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The Berlin Wall Moment For Freedom

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On 19 April, IPA Executive Director John Roskam sat down with Journalist & Founder of the Free Speech Union Toby Young to discuss global lockdowns, cancel culture, and education.

Toby is Editor-in-Chief of the [Daily Sceptic](#) and runs his very own [Substack](#) for those of you who enjoy news on soccer.

Below is a transcript of the interview.

John Roskam:

Welcome to this edition of IPA Encounters. My name is John Roskam and I'm the Executive Director of the Institute of Public Affairs. Today I'm talking with one of the English-speaking world's fiercest, most passionate, most committed advocates and voices for freedom, Toby Young. We'll be discussing the condition of freedom in the world. We'll be talking about what lockdowns around the world have done to our freedoms. We'll be talking about the role of the media. We'll be talking about cancel culture, and of course education. And what can we do to restore our freedoms?

I'm speaking to you today from the Baillieu Myer Media Studio in the IPA offices in Melbourne, and Toby is speaking with us from London. As an IPA member, you are watching this edition of IPA Encounters live, and you've had the opportunity to ask questions of Toby. We've received some dozens of such questions. And what we've done is we've distilled them to a few key themes that we'll be talking about with Toby today.

Let me now introduce Toby. As it happens, Toby and I were speaking over email in early 2020 about Toby potentially coming to Australia as a guest of the IPA. And of course, events conspired against that happening. Despite the title of Toby's 2001 bestselling memoir, *How to Lose Friends and Alienate People*, subsequently made into a successful film and a play, Toby's career has been one of achievement and success. Toby originally left school at 16 and then returned, matriculated, and then was mistakenly sent an acceptance form for Oxford University. Oxford University then felt unable to retract that offer.

Toby attended Oxford, qualified with first-class honors in philosophy, politics, and economics. Then worked at *The Times* for six months before his services were dispensed with, as he impersonated the editor, and did a number of other things.

This didn't stop Toby from winning a Fulbright scholarship, studying at Harvard University and then teaching at Cambridge University. Toby started a cultural magazine, then moved to New



York to work at *Vanity Fair*. Toby has written comedies, he's written plays. He was a restaurant reviewer for the *Evening Standard* and is a judge on *Top Chef*.

Toby is currently the associate editor of *The Spectator* and a regular writer for the *Daily Mail* and *The Daily Telegraph*. In 2011, Toby was the co-founder of the West London Free School, which we'll be talking about today. And in 2020, very importantly, Toby founded the Free Speech Union, which we'll also be discussing. Toby is the founder of the website Lockdown Sceptics, which is now The Daily Sceptic. And it has as its message, wonderful words, question everything, stay sane, live free.

Toby's Substack account is devoted to the football team he supports, Queens Park Rangers in London, and just a few hours ago, Toby filed a wonderful match report on the game that was played yesterday. Finally, Toby, with James Delingpole, participates in my very favorite podcast, London Calling. I listen to it religiously every Tuesday, and it is one of the highlights of my week. To give you a flavor of the podcast for those of you who don't know it yet, let me just read Toby's description from this week.

In this special Easter weekend edition of London Calling, James and I talk about the Archbishop of Canterbury's unwelcome intervention in the immigration debate, the Church of England's refusal to ordain Calvin Robinson, QPRs games on Good Friday and the bank holiday, James's hesitation about embracing the chem trail's conspiracy theory, Joe Biden's imaginary friend, the sinking of the Moskva, and how the war in Ukraine is going well or badly for Putin. And in Culture Corner, the BBC's Platinum Jubilee reading list, Slow Horses, Operation Mincemeat Flying Colours, and The Ship.

That basically covers all the big issues. A few weeks ago in Culture Corner, Toby had a wonderful discussion about two of my favorite characters from literature, Richard Sharpe and Horatio Hornblower. So that is London Calling, and we'll be talking about that at the end of this discussion.

Toby, there is so much more I could say, but welcome to this edition of IPA Encounters.

Toby Young:

Thank you very much, John.

John Roskam:

As I mentioned, Toby, we've received dozens of questions about many topics, which we'll be talking about, but can I begin by asking a question that many have posed, which is, Toby, with your experience in the media, in journalism, in writing, your family's history, how did you come to be the warrior for freedom that you are?

Toby Young:

Well, it started when I was about 13, I think, when I was a punk rocker, and I thought of myself at



the time as an anarchist. I think I've gone on a relatively short political journey. So as an anarchist, I sort of morphed into a small-state, libertarian conservative. And for that reason, supported Margaret Thatcher when she became prime minister in 1979, and was rather surprised, actually, when David Cameron became prime minister in 2010 and embarked on a program of trying to reduce public expenditure.

Some of the people at the forefront of the protests in London protesting about those cuts were self-described anarchists, which slightly baffled me. I thought, well, hang on a second. If you're an anarchist, like I used to be, why do you want the state to be larger? Surely you should be applauding the prime minister's efforts to reduce the size of the state. As an anarchist, don't you want to roll back the frontiers of the state like me?

