

TACKLING A BURNING ISSUE

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ARSON has long been with us. Given man's frailties it is probably almost as old as fire itself. Although Nero's fire attack on ancient Rome may have begun as a misconceived attempt at slum clearance, he is nevertheless regarded as one of history's infamous fire raisers. The destruction of the *Reichstag* in Berlin in 1936 was an outstanding example of arson for political ends.

The motives for incendiarism have always been many and varied as they continue to be to the present. In recent years, however, there is a difference in that arson has become so much more widespread — indeed, if it were not for the fact that it remains such an evil crime, one would be tempted to describe arson today as almost commonplace.

This was certainly the case in the United States. There, the National Fire Protection Association recorded an enormous upswing in arson fires from some 5000 in the early fifties to approaching 200 000 by the end of the seventies. The cost had escalated from around \$10 million to over \$1000 million. The New York fire chief is on record as saying that they had the arson problem licked in the Bronx — there was nothing left to burn!

In Europe the arson disease, while less virulent, has insidiously been establishing itself in the body of public life. In European countries — as, indeed, for a long time in the United States — there was a strong disinclination on the part of governments and official agencies even to admit to the growing severity of this threat. The reasons are not hard to find: first, the feeling of guilt that arson is a rather shameful kind of thing, the existence of which is best denied; then, the feeling of helplessness as to what one can do to prevent it; thirdly, the fact that it is difficult to identify and prosecute the culprits; finally, that its eradication is seen as yet another costly expense.

Another factor in all this is that the facts surrounding arson are grey and muddy. Information about the incidence of arson, and the people who commit arson and their motivation



remains scanty and not particularly substantial.

When I suggested in 1981, as a member of the Confederation of Fire Protection Associations, Europe, that we should tackle arson as a major European fire problem I was met with varying degrees of scepticism. A German fire brigade colleague assured me that arson was certainly no problem in his country. Just one year later a report by the Munich Reinsurance group stated that fire insurers throughout the world were having to devote between a

quarter and a third of their total loss expenditure to pay for losses resulting from arson. Soon after, the Gerling institute of Cologne noted an "alarming increase" in the number of deliberately started fires, as reflected in the criminal statistics of all industrial countries.

At about that time the Dutch were recording a rise in cases of incendiarism from 106 in 1967 to 1600 in 1980. It was said that probably half the fires in the Netherlands were being caused by a pattern of abnormal behaviour.

In (West) Germany the recorded number of arson cases rose from some 2000 in 1960 to nearly 10 000 in 1982. Dr G. Lichtenwald of the German Insurance Association (*Verband der Sachversicherer*) said that the amount of damage caused by arson fires was truly alarming; arson was the leading cause of fire, responsible for 30% of all fires in insured industrial premises.

