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Spooks?

Introduction: Education or surveillance?

In outlining the origins and development of the *Prevent* strategy from its launch in October 2006 onwards, Chapter 3 also highlighted its most contentious aspects. The most enduring criticism, which has dogged *Prevent* throughout its short life, is the charge that this supposedly ‘hearts and minds’ approach is actually a front for large-scale state surveillance of, spying on, British Muslim communities. Such a charge is a very serious one, not only because it implies significant dishonesty by the state and its employees who are designing and implementing *Prevent* but also because it risks damaging the flow of ‘human intelligence’ from within Muslim communities that is most likely to defeat the threat of Islamist violent extremism. Indeed, international analysis of how positive counter-radicalisation programmes can be developed suggests that, at all costs, states must avoid ‘securitising’ their relationship with specific communities within their population, such an approach being fatal to the prospects of gaining meaningful intelligence.¹ The laying of that spying charge, particularly through the *Spooked* report by Arun Kundnani and the IRR, the media coverage of that charge, and its consideration by the House of Commons CLG Select Committee Inquiry were all highlighted in Chapter 3. However, the gravity of the charge and its potential impact on *Prevent*’s success means that it must be analysed in greater depth, and that is what this chapter attempts to do. First, it must be acknowledged that *Prevent* is just one of the four elements of the overall CONTEST counterterrorism strategy. Any reasonable person would expect the state to be engaged in surveillance and intelligence gathering designed to counter planned terrorist operations within that CONTEST strategy, and holding a rigid demarcation between the different CONTEST elements may not always be realistic or possible.

Indeed, Chapter 5 highlighted precisely those dilemmas within the *Prevent* strategy to date over how bodies such as local authorities, YOTs and universities, who have been implementing *Prevent*, should relate to the Police and Security Services. Sir David Omand, the architect of both the overall CONTEST strategy and the *Prevent* element within it, commented to the APPGHS in 2010 that ‘you can’t divide government in two, into those people that go around spying on the population, and there are another lot of people going round to the population and they just don’t talk to each other. It just simply doesn’t work like that’.² Omand was even blunter in an interview given to the *Financial Times* weeks before that,

when he suggested that it would be naïve of the state to not use any intelligence from community-based *Prevent* activities, in the face of a very serious terrorist threat.³ The key issue here, though, is whether any such intelligence is gained in ways that encourages people within Muslim communities to offer information in the future. Here, it has to be acknowledged that even if the allegations of an underhand Pursue ‘creep’ into *Prevent*, as this chapter discusses below, are overblown, actions carried out as part of Pursue can have negative impacts on *Prevent* activity. An obvious example of such dangers came in 2005, when a large-scale, anti-terror raid on a family home in Forest Gate, East London led to the accidental shooting and wounding of one man, but no criminal charges: ‘left in the aftermath would be damaged lives, poisoned community relations, and hysteria over the extent of terrorism in the United Kingdom.’⁴ Alongside that damaging episode came the government attempt to pass what became the Terrorism Act 2006 and its original proposal for 90 days pre-charge detention, a measure blatantly at odds with Britain’s legal traditions, and one which led to the biggest defeat in the House of Commons for a sitting government since 1978.

Despite the damaging public relations impacts of mishandled raids that have often yielded no charges, and proposed legislation that has only inflamed British Muslim public opinion, the importance of the Pursue arm of CONTEST cannot be downplayed. The coalition government’s review of *Prevent* published in June 2011 highlighted that, at the time of writing, 115 terrorism offenders were imprisoned in the United Kingdom, 79 of them were associated with Islamist violent extremism, and other Islamist radicals were imprisoned for other charges. This is despite the Glasgow Airport car bombing attack of June 2007 being the only Islamist attack carried out since 7/7, and that only injuring the perpetrators. Bleich (2010: 74) comments that ‘the British state has thus shown itself to be aggressive in surveillance, arrests, convictions and control of suspected Islamist extremist in a way that has undoubtedly saved lives and provided a significant deterrent to acts of violence’. This context needs to be borne in mind as allegations of spying within *Prevent* activity are considered. The chapter begins by detailing the role, and significant growth, of the Security Services and police in and around *Prevent*, including the role of the RICU and the controversial Metropolitan Police MCU. It then examines the allegations of ‘spying’ outlined in *Spooked* and their amplification by the media and the Select Committee Inquiry, alongside government’s response.

CONTEST and the growth of the security state

Whilst Chapter 1 outlined the reality and scale of the Islamist terror threat facing Britain, Chapter 3 indicated that Britain’s Security and Police Services were underprepared to respond, both in terms of understanding and dedicated resources. Whilst the CONTEST strategy of 2003 marked the start of a response,

