Chapter Five:

Political elites, Public Opinion and counterterrorism policy in the UK

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Introduction

This chapter will explore the relationship between public opinion and counterterrorism within the executive. The previous chapter, examining legislative debates, found evidence to suggest that public opinion was a part of counterterrorism debates (at broadly the same level as for other policy areas). Yet the UK Parliament is sometimes assumed to be a "weak" legislature, in that its capacity to initiate legislation is highly constrained (although Flinders and Kelso (2011) argue for a reappraisal of this argument, suggesting that Parliament is significant and important in shaping the nature of policy debates in other ways). Whether one sees Parliament as weak or not-so-weak, the executive is often assumed to be the true locus of power in British politics (e.g. Marsh et al. 2003); and indeed accounts of securitization examined in Chapter 1 foreground executive politics. Therefore, if Chapter 4 supports the argument that security politics like counterterrorism are not closed, elite-driven "anti-politics", then what of the executive? What is the relationship between public opinion and counterterrorism policy at the executive level? To answer this question, the chapter reports on a series of interviews undertaken with key counterterrorism policymakers in power for the period 2001-11.

The chapter argues that the political elites interviewed here articulate a somewhat paradoxical view about the relationship between public opinion and counterterrorism. For nearly all the respondents, public opinion is seen to be a vital part of counterterrorism policymaking. Yet many respondents also express a view that (for a range of reasons) it is difficult to know what public opinion is. This slight paradox informs the ways in which these political elites construct public opinion. Spurred by a sense of its importance, yet hampered by not knowing it, political elites fill this void with their own constructions of public opinion. Often these are what the chapter terms "indirect" constructions,

where political elites deploy their keenly attuned political sensitivities (and in many case, their connection to a particular constituency as an MP) to discern what it is that the public wants. Often, but not always, these constructions seem closer to Browne's (2011) 'hunches', rather than systematic assessments of public opinion. They also often are, as was argued in Chapter 2, underpinned by particular normative conceptions of what kind of heed they should pay to public opinion. On some occasions, though, the political elites interviewed describe much more "direct" constructions of public opinion, where they participated in outreach and engagement activities with the public, to better understand and appreciate their views on counterterrorism policy. Here, by actively deciding who to talk with – and who not to talk with – political elites are shaping the very public opinion which they argue is crucially important to counterterrorism policy. Thus the chapter further instantiates the argument that the relationship between public opinion and counterterrorism policy is complex and mutually constutitive. Elites argue that public opinion matters, primarily because it is such a high-profile issue that concerns so many people. And this is born out by the efforts they expend to engage with it. If public opinion is of no concern or importance for counterterrorism, political elites are unlikely to devote that rare commodity – time – to it. At the same time, the interviewees also make clear that political elites do not simply follow public opinion (indeed, some of the participants expressly argue against a simple kind of responsiveness). In projecting their sense of what the public thinks and wants on counterterrorism – whilst simultaneously expressing doubts about the fine grain of what public opinion is on this issue – they are constructing a representation (a representative claim, in Saward's (2006) terms) of the very public opinion which they claim is important to consider.

Methods

To understand in greater depth the relationship between public opinion and counterterrorism policymaking within the executive, a series of in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with elite policymakers, who were in government between 2001 and 2011 (on elite interviews see Blakeley 2013; Berry 2002: Richards 1996). This covers the years during which Labour politicians sought to grapple with the aftermath of 9/11 and 7/7 and the early years of the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government, which in turn sought to address whether the previous administration's policies remained appropriate for the protection of the UK. A total of nine elite interviews were conducted between 2018 and 2020.

Interviews were conducted through a series of open ended, flexible questions. The questions asked respondents about:

- their experiences in drafting key counterterrorism legislation,
- the kinds of consultations and engagement with the public which might have been undertaken,
- their assessment as to the importance of including public opinion in counterterrorism policymaking
- whether public opinion played a similar or different role in counterterrorism to other policy areas they worked on in government
- how they became aware of public opinion and
- whether it is easy to know what the public thinks

Interviews typically lasted around an hour and were conducted in a range of locations across the UK, mainly in London.

Interviewees held a range of positions within government (see table 1). Whilst some respondents were happy to be referenced by name, the chapter seeks to maintain the anonymity of interviewees. This is for two reasons. Firstly, not all respondents were happy to be identified by name, so some being referred to by name and others remaining anonymous would be unbalanced. Secondly, a number of the interviewees can be considered to have a relatively high profile in public life. Identifying some respondents by name may produce a focus on what person X or person Y had to say. The chapter, rather, wishes to focus less on individual personalities and more on the views, assessments and opinions of individuals who held high office during this period. Table One gives basic information about the interviewees and their positions in government, which enables contextualisation of their views, but does not compromise their anonymity.

Table One: List of interviews

Interview One	Cabinet level minister with counterterrorism responsibilities (Labour government)
Interview Two	Cabinet level minister with counterterrorism responsibilities (Labour government)
Interview Three	Senior civil servant with counterterrorism responsibilities

Interview Four	Cabinet level minister with counterterrorism responsibilities (Labour government)
Interview Five	Minister with counterterrorism responsibilities (Conservative/Lib Dem government)
Interview Six	Special advisor with counterterrorism responsibilities (Conservative/Lib Dem government)
Interview Seven	Cabinet level minister with counterterrorism responsibilities (Labour government)
Interview Eight	Minister with counterterrorism responsibilities (Labour government)
Interview Nine	Minister with counterterrorism responsibilities (Labour government)

The interviewees were selected through a mixture of purposive and snowball sampling. There were certain high-profile individuals who played a crucial role in counterterrorism during the period 2001-11. Other individuals were identified as important figures by interviewees. The interviews generated a corpus of text of over 45k words. The interviews were analysed using a "framework" approach to qualitative discourse analysis (Ritchie and Spencer 2002; Law et al 2011; Gale et al 2013). This involves a systematic process of sifting, charting and organising qualitative material such that large volumes of data can be summarised in a manner grounded in participants' own accounts (Jones, 2000). An "immersive" reading of the transcript data had four stages (Gale et al. 2013); familiarisation with the text; deductive coding (for issues which were expected to be significant – for example, political elites' views about the importance of public opinion to counterterrorism); inductive coding (codes which emerged through the coding process, such as constructions of public opinion); and application of the framework to the corpus of text. This approach is useful for producing a 'set of codes organised into categories [creating] … a new structure for the data … that is helpful to summarize/reduce the data in a way that can support answering the research questions" (Gale et al. 2013, p. 1).

The importance of public opinion

Perhaps one place to start this analysis is by observing and analysing that nearly all of the political elite participants express a commitment to the importance of public opinion (and whilst, as we shall see below, some query how much influence or impact such opinion had, none of the interviewees

argue that it *should not* matter). One participant stated simply 'if you legislate without taking account of what you think people are thinking, that's a mistake and so one should try to take account of what people are thinking' (Interview Two). Another says 'I mean I think it's a general proposition about government. You can't govern well ignoring what people think - silly idea.' (Interview Five). Other interviewees link their sense that it was important to include public opinion in counterterrorism policy to explicit ideas and notions of democratic representation. One said 'We're a democracy. We're democratic politicians. Of course we have to reflect what our own constituents think' (Interview Eight). Another similarly stated:

> I don't think that public policy is the preserve of politicians or civil servants. It's, it's kind of like in the name, it's public. So, you know, obviously, we have a representative democracy. And so you ask the people that you elect to take those decisions, in your best interests, in the national interest... so taking their views into account is really important (Interview Seven).

