

'The guardian of our democracy? They put me through hell'

Interview



By Tony Diver

Darren Grimes says he found out that he had been fined more money than he had in the world and referred to the police when he woke up one morning in July last year and switched on the radio.

The Electoral Commission had concluded its third investigation into pro-Brexit Mr Grimes's grassroots student campaign, BeLeave, which he had run from his bedroom in Brighton in 2016, when he was just 22. "I heard

the pips of the *Today* programme and that's the first thing they said. 'Darren Grimes has been fined £20,000 and referred to the police,'" he recalls.

The former Liberal Democrat campaigner from Co Durham then entered the worst year of his life. "The BBC got their press release before I had found out about it. My family had found out before I had a chance to speak to them and warn them."

Mr Grimes and his lawyers say that the Electoral Commission had notified them and the media in the middle of the night. It had told Mr Grimes it proposed to fine him the previous month and allowed him to respond, but he first learnt of the final decision when he heard it on the radio.

The commission decided that Mr Grimes had broken the electoral spending rules it was designed to

Darren Grimes, founder of the campaign group BeLeave, won his appeal against a £20,000 fine by the elections regulator

regulate to ensure fair elections. It announced he would face the maximum fine it can impose: £20,000, because it deemed the money he had paid for online ads contributed towards the spending of the national Brexit campaign Vote Leave, pushing

it over its limit of £7 million.

In the coming weeks, Mr Grimes broke up with his boyfriend and was turned down for a job that he has a "sneaking suspicion" had something to do with the investigation. Some nights he stayed with friends to avoid the

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press at his home, and his mother and brother were followed by reporters and photographers questioning them.

He describes the last year as "hell".

Mr Grimes has crowdfunded almost £100,000 to allow him to fight the fine, arguing that his organisation was separate from Vote Leave, and that while he had ticked the wrong box on a form registering it in 2015, he had not acted dishonestly.

On Friday, a year after his fine was announced, a judge overturned the Electoral Commission's ruling and declared that the watchdog had not understood the law it exists to uphold.

Mr Grimes believes that the investigation into his group was biased from the start. A *Sunday Telegraph* investigation last year revealed that almost half of the Electoral Commission's board had publicly criticised Vote Leave or called for the referendum result to be overturned.

"I don't think that had Remain won, and I was a campaigner for some Remain organisation, I would have been accused of all of this stuff," he said. "Had a Leave activist said 'Mr Grimes should be investigated', I don't think the commission would jump through so many hoops to put someone in his twenties through hell."

The commission's fight against Mr Grimes's appeal has already cost the taxpayer an estimated six-figure sum, although it told *The Telegraph* it was "not appropriate to disclose" the exact figure. If the commission is ordered to pay Mr Grimes's legal fees, the final bill could be another £200,000 more.

It said Friday's court ruling was "disappointing", while no announcement has yet been made on any possible criminal charges.

As for those who tweeted daily abuse at him, Mr Grimes says he will consider taking legal action against them. "It massively damaged my reputation. They put me through hell, and I think they should apologise."

Above all, he is disappointed with the organisation that should be the "guardian of our democracy".

"My fundamental problem with the Electoral Commission is that they are judge, jury and executioner," he said.

"But the problem is that it's a biased jury, it's a not very competent judge, and the executioner sides with one side. He's more than willing to chop my head off, and spend whatever it takes to secure it. That's the lunacy of this whole witch hunt."

An Electoral Commission spokesman said: "We are disappointed that the court has upheld Mr Grimes' appeal. We will now review the full detail of the judgment before deciding on next steps, including any appeal."