Prevent: from ‘hearts and minds’ to ‘muscular liberalism’
Therese O’Toole

When Prevent was publicly launched in 2007 under the New Labour government, it was developed as a community engagement ‘hearts and minds’ approach that sought to partner and engage with Muslim communities and organisations to combat violent extremism.1

That approach was much criticised: for its vague objectives and its overlap with community cohesion, which, it was argued, undermined and securitised community cohesion.2 There was, furthermore, widespread suspicion among many Muslim organisations – the prospective partners of Prevent – that Prevent was essentially a spying programme.3 As research from the Muslim Participation in Contemporary Governance project showed, notwithstanding these problems, due to the leeway that local authorities had in interpreting and implementing Prevent, in some places local actors used Prevent to develop mechanisms for engagement between local authorities and Muslim community and civil society organisations,4 sometimes creating new political opportunity structures for the inclusion of Muslim voices in local decision-making across a broad range of issues.5

Prevent since 2011 is increasingly expansive, pre-emptive, centralised, top-down and punitive

By contrast, the strategy that has been developed since 2011 by the Coalition government, and since 2015 by the Conservative government, is an increasingly expansive, pre-emptive, centralised, top-down and punitive approach, which seeks to mobilise front-line personnel in key public sector institutions to spot and report signs of extremism, based on a broad notion of extremism, with few and limited mechanisms for engagement with Muslim communities and organisations.

What has changed?

The 2011 Prevent strategy
The revised Prevent strategy announced by the Coalition in 2011 marked some key changes to Prevent relative to the approach of New Labour. It included: a separation between Prevent and community cohesion; a focus ‘on all forms of terrorism’;6 reduced, and more tightly and centrally controlled, funding; and in relation to tackling ‘the ideological challenge of terrorism’ a focus not just on ‘vulnerable individuals’ who might be drawn into terrorism, but on working with ‘sectors and institutions’ – in effect placing responsibility on front-line staff in education, health, charities and criminal justice to become actively involved in tackling radicalisation – such that in the ominous words of the Prevent strategy ‘there will be no ungoverned spaces’.7 The new strategy, furthermore, made clear that pragmatic engagement with Islamist ‘extremists’ – albeit non-violent – who do not adhere to core British values would not be permitted, in keeping with Cameron’s ‘muscular liberalism’ speech to the Munich security conference in February 2011.8 It is noteworthy that, at this stage, government signalled its unwillingness to change the law to implement the aims of Prevent.8

Prevent after TERFOR
That position changed in the wake of the murder of Lee Rigby in May 2013. The report of the Task Force on Tackling Radicalisation and Extremism (TERFOR) of 4th December 2013 signalled a hardening of the ‘muscular liberal’ rhetoric of the 2011 Prevent
strategy and a tightening up of implementation at the local level – including the announcement that government would introduce legal requirements for local authorities in priority areas to deliver Prevent and the Channel programme.\(^9\)

The Counter Terrorism and Security Act 2015

The passing of the Counter Terrorism and Security Act 2015 by the Conservative government, strengthened the focus of Prevent on non-violent extremism, making the duty to monitor Muslims for, broadly conceived, signs of radicalisation statutorily enforceable across a very wide range of public sector institutions – including Local Authorities, in the words of the Home Office, to “increase the consistency of its delivery across England, Wales and Scotland”. The Act also increased the powers of the police and extended the use of Terrorism Prevention and Investigations Measures (TPIMs).

2015 Extremism Bill

The Extremism Bill, proposed in the 2015 Queen’s speech, goes even further, seeking to ‘strengthen government and law enforcement powers to stop extremists promoting views and behaviour that undermine British values’, to create powers ‘to deal with extremism that falls below the thresholds in counter-terrorism legislation’.\(^10\) It included proposals for: Banning Orders for extremist organisations which seek to undermine democracy or use hate speech in public places; ‘Extremism Disruption Orders’ (the so-called ‘extremism ASBOs’) which are court orders to limit harmful activities of extremist individuals (where ‘harmful’ includes a risk of public disorder, harassment, alarm or distress or a “threat to the functioning of democracy”); Closure Orders granting new powers to close premises, including mosques, where extremists seek to influence others; Broadcasting Bans to censor extremist content on mainstream and social media; and Employment Checks to prevent extremists from working with children.

A ‘muscular liberal’ approach

These changes have a number of significant implications.

