

Mark Rowley's Colin Cramphorn Memorial Lecture

Delivered at Policy Exchange on Monday 26 February 2018

Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests.

I am truly honoured to be delivering the 7th Colin Cramphorn Memorial Lecture.

Colin was an outstanding police leader and a remarkable, yet humble, man. In a distinguished career he championed the cause of community policing and was one of the pioneers in policing who saw its critical interdependency with national security.

I also speak ten years on from the inaugural lecture, delivered by Peter Clarke, the then national coordinator for counter terrorism investigations in the UK.

Peter, like Colin, was another believer in the importance of policing having local to global reach.

Before I begin, I would like to thank Policy Exchange and in particular Dean Godson and Hannah Stuart, for arranging this important event.

I speak today as I near the conclusion of my own career in policing.

A career that began on the streets of Digbeth in Birmingham to leading the National Counter Terrorism Policing network at New Scotland Yard. Over that period of time so much has happened in the world of national security and terrorism.

Back in the 1980's when I joined the service, the Provisional IRA posed the dominant threat in the UK.

That period saw multiple attacks carried out by generally well-organised active service units.

But, as we saw peace take hold after the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 after years of negotiations we looked forward to a time when terrorism in Britain could be a thing of the past.

Then just three years later the world stood still on 9/11 in the worst terror attack of our time.

Al Qaida-directed terrorism would finally get through to the UK four years later on 7/7 after a number of plots had been prevented.

Then as AQ in Iraq transformed into Daesh we saw Islamist terrorism increasingly adopt less sophisticated methods and become less discriminate. The emergence of Daesh seems to have shadowed my own time in counter terrorism.

I took on my current role the day before Daesh leader al-Baghdadi declared the so-called caliphate of the “Islamic State”.

And of course, last year we saw dreadful tragedies unfold in London and Manchester after seeing so many similar events across Europe, North America, the Middle East and Australia.

Today, I wish to speak about my own reflections of these events;

- I will be describing the acute threat from terrorism – from both an Islamist and extreme right wing ideology;
- I will be setting out what I see as the chronic threat from extremism, and
- I will be explaining what I see as a “whole society response” that is needed to address these combined challenges.

My key premise is that the acute threat from terrorism will only be tackled when the whole of society can respond to the chronic threat we face from extremism.

Islamist and right wing extremism is reaching into our communities through sophisticated propaganda and subversive strategies creating and exploiting vulnerabilities that can ultimately lead to acts of violence and terrorism.

This is why we need, what I call, a whole society response:

- from local policing to international partners,
- local councils, the education system,
- media and social media; central and local government;
- civic and social agencies,
- the private sector
- and of course communities themselves.

The days of securocrats alone successfully addressing our national security challenges are history.

In October last year Andrew Parker, Director General of MI5 said of the threat from international terrorism: "Today there is more terrorist activity, coming at us more quickly, and it can be harder to detect.

"It is multi-dimensional, evolving rapidly, and operating at a scale and pace we've not seen before."

As we approach the first anniversary of the terror attack in Westminster we look back on an extraordinary and most challenging of years.

Tragically, we saw five terror attacks, 4 Islamist and 1 extreme right wing, leaving a total of 36 people dead, and hundreds more injured.

And at the same time we saw an unprecedented number of plots prevented. 10 conspiracies of an Islamist nature were stopped since the Westminster attack.

And I can tell you today that over that same period police have been able to prevent a further four extreme right wing inspired plots in the UK.

It is important we make these figures public in order to illustrate the growth of right wing terrorism.

For the first time we have a home-grown proscribed white-supremacist neo-Nazi terror group, which seeks to plan attacks and build international networks.

You will agree this is a matter of grave concern.

In my tenure I have seen some new and emerging characteristics of the terrorist threat.

These include:

The shift from regionally defined organised groups to movements of amateur and professional terrorists such as Daesh – more a cult than an organisation.
The breadth of attack targets has increased.

