

David Lammy: Washington's Man in Labour

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The likely future foreign secretary has been attending elite gatherings in the US while courting MI6 and displaying his establishment credentials on Labour's foreign and military policy, which is likely to be near-identical to the current government.

"If I become foreign secretary I will not hide my trans-Atlanticism", David Lammy [told](#) an audience at Chatham House in London in January.

"The relationships I formed as the first Black Briton to study at Harvard Law school have matured into deep bonds with many who work in Washington DC", he added.

Labour's shadow foreign secretary is unlikely to be misleading people on this score.

Since assuming the position in November 2021, Lammy has been a regular visitor to a string of elite, establishment fora in the US.

Lammy has been highlighting his credentials as Keir Starmer's man and distancing himself from the brief period when Jeremy Corbyn's Labour party challenged the establishment consensus on foreign policy.

At a [speech](#) to the Centre for American Progress in March, Lammy said "my greatest political friendship is with former president Barack Obama" whose "period in government is, I think, exemplary".

Lammy did not, however, mention Obama's policies of attacking Libya in 2011 and funding a \$1bn covert operation in Syria which propelled the country's civil war.

Lammy then spelled out his belief in the Anglo-American alliance, saying: "There is an opportunity for a progressive moment if Labour are able to govern in my country with an ideal partner in Joe Biden".

“We must take the opportunity to seize this potential for a progressive moment with our shared outlook on foreign and domestic policy having merged,” he continued. “Not just repeating the familiar rhetoric about a special relationship but forming a renewed partnership for progressive change on the world stage.”

Lammy added: “The United Kingdom’s future has always been brighter when the United States succeeds”, echoing the traditional alliance, and junior UK role, that all Labour and Tory foreign secretaries have promoted since 1945.

Bilderberg

In his speech at Chatham House, the UK establishment’s leading foreign policy ‘think tank’, Lammy also referred to “working in partnership with the intelligence and security agencies”.

This already appears in play.

Last June, Lammy attended the annual Bilderberg conference in Washington that brings together elite figures from the US and UK and their allies around the world. The secretive meetings are held in private with no publicity provided on their outcomes.

Lammy is one of only two Labour MPs who appears to have attended Bilderberg in the past decade. But what was especially eye-catching was who paid for his trip – former MI6 chief Sir John Sawers, through his consultancy company, Newbridge Advisory, of which he is the sole director.

Sawers, who ran from MI6 from 2009-14 before joining the board of oil giant BP, [compensated](#) Lammy to the tune of over £5,000 for his attendance.

Sawers [runs](#) the Bilderberg Association in the UK with three other directors, including Zanny Minton-Beddoes, the editor-in-chief of the *Economist*, a publication for which Lammy has recently [written](#).

Labour’s shadow foreign secretary was one of 120 [guests](#) at Bilderberg including Sawers himself, CIA director William Burns, GCHQ chief Jeremy Fleming, and director of the National Security Council Jake Sullivan.

Also attending were the former chair of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff Michael Mullen, and corporate figures such as the CEOs of BP, Bernard Looney, and of Shell, Ben van Beurden.

Lammy has not apparently mentioned Bilderberg in public. I requested comment from him about his attendance but did not hear back.

An American progress

A few months after Bilderberg, in November 2022, Lammy spoke at another high-level elite gathering, the Halifax International Security Forum, an organisation based in Washington but which holds an annual conference in Halifax, Canada.

The Forum [says](#) it is “widely recognized as the world’s foremost security conference for democracies” to which it invites “an array of top decision-makers, including senior military officers, cabinet-level officials, members of the US Senate, and global industry leaders”,

among others.

The Forum's board [includes](#) Mark Lippert, a former US military and White House official and Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, a former President of Croatia and NATO Assistant Secretary General.

The Forum offers a "John McCain prize for leadership in public service", named after the hawkish former US Republican senator, and has adopted a list of "China principles" to counter "China's attempts to interfere in democratic societies".

Lammy's attendance at this elite forum was followed in March 2023, by another visit to Washington to speak at the Center for American Progress. Lammy and a member of his staff were compensated to the tune of £8,667 for the visit by Washington-based National Security Action.

That organisation was formed "with the goal of opposing the destructive policies of the Trump administration while mobilizing the national security community in a moment of alarm and action", the group has [said](#).

It is largely composed of former Obama administration staffers and is [directed](#) by a former special assistant to Obama – the US administration that Lammy finds "exemplary".

Endeared to Washington

In these and other speeches, Lammy has – despite the rhetoric of needing "change" from the Tories – been signalling a deeply conservative foreign policy under Labour when it comes to national security issues.

No policy is likely to damage the US special relationship. Lammy has said, for example, Labour's support for Britain's nuclear arsenal is "unambiguous" and "total".

He also does not challenge the Conservative government's recent increase in the number of nuclear warheads nor its strategy of envisaging the use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear states.

Lammy has also repeatedly emphasised that Labour's commitment to NATO is "unshakeable" and pledges to make the UK "NATO's leading European power".

A long standing fear in Washington is that Europe, led by France, might develop a military force increasingly independent of NATO. There should be no fear of this under Lammy.

"Britain's never been signed up to the French-led concept of 'strategic autonomy' or backed a European Army", he [said](#) in a June 2022 speech to The UK In A Changing Europe group. "NATO is Europe's defence alliance. Euro-Atlantic security will remain anchored in NATO, and our commitment to the alliance is unshakeable", he reiterated.

