



**Wilton
Park**

**Report:
Building a new counter-extremism
and democratic resilience approach
for today and the future**

Monday 27 – Wednesday 29 April 2026

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Wilton Park | April 2026

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Over three days in April 2026, senior government officials, parliamentarians, representatives from partner countries, civil society organisations, academics, and other experts convened at Wilton Park to examine the evolving extremism and democratic resilience landscape in the United Kingdom.

The dialogue explored how changes in the threat landscape, ranging from the mainstreaming of extremist narratives to the impact of online ecosystems and state threat activity, are reshaping the context in which democratic institutions operate.

It also considered the effectiveness of current policy approaches and identified areas where new frameworks, improved coordination and stronger evidence are needed to respond to a more complex and evolving set of challenges.

Contents

Executive Summary	1
Highlights and emerging themes	3
A. The UK faces a widening trust deficit	3
B. Extremist narratives are increasingly entering mainstream discourse	3
C. Social cohesion and democratic resilience are national security concerns	4
D. Online ecosystems are accelerating radicalisation and polarisation	4
E. Foreign States can exploit existing societal tensions	4
1. The contemporary British extremism landscape	6
2. The threat of extremism in other democratic societies	7
3. Social cohesion and democratic resilience	8
4. Protecting the democratic order in an environment of information disorder	8
5. Measuring extremism and democratic resilience	9
6. Extremism and national security	10
7. Artificial intelligence, online platforms and extremist content	11
8. Building a whole-of-society approach	12
9. Recommendations	13
Conclusion	14

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Executive Summary

Over three days in April 2026, senior government officials, parliamentarians, representatives from partner countries, civil society organisations, academics and other experts convened at Wilton Park to examine the evolving extremism and democratic resilience landscape in the United Kingdom. Discussions focused on the interrelationship between rising extremism, declining social cohesion, weakening trust in democratic institutions, a disordered information environment, and increasing hostile state activity.

The dialogue considered the scale and trajectory of the current threat landscape, assessed previous and existing policy approaches, and explored the evidence base around interventions designed to counter extremism and strengthen democratic resilience. Throughout the dialogue, a recurring theme was the need to distinguish between counter-terrorism and counter-extremism. While the UK retains a mature counter-terrorism architecture, there remains no comparable strategic framework for addressing extremism below the terrorism threshold, the mainstreaming of extremist narratives across society, or the wider erosion of democratic norms and cohesion.

Participants agreed that the UK faces a long-term and increasingly complex challenge. Extremist narratives and conspiratorial thinking are becoming more mainstream within political and social discourse, while trust in institutions and democratic processes continues to decline. It was also noted that minority communities, particularly Jewish and Muslim communities, are bearing the brunt of rising hostility, intimidation and hate incidents.

There was broad agreement that existing approaches have struggled to keep pace with the changing threat environment, while government responses were frequently described as fragmented, reactive, and insufficiently coordinated across departments and institutions. While recognising the importance of security responses where appropriate, participants stressed that the challenge cannot be addressed solely through counter-terrorism or law enforcement mechanisms and instead requires a broader whole-of-society approach.

The dialogue also explored the role of online ecosystems, generative artificial intelligence, state threat activity and declining public trust in accelerating extremist narratives and social fragmentation. Participants considered the relationship between democratic resilience and national security, arguing that societies characterised by high levels of trust, cohesion and institutional legitimacy are more resilient to extremism and malign influence.

Report:

Significant gaps in data collection, analysis and coordination across government and local authorities were also considered throughout. Participants stressed the need for improved measurement of extremism, social cohesion and democratic resilience, including the possible establishment of a new national index capable of identifying trends, vulnerabilities and emerging hotspots.

The dialogue concluded with a discussion of the components of a future whole-of-society approach. Several proposals were surfaced in the final sessions including reframing extremism and democratic resilience as core national security priorities; establishing clearer leadership from the centre of government; creating a new independent centre to coordinate activity and evaluation; strengthening local resilience and civic trust; and developing more compelling democratic narratives capable of competing effectively within contemporary information ecosystems.

Highlights and emerging themes

A. The UK faces a widening trust deficit

Participants repeatedly identified declining trust in institutions, political leadership, and democratic processes as a defining feature of the current environment. Long-term institutional failures, economic pressures, dissatisfaction with public services and perceptions that government is unable to respond effectively to public concerns, were all identified as contributing factors.