One might be tempted to respond that "well they would say that wouldn't they"; although not all the interviewees were elected politicians (the sample includes ministers who sat in the House of Lords, a special advisor and a senior civil servant), it might be suggested that all actors in the political realm are aware (to varying degrees, and with varying degrees of exposure) that being seen to be committed to being open to public views and opinions is a necessity (see also the discussion in Chapter 4). To that might be added that it is highly unlikely that anyone would say the opposite; that public opinion was unimportant and should be ignored. Yet the interviewees went further than this, often explaining and justifying their view that public opinion was an important factor for counterterrorism policy. There were two main ways this was done. One focuses on the politics of the issue, arguing, in effect, that ignoring public opinion around counterterrorism is politically problematic and likely to create political or electoral problems. The second leans more towards arguments around efficacy and effectiveness, making claims that effective counterterrorism policy requires engaging with public views. (It might be briefly noted here that, to refer back to Herbst's four conceptions of public opinion, that the above two rationales for engaging with public opinion are based on two different conceptions of public opinion; the first relies on the generalised, aggregate notion of public opinion; the second as we shall see, is more focused around the views of particular publics; frequently, Muslim communities).

The view that public opinion was important for counterterrorism policy is sometimes explained in terms of political necessity. This account argues that as counterterrorism is a high salience issue – that is, that it is something that many voters are aware of and which is important to them – that

being cognisant and responsive to such views in some broad general sense, is important for retaining public trust and confidence. Speaking about the passage of key counterterrorism legislation in the mid 2000s, a former government minister said 'those counterterrorism bills took quite a long time, it was a very, very big issue at the time... if they [the government] were very considerably out of tune with public opinion that would have been incredibly damaging for the political party' (Interview Four).

This argument – that attentiveness to public opinion is *particularly* important for counterterrorism policy – is expanded upon in other interviews. Against some of the more conventional readings of securitization theory which might suggest that security issues like counterterrorism are conducted away from the public by a closed elite, the policy elites interviewed here express the view that counterterrorism is an issue where it is *especially* important to engage with, and be responsive to, public opinion. One former cabinet minister explained this by saying that security issues like counterterrorism affect everyone, as opposed to many other policies which have impacts on specific sections of the public, and so making such policies chime with public opinion is of greater necessity than for other areas of policy.

> This [counterterrorism] is not a minority issue, it's not somebody else's problem, it's not a problem that they [the public] see as being debated by those with some expertise or lived experience, it is a threat to them and to their nation, to the national wellbeing, infrastructure or economy and therefore that there is a more gut reaction to it than there would otherwise be [...] I do [think public opinion is more prominent for counterterrorism policy]. Just by the nature of it being universal and instinctive, as opposed to a particular issue affecting a particular cohort of the population [...] I think the weight of public opinion subliminally, is greater with counterterrorism [...] in our inner responses, we are more affected by something that has a direct physical wellbeing or wider impact on the nation as a whole, than we do when we are arguing about a particular cohort [where] it's about policy as opposed to survival (Interview One).

This point that because counterterrorism is about public safety that politicians have to be more attentive to what the public think was reiterated by another interviewee, who said 'Of course, we have to take into account people's views [...] [O]n something like protecting the people, I think that is a huge issue' (Interview Eight). Another former cabinet minister took the argument about the importance of being engaged with public opinion on counterterrorism matters a stage further. They argued that public faith in the competence of the government is at stake, in a way that it is not with other policy areas:

> If they [the government] were very considerably out of tune with public opinion that would have been incredibly damaging for the political party. Assume that we completely and irredeemable f**ked up the reform of [other policy] […] it wouldn't have made any impact on our political standing because it was neither a salient issue in the sense that it was at the top of people's concerns, nor was it an issue that people thought would define the competence of the government […] Public opinion, the need to reassure, the sense that you have to be legitimately seen to be doing things, the need all the time to be constantly exploring ways of making people safer is, in this particular area [counterterrorism], a huge driver […] Unless you are constantly in dialogue with the public you won't retain public confidence (Interview Four).

This person contrasted counterterrorism with "other" policy areas, which might be supposed to not attract public attention or have a clearly defined, well articulated public opinion around them. There is, they argued, 'lots, lots and lots [of] policy like that'. However they continued 'Counterterrorism is absolutely not one of those. Counterterrorism is one of those policies which is absolutely in your shop window. You cannot be Prime Minister unless you have the confidence of the country in relation to terrorism and counterterrorism' (Interview Four). This point was returned to by another interviewee who argued that one of the reasons Jeremy Corbyn was not successful electorally, was that he did not have the confidence of the country on (counter)terrorism issues, particularly in so-called "Red Wall" seats. '[I]t's one of the reasons why we lost the election in 2019 […] And one big reason why we lost out was the perception that Corbyn and the party was seen to be soft on terrorism. Rightly or wrongly […] but I was getting [that] on the doorsteps' (Interview Eight).

Taking these points together, the argument being suggested is that because issues like counterterrorism involve the safety of the country and public as a whole, that awareness of and sensitivity to public opinion is more urgent than with other policy which might affect sub-sections of the population, and/or be of lower importance. Failure to be suitably connected and responsive to public opinion in this area would lead to a government losing public confidence, it was argued.

The second rationale raised for the importance of public opinion was around policy efficacy, such that public opinion was seen to be important to the creation and drafting of effective and coherent counterterrorism policy. One former minister, when reflecting on the outreach and dialogue that they had engaged with on counterterrorism policy (see below), stated fairly simply that they felt this was important to do as government had gaps in its knowledge and these gaps would inhibit effective policy making:

> I think we did something rather different and in some ways, quite exceptional. It was partly because I said to myself "how am I going to understand what the problem is?". So in a sense

it was born of necessity – go out and find the people and talk to them […] I learnt a great
deal (Interview Five).

This was a view supported by a special advisor, also engaged in the outreach and dialogue with publics. They made the case that policy could not be driven "top down" and that it needed input from the wider public. They spoke of 'the importance of finding a narrative that people can accept, understand and take part in *and a sense that we need to construct this thing together*.' (Interview Six, emphasis added).

Another former cabinet minister also thought that it was important to engage with public opinion on counterterrorism because it enhanced government's knowledge and increased the likelihood of coming up with effective policy, but they also argued that such engagement is likely to lead to more enduring policy solutions.

> People will say now some of the terrorist problems are like a public health problem, you need a population based approach, you know, you need to get people to want to change their lives, whether it's five a day, or you know, obesity, or whatever else, these are social and cultural problems. And getting people to own the problem and then to come up with their own solutions that you then help them turn into reality will last a damn sight longer than any government up here saying, right, we've got an action plan (Interview Seven).

Thus it seems that for counterterrorism policy, for a range of reasons, some principled, some practical and others more political, that the policy elites interviewed see engaging with public opinion around counterterrorism issues as vital. Sidestepping, or ignoring public opinion is not perceived to be a viable option. But how do those political elites come to understand public opinion? And is public opinion on this issue straightforward? As we have already seen in Chapter 2, whilst some sense that the public wants "more security" is a fairly recurring, if unsurprising, finding of polls, beyond this was a certain level of ambiguity about exactly what public opinion is/was on counterterrorism.

Ambiguity/uncertainty around public opinion

Whilst public opinion may be seen as a crucial part of the counterterrorism policy matrix, knowing what that public opinion is, is not a straightforward issue. To put this differently, the first thing that should be noted when starting to build a picture of how political elites think about the content of public opinion on counterterrorism issues is that this all proceeds from a place of great epistemic uncertainty. Nearly all of the participants at some time or other expressed concern with the ability

to truly know what public opinion is: 'what the public think is difficult to judge' (Interview Four). The following are a selection, but this was a recurrent theme across most interviews:

> When it comes to the whole question of public opinion, there isn't of course, in this area, a single public opinion – you've got several different attitudes playing into. And some of them are in direct conflict with each other, there is disagreement so you haven't got the luxury of being able to respond to one set of voices (Interview Five).

