'Ealing Calling': riot in the Queen of London's suburbs

Local resident **Kevin Stenson** gives his account of the rioting and its aftermath

This is an account by a researcher both interested in the politics of crime and control and a resident with lifelong, local Irish family links. Riots' characteristics are shaped by local circumstances. I was there on the late evening of 8 August 2011, when the riot occurred and narrowly missed being caught up in an attack by young men on a local supermarket manager, followed by their smashing shop windows and robbing diners in a restaurant. I observed the damage and clean up operations in the town; talked to local victims; looked at CCTV and video footage of these events, and other evidence presented at a special council meeting a week after the riots. I also considered evidence collected by the Council's own investigation of the riots in conjunction with the national riots investigation by the 'Riots and Victims Committee', chaired by Darra Singh, ex-CEO of Ealing Council.

The unfolding riot

Disorder spread after the death of Mark Duggan in Tottenham, and Ealing police officers were transferred to troubled areas. On 8 August the police informed local traders that Ealing Broadway would be targeted, advising them to close early. Large numbers (according to Labour Leader of the Council, Julian Bell, and other witnesses, men in their twenties) in hooded jackets and equipped with masks arrived in Ealing Broadway by public transport and car. At the same time cars full of young men began arriving in West Ealing's High Street. Shops and restaurants, many minority owned, were looted and goods ferried away in vans and cars, cars smashed, individuals attacked, and cars and a bus seized and torched to impede the movement of emergency vehicles. A supermarket was set ablaze, burning out the flats, on two levels, of families including children living above.

One female victim said 'they saw us in the building and set it alight anyway'. Her own and three other families 'narrowly escaped with our own lives'. With only 20 officers in the centre dealing with about 300 rioters, residents were terrorised when homes in several local streets were attacked by large numbers of young men, and rioters attacked an elderly man trying to put out fires started by them. He later died and a 16-year-old young man from Hounslow, several miles away, was charged with his murder. It was several hours before the Ealing police received sufficient reinforcements to regain control of the streets. In an emergency council meeting after the riots Julian Bell claimed that 'a tide of evil ... came into the town'. What is coded as crime involves struggles between attempts to govern situations, territory, property and people 'from above' by officialdom and 'from below' by a range of individual and collective sites and agents of governance (Stenson, 2012). For several hours young men and some young women replaced the sovereign authority of public authorities with their own territorial governance.

The context

Ealing, famous for its films, the Ealing Blues Club, where the Stones cut their musical teeth (and where I have played), and lovely, safe parks, is a microcosm of globalised urban Britain. Images of the borough as white, affluent, culturally rich, economically vibrant and peaceful, with good transport links to the West End and Heathrow, are incomplete. It is the fourth most ethnically diverse borough in Britain. It includes the old town of Ealing (from West Ealing to the Broadway and common) and also Southall, Northolt and Greenford in the west and Acton in the east, covering 55 square km and 316,000 people. 'Middle' Ealing includes wards, represented by Tory and Lib Dem councillors, around the centre north and south of the Uxbridge Road where its shops, offices, transport hubs, town hall, parks, film studios and university are found. While there are pockets of deprivation in social housing, the area has acres of expensive Victorian and Edwardian houses. The trader and street populations around the transport hubs are mixed ethnically but the residential population has the largest density of whites. These include, for example, English, Irish and other Celtic, French, and especially Polish communities. There are also educated professionals and business people of South Asian heritage, Japanese, Middle Eastern and many other groups.

The outer neighbourhoods, represented mainly by Labour councillors (currently in control of the council), have patches of affluence but are generally poorer, more ethnically mixed after waves of immigration by Somalis, Afghans, Tamils, Portuguese, various African ethnicities, and others. These areas have higher rates of crime and other indicators of social deprivation and inter-communal conflict, including formation of street groupings of young people organised along ethnic lines, often antagonistic to the police (Young and Hallsworth, 2006). Southall has Britain's longest settled populations of Indian origin in addition to the aforementioned groups. Greenford and Northolt (once Irish bastions) still have considerable, though declining, white working class populations. Community cohesion surveys have found that, as elsewhere, the white adult working class is the least content with the multicultural

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character of the borough. They are concerned about crime, competition over social housing, employment and access to public services. These concerns are increasingly shared by south Asian and other long settled minority groups, particularly in relation to the rapidly growing Somali refugee population and other more recent arrivals.