It was also observed that this erosion of trust has implications beyond politics alone, and increasingly affects relationships between citizens, institutions and communities themselves. Several contributors argued that the weakening of trust has created conditions in which anti-democratic narratives and conspiratorial thinking can spread more easily.

Discussions also revolved around the extent to which the social contract is perceived to have weakened. Participants noted that many citizens increasingly feel disconnected from decision-making processes and unconvinced that democratic institutions are responsive to their concerns. The cumulative effect of repeated institutional failures was described as contributing to a broader sense of democratic fragility.

B. Extremist narratives are increasingly entering mainstream discourse

The extent to which extremist narratives, conspiratorial thinking and anti-democratic beliefs are increasingly becoming mainstreamed across parts of society was a persistent issue for the majority of participants. There was concern that the *cordon sanitaire* – traditionally separating extremist discourse from mainstream politics and public debate – has weakened considerably.

Furthermore, support for extremist positions was often described as being emotionally rather than rationally driven and that evidence-based rebuttals alone are unlikely to be sufficient. There was concern that grievance, anger, and identity-based narratives are increasingly shaping political discourse in ways that create opportunities for extremist actors.

Participants also discussed the role played by political figures and online influencers in legitimising narratives that were previously confined to the fringes. The normalisation of hostility, intimidation and even violence towards democratic institutions, minorities and public officials was identified as a significant concern.

C. Social cohesion and democratic resilience are national security concerns

There was broad agreement that democratic resilience and social cohesion should be understood as matters of national security. Participants noted that extremism thrives in environments characterised by distrust, fragmentation and declining institutional legitimacy.

As such, it was argued that strengthening trust, cohesion and democratic participation should be understood as preventative security measures rather than solely social policy objectives. Several contributors pointed to examples from international partners where democratic resilience is increasingly being integrated into national preparedness frameworks.

Participants also noted that weakening social cohesion can create vulnerabilities which some foreign states may seek to exploit. Trust between citizens and institutions was repeatedly described as a strategic asset which contributes directly to national resilience.

D. Online ecosystems are accelerating radicalisation and polarisation

Participants discussed the increasingly important role of online platforms, recommendation algorithms, and generative AI in amplifying extremist narratives, conspiracy theories and disinformation. Concerns were raised that online environments reward outrage, polarisation and emotionally-charged content while weakening the ability of democratic institutions to compete effectively in speed, scale and sophistication.

It was also noted that the limited transparency currently provided by major technology platforms and the challenges this creates for understanding the scale of online harms. Some contributors argued that existing regulatory frameworks have struggled to keep pace with technological developments.

The increasing sophistication of AI-generated content and autonomous online influence systems was also discussed. Participants noted that the distinction between authentic and synthetic content is becoming increasingly blurred and that this poses long-term implications for public trust and democratic discourse.

E. Foreign States can exploit existing societal tensions

The role played by some foreign states, particularly Russia and Iran, in amplifying divisive narratives and exploiting existing social tensions within democratic societies were carefully considered in the room. However, participants stressed that foreign

states amplify grievances and narratives that already exist domestically rather than creating them independently.

The use of generative AI, coordinated online influence operations, and asymmetric information warfare were all discussed as growing areas of concern. Participants argued that democratic societies remain insufficiently prepared for the scale and sophistication of these activities.

There were also discussions about the convergence between foreign state activity and domestic extremist ecosystems online, particularly where anti-democratic and antisemitic narratives overlap.

1. The contemporary British extremism landscape

Throughout the dialogue, participants discussed a broad range of existing evidence pointing to a significant deterioration in social cohesion, democratic trust and confidence in public institutions across the UK. Contributors noted that a growing number of citizens perceive democratic systems as ineffective, unresponsive or unable to address long-standing grievances.

Participants identified a range of interrelated pressures shaping the current environment, including economic insecurity, pressures associated with migration, declining confidence in public services, intergenerational tensions and a broader sense of national uncertainty. Several in the room argued that these pressures have created conditions in which extremist narratives and conspiracy theories can flourish.

There were extensive discussions around the mainstreaming of conspiracy theories and anti-democratic narratives. Participants noted that narratives previously confined to extremist ecosystems are increasingly visible within wider public discourse, including narratives associated with "replacement" theories, anti-government conspiracies, and distrust in democratic institutions.

