

# The Tories can't let naive bureaucrats take back control of counter-terror strategy

The Prevent Review signposts a more focused, vigorous and honest way forward that deserves ongoing support

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William Shawcross's independent review of the counter-terrorism Prevent strategy has been a very long time coming. First announced way back in January 2019 by the then security minister, Ben Wallace, Prime Minister Theresa May still had six months remaining in office. The previous review of Prevent had been published in 2011.

After a false start under Lord Carlile (who anti-Prevent activists vigorously opposed) in January 2021, the baton passed to Shawcross. His report, delivered to the Home Secretary in April 2022, has now been published after a series of unedifying Whitehall spats.

Shawcross has eventually served a dish which contains plenty of meat, and proposals which, if fully acted upon, can improve a policy that had lost its sense of direction. The purpose of Prevent is simple – to stop people becoming terrorists. Yet as Shawcross sets out, that mission had become increasingly blurred, with the language of safeguarding and care work becoming ever more prominent. Over time, it all got a bit too mushy.

Today the largest number of referrals are not of would-be Islamist or far-Right terrorists, but those described by the Home Office as having “vulnerability present but no CT (counter-terrorism) risk”. Unless we believe the country is genuinely threatened by “vulnerable” people, this is silly – Prevent is doing the heavy lifting for underfunded community mental health services. Changing the language – for example from vulnerability to susceptibility – is the first step to developing a renewed sense of purpose and focus.

An important aspect of the Prevent review is that Shawcross understands the relevance of ideology, and the need to counter bad ideas. Terrorist activity is fuelled by ideology, and if we are to reduce the appeal of terrorism, extremist ideas will need to be challenged.

This is where some in the public sector begin to come over all squeamish, and where the resistance of the Whitehall Blob has in time been most effective. For example, Shawcross found a government report which noted among motivations for those who travelled to Syria the desire to live under a caliphate and to undertake violent jihad. Yet the same report concluded that religion was not a significant factor motivating travel. Go figure.

Shawcross also identifies that grievance cannot be separated from terrorism – terrorists are angry people, immersed in a succession of complaints about personal status, a cause, or both. These grievances change over time (who cites the 2003 invasion of Iraq as a cause today?) but the violence continues, whether we have an interventionist foreign policy or not.

Prevent reports and training material were found to be narrow in their scope when considering Islamist extremism, largely focused upon Al-Qaeda or Islamic

State. With the extreme Right the exact opposite process occurred, the focus readily moving away from organisations to ideology.

This has to change. Prevent must hold all ideologies to the same standard and should address ideologies proportionately to the threat they pose. According to the Head of MI5, three quarters of their counter-terrorism caseload involves Islamist actors. Prevent cannot afford to meander from that reality.

Prevent has previously been described as the most controversial government policy most people have never heard of. Opposing it is a die-in-a-ditch issue for some Muslim representative organisations, which have worked tirelessly to ensure that their criticisms dominate debate in the public sector and academia.

In the absence of other voices, they have largely been winning. Ministers, Home Office officials, the police and the security services need to better communicate the nature of the terrorist threat in Britain, as part of a wider process of speaking up for Prevent. European organisations, such as Germany's Office for the Protection of the Constitution, do this far better. Realism never hurt anyone. It is time to drown out Prevent's critics with hard

facts. If not, what is the point of either the review, or the policy?

The biggest challenge, however, is probably yet to come. The process for the implementation of Shawcross's proposals and their future monitoring is crucial. Unless a minister's hand is on the tiller, and stays there, the bureaucrats are likely to regain control. For all its delay and disagreement, the Prevent Review signposts a more focused, vigorous and honest counter-terrorism strategy. It deserves ongoing support.

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