After the riots - where do we go from here?

The 2011 riots in several UK cities came as something of a shock to many people, both in and out of government and various other agencies. Many questions arise, such as:

- Why were they such a complete surprise?

- After the first riots in London, why was it a surprise that they spread farther afield?

- When left on their own to try to contain the disturbances, why were the police promptly blamed for much of the ensuing problems?

- Why is there so much confusion and argument about their causes?

- Why are there so many contradictions in the actions that various commentators are suggesting be taken?

Now the dust has started to settle, the most thoughtful consensus appears to be that the riots are symptoms of deep-seated issues in both some local communities and a wider spectrum of British society. That implies that, whatever action might end up being taken, if part of the aim is to reduce the probability of symptoms reappearing, then the action will need to fix or at least minimise some of the underlying causes of the deep-seated issues, as well as head off the more superficial manifestations of them. (In this context, 'superficial' does not mean 'unimportant', it means 'on the surface and visible'.)

And therein lies part of the difficulty and confusion about causes and actions. The use of social networking web sites, for example, might have enabled the organisation of some of the events, if organisation there was. Such web sites, however, could hardly be a cause of riots, especially if the riots are thought of as a symptom of deeper-seated issues. Social copying through networks has been a feature of human existence since time immemorial; now the existence and use of social networking web sites has enhanced the propensity of people to copy others' behaviour. Maybe if anyone had noticed these two things coming together, given the current issues facing much of society, (see below), the riots might not have come as such a surprise.

Various possible causes have been suggested, including:

- Disaffected / alienated youth
- Worklessness, illiteracy
- Alcohol and drug abuse
- Violent disorder - the sole intent being criminal
- Spending cuts and general unemployment
- Breakdown of family life
- Twisting and misrepresentation of human rights
- Over-emphasis on individual rights and entitlement
- Loss of sense of personal responsibility
- A failure of the penal system to reduce re-offending

If these are genuinely causes of the riots, then there is a dilemma. None of these is new - all have been around for a while; many for years. So, to repeat the earlier question, why the surprise? And a new question - if the underlying causes are not new, why now? Why not last year or the year before?

The conventional view is that there must have a trigger, in this case the death of Mark Duggan. As other people have died, however, in not dissimilar circumstances during the years preceding 2011 with no riots following, that leaves the last question on the table. What is the condition that existed in 2011 that did not exist in 2010, or 2009, or 2008 for that matter?

For the purpose of this article, it is not necessary to explore further the causes of the riots, or the causes of the underlying issues that sit below the top level symptom - i.e. the riots. It is sufficient to note that the problems are complex, and their causes are also complex. Moreover, the causes are multiple, inter-related and largely ambiguous.

It is this last set of observations that have serious implications for the people trying to work out a rational response to the riots with, forgive me for repeating, an aim of reducing the probability of future such events, as well as any others that might be triggered by the same underlying causes. Fortunately, there us help at hand, although the help that is available has its own, built-in difficulties.

First the help ...

Three researchers, all concerned in one way or another with social policy and planning, examined the challenges inherent in social planning back in the 1970s, and coined a label to attach to certain types of social problem - they called these problems 'wicked'[1]. A quick summary of what their researches pointed to would include the following:

- Every wicked problem is essentially unique - so solutions must be appropriate for the time and place in which they occur
- Solutions to tackle 'root'causes are needed as well as 'immediate' causes
- Wicked problems require an iterative process of multiple, partial solutions to reduce the magnitude of a problem that cannot be totally eliminated
- The nature of the problem becomes clearer once you start tackling it - an iterative process of exploration and learning is required ...
- ... and every solution will change the problem in some way
- Solutions to wicked problems are not right or wrong - only better or worse. Searching for the 'correct solution' is self-defeating, as it does not exist
- There are no given solutions, and hence there is no best practice that can be applied

... that is also scary

Now this is scary stuff, but there is good news in there as well. First the scary bits - one you will already have noticed, and that is the bit about 'no best practice'. In other words, there is no place you can turn to to find people and agencies who have already experienced your specific wicked problem and have worked out how to fix it - even Los Angeles. Locally, you are on your own. The second is that all simple, mono-dimensional solutions offered are doomed to failure - the do not work with complex, inter-related causes. So, no uniform, national policies will work either. So, no comfort in just applying whatever it is that comes from Whitehall. The third is the observation that wicked problems can never be totally eliminated - so no point where you will ever be able to rest on your

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[1] Horst Rittell, Melvin Webber and Jeff Conklin - "A problem that is difficult or impossible to solve because of incomplete, contradictory, and changing requirements that are often difficult to recognise. Moreover, because of complex inter-de-pendencies, the effort to solve one aspect of a wicked problem may reveal or create other problems"
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wicked_problem#Horst_Rittel_and_Melvin_Webber

laurels and say 'cracked that'! A final scary thought. Given that all wicked problems are essentially unique, innovation will be required in the development of solutions. All innovations are by definition risky, and that means the risk of failure is high. Moreover, since wicked problems can never be totally eliminated, it could be argued that all solutions tried will, to a greater or lesser degree, fail. They will never produce more than a reduction of the problem.

