

Funding the Future

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I'm already a little riot weary.

I'm bored of having to say I condemn rioters: doesn't everyone?

I'm bored also with those who say that there is a political divide on this issue: that the left are wrong to blame cuts and the right are wrong to say that's not true.

The reality is that in a small number of communities, and for a small number of people (I suspect we're talking 5,000 or so rioters at most) the veneer that holds people within social constraints of compliance spectacularly failed at the weekend. That's the one fact we have: there was a break down in law and order. After that there is speculation. And there should be reasoning about how we go forward, and less of the blame game.

There's certainly very good reason for saying blame should not be part of today's exchanges in parliament. That's because it would be hard to put a fag paper between the Tories and New Labour if blame were to be levelled. That's because, if we look for areas of agreement amongst the speculation, most seem to see this rioting as an exercise in mass looting; of materialism out of control, and most seem to recognise that there was in the police response an initial lack of conviction, reflected in no small part by the immediate lack of appreciation of the situation by many in our political leadership.

The reason for the materialism is not hard to find: for thirty years excessive consumption has been promoted as the definition of well being by governments of both left and right. This is the consequence: that people want without entitlement. That may be wrong, but when day in day out people are bombarded with advertising messages whose sole purpose is to make them feel dissatisfied with their current possessions and which say that if only they had what, for many, is unattainable then they would become the human being they aspired to be, that some feel alienated is surely not something we should be surprised by? Isn't the whole of society stressed by this messaging, and wouldn't we all (think about it for a moment) be so much better off without it?

Second, the reason for the inadequate response is not hard to find either. For the

same thirty years or so we have endured neoliberalism - a social construct that says that whatever politicians do they make people worse off because markets can always do things better, and that they should as a result leave well alone. So they did and we have seen the result. They left the police alone to get on with things - but the police have after years of such uncertainty also lost their confidence. And only with great reluctance where the politicians dragged back into the arena of leadership where they belong, and in which they feel so uncomfortable.

I agree with those who say society has failed. On ethics. On parenting. On schooling. And also on leadership. But that's because for too long we have really believed there is no such thing as society., And that greed is good. And this is where it, inevitably, leads.

These are big themes in my forthcoming book - the Courageous State. Both are core to the arguments I make in it. As is my blaming neoliberalism as a whole (adopted by left and right alike: let's not make this personal or particular) for this malaise. Because I think we have the right to do that.

And we have a right to look for something different - for leadership, for courage, for politicians who act on conviction. For politicians who will stand up to the market and say it can get things seriously wrong and it is the job of the state to not just correct for that but to actually stop it doing such things. And for action to bring the excesses of some in society under control so that the differentials which fuel the resentment of those who have no prospect of ever fulfilling the dream that they are told (so inappropriately, and so incorrectly and so unethically) they must have are reduced to levels that are acceptable, because it inequality, not just of outcome but of hope that fuel so much that is wrong in society.

And we have a right to expect the end of looting too: the looting of the feral speculative economy of the real economy in which most of us live and work. Because when we look at looting then the looting of the bankers has to be addressed. As does the looting of the state's tax revenues by so many who have now captured services the state should supply for private gain and so obviously enrich themselves unjustly at cost to all others in the process. Yes, those are issues I address too.

I'll never condone rioting, looting or criminality. Ever.

But please don't ask me to condone neoliberalism either. Because we all deserve something so much better than that. And today if parliament is to do anything useful it should agree that the political consensus in this country has to change; that we now have to agree that we really do need a strong, confident state, and that we do need to tame market excess, but that in the process we can deliver something much more powerful, much more important and much more compelling. That is people who can achieve their potential, communities that are strong, identification with society and a sense of purpose.

Yes, the Courageous State is about all those things too.

Now I'd better go and finish writing it. It's due out in late September.