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# CURATE'S EGG

## THE GOVERNMENT'S NEW COMMUNITY COHESION STRATEGY

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A Policy Exchange Research Note

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## About the Author

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## Executive summary and commentary

Policy Exchange has seen a leaked copy of the Government's new community cohesion strategy, *Protecting What Matters*. It is a mixed bag. This short Research Note analyses the highlights from it, as we see them.

Several things in the strategy will be neuralgic for many. It proposes the creation of a "special representative on anti-Muslim hostility," which will almost certainly hand an official megaphone to an activist with an expansive view of what anti-Muslim hostility is.

The document condemns last summer's widespread flying of English, Scottish and Union flags as the "misuse [of] national symbols to exclude or intimidate. The extreme right has tried to turn symbols of pride into tools of hate."

Integration is described as "a two-way street" – implying that the indigenous community must adapt to the practices of newer arrivals, as well as vice versa.

The party-political tone of the first chapter blames austerity and "immigration policy under the last government" for social tensions with far older, deeper, more complex roots.

The strategy creates clear free speech risks, pledging to crack down on "divisive content" online. But "division," or disagreement, is necessary for democratic debate. If everyone agreed, or was forced to agree, it would not be a debate.

However, several other respects are more welcome. In contrast to last year's "counter-extremism sprint," leaked to us at Policy Exchange and disowned by ministers the next day, the new strategy is clear-eyed that Islamism – responsible for three-quarters of the police's counter-terror workload and 94 per cent of all terrorist deaths in the last quarter-century – is the country's greatest extremist threat. And it recognises Islamism's institutional strength.

The document proposes new powers to shut down extremist charities and suspend trustees, to "strengthen monitoring" of non-violent extremism in universities and to exclude hate preachers from the UK. There will be greater oversight of home schooling, sometimes exploited by extremists, and a "dedicated Home Office horizon-scanning function to identify and disrupt individuals and events of extremist concern" in hireable venues and outdoor spaces. There will be an annual "state of extremism" report.

A section entitled “resetting the social contract” makes clear that “those who come here must make a genuine effort to integrate into and engage with our shared way of life” and must speak good English, as almost a tenth of the non-white population do not: “the ability to use and understand our shared language should be a fundamental basis for participating in society and an expectation of those who wish to call the UK home.”

After the scandal of the Batley teacher forced into hiding by a mob for showing cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed – where, almost five years later, he remains – the document makes a very strong statement that the government will “stand against those who try to intimidate, threaten and harass others because they are offended by so-called ‘blasphemy.’ We do not recognise blasphemy law in the UK.”

One potential ingredient of a blasphemy law – an official definition of Islamophobia, now rebranded anti-Muslim hostility but just as dangerous – is nowhere to be seen in the leaked strategy, though it may still be announced separately.

The strategy promises to “embed the [Conservative] government’s 2024 extremism definition across central and local government” and “embed the 2024 engagement principles so that public bodies do not confer legitimacy, funding or influence on extremist groups.” That could be very significant – though working out which groups fall within the definition does risk creating a buffet for lawyers.

Any deployment of the concept of “extremism” cuts both ways. Many Conservatives, including three former Home Secretaries, objected to the 2024 extremism definition at the time for fear that it could be used against legitimate organisations and individuals, especially without a test of proportionality and reasonableness, safeguards or an appeal body.

Jonathan Hall, the independent reviewer of counter-terror legislation, also called the proposed definition “very loose.”<sup>1</sup> Even with the strategy’s clear statement that Islamism is the greatest current extremist threat, could it be weaponised against the political Right? Could it, for instance, be used against Reform, often attacked as “far right” by left-wing organisations such as Hope not Hate?

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2024/mar/10/three-ex-tory-home-secretaries-warn-against-politicising-anti-extremism>

There is also a pledge to “ensure trusted news sources are prominent and easy to access online.” This could potentially be used against outlets such as GB News.

The risk, of course, is that the bad things in the strategy happen, and the good ones do not. Some of the proposals may create significant backlash from the left. The Government is unstable and has a record of policy reversals.