But weirdly, there's a kind of schizophrenia, I think, within the anarchist political movement and they can be pro big state and pro censorship, in spite of describing themselves as anarchists. The particular reason I set up the Free Speech Union was because I myself was canceled at the beginning of 2018.

Theresa May, then the prime minister, appointed me to a very minor public role. I was one of 15 non-executive directors of a new, higher education regulator in England. And within hours of this being announced, the offense archeologists went to work sifting through everything I'd said or written, looking for evidence that I was an unsuitable person. And it didn't take them long to find it because I've been a journalist for 35 plus years.

It was initially a kind of Twitter storm, which then kind of spilled over, it was a slow news week, spilled over into the mainstream media. And within a week, a petition had been started with over a quarter of a million signatures demanding that Theresa May throw me under a bus.

There was a mob of journalists on my doorstep waiting to see whether I'd resign or not. There was an emergency debate in the House of Commons about my suitability to serve on this regulator. I ended up stepping down and stupidly apologizing for some of the more sophomoric things I'd said on Twitter, after a couple of glasses of wine late at night, and thought that would draw a line under the whole affair. But that turned out to be the equivalent of throwing raw meat to a shoal of piranha fish.

So as soon as I'd stepped down from this new role, they then came after me in all my other roles. And I ended up having to resign from five jobs, including my main day job, which paid the mortgage, running a charity for people who wanted to set up schools. So I was well and truly canceled.

When I went through that experience, I became acutely aware that there wasn't a professional body I could turn to for good, impartial advice about a law, PR, should I or shouldn't I apologize? Would that make things worse or better? And if I was going to apologize, how should I word it? Even though my friends, for the most part, were pretty good at sticking by me, nonetheless, you do feel quite isolated when you are targeted by an outraged mob for cancellation. People are a bit reluctant to put the heads above the parapet and defend you in public because then, of course,

they become targets themselves.

After I'd kind of recovered from this onslaught, I thought, well, someone should really set up an organisation which can provide people who find themselves in the firing line for having said something silly in the past or something that wasn't controversial 10 years ago, but is now controversial because the Overton window has shifted to the left. An organization that can provide people who find themselves in that situation with a bit of support, a bit of advice, a bit of solidarity. And so that was really the wellspring of the idea for the Free Speech Union.

John Roskam:

We'll talk about the union. Can we talk about how you felt when this occurred to you? So you'd been in the public eye, high profile. There's someone like you who this happens to. How did you respond, and how would someone we can speculate who is not familiar with the media respond? Because one of the things the Free Speech Union has done is help and support people who are not Toby Young, people who are just doing their jobs, who say something about the Black Lives Matter protest, for example, and then they're canceled in the way that you were.

Toby Young:

At first John, it felt like a kind of comedy. It was just so ridiculous, the stuff that people were dredging up and trying to cancel me for. I'll give you just one example. I wrote a piece in *The Spectator* in 2001 arguing that Britain's censorship laws should be liberalised. I talked about how the more liberal censorship regime in Scandinavian countries actually hadn't produced a kind of rash of sexual assaults, but actually seemingly had had the opposite effect. One of the arguments against reducing censorship of pornography is that if you make it more widely available, you're going to turn men crazy. They're going to go round assaulting people if their reptile brains are stimulated in that way. And the evidence from Scandinavia suggested otherwise. And so I wrote this-

John Roskam:

You said this 20 years ago?

Toby Young:

... slightly tongue-in-cheek piece about sort of why pornography should be more widely available in the UK. And a mischievous subeditor at *The Spectator* put the headline on the top of the piece, Confessions of a Porn Addict, because in the piece, I described Philip Larkin, the late poet, probably the most celebrated poet of the Second World War, as a fellow porn addict. It was a throwaway line – I'm not actually a porn addict – in the article.

But anyway, that's what the subeditor put at the top. And the offense archeologists trolled through everything I'd ever written in *The Spectator*, and found this article with this headline on it. Someone took a screenshot of it, put it on Twitter, and then hours later, a piece appeared in the *Evening Standard* and then that was repeated in *The Times* the following day. Not the front page,

but close to it. That was the kind of level of wild exaggeration and negative spin put on everything I'd said or written. It was like being confronted with an army of the least charitable readers you could possibly imagine, just determined to read everything in the worst possible light.

So at first it seemed quite funny. I was like, "Well, how could anyone take this seriously? This is just absurd." And I started taking notes, thinking I can turn this into an amusing comic novel about a Tory politician who comes a cropper when someone discovers what he said on Twitter 10 years ago. But then it began to gather momentum and this petition was created. My kids started being asked questions about why I was in the news by their classmates, and my daughter ended up feeling she was unable to go to school. My wife at one point said to me, "If someone else comes up to me with a concerned look on their face and says, 'How are you doing? Are you okay?' I'm going to punch them," she said.

So it gradually did become quite irksome and unpleasant. That's why I stepped down and resigned, hoping that that would just end it. And of course it just made things 10 times worse. I think if the Free Speech Union had existed at that time, I would've advised myself not to apologise and probably just to stick it out.