1. Prevent has become conceptually expansive

Under New Labour, Toby Archer argues, an increasingly dominant counter-terrorism agenda laid the basis for ‘the policy exchange of fears and beliefs’ across a range of governance domains, creating ‘a patchwork of insecurities’ and a generalised ‘politics of unease’ around Muslims in British society.\(^11\) This ‘politics of unease’ is intensified by the current counter-extremism agenda’s implementation across an ever wider range of policy domains, underpinned by a conceptually expansive concern with tackling ‘extremism’ generally, rather than violent extremism. This includes mobilising public sector personnel in schools, colleges and the NHS to be vigilant in spotting signs of increased religiosity, religious or socially conservative views or a failure to comply with ‘British values’.\(^12\) As a leading terrorism expert, Richard Jackson, has argued, contemporary counter-terrorism approaches are increasingly premised on the view ‘that we cannot know who, when, where, why and how terrorists might strike and that terrorists are sophisticated, adaptive, and always creatively evolving their tactics’, and that there are no clear signs of terror to be identified. Consequently, the focus is on ‘pre-crime’, ‘risky citizens’ and ‘efforts to control words and images considered to be capably of infection’. This enlarged focus, however, is a manifestation not of an evidence-based understanding of the threat of terrorism – but its opposite. It is, he suggests, a response that is preoccupied by ‘symptoms’ and ‘signs of future threat’, rather than ‘the deeper roots or causes of terrorism’, and an indication of a crisis in knowledge and understanding in counter-terrorism circles.\(^13\) In particular, the government’s emphasis on the ideological causes of terrorism has been criticised by many for its insufficient engagement with evidence on the causes of radicalisation.\(^14\)

2. Prevent has become operationally expansive

In making Prevent a legal duty on public sector institutions, the Counter Terrorism and Security Act 2015 entails a significant operational expansion of Prevent, facilitated by the rolling out of Prevent training workshops and modules that frontline personnel are required to undertake. In this way, the everyday practices of public sector workers are being reorganised to enable them to identify and report on signs of radicalisation. Indeed, much of the funding that is being put in to Prevent at present is largely being expended
on Prevent coordinators and WRAP training — rather than, as was the case under New Labour, on community engagement projects. This training offers, however, a decontextualized reading of radicalisation — it presents radicalisation as symptoms without causes — beyond the psychological vulnerability of individuals, which, as Leda Blackwood’s article for Public Spirit argues, is based on a poor understanding of the psychological bases for radicalisation. It requires frontline personnel to be vigilant for signs of religiosity — although a leaked MI5 report on the profiles of those who have engaged in jihadi violence found that religiosity is not a particularly strong feature of their biographies. Thus, public sector workers are being asked to interpret signs of radicalisation, based on cursory training that is itself based on a weak and contested understanding of radicalisation. This has had some disturbing consequences. As Jahanzaib Hangir Mohammed’s article for Public Spirit points out, a significant number of children — 918 — have been referred to the Government’s Channel programme in the last three years: 84 of these were under the age of 12 and one was as young as three. Recently, a Staffordshire University student studying radicalisation as part of his degree programme was referred to a Prevent officer by a university official, who had apparently received ‘a few hours training in December 2013’, with the consequence that the student has now withdrawn from his course. The university issued an apology, whilst complaining that Prevent guidance “contains insufficient detail to provide clear practical direction in an environment such as the university’s”.

3. Prevent has become highly pre-emptive

The conceptual expansion of Prevent has entailed a pre-emptive focus on ‘pre-crime’ and on tackling ‘entryism’ by extremists. The Counter-Extremism Strategy recently announced by the Home Office alighted on the problem of extremists entering public sector institutions — citing the conclusions of the Clarke Report on the Trojan Horse affair in Birmingham as evidence of the threat of entryism. One outcome of this are the three hearings currently underway, initiated by the Department for Education, through the National Centre for Teaching and Leadership, which seek to permanently disbar former teachers from the schools at the heart of the Trojan Horse affair from teaching in future. Yet, as reports on the Trojan Horse affair concede, there was no evidence of radicalisation taking place in the schools that were implicated in the affair. Furthermore, the prosecuting counsel in the current hearings recently argued that these cases are “not about an evil plot to indoctrinate young children in extremist ideology or anything like it”, rather they are “about the failure to respect diversity” — begging the question of why they are being used both to define and justify the problem of extremism as well as the proposed strategy to contain it.

4. Prevent has become highly centralised

Under New Labour, there was significant variation in the delivery of Prevent, which enabled local actors to interpret Prevent according to local circumstances, and in some areas to achieve the input of Muslim communities into the policing of Prevent. Such local creativity and adaptation are now being curtailed. Local authorities are under a legal duty to implement Prevent, with funding for Prevent activities controlled by the Home Office. Furthermore, as Bharath Ganesh’s article for Public Spirit points out, the delivery of Prevent is now significantly determined by Counter-Terrorism Local Profiles, which identify the risks that frontline personnel are to look out for: yet these profiles are restricted documents that are not available to the public, they are created by senior Counter Terrorism police, and sharing these with Prevent leads in Local Authorities, or even local elected Police Commissioners, is optional. As Ganesh’s analysis shows, whilst local actors are increasingly mobilised to deliver Prevent, this is not accompanied by mechanisms for accountability or transparency of Prevent to those actors (and see Maria Norris’ article for Public Spirit on the lack of transparency in relation to funding).

