

# Free Speech Union briefing

## Starmers's Misinformation Mafia: The Hypocrisy of Labour's Pro-Censorship Think Tanks

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**Front cover image:** Former minister Josh Simons (left) and Peter Mandelson (right) joined by the current Labour chief whip Jonathan Reynolds at a Labour Together meeting in 2023

## Executive Summary

A cluster of Labour-aligned think tanks, two with close ties to Morgan McSweeney, have campaigned for online censorship. This is ostensibly to protect users of social media platforms such as X and Facebook from mis- and disinformation – or “hate”, as these campaigners often describe it. This shadowy network of pro-censorship lobbyists includes MPs and ex-MPs who helped draft the Online Safety Act and pilot it through parliament, as well as the former British spy behind the Russiagate dossier. Under the guise of protecting vulnerable people from online harm, members of this network have been spreading false and misleading information about people they regard as politically suspect, including journalists. In this briefing you will learn that those shouting the loudest for curbs on freedom of expression in the name of cleansing the internet of “fake news” have themselves disseminated mis- and disinformation about their political enemies.

We reveal that:

\*Sir Laurie Magnus, the Independent Adviser on Ministers’ Interests, did not read vital evidence sent by a journalist to his office before ruling that the former head of Labour Together, Josh Simons, had not broken the Ministerial Code in spite of claiming, while a Cabinet Office minister, that he did not commission a public relations company to investigate troublesome journalists. In fact, the firm did and Magnus was sent the receipts.

\*In February it emerged that Simons, the MP for Makerfield and the former head of Labour Together, commissioned a secret report from the public relations firm APCO Worldwide on the sourcing of a *Sunday Times* article published in November 2023 that exposed Labour Together’s wrongdoing. Although Simons has stated repeatedly that he never wanted British journalists to be investigated, and that he removed a section from the APCO report about the *Sunday Times* reporter Gabriel Pogrund when he sent the report to GCHQ, he did pass on APCO’s false claims that other journalists were covert Russian “assets”. They included Paul Holden, a UK citizen and the author of a critical book about Starmer’s rise to power, as well as the American Matt Taibbi and the South African UK resident

Andrew Feinstein.

\*Weeks before he drafted the final APCO report, Tom Harper, its author, sent a memo suggesting eight journalists ought to be investigated as “significant persons of interest” to his APCO colleague Kate Forrester, a member of Labour Together’s advisory board who is married to Starmer’s former communications director Paul Ovenden. Forrester has confirmed she was sent it, but neither she nor Simons nor anyone else at Labour Together suggested this was inappropriate.

\*When Starmer asked Sir Laurie Magnus, the Independent Adviser on Ministerial Standards, to investigate whether Simons had broken the Ministerial Code, Holden sent Magnus two lengthy emails containing documentary evidence implying that Simons had made misleading statements while serving as a minister, which would have breached the Code – notably his assertion that he never wanted journalists to be investigated. (Simons has told the FSU his statements were truthful.)

\*After Magnus cleared Simons, Holden wrote to him again, asking why he had ignored his evidence. Magnus replied admitting that although he did get Holden’s emails, he had not read them. But he went on to say it was now too late to reopen his inquiry because Simons had resigned as a minister, meaning he no longer came “within my remit”.

\*In light of this admission, the former Labour shadow chancellor John McDonnell, supported by 16 left-wing peers and MPs, has written to Magnus, accusing him of “interpreting the procedural rules in such a way as to open yourself to allegations of evading... the basic role of your office, which is to seek the truth and uphold ethical standards in the government”. In the Commons on Wednesday McDonnell raised a point of order saying that the only way to establish the truth is for the government to set up a full, independent inquiry into Labour Together and APCO’s smears. The Speaker, Sir Lindsay Hoyle, agreed, saying the “smearing of journalists” was a “very serious matter” that had to be fully investigated.

\*This briefing delves into broader aspects of this scandal. Labour Together is only one element in a transatlantic political ecosystem whose members have for years been demanding curbs on online free speech in both America and Britain, while simultaneously disseminating fake news about those with whom they disagree.

\*This shadowy network includes the Center for Countering Digital Hate,

another think tank founded by Morgan McSweeney, which has successfully pressurised advertisers to defund US and UK media outlets on both the left and the right. Its head, Imran Ahmed, is a close friend of both McSweeney and Simons, and the CCDH once shared Labour Together's London office. Now resident in Washington, DC, Ahmed enjoyed extraordinary access to the Biden White House, but the Trump administration's Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, and its Undersecretary, Sarah Rogers, are trying to have him deported for interfering in the free speech of US citizens.

\*On the fringes of this ecosystem, the FSU has learnt, lies a more exotic source: Christopher Steele, the former MI6 officer, head of the private spy firm Orbis Business Intelligence and author of the infamous Russiagate dossier on Donald Trump that surfaced during the 2016 US presidential election. Steele has since disseminated bogus claims about senior UK figures including Boris Johnson and Dominic Cummings, and managed to persuade friendly MPs to raise them in the Commons, where parliamentary privilege means they cannot be sued for defamation.

\*Steele has long been a close friend of Jonathan Winer, APCO's senior counsellor in Washington, and held meetings on Russian issues at APCO's Washington office with Ariuna Namsrai, now APCO's executive director in London. (An APCO spokesperson says Namsrai and Winer did not work with Harper on his report.) Both Simons and the former APCO executive and Labour Together board member Kate Forrester have told the FSU that Harper introduced them to a former Steele employee who was working with him on the Labour Together report.

\*This briefing describes the successful efforts of a group of people clustered around Josh Simons and Morgan McSweeney to silence those they regard as their political enemies, including journalists, under the guise of protecting people from hate – and, at the same time, circulating lies about those same people. Should we take at face value their claims to want to keep people safe from online harms? Or is the censorship apparatus they've helped to create just a means to suppress criticism of their political agenda, whether it comes from the left or the right?

## Britain’s “pro-Putin propaganda network”

On 28<sup>th</sup> February 2026, the Cabinet Office minister and fledgling Labour MP Josh Simons resigned from his government job. The cause was the disclosure that while he was chief executive of the think tank Labour Together before the 2024 general election, Simons had commissioned a secret investigation into the sourcing of a *Sunday Times* article about Labour Together’s unlawful failure to declare £739,000 in donations to the Electoral Commission, for which it was fined £14,500.

The story<sup>1</sup> made a considerable impact. By the time it was published on 12<sup>th</sup> November 2023, Morgan McSweeney, who ran Labour Together during the period 2017 – 20 when the undeclared payments from plutocrats and venture capitalists rolled in, had become the Labour Party’s campaigns chief. He and his think tank were widely credited as the architects of Sir Keir Starmer’s ascent to the party leadership. He would later serve in Downing St as Starmer’s chief of staff.

McSweeney was also the confidante of Peter Mandelson, whose appointment as the UK’s Washington ambassador now looks likely to destroy Starmer’s premiership. Mandelson took a close interest in Labour Together’s operations and advised both Starmer and McSweeney. When I spoke to him last month, he was unstinting in his praise for McSweeney, saying that his skills were “unmatched”.

Other senior figures were closely associated with Labour Together. They include the current Chancellor, Rachel Reeves; the Health Secretary, Wes Streeting; the Home Secretary, Shabana Mahmood; the Housing and Communities Secretary, Steve Reed; the Education Secretary, Bridget Phillipson; the Culture Secretary, Lisa Nandy; and the chair of the Commons Business and Trade select committee, Liam Byrne. After the 2024 general

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/politics/article/keir-starmer-prime-minister-morgan-mcsweeney-investigation-65fnh8zrt>

election, more than 100 Labour candidates declared they had received cash and staffing support worth between £5,000 and £137,000 each,<sup>2</sup> including no fewer than nine members of Starmer's first cabinet.

