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Conspiracy theories are corroding our society

Not all conspiracies are false, but their recent proliferation is a problem that affects us all



Jamie Bartlett

guardian.co.uk, Friday 3 September 2010 12.59 BST



Conspiracy theories continue to surround the attack on the World Trade Centre. Photograph: Richard Cohen/Corbis

It has been quite a week for conspiracy theories. First, the [case of Dr David Kelly was revisited](#), accompanied by claims that he has been murdered at the behest of Tony Blair; then an [MI6/GCHQ agent was found dead in his flat](#), which has sparked a new wave of speculation. Not all conspiracies are false of course: last week's investigation into the [Claudy bombing](#) revealed that the UK government had covered up a Catholic priest's involvement and new sources suggest the [CIA tested the effects of LSD in Pont-Saint-Esprit](#). Next week, on the ninth anniversary of 9/11, there are dozens of events dedicated to proving that the attacks were an inside job.

Conspiracy theories are often dismissed as a harmless irritation. The idea that all is not as it seems, that a small cabal of powerful people control world events has always been with us. But in recent years they have become [a widespread and influential cultural phenomenon](#). In some contexts, they may have serious social implications.

In [The Power of Unreason](#), a [Demos report](#) released last Sunday, we looked at the role of conspiracy theories in extremist groups, violent ideologies and radical doctrine. We analysed more than 50 extremist groups from across the spectrum (far-right, left, religious, cult, anarchic), and found conspiracy theories to be at the heart of a lot of them. We argued they are a "radicalising multiplier", which, when combined with extremist ideology, can push groups and individuals in a more radical direction. Timothy McVeigh, the Angry Brigade, Combat 18, the Peoples Temple – were all fervent conspiracists. Not only that, these theories clearly harm trust in government, in particular counter-terrorism work, in ways not fully understood.

Therefore, something should be done about them. But this is the rub of course, because conspiracy theories are self-sealing. Any attempts, especially by government, risks "proving" the theory itself (if a government goes to the effort of rebutting them, surely there must be something in it). Instead, civil society must play a stronger role in engaging with conspiracy theories where they find them, and the education system needs to do more to equip young people with critical thinking skills, especially in respect of the net. More generally, security services can be more open in a number of, admittedly limited, areas such as reviewing the laws on disclosure of information, making counter-terrorism trial transcripts more widely available, and sharing more

classified information with communities affected by counter-terrorism arrests. This can be done without jeopardising national or individuals' security.

This won't make conspiracy theories go away. Especially when, as the Claudy case shows, our government does routinely cover things up. The challenge facing us can be demonstrated by the immediate unleashing of baseless vitriol and bile at myself and co-author within minutes of the paper's release. We were accused by many 9/11 "truthers" (even though the paper was not about them) of being paid disinformation agents, or government patsies that are trying to indoctrinate children and cover up the truth of an emerging New World Order. Even the letter "o" in our logo is apparently proof of Demos' duplicity, because it looks rather like "an all seeing eye". This is all in spite of the fact that we called for greater openness and support critical thinking – something the truthers themselves claim to support too.

We certainly need healthy scepticism. But conspiracy theories are kneejerk, lazy cynicism. We need to limit their corrosive and destructive impact. The government lacks the credibility to do so. It falls on the rest of us to act.

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Nyah

3 September 2010 1:04PM

Next week, on the 10th anniversary of 9/11

Surely it's the 9th anniversay?

From Oxford dictionaries:

anniversary: the date on which an event took place or an institution was founded in a previous year:

You're not meant to count the year in which the event happened.

Recommend? (55)

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MrSilver

3 September 2010 1:04PM

You can't pull the wool over my eyes,

Your lizard/alien masters will be pleased with your attempts at obfuscation

Recommend? (51)

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MilchCowMuggins

3 September 2010 1:05PM

This comment has been removed by a moderator. Replies may also be deleted.



afcone

3 September 2010 1:06PM

The more you go on to try and argue with the mentals, the more they think they're onto something.

Conspiracy theories often have their root in intellectual arrogance: "I know something you don't know, and if you disagree with me it's because you are too stupid to see the connections".

