

ANALYSIS:

Triggers for disorder: Is the UK facing a summer of discontent?

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The UK is going through an unprecedented time. Barely out of austerity, it has had to contend with a pandemic alongside the impact of events happening elsewhere in the world. Professor Peter Joyce and Dr Wendy Laverick look back over the last few months and examine some of the triggers that could lead to widespread disorder.

Introduction

Recently Professor Clifford Stott (a member of the government's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies) warned that 'it's not inconceivable that we could have disorder on a scale equivalent to August 2011'. This prediction was especially based upon potential public reaction to future policies that may be put forward to combat the coronavirus pandemic. In this article, we assess some of the factors that provide the potential underpinnings of disorder and factors that might turn this potential into reality.

Precipitating and triggering factors

In order for widespread public disorders to occur, it is necessary that preconditions exist that will result in members of the public being motivated to take to the streets. These are referred to as precipitating factors and are distinct from other issues - termed triggering issues - which may be the spark (sometimes referred to as 'flashpoint') that ignites an already inflammatory situation and results in a major outbreak of public disorder. In this article we identify some of the precipitating factors that could provide the tinder for a major conflagration and suggest the potential for policing to act - as it has done so many times in the past - as the trigger for disorder.

The performance of the government

The UK has suffered an exceptionally high death toll arising from the coronavirus pandemic. By early June, this amounted to over 41,000 deaths, although the Office for National Statistics estimated the actual figure was around 51,000.

One explanation of this was that the government was slow to act and spent precious time at the early stages of the outbreak debating the approach that should be adopted, in particular whether to pursue the herd immunity response. Their reaction was then further jeopardised by shortages of PPE equipment needed by frontline medical staff. The inability of a government to perform its basic function, that of safeguarding the lives of its citizens, will inevitably form the underpinning of discontent - a precipitating factor which is evidenced by the recent slide in support for the government. According to a poll conducted by Opinium, at the end of May 2020, the Conservative lead over Labour declined to 4 points - 43:39 - the lowest since Boris Johnson became prime minister.

However, this decline has been aggravated by the actions of a government advisor in connection with lockdown measures.

Lockdown measures

Lockdown entails the sacrifice of basic civil liberties that are associated with a liberal democratic system of government – the freedom of movement and the freedom of association. Both were set aside by guidance from the government which required that people stayed at home and also by lockdown measures imposed by the 2020 Coronavirus Act which were enforced by the sanction of on-the-spot fines. Between 27 March – 11 May, around 14,200 people were fined for breaking lockdown rules.

Requesting and also legally requiring citizens who are accustomed to being able to freely exercise their basic civil rights to no longer do so for a lengthy period of time are extreme measures, but ones that were justified by the severity of the pandemic which required exceptional steps being taken to limit the spread of the virus.

However, for restrictions such as these to be accepted, it is essential that their enforcement is transparently informed by ethical standards of behaviour by state officials. This includes the requirement that they were applied consistently and fairly across the UK, and that all who flouted them should be sanctioned and, if need be, fined.

The importance of the episode that involved the Prime Minister's advisor, Dominic Cummings, gave credence to a perception that members of the UK's political establishment were treated differently to other members of society.

Not only did it seem to be the case that he flouted government guidelines but he was also accorded the ability – denied to others who are subject to on-the-spot justice – of being able to have time in which to prepare a carefully-crafted statement to justify that he had 'reasonable excuse' to act as he did and thus should not be fined for his actions.

His statement, which was delivered on 25 May, related to his drive from London to Durham made almost two months previously on 27 March and also to a further drive within Durham on 12 April. It is quite conceivable that some of those fined for breaching lockdown regulations could, if given two months to provide an excuse, come up with a justification for their actions

that would be deemed as compelling by the police as that made by Cummings.

Public indignation over this episode can be demonstrated by the million or so signatures on a change.org petition calling on the Prime Minister to sack his advisor. That, however, is an unlikely event given the Prime Minister's insistence that this would not happen but is one that could provide tinder for subsequent disorders. This is because the event implies that the government is using its power in a partisan way to safeguard the interests of the political elite and to dismiss criticisms of their actions in a manner that is reminiscent of the way in which any adverse comment on the policies of the Trump administration are deemed to constitute 'fake news' by the White House. This arrogant dismissal of criticism is compatible with actions taken by political leaders in countries that have authoritarian political systems where public involvement in political issues is not welcomed.

