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Policing the mobs Under fire

The police stand accused of allowing mayhem to go unchecked

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Like 75

AFTER five days of spreading Saturnalian anarchy on the streets of English cities, the disgust and anger felt for the rioters was accompanied by growing dismay at the failure of the police to get on top of the violent thuggery in some places. In violated towns and cities, there was angry incomprehension at the apparent willingness of armoured police to stand back while shops were pillaged and torched by marauding youths.



Trying to catch up

A poll conducted by YouGov for the

Sun newspaper reflected the widespread belief that the police had got their tactics wrong. (questioned, 90% favoured the use of water cannon; 78% tear gas; 72% Tasers (an electrostatic weapon); 65% plastic bullets; 33% even wanted the police to use live ammunition against looters. And 77% wanted the army to be deployed.

The criticism of the police is understandable, but is it justified? Most experts doubt whether use of traditional riot-control weapons would have made much difference this week. Although water cannon and tear gas can be effective in getting a large mob to disperse from a particular area, or in allowing the police to “buy distance” or hold ground, they are indiscriminate and clumsy. Tasers are not a public-order weapon—they cannot be fired into crowds—but a non-lethal method of individual incapacitation.

Martin Innes, of the Universities Police Science Institute at Cardiff University, says that water cannon would not be much use against the kind of “fluid, highly mobile satellite groups” that

police have faced. Both he and Peter Waddington, a former policeman and now an authority on crowd control at Wolverhampton University, are sceptical about plastic bullets (or baton rounds, the police call them). Mr Waddington says that the trouble with baton rounds, which travel nearly twice the speed of a cricket ball delivered by a fast bowler, is that they can be dodged, leaving them to smash into other people. "Hit an 11-year-old girl in the head," he says, "and it is all hell to pay."

Both water cannon and baton rounds have now been made available to the police, but they have shown little appetite for employing either. They have, however, started to make greater use of armoured vehicles to break up crowds. As for calling on the army for help, that is something the police, politicians and the army itself regard as almost unimaginable.

But if the police are right to be cautious over the use of crowd-control weapons, they seem to have been slow to react in other ways. Mike Waldren, a retired chief superintendent who formerly ran London's firearms unit, blames senior officers at Scotland Yard, fearful of being charged with overreacting, for hobbling commanders on the ground. According to some reports, riot police were initially ordered to "stand and observe" rather than confront rioters. Mr Innes says that, with a few exceptions (principally those who have served in Northern Ireland), there is now a generation of police leaders whose only experience of public-order problems involves football hooliganism and planned political demonstrations that turn violent.

In their defence, this week's disturbances were of a new, if not wholly unexpected, kind. The police's old tactical manual is based on two principles that were suddenly irrelevant. The first is the assumption that rioters want to attack the police themselves. It makes things a lot easier if you know that they will be where you are. The second is that the main objective is to control the ground rather than people. But now, Mr Innes points out, the police have to find "flash mobs" that use social media to gather and grab loot in one place, disperse, then meet somewhere else. They have to follow them, harry them and channel them away."

The problem with that approach is that when looters are chased, they split up and police are dissipated. Even if officers catch and arrest one (tying up at least two policemen who may be needed elsewhere), they might only be able to charge him (or her) with a minor disorder offence.

Mr Waddington thinks that the police may have been right to rely mostly on CCTV cameras and their own photographers to gather evidence, with the aim of nabbing culprits later in their homes with the stolen goods in their possession. As long as rioters are part of a street mob, they feel strong and invulnerable. Once individuals are arrested in large numbers (well over 1,000 have been by the time *The Economist* went to press), powerful peer networks and the groupthink that goes with them can be broken.

If that is right, the rioting is unlikely to be stamped out by rounding up the feral mobs and locking them away for a good hiding, popular though that might be. Rather the key is to demonstrate through the courts that their behaviour brings with it serious and long-term personal consequences.

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