The investigation Simons commissioned for a £36,000 fee was led by a former *Sunday Times* reporter, Tom Harper, a senior executive at the transnational public relations firm APCO Worldwide. His final report, seen by the FSU, was stuffed with false and defamatory allegations against journalists and other individuals, effectively accusing them of being Russian agents. The first paragraph of the report's executive summary baldly states: "There is circumstantial evidence to suggest that sensitive Labour Together information was hacked from the Electoral Commission by 'hostile actors' before it was disseminated to pro-Russian journalists aligned with Jeremy Corbyn. The likeliest culprit is the Russian state, or proxies of the Russian state."

One of those it accused was Gabriel Pogrund, co-author of the *Sunday Times* article that had prompted Simons to commission APCO's investigation. It claimed he was "heavily involved in the far left of the Labour Party" and had a "close and longstanding relationship" with a "suspected Russian asset". For Simons, this was somewhat awkward, because he and Pogrund were friends.

After the existence of the APCO investigation was revealed by the website *Democracy for Sale* on 5th February 2026,<sup>3</sup> the *Sunday Times* itself reported further details.<sup>4</sup> Simons, it transpired, had arranged to send the final report of what APCO called "Project Cannon" in January 2024 to the National Cyber Security Centre, part of GCHQ, because the report suggested – wrongly, as it turned out – that the information on which Pogrund and his colleague Harry Yorke based their 2023 article had come from a Russian hack.

Simons has stated repeatedly that he never intended APCO to investigate journalists, and that his main concern was to establish whether the undeclared donations story had indeed arisen from an illegal hack. He

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/labour-together-donations-mps-morgan-mcsweeney-b2628925.html#:~:text=Your%20support%20makes%20all%20the,its%20traditional%20trade%20union%20backers>

<sup>3</sup> <https://democracyforsale.substack.com/p/exclusive-morgan-mcsweeneys-labour-together-investigators-journalists>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/politics/article/labour-activists-smear-sunday-times-journalists-kd269klb8>

told the *Sunday Times* in February 2026 that when he sent the APCO report to GCHQ, he had asked his staff to remove the section on Pogrund, saying this had left him “shocked and surprised” and “went beyond the contract”. According to Simons, “no other British journalists were investigated in any document I or Labour Together ever received.” He also posted on X, saying “those who know me know I think the work of journalists is vital to our democracy”, and that a *Guardian* headline saying that a “think tank close to Morgan McSweeney paid firm to investigate journalists” was “nonsense”.<sup>5</sup>

This briefing will present evidence suggesting these statements were untrue.

The person who first suggested that Labour Together should ask APCO to investigate what lay behind the original *Sunday Times* story was Kate Forrester, an APCO executive who was also a member of LT’s advisory board. She was sent a preliminary document bearing the bizarre title “Grimsby Town” by Harper’s team some weeks before the final Project Cannon report. It listed no fewer than eight journalists, including Pogrund, as “significant persons of interest”, suggesting they merited further inquiries. However, Labour Together made no attempt to suggest this might be inappropriate. Several of those on the list were falsely accused in the final report, and according to sources at APCO, Labour Together made no complaint when it received it.

Forrester confirmed to me that she did receive the Grimsby Town document, but said she did not discuss it with Simons. He told me he had not seen it.

Among those APCO defamed in Harper’s final report was Paul Holden, who, though born in South Africa, is a British citizen. He had already been singled out for attention because he had been credited as sharing the Electoral Commission documents with the *Sunday Times*. In fact, he got them through entirely lawful, journalistic means.

The Grimsby Town memorandum that was sent to Forrester stated that Holden was of special interest because he was planning a book that “focuses on Labour Together and its role in the Labour Party and Keir Starmer’s leadership”. This meant it was “important to identify the source

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5 <https://x.com/joshsimonsmp/status/2019864234646204874>

of [his] information and to ascertain what additional information might be published". Entitled *The Fraud: Keir Starmer, Morgan McSweeney and the Crisis of British Democracy*, Holden's book was eventually published in September 2025.<sup>6</sup>

After other national media outlets picked up the story about the APCO investigation in February 2026, Starmer asked the Cabinet Office Propriety and Ethics Team to establish the facts and referred the matter to Sir Laurie Magnus, the Adviser on Ministerial Standards. He determined that Simons may have caused "reputational damage" but did not find he had broken the Ministerial Code. Nevertheless, Simons resigned from his Cabinet Office job, saying that although he considered that Magnus had exonerated him, his continued presence as a minister had "become a distraction from this government's important work".<sup>7</sup>

It seemed an attempt was being made to draw a line under the affair. Yet somehow, it kept on resurfacing, partly because Simons continued to discuss it in public.

On 28<sup>th</sup> March, he gave an extended interview to Laura Kuennsberg and Paddy O'Connell on the BBC Newscast. In this, he admitted he had been "naïve" but once again insisted: "I've always been really clear that I never intended any newspaper reporter to be investigated. That was never my goal... it was never about any of the journalists who wrote the news stories about Labour Together". Simons said he had been put through a "pretty forensic process... I had hours of interviewing", and that Magnus had confirmed he "was being honest and truthful".<sup>8</sup>

The following week, Simons appeared on Times Radio. This time, he tried to explain his actions by blaming his relative youth, saying, "I was 30 years old. I didn't read the contract very carefully."<sup>9</sup>

In fact, the contract states that APCO was planning to investigate the "sourcing, funding and origins" of both the original *Sunday Times* article and "upcoming work by authors Paul Holden and Matt Taibbi". Its findings could be "packaged up for use in the media, in order to create narratives

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6 <https://orbooks.com/catalog/the-fraud/>

7 <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2026/feb/28/minister-josh-simons-resigns-labour-together>

8 <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cy8135ny182o>

9 <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/politics/article/josh-simons-contract-sunday-times-smear-v6l3387h3>

that would proactively undermine any future attacks on Labour Together”. It does not mention a supposed hack at all.

In any event, the FSU has established that Holden was defamed in APCO’s Project Cannon report. It falsely accused him of being an “asset” of the African National Congress intelligence service, which, it claimed, was “very closely aligned with Russia”. Two other journalists, Andrew Feinstein and the American Taibbi, were defamed in a similar fashion, along with Andrew Murray, a former Corbyn aide who worked part-time for the *Morning Star*, who was also, as Harper’s report noted, the father of Holden’s partner.

The APCO report falsely claimed they were all “being used as cutouts for Russian political influence operations against Starmer”. Several other individuals, including Mohamed Amersi, a wealthy Conservative Party donor and friend of King Charles, were also falsely alleged to be Russian “assets”. According to APCO, they were all part of a “pro-Putin propaganda network”.

The allegation that Holden and Feinstein could have been working for the ANC is simply ludicrous, for as we shall see, they had both played very public roles in exposing the corruption of its former leader and South African president, Jacob Zuma, and had every reason to fear, rather than collaborate with, any intelligence agency linked to the ANC.

The false claims about Amersi were contained in the section about Pogrund and were therefore not passed on to GCHQ. But I have confirmed that those concerning Holden, Feinstein, Murray and Taibbi were. Meanwhile, the *Sunday Times* stated in February 2026 that APCO’s bogus claims were also “informally shared with... present cabinet ministers and special advisers”, while “one of the prime minister’s closest aides and another government special adviser were among those who repeated – and appeared to believe – the report’s contents”.<sup>10</sup>

Simons commissioned Project Cannon some two years before he became a minister. Technically, that meant Magnus could not consider the contents of APCO’s report when determining whether Simons broke the Ministerial Code. But the FSU can reveal that Holden sent two lengthy emails to Magnus before he announced his findings.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/politics/article/labour-activists-smear-sunday-times-journalists-kd269klb8>

Quoting extensively from leaked APCO documents, Holden wrote that Magnus needed to establish what had happened in the period 2023 – 4 in order to determine whether his actions as a minister in 2026 violated the Code, especially its requirement for “honesty” as set out in paragraph 1.4f: “It is now clear that Mr. Simons... made defamatory statements repeatedly in the period between 2023 and 2024. This included providing misleading information to the UK’s security services to catalyse an investigation into journalists producing factually accurate public interest reporting.”