Help! Where's the good news?

First, the research on wicked problems shows that the best multiple, partial solutions are developed when there is a high level of connectivity, both within organisations and between them. Collaboration is the way to go. That means that the police service is not on its own after all. An added dimension is that the best route for developing innovative solutions is for people from different functions to share their knowledge across organisational boundaries to solve problems, within and between local agencies.

An added bonus is that there is considerable evidence to suggest that it is when practitioners share their knowledge to solve problems that excellent, local solutions are developed. It is practitioners who have an intimate and detailed knowledge of the local manifestations of what might be considered a uniform, national problem, but which, in reality, are far from it. And as practitioners are the largest group in any organisation, (or should be!), that means that there are ample resources to tackle the wicked problems challenge.

One way of thinking about this is that there is collective intelligence within multiple agencies that goes far beyond that contained within any one agency - two plus two truly does make five or even more. And, as every police officer knows full well, good intelligence is a prerequisite for successful operations.

Another thought is that you do not have to seek perfect solutions, as they do not exist. What some commentators have called 'clumsy solutions' are the way to go. The point about clumsy solutions is that imperfection is an acceptable standard to achieve. This does not translate as permission to be sloppy in either research, idea development, or implementation planning. It does translate to permission to run with a solution that appears to offer a decent probability of producing some benefit. As one of my managers from years ago once asked "How long are you prepared to wait for perfection?".

Moreover, as every solution will change the problem in some way, searching for an elegant, 'perfect' solution that promptly changes the problem seems like a waste of time and effort. The alternative approach of iterative experiential learning is much more attractive and holds out the possibility of getting some benefits NOW, instead of waiting for the end of the search for that elusive, perfect solution.

All of this is totally in line with much recent research on emergence. The insights include the fact that by observing the interactive behaviour of 'actors in a network' it is impossible to predict with any accuracy what the outcome of those interactions will be. New ideas will emerge as a product of the complex and often ambiguous interactions that exist. Highly connected people operating across organisational boundaries are 'actors' in a network, and ideas for solutions will emerge from their interactions in exactly the way 'emergence' suggests. This is the application of collective intelligence. Through the learning process that develops, collective intelligence is enhanced.

Here are some ideas on how to get started

Now all of this is relatively easy to say, but getting started may appear to be more problematical. Getting started on the road to developing and implementing clumsy solutions to wicked problems is a wicked problem in itself. As it happens, there are some guidelines available to help get the process started.

The first and most crucial step, whatever the specific wicked problem to be tackled, is to acknowledge that it is a wicked problem. That includes accepting that there are no known solutions, and that all that can be achieved is to minimise the magnitude of the problem through successive, partial solutions. Implicit in that is acceptance that there are no perfect, complete solutions and that partial success is just fine, as long as that prompts more learning - and more partial solutions.

The next step, as an enabler of effective working across functional boundaries, is to establish shared goals. There are two ways of doing this - one conventional and one less so. Sadly, the conventional approach does not work with wicked problems. This is to agree the end-outcome of the journey, and then to plot steps towards that goal. In circumstances where every action / solution changes the nature of the wicked problem being tackled, this approach breaks down more or less straight away. A better bet, non-intuitive as it may appear at first glance, is to create a sense of direction that is moving away from (the current state), (in a desirable direction), rather than towards something.

While there may be lots of diversions and tactical moves implicit in this approach, it is more likely to create a sense of successful movement, than chasing a goal in relation to a problem that will not stay the same long enough to work out a long range plan for dealing with it.

There are now several steps that all come under the heading of 'discovery'. Accepting that wicked problems have complex, multiple, inter-related and often ambiguous causes, means that conventional, linear approaches to identifying the causes of the problem also break down.

First, a little research is needed, itself focused heavily on the 'customer', to try to understand both the nature of the problem and what is driving it. At this stage, it will be useful to use some of the creative thinking tools around to analyse for cause. One critical component of this is to locate root causes as well immediate causes. Root causes are the little blighters that sit below the surface, and keep right on manifesting themselves in superficial causes that may have huge variety.

This approach will enable people to focus on 'manageable units'. Each small facet of the problem, that emerges through the analysis for cause will be small enough to make it possible to address it.

Next, based on another acceptance that is required, (that wicked problems have no simple, single solution), is a search for multiple, partial solutions - anything that will create movement away from the current state, in the desired direction. This is another opportunity for creative thinking tools to be applied. Every solution will impact the problem, and that means that we have to do a little more finding out to discover the new current state. This involves a process of continuous learning.

Small pilots will reduce the inevitable risks associated with innovations, as will involving the 'customer' all the way along the line - before, during and after the event.

High levels of connectivity across boundaries is a requirement for this to work, as is sharing knowledge across those boundaries, but why not? Sounds like constant progress to me.