

Social democratic defence as a mobilising mission:

Why cohesion, resilience and our social fabric are essential to national security in an era of anti-democratic resurgence¹

Dr Kate Ferguson and Andy Fearn
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National Security is the first responsibility of any government, that never changes. But as the world changes, the way we discharge that responsibility must change with it. And the world has changed.’

Prime Minister’s foreword - National Security Strategy 2025: Security for the British People in a Dangerous World. Summer 2025

I. Executive summary

The nature of aggressive statecraft, conflict and insecurity has transformed yet democratic strategy is still set up for a past era, straightjacketed by assumptions, systems and habits that kept us safe in a different world but can no longer do the job. Authoritarian states, political extremists, anti-democratic disruptors understand something we continue to treat as peripheral: the fastest way to weaken a democracy is now not military confrontation but social fracture. They are winning ground and turning profit by dividing communities, eroding trust in institutions, weaponising identity and grievance, and hollowing out the social foundations that make democratic societies resilient, legitimate and safe. These efforts are increasingly effective because the tactics are deliberate, coordinated, varied, scalable, deniable, and very low cost; this playbook also works because democratic defence of what is under attack is still treated as secondary or downstream to the core objectives of our government and governance.

Instead, expertise on inclusive democratic defence and societal resilience has remained marginal to national security, public safety, economic policy, and foreign affairs. As adversaries have built capacity, coordination, and strategic clarity, the UK and many other democracies have hollowed out their own institutional capabilities to respond. The result is a widening and dangerous gap between the speed and sophistication of efforts to divide and destabilise UK society, and the lacklustre mobilisation being brought to bear in defence of it.

The new fronts of strategic competition and the harm they cause cannot be met with tanks on the lawn and drones in the skies. The UK requires a commensurate

¹ This is a private brief for limited circulation to support thinking within government, by funders, and close partners. It seeks to respond to questions raised during a roundtable of UK community funders at the end of 2025, and has been shaped by countless conversations with others including recent visits to Germany, Denmark, Greenland and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

mobilisation of resources, political will, and institutional capability to repair, strengthen and defend what is under attack. Traditional defence and rapid investment in hybrid security is needed but alone will be insufficient; in the face of the resurgent anti-democratic playbook it will be societies that trust their governments and institutions, and the resilience of connective social, cultural and economic tissue that ensure democracies like the UK are able to successfully and safely navigate a prolonged period of volatility, shock, and anxiety. We need to mount a democratic defence that recognises it is precisely what makes inclusive, fair and vibrant democracies distinct from the alternatives that are also what keep us safer, freer, and more prosperous.

We judge the UK to be approaching a significant juncture where decisions made by over the next two years hold potential to confront and overcome serious threats to our very way of life. This note proposes ambitious and cost-effective expansion of current political and philanthropic commitments to the UK's social cohesion and shared efforts to rebuild public trust as essential to our national security.

How we conceive of, defend, and invest in our national security needs to significantly change. Definitions of what constitutes national harm or damage require urgent update. Government, institutional and funding structures must reflect the reality that most contemporary challenges cut across portfolios of responsibility, operating in the grey space between domestic and foreign policy, below traditional thresholds of war and peace, and across the hybrid terrain linking military and civilian domains. Addressing the deficit in affirmative democratic strategy — inside and outside government — will require a surge in human capability, creating new constellations of influence, thought leadership and constructive challenge.

II. Defending and strengthening the home front

The world is entering the most dangerous and unpredictable period since 1945. It is the sober conclusion of our government's own national security assessments. Intensified strategic competition over values, rules, and influence is not only reshaping global relations but intentionally breaching national borders in an effort to weaken democratic societies from within. Community cohesion in the UK is being degraded through multiple, intersecting harms as identity and grievance are deliberately weaponised to polarise, alienate and fracture democratic societies.²

Far-right movements, authoritarian states — including Russia and China — and transnational hate networks exploit wedge issues rooted in gender, race, religion, sexuality and belonging to weaken trust, undermine pluralism and erode democratic consensus. These tactics range from stoking online incitement in the aftermath of terrorist attacks, to the use of transnational repression to silence democratic resistance within diaspora communities, and the large-scale monetisation of misogynistic and anti-democratic content. Together, these dynamics normalise exclusionary and authoritarian narratives and deepen social fracture. They are visible in far-right mobilisation, coordinated influence operations linked to hostile states, and

² *This paper addresses the home front but makes clear contemporary domestic interests demand sophisticated comprehension of the international — Britain's role in the world and its foreign policy must be understood as integral to the new futures of national and collective European security, safety and freedom.*

shifting transatlantic dynamics marked by weakening commitments to democratic norms and pluralism.