The increasing hostility towards minority communities, particularly Jewish and Muslim communities, was also discussed. Contributors pointed to rising levels of antisemitic and anti-Muslim incidents, as well as broader concerns around intimidation, harassment and social exclusion.

Several participants emphasised the central role antisemitism plays across multiple extremist ideologies. Antisemitism was described as a recurring feature across Far-Right, Islamist and some Far-Left extremist ecosystems, often functioning as a unifying narrative despite ideological differences elsewhere.

Discussions were also raised around generational trends, particularly the susceptibility of younger demographics to extremist narratives online. It was raised in the room that traditional forms of civic engagement and community infrastructure appear to have weakened among younger generations, leaving some individuals more vulnerable to online radicalisation and identity-based narratives.

Participants repeatedly stressed that extremism cannot be understood solely through socioeconomic indicators. While deprivation and exclusion may contribute to vulnerability, discussions suggested that extremist beliefs are present across a wide range of educational and economic backgrounds.

There was broad agreement that the UK lacks a sufficiently developed evidence base to fully understand the scale and nature of the challenge. It was also noted that existing data remains fragmented across institutions and departments, limiting the ability to identify patterns, trends and emerging vulnerabilities.

2. The threat of extremism in other democratic societies

Representatives from several partner countries reflected on comparable challenges facing democratic societies internationally. Participants from Europe and Australia noted that declining trust in institutions, polarisation, online radicalisation and the mainstreaming of extremist narratives are not unique to the UK.

They discussed how extremist movements increasingly operate transnationally, sharing narratives, symbols and strategies across borders. Contributors noted that online ecosystems allow extremist actors to rapidly adapt and disseminate narratives internationally.

Furthermore, many voiced how different democratic societies conceptualise extremism. In some partner countries, extremism is viewed as a broader societal challenge distinct from terrorism, with policy approaches focused not only on security threats but also on democratic resilience and social cohesion.

Participants highlighted a range of international initiatives designed to strengthen local resilience, improve data-sharing and counter online harms. Several contributors pointed to the importance of local government and civil society partnerships in identifying tensions early and developing preventative interventions.

The relationship between trust and resilience emerged as a recurring theme throughout discussions. There was significant debate that societies characterised by higher levels of social trust and institutional legitimacy are generally more resilient to extremism, disinformation and hostile influence.

There were also discussions around the convergence of extremist narratives across ideological lines. Participants noted that anti-government sentiment, conspiratorial thinking and antisemitism increasingly function as connecting themes across otherwise distinct extremist ecosystems.

The importance of clearly distinguishing between criticism of government policy, protected political expression and extremist activity was repeatedly stressed. Contributors argued that maintaining this distinction is essential both for democratic legitimacy and for effective counter-extremism approaches.

Report:

3. Social cohesion and democratic resilience

Participants repeatedly identified social cohesion as the primary long-term defence against extremism. Cohesive communities characterised by trust, participation and strong local relationships were described as significantly more resilient to extremist narratives and hostile influence.

However, participants expressed concern that social cohesion in many parts of the UK has weakened substantially over recent decades. Contributors pointed to declining participation in civic institutions, weakening local networks and growing distrust between citizens and institutions.

A recurring theme in the discussions was that democratic resilience should be understood not simply as institutional durability, but also as the capacity of societies to absorb tension, disagreement and external pressure without fragmentation.

The importance of local government was emphasised throughout discussions. Participants noted that local authorities, schools, faith groups and community organisations are often best placed to identify emerging tensions and build trust within communities. However, contributors also highlighted significant resource constraints and uneven capacity across local authorities.

Furthermore, there were discussions around the importance of creating meaningful opportunities for civic participation and democratic engagement. Participants argued that many citizens increasingly feel disconnected from decision-making processes and that restoring agency is essential for rebuilding trust.

Several contributors highlighted the importance of education, particularly civic and historical education, in strengthening democratic resilience. Participants raised concerns around declining democratic literacy, limited understanding of democratic institutions and increasing exposure to misinformation among younger demographics.

Participants also discussed the relationship between public services and democratic trust. Public services were described not only as functional systems but also as key interfaces between citizens and the state. Negative experiences with public institutions were seen as contributing to wider distrust and alienation.

