

Rt Hon Jacqui Smith MP made the keynote address, entitled 'our shared values – a shared responsibility,' at the first International Conference on Radicalisation and Political Violence on 17 January 2008.

<http://security.homeoffice.gov.uk/news-publications/publication-search/general/home-sec-speech-0108?view=Binary>

In her speech, Smith made the case for more decisive action to prevent radicalisation, particularly on the internet. Setting out the principles of the government's counter-terrorist strategy, pursuing terrorists, protecting infrastructure, preparing for 'any incident' and preventing radicalisation, she acknowledged that it was the last of these – preventing radicalisation – that is a 'major long-term challenge'. In her analysis, she attributed 'violent extremism' to: 'An ideology... a misinterpretation of religion and a view of contemporary politics and history' 'Ideologues and propagandists for this cause... taking advantage of the open institutions in this country' 'The vulnerability of the young Communities that are ill-equipped to challenge it' 'Grievances against the government and the state

Smith acknowledged that an effective response to the terrorist challenge needs to go beyond simply law enforcement. Yet in her speech she nevertheless reiterated the orthodoxies of the government's counter-terrorist strategy – policing and communities. While the latter concept has been much-vaunted in recent years, it is open to question how much progress the government has actually made in developing an effective community-based strategy to deal with radicalisation.

Context

Smith's speech was made at a conference launching the new International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (<http://www.icsr.info/>), based at King's College, London. Through 2008, the ICSR are running two research projects, 'assessing pathways into radicalisation' and 'countering radicalisation on the internet'.

Commentary (Nick Lee)

It is telling that Smith quickly resorts to talking about legislative action, for all that she acknowledges that it is best a partial solution. The reality is that the government has displayed a great deal of uncertainty in how to prevent radicalisation (rather than simply legislate against it). They are not the only ones. In the context of online radicalisation in particular, it is not clear how helpful community-based strategies can actually be. She is probably right that the only effective response is the creation of 'shared values, shared rights and shared responsibilities' – a process that, for all the rhetoric, is unlikely to take place overnight.

The online anti-radicalisation strategy that she suggests is, at best, a partial one. While

proscribing certain websites might be have some impact, the experience of countries like China that censor websites on a normal basis demonstrates that such proscriptions are never wholly effective. Moreover, such actions would do little to prevent radicalisation on social networks such as Facebook and using realtime communication services such as MSN Messenger.

Reports from those who attending the conference suggest that many of those participating in discussions outside of Smith's keynote speech shared these reservations. Indeed, the openDemocracy website claims that they were often 'unabashedly critical' and 'blunt' in their criticisms of the government.

Reactions

In the press release accompanying the speech, the Home Office claimed that 'the government is working closely with the internet technology industry... to identify how and where terrorist recruiters are working online to groom young people as future terrorists' (Home Office press release). It is clear that the government's response to the problem of online radicalisation, therefore, is a work in progress.

The Progressive Vision think-tank expressed doubts about how extremism could actually be defined and how the government could effectively deal with extremist websites.