

Governmental responses to the riots

Harry Angel discusses the government's main policy strategy to date

November 2011 saw the publication of *Ending Gang and Youth Violence: A Cross-Government Report* (HM Government, 2011). This document is based, in part, upon the deliberations of a rapidly convened *International Forum on Gangs* chaired by Theresa May and Iain Duncan Smith in October 2011. Clearly, this event was planned when David Cameron and his advisers still believed that the August riots were orchestrated by violent youth gangs. Subsequently, CCTV footage, court records and research undertaken by *The Guardian*, the Cabinet Office and others have demonstrated that this was not the case.

Conspiracy of cockeyed thinking?

In their report for the Runnymede Trust, two academics of a conspiratorial turn of mind have argued that David Cameron's suggestion that youth gangs had instigated the riots was a cunning plot by agents of the state to lay the blame for the riots at the door of the Black community (Hallsworth and Brotherton, 2011). If this is so, it was not nearly cunning enough because, within days, this claim was shown to be nonsense. It seems more likely that the, 'wet-behind-the-ears', political apparatchiks and right-of-centre think tanks that do the Conservative-led Coalition's thinking on social issues (still in thrall to Charles Murray's long discredited underclass thesis) chose to ignore the cautionary note sounded by Home Office civil servants and allowed their 'broad brush' class and racial prejudices free reign, thus scoring a very embarrassing 'own goal'. Subsequently, as *Ending Gangs and Youth Violence* observes, it became

clear that:

Across the ten forces where the disorder was most prevalent a total of 417 arrestees during the period of the disorder were reported to be affiliated to a gang – 13 per cent of the total. For forces outside London, the majority recorded fewer than 10 per cent of all arrestees being identified as gang members.

Doing more with less locally

Straightened economic circumstances dictate that the leitmotif of *Ending Gang and Youth Violence* is inevitably 'doing more with less'. There is a little new money and so this initiative, like much else to which the government has turned its hand, is to be realised through 'efficiency savings'. Thus the report commends a *concerted, long term effort*, to be achieved by statutory and voluntary sector agencies in the fields of policing, youth justice, probation, youth work, safeguarding, health employment and training, who will share information, resources and accountability.

This process will be facilitated, it says, by the new Localism Bill which will give local areas the power to take action and pool their resources through Community Budgets. However, this hearty endorsement of multi-agency working has an odd ring, coming as it does from a government that is withdrawing funding not only from each of the services named, but also from community safety partnerships;

placing such funding as remains in the hands of elected Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) to do with as they, or their political constituency, sees fit. But if the voters are not too worried about gangs, because their violence is confined to a handful of down-at-heel housing estates, but want to see 'travellers' evicted from a local beauty spot, localism will trump the government's gang strategy.

It's a family affair

Unsurprisingly, given the ideological persuasion of the Conservative-led Coalition, the punchline of *Ending Gang and Youth Violence* is 'the family'. To oversimplify, but only slightly, it seems that the problem of violent, drug-dealing, youth gangs is ultimately reducible to the 'troubled family'. If, by dint of a *concerted, long term effort*, we can solve this problem, then the problem of youth gangs, youth violence, poor nutrition, poor motivation, low academic attainment and, presumably, rioting will also be solved. No hint here of worsening poverty, burgeoning social and economic polarisation or fiscal policies that hit the poorest hardest; if we can sort out these errant families we can look forward to a new era of social harmony and high aspirations.

Step forward Tony Blair's erstwhile Anti-Social Behaviour Tsar, the infamous after dinner speaker Louise Casey (Roberts, 2010), who will

head up a new Troubled Families Team (TFT) in the Department for Communities and Local Government. Though many families would be troubled by the prospect of a visit from Ms Casey,

this is to misunderstand the primary role of the TFT. Their job is to target the 120,000 families whose deplorable child rearing practices are believed to be at the root of the gang problem.

The belief that troubled families are the progenitors of the violent

Coalition's thinking on social issues is still in thrall to Charles Murray's long discredited underclass thesis

youth gang predates the deliberations of the 50 or so experts who were flown in for David Cameron's hastily convened *International Forum on Gangs*, in October 2011. Delegates to the Forum barely mentioned the family. Not so, Chair Iain Duncan Smith whose *Broken Britain* identifies the malfunctioning family as the root cause of street gangs and much else besides:

Most significantly however, a catalyst and consequence of these pathways to poverty, is the breakdown of the family. Marriage, far more stable than cohabitation, has rapidly declined in recent decades; 15 per cent of babies in Britain are now born without a resident biological father; and we have the highest rate of teenage pregnancy in Europe. Without strong families violent and lawless street gangs, whose leaders are often school age, offer a deadly alternative.

(Iain Duncan Smith, 2009)

Leaving to one side the bizarre conflation of marriage and single parenthood, most serious research shows that in gang-affected neighbourhoods, parenting is only

one of a multiplicity of social, economic and cultural factors that will determine whether or not a young person becomes involved with a violent gang (Klein, 1997; Hagedorn, 2008). This being the case, the resurrection of the former ASBO Tsar is even less explicable, as is her mission to 'troubled families'.

'Who you gonna call...?'

Alongside the TFU there will be an Ending Gang and Youth Violence Team located in the Home Office, working with a virtual network of over 100 expert advisers to provide practical advice and support to local areas with a gang or serious youth violence problem. There are, of course, a small group of experts who have experience, knowledge and expertise in this complex field. But where, we might ask, have all these other experts (of whom we have not previously heard) been hiding for the last ten years while gang-related fatalities have mounted. Prior to an unspecified damascene conversion, some of them claim they were main men in UK spin-offs of the 'Crips' and 'Bloods'. Others made their names as founders of idiosyncratic youth projects based on some

crackpot version of brain science, military training, sub-psychotherapy or transcendental meditation. In truth, while there are some genuine experts around, there is also a small army of Midas-in-Reverse, arriviste claim-makers wanting to get into this potentially lucrative field; and it is far from clear that the government or anybody else knows how to tell the difference.

This motley crew will turn its attentions and proffer advice to 30 'local areas' where £10 million, lifted from pre-existing early intervention monies, has been redesignated to improve the way mainstream services identify, assess and work with the young people most at risk of serious violence (with at least half this funding going to the non-statutory sector).

Taken together, this eclectic band of gang-busters, offering disparate advice to elected Police and Crime Commissioners who are primarily accountable to their local constituencies, while Louise Casey sends in hit squads to get troubled families to 'shape-up', does not bode well for a coherent, or indeed intelligible, UK gang strategy. ■

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