4. Protecting the democratic order in an environment of information disorder

A prominent theme discussed throughout the dialogue was the extent to which democratic societies are increasingly operating within fragmented and highly polarised

information environments. Contributors noted that traditional information gatekeepers have weakened considerably, while peer-to-peer digital ecosystems now shape how individuals consume and interpret information.

There was concern that contemporary information ecosystems incentivise emotionally charged content, outrage and identity-based conflict. Participants argued that this environment creates advantages for extremist actors and conspiratorial narratives.

The growth of conspiracy-based communities online emerged as a significant concern as participants noted that conspiracy theories increasingly function not simply as isolated beliefs but as interconnected systems through which individuals interpret political and social events.

The relationship between distrust and conspiracy theories was discussed extensively. It was argued that conspiracy theories often emerge where institutional legitimacy has weakened and where individuals no longer trust traditional sources of authority.

Discussions also focused around perceptions of unequal treatment under the law and declining confidence in institutional fairness. Participants noted that perceptions of inconsistency, bias or selective enforcement can contribute significantly to distrust and polarisation.

Contributors debated the extent to which liberal democratic societies have struggled to articulate a compelling civic narrative capable of competing with extremist or authoritarian alternatives. Several participants argued that democratic institutions have too often assumed democratic values would remain self-sustaining without active reinforcement.

Participants also discussed the role of dialogue and deliberation in rebuilding trust and cohesion. While many supported greater opportunities for structured civic dialogue, others questioned the effectiveness of some existing interfaith and community engagement models.

5. Measuring extremism and democratic resilience

Participants broadly agreed that the UK currently lacks sufficient analytical capability to comprehensively measure extremism, social cohesion and democratic resilience.

There was broad support for the development of a new national index capable of integrating attitudinal, behavioural and social indicators in order to better identify vulnerabilities and emerging risks.

Discussions explored a number of possible functions for such an index, including identifying geographic hotspots, tracking trends over time, informing policy interventions and improving resource allocation.

It was also argued that any future index should avoid framing communities solely through a security lens. Instead, participants suggested the framework should focus equally on resilience, cohesion and protective factors.

The importance of integrating multiple forms of data was also emphasised in the room, including survey data, local authority reporting, online monitoring, hate crime statistics and indicators related to democratic trust and participation.

There was also debate around governance and ownership. Participants overwhelmingly argued that any future index should remain operationally independent from government in order to maintain credibility and reduce concerns around politicisation.

The possibility of establishing threshold indicators capable of triggering preventative interventions was also discussed. Contributors stressed that any measurement framework should directly inform practical action rather than functioning solely as a research exercise.

6. Extremism and national security

Participants broadly agreed that extremism, declining democratic trust, and weakening social cohesion, should be understood as long-term national security concerns.

However, contributors noted that existing national security structures remain primarily focused on acute threats such as terrorism, espionage, and other state-threats activity rather than chronic democratic erosion.

A recurring theme in the dialogue was the extent to which extremist narratives have become normalised below the terrorism threshold. Contributors stressed that while these activities may not always meet criminal thresholds, they can nevertheless contribute significantly to democratic fragmentation and social instability.

Discussions also considered the limitations of relying primarily on counter-terrorism tools to address extremism. Approaches developed to disrupt terrorist activity were widely viewed as not necessarily suited to addressing broader social and ideological ecosystems.

Several participants noted that a heavily securitised approach risks undermining legitimacy and trust if not balanced with wider community-based and preventative measures.

Also discussed was the importance of defining and identifying "permissive environments" in which extremist narratives can spread more easily. Participants argued that understanding these environments is essential for developing effective preventative interventions.

There was broad agreement that strengthening resilience and reducing vulnerability should become central objectives of future policy approaches.

7. Artificial intelligence, online platforms and extremist content

The discussions in the room also explored the increasingly significant implications of artificial intelligence and digital technologies for extremism, democratic resilience and public trust.

Generative AI was described as significantly accelerating the scale, speed and sophistication of harmful online content. Participants noted that extremist actors are increasingly capable of producing persuasive synthetic content at very low cost.

Concerns were also raised around declining standards of content moderation across major platforms and the limited transparency currently available to governments and researchers.