According to Holden, the repeated claims that Simons made in 2026 that he did not want journalists to be investigated were what had breached the Code.

When Magnus declined to act, Holden suspected he had not considered the evidence he had submitted, and wrote to him again. On 18<sup>th</sup> March, Magnus admitted in an email that although he did receive Holden’s emails, he had not read them. Unfortunately, it was now too late. Magnus told Holden he was “sorry to read about the distress that you and your family have been experiencing”, but said he could not reopen his inquiry because Simons had left the government. This meant he no longer came “within my remit”.

Some might conclude that this represents something of a Catch-22. In any event, having been shown the correspondence between Holden and Magnus, seventeen left-wing MPs and peers, led by the former Labour shadow chancellor John McDonnell, wrote to Magnus asking him to reconsider. They suggested his failure to consider Holden’s evidence, and indeed, to speak to anyone defamed by the APCO report, meant his inquiry was “defective”, and he should therefore reopen it.

Their suggestion was rebuffed. Last week, Magnus wrote again to both Holden and McDonnell, stating “it is not within my remit to open or re-open inquiries into individuals who are no longer ministers in the Government, or to comment on their actions once they have left office”.

This left McDonnell unimpressed, and he wrote to Magnus again, accusing him of “interpreting the procedural rules in such a way as to open yourself to allegations of evading... the basic role of your office, which is to seek the truth and uphold ethical standards in the government”.

On 22<sup>nd</sup> April, McDonnell made the first of two points of order in the House, saying that the only way to establish the truth was to establish a full, independent inquiry. He repeated this call on Wednesday, and the Speaker, Sir Lindsay Hoyle, said he agreed, urging McDonnell to take further steps to get the government to investigate. According to Hoyle, “the smearing of journalists is a very serious matter”, and he advised McDonnell to table a Commons motion calling for an inquiry when Parliament resumes after the current recess.

Is this just an internecine Labour Party row of limited importance? For those who care about freedom of speech, it has bigger implications, for Labour Together is just one element of a broader political ecosystem whose activities have often been hostile to free expression. Its other elements include the Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH), the trans-Atlantic campaign group co-founded by McSweeney and the former Labour Party adviser Imran Ahmed. This was sued unsuccessfully by Elon Musk in 2023, when it published research suggesting that Musk’s purchase of Twitter had increased its “hateful content”. The following year, it emerged that Ahmed planned to “kill Musk’s Twitter”.<sup>11</sup>

Embedded within the CCDH was another campaign group, Stop Funding Fake News (SFFN), led by McSweeney and Ahmed. With considerable success, this pressured advertisers to cut off the revenue streams of media outlets on both the left and right, such as *The Canary*, *Breitbart* and *Westmonster*.

On the fringes of this ecosystem lies a more exotic source: Christopher Steele, the former MI6 officer, the head of the private spy firm Orbis Business Intelligence and author of the infamous Russiagate dossier on Donald Trump that surfaced during the 2016 US presidential election. This contained the lurid “pee tape” claim that Trump had been filmed by Russian intelligence watching prostitutes urinate on a bed once used by Barack and Michelle Obama in a Moscow hotel.<sup>12</sup>

Subsequently, Steele has disseminated bogus claims about the purported closeness of prominent figures in Britain to Russian intelligence agencies, including Boris Johnson, his former chief of staff, Dominic Cummings, the

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2025/01/27/left-wing-groups-try-shut-down-musk-x-given-taxpayer-cash/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.thetimes.com/world/article/spy-was-offered-1m-to-prove-trump-russia-link-rnz32vn7d>

former Tory Party treasurer, Sir Ehud Shelleg, and Mohamed Amersi. Worse, he has managed to persuade friendly MPs to raise them in the Commons, where parliamentary privilege means they cannot be sued for defamation. On one occasion in 2023, Steele received £30,000 for drafting the text of false allegations against a blameless businessman, Fraser Perring. They were then uttered verbatim by the senior Labour MP and former minister Liam Byrne, who accused Perring of undermining UK national security by working for the Russians, with whom he had no links at all.<sup>13</sup>

However, there *are* connections between Steele and APCO. Documents released under the US Freedom of Information Act reveal that Ariuna Namsrai, Executive Director at APCO's London branch, where Harper worked on Project Cannon, has known Steele for many years and held a meeting with him in 2014 to discuss "Russian matters" at APCO's office in Washington, DC.

As for the "pee tape" dossier, an authoritative report<sup>14</sup> issued in 2020 by the bipartisan US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence states that the man chiefly responsible for disseminating it in America was a senior State Department official named Jonathan Winer. A close friend of Steele for many years, he worked for APCO before joining the Obama administration, and after Trump's 2016 victory, to APCO he returned, where he currently serves as its senior counsellor in Washington. (APCO's spokesperson says Winer and Namsrai were not involved with Harper's investigation.)

Since its foundation in 2020, the FSU has sought to counter ongoing efforts by both Conservatives and supporters of the present UK government to create new laws and regulations that threaten freedom of expression, such as the Online Safety Act (OSA) 2023.

The onerous burdens this imposes on online service providers and the regulatory powers given to Ofcom have raised concerns in the United States, where Sarah Rogers, Trump's Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy, has criticised attempts from overseas to impose "over-censorship of speech" through online regulation. This "censorship-industrial

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<sup>13</sup> <https://unherd.com/2025/10/christopher-steele-reputation-mauler-for-hire/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-documents-report-volume5.pdf>

complex” must, she says, be dismantled,<sup>15</sup> while Vice President JD Vance told an AI summit in Paris he was “growing tired” of foreign attempts to curb free expression.<sup>16</sup> Ahmed, who once basked in the glow created by high-level access to the Biden White House and Capitol Hill, is now facing deportation, although he is trying to fight this in the US courts.<sup>17</sup>

Simons, Ahmed, and their allies on both sides of the Atlantic justify their quest for further digital censorship by claiming it has become essential to counter the threat posed by fake news and disinformation. This supposedly threatens democracy by spreading what they often refer to as “hate” – a remarkably broad and elastic category, which in the eyes of the CCDH, extends to criticism of the net zero energy policies pursued by the UK government.<sup>18</sup>

Josh Simons, Liam Byrne and Communities Secretary Steve Reed, who was more closely involved with Labour Together than any other minister, have been at the forefront of such demands, as has the Conservative former technology minister Damian Collins, an architect of the OSA, who chaired the joint committee of the Lords and Commons on the draft bill.

Earlier, as chair of the Commons select committee on Digital, Culture, Media and Sport 2016-19, Collins led high-profile efforts to make social media companies “accountable” for so-called fake news,<sup>19</sup> repeatedly claiming that Russian disinformation was responsible for Brexit. His principal ally was none other than Steele, who even appeared on Collins’s podcast to warn that Moscow was trying “to create great polarity, great partisanship and divisions within political life, the likes of which we have not seen in democracies before”.<sup>20</sup>

Collins has been a director of the CCDH since 2022. In 2024, when he lost his parliamentary seat, he was appointed to the board of Steele’s firm Orbis Business Intelligence.<sup>21</sup>

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15 <https://www.shortform.com/podcast/episode/all-in-with-chamath-jason-sacks-friedberg-2026-01-22-episode-summary-under-secretary-of-state-sarah-b-rogers-on-dismantling-the-censorship-industrial-complex>

16 <https://apnews.com/article/paris-ai-summit-vance-1d7826affdcdb76c580c0558af8d68d2>

17 <https://www.theguardian.com/law/2025/dec/26/us-judge-trump-imran-ahmed-uk-anti-disinformation-campaigner>