the extent to which the state was behind the game was illustrated on 6th July, the day before the 7/7 bombings, when the head of MI5, Dame Eliza Manningham-Buller, told a committee of senior Labour MPs that there was no imminent terror threat to Britain.⁵ The Security Service (MI5) had started to respond to the threat of Islamist violent extremism only after the Madrid bombings of 2004 and was still scrambling to come to terms with new realities at the time of the London attacks. The revelation that 7/7 had been perpetrated by four young men from West Yorkshire led to MI5 changing direction: 'admitting that counter-terrorism was too London-centric, the security service began an effort to establish regional offices around the country to work more closely with Police forces.'⁶ MI5 has subsequently developed nine regional offices across the United Kingdom, with the eventual aim of 25 per cent of the agency's staff being based outside of London.⁷ Alongside this has come a significant growth and reconfiguration of counterterrorism policing, with an underlying drive for national integration and coordination. A new Counter-Terrorism Command (SO15) came into existence in October 2006, working closely with the multiagency JTAC established in 2003. The OSCT was established in 2007 at national government level, designed to overcome cross-departmental confusion, The Police Special Branch subsequently received more funding to establish eight regional 'intelligence' centres and four regional counter-intelligence 'hubs' in Birmingham, Leeds, Manchester and the Thames Valley in addition to the existing Metropolitan Police anti-terrorism unit. These CTUs bring MI5 staff together with dedicated counterterrorism police officers and involve liaison with individual police force staff including their identified *Prevent* officers. Gregory (2010) identifies how MI5 staff within the CTUs have directed Special Branch officers to engage more with local Muslim communities, something that has inevitably happened in and around the *Prevent* strategy: 'this joint effort is known as the "Rich Picture" approach.'⁸ A BBC News feature on the establishment of the Greater Manchester CTU 'hub' in April 2007 suggested that it would have as many as 350 police staff, working alongside MI5 and other security services, and including 'vetted' interpreters, as 'officers admit that engagement is not currently strong enough and "hearts and minds" too must be won'.⁹

The scale of the challenge for MI5 and the police in trying to understand the threat of people within British Muslim communities attracted towards Islamist violent extremism is shown by the fact that for MI5 'only 6% of its members were drawn from ethnic minorities at the end of 2006',¹⁰ so making the traditional tactic of the infiltration of subversive groups much more difficult, whilst the Metropolitan Police only had 8 per cent of their officers from non-white ethnic minority backgrounds. This knowledge deficit explains the call made by the recently retired Manningham-Buller in July 2007 to recruit a network of 'Muslim spies' to generate much-needed human intelligence¹¹ but arguably also indicates why the authorities would be keen to take any opportunities that *Prevent* offers to gather information.

Since 2007, and additional to the developments outlined above, *Prevent* has led to the Home Office 'providing additional funding to establish over three hundred new police posts across the country dedicated to *Prevent*',¹² spread across 24 forces, with the aim of this fitting within the ongoing development nationally of neighbourhood policing teams. This has included 80 counterterrorism intelligence officers, although funding for them ceased in April 2011 in response to the 'spying' allegations, according to the 2011 *Prevent* review. For some critics, this very substantial growth in staffing numbers within both the police and security services is evidence of state agencies making the most of the 'terror threat' for their own agency purposes.¹³ Individual police forces have received funding for *Prevent* coordinators, and 'this network has been supported by new *Prevent* engagement officers (PEOs) who connect counterterrorism policing, neighbourhood policing and communities'.¹⁴ The implications of this large-scale police presence within *Prevent* are discussed below, but the fact that 30 per cent of these 321 *Prevent* officers nationally have been from black and minority ethnic backgrounds is relevant to the issue of Police/Security Service ignorance of Muslim communities highlighted above. The Metropolitan Police Service planned to have 93 officers in *Prevent* posts by the end of 2010/11, and Gregory notes that a 2008 report to the Metropolitan Police Authority, in the early stages of the *Prevent* funding, 'makes very little reference to countering radicalisation but does emphasis the intelligence gathering aspect alongside community engagement'.¹⁵ The discussions in Chapter 5 of the tensions and confusions surrounding local implementation of *Prevent* highlighted the complicated relationship between local authorities and the police. Lowndes and Thorp (2010) found that the CTUs in their region of study were offering to 'screen' applications for *Prevent* funding from local Muslim community groups, and Gregory observes that 'within all these structures there is an inherent possibility for a conflict of interest or at least tension between the *Prevent* and Pursue elements of CONTEST'.¹⁶

Even allowing for the possibility that intelligence gathering or 'spying' is one of the key objectives for the police, it is questionable whether such a significant expansion in the number of dedicated *Prevent* police personnel, many of whom are highly visible and wearing police uniform whilst carrying out their roles, is the most effective use of resources supposedly dedicated to 'hearts and minds' terrorism prevention work. Measuring meaningful progress or success for such work is very difficult, and the commitment given by government in the June 2011 *Prevent* review to downsize the police role within *Prevent* can be seen as reflective of that. There have been examples of creative work that *Prevent* police personnel on the preventative and engagement sides, rather than the intelligence sides, of the activity can achieve. One initiative has been 'Operation Nicole' and the subsequent 'Act Now' tabletop simulation exercises originally devised by Lancashire Constabulary. These enable front-line professionals and Muslim community representatives to experience how the police have to react