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teaandchocolate

3 September 2010 1:07PM

In our dull and ever increasing work-loaded lives it is light relief to indulge in a bit of conspiracy.

Whatever anyone says, I do fundamentally believe that George Osborne is a cactus in disguise.

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LeftSaidThread

3 September 2010 1:08PM

The history of politics and the ruling classes is one of plots, intrigue and conspiracy.

Usually involving only a handful of people at a time though; you just can't trust many to keep a secret, which is why 9/11 probably wasn't.

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Damntheral

3 September 2010 1:09PM

The hilarious thing about conspiracy obsessives is that they think of themselves as extremely cynical when all evidence is that they are frightfully gullible.

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CharleySays

3 September 2010 1:11PM

Timothy McVeigh, the Angry Brigade, Combat 18, the Peoples Temple – were all fervent conspiracists.

You can include Mohamed Al-Fayed amongst this group of dangerous nutters.

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MilchCowMuggins

3 September 2010 1:12PM

Mass immigration.

The EU treaty/ constitution.

The Barcelona agreement of 1995 between the EU and Arab and North African countries. A precursor to free movement?

Colonel Gaddafi holding court with pretty ladies in Italy to convert them to Islam, and coming out with gems such as this one:

"We have 50 million Muslims in Europe. There are signs that Allah will grant Islam victory in Europe—without swords, without guns, without conquest—will turn it into a Muslim continent within a few decades."

The general ambivalence among those on the left to white culture. The joy when they say that America will have a white minority soon.

Can you hoestly say that there have been no conspiracies on these linked matters, that have not been kept from the people.

Imagine even 30 years ago describing the state of Britain today. No one would have believed you.

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HypatiaLee

3 September 2010 1:13PM

Yet again we should doff our hats in the direction of William of Ockham and his razor, so good at cutting through the nonsense.

It says something that so many people are happy to carry on looking for an explanation when the obvious one presents itself, and to leap on any imagined discrepancy in the official version of events to support their cause.

The 9/11 'troofers,' offend me particularly. Compare and contrast the 'official,' version of events and the one that would have to be true, and simple logic dictates who is right.

The Twin Towers and Pentagon were hit by hijacked aircraft, flown by fanatics who smuggled weapons on board. Thousands of witnesses observed the attacks which were recorded by hundreds of cameras. The planes were capable of doing the damage they did.

The alternative is a conspiracy which would have taken years of planning and involved hundreds, if not thousands of people to carry out, who have all been entirely silent since.

Troofers can ignore all the facts they like, but their persistent determination to do so is a bit pathetic.

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MacRandall

3 September 2010 1:13PM

and the education system needs to do more to equip young people with **critical thinking skills**, especially in respect of the net.

Oh great. Get ready for lots of capital letters, obtuse references to PYROCLASTIC CLOUDS, all topped off with "DUH!" for dismissive emphasis.

(Actually, from my experience, it's the geezers that need to be educated, particularly my father-in-law. He's been waiting since 1997 for that free money Bill Gates was giving away...)

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whitesteps

3 September 2010 1:14PM

teaandchocolate

"I do fundamentally believe that George Osborne is a cactus in disguise."

It'll do you no good to point it out - Jamie's looking suspiciously green in that photo above...

Oh well, I guess we'll both be moderated by our Guardian Cacti Overlords shortly.

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billwalpole

3 September 2010 1:14PM

Check out the number of times Gordon Brown used the phrases "New World Order" and "Common Purpose" in his speeches. Freudian Slip? The uncontrollable urge to confess? (Like an unfaithful lover who leaves an incriminating diary in plain view) or just taking the piss?

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KhaledDiab

3 September 2010 1:15PM

When I made a [similar point about wacky conspiracy theories](#) drawing attention from real conspiracies, last year, some readers insinuated that I was a cog in the intricate conspiracy! ;-) One even dig up my e-mail address and bombarded me with messages.

"[Congratulations on joining the ever growing throng of mendacious, duplicitous mainstream journalists,](#)" he started.

