

Do you agree that the UK has ignored the threat from the far right?

Dr Chris Allen

"As news began to break about the atrocities committed in Oslo and Utøya on 22 July, a number of media outlets began to suggest that Al-Qaeda (AQ) was behind the attacks. Disparate reasons were put forward as to why this might be so: Norway's involvement in Afghanistan and Libya, a recent decision to deport a Muslim cleric and the decision of a Norwegian newspaper to reprint the Danish 'Prophet Muhammad cartoons'. The next morning, The Sun newspaper was emblazoned with the headline, "Norway's 9/11".

The actual perpetrator was Anders Behring Breivik, someone who describes himself as Norwegian and as Christian. In a 1,500 page dossier posted online days before the attacks, Breivik set out his ideology: a hatred of Islam, 'cultural Marxists' and multiculturalism and a belief that Europe is at serious risk of 'Islamification'. Driven by an extreme far-right ideology, Breivik claimed to have had significant links with far-right groups across Europe including Britain.

These claims have rung alarm bells within the British Government, so much so that Prime Minister David Cameron has called for the national security council to review the monitoring of far-right groups in this country. Given that this comes little more than a month after the Government re-launched PREVENT – its strategy to prevent violent extremism and the radicalisation of vulnerable people – one wonders whether the Government and its institutions have been as guilty as the media in jumping to conclusions: focusing on 'Islamist' and AQ-inspired extremism at the expense of its far-right equivalent.

It is not as though there isn't evidence to suggest a very real threat exists from within the far-right. Far-right groups and organisations over the past decade have been increasingly successful in presenting a more populist front in spite of being founded on an explicit anti-Muslim, anti-Islam agenda. The British National Party (BNP) won two seats in the European elections on the back of campaigns entitled 'Islam out of Britain' and 'Islam Referendum Day' amongst others. Whilst the BNP has waned, the English Defence League (EDL) has blazed a new frontier. Rapidly growing in just over two years, the EDL has taken the protest against 'Islamification' to Britain's streets. Collaborating on the basis that 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend', the EDL has broken with traditional far-right ideology and established Jewish, Sikh, LGBT and women's divisions amongst others.

Aside from what might be described as the more 'respectable face' of the far-right, some have been drawn to violence also. In 2006, David Jackson and Robert Cottage – the latter a former BNP electoral candidate – were found in possession of several rocket launchers, biological and nuclear suits, a number of chemical components, and a significant cache of weapons. In July 2009, Neil Lewington was convicted of plotting a bomb attack. Lewington was found with holdall containing components for two incendiary devices, including digital clocks, batteries, wiring, firelighters and ignition mechanisms including the tools to assemble them. Muslim communities were his alleged targets. Likewise Terence Gavan, a former member of the BNP and soldier who was convicted of manufacturing nail-bombs in January 2010. His stockpile of explosives, firearms and weapons were the largest find of its kind in Britain. Sounding remarkably similar to Breivik, Gavan was quoted: "the patriot must always be ready to defend his country against enemies and their governments". Gavan's enemies were widely believed to be Muslims.

And as with the far-right's growing focus on Islam and Muslims, so both the New Labour and Coalition Governments have done the same in terms of the way in which it has conceptualised the perceived security threats within particular spaces and communities. The sheer desperation of Government to find elusive evidence for terrorism and extremism meant that it focussed on and scrutinised any space in which the mythical process of radicalisation might occur. Because of 7/7, these spaces were primarily seen to be Muslim. This is not to suggest that no threat whatsoever exists within some parts of Muslim communities, but that the blanket attribution meant that all Muslim communities without differentiation became duly stigmatised. A homogenous suspect community harbouring terrorists and extremists, where the greatest threat to 'us' and who 'we' are clearly resided.

Despite the reality of Jackson, Cottage, Lewington and Gavan – and indeed others - the threat from far-right extremists went below the radar. Government rarely offered anything more than a cursory acknowledgement of far-right extremism the same could be said for the media and general public. Although, to coin a phrase to emerge from the events of 7/7, were potential 'homegrown bombers'.

The fear now is that Government will react to the far-right as it did to Muslim communities post-7/7. Knee-jerk reactions are not needed. Instead, in that search for extremism, a more nuanced approach to preventing violent extremism is required: one that recognises and acknowledges that such threats are far more complex and emerge from a much wider spectrum. Whether from the far-right or far-left, from those espousing politicised religious ideologies to those campaigning for animal rights, all have individuals and groups within them that have the potential for violent extremism. This is not to say that all have the potential for violence, but some. And that some, might not always be where the greatest scrutiny is occurring."