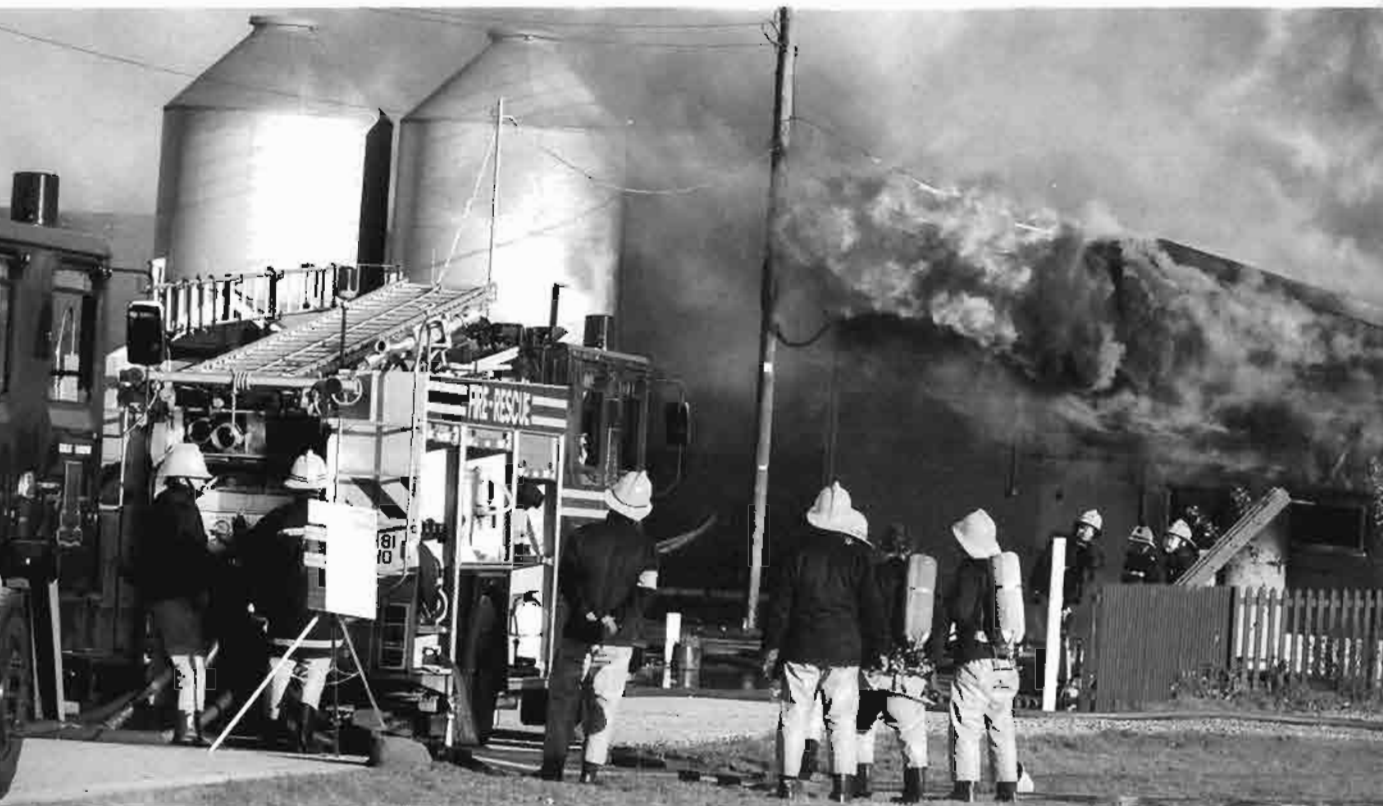
For France, the *Central National de Prevention et de Protection* quoted statistics of the *Police Judiciaire* that in 1983 there were 1025 cases of arson affecting public property and 6921 cases affecting private property. In the Paris fire brigade area 2438 fires were attributable to arson in 1984.

In Belgium the *Association Nationale pour la Protection contre l'Incendie* said insurance companies estimated that 30% of fires were deliberate. Brussels fire brigade thought that 60% of fires in that city resulted from arson.

The Swedish Fire Protection Association believed that up to 30% of the total fire costs in Sweden were caused by arson. These were

among some of the earlier indications of the rising trend of arson attacks. The position has deteriorated still further as indicated by more recent reports. Stockholm police statistics for 1989 showed that 43% of all fires in the Swedish capital arose from arson or suspected

today. In 1989 there were 10 000 fires in dwellings attributed to arson — that is 20% of the fires attended by fire brigades. In industrial and public buildings there were 13 000 arson fires — 30% of the total. Insurers estimate the cost of arson fires at around £500 million, that



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arson. There is special concern about deliberate fires in industrial premises.

The Finnish Insurance Federation reported a large increase in the costs of arson fires in 1989 with 11% of the major fires having definitely been started deliberately and many of the 33% of 'cause unknown' fires being possible arson fires.

In Norway the total number of fires has been decreasing but the number of arson fires has been steadily going up.

In Germany the criminal police report that the number of arson cases had shown a gradual year-by-year increase from 1985.

The Italian Association of Industrial Safety Officers says that 25% of their major fires (costing more than L100 million each) from 1985-1989 were due to arson, the clothing industry being the worst affected.

