

Could This Be the Last Christmas for Free Speech?

The “writing could be on the wall” for free speech if Extremism Disruption Orders (EDOs) are introduced next year, The Christian Institute and the National Secular Society (NSS) have warned.

In a rare joint statement, Institute Director Colin Hart and the Executive Director of the NSS Keith Porteous Wood highlighted the dangers of introducing overly broad legislation using vague definitions.

They warned that the plans could inadvertently turn millions of ordinary citizens into potential “extremists” virtually overnight.

The statement reads: “The vital importance of free speech is an issue on which both our organizations have always agreed.

“We have previously been able to see off an attempt to make it illegal to be ‘annoying’ in public. We have prevented prosecutions for mere ‘insults’ by helping to secure changes to Section 5 of the Public Order Act.

“EDOs are as bad as anything we have seen in the past—probably worse. It is another attempt by a government to clamp down on free speech in the guise of combating extremism.

“If they are brought in, the writing may be on the wall for free speech in this country.”

Mr. Hart added: “Every time ministers talk about extremism, they seem to want to go much wider than tackling terrorists and their sympathizers.

“Law-abiding citizens, such as Christians, could be caught by the vague definitions of extremism that get bandied about when

ministers are trying to talk tough.

“Broad-brush counterextremism policies catch ordinary citizens and are actually a waste of resources. They do not make us safer. They make us less safe by distracting the authorities from focusing on genuine threats.”

Mr. Porteous Wood commented: “Political activists, environmental campaigners, as well as groups like ours, could all be branded ‘extremists’ under the government’s massively broad proposals.

“It needs to realize that being socially conservative or socially liberal is not extremism. Advancing a philosophy or challenging a religious opinion is not extremism. Wanting major societal change is not extremism. Promoting unfashionable views or defending minorities is not extremism.

“There are already extensive anti-extremist powers available to the authorities, but they are not being fully used. The law already protects against incitement, harassment and violence.

“EDOs are simply not necessary. The government is yet to identify a single unlawful activity which requires EDOs in order to be addressed.”

Referring to David Cameron’s speech to the National Security Council back in May, Mr. Hart and Mr. Porteous Wood concluded by saying:

“The government should not expect us to sit back being ‘passively tolerant’ of a proposal to label ordinary British citizens as extremists. We believe in obeying the law. In turn, we expect the State to leave us alone. It is high time the government turned the page on its failing EDO proposals.”

The campaign group Defend Free Speech was launched in October to oppose the Government’s plans for EDOs.

The group is supported by The Christian Institute, the

National Secular Society, the Peter Tatchell Foundation, Big Brother Watch, Index on Censorship and Green MP Caroline Lucas.

The website gives up-to-date information about the campaign, and helps people to contact their MP about the proposals.