

Riotgate: Dispatch from East London

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“Stuff happens and it’s untidy, and freedom’s untidy, and free people are free to make mistakes and commit crimes and do bad things.” -Donald Rumsfeld on Iraq looting (April 11, 2003)

From afar we have heard the politicians, the social scientists, the psychologists. It is “feral youth”, “black youth”, “lowlife scum living off the State” (say the millionaire politicians in charge of the State, living off it courtesy the tax payer.) The “lazy”, the “feckless”, “people from sink estates”, are responsible – and so it goes on.

The neighbourhoods from which trouble has erupted are “poor”, “deprived”, those living there are “unemployed”, “semi-illiterate” and from “urban wastelands.”

Here in East London, terrible things did happen, franchises, small businesses, and aspirations went up in flames, or were comprehensively looted then trashed. As across the country, it was first the designer clothes, sports trainers shops, designer spectacle frames, betting and pawn shops raided for the cash, the mobile phone outlets, sports bicycle shops, jewelers, electrical goods outlets, stripped then destroyed. Cars were, largely, not even stolen, they were torched.

Inexplicably, health food outlet Holland and Barret had a tell-tale boarded up window. “What did they take from here?” I asked. “Two large jars of protein tablets and a lot of packets of dried apricots,” said the assistant with a grin: “Perhaps their energy was flagging.”

Two minutes up the road was an encapsulation of tragedies repeated throughout the country. Shiva Kandiah is the embodiment of what makes this part of London special. He gradually built up his aptly named Convenience Store* over eleven years. Open from early till late, locals could pay bills, top up mobiles, send and receive money via Western Union, and buy anything from coffee to London travel tickets, tacos or tequila, newspapers to nut crunch.

His lovingly nurtured little business was a stripped, burned hulk. The varying payment machines lay – melted – in a pile inside the door. He walked towards me, this upright, gracious man, with the same courtesy, standing in the blackened debris, as he would extend to any customer. The look in his eyes should have been seen by those who did this. The questions vanished. I could only put my hands on his shoulders and gulp: “I am so sorry, so, so sorry.” There was just one thought: “But you must have known some of those who did this?”

“Yes, yes, yes.” The pain, incomprehension, broken trust, were palpable.

In the short time I had been in the shop, a beautifully written letter had been stuck to the outside of the door. One line read:

“You, your shop and the people who hung out there, were the closest thing to a community we had.”

And the same mix of people – all colours and walks of life, were cleaning up the bewildering debris across here and across England as were creating it, Bringing brooms and brushes from home. Many spontaneously painted, boards nailed over broken windows in bright colours, cheerily camouflaging destruction.

The official street cleaners and dumpster drivers also worked overtime, into the nights, returning at dawn. They too, of all colour, creed – or none. The police facing the rioters were of the same mix. Forgotten by the political blame-gamers is even the black policeman on door duty at No. 10 Downing Street, photographed shaking hands with Barack Obama.⁽ⁱ⁾

An appeal started for Mr. Kandiah – whose stock was uninsured (cost prohibitive) raised £13,000 in little over 24 hours. In 48 hours the amount to replace near all had been reached.

In nearby Tottenham, eighty-nine-year old Aaron Biber’s looted barbers shop was reopened, moneys raised in under a week. Instant appeals were launched on networking sites, for clothes, bedding, food, for those who had lost their homes, to be dropped at speedily arranged outlets.

The actions are replicated nation wide. Countless thousands of brightly coloured “post it” notes have appeared on pavements, boarded businesses, tiny messages of solidarity area and traders.

In nearby Camden, as police guarded streets at considerable risk, residents dispensed tea and sustenance.

Finally, Prime Minister Cameron, London Mayor Boris Johnson (a man who could transform a possie of priests, pacifists or nuns to rioters in moments) and Home Secretary Theresa May straggled reluctantly home from their villas in sunny climes.

They chastised the police, Cameron condemned violence as “utterly unacceptable” – as Royal Air Force bombs fell in support of looters, arsonists and violent rioters in Libya, with British violence in Iraq evident in the allegations of torture, even dismembering, stacking up in the legal system. The day before their return, a soldier just back from Afghanistan, was alleged to have collected Afghan’s fingers as souvenirs.

