

The hole St Paul's has dig itself into

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I spoke at #occupylondon this morning outside St Paul's Cathedral.

I, and my family, had a great time there. It was a relaxed morning. You could not have asked for a nicer autumn morning in London and I had a great audience for what I found to be an exciting exchange of ideas that over-ran its schedule until the BBC asked me to go and do a live broadcast.

Throughout I emphasised what those campaigning can demand. I believe in practical, pragmatic, deliverable politics. And I believe there is a very great deal that those with empathic concern for the people of this country can demand. I'll come back to some of those issues soon, but I have to touch on an issue that vexed me throughout last week and now utterly perplexes me, and that is the way in which St Paul's have managed this situation.

For all those saying St Paul's was not the target of this protest I say you're quite right: it wasn't, and it isn't. The London Stock Exchange was, and rightly so. And the fact that the free right to walk the pavements of London around the Stock Exchange has been suspended is sure sign of how effective that targeting has been. For those in doubt, the camp is 200 metres or so from the LSX: it just so happens that St Paul's is even closer.

But, once camp was made where it is and not as planned 100 metres away in Paternoster Square St Paul's came into the frame. I've said, and I'll repeat it: St Paul's had only one duty in this situation and that was to welcome the protest and to open its doors as a place of sanctuary to all those undertaking it. The Christian teaching is explicit: if the church is to fulfill its duty to the poor then that is what it must do.

But of course, after one rather ambiguous moment on the first day of the protest when Giles Fraser appeared to tell the police to back off the Cathedral has made a PR disaster out of the situation it has created for itself.

Today was perfect example of this. The Cathedral is [supposedly closed](#) because of the health and safety concerns they have that supposedly have left them with no choice

but close the cathedral on legal grounds.

Well, let's be clear, the entrances and exits to the Cathedral were wide and clear this morning. Thousands could have gone in, and out, without problem.

And let's also be clear, every business with premises around the Cathedral likely to have been open on a Sunday morning was open. Not one seemed to be concerned at the health and safety risk. None were turning people away. Finding a loo was easy - if you bought a coffee. And there were plenty of places selling it.

You have to ask the simple question - how come the Cathedral had been advised to close when M&S, Starbucks, Pizza Express and many others were open? What was the difference? All these are trading in close proximity without any apparent concern.

The one thing that can safely be concluded is that Giles Fraser, Canon of the Cathedral, was right yesterday when he said yesterday:

Those who are claiming the decision to close the cathedral has been made for commercial reasons are talking complete nonsense.

Of course that's nonsense. No one has said they've closed for commercial reasons. And candidly they are simply not telling the truth when they say they have shut for health and safety reasons - a claim that lacks any hint of credibility, at all. They're shut for one reason and one reason only, and that is politics. No other explanation is possible.

The press suggestion tonight that:

Officials from St Paul's Cathedral and the wider City district are considering legal action to force protesters to remove a camp set up outside the church more than a week ago, following an impasse between the two sides.

There is no impasse: people are exercising their right to protest. That's fundamental to democracy. When you deny the right to protest, to assemble, to deliver your message then you challenge democracy itself.

Here is nothing at this moment more profoundly political that the Cathedral could do. If they take this action they make clear on whose side they are. Giles Fraser will be shown to be a hypocrite when he said yesterday:

I remain firmly supportive of the right of people peacefully to protest. But given the strong advice that we have received that the camp is making the cathedral and its occupants unsafe then this right has to be balanced against other rights and responsibilities too. The Christian gospel is profoundly committed to the needs of the poor and the dispossessed. Financial justice is a gospel imperative.

And then he sides with the greatest oppressor of the people of this country (the City of

London) to suppress that right to protest peacefully in a way that cannot in any way possible be threatening to his Cathedral, and which in no possible way justifies the suspension of Christian worship in his church? It is simply impossible for his comment to have any credibility in that context.

So, the only possible interpretation of the action of the Cathedral is that it is political. This, incidentally, is unsurprising. The Cathedral's Dean is [Graeme Knowles](#). He was formerly [Bishop of Sodor and Man](#) - and yes that does mean the Isle of Man where I can find no record of his opposing its tax haven activity and where he did sit in the Tynwald and is not recorded as opposing the tax abuse that legislature facilitates. No wonder he was an ideal candidate for the post of Dean of St Paul's - and no wonder he appears to feel so comfortable with the mechanisms of financial exclusion and abuse promoted by so many of his near neighbours, many of whom appear on his list of sponsors.

So yes, let's be clear: I am suggesting that the only plausible explanation for St Paul's acting as it is must be that it is acting in association with the City of London to close down this demonstration. Nothing could be more profoundly political. It's moving onto very dangerous ground. Not least because it is not at all clear that for all the risk that action to suppress democratic freedom by the church will entail that they will actually win.

So let's look at the hole the church is digging. It's on the one hand shut on wholly spurious grounds and how it can now reopen is hard to say. When you spin a yarn as big as that one how on earth do you justify reopening, even though all those around you never apparently saw the threat in the first place? It's almost impossible for the Dean to reopen the cathedral now without looking very stupid so long as the camp stays.

And to get themselves out of this mess of their own making they have to go to court to evict people from land they do not own; whose ownership is unknown, and where there is no sign at all of any breach of the peace occurring.

And there are those who say #occupylondon has no apparent aims? Well it has so far made very clear that St Paul's and the City are very definitely on the back foot, panicking and out of control in their desire to oppress the ordinary people of this country and their democratic rights.

You're in trouble Dean.

Stop digging.