

3. Counter-extremism policies and free speech in UK universities

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3.1 INTRODUCTION

Right-wing commentators and conservative politicians in many countries – the United States, United Kingdom (UK), and Australia, in particular – have expressed concern that universities are hostile to conservative social and political views, and that academics and students who go against a progressive ‘orthodoxy’ are at risk of being ‘cancelled’ and ‘no-platformed’ by intolerant activists. This concern has been fuelled in the UK by think tanks such as Policy Exchange (2020), Civitas (2020), and the Legatum Institute (2022). It has been amplified in the mainstream conservative press, in radically contrarian right-wing online media such as *Spiked* and *Unherd*, and also in liberal media such as the *Guardian*, where some commentators, such as Hadley Freeman and Susanna Rustin, are sympathetic to gender-critical feminists and sympathise with their apparent harassment by transactivists (see Tani 2023). The last conservative government had also expressed concerns about religious groups, especially Muslims, seeking to restrict free speech through what are regarded as ‘extremist’ demands for the reintroduction of laws on ‘blasphemy’, concerns which have also been reinforced in conservative and liberal media alike.¹

Among university groups organised to promote academic freedom – for example, Academics for Academic Freedom and the Committee for Academic Freedom – concerns are also expressed about corporate human resources (HR) policies within universities that derive from the Equality Act 2010 and support for staff and students with protected characteristics. Here, the issue is the supposedly ‘illiberal’ promotion of ‘liberal’ values and the adoption of ‘charters’ that indicate advocacy, enjoined by the university upon its staff,

¹ As discussed in the ‘Independent Review of Prevent’ (Shawcross 2023, paras 6.291–6.300); this report is discussed further below.

for specific equalities, rather than policies designed to prevent discrimination (Mieschbuhler 2020). Universities, corporately, are argued to have come under the thrall of lobby groups with particular agendas for promoting equalities and diversity on campus, which have had the consequence of reinforcing an identity politics of ‘groups’, rather than the protection of individuals (ibid.).²

In this chapter, we look at how the UK government’s Prevent policies to counter extremism have been neglected in these debates, notwithstanding that their focus is on the restriction of lawful speech and that a number of reports have identified serious concerns.³

3.2 FREE SPEECH AND PROTEST

Free speech is frequently defended as a potentially ‘noisy’ affair which entails that there is no right not to be offended (as in arguments against blasphemy laws). This must also include the right to protest, within the law, against what is regarded as offensive. In this context it is notable that at the same time as vigorously promoting free speech, the government also introduced draconian restrictions on demonstrations and protests in the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 and the Public Order Act 2023. These created new protest offences and enhanced police powers. The former also included provisions so that cases of criminal damage to memorials could more easily be sent for trial at the Crown Court, where a maximum sentence of ten years is available. Previously, where criminal damage was under £5000, the case would be heard in a magistrates’ court, with a lower maximum sentence. The explanatory note accompanying these changes states: ‘concern has been voiced in Parliament and society that the law focuses too heavily on the monetary value of the damage with insufficient consideration given to the emotional or wider distress caused by this type of offending, and as a result, the punishments do not fit the crime’ (Home Office 2022). In effect this involves a new concern for a lack of reverence for public memorials, or what might be called ‘civic blasphemy’. The double-standard is clear: a group identity associated with ‘the nation’ is to be protected, but not those identities associated with religious groups.

² This is something that has been enacted in dramatic fashion in the US by President Trump in executive orders declaring Diversity, Equality and Inclusion (DEI) policies to be illegal and replacing them with Merit, Excellence and Intelligence. See, Harvard Law School Forum on Corporate Governance, February 2025: <https://corpgov.law.harvard.edu/2025/02/10/president-trump-acts-to-roll-back-dei-initiatives/>.

³ See, for example, Rights and Security International (2022), our own People’s Review of Prevent (2023), and Amnesty International (2024).

Notwithstanding the focus on free speech in universities, there is very little evidence of widespread problems to which the critics point. The cases – deeply regrettable as they are – are relatively few. Nor do surveys, when properly conducted,⁴ indicate that students or staff share the concerns expressed in the media (see Chapter 4). The fact that there is wide media coverage promoting a problem of free speech means that many students may confirm that they think universities are becoming less tolerant: around 49 per cent of respondents to a recent survey by the Policy Institute at King's College did so, for example (Policy Studies Institute 2022). However, when asked about their own institution, 80 per cent said that they felt free to express themselves. Significantly, as Jim Dickinson sets out in chapter 4, it is 'minority' students (that is, those with a protected characteristic under the Equality Act) who feel most constrained about expressing their views; that is, those whose 'identity politics' are argued by commentators to be limiting right-wing speech.

