

Is the Commission for Countering Extremism going to erode freedom of religion and belief?

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Carys Moseley looks at recent developments in the government's 'anti-extremism' measures and how they could be used to restrict Christian freedoms.

On 20 September the Commission for Countering Extremism¹ published the Terms of Reference for a study on extremism in the UK² and how to challenge extremism more effectively. There is a discussion of 'Harms Caused by Extremism' on page 11, which begins by referring to Ahmadi shopkeeper Asad Shah, Jo Cox MP and Muslim worshippers at Finsbury Park mosque, all victims of murder at the hands of violent extremists.

The hunt for 'victims of extremism'

The statement is then made that "there are other victims of extremism" as follows:

"We heard about mixed-faith couples whose wedding days were disrupted by religious hardliners, gay people forced to choose between living their lives as they want and their faith, and suffering abuse as a result, and the abuse faced by people countering extremism affecting their emotional and psychological wellbeing."

This suggests the Commission could advocate forcing orthodox religious bodies to accept mixed-faith marriages and homosexual lifestyles or risk being branded as extremists, effectively forcing them to deny their own teachings on marriage and sexual ethics. This would be a major attack on freedom of religion and belief in the United Kingdom. It completely undermines Theresa May's statement, made as Home Secretary, on the Radio 4 Today programme on 19 October 2015³, that the Counter-Extremism Strategy⁴ would not diminish religious freedom as it wasn't about 'different views' or 'different beliefs' – but nevertheless targeted 'extremist views'. John Humphrys had asked her specifically about objection to same-sex 'marriage'.

Encouraging the public to report 'perceptions' of 'extremism'

The Commission acknowledges what has been a problem all along, namely that the government, the police, campaign groups and

academics all have different definitions of extremism (page 9 of the Terms of Reference). The solution proposed by the Commission to remedy this situation is twofold.

First it is allowing members of the public to come forward with their own 'perceptions' of what extremism is:

"For our Study, we want those providing evidence to consider the definitions we have provided but to use their own perceptions on what they consider to be extremism." (page 9 of the Terms of Reference)

This in itself is a dangerous form of populism, as it will encourage people with all sorts of private personal grievances against others to turn disputes into examples of 'extremism'.

Second, the Commission proposes that it will do the following:

"Our Study will look at the wide range of different perceptions of extremist behaviours and ideas, and identify commonalities and consistent themes, as well as areas of contention. We will propose a consensus over the boundaries of extremist attitudes and behaviours." (page 9 of the Terms of Reference)

It is also important to remember that the Counter-Extremism and Safeguarding Bill went through no less than fourteen drafts at the hands of government lawyers before 'sinking without a trace' in January 2017 because it proved impossible to define 'extremism'.⁵ It was embarrassingly obvious that this would prove impossible given that describing something as 'extreme' can only ever be a matter of opinion.

The Lead Commissioner for Countering Extremism, Sara Khan, is on record as questioning the need for a Counter-Extremism Bill⁶. However, by now endorsing the Commission's delay in 'setting the boundaries of extremism', i.e. defining 'extremism', until enough people come forward with examples, she is ultimately creating the same problem – thought-policing. Only this time, members of the public are being encouraged to come forward with 'perceptions'. This is basically the Commission creating a surveillance society

where people are encouraged to snitch on traditional and conservative religious people.

Treating counselling and therapy for unwanted same-sex attraction as 'extremism'

No Royal Commission or Public Inquiry would be allowed to get away with this entirely subjective and arbitrary way of working. So why does the Commission for Countering Extremism get away with it? The creation of this Commission was promised in the Queen's Speech in 2017⁷. It appears that this was in response to the Casey Review on Integration⁸. The Charter for the Commission states that it "will provide impartial and expert advice on the tools, policies and approaches needed to tackle extremism".⁹

The exclusive focus on mixed-faith weddings and homosexuality in the Terms of Reference of the proposed study by the Commission echoes the end of chapter 8 of the Review into integration published by Dame Louise Casey in December 2016.¹⁰

"There are examples of inequality and intolerance in other ethnic and faith groups, with concerns expressed to us during the review about increased Sikh extremism (for example in disruptions to mixed faith couples' weddings), the treatment of women in some strictly Jewish Orthodox communities (with children reportedly being taught that a woman's role is to look after children, clean the house and cook) and newer Christian churches (with activists seeking to 'cure' people of homosexuality). All such instances undermine integration and should be challenged."

This is an intellectually lazy and completely erroneous attribution to some Christian churches that they try to 'cure' people of same-sex attraction (given that Christians, like everybody else, know very well that it isn't a mental illness and so cannot talk of 'cure' here). The real target is pastoral counselling and therapy for unwanted same-sex attraction, which I have repeatedly warned might be treated as 'extremism' and 'hate speech' by the UK government ever since the Home Office said it would support a ban.¹¹

Casey is on the Expert Group¹² for the Commission for Countering Extremism. However, given that she has no academic qualifications in religion nor any pastoral training, not to mention the fact that she is

seriously misinformed on the subject under question, the Commission and the government should ignore Dame Louise Casey's recommendations on the matter.

