Introduction
Download the LearnEnglish Themes podcast. You'll find more information on this page:
http://www.britishcouncil.org/learnenglish-podcasts-themes.htm

This support pack contains the following materials:
- the article that you can listen to in the podcast
- a comprehension activity based on the article
- a grammar activity based on the article
- links to other activities on the LearnEnglish website on this theme (conspiracies).

Read the article
Conspiracies
by Richard Sidaway

Are you convinced that your government is in contact with UFOs? Do you think that President Kennedy was the victim of more than one assassin? Do you get the feeling that we are being watched? Then you are probably a believer in conspiracy theories.

The success of the ‘Da Vinci Code’ alleging that the Catholic Church has suppressed the truth about the death of Jesus shows how such theories can take hold of the popular imagination.

Everyone loves a conspiracy
They say that there are two basic explanations for dramatic or world-changing events. The conspiracy theory assumes that tragedies such as the death of Princess Diana in Paris were not just accidents but were carefully planned and carried out by a group of powerful people operating behind the scenes for various sinister motives. The cock-up theory of history says that such events are probably caused by a combination of human incompetence and bad timing.

The conspiracy theory is, naturally, much more attractive because humans can be seen as powerful shapers of their own destiny, rather than the weak and fallible creatures they are. And because they are usually impossible to prove either one way or the other, conspiracy theories are limited only by the human imagination.

The real thing
Of course, there have been some real conspiracies through the ages. The Gunpowder Plot in England in 1605 to get rid of the King of England, or the July 20th plot to kill Hitler in 1944, were taken seriously enough at the time - the conspirators confessed after being tortured and they were then executed.

Secret societies are a matter of historical record too, with their initiation rites, hierarchy, secret signs and elaborate rituals. Some, like the Brotherhood of the Rosicrucians, were mystical or religious in nature. Others are more social or political in character like the Freemasons, whose members have included writers, generals, politicians and even kings. They formed the opposition to the Catholic Church in Southern Europe, for example, and supported the pursuit of rational thought, scientific endeavour and liberal democracy.

Verging on the paranoid
But just because you say you have discovered a plot and brought some people to trial doesn’t mean that a conspiracy really existed. In the dying days of Stalin’s regime, a group of Jewish medical professionals were accused of conspiring to poison Soviet leaders and overthrow the state. Hundreds were arrested and executed. The Doctors’ Plot of 1953 was just one in a long line of cases.
of purges necessary to maintain the climate of fear by which the Communist Party ruled. It was more a symptom of Stalin’s anti-Semitism and paranoia than a real conspiracy.

**Tragic consequences**
The longest-running conspiracy theory is probably the one about the Jews wanting to take over the world. Such ideas have served as the justification for acts of random, irrational violence against Jewish communities over the centuries, and led to the systematic persecution of the Inquisition. A book was published in the 1920s supposedly giving documentary proof of such a world conspiracy, but it was later exposed as a fraud. This didn’t prevent the horrific attempt by the Nazis to exterminate the entire Jewish population of Europe during the Second World War.

**The downright silly**
Some conspiracy theories can be quite entertaining. Take the case of the humble light bulb. Who would believe that companies had known for years how to make one that lasts for much longer than normal, but formed a cartel to suppress it from the market because it would mean their profits would be drastically affected.

And what about the carburettor that can make a car run 300 miles on a single gallon of petrol but has been kept from consumers deliberately? Or the automobile company that tried to get control of trams in cities so that people would buy more cars instead of using public transport?

Some people even believe barcodes are a population-control device used by a secret unnamed organisation intent on world domination and that the numbers hide the mark of the devil…

And the death of Diana? Well, apparently the driver wasn’t really drunk and there was a lot of carbon monoxide in his blood. A letter had been written by the Princess just before the accident happened claiming that someone wanted to get rid of her, and the French authorities never carried out a post-mortem to find out the cause of her death. These isolated facts supposedly add up to a secret plot by intelligence agencies to prevent the destruction of the British monarchy. An awful warning

Whatever you do, though, don’t let your life be dominated by conspiracy theories or you could end up like the former footballer and TV sports commentator who currently believes that the world is going to be taken over by a secret brotherhood of reptiles, and has published various books giving details. His writings sell very well in some parts of the world, but there must be easier ways of being popular in Canada …

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**After reading**

**Exercise 1**

What do the words in bold in the text refer to?

1. **such events**
   a. conspiracy theories
   b. powerful people operating behind the scenes
   c. tragedies such as the death of Princess Diana

2. **they**
   a. conspiracy theories
   b. humans
   c. weak and fallible creatures

3. **Some**
   a. initiation rites
   b. elaborate rituals
   c. secret societies

4. **Hundreds**
   a. Jewish medical professionals
   b. people
   c. Soviet leaders

5. **It**
   a. the Communist Party
   b. The Doctors’ Plot
   c. a long line

6. **This**
   a. the fact that the book was exposed as a fraud
   b. documentary proof of such a world conspiracy
   c. a book

7. **one**
   a. a cartel
   b. a conspiracy theory
   c. a light bulb
Exercise 2
The phrases in the first table below all use the **passive** because the people involved are not known or because what happened is more important than who did it.

Match each of the phrases with a form of the passive in the second table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>We are being watched</th>
<th>A book was published</th>
<th>A letter had been written</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>humans can be seen as</td>
<td>...has been kept from</td>
<td>don’t let your life be dominated</td>
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<td>medical professionals were accused of</td>
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<td>Future</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imperative (negative)</td>
<td>don’t let your life be dominated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present Continuous</td>
<td>we are being watched</td>
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<tr>
<td>Modal present</td>
<td>humans can be seen as</td>
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<tr>
<td>Present Perfect</td>
<td>...has been kept from</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past simple (x2)</td>
<td>medical professionals were accused of</td>
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<tr>
<td>Past perfect</td>
<td>A book was published</td>
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<td>Conditional</td>
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More activities on this topic
You’ll find links to all the following activities connected to the theme of conspiracies at: http://www.britishcouncil.org/learnenglish-central-themes-conspiracies.htm

- **Word game: Conspiracy idioms puzzle**. This jigsaw puzzle practises idioms and expressions related to conspiracies.
- **Story: The Trial**. This surreal novel by Franz Kafka is about a character named Joseph K., who awakens one morning and, for reasons that one never discovers, is arrested and subjected to the rigours of the judicial process for an unspecified crime.
- **Trivia**: Everything you (n)ever wanted to know about conspiracies.
- There is also a conspiracies-related cartoon, a poll, and some carefully selected external links.

**Answers**
**Exercise 1**: 1. c; 2. a; 3. c; 4. b; 5. b; 6. a; 7. c

**Exercise 2**:

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