Now looking beyond iconic targets anyone is deemed as "legitimate" as was graphically demonstrated last year.

We are seeing simpler and more readily accessible attack methodology not just ambitious and complex plots we saw when Peter Clarke oversaw CT investigations.

Terrorists still aspire to conduct "spectacular" attacks but this "lowering of the bar" empowers those who do not need training or sophistication.

The ease and speed in which vulnerable people can be radicalised through online propaganda and then move to attack planning has been a shocking feature of many of our cases.

Examples include the case of the youngest Briton ever to have been guilty of a terrorist offence.

14 at the time, the boy from Blackburn plotted with an Australian jihadist over the internet to behead police officers at an Anzac Day parade in Australia.

The “normal” teenager from Blackburn had been “immersed” in online extremist material and “groomed” by adult extremists.

Meanwhile the case of Brusthom Ziamani shows how quickly a person can be radicalised into carrying out an attack.

Ziamani became radicalized within four months and was arrested in possession of a large knife and hammer with the intention of using them to attack a soldier.

The volume in the threat is considerable at this time there are over 600 investigations encompassing Islamist, Extreme Right Wing and other motivations comprising more than 3000 subjects of interest and a legacy of over 20,000 individuals who featured in past terrorism investigations.

A deeply concerning characteristic is how both far right and also Islamist terrorism are growing allowing each side to reaffirm their grievances and justify their actions.

So how have the often converging threats of extremism and terrorism affected our operational response?

- Over the past three years (compared to the previous three) arrests have doubled.
- Producing 587 charges and 478 convictions for CT-related offences.
- Whilst we worked with partners on prevent interventions to reduce the vulnerability of around 2000 people of both Islamist and extreme right-wing ideologies.
- In addition, since the start of the Syria conflict around 100 children have been safeguarded through the Family Courts.
- And, to contend with the ever-increasing global nature of terrorism UK CT policing now operates in over 90 countries.

So, with this increased demand we now have to stretch to cover far more volume in an environment where plots develop far more rapidly and conspirators can work in secrecy on-line.

Our strength comes from a constant hunger to improve and to learn lessons. For example, following last year's events we and MI5 immediately commissioned an operational improvement review (OIR) which, under the independent scrutiny of David Anderson, proposed three key "step changes".

The first responds to the growing extreme right wing terrorist threat through bringing the skills and techniques of MI5 to the fight alongside police.

The second step change aims to improve capability especially data analytics to spot behavioural escalation within the very large cohort of former subjects of interest and beyond.

The third step change proposes going beyond existing national security community relationships to enable the widest range of local partners to play their part in managing the risk from former SOIs reactivating their extremist activities.

A key underpinning principle to these step changes is better connect our "Pursue" and "Prevent" activities to better manage those hovering between radicalised and mobilised.

There are many reasons why we should be optimistic in our nation's ability to confront the acute threat we face from terrorism.

First, we benefit from a mature national security infrastructure – CT policing and MI5 have built a highly capable and effective partnership allowing us jointly to confront a range of threats, including Islamist, Irish Republican and extreme right wing terrorism.

Second, political support and our legal tools – We have been fortunate to have had successive governments from different political sides investing in counter-terror capabilities providing and continually refining a sound legislative framework in order for us to do our job.

Third, the low availability of illegal firearms – The relative difficulty in procuring such weapons in Great Britain is an advantage we must sustain.

We are not complacent and we continue to work tirelessly with the NCA and Border Force to make it as difficult as possible for terrorists to access weaponry.

Fourth, being an island nation with strong borders – provides an obvious advantage when it comes to the movement of terrorists and material in and out of the country.

However, this doesn't remove the requirement for strong partnerships with our international counterparts both in Europe and beyond.

Last, but not least, is the age-old British model of community policing and the trust and legitimacy it secures.

The founder of British policing, Sir Robert Peel, said in 1829 “the police are the public, and the public are the police” and that principle is as true today as it was nearly 200 years ago.

We have invested heavily in our community engagement which is why public confidence remains high.

