

LIFE

United Kingdom: silent prayer becomes thought crime

LIFE AND BIOETHICS

09_03_2023

**Patricia
Gooding-
Williams**



UK citizens went to their beds last Tuesday March 7, a step closer to living in a police state. This is the date the controversial Public Order Bill (POB) was voted into law by a clear majority in the House of Commons. The aim of the Bill was to provide the police

with greater powers to respond to disruptive protests. But, abortionist politicians hijacked the Bill to suppress the pro-life movement as well. For the first time in modern British history, legislation has passed that introduces a bizarre new “thought crime” in designated areas in England and Wales near abortion facilities called “buffer zones”. In these areas private thoughts and consensual conversation on abortion are illegal.

According to the UK government, existing legislation and police powers needed bolstering to deal with the “guerrilla tactics” used in recent protests. Groups such as [Just Stop Oil](#), Insulate Britain and Extinction Rebellion had “cost millions in tax-payers money and prevented hundreds of hard-working people from getting to their jobs”, states a [government fact sheet on the POB](#). This prompted the introduction of new offences: locking-on, obstructing major transport works, interference with key national infrastructure, tunnelling. And preventative measures: introduction of Serious Disruption Prevention Order (SDPO), increase in police powers and of the Secretary of State, extending stop and search powers, the introduction of buffer zones.

While public order is a government priority, the connections that have been made between violent protests and the peaceful support pro-life volunteers offer outside abortion facilities is arguably forced. Buffer zones establish a circumference of 150m around all abortion facilities and ban behaviours which could be defined as “influencing and interference”. Abortion related conversations even if they are consensual (that is, without stopping people to give out flyers or otherwise against their will) or silent prayer are now punishable with fines that range between £100 and £1,000 and offenders are considered criminals.

Clause 10 of the POB which introduces buffer zones was hotly debated in both Houses of Parliament and by members on both sides of the debate. In the Lords, Baroness Claire Fox argued that opposing such censorship didn’t require holding pro-life views. She believes women should have “maximum access to the right to abortion”. Lady Fox also stated “A woman who may not be sure and is still thinking about it, even as she goes in for a termination, might be given a leaflet and then says in her own defence, ‘I’ve changed my mind, there may be an option of getting some practical support for pregnancy’. Whatever the reason is, that is their choice. The point is that I’m pro-choice. I do not want us to undermine women’s agency in our enthusiasm to support laws presented as protecting women”. The Lords sent the Bill back to the Commons with numerous amendments recommended for debate.

In the final debate in the Commons, Sir John Hayes, Member for South Holland and The Deepings, emphasised, “This is about freedom – it’s not about the purpose of

freedom or the location of it. It's about the ability to think, and speak, and pray freely," he explained.

Whereas, Conservative MP Andrew Lewer (Northampton South) attempted to alleviate the Bill's damage by proposing an amendment to protect silent prayer and consensual conversation. "Police shouldn't be asking 'What are you thinking about?!'", said Lewer. Speaking in Parliament he continued, "Censorship of this sort is a notoriously slippery slope. It might not be your thoughts that are criminalised today, but I think we should all be careful not to open the door to that tomorrow about some other opinions that people may hold about something else,". The point was missed. His amendment was squashed in a free vote by 116 to 299.

Of course, it is easy to support free speech when everyone agrees with what's being said. But, it's when conversation is difficult and divisive that a true democracy is put to the test. Moreover, one wonders if a democratic government should be legislating to prevent conversations between people. Parliament has taken on itself to decide for women what information they are allowed to hear, where and from whom. It has also awarded the police sweeping powers to convict people for their thoughts and speech in these censorship zones which in any other area of the country would be completely legitimate.

The vote came just a day after Isabel Vaughan-Spruce, a Catholic and Co-Director of [March for Life UK](#), was arrested for the second time for praying silently near the BPAS Robert Clinic in Kings Norton, Birmingham under a Public Spaces Protection Order. The arrest, attended by six police officers, comes three weeks after Ms Vaughan-Spruce was [acquitted by Birmingham Magistrates' Court](#) together with [Fr Sean Gough](#), a Wolverhampton priest who had also prayed silently outside the same clinic and held up a sign reading "Praying for the Freedom of Speech". From now on, British citizens will have to pay a "tax" if they want to pray silently in these "buffer zones".

Ironically, on International Women's Day this year in the UK, women are less free. Often the decision to have an abortion is the surface manifestation of a much deeper problem. A [2022 poll commissioned by the BBC](#) showed that 15 per cent of women aged 18 – 44 said they had felt under pressure to abort against their will. 2021 had the highest abortion figures ever and yet rather than offering women more opportunities to look at alternatives Parliament has adopted measures to clamp down on those who help women in some of the most challenging situations.

The international debate opened by the POB has provoked a number of alarmed

reactions. Five UN [Special Rapporteurs](#) have raised grave concerns that the Bill curtails human rights including the [Commissioner for Human Rights](#) of the council of Europe. [Amnesty International](#) made comparisons to repressive policies in Russia and Belarus whereas a group of [Hongkongers](#) likened the measures to those used against the democracy protests in Hong Kong. [Human Rights Watch](#) warned that the UK was in danger of being added to its global list of human rights abusers.

Paradoxically, the powers conceded by the POB are so influential, they not only stifle the modest pro-life support that still exists in the UK, they also torpedo the democratic foundations that once made Britain Great: religious freedom, freedom of movement, freedom of speech and freedom to protest peacefully.