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The New Prevent: Will It Work? Can It Work?



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Introduction

The Conservative–Liberal coalition that was formed following the election of May 2010 was quick to set to one side the previous government’s strategy for preventing violent extremism (known as ‘PVE’ or, more commonly, ‘Prevent’). Formulating a new strategy proved, though, to be a lengthy and fractious process. Initially due to be released in January 2011, the successor policy to Prevent was delayed to June 2011, during which time the Security Minister, Pauline Neville-Jones, resigned. Journalists reported that the coalition was divided between hard-line ‘neo-conservatives’ like Michael Gove and more moderate voices such as Nick Clegg and Sayeeda Warsi.¹ As late as April 2011, just two months before the release of the new strategy, Neville-Jones stated in a speech that the core of the new policy would be three ‘i’s: ‘ideology, institutions and individuals’. However, the new strategy does not mention this triad even once, indicating that the final report was subject to all kinds of last-minute alterations and insertions.²

Indeed, this is how the new strategy comes across when read closely: some statements seem to clash with, even directly contradict, others, as though they have been shoehorned in during the final draft.³ Whatever the accuracy of the journalistic accounts of divisions in Whitehall, it is certainly true that one can point to those passages in the published report that seem to have been inserted by hard-liners and those that seem to have been written by more moderate individuals. To take one example, midway through the report a passage emphasises the significance of maintaining free expression and ‘the rights of all men and women to live free from persecution of any kind’ as a way of challenging extremism. Yet just a few pages earlier it talks insouciantly about how it is now a criminal offence to ‘wear clothing or carry articles in public which arouse reasonable suspicion that an individual is a member or supporter of a proscribed organisation’.⁴

Nevertheless, though it is far from entirely coherent, the new strategy does mark out some important departures from its predecessor. In this article our aim is to explore the possible implications of these departures. Drawing upon work from a national research project⁵ examining Muslim participation in processes of governance, we examine some of the events that formed the background to the new strategy and how they shaped it. We argue that, despite its rhetorical claim to mark a new approach, there are a number of significant continuities between the old and new strategies, and that some of the tensions that were evident in the old strategy are likely to beset the new one. Indeed, the key question we seek to ask is whether Prevent, defined as a policy designed to make extremism less appealing to British citizens, can actually succeed in *any* form.

Criticism of Prevent under New Labour

There was certainly no shortage of criticism of the Prevent strategy under New Labour, most of which can be traced to the way it focused on the British Muslim population. Despite the fact that it is widely accepted that extremists are a tiny minority in Britain, the strategy frequently appeared to be trying to effect a substantial change in all Muslims’ attitudes.

When the first ‘Pathfinder’ funding for Prevent was announced to local authorities by the Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG) it was requested that only authorities with a Muslim population of more than five percent (the national average is three) bid for the money. When the full strategy was rolled out, local authorities were funded directly in proportion to the number of Muslim residents.⁶ Money was injected into a bewildering variety of community initiatives aimed at Muslims, especially the young, including everything from theatre projects and national ‘roadshows’ of religious scholars, to women’s organisations and helplines for Muslim youth.

Unsurprisingly, this had the effect of frustrating non-Muslims who felt that they were being denied public money when they had equal levels of need.⁷ The strategy, which entirely ignored far-Right and other forms of extremism, also seemed to imply that British Muslims in general were ‘flawed citizens’ in need of alteration.⁸ The varied uses to which Prevent funding was put meant that the policy goals of countering terrorism and promoting social cohesion became blurred, with a number of critics suggesting that the former had undermined the latter.⁹ Government efforts to promote a ‘mainstream’ form of Islam caused controversy, particularly among more liberal Muslims who found themselves accused of ‘parroting the government’s line’.¹⁰ Others found fault with the way the strategy was implemented and its success evaluated.¹¹ Numerous councils and other public bodies, many of which had been trying to avoid funding specific ethnic or religious minorities, either rejected Prevent funding or rebranded it.¹²

