



# ‘The greatest skill is to listen’

**David Lammy** was appointed Shadow Secretary of State for Justice and Shadow Lord Chancellor in April 2020. He is MP for Tottenham. Huw Spanner interviewed him on Skype for High Profiles.

## How did your upbringing shape you as a man?

Initially, it was this parochial, working-class upbringing in inner-city Tottenham, in a very West Indian home. Wider England was a mysterious thing. At primary school, all the teachers were white. It was a tough atmosphere – there were quite a lot of fights.

Then, aged 10 I won a choral scholarship to the King’s School in Peterborough. I was so fortunate – it makes me emotional thinking about it – to go to such a wonderful school with wonderful teachers and wonderful facilities.

I was privileged – and yet it was tough psychologically. I was much more aware of racism in Peterborough, and then there was suddenly this huge impostor syndrome that you experience when you’re working-class, because you don’t know how to hold your knife and fork properly.

The contrast between Tottenham and Peterborough is what first opened my eyes to the very idea of injustice. I saw that there was a different Britain and I wanted some of it.

## Tell me about your parents.

My dad was a taxidermist and his factory was a wonderful place to roam as a child, with the smell of chemicals and these huge animals that he was building. He was a very creative and ambitious man, but he was a very poor businessman.

My mother was shy, but she was very aspirant for her kids and she believed very strongly in education as a route out to success. She’d left school at 14 or 15 and I think she desperately wished that she could have stayed on.

## What sort of values did they instil in you?

I was encouraged to have a degree of self-belief. I was very ambitious, with a determination to succeed against the odds.



My father was unusual for a West Indian of his era, very comfortable with different kinds of people. He loved to invite people back to our home.

My mother and my father were quite strong Christians at this Anglo-Catholic church where they felt at home. That’s the tradition they were from in Guyana. I’ve always retained my Christian values.

## How did the departure of your father when you were 12 affect you?

I felt lost for years, deeply inadequate, a powerful sense of shame. I think that, as a young black man, not having a powerful male figure was really dislocating for me. It was a wound that I carried around well into my twenties.

I did search out lots of others to fill the void – teachers, youth workers, uncles, wonderful people who were happy for me to latch onto them, thank God.

**You mentioned your Christian values. You said recently 'God for me is cultural.' What did you mean by that?**

I'm not in the business of forcing my faith down anybody else's throat. When I'm in a church, it locates me in something of my family, in those early years in Peterborough as a cathedral chorister; and those are comforting feelings.

My Christian faith has given me a sense of self. Politics is a rough and tough game, to be honest, and you can lose yourself, to alcohol and drugs. I think I would have struggled if I just located my sense of self in the *Guardian*. I need a little bit more than that.

Being a minority is always a bit of a challenge: there are burdens and scars that we carry, some of which are hard even to talk about. But the way that I have coped is by holding on to those bits of my identity that are located in very solid places.

**Is identity a zero-sum game? You identify as Guyanese but are you less English as a result? Or can you be fully both?**

It occurred to me that I was *English* [in my twenties] when I was apparently at a very successful point of my life, working in a California law firm after graduating from Harvard. I had this office that looked over the Pacific but I missed Ribena and Walkers crisps and rugby fields and the BBC, and all the things I cherished. I was the loneliest I've ever been in my life and I had to come home.

It's a huge privilege to serve in the House of Commons: you can't really do the job unless there's quite a big [part] of you that loves your country and the people that you rub up against. I've always said that I could only ever have been the MP for Tottenham or Peterborough, really, because that sense of place means a lot to me.

I went back to Peterborough for my new book, *Tribes: How Our Need to Belong Can Make or Break the Good Society* (Constable 2020), and I spent a lot of time with folk who are zealous Brexiteers – and zealous Conservative voters, many of them – but they still adore me and I adore them!

Tottenham is on the map because we've got a great football team, yes, but also because of the riots [in 1985 and 2011]. So one of the things it's important to me to hold on to, that empowers me to speak up on behalf of the people I represent, is an understanding of being powerless, of being written out of the story, of having to hold on to your stories or they're quickly erased and forgotten.

**The subtitle of your book suggests that 'our need to belong can make or break society' ...**

There is, I think, a new tribalism in society today – I don't think anyone would dispute that Britain feels more polarised now than it has for many years.

I'm now into the last third of my political career. The first ten years was a time of consensus. I was the MP for Tottenham but I had a lot in common with MPs from Middle England. Cool Britannia was the theme. This second period has been way more divisive, particularly the last five years, from Farage to Trump. The murder of Jo Cox – oh God! It's been tough.

**You have said that you were very ambitious. Why did you go into the law?**

Well, I knew that I had the gift of the gab; I'm not sure I had much else. What I can do is consume information and deploy it. I like being an advocate on behalf of people and getting their voice heard.

**So, why did you then go into politics?**

I know it sounds a little bit *worthy* that I wanted to help people, but that was quite a strong motivation.

Also, I would be the youngest MP; I've experienced lots of firsts – the first black cathedral chorister, the first black head boy at my school, the first black Briton to study at Harvard Law School – that had become quite addictive.

I was determined that I wasn't going to have a small life. I wanted to be somebody.

**When the Guardian asked you in 2018 why you were not on the front benches, you said 'Go and ask the white men who run my party.'**

I was slightly irritated. Look at what I've achieved from the back benches. If you look at the major debates of the last five years – Brexit, Grenfell, Windrush – I've been at the centre of all of them. The only politicians who have a larger social media following than me have either led their party or are leading it. I've had quite a lot of power – because that's what being in the House of Commons gives you if you know how to use it on behalf of those you've come to represent.

I've made my values really clear. My politics lies between Tottenham and Peterborough. I have an instinct for the underdog: the dispossessed, the poor, the deprived. I *hate* injustice. I care a lot about social justice and I'm interested in *power*.

Most of my constituents don't have a platform. They're bullied and shoved around in terms of their employment, their housing. They're people that go to work late at night and come home early in the morning, often. They're people like my mother, like folk in my wider family. And I'm damn well going to use the platform I have on their behalf.

I'm never, ever, on behalf of my ethnic group, going to deny the truth of the evils of white supremacy, and those who think it's fine to promote such ideas. As the descendant of enslaved people, I don't take white supremacy lightly. I'm deadly serious about the challenges I see in our country. Hate crime is rising, prejudice is growing, and there are politicians that are stoking it. There are aspects of One-Nation Conservatism that I can identify with, particularly as a Christian; but that is not what we're seeing [now]. It has to be fought, pretty aggressively.

**What do you think is the most important quality in a politician?**

People think it's the ability to deliver a great speech, but it's not. The greatest skill is to *listen* and to really understand.

**Is there life for you outside of politics?**

I love the cinema and the theatre. I'm in love with my wife but I'm also in love with her art. My three children matter to me hugely. And Spurs means the world to me. I haven't got that many memories of my father, but I remember him taking me to watch Spurs and what it was like in the 1970s to scream and shout and not get into trouble. It was just amazing. I still enjoy that.

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