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# Four days in August: the UK riots

LEE BRIDGES

*Abstract:* In August 2011, England experienced widespread public disorders in sixty-six locations following a protest at the shooting dead of a black man in north London by the police. The author examines, *inter alia*, reports from the Metropolitan Police Service, academics Steve Reicher and Cliff Stott, Tottenham MP David Lammy, the *Guardian*/London School of Economics, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and the Ministry of Justice to analyse the riots in London and other cities. He looks at the shooting of Mark Duggan, the immediate trigger, the riots' deeper causes and the arrests that followed. Instead of a formal inquiry, the government set up the Riots Communities and Victims Panel, which has now reported, blaming the breakdown of families and lack of character in the young, rather than structural issues. While it asks for the community to work out, with the police, ways to reduce the impact of stop and search, the Metropolitan Police Service asks that stops be linked to its intelligence gathering; a sure way, argues the author, not to deal with the alienation of the young.

*Keywords:* David Lammy, Gary Younge, Independent Police Complaints Commission, Mark Duggan, Metropolitan Police, riots, stop and search, Tottenham

For four days in August 2011, England experienced probably the most widespread public disorders in its history. There were riots or other public disturbances in sixty-six locations, involving an estimated 15,000 people. Five people died and the financial loss across the country was approximately half a billion pounds.

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The London Metropolitan Police Service's (MPS) review of the riots vividly describes the chain of events, from the initial outbreak of disorder on the evening of Saturday 6 August in Tottenham in north London:

On day two disorder spread geographically to a total of five London boroughs. The disorder intensified rapidly which tested police resources unremittingly by the speed and scale of its escalation. Arson and looting became key features and it also became clear that social networking was being used to coordinate groups in direct conflict with the police.

Day three exceeded the expectations of authorities and the public alike as intense disorder and criminality proliferated across 22 of London's 32 boroughs. Repeated attempts to quell disorder in one area met with its outbreak in other areas. Resources were stretched across the capital resulting in an insufficient response to some of the worst violence London had ever witnessed.

Whilst the spread of disorder had begun to travel across the country on day three, day four saw this aspect become the primary feature. London meanwhile was flooded with police resources and order was restored.<sup>1</sup>

### **The start of the riots**

As noted above, it was in Tottenham, site of the 1985 riot on the Broadwater Farm estate, that the 2011 disorders first broke out. As in 1985, the initial disorder followed a police operation resulting in the death of a local resident, but also occurred in the context of a long history of conflict between police and the local black community.<sup>2</sup> In 1985, it was a black woman, Cynthia Jarrett, who died of a stroke after being pushed over by the police during a search of her home. In 2011, a local black man, Mark Duggan, was shot and killed after officers from the Metropolitan Police anti-gun crime Operation Trident, who had him under surveillance at the time, stopped a mini-cab in which he was travelling (apparently without consultation with the local police) and attempted to arrest him.

This incident occurred on 4 August, over forty-eight hours prior to the initial outbreak of disorder. The exact facts of the shooting incident are still not clear because an investigation by the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC) is still ongoing. However, from all the subsequent inquiries into the riots, including that of the MPS, it is evident that, over these two days, there was a catalogue of errors by both the police and the IPCC, without which any subsequent disorder might never have erupted in Tottenham or across London and the rest of the country.

It was reported in the press the day after the death that an IPCC spokesperson had said that Duggan had been killed in a shoot-out with the police, during which a police officer was first hit by a bullet that lodged in his radio, and that Duggan was then killed by return fire. Duggan was also described as a 'well-known gangster', something that is disputed by his family and members of the local community.<sup>3</sup> It was also reported in the press that Duggan had been taken from the mini-cab

in which he was travelling and held down by police before being shot.<sup>4</sup> Yet, as the MPS review notes:

Neither the MPS nor the IPCC actively rebutted the 'exchange of fire' story prior to the disorder in Tottenham on the evening of Saturday 6th August 2011. Similarly the 'assassination' rumour was not refuted directly until after the disorder on the Saturday ... The issue of inaccuracy in the media story concerning an exchange of fire between officers and Mark Duggan should have been positively rebutted immediately.<sup>5</sup>

The explanation offered for this was that there was confusion between the police and the IPCC, which took over responsibility for the investigation on the evening of the killing, as to their respective roles. The same excuse was also cited as a factor in the failure of either the police or the IPCC to directly contact and inform Mark Duggan's parents of his death in the days immediately following his killing.