Perceptions of unfairness could be further aggravated if, as Professor Stott argued, the easing of lockdown measures was carried out in a differential manner whereby some geographic areas and the communities that reside within them were subjected to harsher conditions than others. Although this approach might be justified on scientific grounds, those on the receiving end may perceive that they are being discriminated against and the unfairness of this could underpin outbreaks of disorder based on the perception that society is treating some groups unfairly.

The inevitable sense of frustration felt by people – especially younger people – who have been subject for lockdown restrictions for several months is a precipitating factor that could underpin aggression leading to the flouting of restrictions which could take many forms including the illegal gatherings – 'raves' – that occurred in Greater Manchester, Leeds and Staffordshire over this past weekend – and which could so easily result in serious outbreaks of disorder.

Social and economic deprivation

Inadequate public services in areas such as education, health and housing and, in particular, high levels of unemployment have fuelled disorders in the past. This was certainly the case in 1980, in areas affected by disorders in 1981 including Brixton, Toxteth and Moss Side and remained a potent underpinning in places subsequently affected by riots in 1985, 1991/2, 2001 and 2011. With the exception of most of the 1991/2 housing estate riots, racial discrimination was an added factor that affected the lives of communities where disorders occurred, leading Lord Scarman to conclude in 1981 that 'where deprivation and frustration exist on the scale to

be found among the young black people of Brixton, the probability of disorder must...be strong'.

Racial discrimination and socio-economic inequalities remain as impediments affecting the lives of persons from minority ethnic communities. In 2018, the UN Special Rapporteur on racism (drawing on the findings of both the UK's Racial Disparity Audit and the 2017 Lammy Review) raised concerns over continuing widespread discrimination and socio-economic inequalities faced by ethnic minorities in the UK and further drew attention to the disproportionate impact of austerity measures on BAME communities. It was concluded that 'the harsh reality is that race, ethnicity, religion, gender, disability status and related categories all continue to determine the life chances and well-being in Britain in ways that are unacceptable, and in many cases unlawful'. This conclusion is important insofar as it makes the point that BAME communities are but one of several disaffected social groups in contemporary society which have experienced discrimination and social and economic disadvantage, which could act as precipitating factors for participation in future disorders.

Unemployment on a scale equivalent to – or worse than – that experienced during the early part of Margaret Thatcher's premiership is a distinct possibility in post-lockdown UK. Unemployment is likely – as it was in the past – to affect BAME communities more adversely than others, fuelling further resentment against an unjust social system against the backdrop of such communities suffering more fatalities during the coronavirus pandemic.

The economic future of the UK is uncertain. Certainly, measures taken to combat the spread of the coronavirus have impacted adversely on the economy and especially the service sector. A report by the Office for National Statistics published on 12 June indicated that the UK economy shrank by 20.4% in April which is the highest monthly contraction on record. It was stated that this shrinkage was three times greater than the decline experienced during the economic downturn arising from the credit crunch in 2008 and 2009.

There will certainly not be an overnight economic turn around and it unknown how many establishments in the service sector – especially small concerns – that have been subject to a prolonged period of closure will be able to re-open and ultimately recover.

An added complication is Brexit and the possibility that the UK will walk away without a trade deal being struck by the end of the transition period on 31 December 2020. On 11 June, Carolyn

Fairburn (CBI Director General) claimed that this course of action would constitute a 'major block to recovery' which would 'worsen inequalities' and result in 'damaging regional and national growth'. But an action of this nature is one that the government may adopt, having formally rejected asking for the transition period to be extended despite the inevitable disruption to negotiations that have been caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

The politics of race

The election campaign of Donald Trump for the American Presidency in 2016 was based on populist rhetoric in which negative views were expressed against non-white races, epitomised by a pledge to build a wall to separate the USA and Mexico. Events in Minnesota and the subsequent Black Lives Matter protests present the possibility that race could become the fulcrum around which American politics in the immediate future will revolve. Trump's election strategy for 2020 is to solidify his support among those Americans for whom race has negative connotations and hope this will be sufficient to carry him over the victor's line. But to do so, he will need to secure the support of all of his grass root supporters who are registered voters and with whom he has established a direct line of communication via social media. And this may induce inflammatory rhetoric on his part as opposed to attempts to build bridges and unite America's divided society.