> [Responding to question as to whether it is easy to know what public opinion is] I think it takes time. Because something like this [counterterrorism], it has blips. So when there's an incident, everybody's really, really concerned. And then if nothing happens, for six months, it goes off, off the boil. And also, it's quite interesting, because there's people who are in it, who are more knowledgeable, who are very concerned. And then there's, if you like the wider periphery, and you know, they read a Sun editorial, that all these people are going to blow you up. And they suddenly become concerned. And they'll be very concerned, but it's quite surface. *So I think you need to be forensic enough to be able to assess the level, and it's not a perfect science*. (Interview Seven, emphasis added).

> I think it's very difficult to say what public opinion is, in any sense… [Referring to MP/constituency link] so they [the public] say what they think, and you kind of get a sense of what that is, but is that public opinion? Well, it's certainly not scientific and you can have quasi scientific tests by polling and so on but as you know that depends very much on how the question is framed and *so there's a climate of opinion more than public opinion*. And I would definitely say the climate of opinion was to use what measures you can to stop this kind of thing happening. A strong climate of opinion. But you couldn't deduce from that that there was strong public support for measure X or measure Y because it was very inchoate in the way that it was expressed (Interview Two, emphasis added).

Each of these three extracts refers to the difficulties of knowing precisely what public opinion is, albeit each of them places the sources of this uncertainty in slightly different places. For the first extract, from Interview Five, the complexity and difficulty of knowing what the public thinks lies in the polyvocality of public opinion – there are many different opinions and "boiling them down" to one single, "public opinion" is difficult, if not impossible. To some extent, this is a position which is reflective of the fundamental tension within the idea of public opinion noted in Chapter 2; opinions are individually held, but a public is plural. The second of the above extracts refers to the difficulty of ascertaining the intensity, reliability or fixity of attitudes expressed; as events wax and wane, various opinions become manifest, but the extent to which these are deeply held, firm or fixed opinions, or more transient, mutable ones requires, for Interviewee Seven, skilful discernment and is not immediately apparent. The last of the above extracts similarly identifies plurality in the information environment around public opinion but traces this to the different ways in which "public opinion" can become manifest. The creates, for Interviewee Two, a broad information environment, a 'climate of opinion', composed of different bits of information – MPs representations of

constituency based opinion, plus opinion polling and other things – but for Interviewee Two, this is inchoate.

In this context of uncertainty about public opinion it is worth spending some time analysing the interviewee's different perspectives of the MP/constituency link. Frequently this was held up as some kind of gold standard for knowing public opinion. In the context of a discussion of the difficulty in knowing public opinion, one former minister, (recalling counterterrorism policy making the wake of 9/11 and 7/7) highlighted that MPs occupied a particular position from which they could advise government of the public mood:

> Members of Parliament are still a conduit for gathering, collecting opinion and being subject to substantial lobbying. Email was only just in, so people were just getting used to emailing their Members of Parliament, but they held advice surgeries and were in their communities. Hence the ability of some people to be able to criticise the government's proposals on the grounds that they'd received representations of disquiet (Interview One).

This person continued, explaining the importance of advice surgeries and contacts with people in their constituency to their activities as a minister

> [That direct contact] made a difference. I think it's the great strength of single member constituency […] As people really do have to hold those meetings and have to be part of and responsive to their community. I still believe that matters (Interview One).

Other interviewees similarly valorised the ability of MPs to "keep their ear to the ground" and have, in a way, a privileged sense of public opinion, and saw MPs as representing a particular, unique, source of knowledge about public opinion. For one former minister, however, this was an under utilised resource which government didn't make sufficient use of.

> And one of the things that I was disappointed with was we didn't try to tap the intelligence that was being gathered by MPs, what they were experiencing in their communities. You can't really do it in a debate in the House of Commons, you need something much, deeper and richer and grainier than that, if you want to if you want to come up with real insights into what's going on. And we never did that […] And it seemed to me that that sort of - call it whatever you want, intelligence gathering, information coming in, nous you might have possessed as somebody who lives in the community and understands it – we never […] the government, then or now, ever really tapped that (Interview Nine).

Despite the concerns that government did not use it enough, the view here privileges the kind of "thick", granular knowledge about the public that MPs can discern from their being within particular communities. Others though, were more sceptical of the importance or significance of the

MP/constituency link's facility to generate accurate, or representative, knowledge of public opinion. Some raised mild concerns or observations as to whether what a given MP heard from their constituents could be said to approximate public opinion.

> One of the virtues of the parliamentary system is that MPs, including me […] would be in constituencies on a regular basis. […] MPs will constantly be approached by people in their constituencies just in the ordinary course of events as they walked around, people would say "what are you going to do about this" or whatever, usually in a non-adversarial way. But they believed the MPs job is to listen to what they think and so they say what they think, and you kind of get a sense of what that is, but is that public opinion? (Interview Two)

Others more explicitly raised questions as to whether the voices that MPs heard from could be considered to be representative:

> [I]t's a very important qualitative way of doing it. [But] If you do get a sense of what is going on in your constituency, that will be not a perfectly objective sense. But you're there and you're actually going and talking to people, they certainly get a sense of the political engaged part of your constituency and understand what - you won't get a sense of the disaffected and alienated parts of your constituency. You'll find supporters and opponents but the there's a chunk of people who are just, you know, fed up with the whole process and have lost interest. You find it really hard to find out what those problems are. You also get disproportionate sense of things being worse because people who visit your constituencies surgeries are always people with problems […] the mistake people would make was thinking that their constituency is somehow representative of the country at large. And it never is. (Interview Six)

The point was similarly made by two other interviewees, who, interestingly, also like Interviewee Six, were not elected politicians. It seems that support for and belief in the significance of the MP/constituency link is strongest amongst MPs themselves. Here, there are echoes of the way in which the Westminster Model, of which the MP/constituency link is an important part, functions as a legitimising mythology (see Richards and Smith 2000). Others working within the policy space seem to have a more sanguine view of the relationship:

> I think that MPs spend far too much time in the surgery dealing with people's complaints about their benefits or their what have yous, rather than actually getting out and talking much more generally. And of course the town hall meeting has disappeared. You talk to your followers these days […] my criticism is that I'm not sure the MPs do know what's going on in their constituencies […] they spend their time acting as case officers. So I just do wonder if the MPs don't flatter themselves about how good a transmission belt they are (Interview Five).

> Because I was in the Lords it was assumed that I knew absolutely nothing about what public opinion was. I was also not experiencing what they were experiencing […] when they went

back to their constituencies. I was quite resentful of that lack – it makes you a much, much weaker political player. I used to think that they were getting the view of whatever particular section of the public would be in say, Liverpool or Birmingham. I was getting full blast whatever the public opinion was in [XXX]. All in their own particular way, equally both representative and unrepresentative (Interview Four).

Therefore whilst for some, the MP/constituency link offers a valuable, perhaps even unique, insight into public opinion, for others it is not a panacea to the problem of knowing exactly what public opinion is. The problem can be that what MPs hear from particular people in particular constituencies is not generalisable to the broader public. And/or that MPs don't quite do enough outreach and engagement to really know what the public thinks even in their specific and distinctive locale. Either way, the faith that some MPs have in the link is called into question and it may not be a simple solution to the problem of knowing what public opinion is.

