



A forgotten pioneer?



Barbara Wootton was a woman ahead of her time says

Ann Oakley

Elizabeth Schafer: Equality, promotion, and the loyal servant theory - advice from the front line



Ann Blair: Delivering fairness in promotion

Jonathan White: education is not for profit

Ian Searle: Saving our public libraries

Des Freedman: The assault on our universities

Steve Cushion: The politics of pensions

Patricia Hulme and Dan Arthur: The 'back office' bites back

NEC Elections 2012 • Equality Conferences

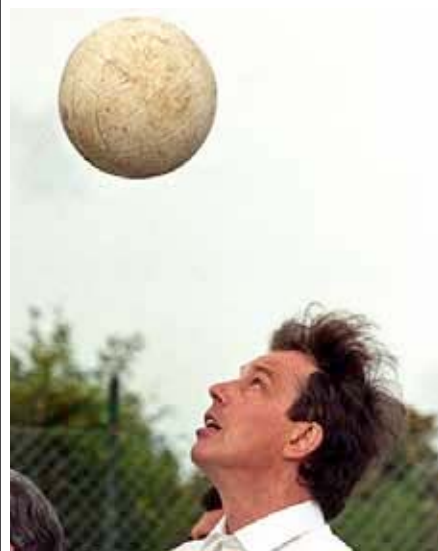
'Education, education, education...'

Ken Spours on why education must not be a political football

Is there a future for HEFCE?

Interview with funding chief **Sir Alan Langlands**

Sally Hunt says attacks on pensions make militants of us all



your new format magazine

www.ucu.org.uk



for members of the
University and College Union
Autumn 2011



ALAMY

Nothing 'simple' about 'simple criminality'

Peter Squires on the summer riots

There's nothing 'simple' about 'simple criminality'

Peter Squires

Britain's summer riots provided the occasion for a truly bulimic outpouring of intolerant reaction as politicians rushed back from their holidays to satiate the media's incessant demand for tough, no-nonsense, sound-bites to reassure middle England that some kind of order was being restored.

Sadly, we've seen it all before; the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce, as the saying goes, but what about the third and the fourth time? By then we get just lazy rhetoric (John Major's 'understand a little less; condemn a little more' from 1993 springs to mind) and easy clichés to please the gallery. The very people who, on other occasions, have decried 'knee jerk reactions' and demanded enquiries felt sufficiently confident to write the riots off as 'simple criminality' (as if there was such a thing), a consequence of our 'feral youth' and a sign of 'Broken Britain'. On the other hand, Cameron's incoherence was thoroughly exposed: not so long ago he was encouraging us to 'hug a hoodie', but the gloves came off at the first sign of trouble.

Policy incoherence and the recycling of half-baked ideas are very much par for the course in law and order policy-making with the need to be seen to be doing something – anything – about the riots apparently taking precedence over informed policy development. We need to be vigilant



Peter Squires
is Professor of
Criminology and
Public Policy at
the University of
Brighton

in ensuring that the riots are not used as a further pretext for another round of uninformed policy-making. During 2008 I became involved in developing evidence for 'Street Crime Commission' set up by Channel 4 and chaired by Cherie Blair. One of the bizarre proposals that captured the imagination of the Commission was a suggestion that knife carrying young people be taken on a late-night tour of A & E departments to confront them with the bloody consequences of carrying weapons. It is not hard to see how this might backfire: it might just feed the fear that promotes weapon carrying in the first place. Every survey of youthful knife carrying I've ever seen reveals young people – if only we can be bothered to ask them - saying they carry weapons to protect themselves. In the event, the proposal was watered down to a school-based project, modeled on various US initiatives 'Growing against gangs' and targeting schools in high risk areas.

The trouble with such initiatives is that they can have a number of counter-productive consequences. They can foster stigma around these schools, give kids ideas about violence or in many cases just scare them, which as noted already, is especially counter-productive given that we know young people mostly say they carry knives 'for protection'. Such projects typically fit into a broader gang enforcement paradigm involving an uneasy mixture of heavy-handed police led enforcement and quite naive, often preachy communication projects. By contrast was need to re-connect with the evidence base on these issues and understand from young people's point of view why they get involved in gangs and violence and the pressures upon them.

And that, in a nutshell, is the political problem of responding to the riots for any social science that seeks to be relevant to current problems.

The political and media agendas are fast-moving and daily, whereas good social science takes years. Yet when politicians and editors ignore the established evidence base, in favour of 'instant fixes', they cut away the foundations upon which effective policy development might proceed leaving the researchers playing catch up. Even the highly laudable efforts of the LSE and *Guardian*, modeling their recently launched 'Reading the Riots' initiative on the 1967 riot research in Detroit, which saw social scientists and journalists collaborate to produce evidence quickly to rebut the right-wing calls for tougher law and order (to redress the problems that police brutality had played no small part in causing), will take months. By which time most of those arrested for their involvement in the riots will have been dealt with by the criminal justice system and, judging by the

www.ucu.org.uk
online here



excessive two-thirds remand rate, many are likely to be in prison, adding further pressures to our already overcrowded and, in (Justice Secretary) Ken Clarke's words, 'broken' prison system. And by then the debate will have moved on.

Of course Clarke is correct; he just doesn't go far enough. The broken penal system and its tendency to amplify, entrench and recycle, the delinquency of the most deprived social groups has been understood for decades. This is but one of five enduring lessons drawn from the evidence base by youth justice researchers and summarized by Barry Goldson, Professor of Criminology at the University of Liverpool, but routinely ignored by criminal justice policy-makers. The penal juggernaut is broken, but the driver is deaf and blind. For the record, the five lessons are: Youth offending is relatively 'normal'; youth crime trends are relatively stable; diversion and minimum necessary intervention are cheaper and more effective; universal services, holistic approaches and 'de-criminalising' responses are the least damaging forms of intervention; custodial sanctions comprise the least effective and most damaging forms of intervention. Of course, the particular problem in the heat and apparent urgency of Britain's 'riot moment' is that it will further assist in the sidelining of the established evidence base because something has to be seen to be done now.

Perhaps, not surprisingly nearly all the instant, off-the-shelf, diagnoses provided by our 'usual suspects' for the riots proved to be rather wide of the mark.

Even so, it was the politics of policing which had to be settled first – after all the police are seldom slow to exploit an opportunity to press their own case. The riots, senior policing commentators reminded us, were a sign of what was to come if the anticipated cuts to policing budgets were to have their impact upon the policing of the streets. Chaos would ensue, it seemed, the moment the 'urban underclass' realised that the police lacked either the numbers or the will to keep a tough lid on things. The implication that the robust tactics of a 'thin blue line' were the only thing keeping us from urban anarchy was rather unsettling, accordingly the police were accused of having mishandled the early riot 'flashpoints'.

Of course, as flashpoints go, a mishandled, race-involved, police shooting is right up there (and not only did the IPCC get it wrong in its initial media release by talking of a non-existent 'exchange of shots', its involvement

www.ucu.org.uk
online here



also appeared to suggest to the community that the police were not taking responsibility for the incident itself); after all police shootings are the most frequent immediate cause of race/community riots in the USA. On the other hand, a deeper look would confirm that it is seldom just a matter of the flashpoints themselves, we should also pay attention to the deeply combustible tensions lying beneath.

Next, the police were thought to have been too ‘soft’ with the rioters though, once again, the back story is still more complex. Since the death of Ian Tomlinson at the G20 protests in 2009, public order policing has been under intense scrutiny, and increasingly guided by a philosophy of ‘facilitating legitimate protest’ – even as discontent regarding several major areas of public policy began to grow. The police were still largely embracing this approach even as the protests into the Tottenham shooting turned swiftly into riot and disorder. Understandably, politicians do not want the police to facilitate riot, but in the early stages, for the police (lacking numbers and a wider public order support infrastructure) the alternative – perhaps even more unpalatable - would have been hand to hand fighting in the streets. Unfortunately rather than backing traditional strategies for containing the disorder, senior politicians from the PM down, signaled their willingness to sanction tougher measures (plastic bullets and water-cannon – resources the police did not ask for, they know they have to police these same communities the following day) in an oxymoronic strategy to ‘fight violence and disorder’. Throwing police at social problems may be a tried and trusted response to disorder but it is almost guaranteed to exacerbate social tensions as Lord Scarman acknowledged back in 1981.

Other instant diagnoses of the riots proved to be just as fallible.


No doubt picking up on the urban youth and street gang narratives that have become prevalent over the past decade, the rapid spread of the rioting was attributed to the activities of gangs, some of them cunningly employing Twitter and Facebook, to disseminate the riot message (prompting calls to shut down Twitter during moments of civil unrest). In any event, David Cameron duly ‘declared war’ on ‘gangs and gang culture’ although, barely three weeks later Theresa May told the Home Affairs select committee that the proportions of rioters who were ‘gang involved’ – at 19% - was much less than originally estimated. However, even that, phrase, ‘gang involved’ is often a highly inventive construct of police intelligence, as gang researchers the world over are well aware.

www.ucu.org.uk
online here



Next, picking up on a wider youth-related narrative, a sequence of moral, ‘state of the nation,’ panics which, since the killing of Jamie Bulger in 1993 have dominated the politics of youth and youth justice in particular (not growing out of crime, persistent young offenders, anti-social behaviour, culture of impunity, Respect agenda, knife crime), the riots were attributed to the actions of the ‘feral’ underclass youth populating our inner cities who took the opportunity presented to indulge in a little ‘shopping with violence’ in historian David Starkey’s unfortunate phrase. There were, from the start, different versions of this account, corresponding loosely to left and right political viewpoints. In the former, the riots were the revengeful actions of dispossessed youth, fed a daily diet of glamorous consumer hedonism, but denied the opportunity to experience it first hand. In the latter, the young rioters were evidence of the demoralized state of ‘Broken Britain’; they were under-educated and un-skilled, the products of bad habits, absent discipline and lousy parenting, permissive morality and overgenerous welfare. Such people were easily led and, by way of thoroughly undermining any legitimate or community grievances they may have had (not that such questions are usually asked), susceptible to the call of the mob in the heat of the moment. Except, as soon as the *Guardian* began to reveal its analysis of the 2,700-odd people arrested in the wake of the riots, it turned out that less than a fifth were under-eighteen anyway – rather more were in their twenties and older.

So contrary to David Cameron’s ‘simple criminality’, the closer one looks the more complex the riot picture begins to appear and the less satisfactory any single line of analysis. It remains to be seen how receptive politicians – and policy-makers – will be to the more complex and nuanced message; too often they seem reluctant to listen, condemnation of criminals is the only game in town, explanation is conflated with offering excuses. In such a situation, an informed and relevant social science needs to keep asking the difficult questions and building an evidence base that allows us to understand the events. It is not enough just to seek the views of victims. The centre of the evidence base has to be the perspective of those who were most involved. Without them we can speculate and talk about them but will never really know why they did what they did or what might be done about it. It is more than good social science or improved evidence-based policy making; it is also a more accountable process for democratic governance.

 UC contributors welcome the chance to discuss their work. Responses to this article should be sent to mwaddup@ucu.org.uk

www.ucu.org.uk
online here

