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Look out – Canada, too, could catch the riot virus

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Canadians prefer to believe that our cities are models of urban tranquillity and that riots of the sort that engulfed London last week could never happen here. Perhaps we should not be so sanguine. In the past year, riot police have been deployed in both Vancouver and Toronto. Granted, in each case the violence was precipitated by an external event, but the deepening social and economic divisions that are all too apparent in London are becoming evident in our own cities as well.

Instead of reducing and flattening economic distinctions, globalization has made them sharper. The world is not flat, but spiky, unequal and divided. Nowhere is that more apparent than within our cities. As I recently argued in the Financial Times, there is a real danger that riots like London's will become a feature, not a mere bug, of global cities.

Canada's cities might not have the extreme class divides of London, New York or Los Angeles, but the gulf is getting wider. The streets of Yorkville and downtown Vancouver are filled with Rolls-Royces, Bentleys, Mercedes and the occasional Ferrari and Lamborghini. The average price of a detached single-family home in Vancouver is more than \$1-million. Toronto's housing prices continue to escalate too.

As in London, these divides are heightened by two very different kinds of immigrations. On the one side is the influx of the global super-rich on the lookout for stable nations and cities, tax shelters and shopping opportunities. On the other side are less-skilled immigrants, hungry for better lives. In between are often caught local populations.

Toronto and Vancouver, like London, are patchworks of rich, poor and a struggling, increasingly frustrated middle. Toronto's class divides have worsened over the past couple of decades, as the research of David Hulchanski and his colleagues at the University of Toronto has found.

Canada's social compact at the provincial and national levels remains strong; the country faces nothing like the debt crisis and thus the austerity and deep cuts that have brought Britain such pain. But let's not fool ourselves.

In Boris Johnson, London has an urban-oriented moderate for a mayor who cares deeply about the quality and diversity of his city. For example, London's bike-sharing program is known as "Boris Bikes."

In contrast, Toronto's Rob Ford might well be the most anti-urban mayor ever to preside over a large global city. He has sought to remove bike lanes, shunned gay pride and is seeking to impose deep cuts on a wide range of city services. Mr. Ford rode to the mayoralty on a wave of populist, Tea Party-like support from lower-middle class, working-class, car-driving and new-immigrant voters mainly from outer wards who resent what they view as the privileged lifestyles of the downtown gentry, urban hipsters and unionized public-sector workers.

Then there is this: Our greatest cities are not bland monocultures. The very features that make them so dynamic also contribute to their instability. It is no accident that the most innovative U.S. cities also have the highest levels of protest and among the lowest levels of social capital and cohesion.

Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm noted long ago that having large numbers of the poor packed into dense neighbourhoods that were located right on top of the centres of political power couldn't but turn old-style cities into centres of insurrection. The same thing can – and is – happening in our cities as well.

The London riots were also a reaction to its unvarnished corporate remaking. Like so many other global cities, the vast majority of London's political energy is directed toward the needs and interests of an elite sliver of its population. The transformation of London into an "Olympic city," with all the bulldozing and uprootings of poorer populations that go along with that, have engendered deep resentments.

Vancouver's Olympic redevelopment, though far less intrusive, stoked similar tensions. Toronto's downtown renaissance, with its construction cranes and gleaming towers, also suggests a tilt toward a more privileged, less inclusive city.

If Canada's cities are going to continue to prosper, they have to get back to doing what they have always done: providing real pathways for opportunity for all their residents. We need a new civic compact, one that moves beyond the old statist recipe of public housing, dead-end make-work jobs and public welfare, which helped to create a more or less permanent underclass in the first place – but that at the same time recognizes that government still has an enormous role to play.

That means real investments in social services and physical infrastructure and most of all in our people. Every member of our community – rich and poor, native-born and newly emigrated – is a source of creative economic energy.

We need to devise early childhood development programs and other efforts to channel young people's talents into new enterprises and creative endeavours. We must focus on turning low-wage, low-skill service jobs – the fastest-growing job category in the new economy – into higher-paying, more fulfilling and more productive work.

Until we acknowledge our growing class divisions, they are only going to get worse. And if the time comes that they do bubble over, as they just did in London, we won't be able to say we weren't warned.