“Despite the fact that it is widely accepted that extremists are only a tiny minority in Britain, [Labour’s Prevent] strategy frequently appeared to be trying to effect a substantial change in all Muslims’ attitudes”

In addition to these general problems, there was widespread suspicion that Prevent funding was being used to gather information on Muslim communities.¹³ The suggestion that this was official policy was always denied by CLG,¹⁴ but some youth workers and councillors who were involved with Prevent certainly reported that they felt coerced into providing information about individuals,¹⁵ with some claiming that local government was under pressure to become ‘an agency of the intelligence service’.¹⁶ These perceptions were not helped by cases of covert surveillance, such as Project Champion in Birmingham, which had the effect of alienating whole Muslim communities. Project Champion was a scheme led by West Midlands Police Authority that entailed the installation of 216 closed circuit television (CCTV) and Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) cameras in two areas of Birmingham in which Muslims are concentrated: Sparkbrook and Washwood Heath.¹⁷ Initially, the cameras were announced as a general crime prevention initiative under the Safer Birmingham Partnership. It gradually emerged, however, that the scheme was funded by the Home Office via the Association of Chief Police Officers (Terrorism and Allied Matters) (ACPO [TAM]), and its counter-terrorism surveillance purpose had been effectively concealed. Following a campaign by citizens and residents groups, the cameras were

covered over and then finally dismantled in 2011. Two public reports – one from Birmingham City Council, the other from Thames Valley Police – condemned the way in which Project Champion had been implemented and the ways in which local communities had been misled over the purpose of the cameras, with the latter arguing that the initiative had ‘set back community relations by a decade’.¹⁸

Outline of the New Prevent

Given this widespread opposition, it is perhaps unsurprising that the new report – authored by a government keen to distance itself from its predecessor – accepts many of the criticisms of the strategy it replaces. One of the things it emphasises particularly strongly is the need to separate Prevent-funded activities from community cohesion. It argues that targeting the whole British Muslim population is likely to lead to resentment and wasted money.¹⁹ It accepts, in a way New Labour’s strategy did not, that ‘well-integrated’ people have committed terrorist attacks – which also implies, of course, that belonging to a tight-knit religious community does not necessarily make one a risk to national security.²⁰ Although still mainly concerned with violence in the name of Islam, the report is also far clearer that it is interested in extremism *per se*, and discusses the threat posed by far-right and inter-ethnic terrorism at various points.²¹

The rhetorical style, too, is different. Gone is the New Labour rhetoric, with its frequent references to ‘faith’ and ‘community’. In fact, ‘religion’ and ‘faith’ are mentioned relatively infrequently in the new strategy. The coalition’s strategy does not aim to shape gender relations among Muslims as part of Prevent. New Labour’s policy documents on Prevent contended that government should ‘enable [Muslim women’s] voices to be heard and empower them to engage with disillusioned youths’ by breaking down barriers to mosques.²² There is an argument for strengthening the role of British Muslim women (who remain excluded from many places of worship and chronically underrepresented in higher education and employment in the UK).²³ Yet making this a part of counter-terror policy confused matters – not least because, as Katherine Brown observed, it cast British Muslim women only as ‘mothers’ whose role is primarily to act as a ‘correcting influence’ to ‘combative masculinist’ varieties of Islam.²⁴

The rationale announced for choosing areas on which to focus Prevent activity is a large improvement also. Rather than using the number of Muslims living in a specific area as the basis for prioritising Prevent work, the new strategy is led by intelligence on levels of extremist activity. The result of this shift is fairly small: 17 of the 25 new ‘priority areas’ for Prevent would feature in a list of the top 25 areas of percentage Muslim population. Nevertheless, the effect of this and other changes is to give the impression – far more clearly than Labour’s strategy did – that the UK government is dealing with political violence, not trying to reshape Muslim Britain.