Arson and suspected arson remain the largest single cause of property damage due to fire in the United States, although the number of arson fires is now the lowest since 1977, reflecting the strenuous efforts made to combat arson in recent years.

In Britain there has been a steady increase in the number of arson fires from a few hundred a year in the early sixties to many thousands

is half the total cost of fire claims.

In all countries arson also involves human loss. In Britain it is known that some 2000 suffer death or serious injury in arson fires each year. In the United States there were 740 civilian deaths in arson fires in 1988.

New York's worst fire for some 80 years killed 87 people when a blaze struck a social club used by immigrants. An unemployed Cuban immigrant was accused of starting the fire with a jug of petrol after having a quarrel with his wife.

Also in the United States, a ring, comprising police and firefighters, was formed to protest against state tax-cutting measures, which would involve a loss of jobs. The group of seven, however, became obsessed with pyromania and regularly returned to the scene to watch the fires burn. During a period of two years they were involved in setting 269 fires expertly, in which at least 282 people were injured. The fires were set randomly and there was no evidence for profit found in any of the fires, despite thorough examination of insurance and sales records. It was only due to a demonstration of over-exuberance during a fire that one of the arson ring was caught.

Arson can be categorized in different ways

and the line between one kind of motivation and another is by no means hard. One can say that almost all cases of arson are the result of abnormal behaviour. The various motives or impulses for deliberately setting fire to property or people are vandalism, revenge or spite, profit, mental instability/pyromania, concealment of another crime or violence/terrorism.

In the USA it was long held that arson for profit (to cheat insurers) was the main motivation. Certainly, this kind of arson is very prevalent there and has led to a concerted attack by insurers both individually and collectively through the Insurance Committee for Arson Control. Not all American sources, however, agree that profit is the major motive for arson. The Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA) has stated that 42% of arson fires were the result of vandalism and only 14% were profit orientated.

For the British there is little hard evidence of any growth in the number of arson cases to defraud insurers, although in the current period of industrial recession there is probably some slight increase in such cases. Much of the arson increase is associated with vandalism. In the UK there has been a spate of fires associated with schools and other buildings easily accessible by children and the young. Arson is often associated with another crime such as burglary, to conceal the other crime, or is committed as part of the mindless destruction that is so often a feature of break-ins committed by the young.

Revenge or spite are frequently quoted as motives for arson such as a disgruntled employee who feels he has been badly treated. The reasons given by people for committing arson verge on bizarre. A man who set fire to a £1.5 million Rubens painting in the *Kunsthau*s museum, Zurich, said he did so to draw attention to environmental pollution.

FIRES IN BRITAIN			
Main targets:	Arson fires:	Total fires:	Share of total:
Schools	1108	1992	55.6%
Entertainment	695	1552	44.8%
Construction	401	992	40.4%
Shops	1256	4597	27.3%
Agriculture	505	2428	20.8%
Hospitals	399	2146	18.6%
Hotels	252	1683	15.0%

Concerted European activity against arson was begun in the early part of the eighties by the Confederation of Fire Protection Associations, Europe (CFPA Europe) and manifested itself in particular at two major symposia on the subject. The first took place in the Brussels conference centre of the European Commission in 1985. The symposium was attended by government, police, fire brigade, and insurance representatives together with others having a

special concern for the control of arson.

At the conclusion of the symposium the delegates who came from fourteen countries agreed a 20-point programme for future action including the following:

- Better information required on targets and motivation of arsonists
- Arson statistics should be on uniform basis for all countries
- Cases of arson need to be more effectively investigated and prosecuted
- Investigation requires full collaboration between fire brigades and police
- Owners of buildings need to make themselves familiar as to the signs of suspicious fires
- There needs to be facilities for training people in fire investigation
- More use should be made of science and technology to detect arsonists
- Documentation should be provided to assist in arson investigation
- Special measures needed to deal with arson to defraud insurers
- Design of buildings to help prevent arson
- Fire protection equipment designed to cope with arson
- Companies to have arrangements for arson protection as part of loss-prevention programmes.

