

## Let Tottenham Burn: A personal recollection

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Riots on Tottenham High Road – 15 mins walk from my home, 10 mins walk from the school where I teach - many shops looted, vandalised, burnt – in consequence many homes also burnt and people forced to flee.

I am away on holiday when I see the reporting on the looting and burning - I become glued to the television – as I watch there are tears on my face – *not Tottenham again* - a friend rings - my cat is very ill, she doesn't know what to do – I am disturbed in several directions - my partner and I drive back to London, worried about our community – collect the cat – I stay with the cat - he returns to the West Country and the family. *How can I worry about the cat?* I think - *there are so many more important things going on.* I am aware that the one is, in my mind, becoming a metaphor for the other. I feel stuck, powerless – *what to do? what can be done? What can one person do on their own?*

The cat takes a couple of days to die – I try to nurse her, but to no avail - we couldn't get to our usual vet, the roads were closed - I continue watching the news reports and contact friends, family, colleagues who live in the area - I see the old Co-op building (more recently a Carpet Right shop downstairs, and a warren of flats upstairs<sup>1</sup>) now a burnt out shell, it's once art deco glory gone forever – I recall it being a regular landmark of expeditions with my grandma.

Nightmares, waking and sleeping.



<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-14446548>

I leave the house and head down to the emergency relief centre based at Tottenham Green Leisure Centre. As I approach the entrance I see people carrying in bundles – bedding, clothes, toys and more - lots of bundles, lots of people of all descriptions - I also see a line of people carrying out large plastic bags of goods and loading them onto a series of vans - I see one of them is a colleague - we hug, swap news and concerns. I join the queue at the front desk (actually a trestle table staffed by Salvation Army volunteers) – in front of me is a family of Asian heritage – they have brought bedding, they are saying they have more at home, should they bring that

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.apcg29.dsl.pipex.com/new%20goal%20for%20tottenham%20store.htm>

too? The people staffing the desk are appreciative, grateful and saying that no more bedding is needed. When it's my turn I ask them what is needed – they say cleaning stuff – I go to the nearest supermarket, buy as much cleaning stuff as I can carry and return.

'What else is needed?', I ask

'Leafleting', they say.

I am taken back into the main centre of activity.

A huge gymnasium has been taken over – it has trestle tables lining the walls and piled high with goods, all donated by the community - it's an overwhelming sight – *this is what Tottenham really is about - this is who the people of Tottenham really are – this is one thing that a person can do on their own: become one of many.*

Central areas of the gym have been sectioned off - there are quiet areas for counselling, a quiet play area for children, advice areas on housing and benefits – everywhere you look there are people helping people - yet again Tottenham is trying to pull itself up by its bootstraps - *will this get on the news?* I go leafleting. The next day my partner returns from the West Country. We do some more leafleting together. As I do this I talk to some of the local shop keepers whose shops are intact - they are grateful for the leaflets, they are appreciative of what the emergency relief centre is offering but say what they really need are customers – no-one is out and about - no-one is buying – Tottenham is becoming a ghost town.

### **While Tottenham was burning:**

- One of my nephews is a fire-fighter and was called to attend in Tottenham on the night of the riots - at one point he was kneeling in the doorway of a large shop, training his hose on the fire. He was surrounded by 8 police with riot shields in order to protect him from bricks and stones that were being hurled. Eventually the fire fighters were advised to leave for their own safety.
- My first thought on hearing this was something like *good – I'm glad our fire-fighters are being taken care of.* Hard on the heels of that thought came another – *actually, no – what they are saying is 'let Tottenham burn'.*
- Of course, no-one wants to put fire-fighters lives at any more risk than they already are. What I question, as do many others, is why more police weren't deployed? Immediately.
- If, as David Lammy says in his book,<sup>2</sup> there was a 'distant control room that called the shots during the riots' ( p.46), why weren't they controlling the riot in Tottenham? What about all the extra police that had been on duty for the Spurs match at home that very afternoon?
- One of my colleagues lives opposite Tottenham police station. She was so scared she couldn't leave her flat for a week.
- The old co-op building was set on fire by looters. Not all of them knew that people lived above the carpet shop. The first thing one family knew of the fire was someone banging on their door and the voice of a terrified 'looter' (after being told that there were families 'in there') shouting for them to get out as the building was alight.

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<sup>2</sup> *Out of the Ashes- Britain After the Riots* David Lammy 2011 pub. Guardian books