Britain’s riots this summer presented as a surprise to the general public. However, for those of us working at street level it was simply a moment where the ongoing rot endured by vulnerable inner city communities was made visible. David Cameron rightly responded robustly, achieving calm. Between the politicians and the media a consensus emerged describing the riots as manifestations of public greed. Those who stole plasma TVs and trainers were paraded for humiliation. Any suggestions of a class divide were eroded by ensuring that the millionaire’s daughter, the teacher and the hoodie were equally sanctioned and ridiculed. The riots, as manifestations of consumerism gone mad, were paradoxically reassuring. Everyone can imagine their desire being potentially out of control, so those who were not involved assumed a moral high ground, legitimately chattering about the immorality of those involved.

Privately, the politicians know that the riots have a more sinister genesis. It is acknowledged that they were led by criminal groups which attracted into the momentum other participants.

Fundamentally there were three groups involved. The initiators, whose criminality and rage had reached the extreme. They don’t care what happens to them and they have enough fury to shatter windows and set buildings alight. The initiators, predominantly young teenagers, followed the initiators partly in admiration and partly in fear. Once the rage among these two groups was evacuated the opportunists followed taking goods including a vast amount of food, nappies and children’s clothes. Just as much food was stolen as expensive goods but the media played down the theft of food because suddenly ‘greedy risked looking like needy’.

It’s not about blaming any one political party. Labour did a great deal to support vulnerable children but they left out the most high-risk because they cost too much and their problems are entrenched. When the Coalition came into power the teenagers were telling me ‘the Government hates us, Camila’, because all they could hear was narratives of sanctions, withdrawal of benefits, descriptions of them as lazy scroungers who need to be knocked into shape. It felt as
if Downing Street had nothing positive to offer young people. This is in the context of nearly one million young people being unemployed.

In the meantime, the risk levels in the ghettos of Britain have been escalating. Repeated surveys carried out and suppressed capture fear among children and young people. Children are describing horrific levels of violence in their neighbourhoods with drug dealers and gangs running the estate. Shootings and stabbings have become a perverse norm with young boys feeling that they have no choice but to carry a weapon and young girls giving in to sexual assault because fighting could potentially risk their lives. Human life has become so cheap that as part of gang initiations kids are forced to torture and abuse others in order for over familiarity with violence to become a norm. The police are paralysed as they cannot get the witnesses to give evidence. Privately, a Borough Commander explained ‘there is a new kind of kid on the block. He shoots and doesn’t even bother to run away. I’ve told my officers not to run into incidents anymore. Years ago we could rely on them running away. Now they have a firearm and they don’t care.’

Ask yourself what have we done that such large numbers of children and young people are presenting with greater capacity to cause harm. How sad that they turn to the very drug dealers they’re terrified of for protection and sustenance, perceiving social care agencies to be cold and ineffectual. Simply describing the problem as manifestations of mass criminality misses the point. Violence is a public health problem. It spreads like a virus as victims aspire one day to have the potency of the perpetrator. Among the disenfranchised the capacity to cause harm acquires a high status with young people vying for elevated personal credit rating by enhancing their quota of violence. Just as middle class Britain preoccupies itself with designer handbags and cosmetic surgery, ghetto Britain seeks credit rating through harming others. It’s savage, while the perversion can be easily identified in those causing visible harm; the genesis of it is more hidden. It begins paradoxically with the decisions made by civil society.

Sinisterly, our young people are getting the message that human life is not worthwhile. The messenger is the social work department who turns away their pleading mother using security guards, immune to her crying. It’s the housing office leaving the family in a flat where damp has created a gaping hole in the floor and children have to walk around it for fear of falling through. It’s the GP receptionist who tersely turns the patient away and doesn’t bother to notice that years of dirt have accumulated on the broken toys in the waiting area. It’s the police who are too overwhelmed and give you a crime reference number when you’ve been robbed and the thief has defecated on your bedroom floor. It’s the asylum centre where human beings are lined up like cattle ready for deportation. It’s MPs and their expenses scandal. It’s humanitarian invasion of other countries disguising an appetite for their oil. It’s powerful manufacturing industries using steamy ghetto kids to advertise their products and then making the products too expensive for them to buy with benefits of £42.50 a week. It’s sitting in the dark when you don’t have enough money to top up the gas and the electric meter. It’s Christmas time when you’re guaranteed to be alone in your dangerous hostel when the plasma TVs do family gatherings and the latest toys. Really, it’s about shame, about feeling so profoundly trashed that those who don’t help are excused as you believe yourself to be unworthy of their care.

With the personal notion of worthlessness comes the logical conclusion that other human beings must be equally disposable. Human life need not be cherished. It becomes so much easier to stab, kill, sexually assault, burn property, and steal from a fellow human being as life is deemed worthless. 1.5 million children are being maltreated in Britain. We rank bottom of 21 wealthiest countries in the world for the wellbeing of children. Why? While Governments throw the searchlight onto problem families, it would do well to scrutinise its own decision making process. The erosion of humanity always begins with the powerful and is reflected back by the powerless. The riots of the summer were an opportunity for Britain to look in the mirror without image management. Truth hurts but it’s a prerequisite for reparation. I hope our decision makers will have the moral courage to do the right thing and find ways to reintegrate those who have nothing left to lose rather than suppress the message the riots unveiled. Britain’s crying out for it.

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