

Prevent and anti-extremism education

PAUL THOMAS and TED CANTLE 26 January 2015

In fact, the removal of the ‘duty to promote community cohesion’ in schools from the UK’s [Ofsted inspection regime](#) sent a very clear signal.



Release Moazzam Begg

demo, Birmingham, 2014. Flickr/Geoff Dexter. Some rights reserved.

We are grateful to David Knowles [for his recent article on Prevent](#) and also to open Democracy for allowing this debate to continue - there hasn't been nearly enough explanation of, or critical discussion around, the content and purpose of Prevent's terrorism prevention work with young people.

In this article, we find some points of agreement but we take issue with some of the assumptions and approaches Knowles outlines and suggest that the direction of policy – apparently to be reaffirmed in [the Government's current consultation](#) – needs to change.

Firstly, we of course all agree that we need to re-double efforts to help young people of all backgrounds develop individual and collective resilience against terrorist actions and ideologies. The key question is obviously how it should be done and what does the evidence about effective policy suggest?

We do agree with David that measuring the success of Prevent – or even knowing what measures to use – is challenging. For instance, is the fact that the Woolwich murder has been the only loss of life in Britain due to Islamist terrorism since 7/7 anything to do with Prevent, or is it rather due to the consistently excellent, traditional police work of detecting plots and prosecuting plotters?

For that reason, we cannot accept David's concluding statement that '*without the Prevent programme, the number of terrorist incidents in the UK would have been much larger*', as that is simply not provable and risks sounding self-serving. Potentially, the Channel programme of tailored interventions for individuals viewed as 'at risk of radicalisation' might provide the strongest evidence of Prevent intervention preventing terrorism, but a [recent report highlights](#) that the two internal government reviews to date of Channel have not been published and '*a publicly available slideshow produced by the Home Office in 2010 noted that "hard evidence of intervention projects' capability not yet established,"*'.

David quotes the example consistently used to justify Channel interventions, the fact that 7/7 bomber Hasib Hussain drew graffiti in praise of the 9/11 attacks on his school books. The problem with claiming the absence of Prevent intervention as causal to his later actions is the lack of a control group – we simply don't know how many other young people were also drawing such graffiti (or pro-fascism or pro-IRA graffiti) on their school books and then going on to live law-abiding lives.

As [Arun Kundnani points out](#), many of the leading international academic experts on terrorism now question the very notion of 'radicalisation' and policies based on preventing it. That is not because the terrorist threat isn't real: but they do question the assumptions and impacts of policies implemented on the basis of the 'radicalisation' theory.

Here, the concept of 'do no harm' is relevant and we have previously argued that Prevent's assumptions, approach and overwhelming focus on young Muslims are both ineffective and counter-productive. Our argument is based as much on what Prevent is NOT doing or encouraging as much as on a critique of what it is doing.

Some of the Prevent work David outlines, such as addressing the attractions of travelling to fight in Syria is vitally necessary, just as the effective dialogue with Syria aid convoys carried out in areas like West Yorkshire was. What we don't have, though, as part of the Prevent strategy, [as we previously argued](#), is a comprehensive programme of citizenship education for young people that both teaches the skills of and builds support for democratic processes and the equal citizenship that underpins it.

We've advocated the work of [the Think project](#) as a positive example of targeted interventions, while a great recent example of more generalist work is the '[My Country, My Vote](#)' project carried out in Kirklees, West Yorkshire. There, Andrew Mycock of Huddersfield University has worked with Kirklees Council and the Parliament's Education Service to develop youth democracy projects in 4 local high schools. This has led to hundreds of young people debating issues and taking part in votes, with the winning teams meeting their local MPs at the House of Commons.

Such work, as part of re-energised Citizenship Education programmes in all schools, colleges and youth projects provides a positive and non-stigmatising basis for building democratic skills and resilience, and for addressing the identity questions that David rightly highlights as central to the threat of extremism. Such an approach would be less about 'don't be a terrorist' and more about positive enactment of our democratic values. It also embodies the thinking and approach of community cohesion. This positive context would then make more specific interventions, such as around Syria, and use of excellent simulations like 'Act Now', seem less stigmatising and more justifiable.