Luckily, most comments were sensible. and supportive

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thesingingdetective

3 September 2010 1:15PM

Sadly, in a world where Governments routinely lie, the conspiracy theories will thrive. It is the corrosive nature of politics and politicians that needs to be examined here otherwise scepticism will simply become the order of the day. Please don't forget that we were lied into a war.

Such things breed distrust and in a world where the media is utterly supine don't be surprised if the space that should be occupied by high quality investigative journalism becomes populated by those with whom you disagree.

Do your jobs as journalists and give us the truth and the problem - as you see it - goes away.

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INDICNORTH

3 September 2010 1:16PM

Good article:

I still like to BELIEVE in the tooth fairy, father Christmas, the Moon being made of cheese and the Earth being flat!

Thats is the point. Conspiracy theories are a Religion, no evidence needed!

Choose what you WANT to believe.

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harlequinmod

3 September 2010 1:17PM

I think the proliferation of conspiracy theories is probably a reflection of the amount of trust the general public has in politicians.

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MilchCowMuggins

3 September 2010 1:17PM

Indeed, politicians did start talking about the new world order once the conspiracies became really popular. Of course they always referred to it as something benign, such as when Brown described it as a system of financial regulation to prevent another recession. One must assume they were attempting to seize the initiative from the conspiracy uncoverers, who were getting too popular and too close to the truth.

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moishe

3 September 2010 1:18PM

Cool! We get to have another CIF thread about 9/11 conspiracies. They're so much fun!

This article is obviously a conspiracy to re-introduce a 9/11 conspiracy thread in order to boost CIF readership.

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dan1973

3 September 2010 1:19PM

Just because we're paranoid, it doesn't mean they're not out to get us.

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MilchCowMuggins

3 September 2010 1:20PM

A recent conspiracy would seem to be the media's attempt to describe the ground zero mosque as anything but a mosque.

My church has a bar and social club next to it. It's still a bloody church tho.

Such an obvious lie, was perhaps the straw that broke the camel's back, at least in the good ole USA

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billwalpole

3 September 2010 1:23PM

This comment has been removed by a moderator. Replies may also be deleted.



AllyF

3 September 2010 1:24PM

How funny. Our resident CiF conspiracy expert was telling us just last week that Demos was a front for the New World Order and is in fact a Masonic-Jewish-Marxist-Illuminati fifth column inside the British establishment.

I didn't believe it at the time, but the above surely proves it beyond all reasonable doubt...

In all seriousness

More generally, security services can be more open in a number of, admittedly limited, areas such as reviewing the laws on disclosure of information, making counter-terrorism trial transcripts more widely available, and sharing more classified information with communities affected by counter-terrorism arrests. This can be done without jeopardising national or individuals' security.

The problem with this is that even the least credulous among us know full well that the intelligence services of the 'democratic' world have spent decades (or centuries) assassinating people; destabilising elected governments; waging secret proxy wars; indulging in secret arms trading; conducting Black Ops; spying on democratically elected officials and interfering in the political process etc etc etc.

It's not *just* fiction, and it is not *just* conspiracy theory.

The problem with most modern conspiracy theorists is that they are themselves exceptionally gullible, and while they mock the general population as 'sheep' who believe everything the government tells them, they will themselves believe whatever whackjob ramblings they find in the dark corners of the internet, and the more spurious and unlikely it is, the more likely they are to believe it.

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whitesteps

3 September 2010 1:24PM

MilchCowMuggins

"Can you hoestly say that there have been no conspiracies on these linked matters, that have not been kept from the people."

There's a big difference between somebody planning/saying something, and somebody actually having the capacity to carry it out.

This is one crucial difference that escapes conspiracy theorists.

Gaddafi can spout gibberish all he wants, but he lacks the power or influence to do anything other than comment on trends that are driven by a far more complex mix of outside influences.

They also seem to regularly miss that post hoc doesn't always mean propter hoc.

I could point out that thousands of people are killed on the road each year, so therefore the car was a sinister device let loose on an unprepared public by the Government as a method of population control.

I mean, it'd make me an idiot, but I could demonstrate that, in various ways, the Government has made it easier for people to use cars (everything from not banning them, to building roads), and that the death rate rose as car use rose, and that the anti-car lobbyists were silenced (we assume, because we don't have any record of them). Of all the conspiracy theories in the world, it's probably one of the less bonkers.