Did the police make mistakes? In the near instantaneous eruption of massive violence, probably, they are human. But they, the fire and ambulance services, were the ones running in to burning buildings, when others were running out – as Cameron et al were sunning. Their vehicles, attacked and torched, they stayed and did a very brave best.

When a young woman, was trapped at a window about twenty feet up, the building burning behind her, the police put their arms up urging, “Jump, jump”, preparing to catch her, at risk possibly of even broken spines. She did, surviving unhurt.

Mayor Johnson related watching scenes as this on a television in Calgary airport. It was

shaming, shocking and he is determined that it will not deter people traveling for the 2012 Olympics, down the road from the carnage. Initially, no word, for the terrified, injured, displaced and front line emergency services. Days later, he pitched – booted and suited – up in Tottenham for a photo-op – surrounded by police security – wielding a broom.

Tottenham has a large African, or African descent population. Fortunately they were seemingly unaware of his opinions of them and their continent. Of a visit by Tony Blair to the Congo, Johnson wrote: “No doubt the AK47s will fall silent, and the pangas will stop their hacking of human flesh, and the tribal warriors will all break out in watermelon smiles to see the big white chief touch down in his big white British taxpayer-funded bird.” (ii)

There was some current tax payer funding, as one correspondent noted of David Cameron: “Addressing the recalled Parliament as he spits venom at the youth of Britain, it was interesting to note that all recalled MPs had been told by email to make sure they claim their full expenses of having to return from holidays.” (iii)

This, as banks and mortgage companies announced that there would not be even temporary mortgage freeze for those whose homes and businesses had burned down.

In the northern city of Birmingham, the Childrens Hospital staff formed a human chain around it to prevent attack by approaching rioters. When Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg eventually pitched up in the city, he too arrived in a reinforced limo, and ventured out only surrounded by Special Branch officers. As he talked of making those responsible clean up (long done) in orange jumpsuits (barbarism) he was booed. His own juvenile past, incidentally, is not quite arson free. (iv)

Birmingham, however, brought forward a voice of sanity which rang round the nation and the world. Three young men, Haroon Jahan, Shazad Ali, Abdul Musavir, were: “standing outside the shops where everyone goes”, attempting to protect them from looters. They were mown down by a car and died.

After spending the night at his dying son Haroon’s bedside, Tariq Jahan, Haroon’s father, returned home, stood on a wall and said to the crowd:

“I lost my son.

Blacks, Asians, whites – we all live in the same community. Why do we have to kill one another? Why are we doing this? Step forward if you want to lose your sons. Otherwise, calm down and go home. Please.” (v)

When an estimated 20,000 came to pay their last respects to the three young men, in the city’s Summerfield Park, they came and left in dignified quiet and calm. At this Muslim farewell, one speaker prior to the Janazah (funeral Prayer) was Alan Blumenthal from the nearby Synagogue. They were, he said: “beacons of light.” One man flew from Saudia Arabia, simply, he said, because he had been so touched by the tragedy and Mr Jahan’s reaction to it.

As politicians and dignitaries trailed round the country, getting in the way, looking earnest for the cameras, guards and flunkies in tow, communities, in the real sense of the word, quietly co-operated; rebuilt. There is a long way to go, but as planet Westminster

pontificates, the real world is carefully, painstakingly regenerating.

Seldom have the “great and the good” seemed more irrelevant.

Perhaps the ultimate irony was that Prince Harry, no stranger to the odd bit of unruliness himself (vi, e.g.) memorably photographed on the appropriated motor bike of a local in Afghanistan – took time from Apache flight training and his plans to return there to destroy people and property on industrial scale – went to Manchester.

Surrounded, by Royal Protection Officers, he toured a city much of which resembled a war zone itself. Police cited: “an extraordinary level of violence.” The 240-retail outlets of the Arndale Centre (motto: “Whatever you’ve got in mind, we’ve got it inside”) is widely damaged. He was “shocked” at what he saw, and that police had to face, rocks and bricks from rioters raining down from rioters. Quite.

Then he returned to an air base in rural Suffolk to resume training to rain bullets and missiles on the poorest of the poor.