Gender has become a site of political mobilisation, with coordinated rollbacks of rights and the valorisation of rigid “traditional” family models that cast those who fall outside them as socially harmful or illegitimate. This has fuelled a resurgence of misogyny, escalating violence against women and girls, and rising hostility towards LGBTQ+ communities; it is driving a new toxic masculinity that is being felt in homes, classrooms, in public spaces, and online. Global evidence shows that younger men in many democracies are becoming less liberal over time — a trend already shaping electoral outcomes across Europe and North America. As Alex Farrow of Kaleidoscope has warned, ‘LGBTI+ rights are often framed as a social issue. But today they are a frontline in the defence of European security - continental, national, and individual. Without serious support, Russian tactics face little resistance — leaving Europe even further exposed...If it fails to act, Europe risks not just losing freedoms but becoming a fractured, weaker continent.’

Migration and citizenship have become similarly toxic terrains, shaped by racialised, gendered, and demonstrably false narratives that exacerbate genuine concern, intensify perceptions of insecurity, and drive polarisation. Real and amplified grievance of economic precarity and the message that democracy has not delivered for the majority sits within these threat vectors, whether explicitly or in tactics that are more concealed. These narratives are all deliberately amplified by populists, extremists, and authoritarian actors seeking to destabilise democratic societies or profit from the process. Rapid technological change and a profoundly disrupted information environment have made it easier than ever to manipulate identity, grievance, and fear at scale. Genuine (and fabricated) localised community discontent can now be instrumentalised by devolved transnational architectures of political influence, financial flows, and visions of an alternative world. This is not to diminish the challenge of ‘home-grown’ grievance or sincerely held legitimate political views but to underline that the civilian, community, and even familial realms are now also explicit targets of anti-democratic practice.

As these dynamics intensify, hate crime, gender-based violence, varied identity-based harm including terrorism, and social fracture will keep rising, becoming simultaneously normalised and more extreme. Minority communities will continue to pay the highest and earliest price. But the harm will not stop there. As anti-pluralist politics consolidate, new groups will become vulnerable, trust in democratic institutions will collapse further, and the social conditions required for stability, growth, and security will disintegrate. At that point, no amount of downstream policing, crisis response, or military preparedness will compensate for the loss. The space for democratic mobilisation will shrink. When shocks come — whether in the form of civil unrest, an attack on our infrastructure, or in the breakdown of supply chains — if the social fabric is torn, human, financial and economic costs will spiral.

For government and philanthropy alike, the implications are stark. If cohesion continues to be treated as optional or secondary, much of what has been invested in democracy, inclusion, opportunity, and social progress over the past decades will be undone.

III. The opportunity

As the world changes, the way in which government discharges its responsibilities of national security must change with it and the UK is no longer facing a security environment in which threats are confined to borders, battlefields, or traditional domains of defence. But democratic governance has become increasingly characterised by short-term decision-making, reactive response, and a belief that value-led policy is a luxury no longer afforded. What is seen as rational political orthodoxy now subjugates the fundamentals of social democracy – rights, protections, values – as often at odds with our national interests. This group think is not serving progressive democracies nor the publics they serve.

Meanwhile, our adversaries have invested in strategic execution of the long haul towards a vision of the world not as it is but as they wish it to be. Identity, grievance, and belonging have become their strategic weapons. Disinformation, social media manipulation, lawfare, and coordinated political pressure are being used to inflame division, normalise exclusion, and hollow out democratic legitimacy from within. These tactics are not peripheral to contemporary competition and demand a new kind of democratic sovereignty in order to discharge the responsibilities of national security and public safety.

The UK's 2025 National Security Strategy is explicit: threats to the homeland are increasing; societal cohesion is being actively targeted; and aggressive statecraft is increasingly waged below the threshold of conventional war, within civilian, social, and cognitive domains. But recognition alone is insufficient. Without a corresponding shift in strategy, investment, and delivery, these warnings risk becoming retrospective rather than preventative.

Strengthening community and social cohesion is not the singular answer but is one of the most urgent, cost-effective, and preventative national security investments available to the UK. If the UK and its partners fail to act decisively to protect what is at stake, the cumulative damage will be irreversible. The cost of inaction is not stagnation — it is systemic failure of democratic security and the degradation of our way of life. The question is no longer whether we should act but whether we are prepared to accept the consequences if we do not.

Our government's own diagnosis of the problem demands a fundamental rethinking of assumptions underpinning UK security since 1945. In a volatile and increasingly authoritarian global context, the resilience of the UK will be determined not only by military capability or economic strength, but by the cohesion of its communities and the health of its democratic social fabric.