Constructing Public Opinion

Putting the previous two discussions next to each other, the picture which emerges is a somewhat paradoxical one. On the one hand, many of the policy elites interviewed identify public opinion as an important factor in counterterrorism policy for a range of reasons. But, that public opinion which is seen to be important, is at one and the same time, hard to know. The conjunction is significant. Were public opinion not seen to be particularly important for counterterrorism policy, it's epistemic fragility would not really be an issue; it could either simply be ignored, or left as an unexplored curiosity. That public opinion is frequently seen to be important *and* it is seen as difficult to know raises a particular set of issues. Ignoring public opinion is not seen to be an option. So it appears that political elites must do their best to engage with public opinion. This engagement with what is understood variously as incomplete or partial knowledge of public opinion takes two main forms, which will be discussed in turn below. The first of these, an indirect construction of public opinion, is to make a judgement about or a representation (to invoke Saward's term) of public opinion. And as discussed in Chapter Two, for Saward (2006), such representations are necessarily creative acts; when political actors represent the public and public opinion, they are in a very significant sense, constructing that opinion (Soo et al. (2021) also point to the ways in which political elites rely on their own judgements to interpret what public opinion is). There are limits and boundaries to such creativity and representations which do not resonate with the public are likely to be rejected. But, as we shall see, political elites may use their judgement, their political antennae, along with the various information sources at their disposal, to come to a view about what the content of public opinion is. They do so in a context of uncertainty, but understand themselves to be faced with the political

necessity of so doing. The second way in which the political elites interviewed engage with the epistemic uncertainty of public opinion is a more direct construction of public opinion, by seeking to gather further knowledge and information, to bridge, or cover, such epistemic uncertainty about public opinion. We will examine each of these strategies in turn. But the argument for both of these is that what political elites are doing here is *constructing* public opinion. The point here is not that they are *fabricating* public opinion (not least because, given the arguments analysed in Chapter 2, there may not be a pre-existing public opinion to fabricate), at least not in the pejorative sense, but rather faced with a (perceived) need to be attentive to public opinion, but also unsure about public opinion as they see/know it, they construct a version of it.

Constructing Public Opinion (1): Political Judgement

The epistemic uncertainty about public opinion seems to lead to – for a great many of the respondents – a sense that knowing what public opinion is, is something that requires discernment and judgment. It's not something that is immediately obvious or apparent, and either by balancing different viewpoints, different sources or weighing the worth, intensity and permanence of views, political elites must employ their political experience and judgment to come to understand and appreciate what public opinion is through a reflective process, weighing a number of different considerations. The interview responses which make these claims are strongly redolent of Stimson et al.'s (1995, p. 559) imagery (discussed in Chapter 2) of politicians as like 'antelope' with political antennae keenly attuned to political moods. This process of weighing or evaluating different information sources on public opinion leads to three different pictures or constructions of public opinion on counterterrorism.

The most frequent – indeed, the dominant – construction of public opinion put forward by the policy elites interviewed, is of a public which is hardline on counterterrorism issues, desirous of "more" powers to combat terrorism and not particularly concerned with civil liberty issues. This image of public opinion was asserted in the great majority of interviews. The following are some examples of these discussions:

> [T]he instinct I think of a lot of people over terrorism is "lock em up". "Lock em up". "Be tough". "This is our society" and the desire for […] the use of force and revenge is probably there (Interview Five).

> [T]the politicians were incredibly keen to react to the mood of the public. And the mood of the public was – they wanted action […] Had we done nothing after 9/11 I think people would have thought "f**k, what are we doing, nothing at all?" (Interview Four).

> [T]he public as a whole was strongly in favour of taking action to provide greater security (Interview One).

Most of these examples refer to public opinion about counterterrorism in general terms. On occasions, some participants articulated a conception of public opinion about specific counterterrorism policies. Recalling the debates and discussions within government about how to respond to the Law Lords ruling that indefinite detention of foreign national suspected of terrorism was illegal, one former senior civil servant said:

> And that was a moment where you could sense there was going to be public outrage that these people were going to be let out – huge public pressure to do something […] And that [Control Orders] was very much trying to catch a public mood, satisfy a public mood. "You can't have these dangerous people walking amongst us" (Interview Three).

On occasions, these constructions draw on particular, local and specific "public opinion":

> Going around my old constituency, in [XXX] working class constituency, mainly. I remember talking to people about these issues in the elections of 2005 and 2010. And there's no question in my mind, to quote somebody from a council estate […] "I know what I'd do, [XXX], I'd lock the buggers up and throw the key away" (Interview Eight).

There are a number of interesting and significant points to further explore in the above constructions of public opinion around counterterrorism measures. The first is to note that they broadly resonate with the available evidence from the information environment about these issues discussed in Chapter 3, where (notwithstanding issues around framing, question wording and so on) it seemed public opinion was supportive of "more" security when it came to counterterrorism. Two points follow from this; firstly, this should not be a surprise. The political elites interviewed were successful political actors and as Saward (2006) argues, representations, or depictions of public opinion which are out of step or do not resonate with publics, are likely to be rejected and this would have political consequences. There's a danger of circularity to this point, but with a degree of caution, a broad point might be made that political elites have significant incentives to depict public mood in a way which chimes with the public. A cardinal sin for a politician is to be "out of touch" (as can be seen in the ways in which politicians not knowing the price of milk or bread can cause acute political embarrassment). The second point is that although this reading of public opinion about counterterrorism seems reasonably in accordance with available information and evidence, *it*

remains a construction. The overview of (some but by no means all) information about what the public thought about counterterrorism identified a number of alternative possibilities. Chapter 3 pointed to particular questions about the "softness" or otherwise of public opinion and that, when prompted by certain questions, a higher degree of ambiguity emerged than from simpler, binary questions about "more" or "less" security. Indeed, at least one of these possibilities is picked up in the above extracts. The former cabinet minister in Interview Two points towards the lack of granularity or detail in public opinion, going as far as preferring to use the term 'climate of opinion' rather than public opinion. Another former cabinet minister stated:

> Public opinion is normally not engaged in the detail of things, so the precise days of detention, although that became quite an important issue, or the precise terms of Control Orders – public opinion won't be particularly engaged in the detail of that (Interview Four).

In other words, whilst we might conclude that the representations of the political elites interviewed as to the shape and content of public opinion on counterterrorism appear to be consonant with the information environment around public opinion at the time, other representations are possible (in the same way that a painting of a scene or person, no matter how realistic or "lifelike" does not preclude other depictions, which may also move or appeal, perhaps in different ways, through different types of representation to "capture" the essence or likeness of an image or object). Public opinion could have been seen to be often supportive of greater security measures but concerned about going too far beyond existing legal precedents (as respondents appeared to be in YouGov 2008 and ICM 2008 polls). Given the plurality of views in the media, it would be possible to articulate a public mood that was concerned about terrorism but also wary of introducing draconian powers, which might be more for political show than for actual effect. These would have also been "reasonable" interpretations of the public information environment at the time. Therefore, a key point to emphasise is that the view of the public as wanting greater counterterrorism powers is a construction of public opinion, albeit one which broadly resonates with much (although not all) of the information about public opinion available at the time. It is also worth noting that, importantly, given the opinion polls at the time this is also a view which would likely command intersubjective agreement; as noted above in terms of the seeming consensus amongst the interviews here, it probably represents what other people, elite or otherwise, considered public opinion to be. In other words, it not only represented what a specific political actor thought the public wanted, but also what that political elite thought others – other political elites, the public – thought public opinion looked like on this issue.