to the rapidly developing facts and circumstances of a simulated terrorist plot, hopefully not only building greater civilian understanding of the police's role and responsibilities in such circumstances but also how radicalisation can lead certain individuals rapidly down the path towards acts of violent extremism. Another innovative example was the Metropolitan Police's MCU. This short-lived and controversial police unit was a key example of the pragmatic 'means-based' *Prevent* approaches outlined in Chapter 4 that aim to work with radical but non-violent Islamists within the community to expose Islamists preaching violent extremism and deny them positions of influence where they can manipulate and recruit impressionable others. To Spalek and Lambert (2010), the latter of whom served as a key officer within the MCU, 'radicalisation is often conflated with violent extremism, and so those Muslims are often marginalised and excluded from policy-making processes'.¹⁷ Always a small-scale operation with between two and eight officers at any one time, the MCU focused on community engagement strategies of building dialogue and relationships of trust with non-violent Islamist groups and individuals in key areas. This centred particularly on Finsbury Park Mosque in north London and Brixton Mosque in south London, both dominated by advocates of violent extremism during the 1990s to the exclusion of other radicals opposed to any form of violence: 'at both of these sites, the partnership initiative was effective in securing its explicit purpose of countering the impact of al-Qaeda propaganda and recruitment activity within local Muslim communities.'¹⁸ This involved actively working with Salafists in Brixton and Islamist radicals associated with the Muslim Brotherhood at Finsbury Park, both of whom are seen as 'beyond the pale' for government engagement by the increasingly dominant 'values-based' national approach to *Prevent*, as Chapter 4 discussed. For the police officers within the MCU, they were trying to learn the lessons painfully learnt from contact with the London Irish community in a different era of keeping lines of dialogue open and not counterproductively stigmatising whole communities, but this MCU approach faced hostility and negativity both from other parts of the Metropolitan Police and from influential sections of Muslim communities, and was disbanded. Whether the state as a whole has learnt the lessons from the mainland Irish community experience in the way how it currently relates to Muslim communities in relation to counterterrorism is highly contested.¹⁹

RICU: Massaging the message?

Whilst the innovative, 'means-based' engagement approach of the MCU did not survive, government itself has been very careful, if not manipulative, over how it has actually communicated with the public in general and Muslim communities in particular. This has been best shown through the work of the

RICU, the introduction of which was highlighted in Chapter 3. A similar unit had previously been used by the British government to counter the propaganda of republicans in Northern Ireland. RICU has drawn on a staff of 35 from across a range of government departments, with some private sector expertise. The RICU's work has included weekly newsletters providing 'background to topical news stories and issues that resonate in communities', as well research into the attitudes and identity of young Muslims. For Charles Farr, director general of OSCT, 'a lot of the focus has been how you communicate the threat in and through Muslim communities in this country, what language is appropriate'.²⁰ These careful government calculations around language and its possible implications were shown in an early RICU briefing document from September 2007, *Counter-Terrorism Communications Guidance: Communicating Effectively with Community Audiences*. This highlighted that 'it is important to avoid implying that specific communities are to blame' and that 'terrorists operate in isolation from mainstream communities and are the enemies of all of us'.²¹ The document went on to detail 'top line CT messages' and 'detailed messages' that explained those 'top line' approaches. They included, 'Terrorism is not the product of any one religion or community'.²² In an appendix to the document, a 'Language Table' was provided which examined a number of possible government messages under the heading 'What Is Said', suggested how it might actually be understood by British Muslims under the heading 'What Is Heard', and suggested 'possible alternatives'. For instance, it suggested that a statement 'communities need to stand up to extremism/weed out terrorist sympathisers' would actually be heard as 'communities are to blame for extremism and are responsible for hiding terrorists in their midst'. It therefore proposed the alternative of 'we all share responsibility for tackling violent extremism, and there are specific tasks that communities can help us with'.²³ This highly pragmatic (and sensible), means-based approach was in clear contradiction to some of the headline 'values-based' statements by government ministers as *Prevent* was launched in 2006. In practice, the Labour government, particularly after Gordon Brown became prime minister in 2007, worked hard to avoid formulations such as Bush's meaningless 'war on terror' or 'Islamic terrorism' and instead stick to 'terrorism' or 'international terrorism' even though, as Chapter 3 highlights, Islamist violent extremism was the clear focus of strategies: 'British policy-making has been quite contradictory and conflicted in the extent to which it acknowledges the Muslim element of extremism and terrorism confronting the state'.²⁴ However much RICU has carefully constructed and massaged the government's public messages around *Prevent* and violent extremism, it cannot 'sell' politically distrusted messages, as the Association of Police Authorities acknowledged in its evidence to the CLG Select Committee Inquiry. The coalition government accepted in its *Prevent* review of June 2011 that RICU's results had been mixed to date but the lesson learnt from this seemed to be the wrong one.

In line with its broader and arguably ill-advised lurch in the direction of 'values-based' judgements of wider religious and political attitudes within Muslim communities, the government stated that 'going forward, we will want to emphasise the connection between extremist and terrorist ideologies'.²⁵ That suggests that RICU will need to draw up a significantly different type of 'language table'.