The MPS review makes it clear that these specific errors were only part of a generalised failure of the police to gauge, through their extensive network of 'community engagement', local intelligence-gathering and neighbourhood policing, the extent of anger in the area over the killing of Mark Duggan. Although the review catalogues contacts and meetings with the local authority, the local member of parliament, members of the police's own local Independent Advisory Group (IAG) and Black IAG, and others in its Key Individuals Network,<sup>6</sup> at no stage does it appear that any senior officer actually visited Tottenham.

On the morning of Saturday 6 August, the local police did pick up that a protest march to Tottenham police station was being organised for later in the day, and contingency plans were made for policing this event in a 'low-key, facilitative' manner, albeit with two squads of officers from the Territorial Support Group and the MPS anti-knife crime Operation Blunt being called to Tottenham to be held 'in reserve'.<sup>7</sup> When the protest march took place later that afternoon, it was met, first, by a local police inspector on duty at the time and, subsequently, by the local chief inspector, neither of whom were in a position to meet the protestors' demands for further information relating to Mark Duggan's killing. A more senior officer was called and subsequently reported that, on his way back to the police station, he had contacted the IPCC to send a representative as well, a request that was declined. In any event, before he arrived, part of the protest group had left the scene. The MPS review describes what happened next: 'the situation immediately intensified with multiple missiles thrown at the police station from the crowd and two police vehicles set on fire. This marked the first step change in events.'<sup>8</sup>

## Explaining the riots

The Broadwater Farm uprising of 1985 also started with a protest march, but one that was stopped at the entrance to the estate by anti-riot police. In his

retrospective account of the 2011 riots, *Out of the Ashes*,<sup>9</sup> local MP David Lammy has sought to distinguish not only between the 'group that had marched peacefully' to Tottenham police station and 'more sinister elements determined to cause trouble', but also between the 1985 and 2011 riots. On the first point, Lammy was one of the first politicians, standing before cameras on Tottenham High Road the following day,<sup>10</sup> to describe the rioters as 'mindless, mindless people', to which he has subsequently added the epitaphs of nihilistic and hedonistic. In this, Lammy gave the lead to other political leaders in their characterisation of the riots as 'criminality, pure and simple' (Prime Minister David Cameron), 'needless and opportunist theft and violence' (Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg) and the product of 'a feral underclass' (Justice Secretary Kenneth Clark).

Contrast David Lammy's statement with that of his predecessor as MP for Tottenham, Bernie Grant, in his immediate reaction to the 1985 riots, that 'what the police got was a bloody good hiding'. The point that Lammy misses is that even the MPS's own review of events that evening in Tottenham<sup>11</sup> shows that a (peaceful) protest over the shooting of Mark Duggan turned most immediately not into a general orgy of consumerist-led looting, but rather a more general (and violent) anti-police protest. For a period of a few hours, the attacks in Tottenham were being aimed directly at the police lines and police property, with the initial looting of local stores being mainly to obtain bottles and other missiles to throw at the police.

On the broader comparison between the 1985 and 2011 Tottenham riots, Lammy asserts that:

1985 was a race riot, given its energy by an explosive relationship between the black community and the police. In 2011 tensions lingered but the relationship between the local force and the local community had improved immeasurably ... 1985 involved youths who, almost exclusively, came from Tottenham itself. It was almost a territorial battle. In 2011 police told me that roughly half of those arrested in the area were not from Tottenham at all – as news of lawlessness spread, criminals from all over London swarmed to the area.<sup>12</sup>

