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## **Prevent and Community Cohesion – Synergy or Conflict?**

Paul Thomas, University of Huddersfield, UK

In offering thoughts on how Prevent can be successful in the future, I want to focus on the relationship between Prevent and Community Cohesion, and I want to suggest that there needs to be a positive synergy between them, instead of the current conflict which is blocking the successful development of Prevent.

In pinpointing the relationship between Prevent and cohesion, I'm covering familiar ground. In a feature article, the Financial Times Magazine described the relationship with community cohesion as 'the sore heart of Prevent', and the CLG Select Committee Inquiry focussed heavily on this relationship. They felt that overlap between them was damaging Prevent and called for greater demarcation, something that the Coalition government has apparently delivered in last year's Prevent review when they cut DCLG out and left the Home Office in charge of a stream-lined Prevent programme. However, I don't feel that this has solved the problem – Prevent is still delivered via local authorities and still consists of work focussed on Muslim young people through community and youth educational activity funded by anti-terrorism programmes, and so it remains 'between two stools' as I've previously argued.

I was asked to give evidence at one of the Select Committee hearings in the Commons and found myself at cross-purposes with the Committee – they wanted to understand my focus on community cohesion as support for their position that Prevent should be left with the Home Office, but my position was that ALL Prevent activity should actually be community cohesion work, whichever government department funds it. When Prevent was first announced in 2006/7, the local authorities in West Yorkshire who I work closely with responded to government that ‘they struggled to see the distinction with community cohesion’. That is a somewhat controversial point of view, partially because community cohesion itself is highly-contested, so I want to briefly outline my arguments about how to take the aims of Prevent forward effectively, firstly by outlining what community cohesion has been, and has the potential to be, in practice. In doing so, I’m summarising the arguments of my new book, *‘Responding to the Threat of Violent Extremism – Failing to Prevent’*.

Community cohesion, or Integration as the current government terms it, apparently represents a new phase in state policy to ethnic relations. Before the 2001 northern riots, government talked of ethnic diversity and multiculturalism, whereas since then the language has been of cohesion and

shared values, accompanied by overt attacks on multiculturalism. The key themes of community cohesion can be summarised as:

- Ethnic segregation and parallel lives
- The extent to which separate identities, and antagonistic and oppositional minority versions of them, can flourish in such monocultural spaces
- Over-developed bonding social capital in the absence of bridging forms
- The role of agency in over-coming this reality
- The increasingly problematic impact of previous multiculturalist policy approaches, which have focussed on the needs of each separate, essentialised ethnic community, rather than on common needs and identities

These themes are controversial in themselves, but some of the accompanying political discourse and overt attacks on multiculturalism has made cohesion a tainted concept, with accusations that it represents a lurch back towards coercive assimilationism. The problem here is that academic debates have been evidence-free, with no data on how cohesion has actually been understood and practised on the ground. I tried to rectify this in my previous book: *'Youth, Multiculturalism and Community Cohesion'*, which looked at how

cohesion was being operationalised by youth work organisations in Oldham.

This can be briefly summarised as:

- Creating 'meaningful direct contact' between young people of different backgrounds had become central to all practice
- This new practice was utilising 'contact theory', creating safe space for cross-community dialogue, within programmes that focussed on building common experiences and identities
- This cohesion practice is NOT assimilationist – local, community-specific youth provision still exists, and is the stepping stone for young people taking part in contact work. Distinct identities are acknowledged and celebrated within processes of commonality but are augmented with stronger forms of commonality
- This suggests that cohesion is a re-working and a re-balancing of multiculturalism – a position supported by Professor Tariq Modood.

So, how does that related to Prevent? I'd suggest that this community

cohesion analysis helps us to critique the short-comings of Prevent to date:

- Prevent has been monocultural, focussing on Muslims only, so creating a double whammy of Muslim suspicion AND envy from other

communities at what has been a community development funding stream for one community only

- Prevent funding has targeted entire Muslim communities and overtly attempted to engineer new forms of leadership, organisation and even religious practice within those communities, with some of it led by police and security services. Such overt state interference is likely to have damaged precisely the human intelligence needed to defeat terrorism
- The cohesion analysis would suggest that such monocultural work is part of the problem – it actually strengthens Muslim-only spaces where minorities can promote extreme versions of faith and identity and does nothing to help equip the majority with positive experiences of cross-community contact and so arguments against extremists
- In practice, remarkably little Prevent activity has actually addressed the political and social issues driving support for more extreme versions of Islamism
- Prevent has also badly neglected the far-right threat – this may be starting to change, but the answer here is NOT white-only work

So, how can we make more effective progress around the aims of Prevent?

- All Prevent-oriented work should involve cross-community contact and dialogue as part of the process
- There needs to be much more overt focus on political issues and on enabling young people to both debate them and learn the skills of political engagement.
- We DO have evidence of how this can be achieved – the Prevent-funded ‘Project Safe Space’ run by ACPO and the UK Youth Parliament involved youth residentials where young people engaged in robust and overt debate of key political issues in a multicultural and respectful environment
- The title and distinct funding stream of Prevent, which remains Muslim-focussed, is hopelessly tainted and needs to re-worked
- Existing government policy strands, like cohesion and Integration, the Youth Parliament scheme and the National Citizen Service could and should be utilised as vehicles for such activity around Prevent goals – the starting point here is a positive and cross-community one, rather than monocultural work funded by anti-terrorist programmes.

THANK YOU