The last Conservative government (2010–24) proposed a new Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act which was passed in May 2023. It modified the existing Education Act (No. 2) 1986, requiring universities to support freedom of speech within the law. The new Act strengthened this requirement by mandating universities to 'promote' free speech. The new Labour government paused the complaint mechanism which had been due on 1 August 2024 shortly after coming into office, but has subsequently announced that it would be implemented with some modifications (removing resort to a statutory tort), as described in Smita Jamdar's Chapter 2.

The anti-war protests associated with Israel's military actions in Gaza generated public pronouncements that there was insufficient use by the police of their powers (Harding 2024). Guidance was provided for university leaders about protecting Jewish students on university campuses.⁵ It also encouraged universities to adopt the intellectually discredited International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism (see Adam Sutcliffe's Chapter 11), and reminded them of criminal offences related to antisemitism (incitement of racial hatred) and support for terrorism. It gave indications that it would be considering the withdrawal of visas from international students who fall foul of the definition, and asked that universities act decisively against staff and students whose actions are deemed antisemitic: it proposed that students could be suspended pending investigation and that their fees and maintenance payments could also be suspended by the Student Loan

⁴ Many of the surveys are conducted online or through email surveys with little concern for proper sampling or questions designed to contextualise responses.

⁵ As set out on the Department for Education's blog 'Education Hub' in November 2023, <https://educationhub.blog.gov.uk/2023/11/05/how-were-protecting-jewish-students-on-university-campuses/>.

Company during that period. The message was clear: protest should be carefully policed to ensure that it remains within the law, but also the law should be rigorously applied and may need to be further strengthened.⁶

Although worrying, this seems straightforward. After all, rights to free speech only apply within the law, albeit that the range of legal restrictions in the UK has been expanding. This includes new non-violent terrorism offences, which are themselves largely associated with ‘speech’ offences such as downloading material or displaying images associated with proscribed organisations, as set out in the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act 2019, for example.

Calls to extend legal sanctions against public expressions of dissent by those who had previously called upon universities to promote free speech may be regarded as hypocritical, but they do not themselves breach free speech mandates. As Smita Jamdar has pointed out in Chapter 2, human rights protections on free speech do not apply where that speech is directed at the suppression of the rights of others. In this context, however, it is significant that many right-wing advocates of ‘free speech’ promote populist ideas of ‘democratic sovereignty’ rather than legal constraints exercised through the courts, both domestic and international; as in former government ministers proclaiming the need to withdraw from the European Convention on Human Rights. According to government, protest is not ‘cancelled’ so long as it is undertaken lawfully, even where the law is used to restrict protest. Changing the law through Acts of Parliament is part of the democratic process, and those same laws also provide protections; albeit that those protections are increasingly dependent on the will of parliamentary majorities and subject to populist claims about ‘mandates’ from the electorate.

3.3 PREVENTING LAWFUL SPEECH

There is one area where free speech is routinely and explicitly cancelled, and ‘values’ specifically promoted against lawfully expressed contrary views. This is the government’s policy to counter violent extremism, Prevent. The advocates of free speech make no comment about it, notwithstanding its role in generating a climate that chills free speech for British Muslims (Scott-Baumann and Perfect 2021). Prevent was set up in 2006 by the then Labour government as part of the counter-terrorism strategy, CONTEST (whose other component

⁶ As set out in a government response in May 2024 to a report by the Independent Adviser on Political Violence and Disruption, Lord Walney. See, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/statement-on-lord-walneys-report-protecting-our-democracy-from-coercion>.

parts are Protect, Prepare, and Pursue), though some aspects of Prevent had already been introduced in 2003.

From the outset, Prevent has been widely criticised for its construction of Muslims as a ‘suspect community’ and as potentially having values at odds with those of mainstream Britain (People’s Review of Prevent 2022). Although initially Prevent was associated with programmes to promote social cohesion, it had the paradoxical and divisive consequence of also generating public anxiety about British Muslims and their religious identities. This in turn created support for redirecting Prevent more explicitly toward security concerns and public safety.

