

REFORM PREVENT TO WIN TRUST

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My job requires me to see some things I would rather not. The soft-focus videos with which Da'esh lured the impressionable to its "caliphate" were repellent enough. Worse still are the current crop, which tell western viewers how to mix an explosive charge or kill with a simple kitchen knife. Young Muslims with a grievance or a crisis of identity are recruited to the false certainties of violent Islamism. And increasingly, right-wing extremists like Thomas Mair, the killer of Jo Cox MP, feed off the tension to plan violence of their own.

These activities are criminal. But law enforcement can address only the symptoms. Tackling radicalisation means working with prisons and social media companies, assisting groups who promote critical thinking and e-safety, identifying young people at risk of being drawn into terrorism and providing mentors for them under the Channel programme now operating in all local authority areas.

This is what the Prevent strategy is about. The Government credits Prevent with helping to spread counter-narrative messages viewed 36 million times over the past three years, and with disrupting more than 150 journeys to Syria-Iraq in 2015 alone. A quarter of Channel cases are now said to be far right-related. The scale of the problem, and the pressing need for solutions, are undeniable.

Yet Prevent is controversial – to the point where many reputable community organisations refuse to engage with it, or to admit that they are doing so. Exaggerated tales of heavy-handed teachers and police spies have found a ready audience among frightened Muslims and well-meaning liberals.

A strong Prevent strategy should be capable of shrugging off such attacks. But suspicion has tainted the brand, and will only be deepened by US actions seen to be targeted on Muslims. The message is not getting across where it most needs to be heard. Significant reform is required.

The first step is better engagement. London has good examples of local advisory boards. Central government needs to listen and speak to more British Muslims, in more places and on topics other than just terrorism.

Moves towards greater openness should be stepped up. Intervention criteria, training materials and metrics for success need to be published and debated, if standards are to be improved and rumours about discrimination dispelled.

Clarity and restraint are needed over the application of Prevent to "non-violent extremism". That vaguely-defined concept encourages referrals, alarms universities and strengthens those who see Prevent as an attack on civil liberties or on the Muslim faith.

Prevent should be subject to independent oversight so as to clarify the facts, identify poor practice and promote public confidence where merited.

Finally, this Home Office strategy needs cross-departmental management. Radicalisation threatens our security: but it has elements in common with other hazards afflicting the young, from gang recruitment to mental illness. Nationally as well as locally, the emphasis has to be on safeguarding.

Prevent can increase resilience to all forms of terrorism – but only if it is trusted across the board. These changes would help build the necessary trust.