One of the mistakes I think people often make when they find themselves under this kind of pressure is that they voluntarily resign. They don't wait to be fired. And that actually makes life a lot easier for the organisations or the companies that they're associated with. They don't have to take the difficult decision about whether or not to fire them. I don't know whether the government would've sacked me from this regulator, but possibly not. So I think you can, if you are thick-skinned enough, kind of brazen these things out. Often it's a judgment call and sometimes apologising can actually make things better, though very rarely.

But it would've been great to have had an organisation I could have turned to with a legal department, a press department, and also an organisation that could have put me in touch with other people who'd been through similar experiences. That's one of the things we do. I think it's like you are watching your career go up in flames in front of you. Literally, you find yourself standing in a burning building.

Everything you've built, in my case over 35 plus years, and I was on various charitable boards, I'd set up this umbrella charity within which these various schools, four schools were sitting. I'd also helped set up those schools. I had a complicated, multifaceted career, which I built painstakingly over the past 35 years.

Literally it had turned into a dumpster fire. And you think, well, what the hell do I do? How do I put it out? Everything I'm doing to try and put it out, just seems to make things worse. Inevitably you do begin to panic and despair, and you desperately want some people who know what they're doing and know what they're talking about to advise you on how you put the damn thing out, because at the end of it, it's just going to be a smoldering pile of ashes. You have to start again. Which when you're in your mid to late 50s with four teenage kids and a pretty big mortgage is a pretty horrifying prospect.

John Roskam:

There's a few aspects from what you just mentioned. Did you have any defenders? You used the wonderful term, the 'offense archeologists'. Were there any people who said, "Look, this is 20 years ago. This is ridiculous. It was said in jest, there's no one better qualified to be a non-executive director of this organisation, than Toby Young. If anyone's passionate about education and the opportunity it provides for young people, it's Toby. We have to stand and defend him. This is where we fight."?

Yeah, I did have some defenders. So, the then Minister for Education, Jo Johnson, Boris Johnson's younger brother. He'd been involved in my appointment to the Office For Students. And when an emergency question about my appointment was granted debate time in the House of Commons, by the wonderful John Bercow. He stood up and defended me. And shortly afterwards, he had to resign as Education Minister and everyone thought that he had to resign, because defending me was the nail in his coffin. But, I think, your friends for the most part, stand by you and I didn't have many complaints.

One, or two turned on me. And one person who initially defended me, then retracted his defense of me and said, "He'd had no idea, just how awful some of the things I'd said were when he initially defended me. And now he knew the full story, he was withdrawing his defense." So, that was even worse than him not defending me at all. That was pretty shocking.

Louis C.K, the American standup, when he was canceled, said, "People tell you when something terrible, like this happens, that you find out who your real friends are." And he said, "That's true. But, unfortunately it was the wrong half." But, that wasn't my experience. In my experience, it was very much the right half. Fraser Nelson, for instance, the editor of *The Spectator*, he did defend me. He didn't fire me and he didn't ask me to give up my *Spectator* column, which I've been doing since the late '90s. So, that was a relief. And I was still able to carry on working as a journalist and earning a living as a journalist. It just meant I effectively, had to give up all my educational work, which was a wrench, because I'd devoted 10 years of my life to it.

John Roskam:

And when this happens to someone, who's not you, someone who's not familiar with the media. So, you mentioned that perhaps they shouldn't apologise, or should think before apologising. What would someone in that situation go through, given what happened to you?

Toby Young:

Well, I'll give you an example of someone we helped at the Free Speech Union in 2020. A guy called Nick Buckley, set up a charity in Manchester to work with young, homeless people. At the height of the BLM (Black Lives Matter) protests, he wrote a blog post on his LinkedIn account, in which he questions some of the more extreme policies of the BLM movement, such as wanting to defund the police, dismantle the nuclear family, end capitalism and said, "Is this really an organization that we want to get behind? Even if we are anti-racists." And he said, that he thought some of their rhetoric was quite divisive and actually might exacerbate racial tensions in



Manchester, amongst young people who he'd been working with the past 20 years or so, and not actually improve race relations.

Very moderate, reasonable points. But, at that particular time, that was absolute heresy. And some BLM activists discovered this blog, found out that he'd started this charity in Manchester, started a petition demanding he'd be fired from the charity he, himself had set up. It got less than 400 signatures, but the trustees of the charity panicked and fired him.

Initially, he was knocked for six by this. But then, I contacted him and said, "I've set up this organisation. It was set up to help people like you. I think I can help you." And what we did was, I found him a pro-bono charity lawyer, who then looked at the governing documents of his charity and his contract with the charity and discovered that he had an open-ended employment contract, and he hadn't been fired in a proper way.

So, the trustees were effectively, on the hook for his unpaid salary up until something like 2029. And they couldn't get out of it by resigning and dissolving the charity. And when we pointed this out to them, they one by one resigned and eventually, he was reinstated. And he's now a great defender of the Free Speech Union.