So who, literally, ran riot over swathes of England (not Scotland, or Wales.) The mix seems to have been broadly consistent, where ever trouble erupted. Criminal, opportunist, neglected (children reported as young as six and seven) the organized, unemployed, employed and the unexpected.

An elegant “Olympic Ambassador” was charged with violent disorder, burglary and attacking a police car. She was to meet and greet visitors in 2012 and previously photographed with Mayor Johnson, Sports Minister Richard Caborne, and former M.P., now Olympic Authority Chairman, Lord Sebastian Coe.

The so far accused include a primary school teaching “mentor”, university students, an Oxford University law graduate, an aspiring ballerina, an accounts clerk, a postman, lifeguard, scaffolder, model, estate agent, a brace of chefs – and a millionaire’s daughter and a seventy year old.

Desperate to be seen doing something, one Cameron response is bringing in social networking restriction powers.

Another no brainer: A new verbal currency arose instantly. Asking businesses (still, open, standing) when they are closing, the reply is, seemingly, the same across the country: “usual time – unless the police call.” They too, tweet and text all local traders, on hearing of possible trouble. Police access to networks also led to planners and participators arrests.

In January’s uprising onset, Egypt moved to block social media. Cameron opined it: “the entitlement of people everywhere, (from) Tahrir Square (to) Trafalgar Square.” Not now, it seems, from Tottenham to Trafalgar Square.(vii)

At the height of the chaos, walking the couple of miles home – an enjoyable routine – a bus for once would have been preferable, but they were burning or headed for safety. Groups of 20-30 youths, only eyes visible through balaclavas, or black scarves wrapped “SAS” or “Special Services” style round their faces, were everywhere. Perhaps they’d been watching too many war videos.

I attempted invisibility. At the back of the 24 hour food superstore (firmly shuttered) a group

was smashing their way in. Many jobs would be lost were it looted and burned. Turning back down a temporarily unaffected side street I banged on the window of a local pub – customers inside, building locked down. They called the police, asking me in, “until things calm down.” If they didn’t it would be a walk in the dark. I left.

As I walked, minutes away, Mr. Kandiah’s shop and street were being looted and lighted. As they were, priest Father Rob Wickham, from nearby St John at Hackney (viii) and the Bishop of Stepney, the Rt. Revd., Adrian Newman, walked past the burning cars, through smoke, armed looters, chaos, trying to defuse the situation; successfully negotiating an ambulance be allowed through to a badly injured woman.

Minutes from home, all was shuttered, but the sun shone, and on what Cameron would label a “sink estate”, a neighbour’s sunflowers were reaching heavenward, her multi-coloured nicotinas, geraniums, lavenders were beginning to scent with the dew’s arrival; tomatoes were turning from green to gold, pinks and peppers flourished. Labours of love she nurtures before 6 am. and readying for work.

It is simplistic to wonder whether England, seat of Parliament which has endorsed the wreaking of so much destruction on other nations, looting them in entirety, with unimaginable violence, might have had an effect on a swathe of youth addicted to television and violent video-games. Who knows.

The gentle subjects (arts, music, nature studies) are an irrelevance in most state schools. “Role models” are footballers, many whose violence on the pitch continues off it, with aberrant behaviour seemingly an ongoing addiction. When an O2 phone outlet was robbed, the crowd was chanting: “O2, O2, O2...” in football match chant mode.

A recent UNICEF study ranked the UK the most child-unfriendly of 21 industrialized nations. 3.4 million children live below the poverty line; in some areas about 60% of 10-15 year-olds become victims of crime at least once. Joining a gang becomes both a form of protection and source of self esteem.

A humbling irony has been the lead of the Muslim community. In 2003, people went from across the Western world, as human shields in Iraq, attempting to prevent war. In 2011 the Muslim community acted as human shields against another kind of violence. In East London, and elsewhere, the Turkish and Kurdish shop owners stood in their numbers, protecting their and others businesses and properties. (Some did hold their kebab knives prominently – it worked.)

After twenty years of a steady political drip, drip of the “Muslim threat”, the cultural “enemy” was within. There was not a hijab, niqab, abaya or dish dasha amongst the rioters. There were many amongst the protectors and peace makers. Faces were covered, across the country though, with scarves and balaclavas. Perhaps they should be banned.