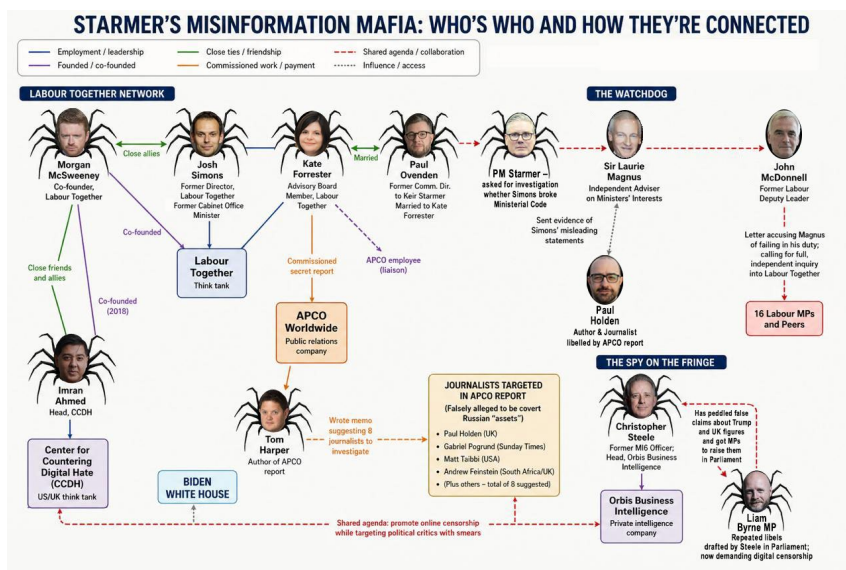
18 <https://counterhate.com/research/new-climate-denial/>

19 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-45943444>

20 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-53685051>

21 <https://orbisbi.com/about-orbis/>

In all this lies an irony. Some of those shouting loudest for curbs on freedom of expression in the name of cleansing the internet of “fake news” have themselves disseminated poorly evidenced claims about their political opponents – which have turned out to be totally false.



## Shooting the “fake news” messengers

As noted above, the immediate trigger for Labour Together’s decision to ask APCO to investigate Paul Holden was the fact that he supplied the Electoral Commission documents that underpinned the 2023 *Sunday Times* article about Labour Together’s undeclared funding.<sup>22</sup> The article also mentioned his forthcoming book, which includes many details of the attacks mounted by McSweeney and the organisations he helped set up to combat disinformation.

In theory, the various bodies involved were distinct and separate. But the CCDH was not only co-founded by McSweeney, but he and its chief executive, Imran Ahmed, shared the same office for many months. In a deposition to the US House of Representatives Judiciary Committee in June 2024, Ahmed said McSweeney was a “very, very close friend” and that he had known Simons “for many, many years, because we’re old friends”. Holden told me: “Although they were publicly distinct organisations, they were *de facto* a single enterprise, sharing staff, office space and the same political goals.”

On the left, Ahmed and McSweeney’s first target was *The Canary*, the Jeremy Corbyn-friendly news site that at its peak employed some 29 journalists and attracted 8.5 million hits each month. For McSweeney, writes the broadcaster and journalist Anushka Asthana, the site had become an obsession, and he once told Labour Together MPs: “Destroy *The Canary* or *The Canary* destroys us.”<sup>23</sup>

Their weapon of choice was a new campaign group, Stop Funding Fake News. For more than a year after SFFN was founded in early 2019, its members remained anonymous, justifying this on their website by saying that publishing their names could put them at risk. A report published by *Jewish News* described it as a “small group of friends” who kept their

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<sup>22</sup> <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/politics/article/labour-activists-smear-sunday-times-journalists-kd269klb8>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2024/sep/14/corbyn-had-flown-too-close-to-the-sun-how-labour-insiders-battled-the-left-and-plotted-the-partys-path-back-to-power>

identities secret because of possible reprisals, although they had managed to enlist a well-known person to be their champion, the TV presenter Rachel Riley.<sup>24</sup>

Ostensibly, then, SFFN was a ground-up, grassroots movement. But as Patrick Maguire and Gabriel Pogrud write in their book about Starmer's rise to power, *Get In*,<sup>25</sup> Riley only became involved with SFFN after meeting Ahmed in the central London office he shared with McSweeney, and SFFN's website was registered against Ahmed's personal email address. SFFN launched its campaign against *The Canary* on 5<sup>th</sup> March. The very next day, the Labour Together co-founder and future Cabinet minister Steve Reed praised it on social media as "a fantastic new campaign to stop funding fake news sites that spread hatred [and] bigotry and warp our politics towards extremism", adding a link to the SFFN site. Labour Together's senior programme manager, Hannah O'Rourke (who later became an LT director), publicly endorsed it the following day. The CCDH eventually acknowledged SFFN as one of its "projects" in 2020. In 2021, Ahmed posted on Twitter that he was the "founder/CEO" of both the SFFN and the CCDH.

Holden suggests in his book that SFFN was thus an example of the phenomenon known as "astroturfing" – a centrally coordinated, professional campaign that hid behind significant disinformation: the pretence that its members were ordinary citizens acting independently, motivated only by a desire to foster the common good. Political scientists have suggested that astroturfing often enhances the impact of campaigns.<sup>26</sup> According to Holden, in the case of SFFN, it certainly did, allowing it to pass as non-partisan: "The group's work would surely not have resonated as widely if audiences had known the group was founded and run by high-level Labour Party insiders who despised Corbyn's leadership."

I discussed SFFN's campaign against *The Canary* with one of those involved. He told me he still thought it justified because the site had defended Corbynite Labour members accused of antisemitism and published extreme views about Israel. Indeed, in January 2021, a report<sup>27</sup> by Daniel Allington, a senior lecturer at King's College London and the

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24 <https://www.jewishnews.co.uk/how-a-group-of-friends-are-fighting-fake-news-with-a-hand-from-rachel-riley/>

25 <https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/1529939445>

26 [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/336834531\\_Political\\_Astroturfing\\_on\\_Twitter\\_How\\_to\\_Coordinate\\_a\\_Disinformation\\_Campaign](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/336834531_Political_Astroturfing_on_Twitter_How_to_Coordinate_a_Disinformation_Campaign)

27 <https://archive.jpr.org.uk/download?id=11299>

deputy editor of the *Journal of Contemporary Antisemitism*, found that one of *The Canary's* staff had once referred to what he called the “Zionist cancer”, although he had later apologised. Among other evidence, his report cited a 2016 *Canary* article by Nancy Mendoza, a Jewish woman. This argued it was legitimate to compare Israel’s conduct with that of Nazi Germany; that Israel was an apartheid state; and that the people of Gaza had been forced to live in an “open air prison”, although their only crime was to have brown skin.<sup>28</sup> Comparing Israel to the Nazis conforms to the International Holocaust Remembrance Association definition of antisemitism, which the British government and many public bodies have accepted.

*The Canary* had signed up to Impress, the media regulator set up in the wake of the Leveson inquiry. In response to Allington’s findings, it launched an investigation. It concluded that although some might find the site’s views of subjects such as Zionism offensive or provocative, they “did not rise to the level of threat to or targeting of individuals or groups on the basis of their protected characteristics”, nor to “discrimination against Jewish people”.<sup>29</sup>

Even if Impress got this judgement wrong, it is not obvious how articles such as Mendoza’s, which were clearly expressions of opinion rather than reportage, could be said to constitute “fake news”. Indeed, the evidence that *The Canary* had been routinely publishing fake news looks weak. It had, as SFFN proclaimed on social media, been required by Impress to apologise for a minor detail in a story about Laura Kuenssberg, which it had already corrected a few hours after publishing. Later, SFFN publicised an article on the media trade website *Press Gazette* that said Impress had received more complaints about *The Canary* than any other outlet it was regulating. However, it failed to note that only two out of the 80 submitted were upheld. In the period covered by these statistics, the site had published more than 9,000 articles.

