

Letter of Concern: Security-Focused Think Tanks

December 2021

We, the undersigned, express deep concern over the role that certain security-focused think tanks are playing within current UK Government policy, the problematic nature of their research methodologies, and the negative impact we believe they are having on human rights, equality and security in British society.

Representing a wide range of professionals active within or connected to academia, research and civil society, we wish to highlight the seemingly poor, insufficient or deficient methodologies being used in reports by such groups, many of which are directly influencing national-level policy and discussion in the British media and Government.

At a time of heightened concern over growing divisions in society caused by racism, polarisation and structural inequality, the need for accurate research and findings is important in us understanding how to respond. Particular concern has been raised about the methods of groups such as the now-defunct Quilliam, the Henry Jackson Society and Policy Exchange, who hold a privileged position in policy-making and continue to directly influence national-level policy and discussion in the UK media and Government.

This open letter requests that MPs and journalists recognise the many concerns held by community groups and academics about the privileged position held by such groups - who, often, hold charity status despite seemingly aligning with partisan positions and engaging in political actions. We wish to see the democratisation of policy-building, where political parties work directly with the rich array of independent researchers, academics and community groups in Britain, to create more impactful and positive policy.

Particular concern is raised over the following incidences that have occurred in relation to such think tanks:

- Falsely identifying organisations, individuals or community groups - particularly those linked to Muslim and minority communities - as “extremist” or spreading “extremist subject matter” within high-profile reports.
- Wrongly claiming that universities are “hotbeds of Islamic extremism” and seeking to “ramp up fears of extremism” in a way which negatively impacts Muslim and minority students. In a Home Affairs Committee in the UK Parliament, these claims were found to be “unfounded in the expertise and experience of the sector and the experience of students” by Universities UK.
- Supporting and amplifying Far Right tropes, such as falsely suggesting that Muslim or Pakistani-heritage men disproportionately engage in child sexual grooming - in a report later critiqued as “a case study in bad science” and debunked by the Home Office’s own findings.
- Holding significant links to Far Right platforms and think tanks such as Breitbart and the Middle East Forum - some of which have openly espoused Islamophobic views and offered support to Far Right individuals such as Tommy Robinson in the UK and Geert Wilders in the Netherlands.

- Stoking the mobilisation of Far Right groups, such as the English Defence League (EDL) into targeting Muslim-related events and venues, with literature being used by Far Right groups to harass and intimidate Muslim societies in at least seven universities.
- Attacking Muslim charities, claiming that "Islamist extremists exploit the UK charitable sector" and that British taxpayers have given "more than £6 million to charities that... have been... used by extremists to further their radical agenda".

Such groups clearly hold a vastly privileged position, reported as running lobbying events with MPs and receiving significant payments from the Home Office and successive UK Governments. We are concerned at the influence that such groups have within the current British Government and the potential implication this has for democratic transparency, equality and polarisation in the UK.

We call on MPs and journalists to distance themselves from such security-focused think tanks around which concerns have been raised.

We ask MPs and journalists to raise these concerns with the UK Government, so as to challenge the role such security think tanks play in policymaking.

And we call on MPs and journalists to commit to working with the vast array of community groups, local charities and independent academics, who provide a wealth of knowledge and experience about recent developments in British society.

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