5. Prevent has entailed little effective engagement with Muslims

These developments have all been taking place alongside what former Conservative Minister Baroness Sayeeda Warsi has described as a policy of ‘disengagement’ with Muslims ‘over the last six or seven years’. Where Prevent previously released funding for community engagement projects, aimed at increasing civic capacity and leadership among Muslim community organisations, funding is now directed largely at Prevent training. Consequently, there are
few mechanisms for feedback, accountability, or assessing and understanding the impact of Prevent on institutions or Muslim communities. This looks set to intensify under the new proposals. E.g. the proposed Closure Orders allow government to close mosques where there are extremists, rather than to work with mosques to enable them to challenge extremists.

Recently, there have been some nudges towards greater engagement with Muslims. In his foreword to the October 2015 Counter-Extremism strategy, Cameron stated that government would ‘work in partnership’ with faith communities ‘to isolate extremists from everyone else – and to stop them from driving a wedge between British Muslims and the rest of our society’. Worryingly, this seems to suggest that government regards British Muslims as a whole as prone to extremist, anti-British values.

To take such engagement forward, government has set up a ‘Community Engagement Forum’ comprising 30 faith representatives that met for the first time on 13th October. As previous experience of government-created Muslim community engagement forums, such as the National Muslim Women’s Advisory Group that was established by New Labour, suggests, such forums are inadequate mechanisms for feedback and accountability, since their reach into Muslim communities is limited. Meaningful engagement requires more extensive and frequent participatory mechanisms at national and local levels. The government’s forum furthermore includes advocates and supporters of its strategy – such as Quilliam. Without including a range of critical voices, its ability to speak frankly to government about the impact and implications of Prevent is likely to be weak. The government’s recently announced £5million funding for grass roots organisations to tackle extremism is similarly engaged with those who accept, rather than offer critical feedback to, its narrative.

The current direction of travel for Prevent and the government’s increasing emphasis on and development of a battery of powers to combat extremism exemplify the tensions inherent in Cameron’s concept of ‘muscular liberalism’, where defence of ‘British values’ – democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and belief – is being realised by ever expanding and restrictive measures (e.g. Theresa May’s surveillance bill), that target and marginalise Muslims. So far, these are being developed in a policy climate of acceptance of the government’s construction of the problem of extremism, with little consideration of its implications for either Muslim civic inclusion or civil society more broadly.

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References


7 Home Office (2011) Prevent, p. 6. This echoes the analysis put forward by Quilliam in its confidential briefing paper to the OSCT in 2010, which argued that universities had become ‘ungoverned spaces’ in which the Prevent programme has had little impact (2010: 32). Quilliam (2010) Preventing Terrorism: where next for Britain? The paper also detailed a number of organisations and individuals that it regarded as holding extremist views, and with whom government ought not to engage. Many of the recommendations of Quilliam’s report are evident in the developing strategy since 2010. See: http://www.scribd.com/doc/34834977/Secret-Memo-to-government


15 Approximately 300,000 workers have undergone Prevent training according to Theresa May: 18th June 2015: We Must Work Together to Defeat Terrorism: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/home-secretary-we-must-work-together-to-defeat-terrorism


17 The cases against the teachers rely significantly on the conclusions of the Clarke Report, and these have been a basis for the measures that are being developed in the government’s counter-extremism strategy. These hearings provide the first opportunity for legal testing of the assumptions and claims contained within the Clarke report.


19 In 2009-10, Prevent funding totalled £93m. Once the Coalition’s funding plans became effective, annual funding reduced to £36m-£40m a year, with £5m allocated to local authorities across the 30 priority areas, with most of this going to fund Prevent officers within local authorities.


21 Government has been reticent about releasing the details about the membership of the Community Engagement Forum – with two FOI requests on this question yet to be answered. The Liberal Democrat MP, Greg Mulhol-land, recently raised a question in Parliament about its membership, the written response from John Hayes, the Home Office Minister for Security, stated: “Attendance at
forum meetings will rotate to allow ministers to hear directly from a wide range of individuals and groups taking a leading role in challenging extremism in our communities.” This seems to suggest that membership is focused on those who are aligned with the agenda, rather than inclusive of those with a more critical perspective. An unofficial list of the Forum members is available here.