

British government defeats amendment to gay-hate-crimes

LONDON – The British government has defeated an attempt to amend a gay-hate-crimes bill that the Catholic Church claims will prohibit Christians from expressing their beliefs about marriage and family life.

The proposed amendment to the Criminal Justice and Immigration Bill was aimed at making sure Christians are not prosecuted simply for criticizing homosexual lifestyles. It was drafted with the help of the Department for Christian Responsibility and Citizenship of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales and the Church of England's Mission and Public Affairs Council.

But the government ensured its failure by instructing ruling Labor Party members of Parliament to vote against the amendment as the bill passed through its final stages in the House of Commons Jan. 9.

The proposed law against incitement to hatred of homosexuals carries a maximum penalty of seven years in jail – a longer sentence than the five years typically handed down to a rapist. The bill must pass through the House of Lords, Britain's second political chamber, before it becomes law.

The proposed amendment was introduced by Jim Dobbin, a Catholic Labor Party legislator, who said Catholic and Anglican leaders believed it would be impossible for Christianity to be practiced and taught without convictions on marriage and the family being widely and freely discussed within the churches and wider society.

He said church leaders feared that the proposals would “impinge on their basic freedom to practice their religion.”

“We cannot ignore such a serious concern from two important national religious institutions,” Dobbin said during the debate.

He said he could list “many occasions on which leading church people have been visited, telephoned or placed under scrutiny by the police for sermons that they have

given in their churches.”

“That is what people are worried about,” Dobbin added. He said Catholic Archbishop Mario Conti of Glasgow, Scotland, “was reported to the police in 2006 for a sermon in which he asserted that civil partnerships undermined marriage.”

Dobbin said that while government ministers may view the amendment as unnecessary, “the churches whose members and leaders may be on the receiving end of malicious complaints under the new law do not agree.”

Dominic Grieve, a Conservative Party legislator, said there was “ample evidence that the lack of a saving clause ... will cause problems, because the public authorities and the police misinterpret what the law says.”

But speaking on behalf of the government, Maria Eagle, undersecretary of state for justice, told the House of Commons that the legislation concerned only “ threatening words or behavior intended to incite hatred against a group of people on the basis of their sexuality.”

“That is very narrow and very clear,” she said, adding that “proper guidance and training” would remedy overzealous policing.

“Those matters will be dealt with once the law is passed,” Eagle said.

The proposed law is considered so severe that it has drawn criticism even from within Britain’s gay community, with well-known actors, journalists and gay rights campaigners publicly opposing it.

In November, Catholic and Anglican churches sent a joint memorandum to the Public Bill Committee of the House of Commons in which they complained of police harassment under existing legislation.

Those already visited by police after expressing their views on homosexuality include a Catholic journalist, Lynette Burrows, who was interviewed by officers in 2005 after she questioned the rights of gays to adopt children.

In 2006, police investigated Sir Iqbal Sacranie, then head of the Muslim Council of

Britain, after he described homosexuality as harmful in a radio interview.

The same year, police officers spent 80 minutes questioning Joe and Helen Roberts, a retired couple from Fleetwood, England, in their home after they complained to their local authority about its promotion of civil partnership ceremonies and the distribution of gay rights leaflets in public buildings. The couple later won 10,000 pounds (US\$19,500) in compensation and an apology from Wyre Borough Council.

Neil Addison, the lawyer who represented the couple, told Catholic News Service Jan. 8 that “the new law will give a green light to that form of police intimidation.”

“Increasingly, hate-crime laws are being used to harass and intimidate ordinary people who dare to disagree with PC (politically correct) orthodoxy,” he said.