The second point to emphasise about these constructions of public opinion as hardline and supportive of more counterterrorism powers is that they generally (but not always) treat the public – or depict the public – in monolithic terms, ignoring or downplaying the nuance and variation that exists amongst the public. In one sense here, political elites are shifting between different conceptions of public opinion, between public opinion as an aggregate of individuals opinions and public opinion as majority public opinion (Herbst 1993). But in slipping between these conceptions of public opinion, what is sometimes lost is the uncertainty and difference that is to be found in public opinion on counterterrorism. Some of the political elites interviewed displayed recognition of this. '[T]here's inevitably a difference of views amongst people of Asian origin in parts of England, they may take a different view on the Prevent measures and so on, probably do' (Interview Eight).

However, as the above extract indicates, the reference to diverse views is nearly always "othered" or otherwise exceptionalised to dissenting voices. So whilst pointing to the diversity of views on counterterrorism by way of reference to Muslim communities was one explicit recognition of diversity/complexity, another was to hive off "dissent" or departure from the mainstream view to lawyers or other types of "purist":

> [W]hat happens when public opinion is divided? […] Counterterrorism, honestly, was not that area. Counterterrorism is an area where it's the lawyers versus the rest, basically. And the lawyers always want restraint […] and public opinion always wants more, basically (Interview Four).

> I think the 90 days, which was hugely contested, the control orders were hugely contested, not necessarily in the public […] you'll always have some, and I don't blame them, you know, you need them in a free society, some intellectual purists who will say, under no circumstances can you impinge on people's fundamental freedoms, and it's a dangerous path, and you have to be very careful (Interview Seven).

What's interesting here is that in these interviews, there is occasionally an acknowledgment that there are different views about counterterrorism, but these are rarely, if ever attributed to the public at large. Minority groups can have different views. Interest groups, lawyers and intellectuals can have different views, but "the British public" is not included in this diversity. No accurate reading of the polls (with all the caveats about what polls can tell us) would ignore that a minority – and sometimes a significant minority – of "the British public" seemed to have qualms about many of the measures introduced. Even in a question which is potentially loaded towards getting a "more security" answer, like a binary yes/no as to whether the rise of ISIS meant Britain needed tougher counterterrorism laws (ComRes 2014), more than 1 in 9 people disagreed. Where questions were

less "loaded", the proportion of the public who did not support the "pro security" seemed larger still. Nearly 1 in 3 respondents to an ICM poll in 2008 backed a pre-charge detention period of less time than 28 days (the limit at the time). Nearly 1 in 4 of those polled were concerned that extending pre-charge detention to 42 days would lead to innocent people being detained (YouGov 2008). These findings (again, with all the caveats about polling) do not sit easily with a simple narrative that "the public want more security". In large part, of course, when making such claims about public appetites for more counterterrorism measures, political elites slip between aggregative and majoritarian conceptions of public opinion, but such elisions happen without fanfare. And this is one area in which the constructions of public opinion could be said to be less resonant with the available information about public opinion, or perhaps more accurately, underrepresenting the complexity and diversity of such opinion.

Related to this point, representations of the public as a homogenous block also often brush over the extent to which opinion in this area may be "soft" or malleable. As noted in Chapter 4, qualitative research shows that public support for counterterrorism attitudes may not be as robust or as fixed as polls sometimes suggest. When encountering new information, or challenges to (initially) held views, individuals sometimes shift in their views and attitudes. This "softness" in attitudes is sometimes picked up in polls as well. An ICM (2008) poll which pointed out to people who had professed support for an extension to 42 day pre-charge detention that this exceeded prison sentences for burglary, found that 1 in 3 changed their position. The lack of attention to this potential pliability of public opinion may be commensurate with the view expressed by Interviewee Four, above, that the public are not engaged in the detail of policy. The larger point the chapter would seek to make, however, is that the information landscape about public opinion would allow for alternative readings and depictions of public opinion; as something perhaps generally supportive of "more security", but also unsure and circumspect, with significant minorities – and not just "minority groups" or "the usual suspects" – who opposed such measures. That this depiction of public opinion was not found amongst the interviewees is less significant than that it would, I would argue, represent a "reasonable" interpretation of the information/knowledge about public opinion on counterterrorism at the time. Indeed, one might push the argument a little further and suggest that this would be a *more* accurate representation than that which found amongst the interviewees.

The final point to draw attention to is that the above assertions of public opinion generally come without supporting evidence. The general line that the public wanted more security powers for the government/state to address terrorism was not one that was buttressed by reference to polls, or

indeed, any other kind of data or proof. (There is an exception to political elites not referring to supporting evidence, and this was particularly prominent in the representations and activities around Muslim opinion, which is discussed in the next section). This perhaps reflects four things. Firstly, it may simply be an artefact of the interview setting. As far as possible the interviews were conducted in a naturalistic fashion, to allow the interviewees to converse as they saw fit. In this context, it would perhaps seem to be unusual or stilted to "reference" opinions or views (although Cook et al. (2002) and Paden & Page (2003) and Chapter 4, note that policymakers seem reluctant to refer to things like polls in formal legislative settings as well); such conversations did not adhere to academic referencing norms or procedures. A second explanation refers back to the work of Herbst (1998) and Brown (2011) who found that politicians frequently eschew a reliance on formal means of assessing public opinion, preferring hunches and intuition. For such accounts, in one sense, there would be no data or evidence to reference as the picture of public opinion is not drawing on such data, and is rather coming from the actor's own senses and sensibilities. Related to this, a third explanation would be that (as Herbst (1998) and Brown (2011) also found) that political elites often are suspicious of the ability of opinion polls to capture public opinion. This has been demonstrated in the sample of political elites interviewed here, as discussed above. Finally, given that the interviewees were being asked to recount experiences and moments from the past, it may be simply that such evidence/proofs has not stuck in their minds, particularly as they are likely not to have been centrally involved with the collection of such information (and more likely, civil servants or advisors collated these kinds of information for ministers). Therefore, whether due to the informality of the setting, the fact that such depictions of public opinion *had* no formal supporting evidence, that politicians are reluctant to cite polls, and/or the passage of time, political elites, in this and in other samples, seem reluctant to buttress their depictions of public opinion explicitly with evidence.

Therefore we might sum up this analysis of political elites' assessment of public opinion and counterterrorism with three points. (1) Political elites tended to represent the general public as a homogenous block that was in favour of expanding counterterrorism measures; (2) This depiction or construction is not a fantasy; in many ways it comports with many aspects of the available information environment and could be seen as a "reasonable" depiction. Yet it could also be seen as a partial or incomplete picture and one which either elides dissenting voices, or which (re)locates such voices away from "the British public" (to minority groups, intellectuals or lawyers) and which overlooks the potential plasticity or "softness" of the seeming support for greater counterterrorism measures; (3) Perhaps reflecting (2) the depictions of public opinion come without evidence to support or substantiate. This may reflect the uncertainty about knowing public opinion decisively.

But it also further draws attention to the point that what political elites say about public opinion represents a construction and not something objective, given, or a simple empirical process of counting or listing.

Constructing Public Opinion (2): Constructing the community

There is one further, more direct, way in which the interviewees constructed public opinion on counterterrorism. Whereas in the previous section political elites provided an assessment of what public opinion was (perhaps drawing on existing information which was apparent to them), in the instances considered here political elites directly engage the public with the effect of shaping the "public opinion" which emerges. This specifically happened with regard to the opinions of Muslim communities. In the interviews conducted, two separate but contemporaneous efforts by the main political parties, Labour (in government) and Conservative (in opposition), to engage in dialogue with Muslim communities in 2006-2007 were discussed. In both cases, ministers and shadow ministers devoted considerable time, effort and energy to these efforts. In one case, the directive to pursue this kind of engagement came directly from the Prime Minister, Tony Blair in the wake of 7/7:

> And so I remember Tony getting everybody together in the Cabinet Office, it's as clear today, sort of 10 years on as it was then. And he didn't quite say something must be done […] But it was very much in that sense of goodness me, you know, this is seismic, and what are we all going to do? […] And basically, the Prime Minister really wanted to kind of dig under the surface and see what was going on in our communities that could lead to this kind of an event. I think the whole kind of country was totally shocked that this could happen. So it fell to me […] to go out and visit all the communities around the country in the next 12 months, particularly where there is a significant Muslim population (Interview Seven).