The Conservative Critique

Though these changes undoubtedly represent an improvement on the New Labour strategy, in order to evaluate the coalition's approach it is important to understand how it has been influenced by critiques of Prevent made by politicians and organisations on the centre-right. Three themes can be identified in these critiques. The first focuses on the perceived wastefulness of Prevent, contending that the monitoring and evaluation of projects was not robust enough to justify the sums of public money spent on them. The former Conservative MP Paul Goodman was prominent in calling New Labour to account on this, raising questions on the subject in Parliament.²⁵ The Taxpayers' Alliance made an argument along these lines too. 'Skilled policing and robust intelligence are the most effective ways of tackling violent extremism', it claimed. 'Funding projects carried out by community groups is a method that is doomed to failure'.²⁶

Given the wide reach of Prevent under New Labour, it is easy to sympathise with this theme (even if one suspects that groups such as the Taxpayers' Alliance are opposed not just to the use of social and community projects to prevent terrorism, but to the public funding of community projects per se). The other two themes, however, are much harder to find sympathy for. The second centres on the allegation – made by the Centre for Social Cohesion and the Social Affairs Unit, among others – that not enough has been done to counter 'radicalisation' within public institutions.²⁷ The new strategy aims to address this by moving away from a 'community oriented' and toward a 'sector oriented' approach. Rather than being delivered through local community organisations, the new strategy will be focused on those areas of society where propagandists are thought to be operating: prisons, hospitals, universities and so on. This may have some worrying ramifications for British Muslims, as well as for an increasingly wide range of citizens in the identified sectors (for instance, health service workers, academics) who could be incorporated into the delivery of the government's counter-terrorism agenda.

New Labour actually took a fairly hard line on this, encouraging UK universities to be vigilant in reporting terrorism.²⁸ This approach had some disastrous consequences, such as the arrests of Hicham Yezza and Rizwaan Sabir, a former administrator and former postgraduate student at the University of Nottingham. Yezza and Sabir were detained in solitary confinement for, respectively, five and six days after being reported for acquiring an Al-Qaeda training manual for academic research. (The manual in question was downloaded from the US Department of Justice website and is freely available from booksellers such as Amazon.) Despite this, there seem to be some within the coalition who are willing to go further. Indeed, at one point the strategy argues that '[t]here should be no "ungoverned spaces" in which extremism is allowed to flourish without firm challenge and, where appropriate, by legal intervention'.²⁹ The suggestion seems to be that every institution, public space and place of worship needs to be regulated and monitored. This is a particularly striking argument given that it comes from the two supposed parties of 'small government'. It also indicates that it is not going to be simple for the widespread suspicion of Prevent among Muslims to be alleviated.

Thirdly and finally, it is clear that many Conservative actors sympathise with the argument articulated by think tanks such as Quilliam and Policy Exchange that Prevent actually facilitated extremist views and radicalisation by sanctioning partnerships between government and Islamist organisations.³⁰ This includes David Cameron, who has accused the former New Labour government of associating with ‘non-violent extremists’ in order to combat ‘violent extremists’ – a practice he said, in a speech delivered in Munich in February 2011, was ‘like turning to a right-wing fascist party to fight a violent white supremacist movement’.³¹ Accordingly, in the new strategy one finds the concern expressed ‘that insufficient attention has been paid to whether [funded] organisations comprehensively subscribe to what we would consider to be mainstream British values’ and the assurance that Prevent funding or support will not ‘be given to organisations that hold extremist views or support terrorist-related activity of any kind’.³²

Will the New Strategy Work?

