



FSU
FREE SPEECH UNION

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Jesper Brodin
Chair and CEO of Ingka Group
IKEA

21st June 2021

Dear Mr Brodin,

I am 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 of our members have contacted us to express their concern at the decision of IKEA to stop advertising on *GB News*. I believe this was in response to a misinformation campaign orchestrated by a group called Stop Funding Hate which has falsely depicted *GB News* as a purveyor of ‘hate’.

It may surprise you to learn that Stop Funding Hate started smearing *GB News* as an outlet for hatred and prejudice before it had broadcast a single programme. Richard Wilson, the Director of the organisation, [announced](#) a full three months ago that *GB News* aims to be a British version of Fox News, the US television channel, which he went on to say is ‘notorious for racism’.

Not only is that a grotesque calumny about Fox News – the Rupert Murdoch-owned television network may be right-of-centre, but there’s nothing racist about it – it’s also a false characterisation of the new British channel.

Andrew Neil, the Chairman of *GB News*, has repeatedly made it clear that he doesn’t want it to be a British version of Fox News. Nothing *GB News* has broadcast has been remotely racist or misogynistic, homophobic, transphobic, or anything else. Like other UK broadcasters – the BBC, ITV, Channel 4 and Sky News – the channel is regulated by Ofcom, which has strict rules against broadcasting any content that spreads hatred against minorities.

So why has Stop Funding Hate smeared *GB News* in this way? It is a left-wing lobby group that was set up in 2016 by Richard Wilson, a Labour Party supporter, and Rosey Ellum, a supporter of the Green Party. It claims to campaign against media companies that traffic in bigotry and hatred, but in reality it targets mainstream publications and broadcasters whose political views it disagrees with, even though there’s nothing bigoted or hateful about them.

As the trade unionist Paul Embery [wrote in *UnHerd*](#) in 2019:

The most cursory examination of this outfit’s activities shows that its ultimate desire is to snuff out opinions it doesn’t like. And it does this by publicly naming and shaming companies which advertise in

newspapers whose editorial line it disagrees with. Stop Funding Hate hopes that this negative exposure will force these companies to boycott those newspapers in the future, and that this in turn will compel editors to toe the line – or even force the newspapers to go out of business.’

As Embery notes, Stop Funding Hate’s modus operandi is to encourage its supporters on Twitter and other social media platforms to threaten to boycott companies – like IKEA – which continue to advertise in outlets it politically disapproves of. The aim is to persuade those companies that large numbers of their customers are on the cusp of deserting them unless they pull their advertising. Even though these campaigns involve just a handful of hashtag activists, the effect is often to panic low-level employees – such as the person operating the company’s social media account – into issuing an apology and announcing they’ll never advertise with the ‘toxic’ publication or broadcaster again. Stop Funding Hate banks on the fact that once these decisions have been made public, even though they’ve usually been made without consulting the CEO, let alone the Board, the companies will then stick to them to avoid embarrassment.

On the face of it, that seems to have been what prompted IKEA UK to announce it would no longer be advertising on GB News. In response to a handful of Stop Funding Hate activists on Twitter telling the company they would no longer shop there due to its advertising on GB News, an IKEA UK employee called Dennis [tweeted](#):

IKEA has not knowingly advertised on GB News. We have safeguards in place to prevent our advertising from appearing on platforms that are not in line with our humanistic values and vision to side with the many people [sic]. We are in the process of investigating how this may have occurred to ensure it won’t happen again in future and have suspended paid display advertising in the meantime.

I assume that you were not consulted about this decision, and nor was Peter Jelkeby, the CEO of IKEA UK, because you would, I’m sure, have advised against a move that risks alienating large swathes of your customers. I am also confident that doing the bidding of a left-wing, anti-free speech lobby group that seeks to silence its political opponents by whipping up outrage mobs on social media would not be consistent with IKEA’s humanistic values.

Such underhand tactics pose a significant risk to free speech and threaten to undermine our democracy. Stop Funding Hate has worked out how to exploit a vulnerability in successful companies – the susceptibility of some employees to social media campaigns that brand their advertising partners as ‘hateful’ – to silence political opinions it disagrees with. The aim of the organisation is to win people round to its hard-left ideology by making sure they never hear any alternative points of view – and to do that under the cover of trying to ‘cleanse’ the media of ‘poisonous’ opinions. That’s a profoundly dishonest and undemocratic approach to winning political battles.

Companies that do the bidding of Stop Funding Hate often regret it. For instance, in 2018 Stop Funding Hate used similar tactics to persuade Virgin Trains to stop selling the *Daily Mail* on its services, only for Richard Branson to overrule the decision. ‘Freedom of speech, freedom of choice and tolerance for differing views are the core principles of any free and open society,’ he [said](#). ‘While Virgin Trains has always said that their passengers are free to read whatever newspaper they choose on board West Coast trains, it is clear that on this occasion the decision to no longer sell the *Mail* has not been seen to live up to these principles.’

Towards the end of last week, IKEA did appear to backtrack on its decision to boycott GB News. The official IKEA UK twitter account posted the following message on June 17:

On Tuesday, we took a decision to suspend advertising on GB News. While we had not actively sought to appear on the channel, the decision to suspend our advertising was taken at great speed.

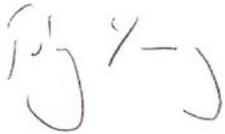
As a newly launched channel, we recognise that it is simply too soon to make an informed decision as to whether advertising there is in line with our advertising policy and brand guidelines. We want to make it clear that it was not our intention to polarise our customers or others in this debate, and a decision on our future approach will be taken in due course.

I welcome this change of heart and would encourage you not to make any speedy decisions in future in response to any Stop Funding Hate campaigns.

It cannot be said too often that free speech is the bedrock on which our democracy rests. Robust debate – appealing to reason, evidence and our shared values – is the best way to resolve political disagreements without descending to violence or intimidation. And free speech is the most effective bulwark against abuses of power by politicians, with history demonstrating again and again that its denial is both the aim of tyrants, because it stops people criticising them, and an ominous precursor to the removal of other freedoms.

The enemies of free speech – like Stop Funding Hate – hunt in packs and its defenders need to band together too. The attempt by left-wing activists to bankrupt a new, politically independent TV channel before it has had a chance to find its feet is something I hope a company like IKEA will firmly reject.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Toby Young'.

Toby Young
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Cc: Peter Jelkeby, UK and IE Country CEO and CSO, IKEA Group
Jon Abrahamsson Rich, Chairman and CEO, Inter IKEA Group