

## **These are my very rough notes on...**

### **The Shawcross Report: Independent Review of the Prevent Programme**

*For some reason I failed to turn these notes into a blog article, so I make them available in this form.*

#### **Big Picture**

- [1] The Shawcross report reveals that the Prevent programme, rather than being targeted primarily at preventing terrorism, has been targeted primarily at people who hold Incorrect opinions. Promoting Brexit has in some cases been labelled as Extremism.
- [2] Mainstream politicians and popular social commentators who hold traditional socially conservative views have also been labelled as Extremists. This is not surprising as the likes of Hope Not Hate have been involved in devising the “training” of Prevent officers.
- [3] Among others, so-called Incels have been addressed by Prevent in large numbers despite being neither ideological nor linked to terrorism. Shawcross does a good job of repudiating this false categorisation (despite being otherwise aligned with the feminist narrative on Incels).
- [4] The report identifies that the Prevent programme, intended to prevent extremism-terrorism, is actually promoting it in some cases (with specific examples), and is also facilitating targeting of named individuals with traditional conservative views.
- [5] Shawcross does not address the social mechanisms whereby this skew in focus of Prevent has arisen. However, it seems likely that a large part of this is due to the fact that people referring “suspects” to the programme are often teachers, university staff, social workers and other local authority staff. One probably needs to look no further for the origin of the political (dare I say, ideological) skew.

Nor am I reassured that, quoting a Headteacher: “Prevent had become “part of the ethos” of what they did as a school and empowered children to confidently raise issues”. Especially if that means things such as the 2017 incident in which, “two young brothers were interviewed by police officers after one had told his teacher that they had been bought a toy gun as a present”. And whilst the Batley school protests show that an individual teacher can be on the receiving end of injustice, that incident illustrates that such teachers will get scant support from their school or from politicians for making a stand for free speech or attempting to face down religiously based intolerance. Shawcross recognises this.

#### **Quotes from Shawcross**

Since this Independent Review of Prevent was commissioned in 2019, six terrorist attacks have blighted our nation. These took place at Fishmongers’ Hall (November 2019), Whitemoor Prison (January 2020), Streatham (February 2020), Reading (June 2020), Southend (October 2021), and Liverpool (November 2021). In addition, shortly before this report was completed, a British citizen held Jewish civilians hostage at a synagogue in Texas (January 2022). All these attacks were Islamist in nature.

Prevent must address all extremist ideologies proportionately according to the threat each represents. However, my research shows that the present boundaries around what is termed by Prevent as extremist Islamist ideology are drawn too narrowly while the boundaries

around the ideology of the Extreme Right-Wing are too broad. This does not allow Prevent to reflect accurately, and deal effectively with, the lethal risks we actually face.

One of the most constant and strident accusations is that Prevent unfairly targets Muslims living here. This is simply not the case.

It is also vital to acknowledge that all too often those who commit terrorist acts in this country have been previously referred to Prevent. This review seeks to address why Prevent apparently failed to understand the danger in these cases and how such failures might be avoided in the future.

Prevent is a crucial pillar of the UK's counter-terrorism architecture, yet it has increasingly come to be seen as synonymous with safeguarding – i.e., an emphasis on protecting those referred into Prevent from harm and addressing their personal vulnerabilities. ... Prevent too often bestows a status of victimhood on all who come into contact with it, confusing practitioners and officials as to Prevent's fundamental purpose.

Prevent has a double standard when dealing with the Extreme Right-Wing and Islamism. Prevent takes an expansive approach to the Extreme Right-Wing, capturing a variety of influences that, at times, has been so broad it has included mildly controversial or provocative forms of mainstream, right-wing leaning commentary that have no meaningful connection to terrorism or radicalisation.

*Re: Prevent-funded civil society organisations (CSOs):* Funding too often goes towards generic projects dealing with community cohesion and hate crime, and few CSOs could be seen publicly to contest extremist discourse. Of particular concern, I discovered that some CSOs have promoted extremist narratives, including statements that appear sympathetic to the Taliban. As a core principle, the government must cease to engage with or fund those aligned with extremism.

At present, 80% of the Counter Terrorism Police network's live investigations are Islamist while 10% are Extreme Right-Wing. The fact that only 22% of Prevent referrals for the year 2020-21 concerned Islamism suggests a loss of focus and failure to identify warning signs. This misalignment has been partly driven by a sharp uptick of 'Mixed, Unclear, or Unstable' (MUU)\* referrals, which constituted **over half of Prevent referrals** for the year 2020-21.

*\*What constitutes MUU is described below – Incels feature prominently.*

The great increase in MUU Prevent referrals is not replicated in any other data set, published or otherwise. **I am not aware of any recognised terrorist attacks in the UK perpetrated by assailants who could be described as falling within the MUU category.** (Shawcross's emphasis)

**It is worth restating that Islamist terrorism is currently the largest terrorist threat facing the United Kingdom.** (Shawcross's emphasis)

Prevent must be consistent in the thresholds that it applies across ideologies to ensure a proportionate and effective response. My examination of the analysis products produced by Prevent's Research Information and Communications Unit (RICU) over the past four years has shown this not to be the case.