This objective underlies his desire to take control of the progress of police reform in order to take the sting out of more radical reform proposals (such as defunding police departments) that might form the basis of a Congressional reform agenda whose aim is to tackle what is viewed as systemic racism in American policing. It also explains his refusal to contemplate renaming American military bases that bear the names of confederate generals (10 in total, that include facilities named after Generals Braxton Bragg, John Bell Hood and Henry Benning).

As globalisation has eroded the extent of national sovereignty, there is the danger that political events in America will influence those in the UK – especially if as a strategy it succeeds electorally.

As we argued in our [recent book on hate crime](#), a key feature of the political debate during the 2016 Brexit referendum campaign was that of race and immigration. These were key aspects of populist rhetoric which sought to renounce political correctness and use these subjects as examples that depicted the (rather ill-defined) 'political establishment' as being out of touch

with the views of 'ordinary people' who wanted to regain control of their country. And while we readily endorse the view that many Leave voters were not racists, as we argued in an article for *Policing Insight*, unleashing the genie of political incorrectness released a political dynamic that could easily spiral out of control. One evidence of this was increases in the volume of hate crime (as attested by the National Police Chiefs' Council and by reporting bodies such as TELL MAMA and the Community Security Trust) in the immediate wake of the referendum, which some people regarded as being legitimised by anti-immigrant sentiment articulated during the 2016 referendum campaign.

The possibility the Brexit would provide a realigning issue in UK politics in which immigration and race act as key differentiators between supporters of the Conservative Party and its opponents has not, however, as yet occurred. One factor against this happening in the future is the gratitude owed by people in the UK to persons from BAME communities and from abroad who have worked in the NHS and other key sectors during the coronavirus pandemic – a figure that amounts to 1:5 NHS workers in England with an even higher proportion among doctors and nurses.

However, political movement in this direction could nonetheless arise. There is the potential for a right wing backlash against the Black Lives Matter protests in the UK, triggered by the issue of removing statues of persons associated with slavery or other racist acts. This situation in itself poses the potential for disorder. However, fears that protests of this nature could be exploited by the far right and increase its level of public support may prompt the prime minister to adopt a more militant stance against protesters which could polarise the UK in the same way as it is doing in America.

Policing

The tragic spectre of George Floyd in Minnesota being subjected to treatment which was tantamount to a public execution by a police officer sparked protests in the USA and other countries (including the UK): 'Black Lives Matter'.

In the UK, perceptions of unfair policing practices have often served to fuel resentment within communities on the receiving end of them and a specific intervention has proved to be the straw that breaks the camel's back and becomes the trigger that causes a serious disorder. This has been the case in all disorders since 1980 and remained the case in 2011, events that

were triggered by the fatal shooting of Mark Duggan.

It is undeniable that prompted by reports by Lord Scarman in 1981 and Sir William Macpherson in 1999, the police service has undertaken numerous reforms that were designed to address the view often held in BAME communities that they were over-policed and under-protected. Additionally, the emphasis on partnership work in policing has served to break down the organisational insularity and the accompanying attitudes that influenced police culture that existed up until the 1980s.

It is thus tempting to argue that what happened in Minnesota would not happen anywhere in the UK. And this may be the case, especially in the sense that the militarisation of American policing and the attitudes that accompany it (in particular, obedience to authority) is not replicated in the UK. But, assessments of the impact of numerous police reforms on police-public relationships need to take into account the continued disproportionality that affects issues such as the use of stop and search powers, the deployment of non-lethal weaponry such as tasers, deaths in custody (whether in a police station or prison) and the adverse impact that 10 years of austerity have exerted on delivering the police diversity agenda. The latter has meant that in March 2019, only 8,329 police officers (7% of the total strength of police forces in England and Wales) self-identified as being an ethnic minority – compared to a figure of around 14% for the general population.