The arguably negative basis of Prevent's current focus links to questions of who leads and delivers such anti-extremism work with young people. David acknowledges that '*Police teams continue to be the main deliverers of Prevent across the UK*' but we cannot accept that the police lead Prevent because, '*The trouble is, professionals like nurses, doctors, social workers and teachers are still*

frightened to challenge behaviour and are still reticent to report their concerns' – this is factually incorrect and undeserved.

Firstly, the evidence around Child Sexual Exploitation cases in Rochdale and Rotherham showed that youth workers and health professionals raised concerns that were initially ignored by the police and other public bodies. Secondly, other professionals *were* initially involved in the 'Prevent 1' phase of 2007-011 but their roles and autonomy were progressively squeezed out by the police before the local-authority-based Prevent element was removed altogether in the Prevent Review of 2011.

Prevent is now a police-run programme because they and the Home Office wanted it that way whilst government has [lost interest in community cohesion](#).

In fact, the removal of the 'duty to promote community cohesion' in schools from the Ofsted inspection regime sent a very clear signal in this regard (ironically now being reinstated to some degree in the light of the 'Trojan Horse' affair). Teachers have not been asked to deliver such training, and had no resources, professional development, or curriculum time made available. Rather than 'mainstreaming' resilience training, it has become another specialised activity, destined to disappear as soon as the funding runs out or the problems move on – exactly like most other cohesion activities.

Most importantly, a significant element of the concern held by many non-police professionals around Prevent is not that they are 'frightened', but that they simply don't agree with Prevent's assumptions behind this particular approach.

The current proposal to make Prevent implementation a legal duty for all public bodies will mean that schools and other educational institutions have no choice but to welcome Police Prevent teams in because this demonstrates their compliance and avoids 'Trojan Horse'- style censure. But this government approach will not help create genuine 'partnership' within Prevent.

Such genuine partnership was possible at the start of Prevent, but we've argued elsewhere that it was rapidly squeezed out. Integrated anti-extremism partnerships and work with young people at local levels could still be possible but not under the Prevent strategy as it currently is. For such genuine partnership to work, the police need to stand back from their primary management and delivery role of what is supposedly an engagement and education programme and allow more varied approaches to anti-extremism education to develop.

That needs government to re-think Prevent, encourage comprehensive, positive programmes of youth citizenship education, and direct the police to focus on their core role of detecting and prosecuting criminals and terrorists.

Anti-terrorism work has unfortunately moved away from the time-honoured adage that successful 'policing is by consent' and getting – and keeping – the community on-side. From the very start, the Prevent programme was designed around the Muslim community alone, it failed to see the diversity within and its homogenising approach created a 'suspect' community which was constantly under surveillance.

The Coalition Government initially moderated this approach, but as former Minister [Sayeeda Warsi has just recently pointed out](#) real engagement with any Muslim communities has all but ceased. As Warsi points out, the refusal to engage 'makes it appear as if the government is neither listening nor genuine in its intentions. And it provokes a negative response, irrespective of the true motive'.

Warsi also illustrates this point with regard to a recent 'letter out of the blue' from Communities Secretary Eric Pickles, to 1,000 mosques which set Muslims apart 'and where even the most benign of correspondence can become toxic'.

Whilst, we do not necessarily support Warsi's prescription of high level meetings with the Muslim communities, engagement on the ground certainly is essential to build trust. And this will be undermined if only undertaken through resilience training by security services and where other professionals are only asked to survey Muslim young people to help identify potential terrorists.

Furthermore, an almost sole focus on Muslim young people not only builds this sense of 'being apart' but fails to recognise that many young people (and some older groups) are all having difficulty to some degree in coming to terms with change and diversity. For a number of reasons, not least geo-political pressures, Muslim communities are often the focus of concerns, but many other communities also feel that their identity is threatened and this of course includes majority White communities.

Building resilience through anti-extremist education and developing intercultural skills across all groups and through an all-encompassing education, will begin to create a real sense of commonality and belonging, so that: 'we are all in this together'.

About the authors

Paul Thomas is Professor of [Youth and Policy](#) at the University of Huddersfield and author of [Responding to the Threat of Violent Extremism – Failing to Prevent](#).

The Cattle Report in 2001 followed disturbances in a number of English regions. In 2005, Professor Ted Cattle established the [Institute of Community Cohesion \(iCoCo\)](#), the UK's leading authority on community cohesion and intercultural relations. He is the author of [Interculturalism: The New Era of Cohesion and Diversity](#).