Evidence from the UK and internationally shows that communities are more resilient to shocks, division, disinformation, and identity-based violence when people experience fairness, agency, connection, and visible care. During the 2024 racist riots across the UK, it was the areas where this social fabric was most frayed that saw the greatest harm and damage to people, infrastructure, and relationships. By contrast, where the cohesion was strong, resistance, resilience, and solidarity in the face of a far right threat brought communities together, activated rapid protection, and triggered spontaneous prevention and preparedness.

For government and funders, the question is not which projects to run, but how to reverse the deficits of strategy, vision and consistency, and where to bring attention, authority, and investment. The answers of how to strengthen our frayed social fabric and principles to guide reinvestment in communities are not new and are rightly being given greater prominence – however, the scale of ambition, resourcing, and prioritisation must be fit to meet the trajectories of threat. This demands a decisive shift from reactive stabilisation towards preventative investment in social resilience.

Rebuilding – and perhaps reimagining – these foundations of our social contract is not a discretionary expense but a unifying strategy for national security, democratic survival, and long-term prosperity.

IV. Recommendations

Government: Policy and Strategy

- Establish national resilience and inclusive democratic defence as a core government mission to be advanced across departments and as a pillar of its devolution strategy. Budgetary contributions should be seen as part of the commitment to 5% GDP for national security.
- Narrow concepts of what constitutes threats to national security, including thresholds of harm that limit focus to ‘threats of life’ no longer reflect the tactics of impacts of contemporary insecurity – new definitions are clearly needed
- Integrate community cohesion explicitly into national security, resilience, and defence planning and budgets – and integrate community knowledge, leadership and constructive challenge into those processes
- Treat identity-based harm and grievance manipulation as preventable harms at odds with the UK’s national interests
- Embed cohesion across national and local resilience frameworks – and embed community expertise, networks and preparedness into those structures
- Use trust, wellbeing, participation, and legitimacy as indicators of national resilience, trust, and the strength of our social contract
- Recognise the agenda of social democratic defence as fundamental to – and not in contest with – growth, opportunity, and pride

The deficit in democratic strategy must be acknowledged, confronted and reversed. The wiring of national and local government must become fit for purpose. Formal and informal advisory structures in Number 10 and to support ministers hold low-cost opportunities for rapid augmentation of relevant expertise and strategic capacity. Longer-term reimagining of the systems of government will be needed to ensure ministerial scope and bureaucratic process are reset for the new reality.

Funding and Philanthropy

This is an inflection point for UK philanthropy. Incremental funding, short-term projects, and business-as-usual approaches are no longer sufficient for the scale and nature of the threats facing UK communities. If social fracture continues unchecked, the conditions required for progress on any issue — children's rights, women's rights, LGBTQ+ rights, anti-racism, health, mental health, education, climate, or economic opportunity — will erode rapidly. In a fragmented society, gains in any one area are unstable and easily reversed. Community resilience is therefore not a specialist or niche concern. It is the enabling condition for all other philanthropic goals. Without urgent investment now, much of what funders have spent decades working to achieve will be at risk.

- Treat community resilience as a cross-cutting priority: funders should recognise that strengthening cohesion, trust, and agency in communities underpins outcomes across all thematic areas.
- Shift from incrementalism to strategic surge funding: this is not a moment for cautious, marginal increases. This includes the move from ad hoc projects to joined-up, place-based approaches. Funders should be prepared to support work that strengthens social foundations over time, recognising that prevention rarely looks dramatic, but failure does.
- Find the entry points within your own mission: funders whose primary focus lies elsewhere — whether advocating for specific rights, responding to particular needs, or supporting change in adjacent fields — should look for ways to support work that strengthens community resilience and social cohesion. This may require identifying the right language and framing. Doing so will broaden and deepen our ecosystems and strengthen the social fabric.
- Contribute urgently to the deficits in ambitious strategy in local and national government by reinvesting in advocacy, influencing, thought leadership and creative problem solving. This requires supporting dynamic advocacy and more political activity.
- Some donors must support scenario planning, preparedness, and protection strategies to ensure that should trajectories of authoritarian, far right, and other harms gain ground British civil society and grassroots networks are able to operate safely
- Support collaboration and collective infrastructure: no single funder can meet this challenge alone. There is a strong case for pooled funds, aligned strategies, and shared learning mechanisms that enable philanthropy to act at the scale and speed required. Collaboration is not optional in a moment of systemic risk — it is a force multiplier.
- Be willing to fund what is harder to measure but essential to protect: trust, cohesion, and agency are not always captured through short-term metrics, yet they are critical protective factors.