Many would dispute Lammy's description of current police-black community relations, whether in Tottenham or elsewhere in London and other cities. For example, in the three months to the end of June 2011, there were 6,894 police stop and searches in the local borough of Haringey, with only eighty-seven of these resulting in an arrest and conviction.<sup>13</sup> London-wide and national statistics consistently show that stop and searches have increased steadily and are directed disproportionately at black and Asian youth in particular. It is not surprising that *Reading the Riots*, the *Guardian*/London School of Economics survey of riot participants across the country, found that:

a significant factor in sparking the disturbances was the humiliation, unjust suspicion, lack of respect and targeting that characterises the way rioters felt

the police carry out stop and search ... The complaint of harassment by those interviewed on the receiving end of stop and search was made in every city the research took place in and by interviewees from different racial groups and ages.<sup>14</sup>

Lammy's complaint about 'outsiders' invading Tottenham to take part in the anti-police riot can be contrasted with his own description of the effects of postcode-based gang culture in London, that many young black people:

live in fear of what lies beyond what they know. It limits their world to the boundaries of a housing estate. I have met countless young boys and young men who cannot remember the last time they left Haringey. Their lives are needlessly parochial. They have no idea of the opportunities that lie elsewhere in London, let alone the rest of the country.<sup>15</sup>

It was reported that, during the riots, 'gangs suspended any ordinary hostilities between each other to focus on other targets',<sup>16</sup> thus enabling young people to gather to protest against the police in different localities. However, it is also clear from both arrest and survey data that the involvement of gangs in co-ordinating the riots was greatly exaggerated at the time.

None of this is to deny that the rioting in Tottenham and across the country subsequently involved more general looting and destruction. In part, this was due to the tactics the police were forced to adopt in the face of the sheer scale of the riots:

The initial policing plan in response to the disorder on the 6th August was to preserve life and property. However, with the resources the MPS had available and the explosive nature of the disorder, the MPS chose to preserve life above property. The MPS is aware that this approach was construed as police 'backing off,' however it was in fact the reality of policing a rapidly evolving incident of serious public disorder. Officers had to make very difficult decisions in a challenging environment where violence was relentless throughout the night ... As a result, [police] inspectors were often left in the situation that should they send officers forward into a dangerous situation to try to make an arrest, they would no longer be able to maintain a police cordon which was critical to hold a junction or protecting a location ...<sup>17</sup>

To set this in context, HM Inspectorate of Constabulary states that the police need to 'outnumber rioters by three or five to one if they are to make arrests and disperse groups – a much higher level than is needed to hold the line and protect territory'.<sup>18</sup> On the first night of the riots in London, the MPS is reported as having 3,480 officers available when rioting occurred in two locations. The following night, police numbers increased to 4,275, but rioting had spread to twelve locations, and, on the third night, police numbers had grown to 6,000, with rioting in



thirty-six locations.<sup>19</sup> Not surprisingly, commentators, including the House of Commons Home Affairs Select Committee, have attributed the spread of the riots to 'the perception, relayed by television as well as the social media, that in some areas the police had lost control of the streets'.<sup>20</sup>

In these circumstances, the police aim was to cordon off the initial targets of the rioters, the police themselves and any property associated with them, and then gradually to push the rioters further away. However, without adequate police numbers, this had the effect of spreading the rioting over a wider area and diverting the rioters to other targets. This was exacerbated when the rioters, through mobile telephone messaging services, began to target other geographically separate locales from which police had been diverted to the site of the original rioting. Ultimately, it was only the flooding of London with overwhelming police numbers drawn from outside the city that resulted in the disorder being brought to an end on the fourth night, with 16,000 officers deployed across the city.

In one of the first reviews of the 2011 riots, *Mad Mobs and Englishmen?*, two academic experts on public disorder, Steve Reicher and Cliff Stott, make the point that:

there is an important asymmetry between attacks on the police and attacks on shops in these, and indeed all, riots. Any rioting process needs to start by getting rid of forces of law and order. That can only happen where there is a large group of people who are sufficiently united in their opposition to the police to force them to retreat. Only then can others act in ways that rely on the police being absent. You can have an anti-police riot without systematic looting, but you can't have systematic looting without an anti-police riot. Equally, you will get rid of looting if you deal with anti-police grievances, but you won't get rid of anti-police grievances by dealing with looting.<sup>21</sup>

The attacks on major shopping centres during the riots have also been seen as an expression of revolt against the types of private-sector dominated urban regeneration, often carried out with substantial public subsidy and, in some cases, in direct response to earlier disorders, which has further exacerbated class conflict in many of Britain's cities:

The urban poor are disqualified consumers in a double sense, both in their inability to consume commodities on offer in regenerated areas ... but and also in their inability to consume property, which is part of the rationale for their clearance from desirable development sites ... The close proximity between the successful consumers of regeneration sites and the broadly disqualified necessitates an increased role for the police in what is, in the broadest terms, a project of policing the return of capital to the inner-city.<sup>22</sup>

Gary Younge, writing in response to the *Reading the Riots* survey, countered the characterisation of the riots as merely mass outbreaks of criminality:

Insisting on the criminality of those involved, as though that alone explains their motivation and the context is irrelevant, is fatuous. To stress criminality does not deny the political nature of what took place, it simply chooses to only partially describe it. They were looting, not shop-lifting, and challenging the police for control of the streets, not stealing coppers' hubcaps. When a group of people join forces to flout both law and social convention, they are acting politically. (The question, as yet unanswered, is to what purpose.)<sup>23</sup>

### **Arrest, conviction and imprisonment**

While it may still be too early to answer Younge's question fully, it is certainly possible to outline some of the more immediate consequences stemming from the August 2011 riots. As has been indicated, these riots were marked by a very different form of policing and pattern of arrest than have previously been the case. In London, only 884 arrests were made during the three main days of the rioting, with nearly another 1,000 completed within the first week following the riots.<sup>24</sup> Many of those arrested during this period were processed through the courts immediately, with a number of courts extending their hours of sitting into the evening and night.

However, as of 27 February 2012, a total of over 4,000 riot-related arrests had been carried out in London, with a further 150 being anticipated in each of the following months. This has been the result of a major post-riot operation, in which more than 500 officers and other police staff have undertaken analysis of CCTV footage of the various riot locations and used this to identify arrestees. This has been in line with one of the first recommendations made by the Riots Communities and Victims Panel set up after the disorders, to 'prioritise the pursuit and arrest of suspected rioters'.<sup>25</sup> However, it may come at a considerable cost and not just in financial terms (estimated at £35 million, to date). It has resulted in flooding the prisons at a time when the government is seeking to cut prisoner numbers, leaving the riot-related offenders vulnerable to further socialisation into 'gang culture', both within prison and on their release from custody. It also means that the threat of arrest and being brought before the criminal justice system, with all the implications this might have for renewed conflict with the affected communities, will be more long-lasting than in previous riots.

Data from the Ministry of Justice<sup>26</sup> on riot-related cases suggest that London accounts for around two-thirds of all riot cases nationally. Of the 2,710 persons who had been brought to court across the country by the beginning of February 2012, just under 1,800 cases had been completed. Of these, 1,483 had led to conviction and 945 (64 per cent) sentenced to immediate custody, with the average length of the prison sentence being 14.2 months. These figures indicate that riot-related offenders received immediate custody at approximately three times the rate as those normally sentenced for similar offences, and that the average length of their sentence was nearly four times longer. In other words, the courts have clearly responded to political demands that riot offenders be seen to be severely



punished. Of those charged and brought to court, 27 per cent were juveniles (up to age 17) and a further 26 per cent aged between 18 and 20; 41 per cent were white, 39 per cent were black, 6 per cent were Asian and 14 per cent were of mixed or other ethnicity. However, in London, a higher percentage were black (45 per cent). Overall, in 17 per cent of cases where the outcome was known, the defendant was found not guilty, with a higher rate of not-guilty outcomes for blacks (23 per cent) compared to whites (14 per cent).

Within London, 70 per cent of arrestees were 'previously known to the police' (i.e. had previous convictions, cautions, warnings or reprimands). However, this figure is likely to reflect the way in which so many of the arrests have been carried out, through identification from CCTV, where it will be easiest for the police to pick out those already on their files. It is also relevant to note that one-third of all males in Britain have a criminal conviction by age 40, and this proportion is likely to be higher for those from the types of highly deprived communities in which the riots took place. Also, based on the figures cited above, only about one-third of the 15,000 people who participated in the riots have so far been arrested. The heavy reliance on CCTV, much of it requisitioned from shops, may also explain the discrepancy between Home Office figures, showing that 50 per cent of the crimes committed during the riots related to burglary, robbery or theft, compared with two-thirds of those whose cases have so far been brought to court being charged with such offences.