Unfortunately there is a serious flaw in this third theme in the centre-right critique of Prevent, namely, that it has been based largely upon a caricature of Muslim organisations within the UK. In texts such as Policy Exchange’s *Choosing Our Friend’s Wisely*, any person who has had any association with the Muslim Council of Britain, the Islamic Foundation or STREET, among others, is portrayed as an ‘Islamist’ dedicated to undermining British democracy from within. Even the Radical Middle Way – a Prevent-funded initiative that organised ‘scholars tours’ of the UK that consistently and clearly preached a message of tolerance and engagement – is deemed to be a barrier to national integration and the government’s goal of countering terrorism.³³

“[The new Prevent Strategy] leaves the government unable to engage with a wide variety of partners, many of whom actually agree with much of what the coalition is trying to do”

It is not, of course, the case that Muslim organisations cannot be justly criticised or that they always play a positive role. There are legitimate debates to be had about whether some Muslim civil society organisations are representative or effective deliverers of services, and some have had links with radical Islamic parties. Yet the reality is far more complex than Policy Exchange’s reports admit. The Islamic Foundation is a useful illustration. It was founded by Khurshid Ahmad, the one-time vice-president of Jamaati-i-Islami in Pakistan.³⁴ One of its main roles early in its history was to translate the writings of Maulana Mawdudi, the party’s founder, into English, and it played a decisive role in mobilising Muslims after the publication of *The Satanic Verses*. However, as research by Seán McLoughlin has shown, since the 1990s the organisation has altered its published output and taken on more British-born members of staff, a number of whom have become prominent advocates

for less oppositional forms of Islam.³⁵ It is these individuals who tend to be invited onto government partnerships – though these partnerships, too, tend to be characterised by Policy Exchange and others as worrying concessions to ‘Islamists’. Indeed, it is not unknown for think tanks to characterise conciliatory gestures by Muslim organisations as merely ‘Islamism by stealth’: only on gaining power, it is said, will their true colours show. In the Islamic Foundation’s case, however, sustained engagement by government actually appears to have encouraged new stances to be adopted.

Another more directly relevant case is STREET, a Brixton-based scheme whose aim is to help young Muslims who may be susceptible to violent extremism. Although at one point the recipient of Prevent funding, STREET has been denounced repeatedly as an organisation run by ‘non-violent extremists’. This is largely because many of its staff, including its founder, Abdul Haqq Baker, identify as Salafis. The term ‘Salafi’ is often equated, even in scholarly publications, with scriptural literalism and extremism, but this is a simplification.³⁶ It certainly does not accurately describe Baker, whose political opinions, interestingly, actually overlap with the Conservatives on some issues. He claims, for example, to be opposed to any kind of support for non-violent extremism, and says the following about debates on the subject of multiculturalism and British values:

There is a problem, I think, that as British, we’ve lost our way somewhat. I think ... multiculturalism has pandered too much to all of the ethnicities that have come in, when it should be that multiculturalism invited different faiths, different cultures to come and subscribe to a set of values, bring conducive cultural values to the table, and [leave] those that [are] not conducive in the private spaces of their home. That’s what I believe in, and if the Conservatives or any other party talks about that, I will be one to stand up and say ‘I agree with that’.... [The UK government should only] work with individuals that ... on the whole subscribe to [those] core values of Britishness and Western society.³⁷

The willingness of many Conservative MPs to accept the argument that New Labour knowingly or out of a misplaced sense of cultural sensitivity engaged with ‘non-violent extremists’ – who differ from terrorists not in their ultimate political ends but only in the means that are seen as acceptable – is likely to cause problems for Prevent. It leaves government unable to engage with a wide variety of partners, many of whom actually agree with much of what the coalition is trying to do. With so many labelled as ‘extremists’ or fronts for a variety of radical Islamic parties, the government is likely to struggle to find partners who can target initiatives in the way the new strategy suggests.

Can Prevent Ever Be Made to Work?

Beyond these flaws, there are other reasons to doubt the ability of the coalition’s Prevent strategy to avoid the pitfalls into which its predecessor fell. It is important to stress that Prevent is not the same as ‘Pursue’, the aspect of the UK’s counter-terror strategy dedicated to finding and jailing criminals. The gathering of information on terrorist suspects has been

and will remain beyond Prevent's remit. It still is a social project with the aim of shaping the opinions of ordinary people within the UK. Specifically, its stated goal is still to reduce the appeal of extreme ideas and opinions within Britain by 'countering extremist ideology' and promoting integration. For that reason, it is hard to see how it *can* be separated from community cohesion policy – especially at the local level, given local authorities are unlikely to be able to separate their activities into two.

