

# Concern candidates not being upfront

By [Daisy Hudson](#)

Southern candidates failing to tell voters about links to a high-profile disinformation group could be "introducing a cancer that is going to undermine democracy", a Dunedin academic says.

Several candidates around the South are either directly affiliated with, or have shared their support online for, the group Voices for Freedom.

But they have been urged to keep those links quiet.

In an August 9 email seen by the *Otago Daily Times*, Voices for Freedom co-founder Claire Deeks encouraged candidates not to disclose their affiliation with the group, which has also urged followers to make New Zealand "ungovernable".

"Any candidate from our community will be in a good position to gain support from their local VFF community," the email stated.

The secrecy around affiliation has been criticised as a danger to democracy.

Two high-profile VFF affiliates, Gill Booth and Jaspreet

Boparai, were standing for the Teviot Valley Community Board, and the Southland District Council and Tuatapere Te Waewae Community Board respectively.

Ms Booth has shared disinformation about the United Nations and often appears as a VFF guest speaker.

In a video chat with Mrs Boparai and VFF in May, she said of standing for council "I would rather tie a rope around my neck and throw myself off the roof".

She declined to comment when contacted yesterday.

Mrs Boparai also frequently discusses conspiracy theories about the United Nations and the World Economic Forum.

She could not be reached for comment yesterday.

VFF has been a significant spreader of misinformation and inflammatory rhetoric.

The group, founded by Libby Johnson, Alia Bland and Claire Deeks, was also a leading player in organising the Wellington Parliament occupation earlier in the year.

Dunedin husband and wife Watson and Tracey Pita were the Dunedin co-ordinators for the group until recently, when they left the organisation.

They were both standing for election, Mr Pita for the Otago Regional Council and Mrs Pita for the Dunedin City Council and Saddle Hill Community Board.

Yesterday, Mrs Pita said the pair were open about their past affiliation with the group.



A photo on Waihopai Toetoe Community Board candidate Judy Leith's Facebook page shows her posing with a VFF placard in Wellington in March.

Asked yesterday if she was a member of the group, she said "I don't actually know if I want to have this conversation".

She did not comment further.

University of Otago researcher and The Disinformation Project research lead Dr Sanjana Hattotuwa said there was nothing wrong with people wanting to stand for elections and engage with democracy.

But people were not being upfront with what they stood for and believed in — making New Zealand "ungovernable".

"You're introducing a cancer that is going to undermine democracy.

"We only have to look at the United States and elsewhere to see where this goes.

"You start local and you invariably impact the democratic framework and firmament of an entire country."

There are also several candidates standing for council and community board roles across the South who have shared disinformation or anti-vaccination views online.

One was Emma Gould, standing for the Oraka Aparima Community Board, who was arrested at the Parliament protest earlier in the year.

When contacted yesterday, she said she was not affiliated with VFF.

Another was Pamela Taylor, who started a petition calling for an end to vaccine mandates.

She is standing for the Dunedin mayoralty and city council.

She did not respond to a request for comment yesterday.

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