

Christian Street Preachers Could Be Gagged by 'Antisocial Behavior' Law

Christian street preachers and others could be caught by new sweeping powers designed to combat antisocial behavior, a senior lawyer and campaign group have warned.

Lord Macdonald, the former chief prosecutor in the U.K., has written a strongly worded legal opinion on the issue, saying the proposal's safeguards are "shockingly low."

And an alliance of groups, which includes the Christian Institute and civil liberty organizations, cautioned that the powers will not deter people from nuisance behavior.

Under clause 1 of the new antisocial behavior bill, antisocial behavior orders would be replaced by injunctions to prevent nuisance and annoyance (IPNAs).

IPNAs are designed to be easier to obtain by the authorities and also require a lower threshold of evidence.

But Lord Macdonald says the proposals are extremely broad and could result in "serious and unforeseeable interferences in individual rights, to the greater public detriment."

He says, "Of course political demonstrations, street performers and corner preachers may be 'annoying' to some—they may even, from time to time, be a 'nuisance.'"

But he says there is a "danger" that the bill "potentially empowers state interference" against such people and barely acknowledges their ability to "exercise core rights without undue interference."

Simon Calvert, director of the Reform Clause 1 campaign group,

which is opposing the plans, says it is a “crazy law.”

“It will not deter thugs and hooligans who are normally already breaking lots of other laws anyway,” Calvert says.

He adds, “It is chilling that there is a complete absence of safeguards and any clear definition of what is deemed to be annoying.

“What this means in practice is that people going about their ordinary business, such as charity collectors, protestors, carol singers, street pastors—even people simply expressing strong opinions in public—could be classed as annoying and hauled before the courts.

“I am sure this was not the intention of the government, but this legislation was badly conceived, is badly written and will stop many reasonable and hitherto lawful activities.”

Calvert also noted the government had only recently bowed to pressure and reformed another law—section 5 of the Public Order Act—after concerns were raised about free speech.

The antisocial behavior, crime and policing bill is currently before the House of Lords for consideration.