We do not trace here its history from its first articulation in 2003. Rather, we concentrate on the Prevent duty introduced in 2015, which placed a requirement on public authorities – including schools (nursery, primary, as well as secondary schools), colleges, and universities, as well as many NHS services and youth services – to pay ‘due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism’.⁷ This has required all staff who have direct contact with pupils, students, patients, or clients to be trained in understanding the potential behavioural and ideological signs of ‘extremism’. These include specific ideological expressions, changes in behaviour, new circumstances, and other supposed indicators.

Any concerns are reported to a local safeguarding lead who will liaise with external bodies responsible for Prevent (including the involvement of local counter-terrorism police officers) for a possible referral to a specialist panel which will determine whether inclusion in the de-radicalisation programme Channel is appropriate. According to annually produced Home Office statistics, only around 10 per cent of referrals are considered to warrant a Channel intervention.⁸ Notwithstanding, all stages of the process – expression of initial concern, decision to refer, outcome of referral – have serious consequences for all those caught up in it: not only does the process involve a serious loss of trust in teachers and others providing important public services, but personal data are also retained and can be shared across agencies (People’s Review of Prevent 2022).

The government has not been able to provide a legal definition of ‘extremism’, which it otherwise describes as opposition to ‘British values’ of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, mutual respect, and tolerance of those

⁷ CONTEST is the responsibility of the UK government through the Home Office. However, its implementation is a devolved responsibility to the separate jurisdictions of England, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Prevent is not mandated in Northern Ireland.

⁸ For the latest, see ‘Individuals Referred to Prevent: to March 2023’, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/individuals-referred-to-prevent>.

with different faiths and beliefs. Alongside the Prevent duty, schools in England have also had a duty to promote fundamental British values throughout the curriculum since the Education (Schools) Act 2014; their compliance is regularly evaluated through Ofsted school inspections (Department for Education 2014). The values are the standard liberal norms set out above (which, of course, also encompass free speech). Describing them as ‘British’ normalises them as part of mainstream culture, while indicating the possible need for ‘minority’ (religious or ethnic) children to be inculcated in them as against the different (potentially ‘alien’) values of their home. Of course, the Prevent duty and its associated curriculum are very visible in schools; a decade on, all pupils who entered UK universities from schools in England in October 2014 have been taught fundamental British values and have been subject to monitoring under the Prevent duty for the entirety of their secondary education.

The Prevent duty ostensibly operates within the normal safeguarding responsibilities of public authorities toward young people and vulnerable adults. For example, there are existing responsibilities to identify those at risk of violence in the home, sexual abuse, and neglect, and to provide support through local government multi-agency teams which comprise social workers, police, and other professionals. In the case of Prevent, the specific vulnerability is an individual’s risk of ‘radicalisation’ and the possible commission of violent terrorist acts. As such, the risk in the case of Prevent is also understood as a risk that may be posed to public safety. Another striking difference is that Prevent does not focus on the source of the radicalising influence, whether that be some local group, family member(s), or online influences. Rather, Prevent limits its understanding and inquiry to the vulnerable individual’s propensity to be ‘radicalised’, along with a perceived disposition to violent actions at some point in the future in support of an ideology they have (somehow) imbibed.

This peculiar construction in safeguarding terms – where no offence has been committed by or against a supposedly vulnerable individual, nor has an intention to commit offences been formed by that individual – derives from the fact that Prevent is concerned with ideas and actions that are lawful, albeit judged by the government to be ‘extreme’. This context arises from an apparent focus on public safety and the government’s desire to be seen to do something about terrorism; this ‘something’ is a focus on the problem of ‘extremism’ by what the government calls ‘taking a whole society approach’. As such, Prevent operates in a nebulous space ‘upstream’ from terrorism, directed at ideas, individuals, and groups which do not act unlawfully. For individuals believed likely to commit terrorist acts (‘subjects of interest’), there is Pursue, a section of CONTEST that manages their surveillance; only if they are subsequently deemed low risk will the police refer them to Prevent. More broadly, there are also laws against the advocacy of terrorism, including the proscription of groups.

3.4 PREVENT IN UNIVERSITIES

Given that schools have more intensive engagement with their pupils than universities do with their students, there are fewer referrals to Prevent from the higher education sector. Nonetheless, the government's recent independent review of Prevent proposed that there were too few referrals and that the duty should be taken more seriously, with new instructions and advice provided to the sector (Home Office 2023).⁹

These new instructions addressed the Israel–Gaza war launched in October 2023. The government paradoxically advised universities to consider that Prevent may be applicable to student responses to the war. Prevent, however, is not suitable for 'organised' protest actions, since its remit is to (supposedly) attend to vulnerable individuals. It is therefore of little surprise that more actions were taken in relation to possible offences such as perceived support for terrorism in social media posts and alleged hate crimes.