The former minister estimated that this entailed around 50 meetings with community leaders, groups and individuals, 'And, you know, it was every week, up and down the country' (Interview Seven). Another interviewee, a former minister from a different government department to Interview Seven, was also part of this. They explained that 'We weren't that well informed about what was going on in these communities' (Interview Nine), but also recounted their:

> rolling sense of shock, and discovery, and just what hostility we faced in our attempt to combat the ground out of which this terrorism was growing […] I hadn't realized the gulf that there was between these attitudes and I suppose what you could call mainstream public opinion in Britain. So, so there were lots of those meetings (Interview Nine).

Parallel to this effort by government ministers, shadow ministers and advisors for the Conservative Party were engaging in a similar exercise. Although more limited in scope than the exercise undertaken by the Labour administration, a (then) shadow minister characterised it thus:

> [W]e certainly did a lot when we were still in opposition. We had all sorts of groups in and individuals in. The more people discovered that we were listening, the more different groups of Muslims would come along and say we'd like to talk [...] Very often, we'd go to the mosque. Or we would go to [town X], and we would go round [town Y] talking to different people (Interview Five).

We will come, in turn, to consider the significance and impact (broadly) conceived of these engagements below. But what is emphasised at this stage is the effort that went into creating these opportunities for dialogue. A politician's – and particularly a minister's – most precious commodity is arguably time. So to have multiple government ministers (and shadow ministers) and advisors engaging in such extensive dialogue and engagement activities, ranging over a long period of time and wide geographic distances, suggests that this was a serious endeavour. It would stretch credulity to argue that this kind of effort was a paper exercise, or a sham consultation; why expend all the effort of senior ministers and officials if this was not a serious enterprise?

Both endeavours listed a lack of knowledge about Muslim communities and the opinions and views of British Muslims as a main driving force for their activities. Thus alongside the widespread uncertainty that public opinion about counterterrorism can be easily known, ran a more specific concern expressed in a number of interviews that when focusing on public opinion in certain communities (and here it was almost always "Muslim communities" which was the reference point), there were particular problems. Whilst knowing "public opinion" at a national level was beset by the kinds of problems listed above, such issues were magnified when it came to knowing Muslim opinion, if indeed, such a thing can be said to exist – British Muslims exhibit diversity and the label/term "Muslim opinion" or "Muslim community" presupposes or imposes an unwarranted homogeneity (Gilliat-Ray (2010). Sometimes this complexity was acknowledged and the diversity of a "Muslim community" singular, or even "Muslim communities" plural was seen as part of the difficulty with regard to public opinion.

> Part of the problem with Islam is that it doesn't have an organised hierarchy in the way most religions do and that's one of the things that a Christian dominated society finds puzzling – "who do I talk to?" [...]
> So when you asked me the question – who did you consult – it's quite hard to answer that question because the nature of the organisations inside that particular minority community

is extremely fragmented. Very often, we'd go to the mosque… And the communities – there were commonalities but also real differences (Interview Five).

A particular point of note, for this interviewee was that community leaders tended to represent an older, typically, male perspective. Such leaders were seen as important voices, but their *unrepresentativeness of the community as a whole* was also asserted, such that these voices needed to be complemented with other voices and views:

> Community leaders… do tend to exist in minority communities, people with prestige and influence in the local community. But given the generational differences that isn't adequate, that isn't enough and it took us a long time to learn that. You do actually need to have peer voices. So you do need, if you're dealing with young people and you're trying to prevent them going off the rails, you need other young people (Interview Five).

One interviewee, a former special advisor, recounted that part of their motivation for getting involved in the counterterrorism policy space was seeing how "Muslim communities" were being represented and discussed in terms of counterterrorism in various reports and policy documents.

> And I was reading them and then I looked at the participants, I came to the participants of the youth group and I realised I knew everybody on the youth group. I had gone to university with them and they weren't people I would say would be my first choice for preventing extremism. Many of them were quite closely connected to the XXX, and I thought well what's going on here, why – partly it was XXX representing themselves as a non-extremist organisation, so they were saying "we are not al-Qaeda, we are very religious Muslims but we don't want violence". Which is true, however they have a very hardline religious content to their views… and they try and present themselves as the monopoly interpreter of Muslim belief which is completely false. It's actually a community where… there's a very wide range of views and they're just one strand of a very diverse community (Interview Six).

A similar point was made by two ministers working on the consultation undertaken by Labour. In a somewhat similar vein to the extract above, Interviewee Nine forcefully asserted that "community leaders" sought hegemony over the Muslim community, and to exclude other voices:

> The community leaders, for whatever reason, usually, they're usually head of a little group or a cabal, usually self-appointed, or else it's a group based around some mosque or something. And I often used to try and ask "Who the hell make you the spokesperson for this group?" And they could never come up with an answer really. Very often, I think it is the result of bullying or politics, smart moves by influential people in communities. Community leaders… I'd mistrust that term hugely (Interview Nine).

This concern with community leaders sometimes saw explicit reference to the Muslim Council of Britain, as a barrier to open and full dialogue with Muslim voices.

the Muslim Council of Britain, I mean, we said we aren't going to talk to you because we're going to talk to all Muslims, they're equal citizens and we're not going to use you as some kind of colonial interface. They didn't like that at all, as you can imagine, so we were attacked and at that stage they were very much in the lead of Muslim opinion" (Interview Five).

Another former minister didn't necessarily see the unrepresentativeness of Muslim community leaders in such stark or deliberate terms, but in their outreach and dialogue activities, they felt the same need as the above interviewees to not simply rely on "community leaders" and instead to seek out women and young people in particular:

And so I made a couple of conditions going around, I said that I wasn't going to meet anybody unless there were women present, which was kind of quite life changing for some people. And sometimes I met the women publicly, sometimes I met them privately. And I also wanted to make sure that there were young people, because in the community, then there was very much a tradition of elders. And I wanted to really find out why these young people were quite so angry (Interview Seven).

Later this former minister gave more detailed information about their interactions with a Muslim group:

I mean, when I first got there, the established groups […] were used to basically having exclusive access to ministers […] And so, again, when I first became minister, they came to see me and they were all older men. And I said, Oh - I didn't say this, in terms to them – But I said, they're not coming back unless they've got women and young people. So they did, they came back with, like, two women and a teenager. And then I said, I want to see other people and I want us to be not creating people and controlling them, but actually sowing the seeds of new voices (Interview Seven).