Increasing military spending

Also certain to be welcome in Washington is Lammy's stance on military spending. The US always laments cuts in the UK armed forces and its power projection capabilities. Lammy has repeatedly [said](#) "we must strengthen our defences".

Under the Conservatives these [have](#) been “hollowed out and underfunded”, he says. Lammy [supports](#) the UK allocating 2.5% of its national income to the military, a rise over the current level.

Lammy recently [wrote](#) that during the Labour governments of 1997 to 2010 “the defence budget rose by 20 per cent in real terms during those 13 years. When Labour left office, Britain was spending 2.5 per cent of GDP on defence, a level that has never been reached since”.

He has also reiterated that “Labour would invest in AUKUS”, referring to the new military alliance between the UK, the US and Australia which aims to ‘contain’ China amid fears within the Western establishment that they are losing their global hegemony.

United in the House

On Russia and the war in Ukraine, Lammy, and Labour generally, has stood united with the Conservative government, barely questioning its strategy on any aspect.

Lammy has not, for example, raised the importance of greater transparency over UK special forces active in Ukraine, who the recipients of UK weapons might be, or concerns about the use of depleted uranium.

“On Britain’s military help to Ukraine and on reinforcing NATO allies, the Government have had and will continue to have Labour’s fullest support”, Lammy [told](#) parliament in February.

He has [tweeted](#) his abhorrence about Russia’s detention of journalist Vladimir Kara-Murza. But Lammy has never tweeted about freeing Julian Assange, incarcerated for four years in a maximum security prison just a few miles from his Tottenham constituency.

Lammy’s only apparent public mention of Assange – who is being persecuted by the US for revealing its war crimes in alliance with international newspapers – was a [tweet](#) to raise the conspiracy theory that the “whole murky spiders web world of Trump, Russia, Bannon, Mercer, Assange and Farage needs to be uncovered”.

Lammy’s foreign policy

“The rule of law will be at the heart of our approach to foreign policy”, Lammy told Chatham House.

But the former minister has been around for a long time and served under Tony Blair, in various government departments, for years during and after his leader’s illegal invasion of Iraq in 2003.

His [belief](#) in “the UK’s historic reputation for upholding international law” will come as a disappointment to anyone hoping that Starmer’s Labour government might rethink key elements of Britain’s past foreign policy.

“You only need look at history to know that we are the party that can be trusted as a force for good”, Lammy [claimed](#) during his Christian Aid annual lecture in November 2022.

But after his speech to Chatham House, a journalist [asked](#) Lammy whether he would promote an ethical foreign policy. Lammy replied by claiming that Labour supported human

rights but he added:

“The policy envelope that I set out is the policy envelope we find us in – ourselves in today, and that is not just conditioned by human rights, it’s conditioned by a whole range of issues that I’ve illustrated. And fundamentally, I think this is a moment which calls for pragmatism in relation to UK foreign policy, not ideology”.

Business as usual

What would Lammy do in office that is different to the current government? Very little, on current indications, and nothing that might displease his recent hosts and allies across the Atlantic.

He has been [seen](#) shaking hands with senior figures in the Omani and Bahraini dictatorships – two key allies of the UK establishment. He has said almost nothing about Saudi Arabia or the UK’s special relationship with Riyadh despite years of fighting their brutal war in Yemen together.

Lammy has [tweeted](#) his opposition to Israel’s illegal settlements but has been largely silent on its abuses in the occupied territories, amid a rising military and trade relationship with Britain.

He has said nothing about restricting UK arms exports to repressive regimes or about the unmissable recent deepening of UK support for such tyrannies, from Egypt to Qatar, in recent years.

In March Lammy launched a 44-page [pamphlet](#) on his prospective foreign policy published by the Fabian Society. It said nothing about UK policies towards Israel, Saudi Arabia, Egypt or arms exports. Instead, it mentioned Russia and China 59 times.

Commitments?

Lammy’s speeches contain few explicit policy commitments. He has said Labour will [conduct](#) “a complete audit of the UK-China relationship” and that “We will strengthen cooperation with the European Union with a new security pact to complement NATO’s role”.

Other commitments are similarly vague – “We will rebuild bilateral relationships with key European partners” – and, what the current government is already doing: “A Labour government will declare an open-ended campaign to reform the UN Security Council in the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine”.

Lammy sees himself as a champion of international development and has criticised the Conservative government for reducing the aid budget from 07.% to 0.5% of national income and for spending £3bn of this to cover the costs of refugees at home.

Yet even on the 0.7% figure, Lammy pledged in his Christian Aid lecture only to reach that target “as soon as possible as the fiscal situation allows” – essentially the current government’s position.

Divergence?

Barely any significant divergences from government policy can be detected.

However, Lammy has [tweeted](#) that he thinks the people of the Chagos Islands, removed by Labour and Conservative governments in the 1960s and 1970s, should be allowed to return home. It is not clear, however, if this will be his formal policy.

The one area on which Lammy's Labour could seriously challenge the establishment consensus, from current indications, is his suggestion to "end our role as a facilitator of illicit finance and cleanse our society from dirty money".

He says he doesn't only mean Russia but also "corrupt elites across the world who have used Britain and our overseas territories to hide their ill-gotten wealth under our noses".

Indeed, Lammy has said that "the fight against kleptocracy" is what "Labour's new approach looks like in a single policy".

Yet is it really likely that, when in power, Lammy and Starmer will seriously challenge the City of London, the tax havens in the overseas territories, the UK corporations and the Middle Eastern dictators benefitting from the UK's dirty money system?

Lammy might need to check first with his friends in Washington.

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