Sara Khan, the Lead Commissioner for Countering Extremism, has also spoken at the Humanists UK Convention in 2017¹³ and at the National Secular Society conference in May 2019¹⁴ on 'Reclaiming Religious Freedom'. This suggests a closeness to secularists who are openly hostile to vocal articulation of Christian principles in public life. For example, Humanists UK are on record as opposing counselling and therapy for unwanted same-sex attraction¹⁵.

The folly of pushing for liberalisation of religious attitudes

It is important to scrutinise how the Casey Review¹⁶ wanted to push for the liberalisation of religious ethics in order to further integration. Having spoken with polling companies, Dame Louise Casey wanted to see more polling evidence for public attitudes on certain issues, insinuating that attitudes needed to liberalise. The Review said this:

"Very little reliable research has been done into more controversial questions related to integration, which might include views around:

- the acceptability of different sexualities, abortion, drug use;
- rigidity of gender roles;
- tolerance of views which directly contradict your own;
- conflicts between tradition and values such as equality."

(Paragraph 5.2 of the Casey Review)

Given the obsession with normalising non-heterosexual sexualities it is reasonable to assume that listing abortion and drug use in the same sentence means they are considered acceptable liberal values, hallmarks of 'integration'.

The truth is that normalisation of abortion and drug use poses a very serious problem for the coherence of Casey's thinking and that of the government on integration, given her report's focus at one point on grooming gangs (which are overwhelmingly Muslim¹⁷). For these, in fact, are very closely linked to the drug trade¹⁸ as well as to abortion. It seems that 'liberal' attitudes to drug-taking, far from being signs of 'integration', are an index of an attitude that

fuels and perpetuates fundamentalist Muslim hostility towards non-Muslims, particularly girls and young women.

When considering attitudes to abortion, the same pitfalls occur. One of the problems with the grooming gangs is that they seem to be very happy to use abortion when it suits them, to get rid of the evidence of raping young non-Muslim girls. This is exactly what happened to 'Sarah',¹⁹ who is being helped by the Christian Legal Centre. Once again, the problem is an all-too-'liberal' attitude to abortion – one that is in fact not so far off that of all sexual and domestic abusers.

Preaching about 'stamping out extremist ideology' and linking this to 'integration' will make no difference at all. Instead, we can expect from some quarters a renewed attack on Christian pro-life activism as 'non-violent extremism', no doubt in support of a renewed campaign to have buffer zones around abortion clinics.

A classic case of Parkinson's Law

It is significant that there is a gulf between how the commission sees extremism and how the public understands it. The commission has published the results of a public opinion poll showing that most of the British public thinks of terrorism when it thinks of 'extremism'. Very few people think of conservative attitudes to sexuality. This is interesting because a ComRes poll published in 2017²⁰ found that the public was overall not really in favour of the use of the word 'extremism' in public debate. Indeed there was much confusion over what counted as 'extreme' in relation to controversial topics.

This should have been enough to discredit the notion that 'extremism' in terms of beliefs is something the government should be tackling – but no, the commission's stated role is to 'stamp out extremist ideology'. It is a quango that is creating problems rather than solving them, a classic case of Parkinson's Law - 'work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion'. We could reword this as 'the definition of extremism expands so as to fill the time available for compiling grievances.' What that really means is that the definition will be stretched ad infinitum unless and until someone in the government has the temerity to say, like the little boy in the fairy-tale, that the Emperor has no clothes.

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- ¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/commission-for-countering-extremism>
 - ² https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/742176/Terms_of_Reference_into_Extremism_Study.pdf
 - ³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OUdsA3svzmk>
 - ⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/counter-extremism-strategy>
 - ⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/jan/29/theresa-may-counter-terrorism-bill-sinking-without-trace-extremism-british-values>
 - ⁶ <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/jt201617/jtselect/jtrights/105/10507.htm>
 - ⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/queens-speech-2017>
 - ⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-casey-review-a-review-into-opportunity-and-integration>
 - ⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/charter-for-the-commission-for-countering-extremism/charter-for-the-commission-for-countering-extremism>
 - ¹⁰ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/575973/The_Casey_Review_Report.pdf
 - ¹¹ <https://archive.christianconcern.com/our-issues/sexual-orientation/why-we-must-stop-the-government-from-outlawing-the-ex-gay-movement>
 - ¹² <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/commission-for-countering-extremism-launches-evidence-drive>
 - ¹³ <https://humanists.uk/civicrm/?page=CiviCRM&q=civicrm/event/info&reset=1&id=230&noheader=1>
 - ¹⁴ <https://www.secularism.org.uk/news/2018/09/nss-to-host-major-2019-conference-on-reclaiming-religious-freedom>
 - ¹⁵ <https://humanists.uk/campaigns/human-rights-and-equality/conversion-therapy/>
 - ¹⁶ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/575973/The_Casey_Review_Report.pdf
 - ¹⁷ <https://www.spiked-online.com/2018/05/28/we-have-to-stop-saying-asian-grooming-gangs/>
 - ¹⁸ <https://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/12662/britain-parliament-grooming-gangs>
 - ¹⁹ <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6169489/Sarah-repeatedly-raped-twice-forced-marriage-EIGHT-abortion.html>
 - ²⁰ <http://comresglobal.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Evangelical-Alliance-Public-Opinion-on-Extremism-Survey-Data-Tables.pdf>