



FSU
FREE SPEECH UNION

The Free Speech Union
85 Great Portland St.
London W1W 7LT
FreeSpeechUnion.org

The Rt Hon Penny Mordaunt MP
House of Commons
London SW1A 2LW

16 May 2024

Dear Ms Mordaunt,

[Conspiracy Theories: A Guide for Members of Parliament and Candidates](#)

I'm writing to you in my capacity as General Secretary of the Free Speech Union, a non-partisan, mass membership public interest body that stands up for the speech rights of its members and campaigns for free speech more widely.

Several parliamentarians have flagged up their concerns to me about a guide to conspiracy theories for MPs and members of the House of Lords that you jointly commissioned and launched with Lucy Powell. Lucy Powell [said in the House of Commons on 9th May](#):

I was pleased to join the Leader of the House this week to launch a guide for Members and candidates, co-ordinated by the Antisemitism Policy Trust, on tackling conspiracy theories. Although the existence of conspiracy theories is nothing new, their reach, risk and repercussions are ever increasing. I encourage colleagues to read this important guide.

To which you replied:

I also thank her for helping me to launch the publication to which she referred. We commissioned it and I thank all the organisations that worked on it. It is important that we combat the rise of conspiracy theories, as that is part of restoring trust in what we do here and keeping trust in democracy. This publication will be a useful product, not just for Members, but for those who wish to come here too.

As I understand it, the document was then sent to every parliamentarian by Lord Mann of Holbeck Moore, the Government's Independent Advisor on Antisemitism.

I share your concern about the danger posed by antisemitic conspiracy theories to Britain's Jewish community, particularly during the present conflict between Israel and Hamas. Indeed, I recently helped to write and circulate the [October Declaration](#), a statement of solidarity with Britain's Jews that has been signed by more than 85,000 people, including many prominent parliamentarians, and I'm a director of the British Friends of Israel.

But precisely because of the threat these conspiracy theories represent it is important not to conflate them with legitimate contributions to ongoing political debates or to lump them in with provisional explanations about why particular public policies are being rolled out – such as 15-minute cities – which may turn out to be true. If we do that, those who believe in antisemitic conspiracy theories, or have malevolent reasons for promoting them, can point to these mistakes to undermine our efforts to discredit those theories.

The first and most obvious problem with [Conspiracy Theories: A Guide for Members of Parliament and Candidates](#) (the *Guide*) is that it makes no allowance for the fact that the difference between a 'conspiracy theory' and a perfectly legitimate theory is sometimes nothing more than the passage of time. This was eloquently expressed by the former Supreme Court judge Lord Sumption in an [article](#) for the *Spectator*:

All statements of fact or opinion are provisional. They reflect the current state of knowledge and experience. But knowledge and experience are not closed or immutable categories. They are inherently liable to change. Once upon a time, the scientific consensus was that the sun moved around the Earth and that blood did not circulate around the body. These propositions were refuted only because orthodoxy was challenged by people once thought to be dangerous heretics.

In this light, it's interesting to note that the section of the *Guide* prepared by Full Fact on the conspiracy theories surrounding Covid-19 avoids any mention of one of the most well-known pandemic-era 'conspiracy theories', namely, the lab-leak hypothesis – that SARS-CoV-2 was created in a Chinese lab and then accidentally leaked.

The reason this isn't mentioned, I suspect, is because it was identified as a 'conspiracy' in 2020 by none other than Full Fact, as well as the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), another of the *Guide's* authors, and is now widely regarded as a plausible explanation for the virus's origins.

A Full Fact report from October 2020 titled [Conspiracy Beliefs](#) says: "The Covid-19 pandemic also brought its own suite of conspiracy theories. The claim that 'SARS-Cov-2 was made in a lab' was believed by 30% of respondents in the UK, and almost as many (29%) in the US."

The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) took a similar line, describing the lab-leak hypothesis in a [briefing paper](#) from April 2020 as a “popular conspiracy theory” that had been “repeatedly highlighted” by “conservative media”.

The lab-leak theory is a good example of a fringe hypothesis that has become more mainstream as time has passed and more evidence has come to light. Last year, following 18 months of painstaking research and analysis, a US Senate Committee published a [304-page investigation](#) into the matter and concluded: “The preponderance of circumstantial evidence supports an unintentional research-related incident...”

This is a good illustration of the point Lord Sumption was making about the danger of labelling any provisional hypothesis a ‘conspiracy theory’. Not only are the labellers at risk of being proved wrong, but when they are proved wrong as in this case – the lab-leak hypothesis clearly isn’t a ‘conspiracy theory’, even if it has not yet been proved true – it undermines trust in their future pronouncements. Avoiding this should be a priority for parliamentarians.

