

POWER TO PROTEST, COMPASSION AND ACTION

By Janet Fenton (2024)

At a time when government action makes the right to peaceful protest particularly necessary it was nonetheless very odd to me to read that John Keenan was equating 'prayer' vigils held outside abortion clinics to the longstanding peace camp at Faslane, on the grounds that 'place' is important for those engaged in protest. Place is certainly important when the place in question is surrounded with razor wire and men with guns. Protest is certainly the appropriate response to government-sponsored injustice.

But do these behaviours actually compare? What is acceptable in making deeply held views clear to legislators? John Keenan is a Scottish Bishop. Like many of us, he has a view that some of the legislation passed by the governments at Westminster or at Holyrood is not compatible with his own morality. So far so good. Many anti nuclear protesters, myself included, go to, or have gone to Faslane Peace Camp, the longest running peace camp in the world, although Bishop Keenan seems not to be aware that it is still there. We also go to other nuclear weapons sites, in part to witness the activities and to understand the reality of the threat that the government makes in our name, and also to note and highlight the military infrastructure and its impact on the natural environment there. Sometimes we act in ways that interrupt or disrupt those activities as a means of removing our consent to the actions being taken. The purpose of the peace camp is not to intimidate anyone and non-violence is a key aspect of actions taken at the nuclear base.

Similarly as Bishop Keenan notes, the notion of place is and has been important to people protesting an inhumane asylum system. Only standing visibly alongside those directly affected is it possible to highlight their existence and their situation. Sometimes these behaviours involve risking arrest and a charge of (most usually) breach of the peace. Breach of the peace is legally defined as behaviour that is likely to put people in a state of cause fear and alarm, and an acquittal can be usually be assured if one can prove that this was neither the outcome nor the likelihood arising from the action taken in blockading a gate or sitting down in someone's way. Placards and banners are often included in actions and may carry challenging messages for governments or military leaders, so if that is acceptable, is it 'the same' as action designed to have an intimidating effect directly on pregnant women and those caring for them?

John Keenan is not a doctor or someone who has any training as a health care professional but he holds very strong views on abortion, believing that the legislation that made it legal more than 50 years ago is a tragedy and the cause of the greatest dereliction of human rights ever, which is clear from videos on Youtube of the bishop expressing himself at the 2021 March for Life anti abortion rally in Parliament Square in London. His moral authority may extend to those who share his view of abortion but the behaviour of those who are putting clinic staff in a state of alarm and troubled women in a state of fear seem to me to be wholly beyond his remit. Women who have already been given access to Bishop Keenan's views should not have to run the gamut of the placards and the slogans and moral indignation at this level.

Protestors at Faslane and Dungavel are not offering verbal and emotional violence to those they disagree with and would not be allowed by the state to do so. There is cause for concern when protest does not recognise the humanity and even vulnerability of those who are being challenged, and chanting and rage lead to threatening and violent behaviour that provides the excuse needed to shut down the voices for compassion and peace.