However, there is one area of Prevent with special application to universities where the conflict with free speech mandates is explicit. This is the requirement for universities to have policies concerning external speakers invited onto campus, whether by student organisations or by academic departments. Individual institutions are at liberty to devise their own policies, but they are overseen by the Office for Students. The required elements of all policies are that details of speakers, the topic of the talks, and a risk assessment, need to be provided several weeks in advance of any event. This will include an 'open source' check on speakers, who will typically be asked to provide details of their social media accounts. This involves a check on not only what individuals may have said or written, but also their associations. The latter includes association with organisations that are judged by government to be extremist, despite not being proscribed by law.

The recent 'Independent Review of Prevent' proposed that these checks were not being done diligently enough and that critics of Prevent were too prominent within universities (Shawcross 2023). It recommended government support to the sector to counter the critics' 'disinformation' and disrupt their activities through the Unit for Prevent Disruptions. The Review advised that to 'effectively address the ideological challenge of terrorism, it [the Unit for Prevent Disruptions] will need to work with its adjacent teams to keep a

⁹ Many civil society organisations boycotted the review because of the perceived bias of the Chair, William Shawcross, and his connections with neo-conservative think tanks. The People's Review of Prevent was set up as an alternative means of expressing critical views. For a criticism of the report of the Independent Review, see People's Review of Prevent (2023).

consistent eye on the activities of “lower level” yet highly influential individuals and groups’ (ibid., para. 3.116).

The methods are necessarily directed at free speech and at groups that are judged by government to be ‘extremist’ because they supposedly provide support for objectives that are also expressed by terrorist groups, despite themselves not endorsing violence. The possible overlaps are extensive, especially since the definition of terrorism includes action against property as well as people, thereby bringing direct action protest within its ambit (in line with the new offences and powers to police protests and demonstrations outlined above, and the recent proscription as a terrorist group of Palestine Action, a direct action protest group).

To this end, following recommendations from the Independent Review, the last government introduced measures to create a register of Muslim-led civil society organisations whose agenda was judged to be ‘extremist’ while being within the law. The purpose of this register is to guide public authorities on whom they should not provide public funds to, nor engage with. In this context, universities have considerable funding provided through the ‘impact’ component of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) to encourage engagement and knowledge exchange with private and public bodies including civil society organisations, some of which will potentially be on the list, thus potentially disqualifying any such impact case studies.¹⁰

It is clear that these measures are necessarily directed at free speech (and in the case of possible ‘impact’ restrictions, academic freedom more specifically). In the absence of a legal definition of ‘extremism’, the measures are determined by the government of the day according to its own ideological predilections. While British Muslims and religious-based terrorism are currently seen as a particular concern, other groups can be included later. It is not our intention to argue for a register that is applied equally across the political spectrum, but to point to its intrinsically arbitrary nature with no checks on executive power. Clearly, the register could be extended to include organisations with other ideologies, but this would simply reinforce the problematic nature of the exercise from the point of view of free speech.

The Independent Review’s attack on free speech is especially plain when it blithely objects that ‘the campaign against Prevent has included some civil liberties groups and activists who seemingly, as a matter of principle, oppose a state-run scheme to counter specific ideas, attitudes, and non-criminal

¹⁰ John Holmwood declares an interest: he submitted an impact case study through the University of Nottingham associated with the Birmingham ‘Trojan Horse affair’ of the supposed ‘Islamification’ of schools, involving collaboration with Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND), identified by the government as one of several organisations that should be considered for registration.

behaviours, no matter how light touch the scheme's methods' (Shawcross 2023, para. 6.250); such groups are considered 'extreme' and likely worthy of Prevent attention.¹¹ On the other hand there is speech which the report seeks to free from Prevent scrutiny: it argued that Prevent was being 'misapplied' to right-wing extremism and that potentially mainstream views were being captured; in truth, this reflected the rightward drift of mainstream debate under the influence of Brexit and the newly established Reform party. It thus argued that the threshold was too low for right-wing referrals and too high for those for Islamism, and that this needed to be addressed in new training materials. Yet, in contradictory fashion, the Report also proposed that, 'it is important to caution that those implementing Disruptions must ensure that they uphold a consistent threshold across ideologies, and not allow Extreme Right-Wing, Extreme Left Wing, and Islamist groups to be held to different standards' (ibid., para. 3.119). Ultimately the Report's own findings undermine its arguments since the data show that a higher proportion of Prevent referrals for right-wing extremism proceed to a Channel intervention than is the case for referrals for Islamist extremism. Bearing in mind that the later stages of the Prevent process involve more highly trained and specialist practitioners, this suggests that the thresholds are too high for right-wing extremism and too low for Islamist extremism.