The creation of an “anti-Muslim hostility” czar, with his or her government platform, constantly finding tendentious new examples of “hostility,” constantly pressuring for new restrictions, constantly present on Radio 4, could alone cancel out a significant part of the good which the strategy’s other policies would do.

# Chapter 1

## The diagnosis – highlights

The report states that Britain’s “historic social cohesion that has kept us united in the face of adversity” is now “under threat.” Declining trust in institutions has, it says, made people seek “answers elsewhere – often from those who do not share our common values.”

### *Mass migration a problem*

The document is clear that mass migration has been a problem, stating: “For many living in the UK, the changes brought about by mass migration have been too much, too quickly, leaving people feeling as though they are losing their local and national identity.”

It says that “a key part of being a UK citizen is tolerance and openness to views, cultures and traditions that are different from our own... at the same time, we also rightly expect new arrivals to make an effort to integrate into our shared culture and respect our traditions and uphold our values.”

### *Cancel culture*

The report does not use this phrase, but clearly refers to it in a passage which states: “Many people feel they cannot air perfectly legitimate concerns about the change they are seeing in their local communities. There must be space for honest discussion without assuming bad intentions or policing language.”

### *The summer flag displays – “tools of hate” misused to “exclude or intimidate”*

Last summer, thousands of English, Scottish and Union flags were displayed on lampposts and other street furniture. The document treats this as a threat, stating: “People should feel confident celebrating national pride – flying flags, wearing colours, and marking our festivals, successes and commemorations.... But we must also call out those who misuse national symbols to exclude or intimidate. The extreme right has tried to turn symbols of pride into tools of hate. We should feel free to celebrate our flag – and stand up to anyone who uses it against others.”

## *Party politics*

Unusually, perhaps, for a government document, and for a plan that is supposed to be about bringing people together, the first chapter is fairly party-political, attacking the Cameron-Osborne government's austerity programme for "cutting off many of the support systems that helped communities," saying that "physical spaces of connection have also been in decline following years of underinvestment" and charging: "Immigration policy under the last government created a system that is unsustainable, and so too is the record level of net migration that we inherited."

It says that "government policy has not kept pace with social and political developments. Austerity, fragmented approaches and a reluctance to confront difficult issues have weakened trust and allowed frustration to build.... In contrast, this government is determined to grip these challenges as part of our renewal agenda."

More neutrally, problems are also blamed on the "collapse" of manufacturing industry and its associated civic institutions.

## Chapter 2

### Cohesion policies – the highlights

The document's chapter 2, "Confident communities," says making unity possible "means managing the pace of change – particularly on migration." Its chapter 3, "Cohesive communities," says that "integration is a two-way street: we all share a role in providing opportunities for people to participate free from fear of discrimination or bigotry, while newcomers have a responsibility to engage with and embrace what it means to be British..."

"We must balance respect for different cultures and backgrounds with the expectation that those who come here must make a genuine effort to integrate into and engage with our shared way of life."

The document states that "gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, and freedom from discrimination are fundamental to who we are. Integration means understanding and embracing these values." The demand that all must "embrace" LGBT rights, in particular, could conflict with communities where there is higher hostility to homosexuality. It is also at least possible that it could be used against people with gender-critical views.

The document adds that "attempts to impose extremist views, restrict the rights of others, or pressure people to conform to an intolerant world view are not acceptable... We will not tolerate efforts of individuals to sow division, stir anger against those with religion, political or social views different to theirs, or spread extremist, intolerant beliefs that undermine our shared values."

#### *A "special representative on anti-Muslim hostility"*

The document states that the Government will "appoint a Special Representative on Anti-Muslim Hostility to champion efforts across the UK to tackle hostility and hatred directed at Muslims and those perceived to be Muslim. The special representative will engage with communities and stakeholders, and support cross-sector action to strengthen understanding, reporting and response."

This post will be a significant bully pulpit, with official backing and strong visibility. Candidates are likely to include activists such as Baroness Gohir, who has campaigned strongly for the controversial All-Party Parliamentary Group definition of Islamophobia, and has attacked media coverage of the child grooming

scandal as “disproportionate” and as being “used... to fuel racism and Islamophobia,”<sup>2</sup> or a figure such as Dominic Grieve.