Major advertisers, such as Macmillan Cancer Support, Adobe and the WWF, were lobbied by Ahmed and his colleagues and persuaded to withdraw their support, slashing *The Canary's* income. In August 2019, it was forced to lay off more than 20 journalists. SFFN was jubilant, its

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<sup>28</sup> <https://www.thecanary.co/uk/2016/05/04/the-inconvenient-truths-that-prove-it-is-not-anti-semitic-to-compare-israel-to-nazi-germany/>

<sup>29</sup> <https://web.archive.org/web/20230402095105/https://www.impress.press/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/364-adjudication.pdf>

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spokesperson telling *Press Gazette* it was “delighted to play a part in forcing them to downsize”.<sup>30</sup> The following year, Ahmed spoke at a conference at the US State Department, boasting that *The Canary*’s full-time staff had shrunk to just one person “within a few months of us targeting it”.<sup>31</sup>

He also described the methods deployed by SFFN and the CCDH, a “very simple set of solutions” that had put a stop to *The Canary*’s “malignant online activities”. His playbook was to “contact brands” who supported such sites, confront them with the claim they were funding fake news, and then, “within a couple of months, you can completely eviscerate the economic base of a website.” Yet in the case of *The Canary*, this tactic itself had relied on deception: the pretence that the SFFN was a grass roots movement, and its questionable claims about *The Canary*’s content.

Further targets were in SFFN’s sights. One was *Westmonster*, a website founded by the Brexit campaigner Aaron Banks; another *Breitbart*, the right-wing US-based news site that was formerly run by Trump’s sometime aide Steve Bannon. In October 2019, SFFN posted a thread on Twitter pointing out that Parliament itself was advertising tourist visits on what it called a “bigoted, conspiracist fake news site” – *Breitbart*. The ads were swiftly suspended. Two weeks later, SFFN announced that the Cabinet Office had taken steps to ban all government advertising from *Breitbart*, *The Canary* and three other sites it claimed published fake news. The Conservatives were still in power, but thanks to SFFN, their administration had adopted a blacklist compiled by senior Labour Party members.

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<sup>30</sup> <https://pressgazette.co.uk/news/the-canary-blames-attacks-by-political-zionists-for-failing-business-model-as-cuts-fall/>

<sup>31</sup> <https://2017-2021.state.gov/anti-semitism-conference-2020/challenges-and-solutions-in-real-life-activists-statements/>

## The name's Steele, Christopher Steele

In the spring of 2026, there has been no one more vociferous in demanding online censorship than the Rt Hon Liam Byrne, the Birmingham Labour MP who chairs the business and trade select committee. A former chief secretary to the Treasury, he is best known for leaving a note for his Liberal Democrat successor after the 2010 election, saying there was “no more money”.<sup>32</sup>

He has also enjoyed the support of Labour Together and Morgan McSweeney. As Maguire and Pogrund report in their book, McSweeney and Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood, a fellow Birmingham MP who was then a Labour Together director, helped bring about Byrne's selection in February 2020 as Labour's candidate for the West Midlands mayoral election. Byrne's links to Labour Together surfaced again this year in his new book, *Why Populists Are Winning And How To Beat Them*,<sup>33</sup> where he thanks its chief executive Alison Phillips for her “clear-eyed wisdom”.

Like Ahmed, McSweeney and Damian Collins, Byrne believes that disinformation is democracy's deadliest foe, writing that “platforms that magnify lies and hate should not be rewarded for it. This is not censorship – it is commonsense”. In Byrne's view, the state must act to combat both the hostile foreign powers that “coordinate disinformation” and the “domestic extremists [who] weaponise social media to intimidate minorities and elected representatives alike”. Just as we would not let our overseas enemies buy UK television channels to transmit hostile propaganda, we should not “let digital networks profiteer from unregulated division”.

Byrne's solution to these ills sounds grandiose: a “Rooseveltian plan for the digital age”. This must create new means to “discipline the platforms that corrode democracy”, regulate their “toxic business model”, and impose “duty of care obligations” on behalf of their users. In an interview with *The Guardian*, he also demanded new “media laws to cover digital and social

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<sup>32</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/may/09/liam-byrne-apology-letter-there-is-no-money-labour-general-election>

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/B0GJ6GRYY3>

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media”, restrictions on platforms based abroad and “emergency powers for Ofcom during election periods”.<sup>34</sup>

Byrne’s book devotes a lot of space to a claim that four individuals and organisations, the hedge funder Sir Paul Marshall, the investment firm Legatum, the cryptocurrency tycoon Christopher Harborne and the financier Jeremy Hosking, have invested a total of £133 million over the past five years in media outlets that support the populist right. This, Byrne writes, has created “a media-political complex of extraordinary scale, built in plain sight”.

This is a curious suggestion: if it really cost them just £133 million over a five-year period, then setting up a gigantic media-political complex looks surprisingly cheap. Moreover, although one of the three outlets Byrne refers to, GB News, does allot substantial airtime to Reform UK and its leader Nigel Farage, the other two, *The Critic* and *UnHerd*, have no discernible involvement with them. Indeed, *UnHerd*’s columnists include the Corbynite Aaron Bastani and the Marxist former Greek finance minister, Yanis Varoufakis. Full disclosure: I used to work for *UnHerd*. But in the dozens of editorial meetings I attended, I never heard it said we should be doing more to encourage populism.

However, there are more important questions to consider in evaluating Byrne’s high-minded Rooseveltian crusade. He would like his readers to believe that he cherishes nothing more than the truth. How strange then it is to report that he has abused parliamentary privilege to falsely accuse innocent individuals of being Russian agents, with Christopher Steele, the author of the Trump “pee tape” dossier, apparently his only source.

The Senate Intelligence Committee determined that none of Steele’s main claims about Trump was reliable or substantiated. Writing in the *London Review of Books* earlier this month, Vadim Nikitin, a former private intelligence operative who was born and schooled in Russia, suggests that in general, Steele and his media acolytes have exaggerated his expertise: he only spent three years in Moscow during his 20-year MI6 career, has not been there at all since 2009, and makes errors when translating the Russian language.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2026/mar/23/funding-for-populist-right-media-political-complex-exceeded-170m-in-five-years-research-finds>

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v48/n06/vadim-nikitin/among-the-private-spies>

Nevertheless, Steele has spent the years since his Trump dossier making bogus claims about other supposed Russian agents.

One example was a dossier Steele compiled in 2021. Known as Project Delta, it focused on the entrepreneur and Conservative Party donor Mohamed Amersi, who had become embroiled in a bitter dispute with the former Tory MP Charlotte Leslie. Its allegations were extremely serious: it claimed Amersi was a Russian “asset” who had for years been supplying Russian weapons to the Assad regime in Syria. (For the avoidance of doubt, these and other claims it made were untrue.) Yet even a cursory glance at the Delta dossier, of which I have a copy, ought to have raised doubts about its credibility, for it asserts that its author had direct access to numerous senior officials in the Kremlin, the Russian intelligence and security services, and to their secret files.

No such doubts were expressed by Byrne, who rose to his feet in the Commons on 17<sup>th</sup> January 2022 and repeated the most scurrilous claims from Project Delta, using wording almost identical to that of Steele’s dossier. Amersi had been slandered, but had no means of redress, thanks to parliamentary privilege.

Even worse was Byrne’s defamation of Fraser Perring, a financial analyst and short seller – someone who makes money by shorting a failing company’s stock – based in Lincolnshire.<sup>36</sup> On 16<sup>th</sup> March 2023, Byrne asked a parliamentary question to the then-Leader of the House, Penny Mordaunt, inquiring whether she would schedule a debate “on the activities of short-selling attack group Viceroy Research and its leader Fraser Perring”. The firm, Byrne claimed, “is working hand in glove with Boatman Capital, which launched the short-selling attack on Babcock International when it was overhauling our nuclear submarines”. Byrne said Perring was “a not infrequent visitor to Moscow” and his firm a “weapon in Putin’s arsenal”, whose links to the Kremlin must be exposed. Not one word of these claims was true, but when his lawyers wrote to Byrne asking him to retract his allegations, he refused.

