

UK: Demonising the Left

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A new report commissioned by the government uses anti-war activism as evidence that socialists in Britain pose an 'extremist' threat.

In a worryingly-McCarthyite new government-funded paper people on the left, including members of the anti-war movement, have been labelled potential sympathisers with “violent extremism.” [The paper is one](#) of thirty being published by the government’s new [Commission for Countering Extremism](#) headed by Sara Khan.

Why does the government’s [Commission for Countering Extremism](#) exist? The Commission is not clear, since it can’t even define extremism. This is hardly surprising — the government itself gave up trying to define extremism earlier this year because [it is “too difficult.”](#)

So what does it counter? Many regard it as an instrument of ideological warfare against British Muslims. Just like the Cameron-era [Extremism Analysis Unit](#), the Home Office’s [Research, Information and Communication Unit](#) (RICU), and the various [astroturf initiatives](#) established as part of the Home Office’s Prevent programme, the Commission is seen as attempting to depoliticise Muslim communities and beliefs.

But now the Commission has turned fire on the left. [In a paper it published on Friday](#) entitled *Violent Extremist Tactics and Ideology of the Sectarian Far-left*, people regarded as “very left-wing” – over half of whom were *Guardian* or *Observer* readers – were denounced as potentially sympathetic to “violent extremism.”

Home Secretary Sajid Javid made it clear [in a speech that accompanied the launch of the first five papers](#) that the exercise is intended to equate the genuine threat posed by violent far-right terror groups such as Generation Identity and National Action with the peaceful activism of Muslim community organisations like the Islamic Human Rights Commission or MEND. This is a clear-cut example of [state-sponsored Islamophobia](#). But the Commission’s work on what it describes as the “sectarian far-left” received even less media attention than Javid’s speech.

The paper’s authors — all on public record as critics of the Corbyn-led Labour Party — concede that their description of left-wing groups as extremist betokens no “realistic prospect of their direct ... involvement in any sort of imminent terrorist activity in the UK.” So, instead, they reason that the anti-war politics of left-wing groups means they are “occupying a position of solidarity with terrorist organisations and violently repressive regimes.”

Little wonder the authors and the Commission demur from defining extremism. If they did, they would end up defaming the millions of Britons who have opposed the most violent elements of British foreign policy or breaches of international law — including all those who participated in nationwide protests against the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

To support this point, the authors attempt to smear the Stop the War Coalition in which Jeremy Corbyn occupied a leadership position for many years. This takes them very close to describing the

Leader of the Opposition as a supporter of violent extremism.

In the aftermath of the Manchester bombing in 2017, Corbyn [made a powerful speech](#) pointing to the link between such acts and British policy abroad, particularly in light of the attacker's history in Libya. It was widely reported that the [majority of the British public agreed with the Labour leader](#). Are millions of Britons who harbour suspicions and discomfort about such wars also extremists?

In the absence of analysis, the authors turn to pathologising the left, based on "a body of work within political psychology" addressing the question of "whether particular personality types are attracted to right or left-wing extremism." By commissioning studies on the violent far-right along with left-wing or Muslim activism — defined as 'far-left' or 'Islamist' — the government is peddling its own peculiar brand of [horseshoe theory](#) which allows it to place its own very right-wing policies in an imaginary, reasonable centre-ground.

Furthermore, the work appears itself to be based on [conspiracy theories about a so-called red-green alliance](#) between socialists and Muslims, popularised by Islamophobic organisations such as the [Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs](#).

Although the Commission claims its report about left-wing activism was peer-reviewed, its definition of that term would not pass academic muster. The 'peer review' was organised by a member of its staff who is not a career civil servant, but rather is [seconded to the Commission](#) from a neoconservative think tank.

Hannah Stuart comes to the Commission after successive spells in [three anti-Muslim think tanks](#): the Centre for Social Cohesion, the [Henry Jackson Society](#) and [Policy Exchange](#). Both the Henry Jackson Society and Policy Exchange are notable for their close ties to government officials in [Israel](#) and the [United Arab Emirates](#), two states that are [increasingly working together to shape UK domestic security policy](#).

Setting that aside, there are obvious conflict of interest issues in government officials overseeing peer review for research they have commissioned and funded.

The paper claims to show that people with left-wing views are more likely to support violent extremism, but only by conflating anti-war views with political violence and claiming that left-wing activists have a particular desire to engage in "public order incidents, rioting, clashes with police, etc."

The paper's authors seem to imagine it extreme to oppose racism, war and the exercise of military force. But does sympathy with resistance movements make someone an 'extremist'? International law is quite clear that when all other options have been foreclosed to change a repressive government, or to resist occupation by a foreign power, violence is permissible.

Nelson Mandela famously set out the rationale for this in [his speech from the dock](#) in the Rivonia trial in 1964: "It was only when all else had failed, when all channels of peaceful protest had been barred to us, that the decision was made to embark on violent forms of political struggle... We did so... solely because the Government had left us with no other choice."

There can't be any question that, had Mandela been in a South African jail today, the report would have flagged sympathy for his cause as a gateway to extremism. Its conclusion that "it would be prudent to monitor" developments in left-wing and anti-war movements "carefully" is ominous. Supported by the Home Office, the exercise feels less like academic research and more like groundwork for increased surveillance.

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