

## Policy Focus: Prevent Inquiry

March 2010

### Background

The Communities and Local Government Committee of the House of Commons is a cross party<sup>1</sup> committee that examines the expenditure, policy and administration of the Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG) and in July 2009 called an inquiry into 'Prevent', the Government's programme for preventing violent extremism. The government's counter-terrorism strategy Contest is multidimensional and contains Prevent as one of its four priorities. Prevent is aimed at the group of people who are not necessarily breaking the law but are vulnerable to recruitment into terrorism networks.

The Committee set out to consider the effectiveness of the 'Prevent' programme under the scope of the CLG to date, and set out questions concerning the Government's analysis, approach and communications regarding violent extremism. Accordingly, this was not an inquiry into the whole of Prevent, let alone the whole of the Contest strategy, but limited to assessing the CLG's remit within Prevent. The CLG is, nevertheless, a key department interfacing with communities and so presents an important gauge of civic engagement with Prevent.

The full report is available here (submissions and oral evidence are also enclosed at the back of the report):

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmcomloc/65/65.pdf>

### What was the response to the inquiry?

Over 70 submissions from the public were made to the inquiry in the Autumn of 2009 – a response that in itself provides a strong clue about the strength and variety of feeling. Five oral evidence sessions were also held. Through these submissions, the Committee effectively engaged in a candid listening exercise that has allowed it to convey some uncomfortable truths about why, as well as how, Prevent is not working well in important areas.

Further details of the Committee, including the terms of reference, submissions and oral evidence can be found via the link below:

[http://www.parliament.uk/parliamentary\\_committees/clg/clgsubpve.cfm](http://www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_committees/clg/clgsubpve.cfm)

### Key observations

- There is a need for a clear national strategy that deals with the specific threat from al-Qaeda-inspired terrorism.
- The single focus on Muslims has stigmatised Muslim communities.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr Phyllis Starkey MP (Chair, Lab), Sir Paul Beresford MP (Con), Mr Clive Betts MP (Lab), John Cummings MP (Lab), Andrew George (Lib Dem), Mr Greg Hands MP (Con), Anne Main MP (Con), Dr John Pugh MP (Lib Dem), Alison Seabeck MP (Lab), Andrew Slaughter MP (Lab), Mr Neil Turner MP (Lab)

- Prevent is contentious and unlikely to be fully accepted in its existing form.
- Despite rebuttals, the allegations of spying retain widespread credibility.
- There has been a pre-occupation with the theological basis of radicalisation, when the evidence seems to indicate that politics, policy and socio-economics may be more important factors in the process.
- There is a sense that Government has sought to engineer a 'moderate' form of Islam, promoting and funding only those groups that conform to this model.

### **Key Recommendations** (among the 27 Conclusions and recommendations)

1. Prevent should be removed from the CLG and placed in the Home Office as a crime prevention strategy.
2. Prevent should clearly focus on violent extremism and not just broadly on 'extremism'.
3. Community cohesion work and work focusing on shared values should be decoupled from the Prevent agenda.
4. Funding for cohesion work in all communities should be increased. Work should be done on a thematic basis and not on a mono-cultural or individual community basis.
5. No organization – unless proscribed – should be excluded from debate and discussions.
6. Work on the level of theology and ideology should be undertaken via academic initiatives and those independent of government.
7. The Channel project should be removed from the Contest strategy and placed within other crime prevention initiatives.
8. There is a need for much more training and support to front line workers such as council staff, police, teachers and youth workers.

Speaking about the report at a press briefing, the Chair of the Committee, Dr Starkey, suggested that the Prevent programme is backfiring in local communities. She said that, *"Much of the positive work undertaken by CLG-to promote better community cohesion and to curb social exclusion - has been tainted by association with the counter-terrorism agenda. Any decision to widen the Prevent programme would only make this problem worse."*

The CLG will now formally respond to the inquiry and the Committee will consider its response in the new Parliamentary session.

### **Quotations from the report:**

"Our inquiry has shown that the current overall approach to Prevent is contentious and unlikely ever to be fully accepted in its existing form by those it is most important to engage." (p. 3)

"We...strongly support the need for a clear national strategy which deals with the specific threat from al-Qaeda-inspired terrorism. However, we question the appropriateness of the Department of Communities and Local Government—a Government department which has responsibility for promoting cohesive communities—taking a leading role in counter-terrorism initiatives. We agree with the majority of our witnesses that Prevent risks undermining positive cross-cultural work on cohesion and capacity building to combat exclusion and alienation in many communities." (p. 3)

“The single focus on Muslims in Prevent has been unhelpful. We conclude that any programme which focuses solely on one section of a community is stigmatising, potentially alienating, and fails to address the fact that that no section of a population exists in isolation from others.” (p. 3)

“...despite rebuttals, the allegations of spying retain widespread credibility within certain sections of the Muslim community. If the Government wants to improve confidence in the Prevent programme, it should commission an independent investigation into the allegations made.” (p. 3)

“...there has been a pre-occupation with the theological basis of radicalisation, when the evidence seems to indicate that politics, policy and socio-economics may be more important factors in the process. Consequently, we suggest that attempts to find solutions and engagement with preventative work should primarily address the political challenges.” (p. 3)

“There is a sense that Government has sought to engineer a ‘moderate’ form of Islam, promoting and funding only those groups which conform to this model.” (p. 4)

“We recommend that the Government take steps to clarify its understanding of the terms ‘violent extremism’, ‘extremism’, and ‘radicalisation’. Holding extreme views is not illegal and Prevent should clearly focus on violent extremism.” (p.34)

“...there is widespread criticism of the Government’s failure to engage with more ‘radical’ voices which do not promote violent extremism. The Government should engage with those who demonstrate a desire to promote greater understanding, cohesion and integration. No organisation—unless proscribed—should be excluded from debate and discussions.” (p. 39)

“The Government should investigate how more independent and academic initiatives that support public and community bodies to resist the ideology and politics of violent extremists and terrorists can be developed. Part of the work of such initiatives should be the challenging of violent extremist networks on the internet, which featured powerfully in the evidence submitted to us.” (p. 43)

“All community cohesion work and work focusing on shared values should be decoupled from the Prevent agenda and brought under CLG’s broader responsibilities for cohesion and integration. Specific cohesion work which is directly aimed at preventing extremism should be addressed through one broad programme encompassing all types of extremism—from al-Qaeda-inspired extremism, to that inspired by the far right— and clearly focused on tackling disadvantage and exclusion, as opposed to being targeted at a single social, cultural or religious group. The Government should learn lessons from the Prevent experience, that any programme which focuses on a single community risks alienating that community, and ignores the fact that no section of a population exists in isolation from others.” (p. 61)

“Funding for cohesion work in all communities should be increased. That work should be done on a thematic basis and not on a mono-cultural or individual community basis. It should be clearly targeted at disadvantaged and excluded groups, many, though not all, of which are likely to be from the Muslim community. Without adequate funding for community cohesion and tackling exclusion, breeding grounds for extremism risk becoming stronger.” (p. 62)