

SUBMISSION PAPER

mend



**MEND SUBMISSION
TO THE LABOUR PARTY'S
SEPTEMBER 2024 REVIEW
OF COUNTER-EXTREMISM
POLICIES**

MEND Submission to the Labour Party's September 2024 Review of Counter-Extremism Policies.

A Submission from Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND)

1. MEND's Contribution to the Inquiry

1.1. This submission from Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND) to the government's September 2024 review of counter-extremism policy makes the argument that there is an overwhelming amount of evidence to show that the concept of extremism, and the policies it has been used to underwrite, is flawed, often prejudicial in its application, counterproductive and has been largely pushed by a circle of actors who share affiliations with pressure groups that advance an ideological agenda that is far-right and Islamophobic.

1.2. MEND is a community-funded organisation whose primary objective is to combat Islamophobia in Britain. We also work to encourage political, civic, and social engagement within British Muslim communities through empowering British Muslims to interact with political and media institutions effectively. Our approach to achieving this involves a combination of community engagement (through education, community events, local campaigns to encourage voting etc.) and advocacy work (involving victim support, submissions to parliamentary inquiries, media analysis, election resources, briefings etc).

1.3. MEND has deep expertise in human rights legislation, counter-extremism legislation and minority group empowerment, working in these areas for around a decade. This, coupled with the fact that we maintain widespread support across Muslim communities who trust us to represent their interests to the institutions of government, means that our insights should be of high value to this inquiry. We believe that with the recent change in government, this is the ideal time for a long overdue correction of the manifold issues that have plagued government efforts to tackle extremism. We hope that our contribution will play a role in helping the inquiry to identify and correct the flaws in the conceptualisation (theory) of extremisms, as well as its operationalisation in the form of counter-extremism policy (practice).

2. Key Positions

2.1. The government's extant definition of extremism, introduced in March 2024 by then-Secretary of State for Communities and Levelling Up, Michael Gove¹, presents a danger to freedom of speech and democracy and must therefore be abandoned. It defines² extremism as, "the *promotion or advancement* of any ideology based on violence, hatred or intolerance, that aims to: negate or destroy the fundamental rights and freedoms of others; or, undermine, overturn or replace the UK's system of liberal parliamentary democracy and democratic rights; or intentionally create a permissive environment for others to achieve the results in (1) or (2)." At first glance, this may appear uncontroversial, but as leading human rights groups have consistently highlighted³, the definition is exceedingly vague, which means that there is room for it to be exploited to clamp down on non-hateful, legitimate speech if the authorities find cause to deem that speech problematic. Underscoring the potential for this, following the outbreak of violence in Gaza in October 2023, numerous Gaza solidarity protests were held, which brought tens of thousands of Brits out onto the streets to exercise their right to freedom of speech and assembly. Notwithstanding the largely peaceful nature of these protests, government officials characterised them as extremist. While many dismissed such claims, this stands as an example of how the concept of extremism can be politicised by authorities or officials who find the cause or objectives of a protest movement disagreeable.

2.2. MEND should be removed from any list that assesses groups for ties to extremism because we do not fit the government's definition of extremism, and there is no credible evidence to show that we are associated with extremists. Upon veiling the government's definition of extremism, Michael Gove also revealed a list of groups who he said would be assessed against the new definition⁴. Three of those groups were mainstream Muslim civil society bodies with widespread support among Muslim communities in the UK, one of which was MEND.

Gove added MEND to the list over reported concerns that it has "Islamist orientation and views"⁵. MEND is an apolitical organisation and we do not promote or advance any ideology. Our organisation was established with one overarching goal: to fight and ultimately expel Islamophobia from Britain. MEND was not formed to champion any ideology or political group, and there is absolutely no evidence to support any such claim. MEND has certainly never endorsed violence, and to suggest that we have is an outrageous slander without any factual basis. In fact, a big part of our work involves challenging violence - particularly racist violence - but also misogyny and broader civil unrest. For example, in our recent work on Israel's war on Gaza, we have condemned the violence of both Israel and Hamas. In our work on the civil unrest that rocked Leicester throughout 2022, we unequivocally condemned the intimidation of Sikh communities by far-right Hindutva supporters, and worked with both Sikh and Hindu community leaders to alleviate inter-communal tensions⁶. Nor has MEND promoted hatred or intolerance of any group. As is explained in more detail below, MEND is not a sectarian organisation, and our staff roster consists of people from all walks of life, including non-Muslims and Muslims

¹ Paul Seddon & Dominic Casciani, BBC News, 'Michael Gove Names Groups as he Unveils Extremism Definition.' March 14, 2024, available at:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-68564577>

² Gov.UK, 'Guidance: New Definition of Extremism.' March 14, 2024, available at:

[https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/new-definition-of-extremism-2024/new-definition-of-extremism-2024#:~:text=Extremism is the promotion or,footnote 5\] of others; or](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/new-definition-of-extremism-2024/new-definition-of-extremism-2024#:~:text=Extremism is the promotion or,footnote 5] of others; or)

³ Amnesty International UK, 'UK: Government's Extremism Definition is a 'Smash and Grab' on Our Human Rights.' March 14, 2024, available at:

<https://www.amnesty.org.uk/press-releases/uk-governments-extremism-definition-smash-and-grab-our-human-rights>

⁴ Paul Seddon & Dominic Casciani, BBC News, 'Michael Gove Names Groups as he Unveils Extremism Definition.' March 14, 2024, available at:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-68564577>

⁵ UK Parliament, 'Extremism Definition and Community Engagement.' March 14, 2024, available at:

<https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2024-03-14/debates/4E9FCBC1-F151-470C-840B-1CC58EBF73F4/ExtremismDefinitionAndCommunityEngagement>

⁶ Muslim Engagement & Development, 'Hindu-Muslim Tensions in Leicester Exacerbated by Misinformation from India,' November 3, 2022, available at:

<https://www.mend.org.uk/hindu-muslim-tensions-in-leicester-exacerbated-by-misinformation-from-india>

from different theological persuasions. We have also engaged with other faith groups and have enthusiastically engaged in campaigning for the rights of marginalised minority groups outside of the Muslim community, also outlined in greater detail below. Therefore, it is simply not true to claim that MEND fits this definitional criteria.

2.3 MEND believes that the government should abandon the very process of labelling organisations as extremist. This is not because we are opposed to rooting out genuinely extremist groups from our society, but because the lack of a workable definition of the term, as we have argued above, risks to stifling the inalienable right of all to free speech. We already have the legislative tools in place by which authorities can prosecute people if they are found guilty of engaging in criminal behaviour, such as laws criminalising hate speech, public disorder and violence. MEND is of the view that that the additional category of extremism only undermines the legislative process by giving officials licence to arbitrarily decide the legitimacy of groups based on their own political views. By allowing our decision-making to be driven by politicised notions of 'good group' versus 'bad group' rather than the law, we are at risk of walking the path of authoritarian regimes who fear the accountability of their people, rather than the path of sophisticated modern democracies.

2.4. Removal of Bad Faith 'Legacy Actors'

There a number of deeply problematic actors inherited from the last Conservative government who occupy senior advisory roles in the government and who MEND feels should be removed from their posts and replaced with genuinely independent experts. Of particular concern are the Advisor on Political Violence and Disruption, John Woodcock (Lord Walney) and the Commissioner for Countering Extremism, Robin Simcox.

In 2024 Mr Woodcock released a report he had been commissioned to complete by the Conservative government, titled Protecting Our Democracy from Coercion. The piece was met with massive criticism for its promotion of what are unequivocally anti-democratic restrictions upon the right to criticise government policies, which includes the call to treat legitimate protest groups as terrorist organisations by assessing their ideologies and tactics and deciding whether they should be deemed "extreme," which if they are could see them face outright bans⁷. His report, public statements and articles make clear the above-mentioned danger of politicisation that is inherent in the concept of extremism. While Woodcock does mention the right-wing, the weight of his focus has been on the Gaza solidarity movement, climate justice groups and "the far-left"⁸. This is all the more disturbing considering Woodcock's well-recorded ties to pro-Israel lobbying groups, arms manufacturers and fossil fuel giants, clearly showing multiple conflicts of interests with his government-affiliated post⁹.

7 For examples of the widespread criticisms, see: Alan Rusbridger, Prospect, 'Lord Walney Shows How Easily Illiberalism can Become an Obsession.' May 25, 2024, available at: <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/politics/66431/lord-walney-john-woodcock-political-protest-al-an-rusbridger>
Steve Hopkins, Byline Times, 'Lawyer Explains How Lord Walney's 'Extreme Protest' Groups Report Makes 'Criminal Law Redundant and is Draconian and Dangerous.' May 20, 2024, available at: <https://bylinetimes.com/2024/05/20/lawyer-explains-how-lord-walneys-extreme-protest-groups-report-makes-criminal-law-redundant-and-is-draconian-and-dangerous/>

8 Lord Walney, 'Protecting our Democracy from Coercion.' May 21, 2024, pp.25-37, available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66462426b7249a4c6e9d3687/E03131940_HC_775_Walney_Review_v02_PRINT.pdf
Not Hoffman, The Sun, 'Far-Left Protestors Post Threat to Britain's Democracy, Says Top Extremism Adviser.' May 21, 2024, available at: <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/28055364/lord-walney-far-left-threat-report/>
Duncan Gardham, Sky News, 'Police Urged to Pay More Attention to 'Extreme Left-Wing' Protesters.' May 21, 2024, available at: <https://news.sky.com/story/police-urged-to-pay-more-attention-to-extreme-left-wing-protesters-13140819>
Will Hazell, The Telegraph, 'Give Police Powers to Ban Pro-Palestinian Protests, Review to Urge.' November 11, 2023, available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2023/11/11/give-police-powers-ban-pro-palestinian-protests-review/>
Lord Walney, The Sun, 'We Must Stop Thugs Threatening Democracy and Ban MPs Working With Groups Behind Palestine Marches.' March 2, 2024, available at: <https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/politics/26316330/lord-walney-ban-mps-palestine-marches-work/>

9 John McEvoy, Declassified UK, 'UK Extremism Adviser Has Been Funded by Israel Lobby.' March 5, 2024, available at: <https://www.declassifieduk.org/uk-extremism-adviser-has-been-funded-by-israel-lobby/>

Damien Gayle, The Guardian, 'UK Government Adviser on Disruptive Protest Accused of Conflict of Interest.' May 17, 2024, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/may/17/government-adviser-on-disruptive-protest-accused-of-conflict-of-interest>
Josiah Mortimer, Byline Times, 'Government 'Independent Adviser' Who 'Backs Ban' on Climate and Palestine Groups has Paid Roles with Defence and Business Lobbyists.' May 17, 2024, available at: <https://bylinetimes.com/2024/05/17/government-independent-adviser-who-backs-ban-on-climate-and-palestine-groups-has-paid-roles-with-de-fence-and-business-lobbyists/>

Mr Simcox is perhaps an even more disturbing case. Simcox has a long track record of working with right-wing organisations, described by some as “hate groups”¹⁰. For example, he was worked for the controversial HJS, whose own founder described it as a “far-right, deeply anti-Muslim racist ... propaganda outfit to smear other cultures, religions and ethnic groups”¹¹. Simcox was also a Margaret Thatcher Fellow at the Heritage Foundation, another right-wing think tank based in Washington DC, which has close ties to Donald Trump. Allegedly, Simcox has promoted proponents of the racist and Islamophobic Great Replacement Conspiracy theory¹². In 2019 Simcox spoke at an event organised by the notorious CIS, which has been widely accused of circulating anti-semitic, white nationalist material, including articles by Holocaust deniers¹³. CIS has also been designated as a hate group by the SPLC¹⁴. When former Home Secretary Priti Patel gave Mr Simcox the post of Commissioner for Countering Extremism in 2021, a Scholar of right-wing groups, Mark Potok, remarked that, it was “mind-boggling that the UK Government would appoint a man to head its Commission for Countering Extremism who interacts with hardline, anti-immigrant organisations and apparently promotes completely discredited claims about the supposed infiltration of Muslim institutions by radical Islamists”¹⁵. He has also written that anti-racism groups like Unite Against Fascism and the “far left” “need monitoring”¹⁶. With a man like Simcox in the position that he occupies once again shows the danger of politicisation of the concept of extremism.

2.5. MEND believes that the government should repeal William Shawcross’s Independent Review of Prevent and conduct an investigation into how this and other so-called independent reviews could have been so ideologically biased, indeed corrupted. Numerous human rights and civil society groups expressed great concern about this review both before and after its completion. Following the announcement that Mr Shawcross would conduct the review, many argued that he was unsuitable for the role considering the abundant evidence that he held Islamophobic prejudices¹⁷. For example, when leading the right-wing HJS he claimed that “Europe and Islam is one of the greatest, most terrifying problems of our future. I think all European countries have vastly, very quickly growing Islamic populations”¹⁸. In 2006, he bemoaned in the columns of the Jerusalem Post how the word “Muslim” was not used in British media reporting about “Islamic fascism,” which he said was a “vast fifth column” in Europe “who wish to destroy us”¹⁹. As mainstream human rights groups argued, the idea that Shawcross was suitable to lead an unbiased review into the government’s counter-terrorism strategy, was farcical.

Showing his ideological biases, in his report Shawcross claimed that too much focus had been placed on right-wing extremism at the expense of focusing on Islamist extremism²⁰, despite the fact that Home Office statistics have in recent years consistently shown that there are more referrals to Prevent for the former than the latter²¹. Such a position is clearly divorced

10 Nafeez ahemed, Byline Times, 'New Government Counter-Extremism Chief's Ties to Pro-Trump Hate Groups.' April 13, 2021, available at:

<https://bylinetimes.com/2021/04/13/new-government-counter-extremism-chiefs-ties-to-pro-trump-hate-groups/>

11 Matthew Jamison, 'Brendan Simms and the Racist Corrupt Henry Jackson Society.' February 18, 2027, available at:

<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/brendan-simms-racist-corrupt-henry-jackson-society-matthew/>

12 Nafeez ahemed, Byline Times, 'New Government Counter-Extremism Chief's Ties to Pro-Trump Hate Groups.' April 13, 2021, available at:

<https://bylinetimes.com/2021/04/13/new-government-counter-extremism-chiefs-ties-to-pro-trump-hate-groups/>

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Robin Simcox, The Heritage Foundation, 'Six Policies for Boris to Strengthen UK Counter-Terrorism.' September 2, 2019, available at:

<https://www.heritage.org/terrorism/commentary/six-policies-boris-strengthen-uk-counter-terrorism>

17 Amnesty International, 'UK: NGOs Condemn appointment of William Shawcross and announce civil society-led review of Prevent.' February 16, 2021, available at:

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2021/02/uk-ngos-condemn-appointment-of-william-shawcross-and-announce-civil-society-led-review-of-prevent/>

18 Jamie Grierson and Vikram Dodd, The Guardian, 'William Shawcross's Selection for Prevent Role Strongly Criticised.' January 26, 2021, available at:

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/jan/26/william-shawcross-selection-for-prevent-role-strongly-criticised>

19 William Shawcross, Jerusalem Post, 'Yes, the Problem is 'Islamic Fascism.' August 13, 2006, available at:

<https://www.jpost.com/opinion/op-ed-contributors/yes-the-problem-is-islamic-fascism>

20 Jessica Elgot and Vikram Dodd, The Guardian, 'Leaked Prevent Review Attacks 'Double Standards' on Far-Right and Islamists.' May 16, 2022, available at:

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/may/16/leaked-prevent-review-attacks-double-standards-on-rightwingers-and-islamists>

21 Home Office, 'Individuals Referred to and Supported Through the Prevent Programme, April 2021 to March 2022.' January 26, 2023, available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/individuals-referred-to-and-supported-through-the-prevent-programme-april-2021-to-march-2022/individuals-referred-to-and-supported-through-the-prevent-programme-april-2021-to-march-2022#:~:text=However, referrals made due to, is greater than Islamist referrals.>

from reality, which is exemplified by the recent far-right riots across the UK, which saw public property, private property, police officers, mosques, hotels housing refugees and other targets attacked by Islamophobic mobs. In the end, Shawcross's conclusions were deemed to be so ideologically driven and discriminatory against Muslims that more than 200 civil society groups and academics from across the UK - including the likes of Amnesty International and Liberty - signed an open letter calling for the entire review to be rejected²². We call upon the government to urgent carry out a repeal of Mr Shawcross's Independent Review of Prevent, followed by an independent review into how such a demonstrably biased individual was allowed to oversee the process of writing this review in the first place.