So, I have started by briefly setting out the acute threat from terrorism its characteristics and how it translates operationally and the advantages offered by the British policing model.

However British policing has always valued prevention above all else. Indeed Peel’s first principle was “The basic mission for policing is to prevent crime and disorder”.

That implies working with others on causes and so I now wish to turn to the chronic threat from extremism, and how it creates a fertile environment that allows the acute threat of terrorism to exist and thrive.

I see extremists from Islamist and far right persuasions both executing a common strategy.

Empirically, as a practitioner, I see four components:

1. Extremists reach into communities through sophisticated propaganda.
2. Extremists create intolerance and isolation by exploiting grievances;
3. Extremists reinforce this sense of isolation by generating distrust of state institutions; and
4. Extremists offer warped parallel alternatives that undermine our values of tolerance and diversity.

This helps create the isolated, fearful setting for terrorists to step into whether that’s in person or on-line to inspire often vulnerable people to carry out attacks.

As someone who has overseen hundreds of counter-terrorism investigations I have repeatedly seen how extremism creates or exploit such vulnerabilities. For example, the Finsbury Park attacker, Darren Osborne had grown to hate Muslims largely due his consumption of large amounts of on-line far right material including, as evidenced at court, statements from former EDL leader Tommy Robinson, Britain First and others.

Osborne had a “dysfunctional” background and history of alcohol and drug abuse, and violence.

There can be no doubt that the extremist rhetoric he consumed fed into his vulnerabilities and turned it into violence.

The murder of Lee Rigby was another example of where extremism leads to terrorism.

The attackers had been long-term extremists, mainly involved in activism. But over time they were radicalised further, ultimately turning their fanaticism into murder.

One of the main groups who inspired them was the pernicious organisation Al-Muhajiroun, aka ALM.

Led by Anjem Choudary, their primary role was to justify and defend Islamist terrorism.

The group had links to the terrorists who attacked London on 7/7 as well as numerous other attacks and plots overseas and here in the UK. The individuals had a long history of vile, but lawful, behaviour.

However, after ALM leadership pledged allegiance to ISIL in 2014 dismantling this dangerous group became a top priority and we were able to get Choudary and many other members charged, and subsequently convicted.

While Choudary became the de facto spokesperson for Islamism in the UK mouthpieces from the far right-wing, such as Tommy Robinson, also attracted notoriety and attention.

Robinson also became a regular fixture in our media giving him the platform to attack the whole religion of Islam by conflating acts of terrorism with the faith often citing spurious claims, which inevitably stirred up tensions.

Such figures represented no more than the extreme margins of the communities they claim to speak for yet they have been given prominence and a platform to espouse their dangerous disinformation and propaganda.

Today, we continue to see and hear so-called representative bodies speak out in such a way to create and exploit grievances and isolation, by:

- being equivocal in condemning acts of terrorism;
- undermining efforts to safeguard the young and vulnerable from
- radicalisation, and
- spreading disinformation about national security and foreign policy.

For example even though a third of all referrals under the Channel programme relate to right wing extremism members of the organisation, CAGE characterise Prevent as an “attack on Islam”.

Their representatives have also sought to whip up ridiculous claims that all Muslims are “terror suspects” in the eyes of the authorities.

And they famously described the “Jihadi John” suspect as a “beautiful young man”.

Leaders of MEND have claimed the UK is approaching the conditions that preceded the Holocaust seeking to undermine the State’s considerable efforts to tackle all hate crime and making an absurd comparison with state-sponsored genocide.

One of MEND’s former leading figures lost a libel case labelling him as “a hard-line Islamic extremist” in the context of comments he made supporting the killing of British soldiers in Iraq.

Meanwhile, Britain First has used deliberately provocative actions, including Mosque incursions and ‘Christian Patrols’ in areas with a high Muslim population confronting imams and making inflammatory claims against them, stoking up community tensions.

Far right groups have used cases of Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) by largely Asian groups as a catalyst to spread discord and hatred against Muslim communities.

