

Copyright & Permissions: David Lammy MP granted the University of London exclusive licence to use this material for (i) academic and teaching activities, (ii) research facilitation and promotion and (iii) reporting or knowledge transfer. This material, including photograph, cannot be reproduced without permission.

David Lammy MP Interview Excerpt 1 of 1

Key:

JC: Dr Juanita Cox (Interviewer)
DL David Lammy MP (Respondent)

Date/Location:

29 June 2023. Portcullis House, 1 Victoria Embankment, London SW1A 2

Bio

The Rt Hon David Lammy MP was born in the UK to parents of Guyanese heritage. He studied law at SOAS and became the first Black Briton to attend Harvard Law School, where he graduated with a Master of Laws degree in 1997. In 2000 he was elected to the London Assembly and replaced the late Bernie Grant as MP for Tottenham. Lammy played a key role in forcing the Windrush Scandal onto the political agenda with his famous speech, which described the emerging revelations as a [‘National Day of Shame’](#).

Excerpt 1 of 1 [from 36:30 – 44:07] Transcript

Keywords: Commonwealth Heads of Government, scandal, politics, prime ministers, presidents, Lenny Henry, John Bercow, Doreen Lawrence, Amelia Gentleman, Mia Goodfellow, Lee Jasper, Patrick Vernon, equality, celebrities, petition, law centres, Tottenham, Camden, Brixton, Lambeth, journalists, media, Guardian, BBC, Independent, deportation, micro-aggressions, structural racism, Windrush.

DL 36:30 [...] It culminated really because of the Commonwealth Heads of Government conference. It was that, that I certainly decided was a critical point at which this, this scandal, which was just a quiet scandal, that no one... Sometimes in politics, I'm afraid with competing news cycles and different, lots of things going on, you need a hook for the press to pick this up. And the hook was that all of these heads of governments, prime ministers and presidents were coming from the Commonwealth to London. And we understood that if we could get this onto the political agenda, it would cause maximum embarrassment to the government. Now, I had thought that the best way to do this was with the power of celebrity. And I remember standing in an airport, I was in an airport in South Africa, I was on... I was with my family in South Africa. So we were, we were... My wife's got, got South African family. We were visiting some families there. And I remember speaking to Lenny Henry, and saying, Lenny, I want you to organise a petition. This is the scandal. I'm gonna get Jack [a member of Lammy's communication staff] to send you the details. We are working with the Guardian. This is what they're doing. And he was shocked. Can you organise some black celebrities to hand in a petition to number 10 on the day that they, all the Caribbean heads arrive? Lenny said, 'Sure. Leave it

with me.' And, you know, bless him, he got going. And, and I said in the meantime, I'm going to put in for an urgent question on the first day, the first day, that was the first day after Easter I think. And, you know, when you put in for an urgent question, you don't know if it's going to be granted by the speaker. We were very fortunate the speaker was John Bercow. And John, lots of people have got a lot to say about speaker Bercow. But I believe on issues of equality, he was very sound indeed. And so he selected my urgent question. And so in the end, Bernie [Lammy means Lenny] didn't need to text celebrities because suddenly I was number one on the news. I got the urgent question, maximum problem. All the press beyond the media picked it up. BBC, the papers picked it up. And suddenly, and then the, the heads of government from the Caribbean were outraged. Theresa May had to... It all became a big storm basically, when Bernie did, sorry... Lenny did subsequently say several things at the time, about Windrush. There was a... Doreen Lawrence had a had a commemorative service for the, for the anniversary of the murder of Stephen Lawrence. And I remember him being rather provocative in his speech that made the news. So Lenny, Lenny and others played their part but, but but I think it was the Commonwealth Heads of Government, my speech through that urgent question being granted and of course, the, the, Amelia Gentleman, Mia Goodfellow in the, in the Independent put that work, that really, it all came together.

JC 40:32 Did you have any contact with people like Patrick Vernon?

DL 40:37 Patrick Vernon had been had been on this. And we did have contact with Patrick, of course. I shouldn't exclude Patrick, but... at all. There's no buts. Patrick was on it.

JC 40:49 I was just trying to work out whether you're saying that Lenny was getting celebrities together to form a petition. And I'm wondering if that petition is, is connected to the petition that Patrick Vernon had asking for an amnesty?

DL 41:08 Might well be, might well be. You may have connected the two. I can't remember. Might well be or that... No, no, that may have been a bit later. No Patrick's petition was later, because Patrick's petition, I'm pretty sure was more focused on deportation. I might be wrong.

JC 41:24 I think the very first petition that Patrick had...

DL 41:34 I have to say Patrick is the King of petitions. What I should say, what, what I think is important to say is many of us have been working on Windrush cases in different ways. And it's right to say that we have senior activists like Patrick Vernon. People like Lee Jasper. We had law centres in Tottenham, in Camden, in Brixton, Lambeth Law Centre, all working our way at this. Feeding up what they're beginning to see to journalists like Amelia Gentleman. So this, this has been bubbling along for years. But the truth was, it had never broken out as a scandal in a public sense. Until that moment. Now, I believed I have to say, slightly cynical David Lammy, believed it was only going to be the power of celebrity that could get it up to that category, which is why I was on the phone to Lenny Henry. I didn't even believe that one, my urgent question would be granted, and even if it was granted, it would be, quite become what it became. But I was wrong. It did. Now that, you know, some people have talked about the speech I gave, but I always say, I don't know if I did give the speech. I open my mouth and out of my mouth, my ancestors, came. And the best way to see that is if you lay down with dogs you get fleas at the end of it, that was not me. That was my, that was my mother. So there was something a bit spiritual about it, with those heads of government coming. So what is really important

for me to emphasise is the work around this scandal had been going on for many, many years, with many, many people working at this on the ground. That's happening every day of the week, really, ever since the Windrush landed: that there are quiet indignities, micro aggressions, structural racism. It's going on every day, and people are fighting. It doesn't get the, it doesn't get the coverage, because we're talking about a minority within minority community. The system often doesn't see, doesn't care, doesn't know. And in a way we ought to see things like Windrush as like the tip of the iceberg, really. Because the more you pick away, the more you look, the more there is actually. It's just not quite documented, not covered, not understood in the way that it sometimes should be.