We (the Free Speech Union) managed to get him his old job back. We helped promote a rival petition, which got 15,000 signatures. And so, that was an early success, but we've been able to do that over 100 times, I think. Similarly, we intervene to help people. Often, if you involve lawyers, if you threaten to go to law, or go to law, that often does help a good deal. I mean, one of the things we've discovered is that, people who want to cancel people, almost always it's for exercising their lawful right to free speech, but saying something that people disagree with and disprove of, they like to hunt in packs.

And if you stand up to them, if you say, "No, I'm not going to cave into these demands, I think you're wrong. And I'm willing to defend what I've said. And I've got these people standing by me who are willing to defend it too. And my right to say it." Often, the mob will just disperse. I mean, I've been amazed by how often, the mob has just disappeared, just withered away, as soon as you stand up to them and push back robustly.

I guess, it's the story the world over. Bullies rely on the people they bully, not standing up to them, being intimidated and scared and no one around them being willing to defend them. But, if you do stand up to them, if you make it clear that you have an army, which is at least as big as theirs, and every bit as determined to fight for what they believe, often they'll just disperse. They'll just go away. They'll back down.

John Roskam:

And one of the things we need to talk about is establishing a branch of the union here in Australia. Can I now move on to the topic related to freedom of speech and freedoms. You set up a wonderful website, a wonderful blog that here in Australia, tens of thousands of people looked at every day during the lockdowns, during the government response to COVID. Lockdown Sceptics,



now the Daily Sceptic. What happened in your view, during the COVID pandemic? What prompted the government's reactions? What prompted the reaction of governments around the world to basically, disregard our basic freedoms in the way that they did?

Toby Young:

Yeah. Well, I think, that's a really interesting question, John. And there are various theories. One of the differences between James Delingpole and me, which we often debate on London Calling, is that he is a conspiracy theorist. He thinks it was all planned. He calls it the Plandemic. He thinks that a cabal of evil billionaires led by Bill Gates were planning something like this for years. And they seized on this opportunity to essentially undermine our liberty.

John Roskam:

And censor our freedoms and censor our freedom of speech to even argue about alternatives to lockdowns.

Toby Young:

That was one of the most shocking aspects of the whole thing. I mean, I'm not a conspiracy theorist. I'm a subscriber to the 'Cockup Theory' of history. And I think what happened around the world, is that governments were faced with these scary pictures coming out of Wuhan in China, followed by pictures of hospitals, being overwhelmed in Italy, having to be accommodated on stretchers in hospital corridors and they panicked.

Instead of sticking to their own pandemic strategies, which have been worked out over many years. Indeed, instead of sticking to what the original World Health Organization advice was the last time they drew up a document about how government should cope with another pandemic in 2019, they recommended against quarantining healthy people in their homes, closing businesses, closing schools. All of that was thrown out of the window by panicking politicians and officials who thought, "Crikey, this is a dangerous pandemic. There's probably not much we can do to prevent transmission, but we have to be seen to be doing something, because otherwise we'll be blamed for unnecessary deaths."

I think a lot of the scientific advisors, public health officials, advising governments, they immediately saw this as an opportunity to massively increase their profiles and their influence. And they recommended various things, which they probably weren't convinced would work. But nonetheless, there was an audience for those recommendations. And after one, or two governments locked down and I think it started in China, and then it happened in Italy. Then, governments around the world, within about a two-week window decided to follow that same draconian policy, that suddenly became the default go-to response, in spite of the absence of evidence that quarantining the healthy, as well as the sick, issuing stay-at-home orders, shutting down businesses, closing schools, turning hospitals into COVID-only, emergency facilities, there was no evidence that, that was actually going to make any difference at all, very little evidence.

It was all based on speculative modeling, which we know is highly unreliable. And there was no effort to try and estimate what the cost of any of these policies was likely to be in the UK. There was no cost benefit analysis at all, before imposing the first lockdown. Masks, initially the conclusion was, “No, there’s no evidence masks will make the slightest bit of difference. Don’t bother with masks.” Suddenly that changed. And again, I think it wasn’t because the evidence changed, it was just because governments thought, “We need to be doing something. We need to be seen to be doing something. We need a story to tell in two, three years’ time before the electorate about what we did to try and mitigate the impact of this pandemic.” And I think, it was just an absolute global catastrophe.

Governments across the world made things much, much worse by imposing this completely untested policy, which had dire unintended consequences. And I think, in years to come, historians are going to be looking back and thinking, “This is probably, the most disastrous policy ever implemented by governments. How on earth did it happen? How can we avoid making this mistake again?”

John Roskam:

How do we avoid making this mistake again? And how do we avoid Western democracies, as you’ve just explained, imposing policies practiced by totalitarian communist regimes? Have we learned the lessons?

