

UK: Citizens Inquiry covers up real reasons for Tottenham riots

Our reporter
20 October 2011

The initial meeting of the Citizens Inquiry into August's Tottenham riots took place last Saturday. The area erupted after Mark Duggan, a 29-year-old father of four, was fatally shot by police on August 4.

The killing of Duggan triggered riots that swept across towns and cities in England. Since then thousands of people have been rounded up and charged with petty crimes, with many receiving long prison sentences. The government is considering the use of water cannon, plastic bullets and the army in future unrest.

The Citizens Inquiry was set up by North London Citizens, an offshoot of Citizens UK, created in 1989 by its current executive director Neil Jameson "as the vehicle to revive community organising in the UK".

Billed as the "voice of concerned local residents," the inquiry is an undemocratic stitch-up masquerading as the initiative of the people of Tottenham and designed to cover up the real reason for the riots. It is the work of seasoned operatives bulldozing through a right-wing political agenda.

The majority of the eight Citizens UK trustees are religious leaders. Among them is James Purnell, a former Labour government minister and currently head of the Open Left project at the think tank Demos. Purnell is a supporter of "Blue Labour", which, with its philosophy of "flag, faith and family" and emphasis on friendly societies, charities and "localism", is Labour's equivalent of the Conservatives' "Big Society" plans to slash state involvement in health care, education and other essential social provisions. Another trustee is director of the think tank ResPublica, theologian Phillip Blond. The *Daily Telegraph* described him as "a driving force" behind the Big Society agenda and promoter of "Red Toryism".

Saturday's proceedings were steered by a panel of 11 self-appointed commissioners, mainly local priests, who will carry out a series of interviews over the next six weeks and report their findings to North London Citizens and the leaders of the main political parties in early 2012.

The inquiry only attracted 60 people. A large proportion were members of St. Ignatius Catholic Jesuit church in

Stamford Hill and students involved in the Peace and Justice society at St. Ignatius College in Enfield. The five people who gave witness evidence appeared to have been hand-picked from amongst the congregations of the churches.

Some idea of the inquiry's remit and the sort of conclusions it will reach can be gleaned from the press statement issued by Alvin Carpio, the social outreach coordinator at St. Ignatius Church shortly after the riots erupted. Carpio, now the Citizens Inquiry full-time organiser, described how 30 "local leaders" organised a public rally "calling for peace, condemning the looters and renewing a sense of hope. It was a wonderful display of community united against the crimes committed by an unrepresentative minority."

Carpio continued, "The young men who have taken to our streets covered with hoodies and balaclavas set out to ruin the places we live in. They must be punished accordingly.... They should be punished for the trail of heartless deeds they have committed. Justice and the rule of law must triumph to ensure the long-term recovery of our city, especially in the lead up to the Olympics [to be held in neighbouring Stratford next year]."

The claim that the riots were the fault of a small, badly parented, ill-disciplined minority that had spoiled Tottenham's image dominated Saturday's proceedings.

The opening remarks were made by Jameson, who declared that citizens had to take responsibility for safeguarding their "peace and prosperity" and reclaim the streets, working directly with the police, the state and business.

North London Citizens member and St. Ignatius College student Edward Badu said, "As someone born and raised in Tottenham, and as a young commissioner on the Citizens Inquiry, I want to show that not all young people are rioters or looters and that many young people are working to rebuild our neighbourhoods as community leaders."

Holy Trinity priest Bunmi Fagbemi declared, "We have to stem the tide of things being done to Tottenham".

Liberty Church pastor Segun Johnson called for a “social contract” between individuals, the police and the state.

Opposition voices were heard when members of the audience were allowed to speak.

William Spring explained that he was an active church member, but “the one issue that has to be resolved before there is any progress is the shooting of Mark Duggan.”

“I do not believe you can leave behind a major injustice and an attempt by the British authorities to cover up what was an unnecessary death.

“I live in Tottenham Hale and I’ve never been worried about gangs or threats to my life and limbs. What does worry me is that the police apparently have powers to wander around Tottenham Hale, stop a minicab and shoot dead the occupant who had no criminal record,” Spring concluded to a round of applause.

In response to Spring’s comment, chairperson Hannah Adu, a youth worker at Bruce Grove Youth Centre (which had been shut closed as a result of council cuts), replied, “I don’t think we can comment,” claiming the case was being dealt with elsewhere.

Spring later told our reporter, “Normally when anyone is shot dead that person is arrested. It can be an accident, manslaughter or murder. But [with Mark Duggan] they’ve let this policeman wander around. He’s still on duty. The investigation could drag on for years.”

Local Labour MP David Lammy notoriously blamed the riots on “A Grand Theft Auto culture that glamorises violence. A consumer culture fixated on the brands we wear, not who we are and what we achieve. A gang culture with warped notions of loyalty, respect and honour.”

Spring said Lammy was “totally ineffectual”. He explained, “I wrote to him about the war in Libya and he never replied. He lives in Highgate [an affluent London suburb] and comes down here and gives his homilies. But it’s more than that. He takes £174,000 in expenses. So it’s obvious you can loot in other ways.”

Yvonne Lawson, whose 17-year-old son Godwin, a St. Ignatius College student, was stabbed to death in an unprovoked attack in March, spoke to the inquiry. Despite the personal trauma and the terrible effects it had had on her family, she said that it was important to understand the causes of the riots, including the lack of resources in the community such as youth clubs, and the way young people feel they have no future. She had set up a foundation in Godwin’s memory to help young people and had come to understand how “the riots were just a platform because these issues were bubbling before. The children were feeling under pressure. The issues didn’t just arise from the riots.”

Paul Mitchell also spoke, introducing himself as a Socialist Equality Party national committee member, *World*

Socialist Web Site reporter and participant in the “Workers Inquiry into the State Killing of Joy Gardner,” who was killed during attempts by police and immigration officials to deport her in 1993.

Mitchell explained that since the killing of Joy Gardner some 600 people had died in police custody, but not a single officer had been brought to account. The killing of Mark Duggan was a major contributory factor to the riots and it would be criminal to ignore it.

“The riots cannot be blamed on ‘feral’ youth, dysfunctional families, single mums and absent dads. It is not just about what happened in Tottenham. There is a much wider political and social context, nationally and internationally.”

Mitchell described how the riots occurred after the greatest meltdown in the world economy in decades, the uprisings in North Africa and the continuing opposition in Greece to cuts in wages and social provision and mass unemployment.

He condemned the demonisation of young people taking place “while MPs who fiddled their expenses were rapped on the knuckles, Rupert Murdoch, whose News International organisation systematically bribed London’s police, has been treated with kid gloves and the bankers who looted the economy for which workers are now paying the cost in terms of austerity measures have got away scot-free.”

He concluded by saying that all the resources to lead a fulfilling and productive life can be attained but, quoting the findings of the Joy Gardner Inquiry, this can only be achieved with a “determined political struggle against the capitalist profit system, its state forces and its political representatives. Workers must unite to put an end to the system which killed Joy Gardner and terrorises millions more and reorganise society in the interest of the majority, not to suit the profit motives of a few.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact