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Evidence and Ideology in the Independent Review of Prevent

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Abstract
A key part of the United Kingdom's counter-terrorism framework, the Prevent Strategy is designed to operate 'upstream' to stop people becoming or supporting terrorists. In February 2023 the long-awaited independent review of Prevent reported, evaluating the Strategy against its core objectives. Led by Sir William Shawcross, the report claimed that Prevent's overarching rationale remains good because the UK continues to face a genuine terrorist threat, but lamented its diversion toward safeguarding and its downplaying of Islamist extremism as the purportedly most pressing source of radicalisation within the UK today. To declare the reception to Shawcross' report mixed would be generous, with some observers even demanding that the Government withdraw the review. We share many concerns raised by civil society groups and practitioners, and in this piece argue that the Review is fundamentally flawed because of its partial – in the sense of both limited and biased – engagement with the relevant (and extensive) knowledge base that exists around radicalisation, counter radicalisation, and Prevent. More specifically – and with particular attention to the report's emphasis on 'ideology' – we show: (i) that the report suffers from a selective, and problematic, engagement with relevant academic research that poorly represents established knowledge in this area; (ii) that this selective engagement leads to a questionable, and highly contestable, conceptual framing of the report's core terms and parameters; and, (iii) that this contestable framing has implications for operationalisation of the report's findings. In doing this, the article makes three core contributions in: (i) situating the Shawcross review in relevant historical and policy contexts; (ii) offering original analytical critique of the review's methodological and political assumptions and findings; and, (iii) extending research on the mechanisms of counter-terrorism review via this new – and underexplored – case study.

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Introduction

After considerable delay, legal threats (Taylor, 2023a), and boycotting from potential stakeholders (Grierson, 2021a), the summary report of the Independent Review of Prevent - the UK's counter-radicalisation strategy – was finally published on 8 February 2023. As its

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author, Sir William Shawcross, set out in the report's Foreword, the Review was tasked with ensuring 'that the government's approach to preventing radicalisation and terrorism is as successful as possible' (Shawcross, 2023, p.3). In a little under 200 pages, the Review evaluated Prevent's delivery against its three core objectives: tackling the causes of radicalisation, safeguarding those at risk of radicalisation, and enabling the disengagement and rehabilitation of those already engaging in terrorism. This was followed by a series of principles for strengthening the strategy in toto, and in relation to its operation in specific sectors. In Shawcross' conclusion: 'as a country, we should be proud of Prevent and the proportionate and humane response that it represents...However, the evidence shows that improvements are needed' (ibid, p.155).

To declare the reception to Shawcross' report mixed would be generous. Amnesty International's Racial Justice Director described it as, 'riddled with biased thinking, errors, and plain anti-Muslim prejudice' (Amnesty International, 2023). The prominent human rights organisation, Liberty, which (with Amnesty and others) had boycotted the review, argued the report '...shows that the Government is not committed to engaging meaningfully with Muslim communities but instead targeting them further' (Liberty, 2023). A response co-authored by, 'over 200 civil society organisations, community leaders and academics', went so far as to demand that the government withdraw the Review (Taylor, 2023b). Perhaps most damning was the assessment of Neil Basu, former head of counter-terrorism policing in the UK, who described the review as, 'driven by a rightwing viewpoint' and 'insulting' to counter-terrorism professionals (Dodd and Syal, 2023).

In this article we offer an academic critique of the Shawcross Review's framing and proposals. Our overarching argument is that the Review is fundamentally flawed because of its partial – both limited and biased – engagement with the relevant (and extensive) knowledge base that exists around radicalisation, counter-radicalisation, and the Prevent Strategy. More specifically – and with particular attention to the report's emphasis on 'ideology' – we show: (i) that the report suffers from a selective, and problematic, engagement with relevant academic research that poorly represents established knowledge in this area; (ii) that this selective engagement leads to a questionable, and highly contestable, conceptual framing of the report's core terms and parameters; and, (iii) that this contestable framing has implications for operationalisation of the report's findings.

The motivation for this article is twofold. First, having written widely on terrorism and radicalisation, we share many of the civil society and practitioner concerns raised above. In what follows we attempt to situate these concerns within wider and prior academic debate on Prevent, on related instruments of counter-radicalisation and counter-extremism, and on processes of independent review more broadly. Doing this, we suggest, shines important light on the report's limitations and implications. Second, although a number of academics refused to engage with the review – some going so far as to establish an independent 'People's Review' of Prevent (Prevent Review n.d.) – we were amongst those who did respond to the call for evidence, submitting findings on the experiences of higher education students (see Jarvis *et al*, 2024). The Review's absence of any meaningful engagement with findings such as ours – which ran counter to the Review's recommendations – propelled us toward writing this article. Before beginning our critique, we begin by briefly situating Prevent and this Review in relevant historical and policy contexts.

The Prevent Strategy

To make sense of Shawcross' Independent Review (and criticism thereof) it is helpful to locate the Prevent Strategy as one of four separate pillars of the UK's overarching counter-terrorism strategy, CONTEST: Pursue, Protect, Prepare and Prevent.[2] First launched in 2003, the pillars are designed to tackle terrorism at different points in its trajectory, with Prevent working 'upstream' and aiming to stop people becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism. In its earliest iteration, Prevent lacked the development of a fully-fledged Government strategy and was not made public. However, after the 2005 attacks in London the strategy received a significant increase in attention and resourcing, reflected in a revised version of CONTEST published in 2006. Prevent, in this iteration, sought to dissuade British Muslims from adopting extremist views via a community engagement approach that worked closely with Muslim populations within the UK under the rubric of 'cohesion'. Even at this early juncture the controversy that would later surround Prevent had begun to emerge, with critics concerned this approach not only rendered Muslim communities suspicious, but that it could also

[2] Much anticipated at the time of writing is the addition of 'Martyn's Law', otherwise known as the 'Protect Duty' (HM Government, 2023a, 25).

stigmatise legitimate political dissent (Brighton, 2007; Thomas, 2010). Similarly critical, but with rather different focus, were the voices of those such as MP David Davis who argued equally vehemently in the early days of Prevent that the strategy was *insufficiently tough* to challenge the threat posed by terrorism (HC Deb 10 July 2006).

The year 2007 witnessed publication of another revision of Prevent which was integrated two years later within a relaunched version of CONTEST. This revised version was vital for introducing what would become a concern of increasing importance - the safeguarding of those at risk of extremism. In so doing, it paved the way for the emergence of a new multi-agency mechanism, Channel, the purpose of which was to support 'vulnerable' people identified by members of the public or, indeed, concerned front-line workers such as teachers or medical practitioners. This new version of CONTEST saw a significant stretching of Prevent's rationale, expanding its focus beyond violent extremism to what came to be known as 'non-violent extremism', which 'can reasonably be linked to terrorism' (Home Office, 2023, p.33). With this dramatically expanding remit, and amidst growing criticism, the Government called for an independent review of Prevent led by Lord Carlile (Carlile, 2011). This review highlighted several shortcomings and led to the completion of a further revised version in 2011. The need to address 'non-violent extremism' was made explicit within this newest iteration, although to repudiate concerns that Prevent offered a tool for spying on Muslims, it also stressed that 'all forms of terrorism' were being addressed, notably including terrorism associated with Extreme Right-Wing organisations or ideas (ibid, p.6).

The next major development in Prevent came with the enactment of the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act in 2015. This legislation created a statutory duty for front-line workers in prominent public sector organisations including schools and universities to pay due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism. Referred to as the 'Prevent duty', this saw safeguarding deployed to justify an expansion of counter-terrorism into public health, education, and the criminal justice system. A pragmatic, even intuitive, development for supporters, the duty has been one of Prevent's most controversial

developments to date, bringing about new concerns around prejudice, privacy, and freedom of speech.[3]

Piloted in 2017, the Desistance and Disengagement Programme (DDP) was added to the work of Prevent by the 2018 CONTEST Strategy. The DDP adopts a multi-agency approach to provide tailored support interventions with the aim of rehabilitating and reintegrating those already engaged in terrorism-related activity (HM Government, 2018). Further expansion of Prevent's remit occurred again during the evidence gathering phase of the independent review. A Home Office restructuring saw the Homeland Security Group take on the Counter-Extremism Directorate, which brought the Extremism Disruption Unit into Prevent. This Unit focuses on disrupting the activities and influence of those seeking to radicalise others, but falling below terrorism and criminal thresholds (Shawcross, 2023, pp.38, 125). The steady growth in Prevent's ambit has led some senior security and counter-terrorism officials to express concerns about mission creep (ibid, p.144).

While not exhaustive, this timeline brings us to 2019 and the Government's commissioning of the second independent review. Initially led by Lord Carlile (Bowcott, 2019), a legal challenge from civil liberty groups saw the review taken over by Sir William Shawcross: a former foreign correspondent whose previous roles included chairing the Charity Commission, serving as Special Representative for victims of Qadhafi-sponsored IRA terrorism, and membership of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees Informal Advisory Panel (HM Government, n.d.). The Home Secretary and Commissioner for Counter-Extremism spoke positively about the review's findings (Simcox, 2023), and 33 of Shawcross' 34 recommendations were accepted by the Government (the remaining recommendation was agreed to in principle) (HM Government, 2023b). These included recommendations to: explore the extension of Prevent to immigration and asylum, and to job centres; establish a new Unit within the Homeland Security Group to rebut misinformation about Prevent; and, develop specific measures to counter what Shawcross described as the 'anti-Prevent campaign' at universities (Shawcross, 2023, pp.158-162).

[3] For example, within higher education both the National Union of Students and the University and College Union have run campaigns opposing the Prevent duty (University and College Union, 2015; National Union of Students (n.d.)).

The Independent Review and Shawcross Report

In 2006, Professor Clive Walker wrote the following of 'panic legislation' in the face of atrocity:

> Terrorism is about political drama. Drama is meant to engender emotions, and, when drama is not confined to the theatre but moves onto the streets, the emotions are to prompt action. Some call this capacity of political violence to skew policy and action 'the politics of the last atrocity'. The resultant danger of ill-considered, ill-defined 'panic' legislation is manifest (Walker, 2006, p.1142).

Terrorism asks questions of the Government's principal responsibility to secure the state and its citizenry. Consequently, as Walker points out, there is often a desire (and pressure) for the legislature to respond with laws that enhance counter-terrorism powers (see also Neal 2012). Given that these laws may grant the state some of its most draconian powers,[4] ensuring the suite of legislation is necessary, proportionate, and applied correctly is paramount. It is in this context that Blackbourn, de Londras and Morgan refer to the 'counter-terrorism review assemblage' as the combination of actors, institutions and activities that can give effect to the 'fundamental constitutional and democratic commitment to accountability' (Blackbourn, de Londras and Morgan, 2019, p.1). Since the consolidation of UK anti-terrorism legislation in the Terrorism Act 2000, the Government's creation of the position of Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation has become an important part of this assemblage.[5] Although initially limited to an annual review of the Terrorism Act 2000, the scope of the Reviewer's remit has since expanded considerably (Hall, 2022).

This model of independent review led by a designated individual operating outside of government has been replicated with Prevent on two occasions: in 2011, with former Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation Lord Carlile, and in 2023 with Sir Shawcross.

[4] For example, extended periods of detention without charge (*Terrorism Act 2000*).
[5] The authors of *Accountability and Review in the Counter-Terrorist State* - the most extensive piece of research into the review of counter-terror laws in the UK to date - found that across 24 elite interviews and a key stakeholder workshop the Independent Reviewer was particularly prominent and that 'Government and Parliament seems to rely heavily on the Independent Reviewer's work' (Blackbourn, de Londras and Morgan, 2019, p.12).

Unfortunately, save for where the review of Prevent has been explored as a specific case study (Blackbourn, de Londras and Morgan, 2019, pp.53-66), or where Independent Reviewers of Prevent have offered reflections in their final reports (Carlile, 2011; Shawcross, 2023, pp.163-165), little has been written about the process of these reviews. More detailed reflections on the process of independent review have, however, been offered by Independent Reviewers of Terrorism Legislation (Anderson, 2014; Hall, 2022) and by a specialist body of academic literature on terrorism-based legislative review in the UK (Blackbourn, 2014; Blackbourn, de Londras and Morgan, 2019) and other jurisdictions (Lynch and McGarrity, 2010; Lynch, 2012). In one insightful overview, former reviewer David Anderson KC (2014), details the extensive breadth of evidence and advice he sought in this role, including from senior judges, the intelligence community, police officers, NGOs, and academics. This matters, because in the UK context the Government tends to respond favourably to the Reviewer and to implement their recommendations.[6]

The focus of this article – Shawcross' report – is a substantial piece of work. Stylistically, it contains the trappings expected of formal policy reports – a foreword, appendices, an enumerated list of recommendations – presented with a clarity of expression accessible to readers without relevant background expertise or knowledge. Structurally, the report is organised around the three objectives articulated in CONTEST's 2018 iteration: (i) tackling the causes of radicalisation and responding to the ideological challenge of terrorism; (ii) safeguarding and supporting those most at risk of radicalisation through early intervention, and, identifying them and offering support; (iii) enabling those who have already engaged in terrorism to disengage and rehabilitate.

The report's overarching narrative comprises two primary claims. First, Prevent's motivation and rationale remain good because the UK continues to face a genuine terrorist threat, and because pre-emptive intervention may be more desirable than retributive responses to terrorism. As such, the report positions much academic, civil society and media criticism of Prevent as either unintentionally misplaced or even suspect because part of a concerted effort to discredit the strategy (Shawcross, 2023, pp. 89). Such criticism, as a result, is deemed

[6] One important caveat is that these assessments are based on the first Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation, Lord Carlile, believed by some to be unwilling to criticise the executive and focused on 'minor recommendations on narrow, practical details, or offer[ing] suggestions in line with existing government policy' (Lynch and McGarrity, 2010, p.103; Blackbourn, 2014, p.964).

irresponsible as well as misleading. As the Executive Summary argues: 'The caricature of Prevent as an authoritarian and thinly veiled means of persecuting British Muslims is not only untrue, it is an insult to all those in the Prevent network doing such diligent work to stop individuals from being radicalised into terrorism' (Shawcross, 2023, p.6).

The narrative's second primary claim is that Prevent has seen its implementation diverted – in part because of external criticism – in two fundamental ways through its various iterations. First, is the shift toward safeguarding which has taken Prevent away from its original emphasis on addressing the terrorism threat. Second, has been a concerted downplaying of the most pressing source of radicalisation within the UK today: Islamist extremism. This double diversion not only sets Prevent apart from other elements of the UK's counter-terrorism strategy which *are* deemed to focus appropriately on Islamism (and, presumably, the terrorist threat). It is also believed to introduce heterogeneities in the treatment of different forms of extremism, with disproportionate attention afforded, for example, to extreme right-wing and related threats (ibid, 2023, p. 14, 25-26).

Driven by this bipartite narrative, the Shawcross report highlights for scrutiny important issues regarding the workings of Prevent. First, is a tension at the Strategy's heart in which those posing a threat to UK national security as potential extremists also require safeguarding and protection *because of* their vulnerability to radicalisation (ibid, 2023, pp. 41-43). Second, is the insight that Prevent and its resources are used to fill gaps in the provision of important social services including around mental health care (ibid, 2023, pp. 61-62). Third, is the economic corollary of the above whereby Prevent's resources are used inefficiently for purposes other than counter-terrorism such as youth work (ibid, 2023, pp. 26-27). Fourth, are concerns about Prevent's implementation and the poor standard of training afforded doctors, teachers and others it responsibilises in the fight against extremism (ibid, 2023, pp. 99-105). Fifth, although explicit political critique is notably rare in this independent report, it does acknowledge some important concerns with the working of Prevent including the retention of data around Prevent referrals, especially in relation to children. That the report recommends reduction in the retention time limit from six to three years, however, exemplifies its reformist rather than radical tone (ibid, 2023, p. 55). Sixth, the report also explicitly raises concerns around Prevent's transparency in data collection and use. Such

concerns, typically, receive instrumental rather than normative framing, for instance in relation to public acquiescence:

> Prevent should also encourage public trust by improving transparency and establishing better oversight of how Prevent is implemented. It is important that when members of the public, officials, or practitioners have grounds for believing Prevent may have fallen short of its own standards, they know where they can take any formal complaints. Demonstrating that Prevent has nothing to hide by upholding complaints when they are justified, while also putting on public record when allegations are unfounded, will bolster public trust in the programme (Shawcross, 2023, p.156).

Our argument, in the remainder of this article, is that the report's valuable work in highlighting concerns such as these is diminished by a more fundamental lack at its heart. That lack – adverted to above – concerns its engagement with the substantive – and now substantial – knowledge base around (counter-)radicalisation. Using the review's engagement with 'ideology' as a vitally important exemplar here, we show that this partial engagement is responsible for a contestable setting of its conceptual parameters, with important implications for its subsequent operationalisation in practice. Let us turn first to the report's engagement with academic and non-academic sources.

Reviewing the evidence I: Engagement with academic literature

One of the most noticeable – and notable – aspects of the Shawcross report is its paucity of engagement with academic work. While there is some mention of academic seminars (Shawcross, 2023, p.51), academic participation in multi-stakeholder workshops (ibid, p.90), and testimony submitted by academics (ibid, p.88), the details of these are sparse.[7] This neglect, and its accompaniment by occasional references to the opinions of unnamed

[7] Appendix A states that the review's first phase included 55 meetings and engagement events with a range of individuals including academics. Further meetings and engagements were held in the second phase, alongside two thematic multi-stakeholder roundtables. In addition, the review sought evidence from six (unnamed) academics, and attended one academic conference and three academic webinars.

academics without supporting references (e.g., ibid, pp.88, 119), is in keeping with a broader culpability of official documentation in this policy area:

> one of the enduring problems, which becomes clear when analysing Prevent documents, is a lack of sufficient explanation about which works have directly influenced the thinking of policy makers who develop and oversee the programme (Meleagrou-Hitchens, 2022, p.12).

In keeping with this trend, there is relatively little citation of academic work in the report; the 428 footnotes contain a total of three citations of articles in peer-reviewed academic journals, for example. This lack of engagement corresponds with a wider scepticism toward the reliability or findings of academic work in this field which is seen in the report as lacking understanding of ideologically-fuelled extremism, because of a tendency to 'amplify [psychological or social difficulties] as causes of radicalisation' (Shawcross, 2023, p.153). This 'focus on psychological factors in the radicalisation process' is at odds with the report's own conclusions, because it diminishes the weight afforded 'to the role of extremist ideas and worldviews' (ibid, pp.19-20)

Shawcross' response to the perceived failings of academic researchers is an appeal to experiential or vocational expertise: 'Prevent advisory boards must include experts who can show they have worked on the ideological drivers of terrorism, and practitioners with real life experience' (ibid, p.20). Related concerns about the reliance of the DDP on an academic advisory board generate similar recommendations of diversification in order, 'to increase understanding and experience of ideologically-driven offenders' (ibid, p.67). This scepticism towards the quality and reliability of academic research on terrorism might once have been justified, as summarised in critical assessments of the terrorism studies field in the 1990s and 2000s (Horgan, 1997; Silke, 2001, 2009). However, reviews of terrorism research over the past 15 years have demonstrated a significant strengthening in this area, highlighting, in particular, a considerable increase in the use of primary data (Schuurman, 2020, 2023). This growth in robust, empirically-grounded research on terrorism is obscured in Shawcross' report by the simple juxtaposition of academic research with 'real life experience': a juxtaposition that chimes, moreover, with a wider mistrust of 'experts' and 'expertise' in the

UK and beyond (Clarke and Newman 2017, pp.110-112). Overlooking findings from this work, however, has important consequences, as demonstrated below.

There are also difficulties with *how* Shawcross uses academic work. For example, at the beginning of chapter 4 the report argues that presenting Prevent 'as a largely safeguarding initiative … unwittingly bestows a status of victimhood on all who come into contact with Prevent, negating individual agency or risk' (Shawcross, 2023, p.42). He then quotes two (unnamed) 'counter-extremism experts', for whom Prevent 'has removed the agency from the individuals who willingly decide to pursue or support violence for political ends' (ibid, p.42), before quoting 'one academic's contention' that:

> Prevent does not construct terrorism as "a form of political activism that sentient people choose to engage in for reasons, however poorly conceived; rather, it's an ideological contagion […] that afflicts the vulnerable and 'risks' their safety and well-being" (ibid, p.42).

The (unreferenced) quote in fact comes from a piece written by Dr Simon Cottee (2015), published in *The Atlantic*, a (well-regarded) US-based current affairs magazine. The piece describes initiatives like Prevent as 'intrusive and stigmatizing, targeting those who … have broken no law'. This matters because Cottee specifically *criticises* the stated aim of Prevent to counter the ideological challenge of terrorism and its construction of terrorism as 'an ideological contagion' akin to a disease. Cottee's work thus calls into question the very emphasis on ideology at the heart of Shawcross' approach and the Prevent Strategy more broadly (Powell 2016).

The difficulties with Shawcross' use of academic work are especially pronounced in paragraphs 4.96 to 4.101on 'mental health difficulties'. In this section, a total of three pieces of work are cited. First is a report, commissioned by the Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats,[8] and written by academics Dr Sarah Marsden and Dr Simon Copeland (2020). The report is cited to support Shawcross' statement that, 'The extent and nature of the relationship between mental health difficulties and terrorism is disputed' (Shawcross, 2023,

[8] The Centre (known as CREST) is funded by the UK intelligence and security agencies and the Home Office through the ESRC (award ES/V002775/1).

p.61). Marsden and Copeland's report examines the prevalence of mental health problems among different types of 'extremist'. They explain that approximately one in four people will experience a diagnosable mental health problem over the course of a year,[9] that jihadists suffer from above average rates of severe mental health disorders, and that members of white supremacist movements have disproportionately high rates of mental health problems. Whereas around 40 per cent of those referred to Channel have mental health problems (Shawcross, 2023, p.61) – a figure seemingly consistent with Marsden and Copeland's findings – Shawcross asserts that 'In my view, those with mental health issues or complex needs are significantly over-represented within Channel' (ibid, p.62). No references are cited to support this assertion, and the tension with Marsden and Copeland's report goes unnoted.

The second piece of referenced work is a 2013 article published in the peer-reviewed journal *Criminology & Public Policy*. The study examines 139 homicides between 1990 and 2010 in the United States, comparing those committed by far-right lone-actor extremists to those by other far-right extremists (Gruenewald, Chermak and Freilich, 2013). However reliable its findings, the dataset predates important events such as the 2011 attacks perpetrated by Anders Breivik, the 2019 Christchurch attacks, the emergence of Islamic State, and the rise in terrorist use of social media. This raises the question of why more recent studies on the same topic were overlooked (e.g., Ranstorp, 2013; Corner and Gill, 2015; Mohamedou, 2018; Corner, Bouhana and Gill, 2019; Marchment, Bouhana and Gill, 2020; Moeller, Langer and Scheithauer, 2022).

A similar point applies to the third piece of work, a 2017 article in *CTC Sentinel*, a magazine produced by the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point (Corner and Gill, 2017). The authors, Dr Emily Corner and Professor Paul Gill, describe the article's findings as, 'extremely preliminary', adding, 'It is simply too early to come to a definitive answer regarding the role of mental health problems and various forms of Islamic State terrorism' (ibid, pp.3, 6). This research team has since produced a substantial body of work exploring the risk of violent extremism, none of which is mentioned in the Shawcross report.[10] While recognising the role that ideology can play, this work, crucially, also challenges, 'simplistic

[9] Similarly, in the *Health Survey for England, 2014*, 26% of adults reported having been diagnosed with at least one mental illness (Health and Social Care Information Centre, 2015).
[10] See the publications list on GRIEVANCE project website: https://www.grievance-erc.com/. (Accessed: 26 May 2023).

understandings of radicalisation being the result of either "vulnerability" or an agentic choice' (Rottweiler, Gill and Bouhana, 2022, p.840). In their view, violent extremists 'emerge from multiple pathways, some of which may involve mental health problems' (Gill et al,. 2021, p.67). While policymakers tend to treat extremism as the main problem, 'for the individual, extremism is the solution to other problems on-going in their life … which require addressing' (Rottweiler, Gill and Bouhana, 2022, p.839). For frontline practitioners, 'minimizing negative social conditions related to injustices and strengthening protective factors, such as social integration and bonds to settings promoting prosocial norms, may prove promising avenues for diminishing violent extremist intentions' (ibid, p.839). This stands in marked contrast to Shawcross' assertion that, 'Prevent is overly focused on issues such as mental health and social isolation as drivers of radicalisation' (Shawcross, 2023, p.62).

In short, the Shawcross report incorporates only minimal engagement with academic scholarship in this area, appearing to hold practitioner experience in higher esteem. Where the report does incorporate academic expertise, it often evidences: (i) engagement with older, and perhaps outdated, scholarship in this area, and (ii) simplistic, even questionable, interpretation of cited work.

Reviewing the evidence II: Journalism, open source, and 'grey' literature

Setting out its methodology, Appendix A of the report references the 'wide range of evidence on which the report is based, coming to over 650 sources' (Shawcross, 2023, p.164). 439 submissions were received via two calls for evidence, supplemented by 170 meetings with publics, practitioners and others, and the solicitation of evidence from, amongst others, academics, civil society organisations, think tanks, police officers and professional politicians (ibid, pp.164-165). This listing of sources contributes to the impression of transparency, rigour and impartiality that runs through the report, from its framing as 'independent' to its repeated references to 'evidence'. Such claims speak, moreover, to the widespread contemporary aspiration toward 'evidence-based' policymaking (Cairney, 2016).

The parsimonious use of academic literature within the review discussed above finds its counterpart in its embrace of an abundance of non-academic sources of knowledge. The report relies heavily on mainstream news media content, with thirty-one references to the

BBC, twenty-four to *The Guardian*, seventeen to *The Times*, eleven to *The Telegraph*, eight to the *Daily Mail*, and one to the *Independent*. New and social media outlets find themselves similarly well-represented, with twenty-five citations of Twitter profiles or comments, eleven of Facebook, and six of YouTube videos in the published report. Government reports, strategies, speeches, and statistics also feature, with fourteen references to documentation hosted on the UK Government's official website. Other contributors to the eclectic reference list include: legal judgements or texts, with fifteen references to documentation on judiciary.uk; publications hosted or authored by thinktanks such as the right-leaning Policy Exchange (10 references), the Tony Blair Institute (2 references), and Demos (1 reference); blogs such as 'Harry's Place' (n.d.), subtitled 'Liberty, if it means anything, is the right to tell people what they don't want to hear'; and English language dictionaries (1 reference).

This smorgasbord of sources highlights the prominence of journalistic, open source, and grey material within the Shawcross Review. Although such material has benefits – including accessibility and contemporaneity vis-à-vis the time lags of, say, academic research – such heavy reliance raises questions of reliability in comparison with slower or more rigorous forms of knowledge production. As noted above, the vast academic literature on Prevent specifically, and on counter-radicalisation more broadly, remains largely absent here, much of which is helpfully summarised in academic handbooks (e.g., Busher, Malkki and Marsden, 2023), survey pieces, and published bibliographies (e.g., Hofmann, 2012; Schmid, 2013; Tinnes, 2015).

Questions of reliability emerge, too, around the status of evidence purposively collected for Shawcross' review such as written submissions. Although such evidence is, on occasion, referred to explicitly (e.g., Shawcross, 2023, p.23), the report often points more obliquely to overlap between unattributed sources and its own recommendations, for instance: 'Such concerns are echoed in evidence submitted to this review, suggesting that there is an "optimism bias" towards rehabilitation efforts in the prison estate' (ibid, p.73). In instances such as these, the accuracy or origins of those 'echoes' resist easy external verification with any reasonable level of confidence.

Verification challenges also emerge where the report de-identifies sources, such as, 'the senior official [who] told me that Islamism will remain the 'enduring' terrorist threat in the UK' (ibid, p.48); the senior national security official [who] told me that Prevent is "out of

kilter" with the rest of the national counter- terrorism apparatus' (ibid, p.48); or – even less specific – 'I was told of one individual referred to Channel over far right concerns who refused to even touch a bottle of water offered to him by a Muslim' (ibid, p.58). Deidentification is often, of course, a legitimate ethical decision for protecting participants at risk of harm in the research process. Our concern here, though, is with the significant explanatory work done by unsubstantiated and unattributed anecdotes for the review's findings and recommendations; a concern that becomes more acute with the reliance, in places, on anecdotal vignettes: 'I have heard several examples of the role of Islamist ideology being misinterpreted, misunderstood, or even overlooked by Prevent staff' (ibid, p.14); and, 'From my observations, I was encouraged by the VAF-guided assessments used at Channel panels and recommend they continue to be used by trained practitioners in the identification and measure of risk' (ibid, p.46).

Without knowing the specific officials or sources referenced in the report, it is difficult to assess the representativeness of such claims amongst and beyond, say, relevant security professionals. This becomes particularly apparent where the report invokes sources such as social media threads with isolated tweets employed not uncommonly to discredit particular organisations or individuals. This takes place directly through the citation of social media content produced by organisations or groups deemed extremist (ibid, pp.32-35, 46, 119, 122-123, 135-136). The strategy is also, however, used to discredit organisations for association with extremist individuals, such as the civil society organisation whose founder, 'had in 2019 welcomed the Chair of trustees of an organisation in the local area which had previously hosted Islamist speakers' (ibid, p.34). Such usage of social media content without accompanying information on how it was identified, accessed, and analysed is deeply problematic. By what process was this content identified? Is the content indicative of other material produced by specific organisations?

This unsystematic engagement with supporting material is complemented, finally, by the report's periodically cavalier treatment of official evidence. Official data cataloguing referrals to Prevent, for instance, is rejected on what appears little more than a hunch: '*I am of the view* that, rather than being indicative of the emerging threat picture, referral data partially reflects the areas that practitioners and frontline staff think they should be focusing on to demonstrate fairness. The data has become politicised' (ibid, p.50 (our emphasis)). A

widespread perception – or experience – of injustice within Muslim communities relating to the workings of Prevent, similarly, is simply dismissed as inaccurate: 'The notion that Prevent does not seek to protect Muslims, just like all other citizens, from terrorist attacks is highly regrettable. I *do not believe that is an accurate assessment* of Prevent's work. Nonetheless, it is clearly a keenly felt perception among some' (ibid, pp.57-58 (our emphasis)).

Conceptual underpinnings: radicalisation and ideology

The above sections, together, raise important issues around the Shawcross report's reliability. Such questions matter for evaluating its content and quality on their own terms. They matter more, arguably, because we are dealing with the evidence base that sustains the report's conceptual argument and policy recommendations. In the remainder of this discussion we demonstrate some of the implications this has through exploring the prominence afforded to 'ideology' in the Shawcross report *as the primary explanatory factor in radicalisation*.[11] We argue that the explanatory power Shawcross gives to ideology presents a simplified picture that is not fully representative of existing research, and that also serves to support questionable policy propositions.

In the period immediately following September 11th, 2001, efforts to explain those attacks were limited, even stymied, with the prevailing discourse asserting that this act was simply apolitical, irrational, and barbaric (Cummings, 2001). This explanatory void, however, was soon filled by models of radicalisation that gave impetus to multiple domestic and international counter-terrorism initiatives such as Prevent. Radicalisation is defined by the UK Government as 'the process of a person legitimising support for, or use of, terrorist violence' (Home Office, 2023, p.12). Counter-radicalisation initiatives – such as Prevent – therefore seek to determine how individuals come to support or partake in terrorist violence, while attempting to address this through preventative, rehabilitative, and punitive measures. All this is to say that radicalisation as typically understood today is a relatively recent development in efforts to explain political violence, and that it diverges from earlier uses of the term (della Porta, 1995) by placing emphasis on the 'cognitive and ideological transformation' of the individual (Malthaner, 2017, p.370).

[11] As distinct, for example, from the prominence of ideology in legislative definitions of terrorism.

For the last two decades radicalisation has become near ubiquitous in political, media, and academic discourse on terrorism, with scholarly research generating its own large and diverse body of work.[12] While critical scholarship has questioned the validity, rationale, and effects of 'radicalisation' as a framework for the study and address of political violence and extremism (Kundnani, 2012; Schmid, 2013; Baker-Beall *et al,* 2015; Cassam, 2018), explanatory research in this area draws widely upon this concept. Given the time that has passed since this agenda's emergence, it is unsurprising that it has evolved and developed in important ways. While radicalisation studies tend still to focus on the individual as their level of analysis, the placement of emphasis within radicalisation processes, and the conceptualisation of those processes, varies considerably.

For example, early seminal work was reflective of an attempt to develop a 'master narrative of jihadist radicalisation' (Malthaner, 2017, p.379; see also, Sageman, 2004; Wiktorowicz, 2005). Contemporary radicalisation studies, in contrast, increasingly argue that individuals experience radicalisation through complex multifactor pathways (Horgan, 2008; Jensen, Seate and James, 2020). In particular, as the discourse has shifted toward what might make someone 'vulnerable' to radicalisation, research has investigated psychosocial traits or life histories in the context of specific forms of extremism or demographics (Corner and Gill, 2015; Corner, Bouhana and Gill, 2019; Moeller, Langer and Scheithauer, 2022).

The role of extreme ideas has been an important point of contention within radicalisation studies, particularly regarding the 'assumed causal relationship between the cognitive dimensions of ideology (i.e. holding a radical ideology) and behavioural radicalisation (i.e. engaging in terrorism)' (Clubb and McDaid, 2019, p.513). The notion that extreme ideas lead to extreme actions has a simple and appealing linear logic. However, for over a decade now, and in line with broader trends in radicalisation studies, research has acknowledged the boundaries of any causal power for ideas, particularly as a 'root cause' of terrorism. Indeed, a constructive and public dialogue has played out between academics as to how much emphasis should be placed here (Neumann, 2013).

[12] For example, the online repository 'Radicalisation Research' contains 'high quality academic research on these controversial issues' going back as far as September 2010 and at the time of writing contains 1472 pieces of research (Radicalisation Research (n.d.)).

None of this is to say that ideology is irrelevant – or seen to be irrelevant – to radicalisation. Indeed, contemporary research continues to seek out where this link might be most pronounced (Bélanger, et al. 2022; Clearly, et al., 2024), investigating how ideology may influence the choices of those designated 'terrorist' (Carson and Turner, 2024; Carter, et al. 2023; Carson and Suppenbach, 2018). At the same time, the field has clearly been characterised by a general trend away from understanding terrorism as a product of 'terrorist ideologies' and toward an embrace of a more 'limited and non-deterministic' approach to this relationship (Clubb and McDaid, 2019, p.524). This is a trend that incorporates the role of ideology alongside other factors when theorising the 'radicalisation puzzle' (Hafez and Mullins, 2015).

Holbrook and Horgan (2019, p.2) perhaps encapsulate this dilemma best when weighing into the discussion around the causal significance of ideology upon terrorism:

> …despite not necessarily knowing much about the precise mechanisms involved, we might safely assume that when it comes to explaining terrorism (as opposed to other kinds of illicit violent activities) that ideology plays at least *some* role in the development of violent extremist activity. However, there is no consensus in the discussion about terrorism of what the role of ideology in these processes may look like.

Holbrook and Horgan ultimately advocate for a continued focus on ideology insofar as it relates to terrorism by adopting a more conceptually nuanced understanding that eschews the binary logic that ideology either '"does or does not" impact individuals, depending on their substantive engagement with its content' (p.3). Their approach, as a result, responds directly to earlier (and enduring) oversimplifications concerning the causality of ideology via the identification of three factors – cognition, causation, exposure – that challenge the perception of any clear, linear, correlation (pp. 3-5). *Cognition*, here, draws attention to the limited engagement and understanding many violent actors exhibit in relation to 'their' ideology (see: Borum, 2011). *Causation* involves recognising that ideology is simply not as important when considered alongside other factors (see Bjorgo, 2009; Bjorgo and Horgan, 2009). And, *exposure*, finally, maintains that far more people consume extreme ideological

content than go on to commit violent acts. As a result, consuming and even internalising such ideas does not appear a strong precursor to violence (see: Githen-Mazer and Lambert, 2010; Borum, 2011; Hafez and Mullins, 2015).

We provide this context not to make an ontological claim over ideology's lack of importance in radicalisation dynamics. Rather, to question one of the points most keenly stressed by Shawcross – based, to reiterate, on a very partial engagement with the evidence base – that Prevent has been distracted from its core objective: countering the ideologies that fuel terrorist violence (Shawcross, 2023, p.3). The extent of this drift is a cause of considerable frustration in the report precisely because of the explanatory power attributed to ideology (ibid, pp.14, 20), whereby cognitive radicalisation leads to behavioural radicalisation. The report regularly asserts this relationship as a statement of fact, noting the 'inherently ideological nature of terrorism' (ibid, p.20) and arguing that 'extremist or terrorist ideology [is not] merely a challenge, but an actual cause of terrorism' (ibid, p.21).

Shawcross identifies several culprits for Prevent's distraction from ideology, including a lack of practitioner awareness around the relationship between ideology and radicalisation (ibid, p.20) and a 'timidity' when tackling Islamist extremist ideology (ibid, pp.50, 94). However, Shawcross also laments how Prevent has strayed from its purpose because of its increasing framing as a safeguarding initiative (ibid, p.6). It is noteworthy, here, that a scepticism with Prevent *as safeguarding* gives Shawcross and Prevent's critics some common ground, albeit with significantly different reasoning. While critics argue that safeguarding's neutral connotations serve as a political cover for counter-terrorism (Dresser 2018; Heath-Kelly and Strausz, 2019; Whiting et al., 2020), Shawcross argues that approaching Prevent thus encourages us to think of terrorists as vulnerable victims rather than agential extremists (Shawcross, 2023, p.6).

To be clear, Shawcross *does* acknowledge that 'the trajectory toward violence varies for each individual' (ibid, p.12). However, the report's argument appears to be that challenging ideology deserves primacy in Prevent because a consistent feature of radicalisation is the *requirement* for the 'adoption of, or subscription to, an ideology that reorientates an individual's entire worldview through that ideological lens, becoming embedded within their identity and actions' (ibid, p.12). In affording such causal power to ideology, Shawcross adopts a position popular among political elites whereby terrorists are,

'simply seen as acting on behalf of some hostile 'ideology' as they carry out acts of violence' (Holbrook and Horgan, 2019, p.2). In so doing, Shawcross mispresents the state of contemporary research wherein ideology functions as one of a range of factors relevant to radicalisation, and seldom the primary driver or 'precondition' it becomes in this report (see Schmid 2013: 28). As McCauley and Moskalenko (cited in Schmid 2013: 28) note: 'there are many paths to radicalisation that do not involve ideology. Some join a radical group for thrills and status, some for love, some for connection and comradeship. Personal and group grievances can move individuals toward violence, with ideology serving only to rationalise the violence'. Compare this with the report's umbrage toward Prevent staff who fail to see ideology as an 'essential part of the trajectory towards terrorism', instead viewing it as 'one of many potential radicalising factors' (ibid, pp.19-20).

This emphasis on ideology helps sustain the report's claim that the Prevent strategy must not only return to its core function of challenging extremist ideologies (presumably those advocating violence) but that it also needs to challenge those 'operating below the terrorism threshold who can create an environment conducive to terrorism' (ibid, p.7). As we have seen, a concern with the importance of 'non-violent extremism' first appeared in the 2007 version of CONTEST, so this introduction is not new. This concern was, however, controversial at the time and remains so today. Putting to one side potential harms caused by extending counter-terrorism to distasteful *but legal* speech, important conceptual difficulties have been well-established by scholars in this area:

> the idea of a non-violent ideology that is conducive to terrorism would seem to be something of a contradiction. For a belief-system itself to be conducive to terrorism it must have at least some element of doctrinal endorsement or justification for violence, in which case one cannot then legitimately refer to it as non-violent (Richards, 2015, p.373).

Richards made the above point about definitional contradiction in 2015 with specific reference to Prevent (see also Chukwuma and Jarvis 2024). In this context, the Shawcross report's insistence that Prevent should focus not only on the 'tip of the iceberg' but also on 'terrorist-adjacent narratives' (Shawcross, 2023, p.85) appears conceptually imprecise and

ambiguous with potentially harmful consequences. For example, proscribed organisations such as Hamas and Hezbollah cite as founding principles their resistance (violent or otherwise) to what they view as U.S./Israeli imperialism in the region. Would this lead the review to conclude that Amnesty International's (n.d.) campaigning is 'terrorist adjacent' given its calls to 'demolish' a 'violently racist system' installed by Israel that is tantamount to 'apartheid'? If not, against what criteria and by whose judgement? The line of argument advanced by Shawcross is predicated upon a simplistic relationship between ideas and actions, and fails to acknowledge the gulf between believing something, holding an extreme belief, and being willing to use violence (Githens-Mazer and Lambert, 2010).

The bigger issue facing Shawcross' focus on ideology, however, is that it is not clear what he means when he uses this term, or that it is being applied consistently. The only effort to define ideology comes via a dictionary citation suggesting it is, 'at its most basic level, "a set of beliefs or principles"' (Shawcross, 2023, p.18). Not only is this extremely broad, it also appears to be used selectively in the report, primarily with reference to Islamist Extremist ideas. For example, the review never offers similar depth of engagement to ideologies other than 'Islamist Ideology' which is discussed across seventeen paragraphs (ibid, pp.13-19) and a 'Key Islamist Narratives' information box. The review is very explicit that Islamist extremism represents the biggest threat and that subsequently this ideology is of most importance (ibid, p.14). Extreme Right-Wing ideology, by comparison, garners significantly less attention, and is thought to be well-understood by practitioners (ibid, p.21). In fact, the review is critical of the overly broad inclusion criteria used in the analysis of the extreme right-wing and highlights a report by Prevent's Research Information and Communication Unit that refers to books written by 'mainstream British conservative commentators' as 'cultural nationalist ideological texts' and examples of the 'Western philosophic and literary canon' as 'key texts for white nationalists' (ibid, p.24). Specific texts are not noted, but the framing raises important questions about the consistency of boundary-drawing in the report: might such texts qualify as 'terrorist adjacent' in the context of Islamist extremism?

The definition and boundaries of what constitutes an ideology are further muddied, finally, when the review mentions and then dismisses inceldom as a counter-terrorism matter (ibid, p.53). While the debate as to whether incel violence should be considered terrorism is ongoing (Grierson, 2021b), prominent terrorism scholars (Hoffman, Ware and Shapiro, 2020)

and criminal justice agencies in other countries (Matza, 2023) have labelled it such. Shawcross cites CONTEST to say that 'an act of terrorism is when violence is used to further the aims of any ideology' and follows this up by confirming his perspective that 'incel is not a terrorist ideology' (Shawcross, 2023, p.53). It is not a terrorist ideology, so it is not a counter-terrorism matter. Yet, the CONTEST definition in the preceding sentence depicts 'any ideology', *not* any 'terrorist ideology'. At the very least, incel ideology could plausibly be considered 'terrorist adjacent' and therefore by the report's own argument of interest to Prevent. Again, the impression is of arbitrariness in decisions about what constitutes an ideology and how widely the boundaries thereof should be defined. Shawcross is clearly most interested in Islamist extremism and to varying degrees dismisses the relevance of Extreme Right-Wing and inceldom. While incel-inspired attacks have not been as frequent in the UK as in North America, at least one prominent and fatal instance did occur significantly prior to publication of the review (Morris, 2023).

Ideology and the boundaries of normal political life

The above section offered two separate but related arguments. First is the review's deeply contestable emphasis on ideology as the primary causal factor driving extremism or radicalisation. In Shawcross' review, radicalisation requires:

> the adoption of, or subscription to, an ideology that reorientates an individual's entire worldview through that ideological lens, becoming embedded within their identity and actions. Terrorists *can only be labelled as such* if an ideological motivating factor can be demonstrated (Shawcross, 2023, pp.12-13 (our emphasis)).

The second above argument concerns the selective application of 'ideological' to the ideas or motives of particular types of organisation and their adherents. These two points matter, we argue, not only for reasons of conceptual consistency – although such consistency is, clearly, important. They matter also because they help frame the threat posed by, and legitimacy of, specific groups, movements, or actors. Islamist groups – which the report consistently deems under-securitised, or insufficiently prioritised – are frequently and

explicitly depicted *as ideological*. Other belief systems motivating violence, as we have seen, are characterised either as non-ideological – in the case of incels – or depicted as ideological at their periphery or fringes – in the case of the far right.

Emphasising Islamism's ideological roots, while de-emphasising those of other movements and groups, becomes, here, yet another moment in the widespread post-9/11 depoliticisation of Islamist terrorism. As Richard Jackson (2007, p.421) argues of the 'Islamist terrorism' discourse more broadly:

> by assigning non-rational, cosmic aims to violent groups, the discourse depoliticises, decontextualises and dehistoricises the grievances and political struggles of groups and societies, thereby de-linking the motives of the terrorists from the policies of Western states or their allies.

This depoliticisation both draws on, and reproduces wider 'Orientalist' tendencies (Said, 2003), in which Muslims and their grievances are deemed emotional, irrational, and unreasonable (see also Khan 2023). It contributes, too, to the legitimisation of emergency, draconian, or irrational responses to the threat that they pose given the inevitable insufficiencies of 'typical' liberal democratic security measures in the face of atypical illiberal, antidemocratic dangers.

The corollary of this is a (re-)enforcing of the boundaries of 'normal' political life in the United Kingdom in predictably Eurocentric ways.[13] By framing Islamist movements as (merely or primarily) ideological, such groups and their ideas are positioned – in advance – beyond the arena of acceptable debate around the means, ends, costs and benefits of (political) discourse and violence. Doing so not only *reflects* an imaginary border between legitimate and illegitimate ideas and politics. It also helps *reproduce* such a border. Those espousing views associated with the far right, in contrast, do not find their (symbolic, but consequently material) access to the public sphere denied in the same way. Their casting *as political* serves, here, to keep open the possibility of meaningful dialogue or integration. In this sense, the

[13] This speaks to the importance of 'fundamental British values' within the Prevent Strategy and guidance, too.

report risks further inflaming long-standing accusations of Prevent's discriminatory, perhaps even racist, assumptions and politics.

Freedom of expression and open debate

Freedom of expression and ideological debate have an important role in countering extremism and terrorism. As Barendt (2009, p.453) has stated, 'We can only respond intelligently to undesirable extremist attitudes, and remove or reduce the reasons why they are held, if we allow them, to some extent, to be disseminated'. Similarly, the CONTEST Strategy argues that 'Encouraging free speech and open debate is one of our most powerful tools in promoting critical thinking and preventing terrorist and extremist narratives taking hold' (HM Government, 2018, p.37).

This may be contrasted with the findings of empirical studies, which have consistently found that Prevent has had a chilling effect on Muslim communities' perceived ability to engage in open debate and discussion (e.g. Dudenhoefer 2018). For example, a study of British Muslim university students' perceptions of Prevent found a 'general fear of expressing one's views when discussing controversial issues' (Kyriacou et al., 2017, p.105). When asked what types of behaviour they felt would be regarded as a serious cause for concern, responses included talking about controversial topics such as IS and Israel/Palestine and 'saying things that are obviously very anti-West' (ibid, p.105). Other practitioners report a 'real sense in the Muslim community that if one of their kids goes out in the playground and says an Arabic word, they are going to be referred to Channel' (Choudhury and Fenwick, 2011, p.63). Indeed, following a visit to the UK, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights to Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association remarked that 'The spectre of Big Brother is so large, in fact, that I was informed that some families are afraid of even discussing the negative effects of terrorism in their own homes, fearing that their children would talk about it at school and have their intentions misconstrued' (Rights Watch (UK), 2016, p.37). Practitioners, too, also experience similar inhibitory effects, with some reluctant to engage young Muslims in debates or discussion 'for fear of what might be said' (Choudhury and Fenwick, 2011, p.64). This is despite the CONTEST Strategy's acknowledgement of the especial importance of free speech and debate in educational settings (HM Government, 2018, p.37).

