

Let's be honest about Prevent

Denham sees the need to reshape the government's policies on violent extremism, but he has to be clear about past mistakes

Robert Lambert and Jonathan Githens-Mazer

Wed 9 Dec 2009 12.15 GMT

On the [Today programme yesterday morning](#), John Denham, the minister for communities and local government, responded to criticisms of Prevent raised in Arun Kundnani's report, [Spooked](#), with these words:

Alan Johnson [the home secretary] and I instructed there to be an investigation into every single one of the allegations that had been made ... not a single one of those allegations stood up. And I'm quite prepared to look at anybody that comes forward and says that this happened to me or we were asked to do that ... but I have got to say, up until now this is exactly the sort of thing I want to deal with today - the idea that this is happening up and down the country when actually there is no evidence that it is.

This statement indicates why the crisis in the government's Prevent policy runs on and on. The simple rejection of, rather than engagement with, the criticisms made in [Spooked](#), does not equate to proof that these allegations were false. Denham claimed that every allegation made in the report was unsubstantiated. At least three claims made in the report are matters of public record: the alleged harassment of five young men who were youth workers for the [Kentish Town Community Organisation](#) to provide information on their activities, the claims made by Richard Watson on the [BBC Panorama programme broadcast on 16 February](#), and the apparent dispute between the [Reading Muslim Council](#) and local authorities over the nature of Prevent projects. Kundnani's report cites another 30 anonymous interviews with Prevent stakeholders throughout Britain, all of whom allege pressures to adhere to a counter-terror agenda, and in some cases pressure to report details about individuals who are on these programmes.

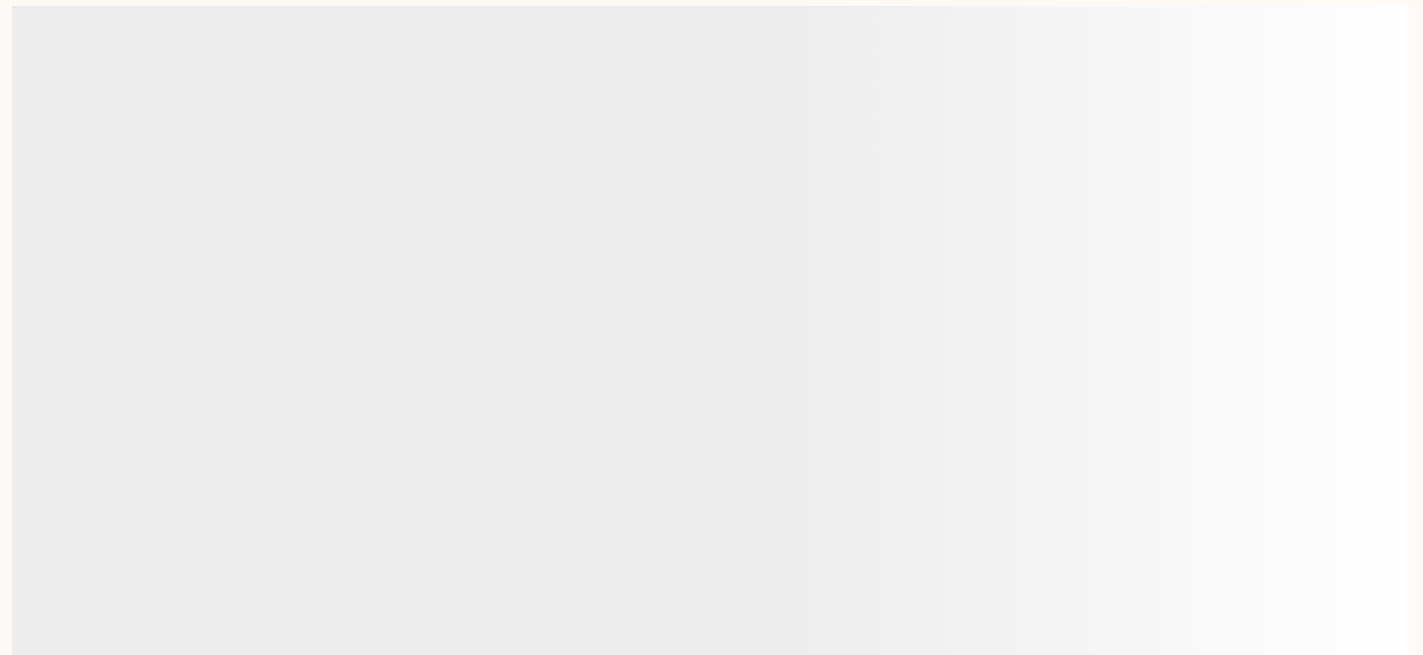
It is difficult to fathom how the government has determined that these allegations are incorrect - not least because they have not actually engaged (at least publicly) with the authors of the report. It is therefore impossible to assess whether they knew the details of the 30 anonymous interviewees to determine whether their interviews were either factually incorrect or misinterpreted by the report. It is also not possible to know whether the government feels as though the three public cases cited by Kundnani were factually wrong, or incorrectly interpreted. Given that the nature of the

allegations hinges on a lack of trust, assuring members of British Muslim communities that these allegations are all false without providing an authoritative account of their investigation is problematic: it ignores community perceptions of the problem and the situation - and does little to alleviate fears or concerns.

This lack of transparency is the problem - a problem which Denham himself recognises and [reiterated in a speech yesterday afternoon](#). To this end, Denham has made substantial and tangible moves to wrench the Prevent programme back from a covert agenda - and this is not least apparent in his assertion that the focus of Prevent shouldn't just be Muslims. This is to be commended - and could be the first step in the long overdue correction of the Hazel Blears and Jacqui Smith drive to connect issues of social cohesion with counter-terrorism. There is some real evidence that he is seeking to de-stigmatise Muslim communities, and put an emphasis on preventing crime and violence, rather than specific ideological or religious orientations.

But this good work is undermined by the current political strategy. Many British Muslims bought into the notions of partnership and community engagement that lie at the core of Prevent. There was a recognition that British Muslims had perspectives that authorities too often missed, and that some well-placed community leaders and organisations could make a real and equal contribution to combating extremist violence - on a basis of partnership rather than acting as informants. As one key contact said to us in a research interview "I care as much about the violence as anyone else - after all it could have been my three-year-old on the tube as much as any non-Muslim". The positive potential of Prevent will remain unfulfilled as long as communities feel as though their trust has been violated.

To this extent, the lack of public, open and transparent engagement stands to jeopardise the goodwill and shared concerns that create the bases for meaningful partnerships between British Muslims and the government. There is ample evidence that the best response to these kinds of allegations is to listen and engage with one's sternest critics - lessons learned as a result of, for example, the [Stephen Lawrence inquiry](#) and its aftermath. At the moment there exists a *prima facie* case for engaging with the details of the report, rather than skirting the issues that they raise or issuing simple assurances that Prevent isn't about spying. We hope that Denham, and the government, recognise this.



Most viewed