

UK counter-terror Prevent scheme to downplay far-right threat and strengthen anti-Muslim scapegoating

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A row is underway in Britain's ruling Conservative Party over a soon-to-be-published review into the Prevent counter-terror scheme. It shines a light on the government's plans to double down on the scapegoating of Muslims and speed the establishment of a state surveillance infrastructure under the cover of combatting Islamic extremism. This is combined with efforts to downplay the danger of the far-right.

Originally commissioned in January 2019, the review has been subject to repeated delays. The latest is an argument between Home Secretary Suella Braverman and Communities Secretary Michael Gove, who will be responsible for the day-to-day administration of the scheme.

Braverman is reportedly concerned that the report is so unguarded in its denunciation of "extremist" organisations, or organisations supporting "extremist narratives", that the government will be hit with costly libel suits. She is insisting names are redacted. Gove wants the text released in full.

This is a minor difference between two ardent reactionaries. Braverman—who does not hesitate to demonise migrants, asylum lawyers and refugee advocacy groups—intends to smooth the implementation of the review's recommendations. Gove speaks for those who want as provocative a crusade as possible.

The review was set up by the government to prepare an onslaught on democratic rights. It was authored by William Shawcross, a fellow of the right-wing Policy Exchange thinktank and former director of the neo-conservative Henry Jackson Society. While director, he commented in 2012, "Europe and Islam is one of the greatest, most terrifying problems of our future. I think all European countries have vastly, very quickly growing Islamic populations."

Previously, Shawcross had described "Britain's humiliation" at the hands of an "immigration free-for-all" and a "bullying 'multicultural' ideology" which has "cosseted extremist Islamist preachers of hatred". He has referred to "Islamо-fascist" Muslims as a "vast fifth column" in Europe "who wish to destroy us."

A fervent supporter of the illegal invasion of Iraq, his 2011 book *Justice and the Enemy* perverts the post-WWII Nuremberg Trials of Nazi leaders into a grotesque defence of "the war on terror", extraordinary rendition and the use of torture in Guantanamo Bay.

Amnesty International and 16 other groups boycotted the review over Shawcross's involvement, publishing an open letter stating that "the UK government has no interest in conducting an objective and impartial review of" Prevent.

Shawcross was appointed after the government's first choice, Lord

Carlile, was forced to step down by a legal challenge led by Rights Watch UK over his "close ties with and publicly declared support for the Prevent strategy," in the words of rights group Liberty.

The Shawcross Review on Islamism and the far-right

Carlile and Shawcross were selected to defend and extend a discredited programme broadly seen for the attack on democratic rights it is, and to deal with the inconvenient fact—for the government—that the scheme is flagging up the growth of far-right, fascist forces.

According to leaked material from the review, Prevent is criticised for being too weak, with the report arguing, the scheme "too often bestows a status of victimhood on all who come into contact with it". In the words of the *Guardian*, shown the leaked text, "it says a more hardline approach should be taken towards Islamist extremism".

This means widening the focus of the programme to target broader sections of the population. The *Guardian* writes that Shawcross is critical of Prevent having "concentrated on proscribed organisations" while, in the report's extremely loose phrase, "ignoring Islamist narratives".

Among these is a complained-of campaign "driven by a number of Islamist groups to undermine and delegitimise Prevent", including by "stirring up grievance and mistrust" towards the scheme.

According to the *Telegraph*, the Shawcross report praises the current legal duty of school and other public sector workers to report people, including children, to the Prevent scheme as one which "works well", and "especially... in schools." It suggests extending the requirement to cover immigration officials and staff in job centres.

The report then takes aim at Prevent's alleged "double standard when dealing with extreme rightwing and Islamism". Shawcross writes that Islamist extremists are "severely under-represented" in referrals to Prevent because officials are putting a focus on right-wing extremism "above and beyond the actual threat it pose[s]." This is attributed to an effort to "try and fend off accusations" that Prevent is "stigmatising minority communities".

The latest figures, for the year to March 31, 2021, show 4,915 referrals to Prevent—1,333 of which were passed to a panel for consideration, with 688 taken on as cases. Of these cases, 46 percent related to "Extreme Right-Wing radicalisation", 30 percent "mixed,

unstable or unclear ideology”, and 22 percent “Islamist radicalisation”. Far-right cases have been the majority group for each of the last three years.

Among the more serious known cases are those of neo-Nazi former army driver Dean Morrice, sentenced for 18 years for possession of explosives and encouraging terrorist offences, and Daniel Wright, Liam Hall, Stacey Salmon and Samuel Whibley, sentenced to a total of more than 30 years for possession of a 3D printed gun and encouraging terrorism.