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CharleySays

3 September 2010 1:25PM

But isn't the constant stream of hysteria about the coalition government intentionally persecuting the poor in order to line the pockets of the rich just another lame conspiracy theory?

I mean do the mentalists who perpetuate this myth really believe it?

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Democrazy

3 September 2010 1:25PM

Q. When is a conspiracy theory not a conspiracy theory? A. When it is a conspiracy to pervert the course of justice.

Paul Chapman, search team member who found Dr Kelly's body said "The body of a gentleman sitting up against a tree" "He was sitting with his back up against a tree"

Lord Hutton in his summing up of his inquiry said "Mr Chapman then took one of the police officers, Detective Constable Coe, to show him where the body was. Mr Chapman showed Detective Constable Coe the body lying on its back"

The pathologist Dr Hunt who spent over 7 hours with the body at the scene said "He was laying on his back near a tree."

"Q.Was any part of his body actually touching the tree; can you recall? A. I recall that his head was quite close to branches and so forth, but not actually over the tree."

Lord Hutton in his summing up said "I have seen a photograph of Dr Kelly's body in the wood which shows that most of his body was lying on the ground but that his head was slumped against the base of the tree - therefore a witness could say either that the body was lying on the ground or slumped against the tree."

Is this a conspiracy theory of Dr Kelly's body being re-positioned after the search team found it? Or is this a conspiracy to pervert the course of justice?

Was the body moved to lying on it's back position because, as the post mortem revealed, (by how blood had settled in the back) that the body was on it's back after death?

Therefore if the body was found sat against a tree; it can only be concluded that Dr Kelly did not die there.

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xxbabygurljxx

3 September 2010 1:27PM

I don't believe conspiracies are as severe a threat as this article would like to suggest.

We are a cynical nation with an obsession with reasonableness. Most working Britons would not give such dogma the time or day. Indeed, there are a few weak minded

individuals who can become disillusioned by the status quo of society and in turn, actively seek out radical ideology which challenges the power division and the values which underpin western liberal democracies. Regardless of this, these people are in the minority, more properly seen as the exception and taking measures to safeguard their interests seems futile and unnecessary.

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[MilchCowMuggins](#)

3 September 2010 1:27PM

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[thesewoodenideas](#)

3 September 2010 1:27PM

It is patently ridiculous to believe that powerful people in high positions of banks and governments may just have a plan for themselves and their friends in maintaining that power. I'm glad the Guardian is here because I for one feel that the Rockefeller Banking Dynasty along with the trilateral commission has been treated unfairly over all these years

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[cummente](#)

3 September 2010 1:27PM

Quite agree.

Imagine poor little Wikidude getting arrested for rape. It must have been the CIA.

More likely CIA front Assange was bailed out by his pals at the CIA.

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[MacRandall](#)

3 September 2010 1:28PM

One of the most fascinating insights into the conspiracy-addled mind was the "History Channel - 9/11 Myths" series which spent quite a bit of time with the Dylan Avery cadre.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X1Gc_Wyotzw

It was quite obvious that Avery *et al* had no idea that what History Channel was *really* doing was a psychological study of the conspiracy industry.

Never once did Avery & Co. actually counter a fact-based assertion presented to them; rather, they would huddle, look to each other for succor, and then smirk and refer to the interviewer as gullible and uninformed.

They depend on one-way communication to spread their silly message. When put in a room with a non-Truther, they're lost and unable to defend their theories on-the-fly, clearly because they're so unfocused and disconnected.

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[Kogvos](#)

3 September 2010 1:30PM

I welcome our Robot overlords.

Recommend? (5)

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[peterbracken](#)

3 September 2010 1:31PM

Well said, Jamie - it needed saying, and needs to go on being said, that cranks can be vicious, and the more toxic among them deform democracies. They add nothing, but denude trust, as you note.

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[cummente](#)

3 September 2010 1:31PM

the CIA tested the effects of LSD in Pont-Saint-Esprit.

Yes, but in the far distant time when **journalists** roamed the earth, there was a US national TV documentary about project MK-ULTRA, a CIA mind control operation using drugs like LSD.