The reason for the smear was that Perring had written a report highlighting the weakness of a Texan healthcare firm, which has since gone bankrupt. Seeking revenge, one of its executives had approached another UK private intelligence firm, which in turn engaged the services of Steele. The impact

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36 <https://unherd.com/2025/10/christopher-steele-reputation-mauler-for-hire/>

on Perring of Byrne's false claims was devastating. He was de-banked, ostracised by friends and thrown off the boards of two public companies: in all, says Perring, Byrne's lies cost him at least £8 million. Meanwhile, leaked texts and a secret recording first published by the Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project<sup>37</sup> make clear that Byrne's smear was drafted word for word by Steele, who then texted it to Byrne.

When I asked Byrne for comment, all he would say was that he had not been paid to ask the question. But leaked documents show that Steele certainly was: a sum of £30,000 transferred into the account of another firm he controls, Walsingham Partners Ltd.<sup>38</sup>

In 2022, Steele compiled another, much longer dossier, which he called Project Fish. It contained extensive allegations about Russia and members of both the Labour and Conservative parties, including, once again, Amersi.

One of its targets was Sir Ehud Sheleg, a former Tory treasurer. After being briefed by Steele, the Labour MP and former minister Anneliese Dodds raised a point of order in the House, suggesting Sheleg had made an unlawful donation to the party of £450,000, and that this had originated from a Russian bank account controlled by Sergei Kopytov, his supposedly "pro-Kremlin" father-in-law in Ukraine.

In fact, Kopytov was in exile, having lost his job and fled the Crimea when Russia invaded in 2014, and he had not given any money to the British Conservative Party. So why did Dodds raise her point of order? She did not respond to my request for comment.

There is no doubting the surreal quality of some of the Fish dossier. For example, its author claimed to have seen a KGB file on Boris Johnson that was opened while he was still at Oxford, when a Russian agent supposedly decided he "might be useful to us". The dossier adds that more recently, Russian spies had determined they could influence Johnson via the "channel" provided by his (needless to say, blameless) wife, Carrie. All this might appear to be some distance away from Labour Together and APCO's dossier on Gabriel Pogrund and other journalists – if not for one critical detail. In the section devoted to Pogrund, the Project Cannon report includes several pages on his supposed "longstanding and close relationship

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37 <https://www.occrp.org/en/scoop/claims-about-short-seller-made-in-uk-parliament-can-be-traced-back-to-private-intelligence-firm-hired-by-steward-health-care>

38 <https://unherd.com/2025/10/christopher-steele-reputation-mauler-for-hire/>

with Amersi”, whose name appears in the report 44 times.

Recycling the false claims made by Steele, the APCO report refers to Amersi’s dispute with Leslie, saying this highlighted his closeness to Putin’s regime, and describes him as “a suspected Russian asset”. It also claims that a story Pogrund wrote in 2021 about the then-Prince Charles accepting questionable charitable donations had relied on Amersi as its source.

Even if Amersi had been, this would have been of no significance, for the story was true, and it did not need much sleuthing to show that Pogrund had once conducted an on-record interview with him. Yet according to his former *Sunday Times* colleague Tom Harper’s APCO report, “many people in the newsroom were shocked that the paper was using Amersi as a source”, thanks to his “very serious Russian links”. As for Pogrund’s scoops, they “had a damaging effect on the reputation of the monarchy”, which could be “seen as destabilising to the UK and also in the interests of Russian foreign policy objectives”.

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## Unravelling Project Cannon

The APCO report commissioned by Simons and Labour Together is now the subject of a formal investigation by the Public Relations and Communications Association, the PR industry's regulatory body. Harper will not discuss it, and Steele has not responded to requests for comment. It is not, therefore, possible to assert that he or his firm Orbis Intelligence had any direct involvement. That said, Project Cannon was a textbook example of Steele's method in other projects, such as Delta and Fish – a haphazard, dubiously sourced compilation of false allegations against innocent individuals that accused them of being assets of the Russian secret state.

Harper himself had studied this technique. In January 2017, when the furore over Steele's Trump dossier was at its height, he co-authored an article about Steele's life and career. It included a wealth of personal and family detail that could only have come from Steele or those close to him, along with praise for his work at both MI6 and Orbis.<sup>39</sup>

When APCO began its work for Labour Together, two of its senior staff had had direct connections with Steele. The first was Jonathan Winer, its Washington senior counsellor. His name appears in the Senate Intelligence Committee report on the Steele dossier no fewer than 132 times, revealing that Steele provided Winer with at least 110 Orbis Intelligence reports while he was a special envoy at the State Department between late 2013 and January 2016. The report says Steele gave him the Trump dossier in October 2016, shortly before Trump's first election victory. By this time, they had "known each other for nearly a decade", and used to "pass each other business leads" when Winer was in his previous job at APCO.<sup>40</sup> Winer, it is plain, was the main conduit between Steele and the US government.

US Freedom of Information Act disclosures reveal the warmth of the

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<sup>39</sup> <https://www.thetimes.com/world/us-world/article/the-spy-left-out-in-the-cold-lh9vzgr0d>

<sup>40</sup> <https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/sites-default-files-documents-report-volume5.pdf>

relationship between the two men. “Chris Steele is a friend of mine who has a very, very high-end business intelligence service based in London,” Winer gushed in an email to a colleague in January 2015. Other emails show Winer and Steele discussing dinner plans in London, on one occasion squeezing in a meeting before Winer was due to brief the then-Secretary of State, John Kerry. They also demonstrate that Winer would introduce Steele to new prospective clients, talking up his value to their businesses.

The second APCO staffer with connections to Steele is its London-based Executive Director Ariuna Namsrai. The Freedom of Information disclosures include an email chain between her and Winer in 2014, when she was working for APCO in Washington. “Ariuna, my friend Chris Steele from London is in town and working on Russian matters as always,” Winer wrote on 20<sup>th</sup> November. “I thought it might make sense for the two of you to get together if you had any time tomorrow.”

“I met Chris before so it’s nice to hear that he is in DC,” Namsrai replied, copying Steele in. “Chris – what time is convenient for you?” Eventually, they settled on 11 am the following day, at APCO’s office on 12<sup>th</sup> St. (As stated above, APCO denies that Namsrai or Winer worked with Harper.)

APCO started working for Labour Together after the November 2023 article about the undeclared donations because Kate Forrester, a member of LT’s advisory board, had a senior job at APCO’s London office and suggested the firm look into the matter to Simons. Her husband, Paul Ovenden, was Starmer’s then-communications director. (He resigned last year when Holden’s book disclosed he had sent sexist messages about the left-wing MP Diane Abbott.)<sup>41</sup>

Forrester told me that she saw some of Harper’s work, and that Harper introduced her to someone he had asked to help with his investigation – a private intelligence subcontractor who had previously worked for Steele. Forrester said that Harper told her this individual was a cybersecurity expert. Simons told me he met him too at an online video meeting. The FSU is aware of his identity, but is not naming him for legal reasons.

The first fruit of their inquiries was shared with Forrester in December 2023. Headed “Grimby Town”, it included a timeline detailing articles, mainly from left-wing websites, that had been critical of the Labour Together/

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41 <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/ckgy79yr74do>

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SFFN/CCDH ecosystem. In the eyes of their critics, the memo said without irony, “Labour Together and CCDH sit at the centre of a nexus of conspiracy theories that involve government attempts to suppress free speech [and] increasing state censorship.”

