Simon Radford

Revenge of the Neets
BEHIND BRITAIN’S RIOTS

As I watched the rioting in London last month snowball from the suburbs to the center of the city and then beyond the capital, it was easy to be reminded of Margaret Thatcher’s famous dictum that there is no such thing as society—only families and individuals. When I ran for Parliament in Enfield North in 2005, much of the tenor of that campaign reflected the voters’ implicit attitude toward the Iron Lady’s succinct philosophy. (I lost.)

Enfield, one of the areas of London hardest-hit by rioting, is a study in contrasts. The leafy streets of the western borough reflect an almost forgotten nostalgia for what London’s outer suburbs once were. Babyboomers, now approaching retirement, skip along shopping streets dotted with fishmongers, greengrocers, and other holdouts against superstores like Tesco that have hollowed out much of London’s central shopping hub. Britain is no longer the “nation of shopkeepers” Napoleon once derided. The supermarket behemoth Tesco now controls over 30 percent of grocery spending in the UK, with its tireless competitor Sainsbury’s not far behind.

While the western end of the borough has so far resisted the encroachment of Tesco, the eastern part has been cradled in its ever-willing embrace. Fast-food outlets, pawnshops, and high-rise tenements stand in place of the family bistros, boutiques, and Georgian townhouses to the west. Edmonton and East Enfield are a high-density mix of Turks, white working-class people, and Greek-Cypriots who have older locals rebranding the area of Palmers Green as “Palmers Greek.” Ghanaian flags proudly waved when that nation qualified for the World Cup.

On the political far right, the British National Party favors the repatriation of ethnic minorities. It lurches from one populist campaign to the latest divisive issue, targeting one highlighted ethnic minority in the borough after another, and maintaining a permanent local constituency. The Conservatives list immigration as one of their chief policy concerns, and the English Defence League has found a local following. Some mosques have been threatened. Jon Cruddas, a Labour MP known for his thoughtful broadsides on hot-button issues like housing and welfare, was one of the first to warn his party that immigration was an issue Labour had failed to appreciate, despite a high-profile exchange between then–Prime Minister Gordon Brown and a elderly northern mill-town woman who wondered aloud why there were suddenly so many Polish people in her community.

The increasing number of chain stores and retail outlets has further unwound some of the social capital built up over decades between local merchants and their customers, deepening the alienation people experience in their local surroundings. Add to this the failure to better integrate new arrivals, and the UK ranks as one of the least socially mobile states in the developed world. British manufacturing, for so long a path from the shop floor to the middle class, has withered as jobs have moved to the service sector. The multiplication of low-level call centers, sandwich-shop chains, and the rise of London as a financial hub have eclipsed Britain’s old reputation as the “workshop of the world.” While a Nissan plant in Sunderland has a lease on life following the company’s decision to build a new model there, the recent troubled history of Birmingham’s car industry has turned it into a shabby imitation of its former self. A recent, high-profile Chinese investment in Birmingham means that quality auto production will continue, but on a much smaller scale than it used to.

As Britain’s manufacturing base has had to move to high-skill niche markets in order to compete, unskilled workers have been left largely behind. According to a report in the London Evening Standard, one in six adults is functionally illiterate. Even government ministers have criticized the usefulness of many of the degrees Britons now pursue at university. The previous Labour government, despite talking a big game on the “skills gap” and launching the admirable Surestart program (based on Bill Clinton’s HeadStart initiative), concentrated its resources largely on the National Health Service. The new coalition government’s austerity project has not made a prior-
ity of equipping Britain to close the good-job deficit. Labour struggled unsuccessfully over the years to find a solution to the problem of the “Neets,” the thousands of young people “not in education, employment, or training.” The recent economic downturn has made the problem worse.

Of course the bad economy has thrown gasoline on already smoldering socioeconomic tinders. The riots partly reflect the powerlessness people feel because of stubbornly high unemployment. Communities have lost the self-respect that used to hold them together in hard times. The violence in Tottenham—a neighborhood adjoining Enfield—originally erupted following the shooting of a black man. It crystallized local residents’ distrust of the police, but was soon copied by people of all races and spread up and down the country. The senselessness of the destruction reflected a disconnect between those who govern and those who are governed. A sense of social trust has been lost, and with it the British “stiff upper lip” and class deference.

The usual bromides of both the Left and the Right appeared in the wake of the violence. The Right insisted the need to instill a renewed sense of personal responsibility; the Left pointed to the short-term political factors that enabled the violence to erupt in the first place. Lost in this traditional rhetorical dance, however, were the longer-term structural factors that turned economic malaise into scenes from a war zone. The present government’s scaling back of investment to satisfy the bond markets seems unlikely to relieve the situation.

While many Britons responded in the riots’ aftermath with broom-power and a heartening sense of solidarity, it is now clear the long-term economic prospects of the country cannot be swept away. Britain’s evolving industrial make-up, its decline in real income for the first time in decades, and the nation’s failure to convincingly maintain its traditional sense of civic belonging have led to a growing sense of cultural emptiness.

No doubt parts of Enfield will return to the apparent sub-urban harmony of recent years, but in huge swaths of less-fortunate communities in the UK the resentment will fester. The Britain projected in BBC costume dramas and films like Notting Hill and Love Actually could not be further from the daily reality of a vast majority of Britons. In the aftermath of the riots, they look to the future with fear and dismay.

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Nick Baumann on Tottenham MP Lammy: commonwealmagazine.org/tottenham