Spooked: Allegations and responses

The very significant growth and development of the police presence within *Prevent* between 2008 and 2011 has been highly controversial, in itself suggestive to many observers, as discussed more fully below, that this is overwhelmingly a surveillance and intelligence-gathering operation. However, if that was the intention, the coalition government seems unsure of its benefits: 'We believe that some *Prevent* police funding has also been spent on initiatives primarily intended to build resilience and promote cohesion'.²⁶ However, this revised *Prevent* strategy did go on to say that 'we believe the police understanding of Muslim communities has improved significantly as a result of *Prevent*' and that 'the police now talk regularly to mosques in a way that was very rare before 2005'.²⁷ Certainly, Gregory (2010) suggests that *Prevent* has emphasised community policing and dialogue, with a heavy focus on inter-agency contact in ways that have justifiably blurred traditional roles and demarcations but, exactly for that reason, has therefore given at least the appearance of being about intelligence gathering. Such blurring of roles is arguably inevitable within a counterterrorism strategy that attempts to include community development aspects as well as policing and security functions.²⁸

For some, particularly those already critical of the past Labour government's apparently offhand approach to civil liberties, its 'values-based' criticism of Muslim communities and its highly contentious foreign policy, *Prevent*'s significant growth in the numbers and functions of Police and Security Service personnel has been cover for the development of surveillance of Muslim communities. Anti-racist campaigners and the IRR think tank claimed that 'there is evidence that the *Prevent* programme has been used to establish one of the most elaborate systems of surveillance ever seen in Britain'.²⁹ Whilst this has been strongly denied by the government, the growth in Police and Security Service numbers is real and so, arguably, is an associated blurring of roles between education and policing, between security apparatus and local democratic accountability, and between the *Prevent* and Pursue arms of CONTEST. For Husband and Alam (2011), who have researched the implementation of *Prevent* by the five West Yorkshire local authorities, *Prevent*, through its police engagement officers and interface between CTUs

and local authorities, has allowed ‘the intrusive and insidious penetration of the protective state’s security activities into the domain that was traditionally occupied by community work or youth work, now covered by community cohesion’.³⁰ The resulting allegations of covert surveillance and intelligence gathering are discussed below, and whilst the actual evidence of them is contentious, the impression of it has taken firm hold, fuelled by political campaigning and media coverage.³¹

Certainly, the reality of police *Prevent* officers playing prominent roles in local *Prevent* boards and Gold, Silver and Bronze multiagency coordination committees, getting involved in what appears to be education and community work, and liaising overtly with further and higher education institutions, all of which was highlighted in Chapter 5, ‘has raised questions of police interference in the political relationships between local authorities and Muslim communities’.³² Indeed, some community-based organisations have felt that the police are actually in charge of this supposedly ‘hearts and minds’ *Prevent* programme at the local level:

The police are such key drivers at a local level together with your counterterrorism officers and the intelligence services; they become the funnel through which what is happening in the community is funnelled back to the government ... it is the police who are leading the agenda.³³

This is confirmed by Birmingham City Council, the largest single local authority recipient of *Prevent* funding nationally between 2008 and 2011: ‘Our delivery plan utilises intelligence from West Midlands Police (e.g. Counter-Terrorism Local Profile) in order to target funding and provision as necessary.’³⁴

It was in this context of a very significant Police and Security Service role within *Prevent*, and apparently within the local operation of it by local government and community groups, that allegations of ‘spying’ emerged. These were crystallised in the *Spooked: How Not to Prevent Violent Extremism* report written by Arun Kundnani, Director of the IRR, and which was published in October 2009. Whilst critics dismissed the report as propaganda from an undoubtedly left-wing think tank, *Spooked* was the product of a substantial and careful piece of field research that involved 32 face-to-face interviews with people involved in the local design and delivery of *Prevent* activity, a roundtable discussion held in Bradford, and the submission of a substantial number of freedom of information requests to local authorities. All of this was funded by the highly reputable Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, suggesting that the evidence and conclusions of *Spooked* should not be dismissed lightly. In addition, the allegations by the IRR had not come out of the blue; in a BBC TV ‘Panorama’ programme broadcast on 16th February 2009, journalist Richard Watson claimed a source ‘at the heart of the government’s counter-terrorism work’ believed that *Prevent* programmes were being used to gather intelligence and that intelligence analysts were in place. The OSCT completely

denied that allegation, as they did the allegations of Kundnani/IRR made later in 2009.³⁵

The allegations by Kundnani of spying within *Prevent* activity came within a broader critique of the very assumptions and starting points of the *Prevent* programme, with the clear suggestion that *Prevent* was having negative, counterproductive effects through its approach to Muslim communities:

Their 'hearts and minds' are now the target of an elaborate structure of surveillance, mapping, engagement and propaganda. *Prevent* has become, in effect, the government's 'Islam policy'.³⁶

For Kundnani, the well-meaning partnership basis of shared responsibility for confronting the ideology of violent extremism had not been lived up to by *Prevent* in practice. The suggestion here was that the interdepartmental battle and ongoing tensions identified in Chapter 5 over whether *Prevent* was mainly transparent community engagement led by DCLG or a much harder edged and only partially visible policing and intelligence-gathering programme run by the Home Office/OSCT had clearly been won by the latter, with the result being community-based activities that were not what they seemed. The broader critiques of *Spooked* echoed many of the points raised in Chapter 4, such as the contradiction to community cohesion, the fact that *Prevent* locally was often working through precisely the older and conservative 'gatekeeper' community leaders that government policy had long seen as problematic, and that Muslim community groups were, in practice, being funded for mainstream activities such as improvements in mosque schools by funding programmes specifically concerned with anti-terrorism.

