

NSS welcomes calls for more sophisticated approach to extremism and radicalisation

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The National Secular Society has tentatively welcomed parts of a [report by the Home Affairs Committee on counter extremism and radicalisation](#). The report recommends further resources being expended on intelligence for better co-ordination. It calls for both the Government and civil-society to develop a "more sophisticated approach" to "identifying the factors which instigate radicalisation and in the measures it takes to tackle [extremism]."The report has however been criticised by counter-extremism experts.

The report drew on evidence community, academic, governmental and business representatives and focuses on online recruitment and extremism. Between February 2010 and the start of 2016, the Committee reported, the Metropolitan Police removed more than 120,000 pieces of terrorist-related content. However the effectiveness of such methods is [far from clear](#).

Keith Porteous Wood, NSS executive director, said "Civil society has been slow to recognise the dangers of online radicalisation and extremism and we're glad to see attempts to rectify this. However, little if any attention had been made to consider risks to freedom of expression, which is a pre-requisite of democracy."

The report recommends, for example, that journalists "do not identify terrorists as Muslims, but as terrorists and followers of Daesh" (Islamic State). The report voices concern about "unbalanced or unsubstantiated reporting" in relation to stories about extremism and terrorism. Mr Wood said that "politicians telling journalists not to mention the identities of terrorists was bordering on Orwellian", but accepted that civil society had a strong responsibility to differentiate between Islam and Islamism, something both Islamists and anti-Muslim bigots deliberately conflate.

The report states that there "must be a zero tolerance approach to online extremism" but then acknowledges that "the Home Office has itself acknowledged that finding meaningful definitions is proving problematic," after years of trying.

The NSS and the Christian Institute, leading members of the [Defend Free Speech](#) campaign (DFS), have previously warned that the Government's approach to extremism risks creating unnecessary and draconian laws which undermine freedom of expression, and even make it possible to outlaw the expression of views that a future Government simply doesn't like. DFS is convinced that innocent people will fall foul of the proposed Terrorism Bill for merely holding unpopular, traditional or challenging views.

The report examines significant failings in the Government's counter extremism strategies, including the Prevent programme – which has been undermined both by genuine examples of overzealous scrutiny of ordinary Muslims and by scare stories generated by the anti-Prevent lobby.

The report was criticised by the Quilliam Foundation, a counter extremism think tank, which said it "misses an opportunity to make progressive recommendations for the Prevent strategy, such as an independent review and an oversight board. Instead, it focuses on peripheral issues like renaming the strategy, or insisting that 'Daesh' is used instead of 'so-called Islamic State'. We are united with

other counter-extremism experts in thinking this report fails in meeting its main objectives and that its recommendations would not enable progress."

The report suggests that poor quality and inconsistent Prevent training could lead to schools closing down difficult discussions or using simplistic stereotypes to misidentify students as being at risk of radicalisation. However the report made few recommendations on sharing best practices or improving working with external partners.

Haras Rafiq, Managing Director of Quilliam, told the Committee that this undermined efforts to foster trust and that genuine dialogue with communities not carried out "through the lens of security and legislation"—would help. The Committee reiterated calls to replace "Prevent" with a more community oriented "Engage" strategy.

Efforts to disrupt online extremism are far more likely to lead to internet services and social media providers wrongly targeting some groups while others operate below the surface when efforts to disrupt online extremism are clumsily handled by the state, perhaps because of an inadequate understanding of the fast evolving extremism and counter-extremism narratives and language.

To counter this, Mr Wood said, the report, "should have included a longer term perspective which asks why extremist narratives may appeal to some young people, particularly from Muslim backgrounds, and why others are increasingly rejecting fundamental values."

At meetings of the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights last year, Mr Wood argued that positive action to confront systemic problems of religious segregation including in [education](#) and promoting robust [freedom of expression](#) protections were essential in upholding fundamental values, and in confronting extremism and hate speech.

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