What is striking in these discussions and extracts from the interviews is both a) the concern with the views of "Muslim communities" and b) the overt attempts to supplement and add additional voices and perspectives to that which was apparent, seemingly, in the judgement of policy elites, to correct for the unrepresentativeness of that extant "Muslim opinion". The veracity or otherwise of these judgments or claims is, for the purposes of the present analysis, somewhat beside the point. What I seek to emphasise is that policy elites were, in a very conscious and deliberate way, seeking to "construct" public opinion (indeed, one could argue that the positioning of "Muslim opinion" as unrepresentative, conservative etc. is itself a construction). In terms of a more "political" analysis of this, whether such constructions represent a genuine, politically or value neutral attempt to correct for a clear and obvious imbalance in how the opinion of a particular community was being

represented – or whether it represents a more politically driven attempt to shape the discourse of "Muslim opinion" to one which seems more supportive of policy and/or the values of the political elites themselves, is not straightforward to answer. But the larger point is that policy elites were very clearly doing this. They sought to edit, to complement, to add voices to those that were apparent. In doing this, they may very well have been producing a more representative "Muslim public opinion"; that is difficult to judge. But what they were doing was *producing public opinion*. Each outreach made choices about who was going to speak; and these choices produced narratives. Different choices would have produced different narratives. The political elites, therefore, were shaping the very discourse that, earlier on in this chapter, they identify as being central to listen to and be responsive to. The extract below gives one very direct example of how the choices about who speaks leads to different narratives about of what Muslim public opinion comprises:

> [F]or example, when I met a lot of the [Muslim] women, they said, very often, our young people are being radicalized on the internet. And they had no internet skills at all […] And so they were very fearful that they weren't, if you like, doing their duty as mums or sisters, in protecting, particularly their young men from this exposure, or at least being able to have a discussion about "is it a good idea that you keep watching these violent videos?" And so one of the things in the Prevent program was to set up programs for women to be able to look at internet use to have the tools themselves for simply monitoring and controlling and moderating and their families use, for them to look out for the first signs of radicalization, and then to have routes through and people to go and see the Prevent coordinators in every borough that kind of thing […] And it is very difficult to draw the line between telling people what to think, and protecting people from vicious and wicked, violent stuff that's out there. So I understand why it's contested. But the anti-Prevent people, I think, have done their communities a great disservice[…] Many of them are very knowledgeable, very educated, very skilled. And they're talking to people who don't have those advantages, and telling them that, you know, preventing violent extremism is somehow an attack on their culture, which is ludicrous. So I feel very strongly about that. So that that was a direct read across from talking to the public. I probably did more, you know, listening to people in that year, on a particular policy issue than probably anything else I've done (Interview Seven).

This lengthy extract has a number of aspects which are worth exploring. In it, the Prevent programme is positioned as being responsive to the needs of Muslim women, the kinds of women with whom the former minister engage personally. As stated above, this former minister made the presence of women a condition of these dialogues. This may be a perfectly justifiable decision, which corrects for gender imbalances in hitherto representations of Muslim public opinion which have not included women. The point I would emphasise here is that the former minister's choices about who was to speak/be present at these dialogues generated the above mentioned discourse of Muslim women concerned about their sons and husbands and wanting, needing help with information technology. Here the Prevent programme is positioned as being responsive to the wishes and needs

of (elements of) Muslim public opinion. Yet the opinion to which the minister's policies are responding is generated by and through decisions made by the minister. One doesn't need to push the argument as far as suggesting that political elites are cynically constructing a public opinion which is sympathetic to and compatible with their wider political goals and values (although it's not precluded). Indeed, the way in which Interviewee Nine expressed shock at the nature of the opinions encountered in some of these dialogues suggests that they were not always straightforwardly stage managed to produce particular types of opinion. The point I wish to emphasis is that through the decisions about who gets included to speak, the exercise of engaging the public (and/or sections of the public) in dialogue actively shapes the kind of "public opinion" which emerges. This is, in a very straightforward sense, constructing public opinion.

A different example of the same kind of homology between engagement/dialogue choices and policy goals can be found in the outreach of the Conservative Party. Both the shadow minister responsible and special advisor emphasised the extent to which their dialogues sought to engage with Muslims as individuals, not through community leaders (who were viewed with suspicion, as having their own, perhaps more "extreme" agenda). Conservative Party policy at the time was concerned about an excess of multiculturalism which might be in danger of 'veering dangerously down the road of separate but equal' (Interview Five) and which wished to assert a greater degree of cultural homogeneity 'Multi-faith, multi-race [...] but single culture' (Interview Five). This was likely not to find a receptive audience amongst traditional faith and community leaders, so again (as above) there was an attempt to shift the participants in the dialogue

> And government essentially after 7/7, went on asking a kind of question like "who are Muslims". And the people who answer were the people who primarily identify themselves as Muslims rather than other things. So they were members of more religious Islamic organisations, organised political movements, rather than people who, yes might happen to be Muslim, but have many other aspects to their life and don't think of it as an overriding part, their belief. People might be doctors, footballers, lawyers, whatever, business people. So we had to, one of the things we had to do, was to explain to the policymaking community that this, that the claims being made by these groups were not representative [...] And one of the reasons we took these, we organised these seminars was to try and understand *direct experience* of people (Interview Six, emphasis added).

So whilst these dialogues are being engaged in, the policy goal is to move towards a less group based identity and a more individualised one, where the dominant identity is not Muslim but British. In the light of this, that the outreach/dialogue activities were pursued with individuals rather than groups is not surprising. This is another instance of the way in which political elites shape the nature and content of public opinion through the decisions they make about who speaks.

These twin examples of direct engagement with the public leading to particular depictions and constructions of Muslim opinion, placed alongside the more indirect ways in which political elites construct public opinion considered above, show that a) public opinion about counterterrorism is not an objective "out there" phenomena to be discovered, but rather something which is called into being by specific political actors. It is, in other words, a social construction. What specific political elites understand – and project – as political opinion is an act or representation, an act of creation. It appears to be created in specific ways to reflect the wider interests and values of a given political actor, albeit the wider interests and values asserted are often broad (as opposed to specific policy goals), focusing on concepts of representation, pluralism etc. All the while, it is important to maintain the point of view that with different values, different choices, alternative depictions and representations would be possible.

Does this matter?

To conclude the discussion, the chapter will reflect on the extent to which this matters. More specifically, it could be argued that the significance or relevance of the point or argument that political elites "construct" public opinion around counterterrorism issues is moot, or of limited interest because such public opinion does not play any kind of role in policy itself. The securitization literature discussed in Chapter 2 (Buzan et al. 1998) saw security politics as elite driven and closed off from normal deliberative processes. The argument might be something along the lines of "who cares if political elites construct public opinion – it doesn't play a role in what actually happens". A version of this might continue that what is going on here is really about providing a gloss of legitimation, and that the constructions themselves have little significance or import on policy themselves. This would link to the arguments of authors like Herman and Chomsky (1988), and Hall (2021 [1979]) noted in Chapter 1, who suggest that public opinion is moulded into being supportive of the political priorities of elites, rather than the other way round.

There are a number of ways to respond to this kind of argument. One way could be to refer back to the discussions in Chapter 1 and 2, which examined the extent (and nature) of the influence of public opinion on policy. The consensus view within this literature is captured perhaps by the statement 'No one believes that public opinion always determines public policy; few believe it never does' (Burstein 2003, p. 29). But how do the political elites interviewed for this project view this relationship? On one level, there is an obvious issue – to what extent can the recollections of former

politicians be relied upon to give an accurate assessment of the varying influences on policy choices, some ten years or more after such policy was made? There are reasons to be sceptical about their views. Would politicians who had ignored public wishes and followed an ideological agenda declare this openly, even if they had retired from public life? Even putting such reputation management to one side, to what extent would a single political figure, no matter how senior, give an accurate assessment of the relative influence of the multiple sources of influence for complex public policy. These are not inconsiderable objections/questions. (Although as has been argued in Chapter 1, quantitative assessments of the influence of public policy are also beset by potential methodological problems). And were the point of exploring such discourses be to definitively adjudicate on such an issue, in the fashion "does public opinion influence policy?" the objections would be weighty. However, that is not what the chapter aims to do. Rather the aim is to understand what political elites say about the relationship between public opinion and counterterrorism policy and to explore that relationship in greater detail. Framed thus, the partial and subjective assessments of key political actors can provide important insights. They may not be completely reliable or completely accurate, but they matter because they, as political elites, are important players in this process. So whilst political elites may "gild the lily", that process in and of itself is of significance and import.