Clinton is a loony, it never happened !!!

President Clinton Apologizes for MK Ultra

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u22mphQsn5s>

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[MilchCowMuggins](#)

3 September 2010 1:32PM

@Whitesteps

You do not deny the trend that Gaddafi identifies then? Of possible muslim takeover of Europe. You do not seem worried by it. You dismiss my point by saying that Gaddafi could not have implemented the plan.

But that begs the question, who did? I say our leaders, both capitalists and communists and many in between. This is not even a conspiracy. It is a fact that will be proven in the fullness of time.

Indeed I believe the taxpayer has subsidised many a mosque in the UK.

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[glaschriso8](#)

3 September 2010 1:33PM

I often find that any time there is an attack on America or her allies, there will always be people automatically assuming that it was a false-flag operation regardless of the facts.

9/11 is obviously the most famous example of this.

The thing I find about debating conspiracy theorists is that the more you debate with them, the more certain they become that they are right and that you have been brainwashed. Its infuriating.

It seems also that the idea of a global jewish conspiracy controlling the world is still going strong, and that one is as old as the hills. Must be something, somewhere in the human psyche that suspects there must be a shadowy cabal somewhere running the world.

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Pinti

3 September 2010 1:33PM

MilchCowMuggins - shhh

Recommend? (14)

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Exodus20

3 September 2010 1:34PM

Conspiracy theories are the inevitable reactions to finjustice, frauds, spins, discriminations and favourtisms. In areas like politics, finances, wealth, war, security, etc everyone should be educated to ask a hundred and one questions like, Who is pulling the strings for whom behind the scenes?

Who will benefit more at whose expense?

Who is directing the media focus?

Who are not being mentioned by the media?

Why are some laws and regulations seem to be made to favour a very small number of people?

Why are politicians, even in their post-political auto-biogrphay, be economic with the whole truth?

Why are some people try to discourage conspiracy theories? Who do they really serve etc.

After 14 years of spin, financial disasters, death of soldiers who ar esuppose to serve only Queen and country, £1.4 trillion of debt (ie. credit to a few), ... there is not enough conspiracy theories.

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glaschriso8

3 September 2010 1:35PM

MilchCowMuggins

Lay off the paint thinner.

Recommend? (19)

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lounnie

3 September 2010 1:36PM

The Jewish conspiracies are the worst.

Alan Rusbridger (Guardian editor) recently appeared in a Channel Four Dispatches documentary complaining of intimidation.

Pro-Israel lobby group bankrolling Tories. Film claims 50% of MPs in the shadow cabinet are Conservative Friends of Israel members, according to

Channel 4's Dispatches

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2009/nov/16/pro-israel-lobby-conservatives-channel4-dispatches>

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Fortress

3 September 2010 1:36PM

Been reading *Voodoo Histories* by David Aaronovitch? All jolly good fun, but the bit where he gets all serious and moral-drawing at the end is not terribly engaging.

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Exodus20

3 September 2010 1:39PM

The rise and rise of conspiracy theories are a symptoms of ills in society and the world, not the cause.

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bariloche

3 September 2010 1:39PM

The fact is that the reality of an assassination, a murder, a terrorist plot, is far more boring than we would hope. The truth is often prosaic and straight forward, despite what many people would like it to be. Conspiracy theorists aren't crazy - they just would prefer an alternative explanation, that fits in with their political views/agenda/ etc... Half way through reading David Aaronovitch's *Voodoo Histories* at the moment - I strongly recommend it...

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NickDas

3 September 2010 1:41PM

@Nyah

Indeed. Have changed it to ninth. Thanks.

Recommend? (1)

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PaulLambert

3 September 2010 1:41PM

'This won't make conspiracy theories go away. Especially when, as the Claudy case shows, our government does routinely cover things up'.

This is a key point. Governments do routinely spin and conceal and misrepresent. Our

at least British governments do. You don't have to be a 'conspiracy theorist' to believe that. Hence, trust in government honesty is quite low in general. And for some, this tips over into them disbelieving *everything* they say, and coming to the conclusion that the opposite is very probably true.

