

# How to mend broken Britain

## Nigel Hall and Cat Tully point to the 'Victorian tricks' that spread wealth

Images of the riots that broke out in Britain last summer ricocheted around the world. For many they were proof that the country was broken. Prime Minister David Cameron said they were the result of decades of progressive moral decline. Iain Duncan Smith, the Work and Pensions Secretary, who has spent years focusing on welfare issues, said Britain was 'in the last chance saloon' before irretrievable social breakdown. Today the country is awash with reports and initiatives, but little changes.

Last summer's events were a manifestation of a wider international phenomenon. There is a growing sense of grievance across nations about the unfair distribution of the economic gains of globalization. The rich are getting richer even during the height of recession.

Having accurately predicted last year's disorder, we look beyond the knee-jerk political reactions and take a longer-term view. The key message is that Government, society, and citizens – each of us – has to be bolder. Current responses only play at the margins. Morally courageous leadership is required at every level. Young people lack hope in the future. The continuous erosion of community leave millions of people disengaged.

In a 21st century interconnected society,

these issues are more serious than before as the cohesion of society is the centre of gravity of our security and prosperity. In scale of ambition, the Government needs to match the most social reforming Victorian governments. We need to echo the greatest of Victorian 'tricks' – bringing together the drive of the wealth and job creators with a near-universal belief in the potential of every individual. As for citizens, we each need to recognise that government will have a smaller role in the future, and that each of us needs to be more pro-active, giving compassion and time to our neighbours in need. We are a huge, still largely untapped, readily available resource that can turn things around as public money dries up.

A broad spectrum of politicians agree that no single spark triggered last summer's mindless violence. They point to fundamental problems in society that have been getting worse for years. Many people have little hope and no stake in society.

There may be nothing new about unruly youth and disadvantaged communities, but the scale of disengagement and hostility is new and deeply worrying. George Galloway MP is not alone when he refers to a new level of hatred for traditional authority and political parties.

The Riots Communities and Victims Panel emphasises the widespread sense of hopelessness and its 63 recommendations are an indictment of decades of UK social policies. More than one million young people unemployed, 20 per cent of children leaving school with literacy levels below the age of 11, 350,000 children with alcohol or drug-addicted parents – these are just a few of its shocking statistics. Labour MP for Birkenhead Frank Field puts stable

families centre stage and bemoans that we have lost the confidence to teach a set of beliefs about society's objectives. School can be no substitute for a stable family.

Unprecedented collective effort is required to get ahead of these deep-rooted problems. We should guarantee employment for all people between the ages of 16 and 30 who are motivated and fit. We must turn around the downward ratings of UK literacy, numeracy, and science. We must end the 'something for nothing' culture, produce a national hymn sheet of society's goals and encourage appropriate role models. Managing migration including from EU countries, in a time of austerity is a real challenge. A difficult, level-headed national conversation about migration, cohesion, and identity is long overdue.

With the 'Big Society', this government has tried to enable volunteers to do far more. But it is just not big enough. Donations are actually down. Government should provide incentives to volunteer, with tax allowances for example, or a student loan drawdown-for-volunteering facility.

The riots highlighted law and order deficiencies. One of the biggest surprises was that the police were caught out so badly. There is broad agreement that the riots were an explosion of mindless violence. Race, politics, ideology or religion were not issues. This raises the question of how the police could cope with a more sustained outbreak of disorder.

Having been stung by the criticism, police chiefs will deliver a quicker and firmer response next time. But what happens if they face multiple large-scale disturbances that overstretch their manpower. Britain has no police reserve and far fewer military personnel available than in the past.

The tough sentencing response for those convicted of rioting has been counter-productive. There is a strong case for piloting alternative approaches, including non-custodial National Service-style programmes focusing on training – 66 per cent of the juveniles convicted had special education needs.

One year on, the scale of the impacts on our society compares to the damage inflicted by an enemy at war with us. Government should sound the call to arms, and we citizens should mobilize, otherwise as Duncan Smith implies, we face being overwhelmed and defeated. ●

*Nigel Hall, Visiting Senior Research Fellow at King's College London, and Cat Tully, formerly in FCO and No. 10 Policy Units, are directors of NHf Strategic Consulting*



*London in flames: social breakdown is as dangerous as a wartime enemy*