

After the UK riots, Keir Starmer needs to tackle the root causes

The Labour government's swift response to the UK's worst riots since 2011 has calmed the violence, but the underlying causes remain unaddressed.

While immigrants were the target, the causes range from outright old-fashioned racism to socio-economic exclusion, most evident in towns and cities with few industrial opportunities.

Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer now faces the trio of challenges: unite a divided nation, attract foreign investment, and tackle the deeper issues that threaten the UK's stability and global reputation.

Spreading lies

The UK's worst race riots in years began after far-right activists using social media exploiting the murder of three children at a Taylor Swift-themed club in the northern town of Southport on 29 July.

These activists wrongly attributed their deaths to a Muslim immigrant. In fact, it was a UK-born 17-year-old who does not appear to have been of the Islamic faith.

Still, the lies spread faster than the facts, and anti-immigrant violence raged in several cities, including the two biggest, London and Manchester.

Immigrant communities and asylum seeker accommodation sites were targeted, as were mosques, notably the Abdullah Quilliam Mosque in Liverpool, and a hotel in Rotherham housing asylum seekers was almost torched.

A tough response

Labour had been in government for less than a month when the riots broke out. Their response, under Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer, was muscular and effective.

Keen to show leadership by tackling the riots head on, he cut short his summer holiday and took charge of the response. He deployed riot police and instructed the courts to prosecute rioters immediately. This quickly quelled the protests.

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Starmer was able to draw on his experience as Director of Public Prosecution at the time of the last riots, which were also characterised by racial tensions and social-economic disparities.

Government messaging this time made clear that anyone involved in the riots, either in person or online activity, would be charged and jailed. Evidence, notably from camera footage, is still being sifted and perpetrators identified.

More than 1,200 people have been charged with violent conduct and more than 450 have been jailed. This, however, can only be a short-term solution. Unless the root causes of the riots are addressed, another chapter will open.

Sir Keir's conundrum

The government has not discussed publicly the riots' underlying causes. There are two competing analytical approaches to this.

One is to attribute the violence to racism and anti-immigrant sentiment among white communities. The other is to focus on the political, social, and economic exclusion of white communities.

The first holds the rioters responsible for the violence, labelling them as racists, thugs and opportunists. The second seeks to explain their actions, and by doing so inferring that poor national and local support infrastructure might be too blame.

For a newly elected prime minister, especially one intent on mobilising the population behind a national "change" agenda, neither narrative is compelling.

Tackling the causes

If Starmer's government is to prevent a recurrence and bring the country together in pursuit of a growth agenda, then it will need to develop a comprehensive response that tackles the root causes of the violence.

It could do so. The Labour party swept to power with an unassailable majority in July and now has the mandate to develop and implement ambitious policies to help reverse the effects of a decade of austerity.

Cities and towns could be redeveloped and revitalised, the north of England could finally get as much attention and spending as the south, and testy relations with Europe could be reset.

It will not be easy. The new government has inherited enormous public debt. Substantive foreign direct investment is needed—and that is the problem. Now that Britain has left the EU, there are few reasons for companies to set up shop there.

Losing credibility

The previous Conservative government tried to persuade other countries that this was the perfect time to invest in the UK, but it only partially succeeded.

There was interest from Gulf Arab countries and their sovereign wealth funds, with \$21bn from Saudi Arabia between 2017–24, and \$7.9bn from the United Arab Emirates over the same period. Some of this money has made its way to the less affluent regions of the UK.

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But many international investors lost some confidence in the UK owing to its political volatility. In four years, the Conservatives blazed through four prime ministers (Theresa May, Boris Johnson, Liz Truss, and Rishi Sunak), from 2019-22.

Each brought their own policies and priorities. Companies deciding whether to plough millions into the UK held back, not sure of what the future held. This damaged the country's international standing and

reputation.

Intimidating and lawless

The occurrence of race riots will compound investors' concerns, even though riots in the UK are part of the country's history and protests are a part of its democratic fabric, given its diverse multicultural model.

But the images that were broadcast to the world—of businesses owned by Britons of Asian and African heritage being vandalised, of hotels housing asylum seekers being set alight, and of mosques being attacked—give a very different impression.

Suddenly, Britain appeared to be racially intimidating and lawless. It was is not a good advert for a country seeking investment, especially from Muslim countries.

To fund projects in the more impoverished areas, Sir Keir needs to convince investors that the UK remains an attractive market. That means ensuring stability by getting to the riots' causes: racism, immigration, and inequality.

Rectifying the problem

The Economist reported last week that only 17% of people now believe that to be truly British, it is very important to have been born in Britain, down from 48% in 1995.

An overwhelming parliamentary majority means Starmer can be bold, just as former Labour prime minister Tony Blair made sweeping changes to the school curriculum, especially in social sciences like history, geography and religious studies.

Labour can ensure that the whole of society subscribes to an inclusive definition of being British and belonging to the nation.

It can also tackle misinformation, an issue facing every society. Many think the best way to address this problem is by educating schoolchildren, involving parents, and regulating (not censoring) social media companies.

Able to be bold

Illegal immigration has been a challenge to lawmakers in Europe and the United States for decades, so Labour must begin with an open and honest conversation with the British public. If it does not, it could open the door to far-right activists.

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Lessons should be learnt from Brexit. Politicians failed to discuss the effects of immigration with the public, leaving a narrative void for right-wing populists like Nigel Farage to fill.

If Starmer follows suit and fudges the issue of immigration, resentment among anti-immigration groups will grow, leading to more riots and deterring investors.

The PM has the mandate and the means to tackle the problem head-on and, in so doing, help restore the UK's image, before it is too late. ♦