Even if the lab-leak hypothesis does turn out to be false, that still isn’t a good reason to dismiss it as a ‘conspiracy theory’. To quote Lord Sumption again, knowledge “advances by confronting contrary arguments, not by hiding them away” and “any system for regulating the expression of opinion or the transmission of information will end up by privileging the anodyne, the uncontroversial, the conventional and the officially approved”.

Another example of a ‘conspiracy theory’ which is, in fact, true – this one flagged up in the *Guide* – is the claim that George Soros has funded and continues to fund “anti-government protests”. This is labelled as “false” in the *Guide* and lumped in with genuine conspiracy theories in the section on antisemitism co-authored by the Community Security Trust (CST) and the Antisemitism Policy Trust (AST). A [recent article](#) in *The Tablet* about the funders of the pro-Palestinian encampments on American university campuses – by any measure, anti-government protests – included the fact that the encampment at Columbia University was organised by three groups, one of which, Jewish Voice for Peace, has “received at least \$650,000 from various branches of George Soros’s philanthropic empire since 2017”.

The *Guide* also labels the claim that George Soros has funded the Black Lives Matter movement as a ‘conspiracy theory’. Again, not true. The Alliance for Global Justice, a left-wing group that put up bail for several jailed BLM activists, received a [\\$250,000 donation from George Soros’s Foundation to Promote Open Society](#) in 2020 that was, according to tax forms, designated to “catalyze Black communities into the global movement for climate justice”.

This bundling together of false and pernicious claims about the role of Jewish billionaires in fomenting global unrest with well-evidenced claims about George Soros’s role in funding various

protest movements can only undermine the *Guide's* attempt to discredit genuine antisemitic conspiracy theories.

More generally, for Parliamentarians to dismiss legitimate contributions to debates that they disagree with by labelling them 'conspiracy theories', or by accusing their colleagues of trafficking in 'disinformation' or 'misinformation', is an unhelpful way to promote public understanding of a complicated topic, such as the pro-Palestinian encampments on British university campuses. If parliamentarians have good reasons to believe that a particular point of view is false or misguided, such as evidence to the contrary, then they should set out those reasons in parliamentary debates.

As the Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandies said almost 100 years ago about attempts to suppress false information:

If there be time to expose through discussion, the falsehoods and fallacies, to avert the evil by the processes of education, the remedy to be applied is more speech, not enforced silence.

The danger with your *Guide* is not just that its authors have proved themselves to be fallible when it comes to distinguishing between 'conspiracy theories' and legitimate contributions to public debates. In addition, the guide actively promotes at least one 'conspiracy theory'.

I'm not thinking of the diagram on page 10, which joins together various conspiracy theories with different coloured-lines – the kind of spider diagram that conspiracy theorists are notoriously fond of. Rather, I'm thinking of the section on 'The 15-Minute City' on page 24, authored by the AST. This says:

In recent times, this concept has been adopted and warped by conspiracy theorists who claim that instead of a way to improve conditions, it is in fact a way of controlling people and reducing personal freedoms, including and specifically, the freedom of movement... Introducing new traffic systems has also led to the adoption of the same narratives spread by conspiracy theorists relating to climate change, including rebranding the 15-minute plans as 'climate tyranny' [footnote 109]. The connection was pushed by campaigners with links to the fossil fuel lobby, who warned that governments would impose travel restrictions not for the purpose of cleaner air, but as a control mechanism [footnote 110].

But where is the evidence that campaigners against this concept have "links to the fossil fuel lobby"? Footnote 110 links to an [article](#) in *Wired* titled 'Conspiracy theorists are coming for the 15-minute city', which claims that the 15-minute city "conspiracy theory has its roots in 2020, when campaigners linked to the fossil fuel lobby tried to push the idea of a looming 'climate lockdown'".

Where is the evidence in the *Wired* article for this claim? To find that, you have to click on a footnote in that piece linking to a 2021 [report](#) from the ISD titled “‘Climate lockdown’ and the Culture Wars”, which focuses on the activities of 29 “climate denialists”.

It turns out, the AST’s evidence that opposition to the 15-minute city concept is linked to the fossil fuel lobby is a report by... the ISD, a co-author of the *Guide*. That’s unacceptably circular for a document that urges parliamentarians to be more circumspect about corroborating evidence.

In fact, the ISD report in question blames the prevalence of the ‘climate lockdown’ ‘conspiracy theory’ on a series of “poorly thought out” headlines and posts from mainstream sources “including media outlets such as the *Guardian* and international think tanks like the World Economic Forum”. That sounds more like a cock-up than a conspiracy theory.

The document’s only reference to funding comes during a discussion of how a *Guardian* editorial – an argument against a post-lockdown ‘return to normal’ on the grounds that it would lead to an increase in energy consumption – was signal-boosted by one of the document’s 29 “climate denialists”:

The following day Steve Milloy, Director at the Heartland Institute (a major funder of climate change denial) [footnote 4], tweeted a link to this article [footnote 5], commenting: “how climate bedwetters hope to translate the #coronavirus lockdown into a climate lockdown.”