Jayda Fransen, deputy leader of far right group Britain First went so far as to say that:

“The world is at war with Islam...I plan to stand with you to fight the bloody lot of them”.

And aiming to undermine authority she declared that her organisation is “a declaration against our own corrupt establishment”.

Each side feeds into each other’s extremist rhetoric with the common goal of increasing tensions and divisions in communities.

At the same time as these highly public examples of extremism we have seen more insidious strategies being adopted such as extremists infiltrating schools, public institutions and places of worship to radicalise children and young people.

These highly worrying cases come just three years after the so-called Trojan Horse affair: the organised attempt to enforce an Islamist ethos into schools in Birmingham came to light.

Peter Clarke found clear evidence that there had been a co-ordinated, deliberate and sustained action carried out by people in positions of influence in schools and governing bodies, who espoused, endorsed or failed to challenge extremist views.

Sadly, these were not isolated events. OFSTED inspectors remain concerned about the vulnerabilities in our education system.

Recently, OFSTED’s Amanda Spielman said that in the worst cases these subversive activities “indoctrinate impressionable minds with extremist ideology.”

We are also seeing the alarming occurrence of known extremists removing their children from school all together and teaching them at home. One London study found nearly half had done so.

An equally disturbing phenomenon has been the introduction of “whites only” food banks that have been set up in a small number of city centre locations across the country and either pop up or involve members going out to find rough sleepers who are again vulnerable.

So ironically, while Islamist and Extreme Right Wing ideologies may appear to be at opposing ends of the argument it is evident that they both have a great deal in common.

I think it important to expose some of what we see as extremists systematically and determinedly trying to undermine a peaceful, tolerant and democratic society.

I am reassured though that we have many advantages in addressing these challenges.

I see many impressive leaders stepping forward to confront these issues, including:

- William Shawcross and Amanda Spielman for their work in highlighting and tackling extremism in our charity and academic sectors respectively;
- Louise Casey, for her report into opportunity and integration,
- and Sara Khan, for her outstanding efforts in this critical policy area, and no doubt for her work to come as the Counter Extremism Commissioner.

But our biggest advantage lies in the resilience and tolerance of communities that was so visible after last year’s attacks where we saw faith leaders and communities come together and drown out the extremists who sought to exploit such tragedies.

So, having set out the acute and chronic threats posed by extremism and terrorism – from both Islamist and Extreme Right Wing ideologies I will now talk about why these distinct, yet clearly connected challenges require a whole society response.

First, I should be clear about the role of the police and our limitations.

We proudly engage in crime prevention but would never want to stretch policing and the criminal justice system to become the main lever to tackle complex social and political issues.

My thrust is rather, to propose that we can collectively do more to make it even harder for the extremists’ strategy to endure.

As they target vulnerable or isolated individuals and communities to create fear and hatred it is critical we collectively do everything possible to undermine their efforts so we can dramatically reduce the domestic recruiting ground for terrorists.

Remember the majority of people we arrest are British.

This means every part of society not just those charged with national security responsibilities coming together to confront the twin challenges of terrorism and extremism.

I do not pretend these issues are easy or that I have expertise across all these sectors but I do talk as a senior police officer with a practical insight into the challenges and I want to provoke a debate about how we can best collectively overcome them.

First as I have said already, it's vital that we – the police and MI5 – squeeze every drop of learning from our reviews of last year's cases.

However, as I have said, it is vital that the police and intelligence services do not "over reach" into areas and problems where we have no legitimacy or rightful place to be.

This would go against the principles of a free society.

Conversely it must be recognised that with such freedoms comes no assurances that no further attacks will ever occur.

As David Anderson, QC rightly said in his report into the London and Manchester terror attacks of our operational improvements they "will not remove the risk of terrorist attack: to do so would be manifestly impossible in a free society."

Such sentiments reinforce the need for a whole society response.

Second, the private sector has an enormous role to play in a number of ways.