In explaining away these facts, Shawcross complains that Prevent’s view on right-wing extremism is “so broad it has included mildly controversial or provocative forms of mainstream, rightwing-leaning commentary” and that an internal report “listed a prominent Conservative politician and member of the Government as being among figures ‘associated with far-right sympathetic audiences’.”

Despite his intentions, this only confirms how the far-right are given succour by the political establishment and the media, centred on the government itself. Prevent was created with the deliberate aim of demonising Muslims while creating the apparatus for surveillance and intimidation against the working class. The idea that it is zealously overreaching against the right-wing is laughable. Rather, the extreme lurch to the right in “mainstream” politics and the media has brought it within the peripheral view of the scheme and forced a series of reluctant acknowledgements.

Boris Johnson’s leadership of the Tory Party earned it the endorsement of fascist group Britain First and fascist activist Tommy Robinson. Leading Tory Jacob Rees-Mogg had already received a promise of “protection” from Britain First members in 2018. He has spoken at the annual dinner of the Traditional Britain group, whose founder, Lord Sudeley, praised Adolf Hitler at a meeting of the Tory Monday Club, adding, “the fact may be that some races are superior to others.”

In 2020, top Tory adviser Dominic Cummings hired eugenicist Andrew Sabisky into the government, whose Social Darwinist views had been publicly expressed by senior Tory figures before.

In 2019, Rees-Mogg was one of several leading Tories to endorse an announcement by Turning Point—McCarthyite witch-hunters of left-wing students and academics—that it intended to set up operations in the UK. Its founding event was attended by the UK editors of *Breitbart* and InfoWars.

Preparation for state repression

Shawcross’s review is intended to help sweep all this back under the carpet and “refocus” the Prevent scheme on its intended objectives. Doing so is made more urgent for the ruling class by the escalation of social and international tensions to a height not seen for decades—an international strike wave and war with Russia.

Prevent now dovetails with the state-backed “left antisemitism” campaign, driven by the same concerns, outlawing anti-Zionism by branding it anti-Jewish hatred. A sympathy with the Palestinians will presumably be labelled an extremist “Islamist narrative”, as well as anti-Semitic.

The real guiding principles of both policies were set out in 2019—the year the Prevent review was ordered—in a report published by the UK government’s Commission for Countering Extremism (CCE), which

declared large sections of the left “extremist” in clear preparation for a campaign of state repression.

For now, this proceeds indirectly, under the cover of Prevent and combatting anti-Semitism. However, in February last year the government ordered a review of “left-wing extremism” headed by John Woodcock, Baron Walney—the former Blairite Labour MP who resigned in 2018 protesting a “left” takeover of the party under Jeremy Corbyn.

This is a closely coordinated state campaign, with the Labour Party intimately involved. The CCE is headed by Robin Simcox, who controls the Counter Extremism Group (CEG) think-tank which hosted Gove and Shawcross this September.

In April 2020, Shawcross was part of a consortium which bought the *Jewish Chronicle*—a publication so committed to slandering Corbyn supporters as anti-Semites that it has had to pay significant damages in libel suits. The consortium included Woodcock, along with former Prime Minister Theresa May’s director of communications Robbie Gibb and John Ware, the producer of the hatchet job “investigation” *Is Labour Anti-Semitic?*

Woodcock was rewarded by Boris Johnson for his attacks on the Labour “left” with a peerage and appointed as his Independent Adviser on Political Violence and Disruption. His political biography is near identical to that of John Mann, now leading the “left anti-Semitism” witch-hunt.

Across all these operations, planned attacks on the left are coupled with covering for the far-right—and directed by individuals with deeply reactionary political connections. Simcox, as reported by the *Byline Times*, has spoken at the extreme right-wing Center for Immigration Studies, which was named a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Centre, and Heritage Foundation.

Woodcock, on a 2017 trip to Turkey, praised President Recep Erdo?an’s “fight against terrorism” and met with members of the far-right Nationalist Movement Party.

A warning of the dangers presented to the working class by these developments is provided by events in Germany, where the Socialist Equality Party (Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei) was placed and remains on the watchlist of the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (Verfassungsschutz), named as a “left-wing extremist” organisation. This was done under the direction of Hans-Georg Maassen, a man intimately connected to the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party.

In the court case taken by the Socialist Equality Party against the German government, the government has been forced to effectively admit its intention to re-establish the anti-socialist laws of Imperial and Nazi Germany.



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