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Bagehot

After the inferno

The riots will change British politics in ways that could help David Camerc

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WHEN a crisis occurs, its political implications are typically said to depend on how it is "handled". Was the prime minister quick to spot the problem? Did he get ahead of events with a plan of action? Was there a communications strategy to soothe anxious voters? If so, this sort of analysis runs, he collects a political windfall. If not, he suffers.

Bad crisis-management can indeed cost lives, livelihoods—and votes. But history suggests that the real political import lies in whether and how the events change public opinion on the issues in question. Gordon Brown handled the financial crash with world-leading deftness—but some sensed it had rendered social democracy unaffordable for the foreseeable future. He scrape 30% of the vote at the subsequent general election.

In 2000 the Labour government mishandled fuel-tax protests; the country reeled for a weel the party strolled to re-election nine months later. The crisis had not shifted the national m tax-and-spend in any lasting way. Thatcherism did not happen simply because James Calla erred tactically during the industrial unrest of 1978, but because that crisis finally snapped public's patience with post-war corporatism.

And so to the latest crisis. The political implications of the riots that began ravaging parts c London and other cities on August 6th are not to be found in David Cameron's itinerary dur those days. Voters are unlikely to damn him permanently for remaining in Tuscany until the infernos forced him home. Neither will they reward him for recalling Parliament and conspi

camping out in Cabinet Office Briefing Room A—or COBRA, to give the room its more impre sounding acronym—when he got back. What matters is whether the political debate has cha in ways that suit a Conservative prime minister. There are reasons to believe it has.

First, only the most blinkered liberal could deny that the terms of trade in the debate betwe freedom and order have become more favourable to the latter. Tories will have an easier ti making their already-popular arguments about crime: that well-meaning efforts to liberalis police have gone too far; that weakness is more provocative to miscreants than heavy-handedness; that for all the talk of a "slippery slope" from minor breaches of liberty by the to outright authoritarianism, the opposite journey—from laxity to lawlessness—is steeper a scarier.

Policing could become as hotly discussed in Westminster as any of the public services. It is curious that it is not already. The theology of academic selection and university funding gri political and media classes but the polls are clear: crime is a bigger worry for voters than education.

Second, and more speculatively, the backlash could extend beyond crime to include welfare other social issues. The left is imploring the public to consider the underlying causes of the They should be careful what they wish for. Voters might conclude that the deep-seated cau not poverty, discrimination and austerity—the riots took place in a country whose governm currently spends half of its national income—but welfare dependency, broken homes and m nihilism.

An indicator of how broad such a reaction might be is readily available. The government ha controversial plan to limit how much can be claimed in housing benefit, a policy that critics will push many poor people out of London. If the riots do harden public attitudes to welfare policy could be popular. If not, it could be seen as the kind of divisive measure that stokes

Gauging the political beneficiaries of suffering is a crass business. But the pattern is clear: tend to bolster the right. Margaret Thatcher won elections after Brixton and Tottenham burn the 1980s. American cities and university campuses were laid waste in the late 1960s; Rich Nixon was duly elected and re-elected. Chaos in French *banlieues* in 2005 seemed to work i favour of Nicolas Sarkozy in the presidential election 18 months later. This week's riots in E might be expected to play out favourably for any Tory prime minister. But the current one i unusually well-placed to benefit.

A conservative soul

As Mr Cameron has reminded voters in recent days, he has been talking about social breako for years. The main theme of his leadership of the opposition was not greenery (an early fa austerity (which he came to late) but a kind of cultural conservatism shorn of religiosity an old-fashioned prejudices about race and sexuality. Time and again he anguished over frayin communities and the supposed death of "responsibility"—his favourite word. This is a politi who was brought up in the conservative Home Counties, mentored by Michael Howard, a legendarily tough home secretary, and converted only tardily to the cause of Tory "modernisation". He is not the anything-goes liberal of occasional caricature.

Mr Cameron put aside some of this conservatism for the sake of the coalition. The Liberal Democrats are still a useful check on his instincts: there is unlikely to be any revival of his pro-marriage tax policies, for example. But it is a steelier, more moralistic Mr Cameron wh emerging from the riots, an incarnation that has not been seen since he became prime mini He is likely to make policies such as welfare reform and elected police commissioners a big part of the government's narrative. Outside 10 Downing Street on August 10th, he describe of Britain as "not just broken but frankly sick" and called for a "clearer code of values and standards that we expect people to live by". Liberals, understandably, will worry about all t But deep down, this is who Mr Cameron really is. After the riots, it might also be what his c wants.

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