Toby Young:

That is one of the oddities of the past two years. Why did Western liberal democracies essentially, copy the policy response of a communist dictatorship? I mean, there was a very telling interview, that Neil Ferguson, who was one of the leading epidemiological modelers, whose famous paper influenced the British government to lockdown, predicting apocalyptic consequences, if the government didn’t lock down, based entirely on his modeling projections. He gave an interview to *The Times* in which he said, that initially, he and his colleagues thought that the Chinese response, in which people were literally barricaded in their homes, literally planks of wood nailed to their front doors so they couldn’t leave their apartments. And we’re seeing a very similar policy currently unfolding in Shanghai at the moment. But, he thought that was the right policy response. And if only, we weren’t constrained by pesky constitutional laws and a tradition of Liberty in the West, then we could follow this response.

And then, he said, in this interview, “And then, I realized that me and my colleagues had wildly overestimated.” I mean, I’m not quoting this exactly, but it was something along the lines of, “We had wildly overestimated the attachment to liberty. And we thought that governments would be unwilling to order people, to place them under virtual house arrest and to close schools and to initiate business closures that would result in catastrophic economic harm. We naively thought that governments would be unwilling to do this, but we were wrong. And we were delighted to be wrong. Turned out that the attachment to liberty across the West, wasn’t nearly as deep seated as we’d feared. And governments weren’t nearly as squeamish as we’d feared, about placing entire

populations under virtual house arrest. In fact, effectively shutting down national health services and turning them into COVID-only, emergency services. We were delighted to discover that actually, they were perfectly willing to copy the communist dictatorship in China. Hallelujah.”

John Roskam:

What does that say about freedom? What does that say? And I think, Neil Ferguson is right in that regard. What does that say about our attachment to freedom, around the Western world?

Toby Young:

It’s tempting to be plunged into despair about this, and to conclude that in the relatively affluent West, people are now much more concerned about their safety and their health and their security, than they are about their liberty. And they’re now willing to sacrifice their liberty, in order to secure their own safety, particularly when it comes to public health. But I haven’t given in to that despair. I think people panicked and I think their willingness to support the lockdown policies was partly, because they were bombarded with propaganda by broadcasters, newspapers, governments, public health agencies, wildly exaggerating, just how dangerous this particular virus is.

There’s plenty of survey evidence to suggest that people exaggerated the threat, exaggerated the danger it posed. People thought that many, many more people were dying as a result of this virus, the risk of hospitalization and long-term adverse consequences of being infected were far, far greater than they really were. I think that’s a natural human tendency to catastrophise, which was tapped into by these various propaganda agencies. We can blame governments and some of my colleagues in the media for not properly scrutinizing some of the wild exaggerations that government ministers and public health officials were making.

The world was sent into a panic about just how dangerous this virus was. And they seemed to be willing to sacrifice almost anything, including their first born, to reduce the risk of catching it themselves. If people had known and had been able to make a proper informed assessment of the risk, I think would’ve been less willing to give up so many liberties.

John Roskam:

And one of the questions many people have asked, many IPA members, is what is the role of the media in this? And you’ve just touched on it. And why was dissent crushed? Why was there no public discussion of alternatives? Why was there no discussion, exactly as you said, of the consequences for young people, of the psychological consequences?

I’m speaking to you from the world’s longest lockdown city, and we are going to be seeing the consequences in young people for years to come. Why was dissent and debate crushed the way it was? Why were you setting up lockdown skeptics? Why were you attacked the way you were?

Toby Young:

I think that there’s a superficial explanation and then probably a deeper explanation. The



superficial explanation is that our government, and I'm sure your government too, went to great lengths to ensure that the official response, the official narrative wasn't challenged.

In the UK, Ofcom, the state broadcast regulator, issued some guidance on the same day that the first lockdown was imposed, cautioning broadcasters to be very careful when inviting people onto the airwaves who were going to challenge the official public health response. Their rationale was that if the Department of Health recommends masks as a way of mitigating the risk of infection and you, Toby, appear on the BBC to tell people that the evidence that masks actually do reduce your risk of infection is extremely thread bare, that might discourage people to wear masks.

And they just took it for granted that the official public health response, the government's response was correct. And that if anyone challenged that response, then they would be increasing the risk that people would become infected hospitalized and die. That was the rationale for suppressing dissent. And that was the rationale for Ofcom issuing this quite frightening advice to its licensees.

The British government spent hundreds of millions of pounds, I'm not exaggerating, hundreds of millions of pounds placing adverts in newspapers, magazines, on radio stations, essentially promoting their policy response as the correct response. And that made some newspaper editors and program editors disinclined to challenge it too robustly. They didn't want to risk losing this advertising and the state pays rate card. If you're in the media, you'll know what that means.

Most people, if they're told by a newspaper that it costs £25,000 to take out a full-page ad on the back page, they'll say, "You've got to be kidding. Take a hike." And they'll negotiate and they'll end up spending two and a half thousand. Not the Department of Health. The Department of Health, when it's buying ads, will pay rate card. They'll pay the full price.

For newspaper editors, this was manna from heaven. And the other advertising was falling off a cliff during the lockdown because the economy was tanking. So this was manna from heaven. A way of keeping their businesses afloat. They were reluctant to threaten that by featuring people like me on their pages. That's all the part of the superficial explanation.