Whilst writing this piece, news reports referred to an attack made on two police officers in Hackney, East London. Luckily, neither sustained serious physical injury in what might constitute an isolated act of jobbery. But it might also be seen as a small skirmish in a future more serious outbreak of violence with the police on the receiving end and it is this context that the importance that Professor Scott attached to engaging with communities by putting more bobbies on the beat becomes of prominent importance, echoing the views of John Alderson back in 1981 whose evidence to Lord Scarman argued the police needed to talk ‘hearts and minds, not CS gas and plastic bullets’.

One important consideration, of course, is what kind of role bobbies on the beat perform. Carrying out activities underpinned by the methods of neighbourhood policing is a worthy exercise – but using large numbers of officers in what might be viewed as saturation policing has been a style in the past that has provoked rather than neutered the onset of violence in connection with the policing of protest as well as the routine policing of communities.

A further important consideration relates to the future nature of policing in an era of penal populism

We argued in a piece written for *Policing Insight* around the time of the 2019 general election that the Conservative Party was endorsing an approach to crime, law and order which in many ways echoed that of Margaret Thatcher – emphatic support for the police, endorsement of tougher powers and sentences and the enhanced use of police weaponry. We argued at that time that this reflected a direct line of communication between police and government, which seemed to bypass the new governance arrangements for police forces in England and Wales provided by Police and Crime Commissioners. And, as was the case during the 1980s, it may make for a more authoritarian style of policing based on the knowledge that the police service has the full support of the government regardless of what actions it undertakes – which in the 1980s was vividly illustrated by Margaret Thatcher’s impassioned defence of police actions at Orgreave in 1984, during the miners’ dispute.

The police handling of the coronavirus pandemic does, in some ways, bear witness to a direct relationship between the government and police service. PCCs have not been vocal on the use of police enforcement powers during the pandemic, even when some controversial methods have been deployed that have included using drones as surveillance methods in order to enforce lockdown measures. Although it can be argued that how the police use their powers is an operational issue that is outside the remit of PCCs, they have the facility to make informal requests to their chief officers especially when police actions might be detrimental to delivering the local police and crime plan by diverting resources away from the attainment of key objectives.

The situation in Wales is perhaps different from that in England where there is public support for strictly enforcing lockdown measures to ensure that a sudden influx of holiday makers does not cause the virus to spread uncontrollably. This prompted the PCC for North Wales, Arfon Jones, to argue in favour of stiffer penalties being applied to those who breached lockdown rules – an approach that he claimed was made on the back of an online poll that suggested 91% of local people endorsed this course of action.

However, public support for the strict enforcement of lockdown measures is perhaps less strong in England than it is in Wales and perceived silence by PCCs on this issue may exert a negative impact on the status of these elected officials in the communities they represent. In instances

where elected officials do not reflect the views of their electors, there arises the danger that it will further devalue the credibility of a public office which already has legitimacy issues, evidenced by the extremely low turn out in the 2012 and 2016 PCC elections. An alternative course of action for disaffected communities who feel that the conventional political system does not represent their opinions is to take their views out onto the streets which can lead to disorder and rioting.

Conclusion

This article has sought to assess views put forward by Professor Stott regarding the possibility of the UK facing a summer of rioting. We have argued that precipitating factors for disorders do exist, a key one of which could be economic catastrophe arising from the twin factors of the coronavirus pandemic and a no trade deal departure from the EU.

The manner in which local communities are policed has undergone numerous reforms since Lord Scarman's report in 1981 but the article has suggested that problems remain, in particular in the police relationship between the police service and BAME communities. There thus remains the possibility of a police intervention providing a trigger that could cause a major outbreak of disorder.

Thus we endorse the views of Professor Stott that the police need to heavily engage with communities in coming months. However, it is also true that policing by consent cannot operate without the underlying condition of government by consent. And this requires the government to take community views, fears and expectations more fully into account than has been the case so far in the coronavirus pandemic in which some of its actions which include the unswerving support given by the Prime Minister to his advisor, Dominic Cummings, smacks of political arrogance by a government that is out of tune with public opinion.

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This article can be found here:

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