## Riots Panel

In the meantime, various inquiries into the riots have been coming to their conclusions.<sup>27</sup> Unlike in previous riots, the coalition government refused to appoint a judicially-led inquiry to investigate the causes of the riots. Instead, the Riots Communities and Victims Panel was set up on a cross-party basis. Its final report, *After the Riots*,<sup>28</sup> resonates with the Victorian values and underlying notions of the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor found in David Lammy's book. Both are also reminiscent in their analysis of the type of 'culture of poverty' thinking found in the infamous Moynihan report following the American urban disorders of the 1960s.<sup>29</sup> This focuses on what are seen as the personal defects and social development problems of rioters – their lack of 'resilience', inability to 'defer gratification', ill-discipline, absent fathers and lack of 'proper role models' – rather than attempting to address the sources of their grievances or structural factors in society. It is as though the Panel, in reaching its conclusion that it is necessary to give the rioters 'a stake in society', failed ever to consider what sort of society Britain has become. Or, as Gary Younge has noted: 'The primary challenge of integration ... is convincing a sizeable section of British youth, of all races, that they can be integrated into a society that won't educate or employ them.'<sup>30</sup>

The Panel's primary recommendations are to address poor parenting and the problems of 'forgotten families' through various forms of family intervention,

while schools should be required to develop policies on 'building character' and be reviewed on these, including carrying out regular assessments of each pupil's 'strength of character'. There is also endorsement for local councils supporting and driving up the number of community volunteers and 'local uniformed groups' such as scouts, girl guides and air cadets. This comes at a time when local councils' own youth services and other social support services have faced devastating cuts under the coalition government's austerity measures, so that in Haringey, for example, 'Eight of the borough's thirteen youth centres were closed ... and the remaining five are under serious threat. In addition, other services, such as after-school clubs and employment support were removed.'<sup>31</sup>

The Riots Panel goes on to recommend that schools should face financial penalties (rather than additional support) should they fail to achieve age-related literacy standards among their pupils and appoint 'business ambassadors' to promote youth employment. It does identify school exclusion of black pupils as an issue, but recommends only that schools should publish improved data on them and, in some unspecified way, be prevented from sending pupils to alternative provision, such as pupil referral units, unless their quality is approved through inspections. Then there is the proposal that the Advertising Standards Authority should develop an education programme on branding and its impact on young people and foster discussions with (but notably not regulation of) the major brands on this issue.

Even when the Panel touches on more structural issues, it does so in ways that seem oblivious to the depth of the economic crisis and government austerity cuts, especially as they impact on the inner cities. There is a proposal for a 'Youth job promise' to 'get as many young people as possible a job', but only once they have been unemployed for a year, with the guarantee of a job only for those out of work for two years. This comes at a time when youth unemployment across the country (and, indeed, the whole of Europe) is at a record high and unemployment among black youth in Britain is running at close to 50 per cent. Nor is there any consideration of the types of jobs ever likely to be available through such programmes, primarily low-wage ones in the service and retail sectors, where the exposure to 'brands' that so concerns the Panel would be further reinforced. It is also notable that within days of the publication of the Panel's final report, the government announced that the minimum wage for young workers would be frozen, for fear that even a modest increase to cover inflation would further reduce job opportunities for them.

As for the more specific grievances that lay behind the riots, the Panel does acknowledge concerns over stop and search, lack of confidence in the police complaints system, and black deaths in police custody. Yet, on this latter issue, the Panel identifies the problem not as one of the number and circumstances of such deaths and how they can be prevented in future (for example, through stronger accountability mechanisms); rather, it is the 'myths' and rumours that circulate in

the community about them, thereby undermining trust in the police. As a result, the Panel recommends that the police themselves should:

proactively engage with their communities to debunk myths on issues that affect the perception of their integrity, in particular around the death of black men in police custody. In doing so, they must be entirely transparent with data and explain and evidence the accountability mechanisms in place.<sup>32</sup>

The mishandling of family liaison and media information following the death of Mark Duggan has prompted a review of the protocols between the police and IPCC when the latter takes over responsibility for investigations, and the Riots Panel has now further recommended that the IPCC reduce its reliance on former police officers to conduct its investigations. In the meantime, the IPCC has recently indicated that the formal inquest into the death of Mark Duggan may be delayed and possibly never take place due to restrictions on its divulging to coroners the content of police intercepts of telephone conversations.