There's one other part of that explanation. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation actually pay newspapers to employ journalists to promote their point of view. The numerous British newspapers, if you drill down into the small print on their websites, will disclose that some of their journalists' salaries are actually being paid by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Those journalists aren't likely to challenge the official pandemic response when that response is being heavily promoted by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Their job is to try and enforce compliance with that narrative and to discredit anyone who challenges it.

The deeper explanation is it was just groupthink. Amongst the educated intelligentsia, the left of center, liberal elite, the lockdown was just thought to be the correct scientifically informed response. And if you challenged it, that meant you were an uneducated, science-denying, Trump-supporting, knuckle-dragging troglodyte. And no one wants to be seen like that.

It was a way of signaling. Endorsing the lockdown, not challenging it, smearing and shaming

anyone who did was a way of signaling that you were a member of this elite club. You weren't someone who disregarded scientific advice. You weren't someone who placed profits above public health. You were a good, concerned, educated citizen, a member of the metropolitan global elite. And that's why you supported it.

It was a perfect opportunity for virtue signaling and status signaling bundled up into one irresistible package. And most of my journalistic colleagues see themselves as members of that particular club. And they persuaded themselves that they were doing the right thing, doing the responsible thing. And at the same time, signaling that they were a member of this elite club. And that one who challenged it was someone beneath contempt, who wasn't in their gang.

John Roskam:

And here in Australia, Toby, a number of journalists pointed out that COVID provided the opportunity for people to trust the experts. This was now the opportunity for people to trust the experts on COVID, on climate change, on any number of other issues. And they saw it as an opportunity.

Toby Young:

I think that was a big part of it too, John. The experts, the meritocratic cognitive elite had taken a succession of blows to their authority and legitimacy. They got the global credit crunch wrong. They got the response to the war on terror wrong. And globalisation, which they had embraced as an economic cure-all for the ills of late capitalism wasn't particularly popular with indigenous working class communities, who found themselves plunged into precarious employment.

And we saw the populist revolts of 2016, which resulted in Brexit over here, the election of Trump in the United States. That flowed from the gradual disillusionment with the meritocratic elite. People began to distrust them and think they didn't have the best interests of the people they were supposed to be looking after at heart, but were pursuing their own narrow self-interest. And a moral crusade, which just made ordinary people feel morally inferior as well as socially inferior to these elites.

The elites saw their authority ebbing away and saw the pandemic as an opportunity to restore it. Finally, here is a crisis in which you have to turn to the experts for sage advice about how we should best navigate it. And we saw the same thing with the massive push for the vaccines. Here is an example of the best and the brightest riding to our rescue, saving us from this apocalypse.

They lept on it as an opportunity to restore that authority, as an answer to the popular revolt. Here is an opportunity to put us back on top of our pedestal, where we belong in Western societies. Trust the experts again, we'll get you through this. That has turned out to be another terrible miscalculation on their part.

Because as I think electorates across the West come to the conclusion that this pandemic was hopelessly mismanaged, the cure was far, far worse than the disease. We'll be paying the price

for decades to come in terms of economic loss, increased debt, learning loss on the part of children, increased mental health. God knows what else. People will conclude that the experts, once again, got it completely wrong. And it could end up being the final nail in the coffin of this kind of global international order.

John Roskam:

Dan Hannan had a wonderful sentence a few weeks ago. And he said, “Very soon, we’re not going to be able to find a single person who supported lockdowns.”

Toby Young:

It’s amazing how quickly the tide has turned. Back in 2020, throughout most of 2021, very few people were willing to publicly oppose the lockdowns. I mean, we were a small band of brothers. And now, it’s almost the majority view. Now it’s actually quite hard, as Dan says, to find anyone willing to, without qualification, defend the lockdown policy.

It’s extraordinary. I compare it to the fall of communism in 1989. There was this famous anecdote, this celebrated New York Times foreign correspondent and columnist called Johnny Apple. He was dispatched to Europe by the New York Times to cover the collapse of communism after the fall of the Berlin Wall. And he interviewed various people and they were all people who lived in countries like East Germany, and they were all very enthusiastic about the collapse of the communist control system. And the sudden revolution that had occurred, peaceful revolution across Eastern Europe and eventually in Russia too.

And *The New York Times* editorial desk said, “Some of this coverage is a bit one-sided, Johnny. Can you not interview some people who rather regret the fall of the Berlin Wall, some defenders of the old regime? It must have some defenders. There must be some people out there who think, well, actually, people are worse off now than they were last year.” And he went off and tried to find people willing to defend the recently discredited regime. And he couldn’t find anyone. There was virtually, there wasn’t a single person, including former apparatchiks. It was extraordinary how few defenders that regime had.

I think there’s a parallel with the lockdown responses. When everyone was terrified that if they expressed any dissent, they would immediately be smeared as a far right eugenicist, who put profit before people and didn’t care about the elderly and the vulnerable. They kept schtum. Most people kept schtum, including dissenting scientists. But now that fear has gone, now that you can say that sort of thing without being penalised or smeared, it’s extraordinary how quickly the consensus behind that policy has completely collapsed.