The Canadian government had a similar “representative on combatting Islamophobia,” who promoted a highly expansive definition of what Islamophobia was, including “everyday microaggressions,” and cited coverage of the UK’s Trojan Horse scandal, where hardline Muslims took control of Birmingham state schools, as Islamophobic.<sup>3</sup> The office was abolished last month.

There is no mention in the document of the highly controversial proposal for an official definition of anti-Muslim hostility, covered in previous reports by Policy Exchange, though a new definition could still be announced separately. Even without a definition, a “czar” could do significant harm.

### **Antisemitism**

The document states, among other things, that “time and again, we have heard from the Jewish community that antisemitism is being normalised in many corners of society – from our schools and universities to workplaces and the NHS.” This may be the most explicit statement yet in a current government document about the penetration of antisemitism into public institutions.

Antisemitism is also at one point described as a religious rather than a religious/racial hatred.

### **New funds**

The strategy promises a further £800m over ten years for 40 areas where “social cohesion is under pressure,” £2m per area per year on average. There will be £750m over four years for youth, sport, and community infrastructure. There will be a £5.5m fund to “restore local news where it has disappeared.”

### **All who live here must speak English (or Welsh)**

The document states that “a shared language is a key facilitator of cohesive communities... The ability to use and understand our shared language should be a fundamental basis for participating in society and an expectation of those who wish to call the UK home....

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.mwnuk.co.uk/go\\_files/resources/UnheardVoices.pdf](https://www.mwnuk.co.uk/go_files/resources/UnheardVoices.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> <file:///Users/andrewgilligan/Downloads/understanding-islamophobia-guide-eng-1.pdf>

The Government will set clear national integration expectations for communities across the country, focused on... English language proficiency and participation in work.”

In the 2021 census, 880,000 people living in England and Wales could not speak English well and 161,000 could not speak it at all. More than five million people in England and Wales (8.9 per cent of the population) do not use English or Welsh as their main language.<sup>4</sup>

### *Home schooling*

Most parents will still be able to home-school their children – a right sometimes abused by extremists, particularly Islamists, to set up small informal schools indoctrinating a handful of children in extremism. But there will be “strengthened oversight,” including obliging councils to keep registers of children not in school and requiring parents of such children to notify the council; requiring local authority consent to home-schooling for “the most vulnerable children;” empowering councils to visit children at home; and “piloting mandatory local authority meetings with parents, in selected areas, before children can be withdrawn from school for home education.”

### *Religion/ interfaith*

The government will “consider including religious education in the national curriculum” and aims to “grow Inter Faith week.” Interfaith is sometimes used by problematic organisations; in 2024, the National Interfaith Network was obliged to close after the Government withdrew funding because of its links with the hardline Muslim Council of Britain.

The strategy also says that the government will “promote the role” of standing advisory councils of religious education (SACREs), bodies sometimes also dominated by activists and hardliners. Money will be provided to support faith buildings.

The United Kingdom is a historically Christian country, with an established Church, that has in practice become increasingly secular. Is it now the Government's job to promote religion? Why? If so, which ones? What message does this send to the sizeable chunk of society that is either opposed to religion, or which may well

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<sup>4</sup><https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/language/bulletins/languageenglandandwales/census2021>

believe, but considers faith a predominantly private matter? Given the wealth of many religions in terms of property and donations, should taxpayers' money be utilised to support faith groups?

There are also practical problems. In the West Midlands the relationship between the police and the Muslim community has been questioned for several years, including the banning of Israeli football fans from the match against Aston Villa on 6 November 2025.<sup>5</sup> Institutionalising such relationships is potentially dangerous – the more police engage with the faith leaders of one community, the more open they are to accusations of bias. Rather than breaking down the dominance of unelected community leaders, in accepting the importance of religion in this way, the Government may inadvertently increase it.

