

IN THE HIGH COURT OF JUSTICE
QUEEN'S BENCH DIVISION
(MEDIA AND COMMUNICATIONS LIST)

CLAIM NO: QB-2016-003371
(PREVIOUSLY HQ16X03656)

B E T W E E N

DR SALMAN BUTT

Claimant

-and-

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR THE HOME DEPARTMENT

Defendant

STATEMENT IN OPEN COURT

Hugh Tomlinson QC

~~Lorna Skinner~~ for the Claimant:

1. My Lord, I appear on behalf of the Claimant and Aidan Eardley appears on behalf of the Defendant.
2. The Claimant, Dr Salman Butt is a British citizen and a practising Muslim. He has a degree in Biochemistry and also holds a PhD from Imperial College London, obtained in 2012. He is the Chief Editor of Islam21C, a publicly accessible website which describes itself as 'Articulating Islam in the 21st Century'. Islam21C hosts articles written by the Claimant and others and covers issues ranging from timetable for prayer and fasting to politics.
3. The Claimant supports the values of democracy, the rule of law, liberty and respect and tolerance of other faiths and beliefs. He opposes terrorist groups like ISIS or Al Qaeda or any other terrorist group.
4. On 17 September 2015 the Defendant published a press release entitled '*PM's Extremism Taskforce: tackling extremism in universities and colleges top of the agenda*'. The press release concerned government measures to stop extremists from radicalising students on campus, known as the *Prevent* Duty Guidance. It alleged that Dr Butt was one such extremist hate preacher who legitimises terrorism and from whose poisonous and pernicious influence students should be protected.

5. This was a very serious allegation to make and it was and remains completely false. Dr Butt is not and has never been an extremist hate preacher. He is opposed in the strongest possible terms to all criminal violence, and is deeply offended by the suggestion that his speeches legitimise terrorism or that students should be protected from what he says.
6. The publication of these false and defamatory allegations by the Defendant has caused Dr Butt and his family very great distress, anxiety and damage to his reputation. He was particularly upset that these allegations had appeared in a formal government document that was issued for the information of the press and that it was published without any prior warning being given to him, and without providing him with any opportunity to respond. The first Dr Butt knew of the press release was when its contents were widely republished in the UK media, including the allegations it made about him
7. Dr Butt therefore issued these proceedings for damages for libel and breaches of the Data Protection Act.
8. The damage and upset caused to Dr Butt was made significantly worse by the following:
 - a. First, the Government refused to remove the press release from the internet, with the result that Google searches against his name would bring up results containing the Government's very serious allegations against him. As a result the accusations have continued to be repeated by other publications.
 - b. Second, that the Government refused to remove the press release despite the facts that it did not seek to defend its contents as true, or even that they were published in the public interest. Its sole defence to Dr Butt's libel claim was "honest opinion".
 - c. Third, that, as Dr Butt learned through the proceedings, the Government had not actually intended either to include his name in the press release or to make the very serious allegations it did about him at all. His name was included through oversight and the Government did not intend to allege that he was an "extremist hate speaker" at all. Nevertheless, it refused to remove the press release from the internet for 5 years and defended this claim, adding to Dr Butt's distress.
9. Dr Butt, is pleased that the Government has now finally agreed to apologise and to join in the making of this Statement in Open Court in order to assist him to repair the harm it has caused him. The Government has also paid him compensation for the purposes of vindicating his reputation and compensating him for the harm done to it, and for the distress caused to him. It has also agreed, finally, to remove the press release from circulation, and to pay Dr Butt's legal costs.

Aidan Eardley for the Defendant

10. My Lord, on behalf of the Defendant I confirm that the Government accepts that it was wholly false to allege that Dr Butt is an extremist hate preacher who legitimises terrorism and therefore someone from whose influence students should be protected". It is sorry for the harm caused to him and in particular for the fact that the allegation was made and maintained for so long.
11. I confirm that the Secretary of State has agreed to join in this Statement in Open Court to publicly apologise to Dr Butt; to pay him compensation and his legal costs; the Government has withdrawn Dr Butt's name from the press release.

12. My Lord, given the public apology and other steps undertaken by the Secretary of State the Claimant is content to let this matter rest.

Dated: 18 August 2021

Approved by Mrs Justice Stacey

Dated: 19 August 2021