

# I PREDICT A RIOT

Eddie Mulholland is a senior photographer with the *Telegraph* newspaper group. On 10 November 2010, he was one of a handful of photographers present at the Millbank Tower in London when students began rioting over a rise in university tuition fees. Sean Samuels caught up with this vice-chairman of the British Press Photographers' Association to find out what it is like to be on the frontline of press photography today.



**Sean:** Talk me through how you came to cover the student riots in London. How did you get in the middle of it all?

**Eddie:** Another photographer from the *Telegraph* was actually covering the event from start to finish. I had been doing a portrait of somebody in Westminster, so I was hanging around in the general area and thought I would wander up and watch it as it went past Parliament. It was a very big march and I didn't know where the other photographers would be. I thought I'd stick my oar in and have a little nose about. I was up by Parliament and a few of the kids had sat down in the middle of the road. I did a few frames of that; it was all very good-natured. I hung about there, wandering down to Parliament Square. There was not much going on, just lots and lots of people walking by. Not a great deal of police at all. Then, once the majority of the march had got past me, I received a text from my wife saying it was live on the news that the students were attacking Millbank and just as that happened I had a call from work saying could I go and check it out. I wandered up with another couple of photographers and before we knew it we were right next to the windows and main door where the police were trying to stop them from getting in.

**S:** In situations like that, how do you get into the position you want?

**E:** You push your way through, basically. When it comes to the contact point between the crowd and the police it can be difficult to get through there. Often, though, protesters quite like having a line of photographers between them and the police because they can use photographers to push the police back while keeping themselves out of hitting distance. In this case we tried to sneak around the side – we didn't go through the middle – and got to a point that was overlooking what was going on. There was a TV crew from the BBC there already so there were four of us in total. We were in a good place to cover it because we were elevated and weren't in a position to be used as a battering ram against the police. As more people filed in behind us we got crushed up against a waist-high barrier, but overall it wasn't too bad.

**S:** What were you seeing and do you know why the situation escalated?

**E:** To this day I still don't understand why the police didn't reinforce the officers there. The ones holding the line were literally outnumbered thousands to one. There were maybe 15 to 20 police and occasionally a few students would

surge forward; people then got through and to the foyer. It was these people who started smashing the window. Then more people got in and some found the bottom of the fire exit and went up inside the building, which led to people getting up on the roof. There were lots of entrances to that building and vanloads of police all around the place. They could have brought hundreds of reinforcements in from the back. Once the students got into the foyer they didn't really know what to do, they were just making the point that they had got in. With the broken glass it was dangerous and the police were trying to get people back. They were being very cooperative and good with the photographers and protesters, staying calm and not lashing out, but I really don't know why they were left for so long to hold out.

**S:** When you are in this sort of situation, what are the factors you are considering and what are you looking out for?

**E:** The main thing is not to get hit when people are chucking things. You have to keep your eyes open to make sure nothing lands on your head. You're not looking through the camera all the time; only when it starts to fizz up do you start taking pictures, but that's when it is dangerous. There are certain people, not so much with this incident, who are quite happy to have a go at photographers. There are people breaking and kicking things in who are not covered up and if they are not covered up someone will get pictures and identify them, and they are soon arrested. When that happens they start blaming photographers for their arrest. Someone said to one of the photographers I was with, 'What are you doing? Stop taking pictures, you'll get them arrested,' and it was a case of no, them breaking things will get them arrested, but if they start to see us as part and parcel of the police then that's when it gets trickier.

**S:** Does the news desk ask you to take certain images, capture certain moments?

**E:** No, they don't ask for particular images, it can't work like that. For some reason when you get loads of people together like this phones stop working, so people are trying to contact you and they can't get through. So once you are in position, you have to hope that is a good position to be in. The image that was published everywhere, of someone kicking the door in with a flare on the floor, was taken from the other side to us, which technically was a bad position, it just happened to be good for that moment. We were elevated and had room to manoeuvre. It should have been a good position, but once you are in a



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place you have to stay there and watch the crowds either through a long lens or with a wide one, so that if it all kicks off right in front of you or far away you can react quickly. There are waves of shooting and watching and when the action dies down you watch elsewhere.