Participants discussed the emergence of autonomous influence systems, including AI-enabled bots capable of sustained engagement and narrative amplification.

Several contributors shared equal concern that current regulatory frameworks remain insufficiently equipped to address the pace of technological change, while others stressed the importance of balancing regulatory intervention with innovation and economic competitiveness.

Discussions also focused on the future societal implications of AI-driven economic disruption. It was noted that large-scale job displacement and social dislocation could contribute to future grievance-based extremism if not managed effectively.

A range of possible interventions were considered, including improved platform transparency, independent auditing of online ecosystems, stronger user resilience and the development of healthier online community spaces.

The importance of international cooperation was repeatedly emphasised, particularly with democratic partners facing similar technological and societal challenges.

8. Building a whole-of-society approach

Participants concluded that existing approaches remain too fragmented and reactive to address the scale and complexity of the current challenge.

There was broad agreement that any future strategy must integrate government, local authorities, civil society, education providers, technology companies and community organisations within a coherent framework.

Several contributors stressed the importance of establishing clear leadership from the centre of government in order to coordinate activity across departments and institutions.

Participants repeatedly emphasised that local communities should remain central to implementation. Contributors argued that interventions are most effective where they are locally trusted, evidence-based and adapted to specific community contexts.

There was discussions around the need for stronger evaluation mechanisms and longer-term assessment of interventions. Participants noted that many existing programmes have not been rigorously evaluated over time.

Contributors also highlighted the importance of developing compelling democratic narratives capable of competing with extremist messaging online and offline. Participants argued that democratic values and institutions require more proactive advocacy and defence.

The importance of education, civic participation and local trust-building emerged as recurring themes throughout the discussion. Participants noted that strengthening democratic resilience ultimately requires long-term investment in social infrastructure and institutional legitimacy.

9. Recommendations

Participants advanced the following recommendations during the closing dialogue:

Reframe the challenge

Counter-extremism, social cohesion and democratic resilience should be treated as core national security priorities rather than peripheral policy concerns. Participants argued that democratic resilience should be integrated more fully into national preparedness and resilience frameworks.

Reset government structures

Participants called for clearer leadership and accountability from the centre of government. Contributors suggested that responsibility for coordinating a whole-of-government strategy should sit with either the Prime Minister or Deputy Prime Minister.

Consider the establishment of a new independent centre

Participants proposed the creation of a new independent national centre to support coordination, evaluation, local implementation and evidence generation. The centre could work closely with government while maintaining operational independence and public credibility.

Develop a national index

Participants supported the development of a new national index capable of measuring extremism, social cohesion and democratic resilience across the UK. The index should integrate multiple forms of data and support both local and national decision-making.

Strengthen democratic advocacy

Participants argued that democratic institutions and values require more proactive advocacy. Contributors proposed supporting trusted voices, educators and community leaders capable of communicating compelling democratic narratives.

Improve online resilience

Participants supported stronger platform accountability, improved transparency and the development of healthier online environments. Contributors also emphasised the importance of improving public resilience to disinformation and extremist narratives.

Report:

Strengthen local resilience and civic trust

Participants highlighted the importance of rebuilding trust at the local level through stronger public services, civic participation, community engagement, and improved democratic literacy. Education was identified as particularly important, including greater emphasis on civic education, democratic values and critical engagement with online information.

Conclusion

Participants concluded that the UK faces a long-term challenge extending beyond terrorism and public order into the resilience of democratic institutions themselves.

The mainstreaming of extremist narratives, declining institutional trust, fragmented information ecosystems and weakening social cohesion represent interconnected pressures requiring a fundamentally different strategic response.

Participants agreed that future approaches must move beyond reactive and fragmented interventions towards a sustained whole-of-society strategy focused on resilience, trust and democratic renewal.

The dialogue highlighted the importance of stronger leadership, better evidence, improved coordination and long-term investment in social cohesion and democratic resilience.

Participants stressed that while the challenges facing democratic societies are significant, they are not irreversible. Rebuilding trust, strengthening communities and defending democratic values will require sustained political commitment, institutional reform and meaningful engagement across society.

Matthew Godwin

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enquiries@wiltonpark.org.uk

Switchboard: +44 (0)1903 815020

Wilton Park, Wiston House, Steyning,
West Sussex, BN44 3DZ, United Kingdom

wiltonpark.org.uk

