

Broken jobs, slashed services led to London burning

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Illustration: Liu Rui

All of us who had a British education, even in the former colonies like New Zealand, learned a song about the Great Fire of London in 1666:

London's burning, London's burn-ing;

Fetch the engine, fetch the engine;

Fire, fire; fire, fire;

Pour on water, pour on water.

Vast areas of the old city were burned to the ground in 1666. Modern London is much bigger now and the burning of London this time was deliberate, not accidentally with a bakery fire. Recently, large numbers of young people went on the rampage night after night, looting, then burning and fighting with the police.

The next day charred wrecks of building were there for the whole world to see on the TV screens.

To many it seemed just mindless vandalism and criminality and doubtless much of it was. But it would be stupid to ignore the background factors. Let us recap on the basic facts first: A young black father of four, admittedly with a criminal record and possibly brandishing a gun, was shot by police.

A peaceful demonstration against his killing broke down into violent confrontations with the police. These spread rapidly across the UK with widespread copycat looting and burning by mainly young people, of many ethnicities.

For me, having lived in the UK for 20 years and then commuted back there from Brussels for a further 10 years, one image will stay with me. The photo that will stay in my mind, showed, in the background of a car on fire, flames leaping skyward with youths dancing around the blaze.

In the foreground was a traditional London taxi-cab and a thin line of riot police. Side on, the taxi had an advertisement for the long-running musical Billy Elliott. It is unlikely that any of the looters ransacking shops could afford to pay the theater price to see it, but the image was strangely relevant.

The original film of Billy Elliott puts its boy hero in the middle of one of the great struggles of the 1980s, the miners' strike when the mighty National Union of Mineworkers was pitted against the Thatcher government's attempts to curb, if not destroy, its power.

Billy is the youngest son of a Scottish miner who took his family south to work in a Durham coal mine, but prefers a future on the stage to one in the pit.

Terrible scenes of violence between miners, police and strikebreakers occur, but Billy stays faithful to his plans to become a ballet dancer, encouraged by the local dance teacher and the remembered support of his dead mother. His father tries to stop this "foolishness" but eventually Billy prevails. It is a wonderful, triumphant tale. But the real mine the story is set near was closed shortly after the strike along with scores of others.

After 1979, when Mrs Thatcher was first elected, 300,000 jobs were destroyed in the British coal industry. There are only five mines operating today, instead of the 229 open then.

And by 2020, Britain will be importing over 90 percent of its oil, gas and coal, as the North Sea reserves run dry. If that is bad enough, what happened to the other miners' sons, and now their grandsons is a salutary lesson. With access to high paid manual work cut off, many have ended up unemployed, semi-employed or working in low wage jobs.

The same thing happened in all cities. A new generation of poor kids, who cannot afford the consumer gadgets thrust in their face from every billboard, frequent inner cities and country towns alike. They are a "lost" generation, but this week they made their presence felt.

It does not seem that many politicians have yet understood or care about just what they have done over the past few decades and how huge a problem they have now created for the whole country. As the draconian public spending cuts enforced by British Prime Minister David Cameron's coalition government take effect, the prognosis for the UK does not look good.

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