John Roskam:

Can we move on to another topic? Something that you are passionate about, education. We’ve received, many questions about out your role in setting up free schools, your suggestions for reform. Can the institutions be reformed? Can I begin by just asking you to explain how you came

to set up the West London Free School? What you were trying to achieve and why you did it?

Toby Young:

In around 2008, 2009, I started looking around to see where I could send my children to school. I had four children and they were all approaching secondary school age at that point. And there were some good schools in Acton where I live in West London. But in order to get your kids into those schools, you either had to be a Church of England, a Catholic or live within a few hundred yards of the school gate. And if you didn't fall into any of those boxes, the choices were pretty bleak.

My wife and I, having done a little bit of research, decided that we had no alternative but to move to within the catchment area of a good comprehensive school, a good state school. And we decided to move to Suffolk to within the catchment area of a school called Thomas Mills. And that just happened to be where my parents in-law lived at that particular time.

At the last minute, just when we were thinking about putting our own house on the market and viewing some properties in Framlingham in Suffolk, I suddenly had a conviction. Well, I thought, "Well, hang on a second. I'm a taxpayer. Why isn't there a decent school that I can send my children where I live in Acton? Why should I have to turn my life upside down, move halfway across the country, just to secure something that should be available to everyone across the country?" And it's just wrong.

And at that particular time, there was a Labor government that the Conservative Party were talking at about, if they were elected, making it easier for parents and charities and teachers to set up schools, replicating the Swedish Free School policy or the Charter School policy in the United States. And at that point, it looked as though the Conservatives might well win the next general election. This was a couple of years out from the general election in 2010.

I thought, "I'll get a group of people together and I'll try and set up a school myself. And then when the Tories win a majority, it'll be possible to do it." And I wrote a piece for *The Observer*, a British newspaper, a Sunday newspaper, in August of 2009 saying I wanted to do this and inviting anyone who wanted to help me to get in touch. And about 150 people contacted me. And I held a meeting at my house and about 50 people crowded into my front room. And out of that group, a group of about 12 people emerged who were willing to do the heavy lifting. And that became the steering committee of the West London Free School project.

Within a year, the conservatives didn't win the general election, but they did well enough to create a government in coalition with the Liberal Democrats. Michael Gove, who was the great spokesperson for the free school's policy, he became Secretary of State for Education. So it did become easier for groups of parents and teachers to set up schools. And because we'd already done some of the groundwork, we became the kind of path beaters, and we were the first group to sign an agreement with Michael Gove to open a school. And we were one of the first schools to open in 2011.



I remember Boris Johnson who was then the mayor of London, opened the school and made quite a good joke at the opening ceremony. He said, “Yes, Michael Gove, the Secretary State for Education has given a new word to the English language. We give, they gave, he gove. And he gove us this school.” Perhaps you had to be there.

And we were told all kinds of things by opponents of the Free School’s policy, and being one of the first free schools, if not the first, we were very much in the firing line. And there was an enormous amount of quite well organized opposition from the teaching unions, from the socialist workers party, by various left wing journalists, the educational establishment, the labor party. So, it was a real political battle. And I was suddenly plunged into kind of the front line of this battle without having had much campaigning experience. But it was actually, for the most part, great fun.

And all the things we’ve been told by the critics of the policy, “What parent would possibly want to entrust their child’s education to a school set up by a bunch of amateurs? You got to leave it to the experts. It would be like a parent sending their child to a hospital run by patients if they got appendicitis. You’re tripping if you think anyone’s going to want to come to this ludicrous crackpot school.” And, of course, it was the most oversubscribed school in the country, 10 to 15 applicants for every place. We made Latin mandatory and we offered children a classical liberal education.

John Roskam:

Do you want to talk about why? You’ve got a fascinating explanation as to why, for example, Latin is compulsory.

Toby Young:

There are a couple of reasons. There is some evidence, albeit quite limited, that learning Latin, because it is such a logical language, teaches you how to think in an orderly logical way. It makes it easier to learn other languages because of the similarity between some of the romance languages and Latin, Spanish, Italian, French.

Also, it’s a doorway into the ancient civilisation onto which our civilisation has been built. You see all these Latin inscriptions on statues and on buildings. And once you begin to pick up a bit of Latin, you realise what it is they say, and it opens a window into another civilisation, which was our predecessor civilisation. So there were a number of reasons why, and it sent a signal that we were a traditional old fashioned sort of school that wanted to teach children traditional old fashion subjects.

John Roskam:

Can you a little bit about, in the time we have, those traditional old fashioned values of the school that as you say, parents overwhelmingly want for their children?

Toby Young:

We described it as a comprehensive grammar school, so a school which is open to all children, regardless of background, religion, ability, but which has the same standards as a good old fashioned grammar school. So uniform, houses, competition, very high academic standards and ambition to get every child into a good university, a fairly demanding behavior management policy, so zero tolerance of disrupted behavior, silence in classrooms and so on and so forth. This particular model has also been called now warm-strict, Neo-trad, and the evidence from not just the UK, but from America and around the world, the evidence is overwhelming that this kind of education, this approach is much more effective, gets much better results than a more progressive child-centered approach.