CFPA Europe set up a working group to develop this programme of work. The working group produced a CFPA Europe *Arson Dossier* providing guidance on these major areas:

- Motivation of the arsonist
- Assessing the risk of arson
- Investigating arson fires
- Security as part of management's overall responsibility
- Security measures against arson
- Environmental and design measures against arson
- Fire protection equipment for control of arson
- Community action against arson
- The role of education and publicity
- Action by insurers.

The dossier, now available in English, French and German versions, was launched at CFPA Europe's second arson symposium held at the European Commission's conference centre in Luxemburg City during 1989.

In fact, the occasion of the symposium also provided a launching platform for yet another major step forward — which was the coming into being of the European Arson Prevention Institute, an initiative originally suggested by the French fire safety body, the *Centre Nationale Prevention et Protection*. In this, CFPA Europe was recognizing that deliberate fire-

raising had reached such serious proportion that a separate agency was required to provide some permanent central point of control. The importance of the subject is acknowledged also in the support given to this anti-arson activity by the European Commission.

The European Arson Prevention Institute acts on behalf of its 13 CFPD Europe member countries and four reinsurance and insurance associate members as a central clearing point for the compilation and dissemination of information about arson and ways in which arson can be fought. To this end it publishes a newsletter containing national statistics and case-studies about arson and examples of activities being undertaken in the different countries to combat arson.

The institute will publish guidance documentation on prevention and control of arson in various occupancies, the first of which, at the request of its members, will cover industrial and commercial buildings which, in most countries, present a particular risk. Studies are being undertaken on the incidence of arson in schools, vehicles and ships.

The institute is running in September 1991 a two-day seminar at the European Commission's conference centre in Luxemburg in which the special problems of children and adolescents who start fires will be addressed by representatives of the educational and social services agencies, fire, police and insurance bodies from all the west European countries.

In 1992 the institute will run a course in fire investigation which will serve as a model for similar courses throughout Europe. It will be particularly geared to the requirements of fire, police, and insurance fire investigators. Throughout Europe we are very short on facts and statistics about arson and the institute is also charged with the job of upgrading our basic arson data. We hope to undertake research into the existing position in particular countries with a view to recommending ways in which statistics can be improved.

It is accepted that the institute can only act as a clearing house for information and to help in the provision of central services. The real task of overcoming the arson problem has to be tackled on a national basis. For this reason, a major objective for the institute is that in each of its member-countries there should be an agency of some kind which addresses the arson problem in that country.

It is pleasing to report that we now have national arson committees set up in a number of our member countries: Switzerland, Sweden, Finland and Britain. Other countries give attention to arson in different ways but eventually, I hope, also set up an organization to deal with the problem as a whole.

The UK's Arson Prevention Bureau came into being in February of this year as a result of growing disquiet on the part of both insurers

and government who have joined forces in a unique way to establish this new agency which is intended to spearhead a concerted and continuing campaign against arson in all its forms. It is, as far as I know, the only such national agency to have been set up anywhere in the world which has as its sole objective the prevention and control of arson.

It is a very small operation with the most modest of budgets. It will depend for its success in motivating and harnessing the much larger resources existing in, for example, government, insurance, and the fire and police services. It has begun work on an ambitious programme of priority objectives.

Investigation: The first and most important in our view is to promote high standards of fire investigation in fire brigades throughout Britain so as to reduce the 'cause unknown' category of fire to negligible proportions, identify fires begun deliberately and thus provide information which the police require for the apprehension of the arsonists. Our aim is to encourage every fire brigade to have one or more officers who are wholly dedicated to fire investigation. These officers would attend larger and more serious fires, would be on call to assist the officer in charge of fire-fighting to establish cause of fire and would help in training others in the brigade as necessary. A corollary is to explore the benefits to be derived from training junior officers in the basics of fire investigation including scene preservation.

