

UK home secretary defends naming Extinction Rebellion as extremist

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The inclusion of climate activists Extinction Rebellion (XR) by police in a guide to “ideological extremism” marks a serious escalation of the assault on democratic rights.

Although the guide has now been withdrawn, the Conservative government has still defended including XR.

The *Guardian* reported last week that Counter Terrorism Policing South East (CTPSE) had included XR among extremists requiring reporting to the government’s counter-radicalisation monitoring programme, Prevent.

The reaction of Home Secretary Priti Patel to widespread criticism of the move highlights its real aims. She told a radio interviewer that although XR was not a terrorist organisation the government had to look at “a range of security risks.”

XR was listed among organisations that should be reported to Prevent, alongside proscribed far-right groups like National Action and the Islamist al-Muhajiroun, in a 12-page document, “Safeguarding young people and adults from ideological extremism.” The document, produced last November, was marked “official.”

The move immediately followed a mass crackdown by the Metropolitan police on XR protests in London held over a two-week period in October. By October 16, 1,642 people had been arrested with the police then imposing an unprecedented citywide ban on XR protests in the capital.

When asked about the document, CTPSE initially said they would review their guidance to clarify their position on XR. They then acknowledged that XR was not extremist and said the document had been recalled. Anxious about the fallout, CTPSE repeatedly insisted that their concern was “vulnerable people.”

Police measures against the fascist right are always designed to win popular support for repressive legislation that is ultimately aimed at any leftward movement of the working class. The “Safeguarding” document confirms this in spades.

CTPSE said the guide had been produced “at a local level” and circulated to “statutory partners” defined as “Those in regular, direct contact with young people or members of the

public. It is also relevant to managers, senior officers and safeguarding leads at all levels of local authorities”

Nine of its 12 pages are devoted to targeted organisations and tendencies. They begin with fascism, but the sequence is revealing: the neo-Nazi National Action and Sonnenkrieg Division; “Extreme Satanism” linked to the far right; Generation Identity and the alt-right more generally; the IS-supporting al-Muhajiroun; XR; animal rights extremism; then a final page on “Internet use.”

This last section covers web use “through browsers, encrypted apps, social media and bespoke software.” It expresses concern that the Internet is “a largely ungoverned space in which users can share or be exposed to extremist material in the form of websites, videos, imagery, documents, posts, and discussions on subject-specific forums.”

Coverage of “What you might see and hear” focuses on circulation of material on encrypted apps and “individuals discussing ideological subjects with strangers on social media or the internet ... encouraging people to act on grievances ... Obtaining information from unevaluated sources.”

XR is described as a “protest and civil disobedience” campaign “to pressure governments to take action on climate change and species extinction.” The document acknowledges that XR is “non-violent against persons,” but listed as a threat because of an “anti-establishment philosophy that seeks system change.”

XR has advocated various forms of localism in production and political organisation while seeking to bolster the authority of national governments, portraying them as potential allies against global corporations. But even advocacy of “green capitalism” is considered beyond the pale by governments, which recognise the mounting social discontent that lies beneath them.

This document insists on political conformity and the impermissibility of criticising capitalism. It warns, for example, of “people speaking strong or emotive terms about environmental issues like ... fracking.”

The release of the police document follows a report year by the government's Commission for Countering Extremism which condemned large sections of the "left" as "extremist." It denounced the way "revolutionary workerist ideas" have fuelled sympathy for "violent extremist tactics."

These categories are deliberately broad and flexible. The CTPSE document advises looking out for students who "may neglect to attend school" to join protests, reserving particular attention for those who "express admiration for those arrested for protest activity." Non-violent demonstrations—sit-down protests, graffiti, blockades—are listed as matters of concern.

Much of the official response to the revelation has been to defend the government's Prevent programme, which forces teachers and other public sector workers to report signs of "radicalisation." Prevent has been heavily criticised since its introduction in 2003, with human rights groups noting it is "stifling freedom of expression," breaching children's right to privacy, and intimidating, victimising and profiling Muslim children.

Last October civil liberties' organisation Liberty noted that a police database with full access to Prevent records was "being used to monitor and control communities." It offered information on the political thoughts and beliefs of thousands of people. Retired doctor Lyn Jenkins, for example, who suffers from claustrophobia, was referred to Prevent last year by his local NHS Trust after he discussed managing his condition in the event of arrest at XR protests.

Lord Carlile, the Liberal peer appointed by Theresa May's government to review Prevent but who subsequently stood down over claims of bias for his previous enthusiastic support for the programme, said of XR they "are not violent terrorists" but "disruptive campaigners." After making a distinction between "terrorism and protest," he added that XR was "mostly legitimate protest."

Carlile, an independent reviewer of terrorism legislation from 2001 to 2011, was defending Prevent and the police's right to mistaken judgment in "a very difficult area," where "errors of judgment are going to be made from time to time." Concern over Prevent's fate also came from its former head (2010-2015) Sir Peter Fahy. He said that moves like the CTPSE's risked eroding community confidence in the programme.

Fahy's remarks immediately triggered Patel's doubling down. She said Prevent's work was "based and calibrated upon risk." Where Fahy had made "one comment," she was looking at "a range of security risks."

She was unconcerned that, as she admitted, XR was not a terrorist organisation but "obviously a protest organisation." Everything "has to be based in terms of risk to the public, security risks, security threats ... based on information from

the police, and various intelligence that we will receive. That's the proper thing to do."

Blairite frontrunner for the Labour leadership, Sir Keir Starmer QC, defended XR's right to protest, but only within the context of reviewing Prevent, not abolishing it.

Starmer, as director of public prosecutions (DPP) 2010-2013, and head of the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), played a key role in the persecution and incarceration of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange after his arrest in 2010. When Sweden was seeking Assange's extradition on false sexual allegations, the CPS, under the DPP, opposed a lower court decision to release the journalist on bail. Starmer said that the CPS was acting "as agents of the government seeking extradition, in this case the Swedish government. These proceedings are brought as agents of the Swedish government."

Every section of the establishment is looking to restore confidence in Prevent to legitimise state surveillance of the population. Last year Metropolitan Police Assistant Commissioner Neil Basu, the country's senior counter-terrorism officer, described Prevent as "badly handled" but vital.

The placing of XR on an extremism list confirms the assessments of the Socialist Equality Party that the state is moving to strengthen its repressive apparatus ahead of major confrontations with the working class. This is the basis for its planned legislation to ban all-out strikes by workers in the "essential" transport sector, paving the way for bans against every section of workers whose role is deemed essential to the functioning of the economy.



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