### *A social cohesion taskforce*

The document proposes the establishment of a Social Cohesion Taskforce, another body that could do more harm than good if it ends up being dominated by unrepresentative activist and identity politics groups.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/politics/article/birmingham-council-maccabi-tel-aviv-scandals-njdqj6npw>

## Chapter 3

### Counter-extremism policy – the highlights

The strategy promises to “carry out a fundamental reset of how government approaches countering extremism... this means addressing areas of vulnerability, whether that is online, in the education and charity sectors, religious institutions or tightening the controls against foreign extremists entering our country.” It will be run by an inter-ministerial group, and with regular reports to the Prime Minister.

Unlike the “Sprint” document leaked to Policy Exchange in early 2025, and then disowned by ministers, this one explicitly foregrounds Islamism as the main threat, stating that “Islamist terrorism comprises about three quarters of counter-terrorism police’s caseload. Islamism is a political ideology; its proponents seek to impose their interpretation of religion and ‘sharia’ as law by state power, and in various manifestations justify acts of terror to achieve their goal of a global Islamic state... Islamists do not represent the Muslim communities of the UK.”

The 2025 Sprint document rejected using the definition of extremism produced the year before by the previous Conservative Communities Secretary, Michael Gove. But this one enthusiastically adopts it, saying that “we will embed the [previous] government’s 2024 extremism definition across central and local government, and working with frontline partners such as the police.”

It also says it will “update and embed the 2024 engagement principles so that public bodies do not confer legitimacy, funding or influence on extremist groups” and “publish an annual State of Extremism report setting out the nature and scale of the current threat.”

It will “strengthen the Charity Commission’s powers to tackle extremism” by “extending its ability to suspend trustees and shut down charities. The Charity Commission will seek to streamline decision making and the government will review the appeals process.” There will be “automatic disqualification of trustees with unspent hate crime convictions and discretion to disqualify trustees who have been excluded from the UK, are subject to sanctions, or are engaged in conduct promoting terrorism, violence or hatred.”

There will be a “dedicated Home Office horizon-scanning function to identify and disrupt individuals and events of extremist concern, eg in hireable venues and outdoor spaces, within charities, and on campuses.”

In schools and universities, the strategy says government will “co-design with students a Cohesion Charter, which brings together a set of agreed principles that guide students’ conduct and engagement on issues that underpin or undermine campus cohesion.” Expecting students to cooperate with this is perhaps optimistic. The Office for Students will also “further strengthen monitoring of universities’ efforts to prevent individuals becoming involved in or supporting terrorism... this includes non-violent extremism if it can be reasonably linked to terrorism.” Prevent duty obligations in education will be enforced.

The strategy promises to “transform our specialist Disruptions Unit to detect expose and counter extremist influence across the UK” and to “make the Home Office visa taskforce permanent and expand its reach to block hate preachers and extremists of all kinds from entering the UK.”

An important commitment comes following the case of the Batley Grammar School teacher who showed caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed in class and was forced by a mob into hiding– where, almost five years later, he remains. The strategy says the Government will “stand against those who try to intimidate, threaten and harass others because they are offended by so-called ‘blasphemy.’ We do not recognise blasphemy law in the UK.”

### *Risks to freedom of speech*

Any wider deployment of the concept of “extremism” also, of course, cuts both ways – with potentially serious risks to freedom of speech. Three former Conservative Home Secretaries objected to the 2024 definition at the time for fear that it could be used against legitimate organisations and individuals, especially without a test of proportionality and reasonableness, safeguards or an appeal body. Also in 2024 a more neutral figure, Jonathan Hall, the independent reviewer of counter-terrorism legislation, called the proposed definition “very loose.”<sup>6</sup> Could it, for instance, be used against Reform, often attacked as “far right” by left-wing organisations such as Hope not Hate?

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2024/mar/10/three-ex-tory-home-secretaries-warn-against-politicising-anti-extremism>

The strategy includes a pledge to crack down on “highly engaging but divisive content” online. “Divisive” is another potentially problematic concept, since “division,” or disagreement, is necessary for democratic debate. If everyone agreed, or was forced to agree, it would not be a debate. There is also a pledge to “ensure trusted news sources are prominent and easy to access online.” This could potentially be used against outlets which are deemed too “right-wing,” such as GB News.