

The chaos on U.K. streets was preventable

By Conrad Black

Because of old associations, natural affinities, and our shared status as secondary mainly English-speaking countries somewhat in the shadow of American contiguity and influence, Canada retains a greater interest in what happens in the United Kingdom than in most foreign countries. It has been distressing to see the violence in Britain this summer. In part Canadians may feel that if violence is more frequent and extensive in England than it has been it may come here next. We have long prided ourselves on our peaceable nature compared to American society although that is practically an inevitable distinction given the revolutionary origins of the United States, the admired tradition of taking up arms against oppressive behaviour, and the legacy of slavery that lingers yet in that country despite its Herculean effort, unique in world history, to raise up a formerly forcibly subjugated minority to a position of absolute equality with the majority that formerly owned the minority as property-human chattels.

Britain is in some respects coming to resemble more than it had in prior history the habits of the French. It has long been a feature of life in that



Riot police hold back protesters near a burning police vehicle after disorder broke out on July 30, 2024 in Southport, England. PHOTO BY CHRISTOPHER FURLONG/GETTY IMAGES

country that periodically, substantial sections of the population of that magnificently rich and sophisticated nation feel compelled almost as if by a physical virus other than any logical process to tear up paving stones and hurl them at the police, erect barricades and march about, especially in the great squares and boulevards of Paris, shouting objectively nonsensical slogans. The key to managing these episodes, as France's most astute leaders, from Richelieu to Joseph Fouché to Napoleon, Adolphe Thiers, and Charles de Gaulle have known, is to do nothing until the irrepressible bourgeois spirit of France suddenly takes hold of public opinion with the cold terror that all this chaos might actually cost it something and then, almost all of France's nearly countless uprisings have collapsed with a modest assertion of authority. In France it is a sort of primal scream therapy, a psychological purgation more than a coherent expression of political discontent.

In the United States it is an abuse of the constitutional right to bear arms by groups seeking some remission from what they regard as an unsatisfactory division of the wealth of

that immense country. After the British, at urgent American request, had removed the French from Canada in the Seven Years' War and doubled their national debt, and set out to tax the Americans, as the most prosperous British citizens for having done as the Americans asked, the Americans rebelled because they had not approved the tax, and even persuaded the French to assist them. As Abraham Lincoln said of slavery and the Civil War, "All knew that this interest was somehow the cause of the war." Eliminating slavery cost 750,000 American lives in a population of 31 million. While Martin Luther King recognized that if African-Americans challenged segregation by threatening the physical safety of the white majority of Americans, they would be suppressed, but by pointing out the hypocrisy and injustice of racial discrimination they would ultimately gain control of the conscience of America, this progress did not occur without a good deal of violence. Even the progress made by the gay community had its moments of violence, as in the murder of the mayor and the city manager of San Francisco in 1978.

Britain has descended into the habit of decennial riots. There was Afro-Caribbean protesting in Brixton in 1981; white working classes rioted over the poll tax in 1990; discontented Asians rioted in Odham in 2001. There was more scattered disorder in the summers of 2010 and 2011, mainly against the economic consequences of the great crash of 2008, and most recently there has been considerable violence over injudicious immigration policies. There is so little tradition of such disturbances in Britain, but it has been alternately angry newcomers or British natives angry about newcomers.

There is a natural tendency to wonder what immigrants are complaining about, since they came voluntarily. To those objecting to the supposedly excessively generous treatment of immigrants and to the disposition of some of them to lawlessness, since all rioting is destructive, it is sheer idiocy to protest lawlessness by breaking the law and

vandalizing private or public property. Other than when that small fringe of professional hooligans who love disorder and fester around almost all demonstrations to try to escalate violence, rioters are almost always damaging their own cause. If they are not sabotaging the property or the persons of potential supporters, their conduct is sufficiently annoying to enough people that it hurts the cause they claim to be promoting.

In Britain, there have been economic and sociological developments that explain some of the problems. In the economically sluggish areas of Sunderland, Rotherham, and Hartlepool the percentage of those on welfare has risen since 2011 by about three points from an average of about 18 per cent. In every one of the areas where there's been rioting in Britain this summer the percentage of the population welfare increased since 2011. And there is unfortunately considerable evidence that in the interim, governments, unable actually to improve education and job opportunities in vulnerable areas, instead admitted migrants to enter the United Kingdom in order to claim that the economy was growing as a result. As Douglas Murray [pointed out](#) in the August 10 issue of the Spectator, "This type of migration benefits the migrant but does almost nothing to improve the actual economy... For many people it undercuts local labour and due to increased demand for housing, worsens the condition of the unemployed."

As Murray continues: "At the time of the 2011 riots, foreign-born workers accounted for 14 per cent of the UK workforce. Today it's 21 per cent," and immigrant workers have accounted for approximately 75 per cent of the increased employment in that time. This practice of expanding the economy while worsening the condition of those most vulnerable naturally generates a great deal of resentment. It is bad economics and bad politics.

The reflexive response of the new British government of Keir Starmer has been to revile all these riots as the work of

white supremacist racists. This is evidently untrue. There is considerable resentment of migrants taking low-paying jobs and raising the cost of housing, but the real subject of the rioters' grievances is the continuous UK government policy of welcoming more immigration than the country can easily absorb and promoting conditions that cause the deterioration in the living standards of its most vulnerable citizens. If the economic policies were correct, actual racial frictions would be minimal.

Governments ignore their own errors and even those of opposing political parties when they were in government and instead unjustly accuse their own citizens of racism. The results are that the police have lost public support, the governments apparently have no idea how to address the problem satisfactorily, a quarter of the population is almost literally up in arms over their economic conditions, and the great majority of the rest are disgusted with the incompetence of those whom they have elected to govern. Britain has never before in its history had six prime ministers in ten years where all of them left office in good physical but not political health, and Starmer shows no sign of doing any better.

Little of this applies to Canada. Our immigration policy has been much more sensible and while economic growth figures have been dismal but have at least been positive, the only similar point is the bungling of housing policy, which has inflicted hardship on millions of Canadians. But we remain a peaceable country. It all illustrates what a splendid country this is but also, with all our advantages, how much more quickly our per capita national wealth should be expanding. We have unlimited resources and little illegal immigration.

First published in the [National Post](#)