This hints at what is really the most striking thing about the new strategy: despite the new report's acceptance of most of the criticisms of New Labour's Prevent strategy, it suffers from many of the same tensions. For example, it tries to distance itself from New Labour's efforts to 'promote a mainstream form of Islam', but still promises to 'support the efforts' of theologians in challenging extreme ideas.³⁸ It confirms that Prevent should not be used as a way of 'spying' on Muslims, and can be credited for calling for greater transparency in the way that local police forces act, but it still leaves open the possibility of gathering information through Prevent.³⁹ The new strategy accepts the criticisms of the old, but treats them as minor flaws that can be ironed out with small adjustments. Yet these continuing tensions suggest a problem at the heart of Prevent.

This leaves an interesting question. Does Prevent actually need to exist? No one doubts that steps need to be taken to ensure that anyone planning political violence is stopped and potentially jailed, but this is not what Prevent is designed to do. That is the place for Pursue – which could and perhaps should have responsibility for, say, any measures taken to ensure that extremists are kept away from university campuses. Similarly, few would argue against the idea of government having some role in supporting vulnerable or disaffected young people or providing assistance to those who support integration and who argue against extremists seeking to turn social groups against one another. But that kind of support could easily be incorporated into community cohesion policy. And if those steps were taken, would there be a role for Prevent left over?

¹ Stratton, Allegra (2011). 'Are we there yet? Nick Clegg and David Cameron agree to disagree' in *The Guardian*, June 1, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2011/jun/01/nick-clegg-david-cameron-disagree>. Osborne, Peter (2011). 'Where's the divide?' in *The Spectator*, January 29, <http://www.spectator.co.uk/essays/6650288/whereandx2019s-the-divide.thtml>.

² HM Government (2011). *Prevent Strategy*. London: The Stationery Office.

³ This point is also made in Nawaz, Maajid (2011). 'Confused, flawed, but a step in the right direction' in *The Times*, June 6.

⁴ HM Government, *Prevent Strategy*, pp.44 and 26.

⁵ For details of this project see:

<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/ethnicity/projects/muslimparticipation/>.

⁶ Kundnani, Arun (2009). *Spooked: How Not To Prevent Violent Extremism*. London: Institute of Race Relations, pp.13–14.

⁷ Birt, Yahya (2009). 'Promoting Virulent Envy? Reconsidering the UK's Terrorist Prevention Strategy' in *Royal United Services Institute Journal* 154, no. 4, pp. 52–58.