It also listed eight journalists, including Pogrund and Yorke of the *Sunday Times*, Holden, Taibbi and Andrew Feinstein, as “significant persons of interest”, implying that they should be subject to further inquiries. If, as Simons has maintained, Labour Together did not want journalists to be investigated, this would have been the obvious moment to call a halt. Asked why it didn’t, Simons told me: “I had never seen that document and still have not. I had also not heard of several journalists apparently named in it as ‘persons of interest’.”

Forrester said: “I do recall being copied into an email to which it was attached, but I didn’t discuss it with anyone, to be honest. I wasn’t very involved in the writing or research.”

Harper’s final report’s allegations about Pogrund have already been debunked, not least by Simons. But its claims against some of the other “persons of interest” on the Grimsby Town list were even wilder. For example, it quoted an unnamed “Western security source with excellent connections inside the South African intelligence agencies” to make florid allegations about Holden. According to Harper, before settling in Britain, Holden was “recruited as an asset by the ANC internal intelligence unit” by its chief, Gibson Njenje. This was said to be “very closely aligned with Russia”, with its leaders feeling “obligated to repay the support they received from Russia during their struggle”. Feinstein, who stood against Starmer in his London constituency in the 2024 election, was also accused of being an “asset” of this unit.

The way Harper put it, “the possibility that Holden and Feinstein, two of Jeremy Corbyn’s most influential media allies, are intelligence assets of the ANC, which is alleged to be working for Russia, is a highly significant [sic].”

Were this true, he would have been right. But to anyone with a smattering of knowledge of recent South African history, it should have been obvious that this claim, for which the report contained no supporting evidence, was as implausible as it was defamatory. For example, the “ANC internal intelligence unit” that supposedly recruited Holden does not, in fact, exist.

It is possible that Harper meant to refer to the ANC internal department known as Mbokodo, which was said to have murdered ANC whistleblowers in exile, but this was closed down in 1990, when Holden was seven.

Both Feinstein and Holden played key, high-profile roles in exposing the massive 1999 Thales arms-deal corruption scandal, which, after years in which they published a long series of exposés, finally engulfed the former ANC president, Jacob Zuma. Holden's 2008 book, setting out many of the details, *The Arms Deal in Your Pocket*,<sup>42</sup> is still in print, and he and Feinstein both spent years investigating some of the closest associates of the man who supposedly recruited them as spies, Gibson Njenje. Some of their targets have been jailed, and others still face criminal charges.

Feinstein was an ANC MP until he resigned from the government in 2001 in protest at the scandal, and he left South Africa when he learnt he was under surveillance by agents of Zuma's regime. He is listed as the primary prosecution witness at Zuma's belated, ongoing trial.<sup>43</sup>

Holden's assessment of Harper's final report is withering. Its claims about his involvement with ANC intelligence are "utterly and totally false, ludicrous, weird and deeply stupid, not least because my alleged 'handler' is connected to a range of individuals I have investigated for corruption".

Feinstein concurs. In his view, Harper's report is "replete with falsehoods and basic errors of fact, reflecting lazy incompetence and astonishing mendacity. The ANC leadership forced me out of Parliament because I insisted on publicly exposing its corruption." He and his family left South Africa when he discovered its intelligence agencies had placed him under surveillance, and he was threatened with arrest.

The claim that he and Holden could have been working for the Russians is, he says, equally false, for "both Paul and I have investigated the corruption of numerous Kremlin-aligned oligarchs, as well as Putin himself. This has led to them placing us under legal duress and threatening that our lives would be endangered were we to visit Russia." He pointed out that he and Holden had also written a book, *The Shadow World: Inside the Global Arms Trade*,<sup>44</sup> that includes strong criticism of Russia for its

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42 <https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/1868423131>

43 <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2018-04-04-zumas-day-in-court-the-witnesses-on-whom-former-presidents-graft-case-depends/>

44 <https://www.amazon.com/Shadow-World-Inside-Global-Trade/dp/0374208387>

“corruption and war-mongering”.

The improbable nature of Harper’s claims about Holden and Feinstein should have been obvious. Their anti-corruption investigations and published books appear in a simple Google search. Yet after receiving the bogus allegations against them, Simons asked Labour Together’s chief of staff to pass them on to GCHQ.

I asked Simons why he had done so without checking their credibility, especially since he could see at once that the report’s claims about Pogrund were fantastical. I also asked him why he had sent the report to GCHQ at all, given that it contained no hard evidence of a hack, but only speculation.

He replied: “Fears that our information had been involved in a hack were genuine and reasonable, after the UK Government had publicly confirmed hacks of the Electoral Commission and other organisations in British politics. The report was shared with GCHQ, the public body responsible for investigating hacks, for them to form a judgement. When we met GCHQ officials, we were told that our fears were understandable and were thanked for sharing the information. The counterfactual, not sharing our concerns and APCO’s report with the relevant public body, would have seemed irresponsible months from a general election where there were widespread fears about foreign interference.”

He also repeated his insistence he had never APCO to focus its attention on journalists: “I never wanted the background of journalists to be investigated. After being silent for weeks during an investigation by the Independent Advisor on Ethics, I was cleared of breaking the Ministerial Code because I have always told the truth about what I sought to do and why. I am a father and a husband, I am Jewish, and I know what it’s like to be hounded. I absolutely regret any impact this has had on the life of any journalist doing their job.”

In any event, there was a postscript. On 8<sup>th</sup> February 2024, shortly after Simons sent the APCO report to GCHQ, *The Guardian’s* political editor, Pippa Crerar, contacted Holden and asked him to comment on a claim that he was being formally investigated by the security services for receiving documents stolen in an illegal Electoral Commission hack. It seems evident that the only possible source for this allegation could have been someone at or close to Labour Together. Holden threatened to sue, and Crerar did

not publish a story. Two years later, in February 2026, *The Guardian* revealed that GCHQ had never opened an investigation into Holden, and by the time Crerar contacted him, its decision not to do so had been relayed to Simons.<sup>45</sup>

The very same day, 8<sup>th</sup> February 2024, Holden had been working with the *Telegraph* on another story about Labour Together's undeclared donations. The *Telegraph* reporter emailed Labour Together, asking for comment, and received a reply from its lawyers, Mishcon de Reya. This said Labour Together believed the *Telegraph* might be basing its story on an illegal hack, and that this was the subject of "ongoing investigations by the intelligence services". This was, of course, untrue, but it made an impact nonetheless: the *Telegraph* elected not to publish the fresh information that Holden had supplied.

A second postscript emerged this week: a disclosure by the *Financial Times* saying that in February 2026, when the APCO story broke, Harper phoned one of his colleagues who worked on his report and urged him to "get rid of everything" to do with Project Cannon, including emails and other digital evidence. The conversation was recorded.<sup>46</sup> John McDonnell raised this in the House, suggesting that Harper had urged his colleague to "muddy the waters" and destroy the "audit trail". He then repeated his call for an independent inquiry into the smearing of journalists, pointing out that he is the Parliamentary representative of the National Union of Journalists.

I asked Simons if he wished to comment on Holden's correspondence with Sir Laurie Magnus and the claim he had made misleading statements while a minister, in view of the fact he did not complain about APCO's investigation until 2026 and had passed on false claims about journalists to GCHQ. He declined.

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45 <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2026/feb/20/labour-minister-falsely-linked-journalists-to-pro-kremlin-network-in-emails-to-gchq>

46 <https://archive.ph/2026.04.28-163323/https://www.ft.com/content/03e909da-0cb3-4c0f-a835-fe8c7144ce4c?syn-25a6b1a6=1>

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## Mr Ahmed goes to Washington

Before Trump's victory, Ahmed and his allies enjoyed high-level access to the Biden administration. In 2021, the year after Ahmed moved to Washington, the CCDH issued a report about what it called a "disinformation dozen". Those on its list were supposedly responsible for undermining trust in Biden's Covid-19 mass vaccination programme, including none other than Trump's health secretary, Robert F Kennedy jnr.<sup>47</sup> Without adducing evidence of how the CCDH reached its conclusions, Ahmed said the twelve were responsible for 65% of vaccine disinformation and should therefore be "de-platformed": denied online access.

