

CAGE's response to Henry Jackson Society/ Student Rights report

The latest report published by the Henry Jackson Society's project Student Rights, entitled "Preventing Prevent? Challenges to Counter-Radicalisation Policy On Campus,"¹ follows an established pattern of their previous publications; a lack of academic rigour, unsubstantiated claims and support for discriminatory policies.

Student Rights and the Henry Jackson Society (HJS)

Among the most prominent personalities of the HJS are its former director William Shawcross, Douglas Murray and Raheem Kassam. Shawcross is currently appointed as the chair of the Charities Commission, Murray is a current associate director of the HJS and Raheem Kassam is former manager of Student Rights, who later agreed to help establish the British wing of the American Tea Party and was appointed as UKIPs election strategist for the 2015 elections.

While involved with the HJS, Shawcross stated that "Europe and Islam is one of the greatest, most terrifying problems of our future."² Murray has previously stated that "Conditions for Muslims in Europe must be made harder across the board"³, while Kassam has supported racial profiling at airports⁴ and was election strategist for a party whose leader stated that Muslims were a fifth column living within the country.⁵

It is normal that much of the work published by the HJS reflects the prejudices of its prominent members. This extends to Student Rights, which has been widely rejected by the student population. A

previous report released in 2014 was dubbed as a "witch-hunt' against Muslims by the head of the NUS at the time.⁶ The organisation was subsequently formally condemned by the NUS executive council, the NUS Black Students' Conference and several university student unions including the LSE, UCL, Birkbeck, Queen Mary and Kings College London.⁷

The template condemnation motion states that "Student Rights' activities fuel Islamophobia, by disproportionately and unfairly targeting Muslim students, contributing to their marginalisation and ostracisation, damaging campus cohesion and feeding into a growing trend of Islamophobic discourse in wider society which should always be challenged."⁸

The "Preventing Prevent?" Report Narrative

"Preventing Prevent?" is a defence of the government's Prevent policy, while accepting that it faces numerous challenges on campuses due to opposition from both the student and staff body. It forwards a narrative that opposition to Prevent on campus was due to misunderstanding and misrepresentation rather than the policy itself,

and that those opposed to the Prevent agenda on university campuses are either “extremists” or those who have been influenced by what Student Rights calls their “malicious and misleading criticisms”.⁹

This narrative simultaneously deflects criticism against Prevent while infantilising the student population – furthering the idea that young adults require the intervention and supervision of on-campus student events by the state.

In order to undermine these assertions, more than 120 academics currently working in British universities signed an open letter published on July 10th stating that Prevent was a failed, ineffective strategy which ought to be ended and replaced with an “an approach that is based on dialogue and openness”.¹⁰

The statement was organised by Cage – accused by Student Rights as a force in opposing Prevent on campus.

Actual academic research into the Prevent agenda, such as by Professor Arun Kundnani, has also recommended that the Prevent policy be abolished in light of a more authoritative understanding of radicalisation.¹¹

The widespread opposition to Prevent among students and academics can be contrasted with the minimal support it enjoys from fringe organisations such as the HJS. This contrast may be better understood in light of the support for discriminatory policies against Muslims held by HJS staff, rather than a lack of knowledge of the reality of the policy from students and academics.

Demonising CAGE and Selective “Extremism”

As part of the attempt to characterise opposition to Prevent as “malicious,” the author describes CAGE as a “pro-terrorist” group¹² - itself a slanderous accusation. The notion that CAGE works on cases

because it sympathises with terrorists, let alone is pro-terrorist, is simply untrue. For example, CAGE has never suggested that the individuals involved in the terrorism plots including Operation Crevice/ Fertilizer bomb plot in 2004, the Transatlantic Airline plot in 2006 or the EDL bomb plot in 2014 are innocent or should not have been convicted.

The report has also adopted the government’s definition of extremism – “Vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and belief.”

One criticism of this definition is that it is sufficiently vague to be applied selectively as and when desired, and in order to exclude unwanted participants from public discourse. The report itself is an example of this; comments by senior current and past HJS staff fall foul of “mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and belief,” yet neither Murray nor Shawcross are branded as “extremists”.

