# Anti-terrorism powers have fractured experiences of citizenship across the UK

By Democratic Audit

*Lee Jarvis* and *Michael Lister* *share findings from new focus group research into the impact of anti-terrorism legislation on public perceptions of citizenship in the UK. They find that many Britons believe new security measures have eroded their rights and reduced their ability to participate in social and political life, but perceptions vary across different social groups.*

The swathe of new anti-terrorism powers introduced in the United Kingdom and beyond in the wake of the 9/11 attacks have been much discussed. As, indeed, has the impact of these powers upon citizens and the category of citizenship, including their erosion of civil liberties, targeting of particular communities, role in the constitution of different types of 'risky' subject, and reliance on 'active' citizens for their functioning (through anti-terrorism campaigns, hotlines, and so forth). Our view is that these debates have been very useful in identifying potentially significant transformations in the practice and protection of citizenship. They have, however, been less helpful for helping us to think through how anti-terrorism architectures impact upon citizenship as a lived, embodied, experience. This is partly because much academic work on these questions has been primarily conceptual or quantitative in nature. It is also, in part, a product of the frequent emphasis on religious identities (and specifically Muslim communities) within much of this work. More fundamental, though, is the relatively limited conception of citizenship underpinning much of this work, and especially a lack of engagement with citizens' own views of the anti-terrorism/citizenship nexus.

Our research sought to engage with precisely these issues and to offer a 'bottom up', qualitative analysis of citizen's own understandings and accounts of the impact of anti-terrorism powers on themselves and others. Exploring these understandings has value, we argue, for tracing how security frameworks impact upon citizenship in ways that extend beyond changes to formal legal frameworks alone. To study these dynamics, we ran a series of fourteen focus groups across the UK, organised around geography and self-designated ethnicity. A total of 81 individuals participated in these groups in total, selected via a purposive sampling strategy. Our findings, as detailed now below, indicated that citizens frequently perceived that anti-terrorism powers have impacted upon numerous aspects of citizenship.

**Erosion of rights**

The first thing we found, perhaps unsurprisingly, was a widespread sense that contemporary anti-terrorism measures had contributed to an erosion of *citizen rights*. Many of our participants discussed these concerns in an explicit language of citizenship, democracy and civil liberties, although very few of the white participants in our groups stated that their rights had been directly affected by developments in this area. Some, indeed, were quite supportive of fairly draconian security measures, including in relation to inchoate offences such as inciting terrorism. Many of our non-white participants – in contrast – argued that their own rights had been directly diminished by anti-terrorism powers, for example: "A black van might just come and I am taken away, whisked away by MI5 or MI6… I have to sort of fear what I say because of the possible repercussions" (Asian, Metropolitan, Male).

**Ability to participate**

The practice of citizenship, though, is about more than the exercise of rights, and participants in our focus groups also discussed the impact of anti-terrorism powers on their *participation* in social and political life. The differentiation between white and non-white participants was even more pronounced in this context, with many of our white participants again feeling largely unimpeded in their everyday life, for example: "All this is happening on a level that does not touch us" (White, Metropolitan, Male). Where anti-terrorism measures had been directly experienced – such as at transport hubs – there tended to be either an acceptance of their necessity, or an experience of irritation and anger connected with some measure of agency. As one participant put it: "I can't say I felt threatened, I was annoyed, I was angry" (White, Metropolitan, Female).

This sense of irritation contrasted sharply with a common view amongst our black and Asian participants that anti-terrorism measures had directly reduced their ability to participate in the public sphere. Many of the people with whom we spoke stated that feeling continuously observed engendered their disengagement from political life, and a retreat into self-censorship on many occasions: "I would love to change things, which is probably why I have a passion for politics. But right now currently I would rather keep my mouth shut and not say anything" (Asian, Metropolitan, Female). Perhaps more worrying, however, was the sense of resignation around which this withdrawal was often discussed: the sense that "there's no point in fighting it" (Asian, Metropolitan, Female).

## British identity

A third frequent area of discussion was the impact of anti-terrorism powers on people's attachment to British *identity*. This was rarely discussed by our white participants, although, where it was, we encountered considerable empathy toward those believed likely to be targeted by security policy. This was often underpinned by a view that non-white citizens or residents might well feel stigmatised and alienated by developments in anti-terrorism powers. Sentiments such as these were, again, common amongst many of our black and Asian participants, who frequently argued that anti-terrorism powers have reversed dynamics of integration or social cohesion. A particular source of this feeling of increasing isolation or disconnection from the state was the belief that it was one's own government – "the people that are meant to be protecting you" (Asian, Metropolitan, Male) – driving this dynamic.

## Citizen obligations

Many, although not all, conceptions of citizenship also reflect on the duties or *obligations* that are owed either to the state or to other citizens. Interestingly, given the above, we encountered general support for engaging with the state – and even with the state's security practices across our focus groups. A sense, in other words, that citizens have a duty to do things such as report suspicious behaviour – albeit perhaps at certain times and in certain spaces. At the same time, a trade-off was also discussed in some of our focus groups. Not between security and liberty which has framed too much academic debate in this area. But, rather, between the state's protection of citizen rights and the duties that are owed by the citizen to the state. In the words of one of participants: "Why should you help a government that doesn't want to help you?" (Black, Non-Metropolitan, Female).

Although we have written elsewhere on efforts to resist some of the above dynamics, our research paints a troubling picture of the anti-terrorism/citizenship nexus because it points to a widespread sense that powers in this area have directly diminished the experience of citizenship for many individuals. Indeed, there appear to be vicious circles at work in this area where reductions in rights link to a declining sense of belonging, a reduced enthusiasm for – or withdrawal from – political engagement, and a sense of diminished commitment to the state and other communities. On top of this, the fact that many of our white participants felt relatively untouched by these developments also points to the existence of contrasting or disconnected experiences of citizenship across the UK. This is troubling, we argue, because these differences potentially contribute to a broader fracturing of the practice of citizenship within the UK.

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