Within that broader context, the concerns over surveillance activity in *Prevent* focused on the involvement of *Prevent* police officers throughout the funding, planning and even implementation of local, DCLG-funded *Prevent* work, and what exactly the balance between intelligence gathering and community engagement therefore was in the programme. This fear of surveillance has been heightened by the greater involvement of police officers in education-based *Prevent* activities that would be normally seen as the territory of youth and community workers:

A significant part of the prevent programme is the embedding of counter-terrorism police officers within the delivery of other local services. The implication of teachers and youth, community and cultural workers in information-sharing undercuts professional norms of confidentiality.³⁷

For Kundnani, this suggested that there had been a counterproductive blurring of the line between *Prevent* and Pursue. *Spooked* found some blatant evidence of such a blurring: 'A West Midlands Police counter-terrorism officer has been permanently seconded to the equality and diversity division of Birmingham City Council to manage its *Prevent* work. He is supported by

two workers, a young person's development officer and a researcher/analyst, whose posts are directly funded by the OSCT.³⁸ Whilst such an arrangement may have been exceptional nationally, the more mundane 'embedding' of *Prevent* police officers raised serious issues, both of ethics and effectiveness, for Kundnani's respondents.

Many of these ethical issues were first identified in Chapter 5 and revolve around appropriate roles and responsibilities, and who shares what 'intelligence' with whom. Problematic features of *Prevent* activity in this regard have included the desire of the Police/Security Service side to 'security check' organisations and individuals involved in *Prevent* community-based delivery, even if those individuals already work for reputable organisations such as local authorities. Delivery agencies, such as local authority Youth Services, have been asked to sign Information Sharing Agreements that cover briefings given to their senior officers that they are then obliged to keep confidential from their own staff. The Channel initiative is discussed below, including how this inevitably led to requests that local agencies report the names of and concerns over individuals deemed to be vulnerable to radicalisation to local *Prevent* boards or so-called 'Silver Groups'. More broadly than that, many of the *Spooked* respondents who were engaged in youth and community work recounted being asked by *Prevent* police staff for the names, movements and attitudes of young people they worked with. For instance, one youth project manager from London commented that he was asked 'to give information about the general picture, right down to which street corners young people from different backgrounds are hanging around on, what mosques they go to, and so on'.³⁹ Such requests seem to have been part of the 'mapping' approach to the gathering of 'Rich Picture' intelligence outlined above, with the result being, in Kundnani's view, that community organisations and individual local authority youth and community work staff were increasingly wary of what was being asked of them. *Spooked* quotes a specific allegation of intimidation of five youth workers in Camden, north London by MI5 officers as part of efforts to recruit them as informers.⁴⁰ At the same time, local authorities have felt that information flows within *Prevent* are one way only, with them expected to pass intelligence on, but CTUs and police not willing to pass anything the other way, often claiming that local authority chief executives did not have the right 'clearance'.⁴¹ Arguably, these concerns demonstrate a naivety about the way community interaction and security aspects of counterterrorism strategies will inevitably interact, as the Northern Ireland experience indicates.⁴²

Kundnani acknowledges that, at ground level, positive community cohesion-based youth and community work has been developing over the past few years, and that some of this activity continued with *Prevent* funding, but 'under the radar', in the initial stages of the programme. However, as the Police and Security Service structures outlined above became established and 'embedded' within *Prevent*, such creativity and flexibility within community-based programmes

became increasingly difficult. For the respondents quoted in *Spooked*, this increasingly assertive Police/Security Service role in *Prevent* was not just ethically wrong but tactically misguided. One northern respondent commented of the police that ‘they don’t seem to understand that their engagement fails because they do not have legitimacy and trust within the community’.⁴³ This British *Prevent* approach to the role of the Police and Security Services in actual counter-radicalisation work is in contrast to the approach adopted in the Netherlands, where ‘the domestic intelligence service has played a very limited role in outreach and engagement and considers its principal task to be that of supporting interventions that deal with “very radicalised people”’,⁴⁴ in the Dutch version of the Channel programme. Whilst the British government might argue that the objective of such high-profile *Prevent* policing has been to build relationships of trust with Muslim communities and professionals, the evidence from *Spooked* is that this has been counterproductively heavy-handed. The argument here is *not* that the police do not have a legitimate counterterrorism role to play but whether that such an overt involvement in funding and monitoring *Prevent* activity, and increasingly even delivering it to young people and community groups, is effective or rather whether it is counterproductive through the unhelpful blurring of professional roles and their proper boundaries. Local authorities clearly feel that this police involvement has unhelpfully blurred the distinction between *Prevent* (education and community development-based activity) and Pursue (necessary surveillance and policing interventions) with this having a counterproductive effect: ‘there is a danger that the levels of suspicion and mistrust around *Prevent* could be used as a tool by those elements who seek to undermine cohesion.’⁴⁵

Arguably, the future downsizing of the police role in *Prevent* announced by the coalition government in June 2011 implicitly accepts that point. That subsequent action is not surprising, given the Conservative Party reaction to the publication of *Spooked* in October 2009. Conservative shadow security minister Pauline Neville-Jones, writing in a newspaper article, saw such allegations as symptomatic of Labour’s approach to *Prevent*, an approach that confused intelligence and community engagement within one programme to the detriment of counterterrorism.⁴⁶