Another miscue is that the Review proposes that the ratios for Prevent referrals should be in line with the actual terrorist threat, which it argued was judged to be higher for Islamist than right-wing terrorism. This, however, entails a misunderstanding of the underlying rationale for Prevent, which is about vulnerability to radicalisation and disposition towards future acts of terrorism. Current terror threats come under the purview of Prevent's sister strands, Pursue and Protect. Also, current acts of terror spurred by recent events are not helpful indicators of future events and associated terrorist acts.

Nonetheless, all the recommendations of the Independent Review were accepted by the government and not opposed by the Labour Party when in opposition. They are currently being implemented in universities. We suggest that they are damaging to free speech in a way that currently discriminates against Muslim students and staff. However, there is also a particular risk to overseas students, since they are not entering universities from the English school system and have not, therefore, become familiar with how their speech is constrained by Prevent (see the previous section). According to Universities UK, of the circa 3 million students in higher education in the UK in 2021/22,

¹¹ Para. 6.248 reads: 'The most extreme elements in this campaign portray Prevent as authoritarian'; 'the most extreme' implies that all groups within the campaign against Prevent are 'extreme'.

around 25 per cent were from overseas, of which 14 per cent were European Union (EU) students.¹² Many of those students will be from different cultures and contexts, but they place themselves in a situation where they risk being caught up in the peculiarities of British counter-extremism policies, especially if they are Muslims.

3.5 COMMUNITY AND IDENTITY

We return to the claims made by right-wing commentators, set out in the introduction, that a problematic identity politics has beset higher education, involving ‘intolerant’ (or ‘woke’) activists promoting an equalities agenda. This is something that is associated with a supposed failure of ‘multiculturalism’, especially with regard to perceived problems of criticising religious or ethnic minorities for fear of being accused of racism.

Some 25 years ago, the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain (acting under the auspices of the Runnymede Trust) published its report, familiarly known as the Parekh Report (Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain 2000) after its Chair, Bhikhu Parekh. The report sought to draw out general conclusions for securing equal participation for all citizens. The argument was subtle and inclusive. It set out the idea of Britain as a single political community with shared values, as well as made up of distinct communities with different histories and beliefs. It proposed that the identities of groups were important, but also set out the important commonalities (rights and responsibilities) of individual citizenship.

The advocacy of multiculturalism was immediately derided in the mainstream media, especially the conservative press. It was also repudiated by the then Labour government. To some degree, this was also a consequence of riots in Bradford, Leeds, and Oldham in July 2001. These were widely seen as race riots involving white and ethnic minority youths. Reports by Ted Cante and John Denham (then a minister in the New Labour government) blamed the riots on the segregation of communities and a lack of integration. Over time, what was initially presented as a failure of integration across community differences came to be presented as a problem of the self-segregation of ethnic minority communities, especially Muslim communities. Shared values of citizenship were promoted against the identity claims of some citizens, rather than in support of their participation.

Paradoxically, ‘multiculturalism’ has come to be represented as both the dominant political ideology against which it is difficult to hold contrary views,

¹² As set out here: <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/latest/insights-and-analysis/higher-education-numbers>.

and something that has demonstrably failed. Not only has self-organisation by Britain's ethnic minority communities been described as potentially extremist identity politics, but it has also been presented as self-segregation.

However, it is difficult to escape the fact that Britain's ethnic minorities experienced significant disadvantages, as set out in the Parekh Report – whether in schooling, employment, or access to public services – and that direct and indirect discrimination was a major part of the explanation for those disadvantages. Advocacy and organisation to remedy those inequalities was urgent, but always at risk of being described as 'identity politics', allowing politicians and the media to describe anti-racist mobilisation as divisive and to represent activist groups as 'extremist', whether that be Black Lives Matter or those challenging Islamophobia.

