

ABORTION IN UK

Catholic priest arrested, pro-life prayer becomes a crime in England

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After Isabel Vaughan-Spruce, Father Sean Gough. There's no stopping to the arrests of pro-life supporters who pray near the Robert Clinic abortion facility in Birmingham. And to make things worse, the UK Parliament is close to approving the law that will

criminalise praying for the unborn.

On February 7, Father Sean, a Catholic priest, was arrested and criminally charged for “protesting and engaging in an act that is intimidating to service users” under a [Public Space Protection Order](#) (PSPO). In more practical terms, the local police found the priest guilty of praying silently in his mind outside an abortion facility in Kings Norton, when it was closed. The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) has dropped the charges (for now) against Father Gough, but made clear that they could be reinstated.

Father Sean’s case is analogous to the case of Isabel, the British woman arrested in Birmingham last December 6 for the same crime: praying silently near the Robert Clinic in Birmingham when it was closed. In the case of Isabel Vaughan-Spruce, the charges were unexpectedly discontinued the day before her court hearing on February 1. The CPS concluded “that there was insufficient evidence to provide a realistic prospect of conviction”. But, it also issued a warning that the charges could be renewed in the future pending new evidence. Both cases remain open and unresolved.

But, Isabel Vaughan-Spruce has no intention of leaving the matter suspended indefinitely. She has stated her intention to pursue a verdict on her charges in court. Isabel aims to clear her name and protect other pro-life activists who might run into similar issues in the future. “Many of us need an answer as to whether it’s still lawful to pray silently in our own heads. That’s why I’ll be pursuing a verdict regarding my charges in court,” she said. “It’s vital that I have clarity as to my legal status,” she said in a statement released by her attorneys at the [Alliance Defending Freedom \(ADF\) UK](#).

Isabel’s battle became even more bitter recently as the controversial [Public Order Bill](#) (POB) which would allow buffer zones to be rolled out around every abortion clinic in England and Wales, is close to being approved in the House of Commons. Part 1, Section 10 of the bill specifically targets abortion clinics in order to prevent women being offered choices, practical help or just compassionate support by pro-life supporters and praying.

The passing of additional legislation to marginalise and silence pro-lifers has left many baffled. Laws already exists to protect people from intimidating behaviour. Apart from the [Protection from Harassment Act 1997](#), local councils can decide to put a boundary of 150 metres around a specific location by granting it PSPO status if residents complain of “anti-social behaviour” in their area. This is what happened in Kings Norton in Birmingham, although the claims made by residents’ that activists outside the abortion clinic were a nuisance to the local community, have never been substantiated.

While evidence from 40 Days for Life Birmingham shows pro-life volunteers themselves being physically abused, spat at, threatened and sworn at by locals (not by those using the abortion centre) resulting in the police having to get involved and one man having to do “restorative justice” i.e. write a letter of apology to the pro-life volunteer for the physical assault.

The Public Order Bill, presently being debated in the House of Commons, is particularly sinister in its attack on fundamental rights and freedoms. The bill, recently backed with an amendment by the House of Lords, is intended to prevent protests and “anti-social behaviour” but is clearly also an attack on providing vulnerable women an alternative to abortion. If the bill passes as it stands, all abortion clinics will become “safe access zones” and indiscriminately put off limits for pro-life volunteers within a radius of 150 metres. More specifically, Amendment 45 of the bill, contains a clause which will criminalise anyone who acts “with the intent of, or reckless as to whether it has the effect of influencing any person’s decision to access or facilitate the provision of abortion services”.

The chilling introduction of “thought crime” in UK criminal law, gives the police and authorised officers extensive additional powers to crackdown on behaviour which is causing ‘annoyance, harassment, alarm or distress’. As it remains unclear which specific behaviours violate the law, they also enjoy a significant margin of interpretation.

It is particularly insidious, the bill lists praying under the heading “protest” as a criminal activity in a buffer zone. But, as the recent cases of Isabel and Father Sean highlight, there are significant **pit falls in a law** that fails to be specific on when prayer becomes crime. On one hand, the police could be accused of not upholding the law if they fail to arrest people praying, on the other, the CPS is at a loose end to enforce charges because of a lack of substantial evidence.

Moreover, anyone condemned could be left bankrupt in addition to a criminal record against their name. According to the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children, offenders face unlimited fines. If this is to be considered an improvement to the original intention to jail people for up to two years, then unlimited fines for saying an Our Father for an unborn baby, is arguably a disproportionate penalty for such a low threshold of criminal activity.

The danger of this law was raised by Lord Jackson during a debate in the House of Lords. Referring to the cases of Vaughan-Spruce along with Adam Smith-Connor detained last November in Bournemouth and fined £100 for remembering his aborted

son in prayer, their arrest, he said, "took people by surprise, since they were not aware that silent prayer had become criminalised in this country". He added, "these cases further highlight the dangers to free expression and belief inherent in buffer zones. They demonstrate how quickly the position could be that the specific act that turns someone into a criminal is whether they had particular thoughts in their head while in a buffer zone area".