

Brexit activist wins appeal against £20K fine

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A London court has overturned a £20,000 fine imposed on a former fashion student by the Electoral Commission over his role in campaign spending during the Brexit referendum in 2016.

The Mayor's and City of London Court yesterday quashed the decision by the commission, the independent body which oversees elections, to fine political activist Darren Grimes £20,000 following its investigation into referendum campaign expenditure.

Mr Grimes, 25, founded the pro-Brexit campaign group BeLeave during the 2016 EU Referendum campaign. The group was one of the 20 highest-spending campaigners in the EU referendum, shelling out £675,000. BeLeave was not a registered permitted participant and Mr Grimes incorrectly registered the spending with the Electoral Commission.

The commission said last year it had

found "significant evidence" of joint working that had not been properly declared between Vote Leave, the official leave campaign fronted by Boris Johnson and Michael Gove, and Mr Grimes' BeLeave group. It fined Mr Grimes last year.

The BeLeave founder appealed against his fine this week, arguing that



Darren Grimes said the Electoral Commission's case was based on an incorrectly ticked box on a form

the Electoral Commission had made "multiple errors of fact and law" and allowed itself to be "be subject to outside influence".

Yesterday Judge Marc Dight quashed the fine and ruled that the Electoral Commission had misinterpreted the law, and set a key legal test that was "too high" to decide whether BeLeave had

been properly registered. He also noted the complexity of the registration form Mr Grimes had to fill out, which was "difficult to understand".

Mr Grimes' lawyers had argued that his application had gone wrong when he registered himself as a permitted participant, rather than as BeLeave.

After the ruling, Mr Grimes, who crowdfunded his appeal, said he was "delighted and relieved" that the court had quashed the conviction. "The Electoral Commission's case was based on an incorrectly ticked box on an application form – something it had been aware of for over two years and had not been raised in two previous investigations," he said in a statement.

The commission had claimed in court that Mr Grimes' appeal was without merit. "The commission considered all relevant material in Mr Grimes' case and had a sufficient and reasonable basis for reaching the conclusions it did as to liability," its barrister Sir James Eadie QC said.