Findings such as these chime with those in our own research with university students in England and Wales - originally completed at the request of the Prevent review team (Macdonald *et al*, 2021).[14] Students described how their awareness of the Prevent Duty sometimes made them reluctant to talk openly, noting it, 'makes me feel a bit more on edge, having to consider that there are people surveilling your thoughts and ideas as you express them' (Jarvis *et al*, 2024, p.122). Students also warned each other to be circumspect when expressing their opinions. One student recalled a discussion with peers concerning an essay they were writing on the strategic nature of terrorism, in which they were advised that 'the strategic argument sounds very much like an opinion that's sympathetic to terrorism. You want to be careful that that kind of opinion isn't reported' (ibid, p.123). Others recalled teachers warning similarly, with one A-Level Politics class on topics including drones and suicide bombing told: 'Obviously, if you mention anything odd in your presentation, I will have to report you' (ibid, p.123).

The starkest evidence of a chilling effect in our submission came from students from minority ethnic communities. One described a class discussion about Shamima Begum. Although not from Bangladesh, they felt that – as a Muslim – they had to keep their opinions in 'check':

> Could it be because of my race or my religion that people think that I'm taking her side? Whereas I'm not, I'm just trying to say 'What are civil liberties and what is citizenship?' Like, these are questions that are normal. And if it was me with white skin and not a Muslim, I think it would be much easier to say that and not have to verify myself (ibid, p.123).

An international student hoping to remain in the UK following graduation noted related concerns about future visa applications in the event of a Prevent referral: 'the problem is that anything you say could be taken out of context [hence I] would be more conscious of what I am saying and how I'm expressing myself' (ibid, p.123). As well as their future visa application, this student expressed real concern at the impact of the Prevent Duty on their intellectual development:

[14] A summary of the findings was sent to the Review team, and posted online, in July 2021.

> I think that it would change my behaviour and it would make me more conscious as a person and less confident of expressing my thoughts, which would be so counterproductive for my learning in the university … [I]f you're doing a politics course and you don't critique the State or its policies and you don't find nuance in these things and you're not able to express yourself like that anymore, it's so restricting and it could curtail your development as a scholar (ibid, p.123).

In the Prevent Review, Shawcross acknowledges that 'Academic research found that some Muslim students feel they must self-censor their discussions and alter their behaviours to avoid becoming the object of suspicion' (Shawcross, 2023, p.134). The report also recalls hearing 'from many higher education professionals who felt that the Prevent Duty was stifling open discussion, particularly for Muslim students. Examples cited included lecturers avoiding certain topics of discussion for fear of needing to make a referral, and a reduced level of trust between students and staff' (ibid, p.126). The Review does not, however, entertain the possibility that this self-censorship and inhibition is (at least, in part) a consequence of the depoliticisation of radical Islamism. Rather, it is portrayed as the product of 'what I judge to be largely false perceptions around Prevent statutory requirements in universities' (ibid, p.134). These false perceptions are generated by 'widespread and uncontested disinformation at universities' (ibid, p.89): one manifestation of a wider 'concerted campaign to undermine [Prevent]', which 'has systematically used disinformation to play on sensitivities within minority communities and sentiments in parts of the political spectrum to mobilise opposition to the scheme' (ibid, pp.131-132). For Shawcross, this opposition to, and criticism of, Prevent is not an attempt at politicisation; rather, the arguments are frequently malicious and 'not made in good faith' (ibid, p.133).

This dismissal of authentic and genuine worries around censorship and freedom of speech may be contrasted with the concern Shawcross expresses when other actors feel unable to voice their opinions openly. For example, he observes that, as a result of 'anti-Prevent narratives', 'a number of academics who support Prevent and the statutory duty feel unable to express their genuine views' (ibid, p.89). Similarly, he states that a 'fear of causing offence' leaves some practitioners 'unable to express their views openly' (ibid, p.94). More generally,

Shawcross refers to 'our national culture of free speech' and calls for it to be 'fiercely protected' (ibid, p.147).

As intimated above, this divergence is particularly stark when Shawcross discusses analysis produced by Prevent's Research Information and Communications Unit (RICU). What RICU describe as 'key cultural nationalist ideological texts' and '"key texts" for white nationalists', Shawcross describes as 'books by mainstream British conservative commentators' and 'historic works of the Western philosophic and literary canon' (ibid, p.24). RICU's outputs, he asserts, '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' (ibid, p.24). However distasteful one might find some right-leaning commentary, it is of course true that the right to freedom of expression 'is applicable not only to "information" or "ideas" that are favourably received or regarded as inoffensive or as a matter of indifference, but also to those that offend, shock or disturb the State or any sector of the population' (*Handyside v United Kingdom*). But this mantra cannot be applied only when considering ideas that *others* find distasteful. Regardless of whether Shawcross agrees with the criticisms voiced by those opposed to Prevent, or even finds these criticisms offensive, to seek to depoliticise the issue and dismiss critics' concerns as malicious disinformation is not to fiercely protect a culture of free speech.

Conclusion

Independent review matters for a number of reasons. The reports of independent reviewers are regarded as authoritative, and their recommendations are influential for policy, for citizens, for rights, and beyond. The review process also offers an important oversight mechanism, enabling scrutiny of legislation, policy and practice that may be far-reaching, even harmful. This is particularly crucial in the context of counter-terrorism, where new powers are often created – and existing powers extended – following high-profile, emotive events (Neal 2012). The importance of the Shawcross review was heightened still further, moreover, by serious concerns long expressed about the Prevent Strategy, as well as by the fact that this was only the second independent review of Prevent in the twenty or so years since its inception. During this time, the remit of Prevent has expanded steadily, with the Shawcross report

recommending further expansion and these recommendations subsequently being accepted by the Government.

Our argument in this article is that these recommendations rely upon a partial and intensely limited evidence base that inadequately engages with existing academic research and relies heavily upon sources of questionable reliability. This, in turn, generates a deeply contestable – and arguably dated – conceptual framing of radicalisation centred around the primacy of ideology, with significant implications for the consistency of its application to groups and ideas. As we have seen, the report's focus on 'Islamist radicalisation' follows, in significant part, its framing of ideology and its importance. In this respect. the Independent Review of Prevent represents a missed opportunity. Not only has it failed to examine adequately the evidence base for Prevent's mission creep. Its partial engagement also impoverishes the examination of many issues the review correctly identified as being of concern. As a result, the review has exacerbated the very feelings of resentment that have plagued the Prevent Strategy since its emergence.

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