

The story of Cerie Bullivant

(Advisory note: Cerie's first name is pronounced Kerry)

It all started when I decided to travel to Syria. I was going to study Arabic and I wanted to work with orphans over there. I was stopped by the police at Heathrow airport and questioned for 9 hours. I was held under section 5 of the terrorism act which means that the officers didn't need to give a reason and it's a criminal offence not to answer their questions. They also took five sets of my fingerprints. They asked me all kinds of questions, everything you could imagine; from what school I attended to who my friends are and information about my grandparents. This went on for a long time but finally the police said I was free to go and showed me to what they told me was a back door exit. Instead it lead me into another room where there was another officer, this time from MI5. She told me that they had intelligence from Syria that had I travelled there the Syrians were planning to detain and probably torture me. She asked me the same questions the police had asked me and also asked whether I knew that Syria was 'forwarding post'. She suggested that I be sensible about where I chose to travel too. I have never broken the law, never had any involvement with the police and I understand that these are frightening times and that those who are in charge have to be cautious. After the interview I was told I was free to go but they kept my passport for a month.

In the 3 years since this began, this was the only time I was ever questioned by the authorities about terrorism.

I was still determined to go and do something worthwhile so once my passport was returned I took the MI5 agent's advice and arranged to go somewhere that wouldn't raise suspicion. I had a friend in Bangladesh, who would arrange for me to help out in an orphanage and also to pursue my Arabic lessons. Two weeks before I was due to travel, MI5 called my friend's mother and asked whether she knew that I was a terrorist and that she shouldn't let me travel. Well, my friend's mother freaked out and that was that – no trip to Bangladesh. One week later I was under a control order.

Once I was under a control order my life changed beyond recognition. Friends turned against me and people were afraid. I was losing any network of support - The Muslim community is so afraid – they don't want to draw anymore attention so they keep their head down. The control order grew more and more restrictive – it began with forced residence, no travelling and daily signing in at a police station and ended up with tagging, curfews, no studying and forced unemployment.

It became impossible to live an ordinary life. As more and more restrictions and conditions were added, normal activities like working and studying became impossible. Not only did inflexibility of the hour that was set for the daily signing

in make it difficult – between noon and 1pm – but any places of work or study had to be vetted by the Home Office. What employer is going to take the risk of hiring someone on a control order! Your life is no longer your own – you can't plan anything. Another condition was that the police could enter my home at anytime and this happened every couple of weeks or so. They would confiscate all kinds of things – once they even confiscated some passport photographs taken when I was 14. They thought I might use them to gain a fake passport.

The control order was based on secret evidence that neither I nor my lawyer ever saw. The only explanation I had was the reason on the control order – that I was 'a threat to troops abroad'. If the situation wasn't so awful it would be funny – my friends joke that I'm too much of a sissy

My mum suffers from mental health problems and I was her primary carer – it's just me and mum in London, she's my only family down here. One of the conditions of the control order was the police searching my registered address – my mum is ill and it would have been so distressing for her to have the police turning over our home so I moved to a flat nearby. I managed to keep the control order hidden from mum for about a year – until the day the police decided to illegally search her home. When she questioned them about what I had done and what their evidence was they told her that they weren't privy to the intelligence against me but they could assure her that it was irrefutable.

It's true I breached the control order a number of times – mostly for signing in late. Everyday I would have to travel to a particular police station to sign in. It wasn't my local police station – it had to be a 24hour station, even though I had a set one hour period to sign in. Often the police station would be busy and I would have to wait in a queue – one of my 'breaches' for being late happened as I was standing in the police station waiting to sign in! On one occasion my mum called me late at night, because of her illness she was having hallucinations and she begged me to come and stay the night. What can you do? It was my mum. I stayed with her that night and the next day the police came to search my flat...of course, I wasn't there, so once again I was arrested for breaching the order. Another time I became really ill with blood poisoning – my cat had scratched me and infection set in. I got really ill, was feverish, sore and couldn't get out of bed. I phoned the police to tell them I couldn't sign in. They asked when I'd be better and I told them I didn't know – after a couple of days they came to my home and arrested me for breaching. I was still ill.