Again, according to the Panel, the issue with stop and search is not the extent to which these powers are used or their disproportionate racial impact, but rather the manner in which stop and searches are carried out. It recommended in its earlier interim report that the 'police work with communities and across forces to improve the way in which stop and search is undertaken'.<sup>33</sup> In its final report, the Panel welcomes what it terms a 'national review of the use of stop and search powers' now being conducted at the request of the home secretary by the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) and a new policy on stop and search announced by the Metropolitan Police in London. In fact, the ACPO exercise is narrowly focused on producing 'best practice' examples in the use of stop and search and will not involve any more fundamental review of the current law and policy in relation to stop and search powers.

As for the Metropolitan Police, it has announced, as part of its 'Total war on crime', an apparent change in the use of stop and search, according to which it will 'become more targeted and effective, with a greater focus on tackling violence and increasing trust and confidence among communities'.<sup>34</sup> In endorsing this, the Riots Panel states that, under the new policy, the Metropolitan Police 'would be substantially reducing the use of stop and search',<sup>35</sup> whereas the MPS, in its strategic review of the riots, specifically says that the 'focus is not on reducing stop and search but making it more effective'.<sup>36</sup> What actually lies behind the new policy is the use of stop and search against those identified through police 'intelligence' as potentially involved in violent crime, in particular gang members and their so-called associates, to place them under continuous surveillance. However, given the weaknesses in the police intelligence networks as revealed in the lead-up to the riots, there is a significant risk that individuals will be wrongly targeted in this way and will have no means of redress against what will amount to a campaign of police harassment and summary punishment. Such a policy is

also likely to lead to even more deaths and serious injuries at the hands of the police.

Following the stunning victory of the Respect party in the Bradford West bi-election at the end of March 2012, its candidate wrote:

This peaceful, democratic uprising comes from the same wellspring of discontent and alienation that fuelled disturbances in British cities last summer. But it is a positive counterpoint – bringing forth a new generation of political leaders, not another cohort trapped in the criminal justice system. Every politician should take notice, as they did not last summer.<sup>37</sup>

This points to an issue that none of those who have inquired into, or commented on, the riots (perhaps, most shamefully, politicians such as David Lammy) have considered, of how to address the political alienation among young people, in general, and black and Asian youth, in particular. Of course, the mainstream political parties in Britain and their bureaucratic apparatchiks, who have made up the various panels of inquiry into the riots, are so much part of this problem that, with few honourable exceptions, they have little to offer towards its solution. But, as Gary Younge has pointed out, the riots took place:

in a context of a weak and ineffectual left that has failed to reinvent and reinvigorate itself in the face of a deep economic crisis. It marks a generational failure. In the absence of any community leadership, viable social movements or memory of collective struggle, the most these political orphans could hope to achieve was private acquisition and social chaos.<sup>38</sup>

If nothing else is to come of the riots, let us hope that it can serve as a wake-up call for those on the Left to once again address the grievances and concerns of the disenfranchised and the disinherited.

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- 3 As quoted from the *Daily Telegraph* in Steve Reicher and Cliff Stott, *Mad Mobs and Englishmen? Myths and realities of the 2011 riots* (London, Constable & Robinson, 2011), Chapter 4. This description of Duggan continues to be repeated, for example by Nirpal Dhaliwal in the *London Evening Standard* on 29 March 2012: 'The killing of a known criminal and gang member in Tottenham triggered an orgy of looting ...'
- 4 As noted from the *London Evening Standard* in Metropolitan Police Service, op. cit., p. 24.
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- 6 Ibid., pp. 26–30.
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- 9 David Lammy, *Out of the Ashes: Britain after the riots* (London, Guardian Books, 2011).
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