Explaining the riot

Government explanations initially focused on organised 'gangs' and offenders taking advantage, for pleasure and material gain, of the police having lost control of the streets. The attendant policy response is tough policing, custodial sentencing, and gang suppression. By contrast liberals and media reports initially emphasised the diversity of offenders and role of new digital media, neo-liberalism, consumerism and inequality – requiring more complex policy responses, but downplaying poverty. The 2011 Ministry of Justice's (MoJ) report provides only limited support for the `gang` thesis. 19 per cent of arrestees in London were identified by police as gang members. But classifying gang membership is not an exact science and a narrow focus on gangs shifts focus away from inequalities and poor community-police relations (Hallsworth and Brotherton, 2011). The MoJ's national analysis shows that of those charged with riot offences, 33 per cent were white, 43 per cent black and 7 per cent Asian. Moreover, those sentenced were disproportionately drawn from poor neighbourhoods and families, had troubled school careers and criminal histories. Those caught and sentenced are not necessarily representative of all those involved. However, *The Guardian*/LSE *Reading the Riots* (2011) interviews with rioters (not all of whom were arrested) found that 59 per cent were from the most deprived 20 per cent of areas in England, 50 per cent were black, 18 per cent mixed race and 5 per cent Asian. Involvement by black and mixed race people was more salient in London than in Liverpool and Salford. This reflects variations in the distribution of poverty and also a history of mutually antagonistic relations between the police and poorer young people.

In Ealing, non-residents coming in, and media influences, interacted with local conditions. 60 per cent of those charged with offences committed in Ealing were not residents of the borough. It is difficult to obtain definitive evidence but from eyewitnesses' reports, determined violent activity followed the visible influx of young men into the borough by car and public transport, but once the riot was underway, diverse local young people also became involved. So, as elsewhere, there seemed to be solidarity among rioters in their shared antagonism towards the police and euphoric, empowered, carnivalesque pleasure in deviance.

Yet this solidarity among rioters is not shared by other sections of the population since the targets were not simply the police but included individuals, cars, homes and small minority owned businesses. Victims, mostly ordinary citizens, can be traumatised and angry at the threat to their sense of everyday security and livelihoods. The impact of the riots on the wider population may take longer to determine. The analytic focus should be on the complex interconnections between economic class divisions and ethnic and other cultural group relations. 81 per cent of pupils in Ealing's maintained schools are from a wide range of minority ethnic groups (more than half of the school population is non-white). So, it is sociologically unhelpful to rely on older, simpler depictions of the population as principally divided along the colour lines of race, or majority/minority, or police/youth relations.

With youth unemployment in the borough already at 25 per cent and rising (especially in Southall), sharpening inequalities, and Ealing Council facing a £85m cut in central government grant in 2012, managing inter-group tensions and avoiding further riots will be a major challenge for authorities. The housing stock dates from a more trusting age. Windows do not have the steel shutters found on French houses and it will be difficult to turn streets into gated communities. If riots become a regular occurrence, will residents believe that Ealing police can manage alone? If not and the sovereign nation state weakens then, as elsewhere, more visceral bases of collective organisation, including ethnicity, rise to the surface. Male citizens will probably create their own forms of governance `from below` in defence of homes and neighbourhoods. As in other parts of London and Birmingham, there were signs of this in Ealing during the August riots, from young Sikh men defending their Gurdwara, Irish men defending their pubs, to men patrolling their social housing estates. Yet nation state sovereignty at local level in the city can never be just about physical security. It also involves a fragile blend of ethnic and civic nationalism in trying to bind citizens together. However, there are risks of demonising some as outsiders. As Durkheim argued, creating solidarity in a disparate population can mean uniting people in shared condemnation of the criminal. This solidarity, confronting the solidarity of rioters, could be combustible for community relations. ■

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