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- ⁸ Birt, Yahya (2011). 'Governing Muslims After 9/11' in *Thinking Through Islamophobia: Global Perspectives*, S. Sayyid and Abdoolkarim Vakil (eds.). New York: C Hurst & Co, pp. 117-128. Mcghee, Derek (2008). *The End of Multiculturalism? Terrorism, Integration and Human Rights*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- ⁹ Husband, Charles, and Alam, Yunis (2011). *Social Cohesion and Counter-Terrorism: A Policy Contradiction?* Bristol: Policy Press.
- ¹⁰ Kazi, Tehmina (2010). 'How Prevent undermined cohesion' in *The Guardian: Comment is Free*, July 16, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/belief/2010/jul/16/prevent-cohesion-communities-islam>. Thomas, Paul (2010). 'Failed and Friendless: The UK's "Preventing Violent Extremism" Programme' in *The British Journal of Politics & International Relations* 12, no. 3, pp.442-458.
- ¹¹ Thomas, Paul. 'Failed and Friendless'.
- ¹² In Leicester, for example, Prevent was rebranded 'Mainstreaming Muslims', while in Bristol Prevent work was carried out under the heading 'Building the Bridge'.
- ¹³ Kundnani. *Spooked*, p.15.
- ¹⁴ Communities and Local Government Committee (2010). *Preventing Violent Extremism: Sixth Report of Session 2009–10*. London: House of Commons, p.3.
- ¹⁵ Kundnani. *Spooked*, pp.28–29.
- ¹⁶ A councillor quoted in Husband and Alam. *Social Cohesion and Counter-Terrorism*, p.146.
- ¹⁷ Birmingham City Council (2010). *Project Champion: Scrutiny Review into ANPR and CCTV Cameras*. Birmingham: Birmingham City Council, p.7.
- ¹⁸ Thornton, Sara (2010). *Project Champion Review*. Kidlington: Thames Valley Police, p.47.
- ¹⁹ HM Government. *Prevent Strategy*, p.30.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.27.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p.25.
- ²² Department for Communities and Local Government (2007). *Preventing Violent Extremism: Winning Hearts and Minds*. Wetherby: Communities and Local Government Publications, pp.9–10.
- ²³ Lewis, Philip (2007). *Young, British and Muslim*. London: Continuum, p.27.
- ²⁴ See Brown, Katherine E. (2008). 'The Promise and Perils of Women's Participation in UK Mosques: The Impact of Securitisation Agendas on Identity, Gender and Community' in *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 10, p.482.
- ²⁵ See Parliament, (2009). House of Commons daily debates, February 26, <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmhansrd/cm090226/text/90226w0033.htm>.
- ²⁶ The Taxpayers' Alliance, (2009). *Council Spending Uncovered II: No. 5: The Prevent Strategy*. London: The Taxpayers' Alliance, p.2, <http://www.taxpayersalliance.com/prevent.pdf>.
- ²⁷ The Centre for Social Cohesion (2010). *Radical Islam on UK Campuses: A Comprehensive List of Extremist Speakers at UK Universities*. London: The Centre for Social Cohesion. Glee, Anthony, and Pope, Chris (2005). *When Students Turn to Terror: Terrorist and Extremist Activity on British Campuses*. London: Social Affairs Unit.
- ²⁸ See Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (2007). *Promoting Good Campus Relations, Fostering Shared Values and Preventing Violent Extremism in Universities and Higher Education Colleges*. London: Department for Business Innovation and Skills.

²⁹ HM Government. *Prevent Strategy*, p.9.

³⁰ Maher, Shiraz, and Frampton, Martyn (2009). *Choosing our Friends Wisely: Criteria for Engagement with Muslim Groups*. London: Policy Exchange. Quilliam Foundation (2010). *Preventing Terrorism: Where Next for Britain?* London: Quilliam Foundation, <http://www.scribd.com/doc/34834977/Secret-Quilliam-Memo-to-government>. See also Bright, Martin (2006). *When Progressives Treat with Reactionaries: The British State's Flirtation with Radical Islamism*. London: Policy Exchange.

³¹ Cameron, David (2011). 'PM's speech at Munich Security Conference' in The Official Site of the British Prime Minister's Office, <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/pms-speech-at-munich-security-conference/>.

³² HM Government. *Prevent Strategy*, p.35.

³³ Maher and Frampton. *Choosing our Friends Wisely*, pp.32–33. Anyone with doubts about the Radical Middle Way can listen to the events and speeches hosted by the organisation, almost all of which are recorded and put on their website: <http://www.radicalmiddleway.org/events>.

³⁴ McLoughlin, Seán (2005). 'The State, New Muslim Leaderships and Islam as a Resource for Public Engagement in Britain' in *European Muslims and the Secular State*, Jocelyne Cesari and Seán McLoughlin (eds.). Aldershot: Ashgate, p.63.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.62–65.

³⁶ The Salafi movement actually emerged out of Egyptian modernist Islam, and though there are certainly literalist and militant Salafis, there are liberals too. See Abou El Fadl, Khaled (2007). *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists*. San Francisco: Harper.

³⁷ Interview conducted for the 'Muslim Participation in Contemporary Governance' project, March 31, 2011.

³⁸ HM Government. *Prevent Strategy*, p.52.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.32.