No matter that, across the decades, reputable national surveys have shown British Muslims to hold values closest to those typical of the population as a whole, visible differences in dress and religious observance have led to them being represented as the most different and least integrated. Saffron Karlsen and James Nazroo (2015), for example, have shown that 90 per cent of Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, and Christians felt part of Britain; Muslims were more likely than Caribbean Christians to report a strong British identification and (along with Hindus and Sikhs) to recognise potential compatibility between this and other aspects of identity. As they put it, 'many Muslims, and those with other minority ethnicities and religions, do not see a contradiction between being British and maintaining a separate cultural or religious identity' (ibid., p. 774). Other studies have found a positive association between Muslim affiliation and positive national identities (Guveli and Platt 2011). Nor is this association affected by the intensity of religious commitments. Importantly, there is a positive correlation between British identification and higher religiosity, the latter being part of behaviour that is deemed suspicious by Prevent. These associations have remained strong across the period since 2001.

Multiculturalism facilitates identification with being British on the part of citizens outside the dominant cultural and religious traditions (Uberoi and Modood 2013). This is because ethnic and religious minorities associate 'Britishness' with a commitment to a plurality that recognises their different traditions. It is not only far-right groups outside the political mainstream that have promoted the opposite view: it has also been advanced by seemingly respectable think tanks such as Policy Exchange, and it has been central to government policies since 2010, especially following the Brexit referendum and the further rightward shift in the Conservative Party as it was challenged on its flank first by UKIP and then by the Reform Party.

One vehicle for the promotion of these views into the mainstream has been Prevent. Some of the groups deemed by the last government (Conservative Party, 2010–24) to be 'extremist' can be understood as 'communities of choice'

– far-right extremism, Black Lives Matter, and environmental activism, for example – where individuals may elect to join them (or not). Accordingly, any extremist ideology that they are held to represent does not implicate a wider community. In the case of ‘Islamism’, however, the issue is seen to involve a perception of Muslims as problematic insofar as they represent a ‘community of belonging’, where religious identity is understood in terms of exclusivity. This perception belies the fact that while Muslims, Christians, or Jews may understand their own religious identity as embodying a relation to what is true and necessary, that does not mean hostility to the beliefs of others.

This elision of community of belonging and community of choice, we argue, is central to the way in which Prevent places Muslim communities under suspicion as potential objects of anxiety for a wider population that is itself exempt from such stigmatisation, whatever the political choices of some members. It fuels far-right sentiments and contributes to a broader shift to the right in politics in Britain (and elsewhere), where ideological expressions that were once regarded as limited to far-right fringe groups are now part of mainstream political discourse, which itself operates through hostility to ethnic and religious minorities.

As we have seen, the introduction of the Prevent duty in 2015 was accompanied by the requirement that all schools in England should promote ‘fundamental British values’ of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs. This carried the implication that the values are part of the heritage of the white British majority, but may need to be inculcated among ethnic minorities where there is a possible deficit of values necessary for social cohesion.

Fast forward to August 2024 and the violent disorder in England. This involved far-right violence directed at the homes and businesses of Muslims and at places of worship, as well as at hotels hosting refugees and asylum seekers (widely represented as being Muslim young men). This was Islamophobia in violent action. Many political commentators have used the language that fuelled the mobs, while deploring the violence. They have called for an understanding of the ‘legitimate’ concerns about feeling left behind and displaced in ‘their own country’ (Holmwood 2024).

Writing recently in a letter to the *Guardian*, John Denham set out that in Britain, and in much of Europe – he might also have included Trump’s America – we are witnessing the rise of a new politics of the ‘cultural majority’ that ‘coheres around a conservative telling of national history, institutions and tradition’ (Denham 2024). Significantly, it ‘rejects liberal values but, in principle, is open to all ethnicities – as the numerous Conservative ethnic-minority leaders demonstrate’ (ibid.). The ‘British values’ expressed within ‘cultural nationalism’, it seems, are no longer those of ‘fundamental British values’, but they are not to be judged as extreme.

3.6 CONCLUSION

This chapter was written at a moment that can be understood as a possible turning point following the end of fifteen years of Conservative government. It is currently not clear whether the new Labour government understands the trajectory of the politics within which its own past actions as a government before 2010 are entrenched. Clearly, free speech is a paramount value for universities, but there would need to be recognition of the way in which lawful free speech within universities (and elsewhere) is currently restricted by the Prevent duty.

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