A complementary exercise is to establish existing good practice in the way the police are involved with fire brigades in fire investigation teams and in other activities to prevent arson (such as liaison with architects). The objective is to persuade police forces to adopt/adapt the best practices and to indicate to them gaps and shortcomings that exist. A third leg to this matter of improved investigation is to maximize the use of forensic scientists in regard to arson fires demanding special levels of expertise.

Protection: For the owners and managers of industrial, commercial and public buildings we plan a national campaign addressed to selected groups pointing out the high cost of arson, that it puts up insurance costs, that it can put firms out of business, and offering arson prevention packages of guidance material tailored to specific interests. This project will probably be run by a small working group led by our Fire Protection Association.

Schools: These remain a specially vulnerable target for arsonists despite the substantial activity already being conducted by the Department of Education & Science, Municipal Mutual Insurance and some local education authorities. The bureau will give special attention to this matter.

A working group will consider the action already taken by various authorities; to select from this analysis examples of good practice; to

consider in particular the benefits and lessons resulting from the work of regional risk management groups. We should also consider how some of these problems are being handled in the United States with particular reference to their juvenile counselling programme.

Action will include the following: Encouraging and guiding education authorities and schools to make school premises more secure; incorporating enhanced protection into the design of new and modified school buildings; teaching children about the perils resulting from fire; treating children who have been caught starting fires so as to reduce the risk of re-offending.



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Fraudulent arson: Fraudulent arson is seen by the media and the general public as the only manifestation of arson. Even if, as we believe, fraudulent arson accounts for only some 10% of the total, the amounts involved are significant. This is an area where insurers can themselves do much to effect an improvement. The problem is to establish whether or not a fire has been started deliberately by the insured or his agent. The police are naturally reluctant to take action unless they have strong evidence. Insurers are reluctant to resist settling claims because of the adverse publicity stemming from such reluctance. Insurers should be able to feel that they have public backing to take a strong line against possible fraudulent claims. Guidelines will be prepared on the handling of claims where arson is suspected.

Statistics: The availability of better statistical information on arson is central to the problem of applying appropriate remedial measures. The chief requirements are to establish the real extent of the crime of arson, the kinds of

arsonists involved, their targets and their motives. The bureau will need to investigate with the appropriate bodies improvements which are desirable and whether it is possible to achieve the improvements.

Let me, in conclusion, summarize how I believe we can achieve some progress in reducing the number and cost of arson attacks. First, there has to be an acceptance in each country that the problem exists and that it can be improved. This will call for the establishment of some kind of system in each country to deal with the problem. It requires the establishment of a bureau or agency or committee that brings together central government, local government, judiciary, police, fire service, forensic service, insurers and industry.

We require to know much more about the incidence of arson, the people who commit arson and their motives. This means that we must have better statistics. At present statistics on fire are, at best, inadequate, and in many countries almost non-existent. I would strongly suggest that the best people to collect fire statistics are the fire brigades and this duty should become mandatory. Insurers should be more willing to contribute information to a central point on the cost of fires and, in particular, the cost of arson fires.

Based on such information the national arson group will be in a position to establish priorities and targets, to decide which buildings are most at risk and which are the most appropriate defences. Even today, with our limited knowledge, we should encourage the owners and managers of all kinds of buildings to carry out an assessment of the threat which arson presents to them and to decide on cost-effective measures to combat arson.

Arson has in most of our countries been allowed to establish itself as a deep-seated malaise. Some of us are now taking the first positive steps to control the disease. The cure will not be easy nor will it be accomplished very quickly. I am, however, optimistic that with the kind of approaches I have outlined we shall see some encouraging results. Whether or not we allow the deliberate destruction by fire of so much valuable property, plus the misery it brings in terms of death, injury and loss of employment, is a matter entirely in our own hands. With sufficient resolve arson can be defeated. ■

Douglas Woodward is the first director-general of the Arson Prevention Bureau, having been director of the Fire Protection Association until October 1989. As chairman of the Confederation of Fire Protection Associations, Europe, he organised two symposia which resulted in his being appointed president of its offshoot, the European Arson Prevention Institute. He is a member of the City's Court of Common Council as well as chairman of the City Heritage Society.