After a year on the control order I tried to study mental health nursing – because of my experience of mum's illness I thought I'd be good at it. However, the CRB check wasn't coming back and the College were suspicious - also the daily sign in time made it impossible for me to attend class on time – and they wouldn't let me change the time I had to sign in. In the end, it was impossible – I had to give it up.

More and more restrictions were added to my control order; I couldn't work, I couldn't study, I couldn't plan anything, friends had turned against me, the pressure had caused my new wife to leave me. I felt isolated. I became really depressed; I was having nightmares, and would wake up in the night terrified, thinking the police were at my door. Some people I knew came to me and said they'd help me get away from all of this – I know now that absconding wasn't the answer, but at the time I was down and desperate.

I absconded for 5 ½ weeks. Without warning the Home Office dropped the anonymity ban and suddenly my face was everywhere, headlines screamed that I was one of the most dangerous people in the country. My name was mentioned in parliament with the Home Secretary at the time talking of derogating from the ECHR – all because of me! I couldn't believe it – I'm just an ordinary guy from east London. I realised that running away wasn't solving anything; I saw that the press were camping outside my mum's house - it was affecting my friends and family and was causing such trouble. It was time to face up to my situation. I called my lawyer and said I was ready to turn myself in.

It was the Saturday that my lawyer called the police and said that I had returned and was ready to face the consequences. I sat with them as they called the police. My lawyer put down the phone, looking baffled 'the police said you can turn yourself in on Monday'. Monday! I'd been hearing how I was the most dangerous man in Britain and the police weren't coming to arrest me and sling me in a cell – instead they were giving me the weekend and asking me to turn up unescorted at the beginning of the next working week!

I was then remanded to custody, mostly in Belmarsh but in Wandsworth too. I was waiting for two trials; the criminal case, which would consider the breaches of the control order and the High Court which would consider the control order itself. It is a crime to breach a control order and in December the criminal case would be the first I would face. I had seven counts of breaching – I wanted the court to know the circumstances and tell them how ridiculous the control order was, that there was no evidence, that I'd never been told what I had done wrong. But the criminal trial couldn't discuss this – only the High Court can consider the rights and wrongs of a control order and this wouldn't happen until after the criminal case. This meant that the jury just had to accept that I was a terrorist and that the threat I presented had already been proven beyond doubt. It was impossible – I *had* breached my control order on all the occasions that they said I did, therefore I was guilty – but I didn't feel guilty. I wanted them to know I'd felt I had no choice and how ridiculous and upside down the whole thing was. I pled not guilty.

Impossibly, amazingly, the court found me not guilty. My own little miracle. It didn't stop there a few months later the High Court quashed the control order. The official judgment wasn't handed down until February but we knew in advance that it was going to be quashed. My lawyers asked the Home Office to relax

some of the conditions while we waited for the official judgment – perhaps I could sign in once a week, rather than everyday? Even though they knew the control order was coming to an end, they wouldn't budge. To me, it seemed like pure vindictiveness. The day the judgment was handed down, I was ecstatic – it was over! I couldn't wait for the police to come and remove my tag, so I cut it off and hand delivered it to them myself. Finally, after two years, my life could begin again.

Looking back, I see how naïve I was. There was no way my life would return to normal. I've had to move – I still get abused in the street, shouted and spat at. The police still stop me – in fact some police stopped me as they believed me still 'wanted'. I can't open a bank account. I've lost friends. I have always mixed with all kinds of people regardless of their creed or colour - but now, no one wants to mix with me. The judge in the high court said there were no reasonable grounds to suspect I was involved in terrorism. I've always tried to live a good life but now I'm the lowest of the low – and I've never been charged, tried or convicted of any terror offences. The only times I've been arrested in my life were for breaches of the control order.

The name of Liberty's campaign - 'Unsafe, Unfair'- makes so much sense because the irony is that had I actually been someone dangerous, with criminal intent, the control order wouldn't have stopped me. Instead all it achieved was to beat me down for two years and change my life forever.

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