They have made considerable progress over three decades in their commitment to "design out crime".

We need the same vigour against terrorism and extremism.

There is much to do beyond current good examples such as partnering on tackling terrorist financing, developing protective security measures and staff awareness training.

We think more can be done collaboratively in the space of data, insider threat and industry vigilance.

Third, for areas of social policy, integration and education. I am not an expert in these fields but I have seen enough to know that more needs to be done to address some of the evidenced vulnerabilities in schooling.

Dame Louise Casey in her report into opportunity and integration evidenced particular challenges, both for poor white working-class kids and also in isolated communities of Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage.

Her recommendations for strengthening approaches to resilience, integration, and addressing economic seclusion make a lot of sense to me.

Fourth, the family courts and social services now routinely wrestle with child protection and safeguarding cases arising out of terrorism and extremism.

However, we still see cases where parents convicted of terrorist-related offences, including radicalisers, retain care of their own children. I wonder if we need more parity between protecting children from paedophile and terrorist parents.

Fifth, mainstream and social media. It is difficult to measure the impact caused by the likes of Anjem Choudary and Tommy Robinson but there can be little doubt they are afforded disproportionate attention by the media, providing a platform to espouse their dangerous views.

I am grateful that the media is challenging itself on this subject and was pleased to be invited to the Society of Editors Annual Conference to take part in a debate entitled “Are we doing the terrorists job for them?”

As well as the traditional media questioning themselves about affording extremists a platform we must also ask more of social media and CSPs to address the vulnerabilities and ungoverned spaces online.

It cannot be right that a person can be radicalised online by viewing illegal content on the internet where he can talk with extremists using encrypted communications where he can research potential targets online without leaving a trace where he can purchase bomb-making materials from online retailers and where he can download instructions on how to assemble and detonate his device.

Sixth, communities. Over the years we have seen how the contribution from the public has helped save lives.

From the worker who reported the suspicious storing of fertiliser that helped stop a major terror attack to the community member who alerted the police about the changing behaviour of a 19-year-old would-be terrorist the participation of the public is a powerful tool.

As a country we should be proud of an approach that puts protecting vulnerable people at the heart of it and in my view it has helped prevent numerous attacks.

As you have seen, I do not pretend to know all the “means” of the Whole Society Response but I do have a clear understanding of what I see as the “end”.

I have spoken much about isolation and vulnerability.

I have described how extremists create and exploit these conditions, and how terrorists turn them into violence.

Surely the best “end” is to transform that vulnerability into resilience, and that isolation into integration.

This will give us the best response to the twin threat from extremism and terrorism.

And I think that it is for the aforementioned sectors to get mobilised and more confident in developing the “means” that are necessary.

So, today I have set out the acute threat from both Islamist and rightwing terrorism; I have described its new and emerging characteristics and the operational challenges it presents.

I have also spoken about the chronic threat from extremism in all its guises which is, in my view, an equally critical national challenge.

And, I have illustrated the connections between extremism and terrorism, where vulnerability converts into violence.

Some of these issues are contentious and before I conclude I want to be clear that;

- I am not saying that extremism and terrorism are simply two ends of a conveyor belt;
- I am not suggesting that we need new laws or powers that criminalise extremist views;
- And, I am not blaming whole communities – I simply condemn the awful behaviour of just a few who claim to represent them.

My assertions are based on the evidence of nearly four years leading the UK’s counter terrorism policing effort.

And, it is at this point I would like to take this opportunity to express my pride and admiration for my policing and security services colleagues for their extraordinary efforts over the past four years in confronting the threat.

We asked so much of them in 2017, and we saw them respond in the best possible way.

Now, we need a whole society response that has the buy-in of all to come on board and be part of our collective efforts to protect the public and our national security.

Countries around the world are experiencing similar challenges from the twin threat from Islamist and Right-wing extremism and terrorism.
But I know of no other country better able to confront this threat than the UK.

I know that Colin would have shared this optimism.

Thank you.