In recent years, the policy of vaccinating children and young adults has attracted criticism by scientists. There is, for example, evidence that Covid vaccines can cause heart damage in age groups unlikely to become seriously ill from Covid.<sup>48</sup> But in July 2021, Ahmed's report was flagged and praised by Biden's spokeswoman, Jen Psaki, at a White House briefing.

In the summer of 2023, the CCDH held a private conference in Washington.<sup>49</sup> Along with White House and State Department officials, those in attendance included senior figures from the British embassy, the UN, House and Senate staffers.<sup>50</sup> Just as Ahmed and SFFN had once targeted *The Canary*, he now advocated putting pressure on advertisers to demonetise X. His ally, the US campaign group Media Matters of America, adopted his playbook and vocabulary, claiming X was promoting hate. In response, firms such as Disney withdrew their advertising.

Until now, US firms have resisted attempts to attack their businesses using the British OSA. The messaging platform 4Chan recently refused

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47 <https://counterhate.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/210324-The-Disinformation-Dozen.pdf>

48 <https://med.stanford.edu/news/all-news/2025/12/myocarditis-vaccine-covid.html>

49 [https://www.realclearinvestigations.com/articles/2026/02/18/deporting\\_censorship\\_us\\_targets\\_key\\_ally\\_of\\_british\\_government\\_over\\_free\\_speech\\_1165667.html](https://www.realclearinvestigations.com/articles/2026/02/18/deporting_censorship_us_targets_key_ally_of_british_government_over_free_speech_1165667.html)

50 <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/25256807-ccdhd-conference-attendees-summer-2024/>

to pay a £520,000 fine levied by Ofcom for failing to block access to UK users younger than 18, and its lawyer mocked Britain's regulator by posting an image of a hamster.<sup>51</sup>

Meanwhile, the Trump administration continues to try to get Ahmed deported. In an affidavit filed in federal court, Sarah Rogers described him as “a key collaborator with the Biden administration on weaponizing the national security bureaucracy to censor U.S. citizens and pressure U.S. companies into censoring”, adding that the CCDH “advocates for foreign regulatory action that extraterritorially impacts American citizens and companies”.<sup>52</sup>

Secretary of State Marco Rubio said in a separate affidavit that the CCDH had tried to defund US outlets such as *The Federalist* and *Zero Hedge*. In his view, Ahmed's continued presence in America had “potentially serious adverse foreign policy consequences for the United States, as they undermined the foreign policy objective of the Administration to protect freedom of expression”. Ahmed, Rubio noted, had played a major part in securing the passage of both the UK's OSA and the European Union's Digital Services Act. In April 2026, when Trump's Department of Justice indicted the Alabama-based Southern Poverty Law Center for allegedly channelling \$3 million to extreme right-wing organisations, it emerged that it had partnered with the CCDH in a campaign for much stricter online regulation and censorship, known as Change the Terms.<sup>53</sup>

For now, America appears to be resisting pressure of this kind, though if the next US president happens to be a Democrat, the censorship-industrial complex can be expected to make a Washington comeback. In Britain, however, barely a week goes by without a senior politician calling for Ofcom's powers under the Online Safety Act to be extended to fight mis- and disinformation.

This briefing has charted a paradox: the questionable attitude to the truth shown by some who wish to make it legally more difficult to publish what they consider to be hatred or lies. We have already dealt with Liam Byrne. As the current Communities Secretary, the Labour Together stalwart Steve Reed is responsible for the government's new definition of anti-Muslim

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51 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c624330lg1ko>

52 <https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/26952350-state-department-filing-on-imran-ahmed/>

53 <https://changethetterms.com/about>

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hostility, which the FSU believes will have a chilling effect on free speech.

Other participants in this drama also remain influential. Documents obtained under the Freedom of Information Act cast new light on the government's ongoing efforts to stifle online expression and award new powers to Ofcom.

Among them is a letter from Imran Ahmed, sent a fortnight after the 2024 election, congratulating Baroness Jones of Whitchurch on her appointment as a junior minister at the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT), responsible for online safety. He called for more "robust" implementation of the OSA and drew attention to issues that have since become something of a government obsession – online imagery generated by AI and the encouragement of eating disorders. There must, Ahmed wrote, be "commonsense safeguards", for without them, there would be "unforeseen damage to our democracy and society".

As ever, he was looking for ways to turn off the advertising tap, asking the new government to clamp down on the "financial incentives propelling hate actors as a priority to reforming the digital world".

His approach seems to have worked. Jones replied a few weeks later, saying it was "unacceptable that people are using social media to cause damage, distress and destruction in our communities" and DSIT would "welcome the opportunity to discuss your policy proposals further".

In the wake of the disturbances that broke out after Axel Rudakabana murdered three children in Southport in August 2024, Ahmed was invited to an "emergency meeting" with senior officials from the Home Office, Ofcom, DSIT and the Metropolitan Police counter-terrorism unit. He recommended the Government create new "emergency powers" allowing the state to order social media platforms to remove content said to endanger national security or public safety.<sup>54</sup>

He also spoke to me, saying he had a "five-year plan" to make social media platforms "accountable" for their content, and to make it impossible for anyone to generate revenue from what the CCDH classes as "hate speech". On 14<sup>th</sup> November, Ahmed and Jones co-chaired a roundtable meeting with DSIT's top civil servants, MPs and representatives from Ofcom. A follow-up was scheduled for February 2025.

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54 <https://unherd.com/newsroom/inside-the-center-for-counteracting-digital-hates-plan-to-kill-x/>

Ahmed's UK influence persists. On 1<sup>st</sup> April 2026, the Commons Home Affairs select committee issued a report, *Combating New Forms of Extremism*, in which evidence submitted by Ahmed was given pride of place, along with his claim that Ofcom "is doing nothing" to bring social media companies that "turn a blind eye to rising levels of extremism" to heel.

The report concludes that the OSA contains "gaps" that must be filled: "The Home Office should lead a cross-government, multi-agency approach to shut down com networks, building on existing cooperation between law enforcement, security services, the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology and other relevant departments."<sup>55</sup>

Also invited to the November 2024 round table DSIT meeting, though he was not yet a minister, was Josh Simons. He, too, had been demanding new and tougher legislation, saying the riots were the result of "lies circulating at speed". Like Ahmed, he thought the OSA did not go far enough: "We must develop new legislation that focuses on societal benefits and impact," including new powers for Ofcom and the means to penalise platforms that allowed "Russian bots and the likes of Nigel Farage can tap into feelings of anger and resentment among a vocal minority."<sup>56</sup>

Another attendee was Tyneside Labour MP Chi Onwurah, chair of the Science, Innovation and Technology select committee. Last year, she authored yet another report, demanding extensions to the OSA,<sup>57</sup> and when Ahmed was threatened with deportation from America, she defended him, saying – without, it seems, any intended irony – that this was an "attack on free speech".<sup>58</sup>

The agenda is clear. The ecosystem described in this briefing has for years been working to create unprecedented levels of state online scrutiny, unprecedented censorship and powers to restrict discourse in times of purported emergency.

Yet some of those responsible have tried to defeat their opponents by circulating lies. Sir Laurie Magnus's argument that he cannot reopen his

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55 <https://committees.parliament.uk/work/9126/combating-new-forms-of-extremism/>

56 <https://www.thejc.com/opinion/its-time-for-action-before-the-algorithms-eat-us-all-wm6087qj>

57 <https://fullfact.org/technology/chi-onwurah-online-safety-act/>

58 <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/dec/24/undermines-free-speech-labour-mp-hits-back-at-us-government-over-visa-related-sanctions>

inquiry despite having failed to examine relevant evidence suggests that the only official process that might have addressed this has failed.

It leaves a pressing question: how can we trust the arguments made and the evidence brought forward to justify further censorship?