Footnote 4 then links to a piece by *DeSmog* about the Heartland Institute, which claims the organisation received \$676,500 from ExxonMobil between 1998-2007, and \$130,000 from energy company Murray Energy prior to its bankruptcy in 2019.

In effect, the only evidence offered by the AST to substantiate its claim that opposition to the 15-minute city concept is “pushed by campaigners with links to the fossil fuel lobby” is a report by the ISD that says an article in the *Guardian* was referenced in a single tweet by an organisation that received money from two oil companies five or more years ago.

Is this the kind of definitive evidence your *Guide* is urging parliamentarians to familiarise themselves with before making pronouncements on contentious topics? To me, it looks like the sort of threadbare connection offered up as ‘evidence’ by conspiracy theorists, often accompanied by spider diagrams. In fact, it meets the definition of a ‘conspiracy theory’ on page 6 of the *Guide*: “an explanation of historical, ongoing, or future events that cites as a main causal factor a group of powerful persons, the conspirators, acting in secret for their own benefit against the common good.”

A further problem with the *Guide* is that its focus is almost exclusively on ‘right-wing’ and ‘far right’ conspiracy theories. Indeed, the section on the ‘climate lockdown’ ‘conspiracy theory’ by the ISD

blames “right-wing media outlets” for promoting it and includes GB News in this category, a description the Directors of GB News would dispute.

Why does the *Guide* contain no discussion of left-wing conspiracy theories, such as the one promoted by the *Guardian* and other media outlets in the aftermath of the 2016 EU referendum that the result was heavily influenced by ‘dark’ Russian money? Surely, that now discredited conspiracy theory posed at least as great a threat to “the integrity of the democratic process” – something you said you were concerned about at the *Guide*’s launch – as QAnon, which features in the *Guide*?

The impression given by the focus on ‘right-wing’ and ‘far right’ conspiracy theories (some of which turn out to be true) and its neglect of left-wing conspiracy theories is that the *Guide* suffers from a left-wing bias. The risk here is that terms like ‘conspiracy theory’, ‘disinformation’ and ‘misinformation’ will be perceived by conservatives as pejoratives for points of view that the left disagrees with rather than references to toxic elements in public debates that pose a genuine threat to minority populations and the democratic process. In short, your *Guide* is more likely to be taken seriously by Labour and Lib Dem parliamentarians than Conservatives, which undermines its non-partisan purpose.

So, what should the Leader of the House’s policy be when it comes to helping MPs and prospective parliamentary candidates traverse this terrain? I would suggest that the House of Commons Library website would be a better bet than relying on this *Guide*. For instance, the Library offers the following briefing on the topic of 15-minute cities:

‘Fifteen-minute cities’ are a concept or an aspiration – there is no one ‘fifteen-minute city’ policy for any councillor or MP to vote on. In recent months the concept has attracted criticism by people who fear the concept may reduce freedom, especially for car users.

The concept of 15-minute cities, sometimes known as ‘20-minute neighbourhoods’, was first advocated by Professor Carlos Moreno, an academic at Sorbonne University in Paris. In 2019, Moreno argued that access to ‘essential living needs’ like schools, shops or green space should be closer to residents, ideally taking no longer than 15 minutes by foot or bike. This would reduce car-based pollution and congestion, save people time, and lead to benefits for public health and the environment.

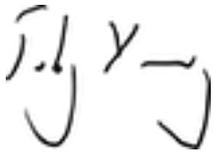
Some critics of LTNs – as well as other schemes such as Clean Air Zones and London’s Ultra Low Emission Zone – have made a link between them and the ‘fifteen-minute cities’ concept. There have been claims that such schemes are anti-democratic, inhibit personal freedoms and may damage local businesses.

That is a more informative, less biased briefing on the topic than anything contained in the *Guide* – and it begs the question of why your *Guide* was thought to be necessary in the first place.

In light of your report's obvious flaws – the fact that it was co-authored by organisations with a poor track record of identifying conspiracy theories and contains at least one conspiracy theory itself – can I urge you to send a follow-up email to parliamentarians withdrawing your endorsement of the *Guide* and urging them to rely on the House of Commons Library when seeking reliable, impartial information on complicated, politically contentious subjects?

There is a danger that your *Guide*, well-intentioned though it is, will have the opposite of its intended effect, giving succour to antisemitic conspiracy theorists, who can point to its obvious flaws, rather than discrediting them.

Kind regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Toby Young', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Toby Young

General Secretary

The Free Speech Union

Cc The Rt Hon Sir Lyndsay Hoyle MP, Speaker of the House of Commons

The Rt Hon Lucy Powell MP

Lord Mann of Holbeck Moore, HM Government's Independent Advisor on Antisemitism