

RIGHT TO LIFE

England, conviction of pro-life activist increases tensions with US

LIFE AND BIOETHICS

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"My conviction has serious implications for the entire Western world." These were the first words of Livia Tossici-Bolt as she left Poole Magistrates' Court on 4 April after being found guilty of breaching a 'buffer zone' around an abortion clinic. The scene is once

again the town of Bournemouth, in south-east England, **where Adam Smith-Connor had been arrested**: at the time for holding a silent prayer, this time it's for displaying two handwritten sheets with the words "Here to talk if you want". But after the recent speech in Munich by **Vice President J.D. Vance, who raised the case of Adam Smith-Connor** to accuse the British government of suppressing freedom, the case could have repercussions on relations between the two countries.

Livia Tossici-Bolt, a 64-year-old dual UK-Italian citizen mother of three, Catholic pro-life campaigner and retired NHS medical scientist is the latest victim of **the "buffer zone" law in England**. Judge Orla Austin who presided over the two day trial, found Dr Tossici-Bolt guilty on two charges: breaching a Public Space Protection Order (PSPO) and "engaging in an act of approval or disapproval, with respect to issues related to abortion services". Dr Tossici-Bolt was given a two-year conditional discharge and ordered to pay more than £9,000 of the £64,000 court costs requested by the prosecution King's Council.

Handing down the sentence, District Judge Orla Austin said of Tossici-Bolt: "She lacks insight that her presence could have a detrimental effect on the women attending the clinic, their associates, staff and members of the public.

"I accept her beliefs were truly held beliefs. Although it's accepted this defendant held pro-life views, it's important to note this case is not about the rights and wrongs about abortion but about whether the defendant was in breach of the PSPO."

In March 2023, Livia was stopped by Bournemouth Council Officers outside the BPAS clinic in Bournemouth, Dorset. They informed Livia that standing within the PSPO legal limit of 150 metres from the clinic holding a sign inviting consensual conversations constituted a form of protest and was therefore a criminal act. She was told to comply with 'buffer zone' regulations and to move outside the area. Tossici-Bolt denied she was breaching the law and kept her place. She also refused a fixed penalty notice of £100 and was prosecuted after she failed to pay the fine. She pleaded innocent to the charge supported by Alliance Defending Freedom International (ADF), an American conservative Christian legal group that campaigns for religious liberties and the right to protest.

"This is a dark day for Great Britain," said Dr Tossici-Bolt as she read a statement outside the court to a crowd of journalists. "I was not protesting nor did I harass or obstruct anyone. All I did was offer consensual conversation in a public place, as is my basic right, and yet this court found me guilty".

"Freedom of expression is in a state of crisis in the UK. What has happened to this country? The US State Department was right to be concerned by my case as it has serious implications for the entire Western world."

"I remain committed to fighting for free speech, not only for my own sake, but for the sake of all my fellow citizens. If we allow this precedent of censorship to stand, nobody's right to freely express themselves is secure."

Adam Smith-Connor, the army veteran mentioned by Vice President Vance as an example of a victim of fundamental rights abuse in the UK, ([see his testimony at a Daily Compass event in 2023](#)) told the *Daily Compass* that he and many others had expected Livia would be convicted. "The same judge in October 2024 convicted me for silently praying, even though I was standing behind a tree hidden from the view of people using the clinic, I was given a two-year conditional discharge and ordered to pay more than £9,000 of the £92,000 court costs the prosecution had requested, just for saying a few prayers to myself", he said.

Smith-Connor, who will have his appeal heard in July, also points out that the order to pay expensive legal costs is a way of circumventing the statutory maximum of £1,000 for a PSPO offence. "It's a deterrent," he says.

Isabel Vaughan-Spruce the first to be arrested for silent prayer in the UK ([see video of Isabel's speech at an event organised by the Daily Compass in 2024](#)) told the *Daily Compass*, "I am deeply saddened that consensual conversation in a public street has today been criminalised in a British court. It's particularly frustrating when our friends in the US have tried to help us see the problems of continuing down this path of censorship but many in authority seem resolute in destroying our nation's freedoms for the sake of their own ideology," she said.

Downing Street said it was vital that women using abortion services can do so "without being subject to harassment or distress" and the right to protest does not "give people the right to harass others". Asked whether there is a problem with free speech in the UK, the No 10 spokesperson said Britain has "a very proud tradition of free speech over many centuries, and we remain proud of it today".

The latter is a clear response to the controversy with the US administration which, in addition to Vance's harsh speech, has taken a direct interest in the case of Livia Tossici-Bolt. First with a statement on X last weekend from the US State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour (DRL), which said "We are monitoring

her case. It is important that the UK respect and protect freedom of expression". And later, with the visit to England of a senior advisor from the same office, Sam Samson, who met with Tossici-Bolt and representatives of the ADF to assess the situation.

Some experts now fear that the British government's intransigence in protecting abortion clinics and the legal proceedings against Livia Tossici-Bolt could worsen already tense relations between the United Kingdom and the United States and, more importantly for London, have a negative impact on trade negotiations with the United States. According to an article in the *Telegraph* newspaper, "a US source even suggested that the row could derail tariff talks with Britain, arguing that there can be 'no free trade without free speech'.