“Preventing Prevent?” – Academically Unsound

The ideological bias of the HJS and Student Rights does not necessarily preclude the report from contributing to the ongoing debate around Prevent. What does is that the report does not appear to have adopted any recognised methodology or made any serious attempt at academic rigour. In sum, it provides a number of tables showing events held at universities by various individuals and organisations it deems as “extremist” as proof of “evidence that a culture conducive to the promotion of non-violent extremism has developed on a number of UK university campuses.”¹³ It also lists a number of students who have either been convicted of terrorism offences or travelled to participate in the current conflict in Syria.

The report claims that it analyses the extent of events held across UK campuses looking at geographical, institutional and speaker trends.

However, it admits that the only source used for the figures is open-source social media information. Therefore, any trends it claims to identify can only be connected to the use of social media, and not the actual events.

The premise of the report is based upon the validity of the argument that “non-violent extremism” leads to “violent extremism”. However until now there is no academically sound evidence that ideology drives terrorism, with the theory being dismissed even within Whitehall by internal government reports which state that the thesis “seems to both misread the radicalisation process and to give undue weight to ideological factors”¹⁴

In the case of this report, it is suggesting that there is a correlation between events taking place at university and terrorism - because there are events in university that they deem “extremist” and that some people who attended university have committed acts of terrorism, reducing these events will reduce terrorism.

There are a number of problems with this type of reasoning.

First, there is no evidence of convicted terrorists attending university events. It is merely assumed that the presence of such events on any UK campus is enough to have radicalised Muslim students studying in a UK university.

Secondly, correlation does not mean causation. It may be that several of those convicted of terrorism attended such events (though there is nothing in the report to confirm or negate this) – but this correlation would not prove causation, given many others have attended and have not been convicted of terrorism.

A further problem is that the data used in the report is completely inadequate to even make a judgement regarding correlation. While there is a list of events and a list of named individuals

who attended university and were subsequently convicted, there is nothing that connects the two other than innuendo.

In actual fact the correlation that the report is suggesting is not that attending the events is a potential radicalising factor, or even that being enrolled in the same university is, but rather that simply being a Muslim student at a UK university while these events are held may be a cause of radicalisation.

The report claims a significant number of university attendees and graduates have been involved in terrorism. It names 11 individuals convicted while enrolled in British universities, and 6 graduates who they claim may have been radicalised while at university. A further 6 individuals who have allegedly travelled to Syria to either engage in fighting or work with extremist groups.¹⁵

There are no other figures provided in the report to back up the claims that the numbers are significant.

According to the 2011 census, there are 2.7 million Muslims in the UK. The British authorities estimated that more than 700 UK Muslims have travelled to Syria[16] – in other words 0.026% of the Muslim population. Estimates place the number of Muslim students attending university at 115,000, so the amount of students named by the report as travelling to Syria represents 0.005% of the Muslim student population.

There may be several other university students not named in the report who have also travelled to Syria. However the case in point is that the report falls woefully short on its own flawed terms given that by their own implied theory of correlation and their own data, attending UK university means a reduced likelihood of travelling to Syria.

In sum, the report is methodologically flawed, based upon an academically unsound theory. Rather than provide any useful or meaningful insight, it is used

simply to promote a pre-determined bias.

Conclusion

While organisations which promote discriminatory policies against Muslims such as the HJS continue to support the government in promoting Prevent, the policy is recognised as fundamentally flawed and counter-productive by growing numbers of students, academics, activists and staff working in the public sector.

CAGE believes that terrorism and political violence is accepted as being a form of political action that is used largely in societies that are closed, restrictive and repressive.

Therefore, it is critical for the UK to refrain from closing down and repressing the exchange of ideas and views in public spaces such as universities and other Higher Education Institutes. If not, there is an increased chance that individuals will attend hidden venues – online and offline – to seek answers to their questions and find support for their views.

Endnotes

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13. Ibid., 7.
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CAGE is an independent advocacy organisation working to empower communities impacted by the War on Terror policies worldwide. The organisation highlights and campaigns against such policies in hope to achieve a world free from oppression and injustice.

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