

UNITED KINGDOM

Prayer against abortion, British police pay compensation for wrongful arrest

LIFE AND BIOETHICS

21_08_2024

**Patricia
Gooding-
Williams**



£13,000 and an apology. This is the pay out West Midlands Police agreed to award **Isabel Vaughan Spruce** last August 19, for wrongfully arresting and imprisoning her twice. Her presumed crime entailed standing outside an abortion clinic in Birmingham

that was closed at the time and thinking silently of God, in 2022 and again in 2023.

The agreement was reached in an out of court settlement and therefore has no legal bearing on similar cases awaiting trial, like that of **Adam Smith-Connor** in September also accused of violating a Public Space Protection Order (PSPO) where all expressions of “approval or disapproval with respect to issues related to abortion services, by any means” are banned.

Ms Vaughan Spruce, who is the director of anti-abortion group March for Life UK, is rightly celebrating the “great news”. For her, the agreement is an important victory which underscores a fundamental principle, “pro-life supporters have rights in the UK” which the police have to respect, she told the *Daily Compass* in an exclusive phone call yesterday. Isabel did not reveal what she might do with the generous sum she has received from West Midlands Police but to all accounts it is an implicit admission mistakes were made and she was due compensation.

Isabel, who will be a special guest at the *Daily Compass* annual conference on September 28 at Shalom in Palazzolo near Bergamo in Italy, had sued the West Midlands Police for two wrongful arrests and false imprisonments; assault and battery in relation to an intrusive search of her person; and for a breach of her human rights both in respect to the arrests, and to the onerous bail conditions imposed on her. The videos of those disproportionately heavy-handed arrests, public body and hair searches by the police, obviously intended to intimidate and discourage Isabel and any like-minded supporters from repeating such behaviour, circulated the globe, made world headlines and alarmed public opinion at home and abroad.

Nonetheless, the out of court settlement does not completely satisfy everyone:

Some pro-life supporters were hoping the case would go to court and result in a ruling which would at least confirm their right to be physically present outside abortion facilities free of “police harassment”. For others, it has let West Midlands Police off the hook permitting them to avoid a potentially tricky protracted court case with critical media coverage which could give weight to accusations the police force practices two-tier policing. Certainly, this “convenient” solution permits West Midlands Police to acquiesce Isabel’s claim without having to officially explain or justify why they agreed to pay her, what they did wrong or how the sum was calculated. But, it will take much more than an out of court settlement and a sum of money to unstick the label, “thought police”, used by some press and members of the public to describe the behaviour of the British police officers involved in Isabel’s arrest.

But, most significantly, news of the agreement has come at a critical time in the UK when the very democratic rights of those who defend life and the democratic rights of women to be informed of all alternative choices to abortion, are being seriously curtailed. According to reports from the Home office a few days ago, Keir Starmer, the new Labour Prime minister, wants to enforce the Public Order Bill (POB) voted in 2023 by a Parliamentary majority and presently on hold. This will roll out “buffer zones” banning any form of pro-life support including prayer within a radius of 150 metres of every abortion facility in England and Wales.

The public scandal of members of the public being questioned, searched, arrested, locked-up or fined and taken to court for discreetly praying in silence near an abortion clinic had provoked the previous Conservative government to delay applying the POB “buffer zones” clause until clear guidelines had been produced for the police to follow. Two separate videos of Adam Smith-Connor being stopped and questioned provided proof that the PSPO buffer zone law was being enforced unequally and unfairly. In the first video recorded last November 2019, police officers in Bournemouth could be heard reassuring Adam, “this is England and that what you are doing is lawful” [praying silently in the vicinity of an abortion clinic]. Whereas in the second video, recorded only seven days later in the same location, local Council Officers are heard informing Adam he could not pray in silence and handing him a statutory fine.

The root of the problem lies in the unclear legal language used in the clause on “buffer zones” which because of its vagueness is excessively open to interpretation. Whereas the guidelines aimed at resolving the issue and which were in their final stages were set aside when the previous Conservative Prime minister Rishi Sunak called a general election.

Thus, when Isabel went to court in Birmingham in February 2023, the judge threw the case out for lack of evidence and fully acquitted her of all charges. Yet, when Adam Smith-Connor went to Poole Magistrates’ court, the judge confirmed the trial should proceed on the basis of his silent thoughts. And in the present political situation, the outcome of that trial is unpredictable.

But, the best is yet to come. The general expectation, if Starmer has his way, is that the law will be enforced without guidelines and without the necessary signage to indicate to members of the public they have just entered the 150metre exclusion zone where illegal criminal activity open to prosecution includes thinking about God, thinking abortion kills babies or perhaps wearing a T-shirt which could be interpreted as being

pro-life. Above all, it forces the police into a guessing game as to what people might be thinking or why they might pause for moment along the street and whether they should ask them because otherwise they have no idea what they are doing or thinking about.

In this way, potential victims convict themselves by admission. Moreover, without signage how will officers have the certainty where the 150metre perimeter starts and stops and if contested will they carry tape measures to check they are right so they can legitimately issue a ticket for violations? The mind boggles at the thought how British life and culture will be effected once this mine field is detonated by the unleashing of this anti-democratic controversial law.