With *The Guardian* newspaper prominently highlighting the *Spooked* allegations⁴⁷ and Labour backbench MPs questioning the government’s approach at the same time as this Conservative Party criticism, it truly felt that *Prevent* with its approach at the time was friendless. Charles Farr, director general of OSCT, acknowledged the damage done to involvement of communities in *Prevent* by these allegations despite the government’s rebuttal of them, when giving evidence to the CLG Select Committee Inquiry:

I find the reasons for their not wanting to engage are rooted in the misrepresentations which *Prevent* suffered from notably in the articles that

The Guardian ran, to some degree based on the IRR report by Kundnani ... When we talk to people who do not want anything to do with Prevent, I find that they do not want anything to do with a mythical construct of Prevent which does not exist and is not part of the strategy.⁴⁸

Indeed, Farr's explicit position in his Select Committee evidence was that the reality of *Prevent*, especially since the advent of Counter-Terrorism Local Plans that provide detailed intelligence briefings to local authorities and their partners, was quite the opposite to that implied by the 'spying allegations: the direction of the information, intelligence if you will, regarding the *Prevent* programme is from the police and from the security agencies into local authorities'.⁴⁹ John Denham, the minister for CLG, was also forthright in his denial of the 'spying' allegations in an interview on BBC Radio 4's 'Today' programme on 8th December 2009:

Alan Johnston (the then Home Secretary) and I instructed there to be an investigation into every single one of those allegations that have been made ... not a single one of those allegations stood up ... I have got to say, up until now this is exactly the sort of thing I want to deal with today – the idea that this is happening up and down the country when actually there is no evidence that it is.

As Robert Lambert and Jonathan Githens-Mazer highlighted, a number of these 'untrue' allegations in *Spooked*, including the Camden youth workers issue detailed above, were already a matter of public record, and that it was entirely unclear how the government had quickly concluded that there was no substance in these very serious charges: 'Given that the nature of the allegations hinges on a lack of trust, assuring members of British Muslim communities that these allegations are all false without providing an authoritative account of their investigation is problematic: it ignores community perceptions of the problem and the situation – and does little to alleviate fears or concerns.'⁵⁰ Despite that assertion, the CLG Select Committee expressed considerable concern about the allegations raised by *Spooked* and by others, focusing heavily on issues of surveillance in their oral evidence sessions. Their resulting report concluded that

We believe that the misuse of terms like 'spying' and 'intelligence gathering' amongst Prevent partners has exacerbated the problem. We recommend that the Government take urgent steps to clarify how information required under *Prevent* does not constitute 'intelligence gathering' of the type undertaken by the police or security services. ... we cannot ignore the volume of evidence we have seen and heard which demonstrates a continuing lack of trust of the programme amongst those delivering and receiving services ... If the Government wants to improve confidence in the *Prevent* programme, it should commission an independent investigation into the allegations made.⁵¹

The government rejected that call for an Inquiry, and with the General Election campaign commencing shortly after the report's publication, official response did

not come until the 2011 revised *Prevent* strategy from the coalition government. That review stated, 'There have been allegations that previous *Prevent* programmes have been used to spy on communities. We can find no evidence to support these claims. *Prevent* must not be used as a means for covert spying on people or communities. Trust in *Prevent* must be improved.'⁵² That went alongside the pledge that 'government will not securitise its integration strategy. This has been a mistake in the past'.⁵³ Obviously, the proof or otherwise of this will come as the new *Prevent* strategy is operationalised, but the retrenchment of *Prevent* into the Home Office/OSCT, so separating counterterrorism, even of the 'hearts and minds' variety, from cohesion and integration work of the DCLG, as the Select Committee Inquiry recommended, is a positive starting point. However, this still begs questions as to the basis and objective of future community-based *Prevent* activity in the 25 target areas, especially given the assertive, 'values-based' rhetoric that accompanied the launch of the revised *Prevent* strategy.

Channel: A way forward?

Perhaps the most open and obvious *Prevent* interaction between CTU/police and local authorities has been through the so-called 'Channel' initiative, an approach of identification and early intervention with young people viewed as vulnerable to radicalisation and manipulation by violent extremism. Channel began in 2008, with *The Times* highlighting that 'eight areas of the country identified as potential breeding grounds for violent extremism are to start government-funded "intervention programmes" to prevent susceptible individuals from being radicalised'.⁵⁴ The article portrayed Channel as an acceptance by the police that hard-edged Pursue arrests alone could not address the threat of violent extremism. Two pilot projects, in Preston, Lancashire and Lambeth, south London had run from 2007, being then extended to further eight areas in 2008. Five of those new sites were in West Yorkshire, with a police *Prevent* officer interviewed in 2008 for the Kirklees *Prevent* evaluation commenting at the time that 'it's a project called Channel, it's run by the government but only in certain areas of the country ... to see how we can engage the community, build trust and confidence and prevent certain groups trying to promote extremism'. Ian Larder, the ACPO leader of the Channel initiative nationally, was quoted by *The Times* as saying, 'it may be theological discussion is needed, or they need mentoring. The project reflects the need to address the problems in our communities. We are asking the community to work with the police and statutory agencies to stop people that have been identified as displaying strange behaviour becoming violent extremists.'⁵⁵

