only the poor, but whole societies, are adversely affected by social, economic and political inequality. Researchers suggest that Consumerism, isolation, alienation, social estrangement and anxiety all follow from inequality and so cannot rightly be just a matter of individual management.<sup>13</sup> Investing in longer term measures that will make a difference is called – rather investing in water cannon and new armoury for the police.

### The Bigger Picture

Those condemning the events in north London and elsewhere would do well to take a step back and consider the bigger picture. Prime Minister David Cameron

has said that this is not about poverty but about culture. Caroline Lucas<sup>14</sup>, through the kind of unrest seen, says 'we must seek to understand why this happened to prevent it being repeated.' There is deep inequality in Britain. Last year, London's richest people were worth 273 times more than the poorest. This increasing inequality played some part in the rioting. Lucas concluded: 'If individuals are defined as consumers not citizens, there is danger that those who cannot afford to consume feel they have no stake in their community and become more likely to turn against it<sup>15</sup>. Though culture may have some influence as the prime minister suggests, growing inequality in a culture that puts consumerism above is a dangerous mix. As Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett point out<sup>16</sup> phenomena usually described as 'social problems' (crime, ill-health, imprisonment rates, mental illness) are far more common in unequal societies than those with better economic distribution and less gap between the richest and the poorest. All these needs to be seen against a backdrop of brutal cuts<sup>17</sup> and enforced austerity measures.<sup>18</sup>

Britain has come to look more and more like a police state. Unlike, when the police walked the streets with very little armoury, they now have a small arsenal of various lethal weapons at their fingertips. People can be imprisoned without charge for two weeks. Increased security everywhere is more a consequence of repulsive foreign policies. The young are sent to foreign lands as soldiers to commit acts that would undoubtedly be judged as war crimes.<sup>19</sup>

**To revolt is a natural tendency of life. Even a worm turns against the foot that crushes it. In general, the vitality and relative dignity of an animal can be measured by the intensity of its instinct to revolt.**<sup>20</sup>

The killing of a black man that supposedly triggered the unrest is

pertinent to the kind of police state Britain has become where the police seem to act with total impunity. Underprivileged neighbourhoods are subject to destructive, terrifying and often fruitless daily police raids. When innocent people are wounded or killed by police, these often result in exoneration of the perpetrators.<sup>21</sup>

Martin Luther King, Jr said that 'A riot is the language of the unheard'. Structural inequalities require more than the provision of a few amenities. People riot when they feel powerless; when they are told all their lives they are good for nothing. To riot gives them a voice and sense of power albeit temporary. They riot when they realise that together they can do anything at all. People who never been respected riot because they feel they have little reason to show respect themselves.<sup>22</sup>

John F. Kennedy said: 'Make a peaceful revolution impossible and you guarantee a violent one.' The crowds of most young people can see their futures being bargained away to people who have left the country with their jobs. They see their parents' safety-nets fly evaporate, unable or unwilling to do anything about it. They are expected to drink reconditioned sewer water because of dwindling clean water supplies. Infrastructures are crumbling around them, rivers are polluted and little is done about it. Ultimately, they see themselves squeezed out of any voice in their future as they are marginalised and excluded from the debate. Such exclusion breeds contempt. It would not hard to deny those who have nurtured a culture of winner take all, to take part in a solution: to be more inclusive, not exclusive, so to improve the quality of life for all.<sup>23</sup>

Those in power did not realise how desperate things had become. They did not see it coming. 'They thought that after thirty years of soaring inequality, in the middle of a recession, they could take away the last little things that

gave people hope, the benefits, the jobs, the possibility of higher education, the support structures, and nothing would happen.'<sup>24</sup> All that is left to them are blanket condemnations and blind conjecture. In the coming days and weeks people will wake up to a country in chaos, fear, racism, condemnation on all sides which will not prevent a repeat of this. It is time to put aside hatred and prejudice and begin to work together and take care of one another. It is a choice.

Nims Obunge, a pastor in Tottenham, said: 'Some of these young people feel they've got no stake in society and they don't think they're risking anything.'<sup>25</sup>

Violence is rarely mindless. There is more to these riots than the death of Mark Duggan, a young man killed by the police. Much conjecture and speculation will follow these riots. Very few people know why these riots occurred because most were disengaged from these communities where there are no jobs, no space to live or move, and the police are on the streets stopping-and-searching people at random. Law and order responses alone are not enough for what is clearly not just a law and order matter. People who have been invisible, ignored, marginalised, and harassed by police without much hope of a future have made it on the news.<sup>26</sup>

**A young Tottenham man was asked if rioting really achieved anything:**

**'Yes,'** said the young man. **'You wouldn't be talking to me now if we didn't riot, would you? Two months ago we marched to Scotland Yard, more than 2,000 of us, all blacks, and it was peaceful and calm and you know what? Not a word in the press. Last night a bit of rioting and looting and look around you.'**

Full set of resources and references are on the ERC website [www.erc.org.au](http://www.erc.org.au)



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