

UNITED KINGDOM

Lineker-BBC dispute, freedom in the West is a farce

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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If there is an example that demonstrates how false the cry for freedom is and the opposition to censorship so often heralded in the West, it is what happened recently in the United Kingdom in the Lineker-BBC dispute. Gary Lineker, a former football

champion, has been one of the most popular commentators and sports presenters since the mid-1990s: for many years he has hosted the *Match of the Day* programme, broadcast on Saturday evenings by the public service BBC. And of course, to crown his long career, he is the highest paid presenter on British TV, taking home approximately 1,300,000 pounds a year.

Lineker isn't just a TV personality with a past as a sports champion, he has also become a social media champion, where he intervenes and gives his opinions on everything, especially on social and political issues. On Twitter, his favourite social network, he now has more than six million followers and the controversies of the last few days will certainly have boosted numbers. Thus Lineker has also become the influencer voice of the liberal and progressive left.

And now we come to the present day: as we know, last week the British government announced the draft law which, in order to stop the arrival of irregular immigrants from across the English Channel, provides for the immediate expulsion of illegal immigrants and the impossibility for them to apply for asylum. A decision obviously opposed by the opposition and some non-governmental organisations, and Lineker could not fail to take the field: first a very indignant tweet referred to the Minister of the Interior Suella Braverman; then, in response to a follower, **the reply that sent the BBC into a tailspin:** "... "This is just an immeasurably cruel policy directed at the most vulnerable people in language that is not dissimilar to that used by Germany in the 30s".

A long time has passed since then but any comparison with Nazism is still a very sensitive issue, and the management of the BBC, in the name of impartiality, immediately suspended Lineker "until an agreed and clear position on his use of social media" had been reached with the management. Needless to say, a revolt broke out against the management of the BBC, accused of censorship, of an attack on freedom of speech, and the first to rebel were his colleagues from Match of the Day and BBC Sport: on Saturday evening the broadcast took place in reduced form, without conductors, with only the highlights devoid of commentary on the day's matches of the championship round. And, of course, the BBC backtracked by immediately readmitting Lineker without the required social media agreement and without the tweet being withdrawn. Now it is some conservative deputies who are protesting the BBC giving way and the consequences this entails, not least the great additional power gained by Lineker in acting as the "spokesman" of the liberal opposition to the government. But they are reactions that will not have any follow-up.

The case lends itself very well to reflection both on the role of social media in directing politics and on the limit to freedom of expression which, by virtue of one's role, can be applied to a worker outside the workplace.

Certainly an interesting topic, but here we are concerned with another reflection. Because precisely in the same days in which the measure against irregular immigration was announced, the House of Commons definitively **approved the law on public order** (Public Order Bill, POB) which, among other things, creates buffer zones around abortion clinics where it is even forbidden to pray alone in silence or to speak consensually (that is, without stopping people to give out flyers or otherwise against their will). **We have already talked about the police stops** that were carried out precisely for the application of these measures which, until now, were at the discretion of the municipal authorities. The latest on March 6, the day before the approval of the law: Isabel Vaughan-Spruce, who had **already been arrested** and then acquitted in court only a few weeks earlier for the same reason, had to spend several hours in the police station for having stopped in silence in front of an abortion clinic in Birmingham: being well known, some locals "perceived" her presence as a protest and for this she had to be sanctioned.

In practice, a law has been passed in the United Kingdom that introduces psycho-crime: it allows the police to arrest people on the basis of what others perceive their thoughts to be; a law that explicitly considers prayer a form of protest to be sanctioned. And, apart from some interventions by deputies in the House of Commons, no one complained; let alone public protests in favour of freedom of thought and expression and religious freedom. For Isabel and for many others who will have to pay in person for their commitment to truth and to life, there is no Lineker to say a word.

In summary: while the great Lineker drama was broadcast in newspapers, on TV and websites which ended with the "good guy" - the famous sports host - defeating the bad guy - the BBC - so as to be able to celebrate the victory of freedom, in the real world freedom was taken away from those who peacefully wanted to help save the lives of children and help women in difficulty.

Let's take this a step further: if by strange coincidence, Gary Lineker had been aware of the seriousness of the Public Order Bill and the war against pro-life and had compared this law to certain provisions of Nazism, do you think perhaps he would have received the same solidarity? Of course not, he would not only have been suspended pending clarification, but fired on the spot and left to public ridicule. And no one would come to his rescue. Because freedom of speech exists only for what Power decides, just

like in any totalitarian regime.