CONTEST 2, which was published in 2009, identified Channel operating in 11 areas, with a further 15 planned; by June 2011 the government highlighted

that 'Channel now covers about 75 local authorities and 12 Police forces'.⁵⁶ Chapter 3 outlined the significant number of people who had already gone through Channel by then, 1,120 in total, the large majority of them young people. The local *Prevent* multiagency arrangements of 'Gold', 'Silver' and 'Bronze' liaison and coordination groups provide the mechanism for Channel to operate, with individual agencies identifying and 'nominating' young people viewed as being 'at risk' of radicalisation, with those young people then referred on via the 'Bronze' group arrangements to a variety of agencies, such as youth work, housing, social work or faith-based organisations, who offer packages of educational, diversionary or specifically de-radicalisation, activity.

Arguably, the analogies repeatedly made by government ministers between *Prevent* and policies of diversion from knife crime, or hard drug use, 'crime prevention' work as then minister John Denham put it in 2009, are most convincing in relation to Channel. This is because the Channel approach has used locally agreed assessment criteria to identify 'at risk' individuals and respond with intervention packages in a targeted way, unlike the large-scale and unfocused youth activities representing the vast majority to date of *Prevent* work funded via local authorities. In its evidence to the CLG Select Committee, ACPO highlighted the fact that 7/7 bomber Hasib Hussain had drawn graffiti in support of Bin-Laden and the 9/11 attacks on his exercise books whilst at high school in Leeds. Similarly, Germaine Lindsay attempted to access radical Islamist websites whilst at high school in Huddersfield, and in both cases ACPO suggests that referrals to a process such as Channel might have made a difference to their subsequent trajectories.

In its organisation and approach, Channel has drawn heavily on the experience of multiagency approaches to child protection or 'safeguarding', as modern governmental jargon describes it, involving what the CLG Select Committee saw as justifiable information sharing: 'It should be acknowledged that the sharing of personal information in the interests of crime prevention, or to protect vulnerable people, is sometimes necessary.'⁵⁷ However, the Select Committee went on to say that during their Inquiry process, 'it became clear that the Channel project epitomised many witnesses' concerns of "spying" about the involvement of the police in the delivery of public services'.⁵⁸ Charles Farr, director general of the OSCT, had firmly rejected the allegations of spying and inappropriate police involvement in his oral evidence to the Committee, saying that a referral to Channel was actually a way of helping people avoid criminalising themselves. For Farr, Channel was a clear success, enabling government to create 'support networks ... which can identify people who look as they are being drawn into the world of violent extremism and providing them with some sort of intervention'.⁵⁹ However, the fact is that local Channel coordinators who refer young people on to providers are overwhelmingly *Prevent* police officers. This does beg a number of important questions around civil liberties, though, particularly over whether any state

has the right to intervene over the political or religious views expressed by a young person, no matter how vulnerable, before any criminal action, or planning towards one, has actually taken place. An American report on how their counter-radicalisation work can become more coherent bluntly concluded that ‘aggressive, government-run intervention and de-radicalisation programs, such as the Channel project in the UK, would be rejected as too intrusive in the American context’.⁶⁰ This civil liberties dilemma for the local British agencies charged with actually implementing *Prevent* generally, and Channel in particular, was highlighted by a senior manager in Kirklees council in West Yorkshire, who suggested that Channel represented an acceptable compromise:

We had a massive debate politically around how far do you take this in terms of people’s rights to be extreme and rights to have quite extreme views, and that very, very productive kind of debate that you can have when people are being a little bit extreme ... But we did manage to get some political consensus about when people are vulnerable and how it can then be used to radicalise them to much more violent extremism if you like, and when it spills out then that will have an impact on cohesion and even on crime.⁶¹

The government justified and sharpened the focus of the intervention approach of Channel in June 2011 by stating that local tendencies to sometime steer ‘people towards Channel who may have been perceived as potentially vulnerable in some broader sense, rather than specifically at risk of being drawn into terrorism’ and that ‘these trends need to be corrected’.⁶² It stretches credulity, however, to imagine that the 290 under-16-year-olds, and the 55 under-12-year-olds referred nationally to Channel between April 2009 and December 2010 really fit that apparently tight definition of suitability. The development of the ‘Channel’ initiative within *Prevent* has been seen as progress by many, both locally and nationally, because Channel works with much smaller numbers of ‘at risk’ young people in a more targeted and intelligence-led way. However, this may well simply be a smaller scale surveillance or ‘fishing expedition’ in that there is little hard academic evidence as to how those genuinely at risk of involvement in ‘violent extremism’ can be identified in advance, so adding to doubts over the whole role of, and significant resource allocation to, the police within *Prevent*. Despite very close government investigation of those Britons to date involved in Islamist terror plots, ‘the security services can identify neither a uniform pattern by which a process occurs nor a particular type that is susceptible’.⁶³ The danger here is that ‘fact-based’ profiles of susceptibility overestimate individual political views and underestimate the processes of mentor–disciple relationships and peer group operations that can tip individuals quite rapidly towards violence, and that predicting this in advance is very difficult, as Chapter 1 highlighted. Kundnani identifies such concerns over the actual targeting of Channel in *Spooked*, quoting one of his practitioner respondents as saying, ‘Badly behaved

young persons who happen to be Muslim or who have said something in anger then become known to the system as “at risk”.⁶⁴ This highlights real concerns over the skills and understandings of those involved in the Channel referral and ‘intervention’ work. This is also highlighted by Fahid Qurashi, who comments, ‘Through my own research, I have found that teachers have repeatedly and wrongly referred young Muslim students for a Channel intervention over such trivial issues as enquiring about halal food, and prayer facilities in schools. Yet the new strategy seems to be oblivious of this kind of fallout.’⁶⁵