Essentially, it's about restoring the authority of the teacher and placing the teacher at the center of the classroom and expecting the children to do what the teacher says, treat the teacher with respect and write down what the teacher's telling them, and commit it to memory. I mean, it's not rocket science. Most people who went to a school like that will recognize that is a far more effective way of educating children from all walks of life, than a more free-for-all progressive child-centered project-based approach. But it's a battle that hasn't yet been won. And I think it's still raging in Australia.

John Roskam:

In the time that we have, can I ask two final questions? The first one about education. We've had many parents, grandparents, young people seek to ask me to ask you, what is your advice to someone who's been confronted by cancel culture in a big way, or a small way, someone who is a teacher in a classroom or a staff room wanting to inculcate some of the values that you've been talking about? What is your advice to someone who wants to stand up for freedom and express their opinions or their thoughts? What is your advice to them?

Toby Young:

Often, it's quite hard to give general advice, because each situation is often very different. And we like to think very carefully and find out as much as we can at the Free Speech Union before actually giving anyone who finds themselves in difficulty, any advice. But I think in general, my advice would be, first of all, find some allies, make sure you're not alone, because you're not alone. And there will be other people, probably in the school, who think the same things you do, but have just been cowed into silence. So by hook or by crook, without necessarily immediately putting own head above the parapet, try and find some allies, create a WhatsApp group, start strategizing, try not to inadvertently trigger any trip wires.

Often, the people we end up helping are people who've used particular words that they didn't realize were taboo words, like describing a female author as exotic. I can think of one example of someone who got into enormous trouble, placed under investigation. Their life turned to misery because they described a female author as exotic without realising, perhaps naively, that exotic was a taboo word, as far as the linguistic thought police are concerned. So make sure you don't inadvertently give your enemies any ammunition by triggering any of these invisible trip wires.

When you finally do set out your stall and make your case in a kind of public forum, do it in as reasonable and as considered and as thoughtful a way as you can. Try not to be too confrontational initially. Make sure that for people in the middle, for people who haven't made up their minds, which is the vast majority of people, for people who haven't taken a position on one of these kind of controversial hot button issues, make yourself appear reasonable and informed and flexible and moderate.

So when they attack you with absolute hysteria and brand you a racist, and a transphobe, and a homophobe, or God knows what else, and Islamophobe, they're the ones who look extreme and unreason and intolerant. One of lessons I've had to teach myself, John is, as a journalist, my inclination is to be provocative and controversial and inflammatory. And, that's served me very well as a kind of journalist writing opinion pieces for the last 35 years. But if you're setting out a policy and you want to win allies and build a coalition and actually win an argument and get a policy through, needless to say, that is not the way to go about it.

Be reasonable, be sensible, think politically, force your opponents to be the unreasonable immoderate ones. And you're much more likely to win that way.

John Roskam:

We've had a wonderful discussion over many topics. Can I ask a final question before we conclude this edition of IPA Encounters, Toby? Are you optimistic about freedom for the future?

Toby Young:

I'm not particularly optimistic in the short term. People are constantly asking me whether I think we've reached peak woke. And even though the Free Speech Union keeps winning individual battles, I still think that the war, at this point, isn't going our way. The institutional capture by the woke cult is so great that the opposition is only just beginning to organize. And, if you think about the long march through the institutions, that's been going on for 50 to 75 years. So the idea that we can reverse that overnight or within a few years is for the birds. We have to think about the long haul. Reversing this institutional capture is going to be a generational battle, not something we can win overnight.

But I'm confident that we can win in the end if we organise and if we're sensible about it. We keep winning elections after all, certainly in the UK. Looks like the next president of the United States will be a Republican. We keep losing these cultural battles, but we keep winning at the ballot box. And that tells us that the majority of people, of ordinary people, if given the opportunity to voice their views, are on our side on most of these issues. If you ask people about their support for free speech, huge majorities support free speech. Huge majorities think that they're no longer able to speak freely. They complain about having to look over their shoulder and having to self-censor. The support for free speech, for open debate, for intellectual tolerance is overwhelming. We need to harness that.



The fact that that support is still there, the fact that the woke cult have yet to take the majority of people with them, they're like the communists who ran the show before 1989, everyone was terrified to speak out. The extent of the opposition was largely unknown because people were so cowed and unwilling to kind of speak up. But actually, what we need is a Berlin Wall moment. We need everyone to realize that the emperor isn't wearing any clothes. It won't happen overnight, it'll be the work of decades, I fear. But I do think in the end, we'll succeed.

John Roskam:

That's a wonderful way to finish this edition of IPA Encounters. Toby Young, thank you so much for being with us, and I hope we can talk again very soon. Thank you.

This transcript of IPA Encounters from 19 April 2022 with Toby Young has been edited for clarity.