Prime Minister Cameron has a unique opportunity to express the thanks of many communities – and to also make a heartfelt apology to Britain’s Muslims on behalf of his government and coalition partners. Likewise, the Leader of the Opposition. A heaven sent opportunity to build bridges.

If they do not, they will be more distant than ever from the mood of the nation.

In affected areas, the reserved British smile at others. Never have the words “community”

and “our society”, been heard so often. There have been tea parties in boarded streets with food donated by stores, to raise money for repairs. Thousands have walked through damaged areas, for peace and solidarity.

At the family run pub on whose door I banged (ix) there is joyous live jazz every Sunday and delicious free snacks. A raffle always raises money for local needs, from an elderly lady who had her purse and pension snatched, to the elderly Normandy veterans, who, abandoned by the Ministry of Defence, have to pay their own way on an annual visit the graves of their fallen friends, before they themselves die. There will certainly be many Sundays in response to local traders’ recent plight.

Another bit of advice for the Prime Minister. Grab the moment to show a new face of Britain. Reflect on Norway’s inspiring dignity after the horrific massacre of nearly a hundred young people, on an idyllic island, on a sun drenched day in July.

Norwegian Prime, Minister Jen Stoltenberg and his colleagues, the Royal family quietly walked, joined, comforted the bereaved. There was no knee jerk rhetoric, no grandstanding.

The attacks, said Mr. Stoltenberg, were “a national tragedy... an attack on our humanity, fundamental values, openness and democracy. We will not be intimidated or threatened by these attacks. The aim of such attacks is to spread fear and panic. We will not let that happen. We will wait, learn, see what we got right and what we got wrong.” A role model for politicians.

And does Mr. Cameron recall the then-Defence Secretary, Geoffrey Hoon’s Statement on looting to Parliament on 8th April 2003, and how the politicians rocked with mirth. He told the commons that most looting as so far confined to Iraqi citizens “liberating” items and “redistributing wealth amongst the Iraqi people.”

To laughter, he said: “I regard such behaviour perhaps, as good practice ...” (x)

As this I written, in Libya, in a re-run, looters are being shown taking furniture and goods away in wheelbarrows. Stripping a legitimate Head of State’s homes, buildings and offices of all, much which is legitimately State property. They are reportedly being mentored by the SAS and Ex-SAS forces, working for “private security consultants.”

There are unconfirmed reports that Tripoli’s museum has, Baghdad style, already been robbed of priceless ancient artifacts. (In Baghdad there were numerous, consistent, first hand reports, reports of US soldiers leaving State building and saying to the waiting looters outside: “It’s all yours, lads.”)

Of London looting, Cameron said in Parliament: “I want to make it very clear. I get it. This stuff matters.” Further: Looting and senseless violence must stop.”

On 22nd August, Moussa Ibrahim, Libya’s government spokesman, spoke passionately of NATO-backed “liberators” : “Burning houses, burning cars, looting shops, stealing their money.”

In England, criminal behaviour is a national tragedy. In Libya and other invaded, ancient lands “stuff” does not only not matter, it is “good practice”, whether little loved businesses, or national heritage – with Britain’s finest seemingly assisting in enabling it. Again.

And what are they teaching out children?

Notes

* <http://www.demotix.com/news/782975/hackney-rioters-loot-convenience-store>

i.

<http://stuartbruce.biz/2009/04/obama-shaking-hands-with-black-policeman-at-no-10-downin-g-street.html>

ii.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/personal-view/3571742/If-Blairs-so-good-at-running-the-Congo-let-him-stay-there.html>

iii. <http://www.morningstaronline.co.uk/content/view/full/108409>

iv. http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/em/fr/-/1/hi/uk_politics/7003100.stm

v.

<http://www.birminghampost.net/news/2011/08/11/birmingham-father-appeals-for-calm-after-son-is-one-of-three-killed-protecting-property-65233-29217891/>

vi. <http://theinternetforum.co.uk/node/2312>

vii.

<http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/2011/08/david-camerons-stormy-relationship-with-social-media/>

viii. <http://www.stjohnathackney.org.uk/home.shtml>

ix. <http://www.fancyapint.com/Pub/london/the-globe-in-morning-lane/29409>

x.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iraq/1426921/Carry-on-looting-Hoon-tells-civilians-in-Basra.html>

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