Some of what political elites think in terms of the influence of public opinion on policy has been covered above, when discussing their assessments of the importance of public opinion. In these discussions, public opinion is identified as being important for principled, democratic reasons, political expediency and to fill knowledge gaps. Unsurprisingly, then, one can identify similar rationales as to the assessment of the *influence* of public opinion. For instance, in terms of political expediency, one respondent noted that public opinion shaped counterterrorism policy for fear of the political, electoral consequences of not being seen to respond adequately to terrorist incidents. They noted a concern that

> if you didn't respond properly that the public would not have confidence in the government. That's the way the views of ordinary people came strongly into the response. And *it was very, very influential*. And the responses are driven in these circumstances by an overwhelming desire to reassure and give people confidence that you're actually doing something about it (Interview Four, emphasis added).

Similarly, another respondent who had emphasised that the public outreach and dialogue activities that they had engaged in were to address knowledge gaps, felt that these engagements had shaped policy. They reported that the understandings as to how particular groups in the UK felt and thought about counterterrorism issues, filtered into policy. When asked whether this influence could be

characterised as a direct, clear type of influence, they demurred, saying 'I think it was more iterative. And because you couldn't… people don't have public policy fully formed in their own mind, what they know is what they're angry about' (Interview Seven). They went on to state their view that as a result of these dialogues 'I think the policy was different, richer, more based in experience' (Interview Seven).

In addition to this sense of influence of public opinion, albeit an influence mediated by political actors themselves, is a view that public opinion influence varied according to the level of counterterrorism policy under consideration. One former senior civil servant stated that at the level of overall strategy, public opinion had little influence 'the overall strategy, how you balance the different elements out, to start with government was nervous about going too public with that' (Interview Three). However, at a more specific level, where public opinion was perceived to be a) mobilised and b) relatively clear, public opinion was seen to be more influential. Referring to the decision of the Law Lords to declare the detention of foreign nationals without charge as illegal, the respondent stated that public opinion was a significant factor in the decision making process

> That's when the Home Office came up with control measures, tagging, restrictions on internet access and so on for suspects. And that was very much trying to catch a public mood, *satisfy a public mood* […] the Home Office responded very quickly, amazingly quickly, coming up with a package (Interview Three, emphasis added).

Others were sceptical about the extent of public opinion's influence. One former government minister who had been shocked by the nature of the public interactions they had had in Muslim communities argued that whilst he communicated his experiences, that these were ignored, in the service of other political goals. When asked if their outreach activities had shaped or influenced policy, they stated:

> No I don't think so, I don't. I mean I kept writing reports and so on, but… I don't think anybody paid any attention to them really. I think the big worries were really about what they kept referring to as community relations (Interview Nine).

Similarly, a special advisor to government felt that their (different) outreach activities had been ignored amid competing political priorities:

> It was sort of taken up and then largely speaking […] was ignored. National security wasn't a policy area that [was] cared about at the time […] the financial crisis happened [and] overwhelmed everything (Interview Six).

A final sense in which public opinion could be said *not* to be influential on counterterrorism policy is the notion that public opinion actually wanted policy to go further and be more stringent, draconian even (it is interesting, in terms of considering the evidence in Chapter 3, whether this would resonate more widely. Perhaps more apposite here is the sense that this particular *construction* of public opinion did not have a great deal of influence). One former senior minister stated:

> People at the time would not have seen this but much of the pressure that I was receiving was to be even tougher. They couldn't understand why we just didn't sling people out of the country, irrespective of whether they were going to be tortured or not in their country of origin. Or irrespective of whether that country of origin would not accept them as being legitimate citizens and therefore provide them with necessary documentation and it was quite difficult to explain to people writing in to you that we have the rule of law […] but we actually believe those conventions and we do want to deal with people as human beings. That's quite difficult. So the pressure from […] the broader public and some parts of the media, it was you're being too soft. I never thought I was being too soft. I would think I got the balance right, wouldn't I? Naturally (Interview One).

This short discussion in many ways reflects the Burnham quote which began this section, that public opinion does exert some kind of influence, but not a determinative one, and not all the time. Linking back to some of the arguments in Chapter 1, as well as the discussions here, it seems that at some levels, at some moments, public opinion exerts some kind of influence on counterterrorism policy. This finds support with other similar strands of research as noted in Chapter 2. Hendriks and Lees-Marshment (2019) also identify enthusiasm amongst political elites for engaging with public opinion and public voices. They note that whilst political elites do not in any straightforward sense "follow" public opinion, that such engagement can and does feed into the policy process, sometimes altering, or contributing to policy outcomes. They find that elites don't necessarily say they follow public opinion, but rather that they integrate parts of what they hear, selectively, into decisions and policy.

The significance here is that if we are to take this fairly mild proposition – not that public opinion determines counterterrorism policy or shapes it all the time, simply that at some moments, it plays some kind of role – then, that such public opinion can or should be seen, at least in part, as a construction of political actors, is something of significance. These constructions matter because they shape policy; they should not be dismissed as unimportant. This suggests a complex, messy, relationship between public opinion and counterterrorism policy. Rather than the simple, one-way relationship envisaged in some models of responsiveness, the picture which emerges here is one where political elites identify public opinion as important for counterterrorism policy, but that they also shape those very opinions, or what comes to be thought of as public opinion. The direct outreach activities, also contribute to the construction of public opinion by shaping the nature of

intersubjective assessments about public opinion. Political elites are important, powerful figures. By engaging with specific communities and thus generating particular discourses about public opinion, they shape not just what those particular elites who participated in the engagement activities, but what other people think public opinion represents as well. In other words, these activities shape the information environment for many political actors, not just the one engaging in the dialogue/outreach.

Conclusion

The analysis presented in this chapter has developed empirical support for the two main arguments presented in the Introduction to this book; that public opinion is an important part of the politics of counterterrorism, and that this public opinion is itself constructed, not least by the political elites who attest to its significance and importance. More specifically, in this chapter, the analysis finds that political elites express consistent support for the proposition that public opinion is important for counterterrorism. Indeed, those interviewed here express that it is *more* important for counterterrorism than it is for many other policy areas. Further, the chapter demonstrates the ways – direct and indirect – in which political elites construct public opinion in this area. These constructions, particularly those direct interventions and engagement, help to shape conceptions and views about what the public (and specifically what Muslim publics) think about counterterrorism. Aside from any conception of influence (which elites attest is there), these very constructions constitute an important part of the politics of counterterrorism. They – and the "indirect" constructions of what the public think, often based on more instinctive readings of public mood, or the climate of public opinion – also have the capacity to shape what other people think public opinion is on these issues. In other words, if, as was argued in Chapter 2, a significant component in authoritative, resonant conceptions of public opinion is what people think other people think public opinion is, then the constructions of political elites, whether disseminated formally though speeches, policy documents or other governmental activities, or informally, through private conversations with other political elites, have significant capacity to shape the ways in which other people perceive public opinion – and thus the way in which public opinion is perceived intersubjectively. This is significant, as political elites interviewed here think that being "in touch" with public opinion on counterterrorism is vitally important. And yet such actors have the capacity to shape not only what counts as public opinion, but also what other people think counts as public opinion. Such dynamics render these constructions of public opinion meaningful and important parts of the politics of counterterrorism.