So if George W. Bush says Al Qaeda carried out the 9/11 attacks, they'll think George W. Bush himself carried out the 9/11 attacks. If Barack Obama says anthropogenic global warming is a real and pressing problem, they'll think anthropogenic global warming is all a big a scam.

Government needs to be more open and honest. Not just to ward of 'conspiracy theories', but because it'd be good for democracy. And it's no wonder serial deceivers and manipulators like Tony Blair came to regret the Freedom of Information Act, when deceit and manipulation is one of the means they use to try and get the public to support what are often egregious and damaging policies.

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MacRandall

3 September 2010 1:42PM

@Democracy

3 Sep 2010, 1:25PM

Was the body moved to lying on it's back position because, as the post mortem revealed, (by how blood had settled in the back) that the body was on it's back after death?

Therefore if the body was found sat against a tree; it can only be concluded that Dr Kelly did not die there.

Are you a detective, pathologist, cop, mortician, paramedic, coroner, criminology major, or ambulance driver?

If not, how can you characterize anything associated with Dr. Kelly's death as "unusual"? On what basis have you determined what his death "should" have looked like?

Why were the inquest records sealed for 70 years? Maybe because 70 years is approximately the average life expectancy of a UK citizen, i.e., the records won't be opened until all (currently) living members of the Kelly family can be expected to have died? Maybe Kelly was despondent over the possibility of embarrassing personal details being revealed in the media ?

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whitesteps

3 September 2010 1:44PM

MilchCowMuggins

"You dismiss my point by saying that Gaddafi could not have implemented the plan. But that begs the question, who did?"

Why do you assume that every event in the world must be planned out by a single mastermind (or interest group) that has been subtly manipulating all human affairs?

If the Islamic faith is spreading, please provide any evidence at all that anybody has the power/influence to actually positively encourage this.

If the spread of Islam has been arranged, then presumably all the Islamic preachers in the world are following somebody's orders to go into Europe. Whose orders? Why has nobody ever found any evidence of them? How likely is it that no Muslim has decided that this conspiracy thing is a bit dodgy and spoken out?

I know what I'm about to say must sound absolutely insane, but is it possible that the spread of a religion may have more to do with;

i.) Humanity's consistent tendency towards accepting some sort of God figure.

- ii.) Islamic preachers who are fairly persuasive.
- iii.) Humanity's occasional tendency towards the more extreme religions (ie, now that Christianity is in general getting a bit more liberal, there are a lot of misogynistic, homophobic people out there looking for a church that better reaffirms their own views).

No, you're right. It must be a secret Muslim King who Cameron is taking orders from. That's way more sensible.

Also, agnosticism and atheism have been spreading fast these past few years too. Please identify whether or not there is a Secret Atheist King who is arranging this (is it Dawkins?). If you do not believe in the Secret Atheist King (but do believe in the Secret Islamic King), please explain why.

Recommend? (8)

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PlasticGypsies

3 September 2010 1:45PM

Not all conspiracies are false, but their recent proliferation is a problem that affects us all

What's the problem?

I can see that hearing about conspiracies theories which *are not all false* is indeed a problem that affects the government and its secret services who would have rather kept it for themselves!

Definitely gets my vote for the funniest 'sub' of the day! Keep them coming!

Recommend? (14)

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DerKleinePrinz

3 September 2010 1:46PM

KhalidDiab,

'wacky conspiracy theorists drawing attention away from real conspiracies

This is a very valid point. The theories that might have more than an element of truth are thrown together with the crazy ones under the catch-all title of 'conspiracy theories'.

Of course you shouldn't believe everything you're told. There's a high level of disinformation in most governments and organisations; they lie all the time.

Despite there being an explosion of different media in recent years, there is less and less sources of information that remain trustworthy. The wackier conspiracy theorists annoy me because of the way they add to disinformation and leave the wider public more trusting of every official line. The people who accept everything they're told also sadden me for their naivety, passivity and ignorance.

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lounnie

3 September 2010 1:46PM

The difference between 1980 and 2010 is that do control almost everything now.

Mandelson, Milibrat and Blair are the socialists of the 21st century, It's hilarious.

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