While the products related to Islamist terrorism focus on the most serious material relating to violent Islamist ideology, mostly Islamic State and al-Qa'ida, much of the material covering Extreme Right-Wing falls well below the threshold for even non-violent extremism.

This material tends to deal with broader themes and often covers content that relates to narratives on social media. These products not only covered non-violent far right extremism, but also examples of centre-right debate, populism, and controversial or distasteful forms of right-leaning commentary and intolerance. Some of this material falls well short of the extremism threshold altogether.

I saw one RICU analysis product from 2020 on Right-Wing terrorist and extremist activity online which referenced books by mainstream British conservative commentators as “key cultural nationalist ideological texts”. The same document listed “key texts” for white nationalists as including historic works of the Western philosophic and literary canon.

A RICU analysis product from 2019, which discussed a cohort of social media users it termed “Actively Patriotic and Proud”, listed a prominent Conservative politician and former member of the government as being among figures “associated with far-right sympathetic audiences, and Brexit”.

Another RICU product about far-right radicalisation online named a highly popular American podcast host, claiming that this individual had been described as a gateway to the far right. It was suggested that he had hosted a disproportionate number of influencers from the “far right of the political spectrum,” although no examples were provided.

I do not consider the above to be appropriate subjects for RICU analysis or Prevent’s attention, particularly as little care was made to clarify that these mainstream conservatives should not actually be considered part of the far right themselves.

I have seen nothing to suggest that RICU has formally adopted an official policy of applying radically different standards to different ideologies. In practice, however, the bar for what RICU includes on Islamism looks to be relatively high, whereas the bar for what is included on Extreme Right-Wing is comparably low.

The issue of disparity in approach goes beyond that delivered to intervention providers, and appears to be both a qualitative and quantitative issue. For example, one Prevent Education Officer course delivered one workshop a week for the three main Prevent referral categories: Islamist, Extreme Right-Wing and Mixed Unstable and Unclear (MUU). The material on Islamist terrorism focused only on Salafi jihadist recruitment for overseas groups, whereas the resources for the MUU workshop focused on Incels, and the third-party material on the Extreme Right-Wing included pro-Brexit and centre right commentators. These are clearly not like-for-like comparisons, are unhelpful, and should not be made.

*This para refers to a footnote which reveals that this “Prevent Education Officer course” was provided by Hope Not Hate. This para is based on the 2020 Hope Not Hate report [State of Hate 2020: Far Right Terror Goes Global](#). The course profiled The Brexit Party, Leave.EU and Turning Point UK under the section titled ‘The Populist Radical Right’. This is all the evidence you need that Prevent has been hi-jacked by the hard left. In an essay titled ‘Brexit, Mainstreaming and the new post-organisation Far Right’, it states the following: “Just as in 1978, when Margaret Thatcher’s claim that British people feared being “swamped” pulled the rug from under the NF [National Front], the normalisation and mainstreaming of*

*Islamophobia may be undermining support for the organised anti-Muslim far right. Why face all the social consequences of supporting Tommy Robinson [written 'Lennon'] when one can vote for a Prime Minister that calls Muslim women letterboxes or read columns by Rod Liddle, Melanie Philips and Douglas Murray that spread negative views about Islam and Muslims via the pages of mainstream publications? Maybe one reason the traditional far right is so small right now is because it is simply not needed."*

It is noticeable that RICU's explanation of the MUU classification makes repeated and extensive reference to the misogynistic Incel online subculture, which is included in the Unclear strand of MUU.

...the country's deputy senior national co-ordinator for counterterrorism policy has said that Incel is not a terrorist ideology. I agree. (Shawcross speaking).

Incel violence against women could well be classified as a form of hate crime. Such individuals may also be driven toward suicide and self-harm due to psychological distress rather than violence against others. Recent recommendations by the Law Commission to protect women (and other minority groups) tackles Incel-related incitement through hate crime legislation, underscoring the position that the Incel phenomenon is not currently a counter-terrorism matter.

*My (WC) observations: (i) no evidence is presented in this report that "Incel violence against women" is significant, or even exists. The report may be using this expression as is now current in our culture, i.e., meaning verbal criticisms of women; (ii) women are not a minority group (bit of a howler that).*

I saw training slides describing the Antifa movement as generally "individuals and groups united by opposition to racism and the far right". I do not consider that to be a politically neutral framing and was persuaded by the Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats research that instead described Antifa as being comprised of "anarchists; anarcho-communists; left-libertarians; and radical socialists".

The number of civil society organisations (CSOs) that Prevent provides funding for varies year-on-year, from around 70 to 100....The projects ranged from theatre groups to sporting clubs and education workshops... one CSO was singled out for praise in the call for evidence for "educating primary age children on the dangers of stereotyping and disinformation, and the importance of critical thinking".... I conducted open-source research into a sample of 15 projects. ... I found insufficient evidence that CSOs in this sample were consistently and publicly contesting extremist discourse and rebutting extremist groups....five of the projects were assessed to have a negative impact on the participants' level of support for freedom of speech and expression if it offended others.... I consider this to be a counterproductive outcome of a Prevent-funded project and worthy of serious reflection.