**S:** How long were you in that position and when do you call it a day?

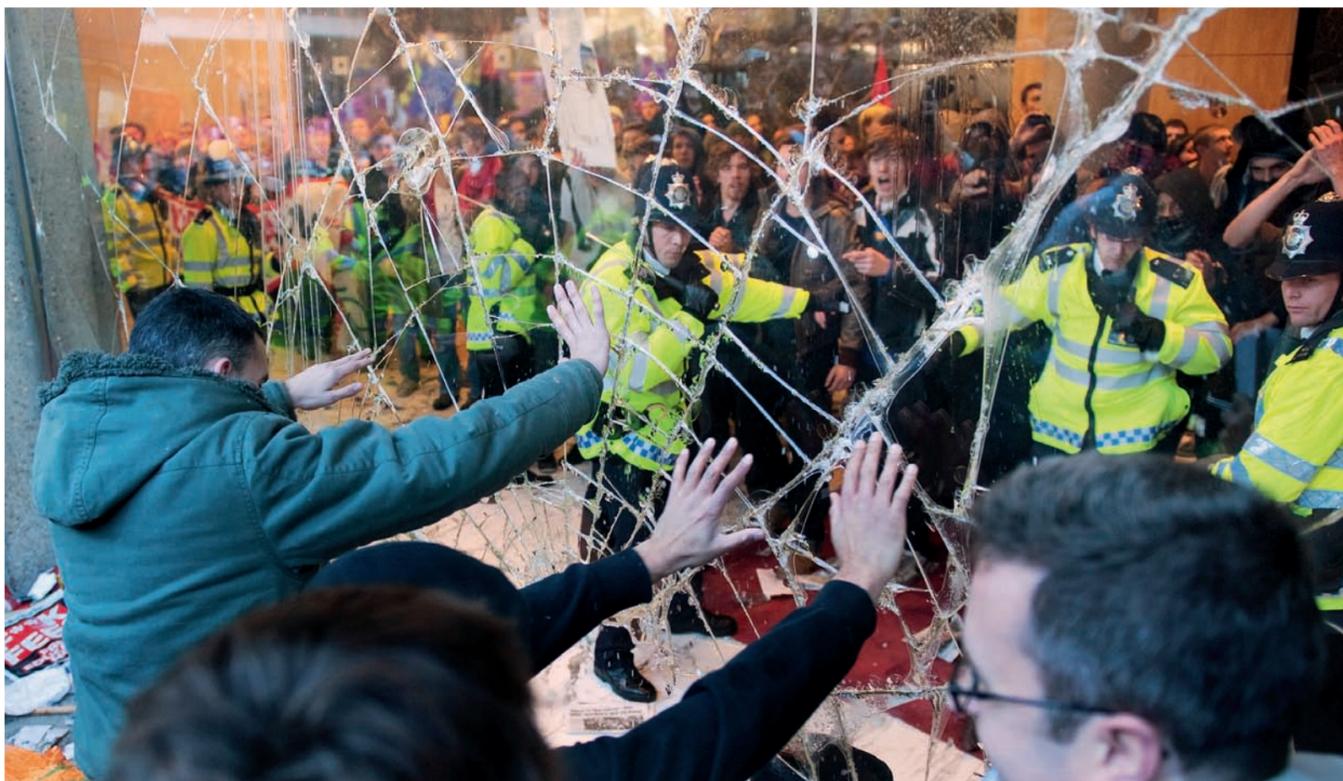
**E:** I was there for an hour and a half, two hours maybe and called it a day when the riot police turned up. They pushed their way through and got into position. I gave that 15 minutes then it looked like they were getting things under control. This is the point when you have to make a decision to stay or go. I don't carry my laptop with me. I like to have minimal kit, two Nikon D3 cameras with two lenses on – a 70-200mm and a 24-70mm. This is the basic kit, but I've also got a 14mm, 17-35mm, a 300mm and a 600mm, but I don't carry all this because I don't like to wear a backpack. You can't get through the crowds easily

and people try to steal laptops from them. It means I have to get out and file pictures from my car, which is nearly always parked nearby.

**S:** Have you found that amateur photographers present a problem in these situations?

**E:** Often I have no idea who the vast majority of people I see shooting on jobs are and for whom they are shooting. I do news nearly all the time so I know pretty much all the news photographers working at High Court jobs, royal jobs and Downing Street, but for some reason at demos the number of people with cameras I have never seen before in my life has swelled to ridiculous proportions. I think a lot of students turn up with a camera and want to get stuck in. You end up with a load of people in a bad position holding the camera above their heads because they've seen that done on television and all they are doing is blocking people who are actually in a position to get a picture. Obviously, it's a lot harder when there are 50 photographers trying to get

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a picture over 20. That said, once upon a time I was a young photographer not being paid to cover a demonstration, because you had to for the work experience. So I can't complain, but it is annoying.

**S: What about the need for official press accreditation?**

**E:** The only difference that makes is the police will let us through their lines, which is something we have been trying to get them to do for years. We don't expect any special treatment; we just expect not to be shoved in with everyone else. As official press photographers we are not going to get through the lines and then start a riot. So there's no logic to the police stopping us from going back and forth through the lines.

**S: How is the relationship between the press and the police at the moment?**

**E:** It's a lot better than it was in the past. I am vice-chairman of the British Press Photographers' Association. Other members of the organisation have been going and talking to the police for the

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past 10 years trying to get them to understand we are allowed access to these things and they are not allowed to delete our pictures. Guidelines are drafted, but then the people on the ground are not told about them and there are still police officers who think they can come up and tell you to delete pictures from your camera. They need to be tuned in to what they can and can't do. It's a lot better, but it's still not perfect, but I don't know if it ever will be. That said the sergeant handling things at Millbank was absolutely brilliant. He was injured and had a cut on his face, but he remained very restrained. Hopefully the wind has changed and they realise they shouldn't have a problem with us being there.

**S: Have you attended an event where you have felt concerned for your safety?**

**E:** Not really. Covering football hooligans abroad is a bit riskier than the average demo. I did a couple of poll tax demos working for the South London Press. A Friday night demonstration/riot in Brixton. We used to do these all the time and they were quite lively. I'll probably end up regretting saying it, but I haven't felt threatened for quite a long time, but then we haven't had any big demonstrations in this country for a long time. Our riots are a little more reserved than the ones that happen in France say, but there is always the next one. We aren't being singled out for attack, but you never know, that might change. **PP**

EDDIE MULHOLLAND

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