

The riots 1 year on: the actions of rioters are not to be defended but serious questions should be asked regarding the finger-pointing that followed

Pete Redford discusses the demonisation of rioters that followed the London riots last year. He questions the severity of the punishment meted out and the notion of a monolithic, welfare scrounging 'underclass'.



As I write this just before the anniversary of the August riots I await the onslaught of coverage. Commentators, unforgiving and ruthless, will appear on our screens banding around the notion of a 'broken Britain' home to a feral and feckless 'underclass'. They are to be feared, ridiculed and hated, this notion of an 'underclass' characterised by their behaviour and lives that are at odds with social norms (whatever they may be).

There is no empirical evidence to suggest that this class exists yet the notion of it has permeated through the barriers of social research into politics and the mainstream media. In a recent study participants were asked to pick pictures that described class. A cafetiere was the image most chosen to depict the middle class whereas Vicky Pollard depicted the working class. Be it as scapegoats for society's ills by politicians or as figures of ridicule by the media the Vicky Pollards and Wayne and Waynetta Slobs conjure an image of chain smoking, idle and feckless welfare dependants.

Unfortunately, this is nothing new. The notion of a 'broken Britain' is the latest in a long line of classic 'right-wing moral panics' from the social residuum in the 1880s, through to the 'problem family' of the 1950s and 1960s, and the 'underclass' of the 1980s. However, if Britain is broken as we are made to believe blame cannot be placed at the feet of a notional 'underclass', should we not be looking in the direction of an 'overclass', the politicians and the media that vilify them?

Politicians and the media characterise the ills of society by providing us with examples of the behaviours that are detrimental to it. Idleness, drug and alcohol abuse, lone-parenthood, teen pregnancy and crime are all apparent traits of estate dwelling benefit claimants paraded on the *Jeremy Kyle Show* every morning for us all to mock. Yet there is an important fact that is never raised in this media circus, the behaviours happen at all levels of society.

During the riots Cameron said that there was a "complete lack of responsibility in our society, people allowed to feel that the world owes them something, that their rights outweigh their responsibilities and that their actions do not have consequences". Can this said of rioters not also apply to bankers or politicians fiddling expenses?

You only have to torture yourself with a minute of *Made in Chelsea* to ask yourself what are these annoying idle rich people, always at lunch or on holiday, doing on my TV? As for substance abuse, you would have to be very naive to believe the middle and upper classes didn't partake in such behaviour. The difference is that falling asleep after a few bottles of wine in front of the TV is more socially acceptable than being battered in the city centre on a Friday night. Poor people generally take drugs to forget the dire situation they find themselves; middle classes generally take drugs for recreation and socialisation. Lone-parents and pregnant teens are also not just a phenomenon of the estates but you would believe otherwise by looking through the papers. Blue collar crime and white collar crime is still crime, however, we can safely say that rioters received more attention from the legal system than the bankers who caused the financial crash.

In response to the riots, the 'broken Britain' rhetoric reached new heights and sensibility went out of the window. The actions of rioters are not to be defended but serious questions need to be asked regarding

the finger-pointing that followed. Somehow, all benefit claimants were grouped together, be it the long term or short term claimants, as the personification of Britain's problems.

Those involved in the riots were to be removed from council houses, because being made homeless would apparently be a solution to underlying problems. Those convicted were given disproportionate sentences, jailed for stealing two scoops of ice cream, 6 months for stealing £3.50 of water from Lidl, 218 children aged between 10-17 given custodial sentences averaging 8 months. With reoffending rates at a record high underlying problems and sensibility was ignored in the moral panic and hysteria that followed the riots.

In the midst of all this blame on a dependence culture being detrimental to our society the true human cost is often ignored. The tragic case of Mark and Helen Mullins received very little attention. An army veteran and his wife unable to live on £57.50 a week walked 6 miles a day to a soup kitchen so they could eat. Helen had disabilities and their daughter was taken into care. Their bodies were found in their rundown council home after committing suicide, unable to carry on in the desperate situation they had fallen into.

Unbelievably, benefit claimants are demonised as 'undeserving poor', if Mark and Helen Mullins were not deserving I don't know who is and still, use of the word 'scrounger' in relation to benefits in the print media has sky-rocketed to an all time high since 2008. As with the double standards on behaviour it is rarely noted that significant amounts of benefit fraud is committed by those in work. It has become easier for politicians and the media to vilify the unfortunate, less articulate and least able to defend themselves than those from their own social groups and standing. Should we not be addressing the underlying problems that have led us to this point, rather than blaming the victim?

Our ruling elites and sections of the media that demonise these people will rarely come into contact with the people they blame or the places they live. Parliament is grossly unrepresentative; currently only 20 MPs have ever worked outside politics, a large proportion are privately educated and went to Oxbridge, yet they create the laws by which all society is governed. They close community centres, cut back on public services and take away legal aid, the implications of which they do not see at first hand as these services that do not affect them.

In the high rises and run down houses of estates will be children who could be CEO's, politicians and journalists but will never get the opportunity because of the life chances afforded to them. They will be less educated, less articulate and less confident. The facts speak for themselves; by the age of 5 they will read and write at a lower standard, fewer of them will get GCSE's (A*-C) let alone A-levels or attend university, and they will also live shorter lives. The gap between the richest and poorest gets increasingly wider and the industries that would have traditionally created jobs for the poorest are all but gone.

When it comes to assessing the riots one year on the blame will still be put on 'broken Britain', the latest in a long line of moral panics. People will still fear the existence of an idle and feral 'underclass' that are coming to steal their cafetieres. Instead, we should pointing fingers at those who shape our society and led to the system of inequalities that made people angry enough to act the way they did. A service based economy but less people able to buy services, highest youth unemployment on record and ideologically driven cuts to public services. The behaviour of the rioters cannot be condoned but the anger of those demonised and struggling in a society created by an unrepresentative 'overclass' is understandable.

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