

“Her Majesty’s Democracy”: Britain’s Parliament demands Violent Repression of Youth Riots

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Global Research, August 12, 2011

[World Socialist Web Site](#) 12 August 2011

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

Yesterday’s emergency debate in the British parliament, recalled in emergency session following the eruption of youth riots earlier this week, was a contemptible spectacle.

The disturbances that have swept large parts of London and other cities and towns across England are the direct product of the vast growth in poverty, deprivation and police brutality faced daily by many working class youth.

Everyone knows that these conditions are of the outcome of deliberate policies pursued by Labour and Conservative governments alike over the last three decades, as they have competed to satisfy the financial oligarchy and super-rich at the expense of working people. And everyone is well aware that the current Conservative-Liberal Democrat government’s austerity measures—driven by the self-same class interests—will lead to even greater social devastation and inequality.

But any reference to this reality was strictly off limits. In the face of an unprecedented eruption of raw social anger by young people, the assembled politicians could not muster a serious, intelligent response of any note. With much of London, Birmingham, Manchester, and other inner-city areas on virtual police lock-down, it denounced working class youth and shrilly demanded that the state prepare for violent repression of the population.

In his opening statement, Prime Minister David Cameron rejected that the disturbances were in any way connected to the police killing of 29-year old Mark Duggan last Thursday in Tottenham.

Duggan’s death was “used as an excuse by opportunist thugs in gangs”, he claimed, to carry out “criminality”.

It is now known that Duggan was shot and killed in a pre-planned operation, and that police claims they had opened fire in self-defence are lies. His death was only the latest in the toll of some 340 fatalities that have occurred in police custody over the last decade or so, for which not a single police officer has been convicted.

Cameron is indifferent to police lawlessness, however. The purpose of his statement was to insist that the disturbances were solely the result of “criminality” and “immorality” amongst young people, who must be dealt with ruthlessly.

The riots had shown that “pockets of society” were “frankly sick”, the prime minister said, marked by “mindless selfishness”, and a “complete lack of responsibility.”

Not only is this a slander against working class youth. Such statements more properly apply to the prime minister himself.

After all, it is less than one month since this smug, multi-millionaire old Etonian was implicated in the lawless activities of Rupert Murdoch's *News of the World*, which included phone hacking and the bribery and corruption of police officers.

For years, the political establishment had kept quiet about News International's "criminality on an industrial scale"—all eager to please the multi-billionaire, arch reactionary media baron lest he reveal the dirt he had on them. Even now Murdoch, his CEOs and the corrupt police officers involved have escaped prosecution.

Cameron's charge, moreover, applies equally to the "pocket" of the City of London, where the greedy, self-serving activities of the banks and super-rich have literally trashed the British economy. Billions of pounds have been looted from public funds and handed over to the City, without any bank, hedge-fund operator, financial speculator, or those supposed to have "regulated" their activities, held to account.

As one young person interviewed on Sky TV noted, "The politicians say that we loot and rob. They are the original gangsters. They talk about copycat crimes. They're the ones that's looting, they're the originals."

According to the government, however, it is only working class youth—the victims of this criminality on the part of the ruling elite—that should feel the "full force of the law" when their justifiable anger erupts.

Pledging that "nothing is off the table", Cameron announced that the police swamping operation in the inner-cities—16,000 in London alone—is to be extended to the weekend, and that an emergency reserve of riot police is on standby.

Plastic bullets were already authorised for use, and contingency plans were in place to deploy water cannon at 24 hours' notice if necessary.

Cameron also insisted that he did not rule out calling in the army in the event of further disturbances. "It is the government's responsibility to make sure that every future contingency is looked at, including whether there are tasks that the army could undertake that might free up more police for the front line," he said.

A range of punitive social "sanctions" are to be enforced against anyone involved in the disturbances—including evicting them from council housing, and stripping them of welfare benefits.

Curfews, the interception of electronic communications and "anti-gang" measures are also on the table.

These efforts to terrorise working class youth and their families on pain of utter destitution received the full support of Labour leader Ed Miliband.

"There can be no excuses, no justification" for the rioting, he insisted.

The saturation presence of police in the inner-cities should be extended indefinitely,

Miliband urged, until the police were satisfied the situation was “under control”. There must be “swift, effective and tough action to send a message about the penalties and punishment” for anyone involved.

As Miliband spoke, mass arrests continued in London and elsewhere. Police battered down doors and raided homes in some of the most deprived areas of the capital, detaining anyone suspected of being involved in the disturbances.

All-night sittings are underway in several magistrates courts in England to process the 2,000 or so people so far arrested. Amongst the first before the courts was an 11-year-old boy accused of stealing a rubbish bin from a department store; others were charged with similar petty offences, such as stealing cigarettes, clothes, food and electronic items.

Contrary to official claims that those involved in the disturbances were “underworld criminals”, many of those arrested have no previous convictions. Predominantly young people, they include college and university students, unemployed graduates, and many employed in low-wage jobs such as call centres.

Despite the lack of previous convictions, many have been refused bail. Those charged with “disorder”, in particular, are being referred for sentencing at crown courts, where they could face up to ten years in prison.

Even these measures are not enough for some. Earlier, one Conservative Member for the European Parliament had urged, “Time to get tough. Bring in the Army. Shoot looters and arsonists on sight”.

During the parliamentary debate, Conservative Sir Peter Tapsell urged that Britain should take the US approach to disturbances. During the 1960s when demonstrators had protested against the Vietnam War, they were held en masse in a Washington stadium. Those involved in the disturbances in London should be similarly be rounded up and kept in Wembley football stadium, he demanded.

It should be noted that during the inner-city rebellions in Brixton, Tottenham, Liverpool and elsewhere in the 1980s, there was widespread acknowledgement that inner-city deprivation and police brutality were to blame. The right-wing government of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was forced to convene an inquiry under Lord Scarman, who reported that “complex political, social and economic factors” created a “disposition towards violent protest”, and recommended remedial action.

There is no trace of this today. The Labour Party is a corrupt, right-wing, big-business party. The various so-called “lefts” and “liberals”—indifferent to social deprivation and horrified at the spectre of social unrest lest it impinge on their privileged lifestyles and bulging stock portfolios—are no different.

The Labour MP Dianne Abbot was just one of those who gave her full support to the police clampdown. Abbot made her political career on the backs of the inner-city riots in the 1980s, exploiting the legitimate concerns of black workers and youth at police brutality. It was the failure of the police to intervene early enough in the current disturbances that gave the green light to “every little hooligan in London” to go out and loot, she said.

The rottenness and corruption of Labour, the “left” and the trade unions is entirely responsible for the fact that the legitimate grievances of young people have taken the form

of an explosion of rage and violence.

These organisations have either become open advocates of big business, in the case of Labour, or experts at directing workers' struggles into the dead end of an orientation to the Labour Party. Walled off from any role in political life, working class youth have been unable to fight their deepening social oppression, until their anger exploded in response to recent acts of police brutality. The riots are in the final analysis the reflection of the government's corruption and utter imperviousness to the basic needs of the working class.

Serious lessons must be drawn from the events of the past days. The concerns of young people—poverty, war and state repression—mean breaking the monopoly of the three big business parties over political life by unity with working people in the fight for the building of a revolutionary party.

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