

Counter-Extremism: Radicalising Society against Democracy

Dr Rob Faure Walker (15th Feb 2021)

A functioning democracy must be underpinned by democratically accountable institutions such as schools and hospitals that support everyone in equal measure. This can be seen in the widespread celebration of the NHS's efficient and nationwide delivery of the vaccine. **When democracy works, it supports everyone and brings us together. However, the continued expansion of counter-extremism measures in the United Kingdom undermines trust in these institutions and thus does more to [promote than to prevent violence](#).**

The latest attempt to expand counter-extremism can be seen in the appointment of Lord Walney to advise the Government on [political violence and disruption](#). Alarming, Walney appears to be making the same error as those who have come before as he seeks to cast anti-racist, environmentalist and left-wing groups as '[progressive extremism](#)' that pose as much danger as the far right. **If these actors are to be prevented from resorting to violence, their concerns must be heard and not cast aside as 'extreme'.** Unfortunately, the '[chilling effect](#)' of successive governments' efforts to counter 'extremism' has shut down debate and prevented many from engaging in the democratic process. As people are surveilled for their risk of 'radicalisation', controversial opinions are silenced. Yet, **these are the very opinions that need to be heard if democracy is to function and create a harmonious society that serves the needs of everyone.**

This 'chilling effect' of counter-extremism has been well-documented in universities, where [Muslim students have become fearful of engaging in discussions](#) lest they be cast as 'extremists'. This has not been the only factor to silence political voices in universities and there is a growing awareness that, rather than 'snowflake students' silencing debate, speakers have all too often been no-platformed by so-called defenders of free speech. This has resulted as **self-appointed pro-free speech organisations have called for the silencing of supposedly 'extreme' voices that they disagree with. This can be seen in the work of organisations such as the [Free Speech Union](#), the [Henry Jackson Society](#), the [Policy Exchange](#), and even the [Charity Commission](#).** The 'chilling effect' can also be seen in [schools](#) and in [mental health services](#), where the duty of doctors and teachers to report signs of 'radicalisation' result in patients and pupils feeling unable to discuss their concerns and thus unable to access education and health services. **This creates a situation where those who are most in need are the least likely to receive the support that they require. This divides us and makes us all less safe.**

The Government's appointment of Lord Walney's business partner [William Shawcross](#), former Chair of the Charity Commission and Director of the Henry Jackson Society, to review the Prevent Strategy and its aforementioned 'chilling effect' seems likely to fuel the divisive and dangerous situation that is created by counter-extremism. **The revelations of business connections between Walney, Shawcross and [new right-wing news channel GB News](#), and Walney's association with [Turkish ultranationalists](#), indicate that they are unlikely to be impartial when deciding who should be designated as 'extreme'.**

There is of course a time and a place for the State to intervene in potentially harmful behaviour. But, former Terror Watchdog and Director of Public Prosecutions Max Hill QC has argued that '[we don't need more terrorism offences](#)'. **The UK has a choice of embracing the rule of law and a democratic future where diverse political voices are heard, or of taking a darker path by expanding the criminal law into more areas of people's lives by continuing to support the ever-expanding authoritarian logic of counter-extremism. Lord Walney must carefully consider which position he intends to advocate for in his new advisory role.**

Politicians who serve the people celebrate the loss of their own power and it is notable that Labour politicians were triumphant at the loss of '[red patches on the map](#)' as 'extremism and Communism made no headway' after the implementation of the Welfare State. **To create a more harmonious society, the Government must abandon efforts to police 'extremism' and instead focus on creating a State that serves the needs of all its citizens.**

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