It is also clear that, in practice, Channel has worked with a significant number of people who are *not* at danger of extremist Islamist radicalisation but who are vulnerable to other sorts of political extremism, such as racism or even far-right racist political activity.⁶⁶ The *Prevent* review of June 2011 stated that ‘Channel needs to deal with all types of terrorism’,⁶⁷ so mirroring the reality of *Prevent* practice by YOTs analysed in Chapter 5. This might be seen as helpful flexibility but also as evidence that the long-standing government insistence that *Prevent* does not deal with other, non-Islamist forms of violent extremism because they are *not* international or organised in nature is more about rhetoric than reality. However, in keeping with the ‘values-based’ tone of the June 2011 *Prevent* review, the government stated that ‘*Prevent* will not fund interventions providers who promote extremist ideas or beliefs’.⁶⁸ As Chapter 4 highlighted, it may be precisely such radical Islamist groups with perspectives based on Salafism, or the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood, who are best equipped to dissuade young Muslim radicals away from violent extremism, but the government will not now countenance their involvement. If such law-abiding Islamist groups are not allowed to play a role in *Prevent*’s de-radicalisation efforts via Channel, it is far from clear who *will* have the credibility and convincing theology-based arguments to persuade radicalised young Muslims in more constructive, law-abiding directions.

Conclusion: Perception is everything?

Whether or not ‘spying’ in any meaningful sense, in a greater degree than is normal in existing community-based policing approaches, is really central to *Prevent*, this perception has taken hold to a very significant degree, as Charles Farr and the OSCT acknowledge, and it is arguably a case of shooting the messenger to blame *Spooked* and its resulting press coverage. The bungled terror raids and draconian attempts to limit civil liberties in the name of counterterrorism outlined above had already created a climate of distrust, especially in some Muslim communities experiencing negative wider relationships with the police and the state. It was always difficult, perhaps impossible, to maintain clear demarcation between the Pursue policing and *Prevent* ‘hearts and minds’

approaches to community engagement within the CONTEST strategy: ‘there is an inevitable tension in relation to the community-oriented multiagency “soft” policing engagement with Muslim communities, under *Prevent*, and the more “hard” policing requirement of intelligence gathering, under the lead of MI5, investigations and arrests under Pursue, with its focus on stopping terrorist attacks.’⁶⁹ In addition, the Labour government’s well-meaning approach to *Prevent* of trying to foster partnership and shared responsibility for the issues arguably has muddied the waters further, particularly around the role of the police, who have found themselves in their *Prevent* activities stuck between those ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ roles. In an article on *Prevent* written in the early stages of its implementation,⁷⁰ I suggested that *Prevent* was ‘between two stools’, and that has certainly been true of the policing aspect of the programme. Here, precisely through attempts to engage both with local communities and with the key statutory and voluntary sector agencies delivering *Prevent*, the police have been encouraged by politicians and the Security Services directing CONTEST and *Prevent* to stray unhelpfully well beyond their normal roles into functions, such as direct engagement with young people, involved for instance in youth provision. In itself, this was bound to raise issues of appropriacy and boundaries, and the fact that it has been done through an explicitly anti-terrorism programme made allegations of surveillance inevitable. As a recent American report on approaches to effective counter-radicalisation suggests, ‘none of the agencies that are mainly concerned with counter-terrorism should be seen to play a dominant role in counter-radicalisation’.⁷¹ Of course, the police should build dialogue and stronger relationships of trust with British Muslim communities, but it shouldn’t need a counterterrorism programme to enable this.

Clearly, high levels of vigilance are needed against further Islamist terror plots, but the question here is whether a crude *Prevent* focus on Muslim communities as a whole, steered overtly by the police and security forces in an effort to ‘spot’ likely terrorists, will really be effective, or it may even be counterproductive because of the suspicions and distrust this approach engenders among ordinary Muslims. The term ‘hearts and minds’ originates in counter-insurgency campaigns and was based on isolating insurgents through winning the support and trust of the majority.⁷² On that basis, the long-term success or otherwise of *Prevent* is unclear, as the appearance and partial reality of state surveillance that is central to its operationalisation has seriously damaged the prospect of community partnership. In contrast, moving towards community cohesion-based approaches of community engagement ‘would create the space and legitimacy for a more sophisticated, intelligence-led approach to tackling specific local threats as and when they occur’.⁷³ Such an approach would suggest a clear separation between policing and cohesion-based community development activities, as highlighted by the overwhelming majority of submissions to the Select Committee Inquiry and their subsequent recommendations.⁷⁴