In any case the Prevent strategy itself is in need of removal. Numerous human rights organisations, experts and academics have been highly critical of this strategy, which has been shown to be lacking in any real evidence base and to be structurally racist and Islamophobic in its inception and practice²³. Too often legitimate and reasonable criticism of the Prevent strategy has been used as a false marker for "extremism," especially if this is from Muslim individuals or organisations. This needs to stop and this government should depart from the views and actions of the previous ones by welcoming such healthy debate and start listening to such views rather than ignoring them.

2.6. MEND calls upon the government to appoint a truly independent individual to carry out the review of counter-extremism policy. This would need to be an individual who has the trust of the communities who have and will continue to be effected by the surveillance apparatuses of counter-extremism policies. MEND calls for the Labour government to move away from the Conservative-era practice of simply establishing 'independent' inquiries, only to be led by individuals who seem to align with the government's positions on the given social issue being dealt with. Often, in the case of the Conservative Party, it appeared that these individuals not only had dubious biases, but those very biases seemed to reflect Conservative Party policy – arguably undermining any claim to impartiality. In order to secure the trust of marginalised and disaffected communities, Labour needs to show that it is not simply engaging in this transparently self-serving practice by the appointment of genuinely independent reviews from the academic, civil society and legal professions who will not draw conclusions that will simply mirror the policy preferences of senior cabinet ministers or publicly articulated Labour policy. It is important to note that the previous Commissioner for Countering Extremism, Sara Khan, also did not command the confidence of the Muslim community²⁴ and it is important that this government does not repeat the same mistakes as the last administration.

2.7. Finally, it has been widely reported that misogyny will be included as a form of extremism under upcoming government revisions to extremism policy. While MEND welcomes any and all government-backed effort to crack down on the marginalisation and oppression of women, there is a real concern across Muslim communities that this could be used as a means of labelling them as "extremist" and in some cases for referrals to Prevent. There is no denying that Islam places emphasis upon gender segregation in certain settings, especially in the mosque, where men and women pray separately. It is very likely that the recasting of misogyny as a form of extremism will be used as a Trojan Horse to attack normative Muslim practices such as gender segregation in mosques and faith schools. It may in fact stoke community tensions by seemingly

22 Diane Taylor, The Guardian, 'Withdraw Review of Prevent Anti-Radicalisation Strategy, Ministers Urged.' March 21, 2023, available at:

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/mar/21/withdraw-review-of-prevent-anti-radicalisation-strategy-ministers-urged>

23 John Holmwood, Layla Aithadi, 'The People's Review of Prevent: A Response to the Government's Independent Review Review of Prevent.' February 2022, available at:

<https://peoplesreviewofprevent.org/prop-report/>

Amnesty International, 'This is the Thought Police: The Prevent Duty and its Chilling Effect on Human Rights.' November 2023, available at:

[https://www.amnesty.org.uk/files/2023-11/Amnesty UK Prevent report \(1\).pdf?VersionId=hjIwRZuHiGd1_JECXroFwg25jyBtwur](https://www.amnesty.org.uk/files/2023-11/Amnesty%20UK%20Prevent%20report%20(1).pdf?VersionId=hjIwRZuHiGd1_JECXroFwg25jyBtwur)

24 Jason Farrell, Sky News, 'New Counter-Extremism Tsar Sara Khan Facing Calls to Quit.' January 25, 2018, available at:

<https://news.sky.com/story/new-counter-terror-tsar-sara-khan-facing-calls-to-quit-11222313>

lending impetus to fringe figures and movements who want to push against normative practices followed by the majority, such as through enforcing female-led prayer. It must be noted that disregarding the sacred rights of Muslims to practice their religious tradition in the only way befitting to their tradition will cause just as much opposition among Muslim women as it will Muslim men. However, we recognise that there are real challenges in how religious institutions such as mosques cater for the needs of women and these need to be addressed. However, this is unlikely to be successful if it is framed within the sphere of extremism.

MEND calls upon the government to exercise great caution in this area, and to engage with Muslim civil society organisations such as MEND on how best to navigate this sensitive area.

How Can MEND Assist Parliamentarians, Policymakers and Community Stakeholders?

- Providing briefings, information, analysis, and expertise on issues impacting Muslim communities.
- Arranging opportunities for parliamentarians, policymakers, and community stakeholders to engage with their local Muslim communities.
- Conducting research within Muslim communities.
- Connecting parliamentarians, policymakers, and community stakeholders to other
- local stakeholders.



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e: info@mend.org.uk

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