



► State: A Last Resort for People

Exclusive interview with Dr. Syed Kamall

Conducted by Bardia Garshashi in London– July 2014

Syed Kamall is a phenomenon in his own right. He comes from an ordinary Guyanese family who migrated to London in mid-1950s. His father was a bus driver, and now at the age of 47, he is the leader of the Britain's Conservative Party in the European Parliament, representing the people of London in that parliament since 2005, when he was only 38!

Having degrees from some of the world's most prestigious universities (London School of Economics and City University London) Dr. Kamall also chairs the European Conservatives and Reformist Group, the EU Parliament's third largest group with 70 MEPs who are campaigning for urgent reform of the EU and of whom Syed is, as he proudly puts it, "the first group leader from an ethnic minority and the first Muslim ever".

Dr. Kamall is one of the few successful and highly educated politicians in Europe who does not come from an elite background or rich family. His path to success has been uphill and demanding. He has firsthand knowledge of the challenges low-income families are facing in their daily lives. That is why the relief of poverty has always been a top priority for him. He works tirelessly to find ways to tackle poverty by educating the young and by creating incentives and equal opportunities for hard-working people. His constituents in London and his peers in both Britain and Europe know him for his intelligence, decency, and eloquence. He is an articulate defender of free markets, education, property rights and equal opportunities for all.

We thought of interviewing Dr. Kamall at probably the most unsuitable time one can approach a politician for an interview – i.e. during the general election of the European Parliament in mid-May. Yet despite being extremely busy, he accepted our request with exemplary modesty, and patiently answered all our questions. So we take this opportunity to once again thank Syed Kamall very much for his time. We are also very grateful to his kind assistants in their offices in London and Brussels, especially Rachel Stone and Zara Colville, who helped us conduct this interview.

Bardia: For a start, will you please share some of your life story with our readers? I'm particularly fascinated by your remarkable journey from the son of a Guyanese immigrant family to the Leader of the British Conservative Party in the European Parliament. How could you achieve that?

Kamall: My father came over to Britain in the 1950s to make a better life for himself and his family. I was raised in North London and my father worked as a London bus driver. From a very young age my parents taught us that there are no limits to what you can achieve in life if you work hard, believe in God and believe in yourself. This principle has served me well as I progressed through life.

My father was interested in politics and used to follow most political programmes. He used to tell me about conversations he had with many of his bus passengers, including academics. He was once invited to speak at a political conference by students but turned it down. He believed, as I do, that you can pursue a political career as a platform to highlight the causes in which you believe. We discussed how to fight prejudice and to empower individuals to overcome barriers. He would often say "you can become the light to show others the way."

It wasn't an easy journey. After joining the Conservatives in 1987, I lost 5 elections and numerous candidate selection meetings until I was elected in 2005. But each time I lost, I picked myself up, dusted myself off and tried again. I once read that the sign of a good man or woman is the one who gets up that one more time they are knocked down. I was elected as an MEP for London in 2005 and I was fortunate to have been elected as the Leader of the Conservatives in the European Parliament in November 2013. In June 2014, I was elected as Chairman of the European Conservatives and Reformist Group. The first group leader from an ethnic minority and the first Muslim ever.

Bardia: What sociopolitical and cultural qualities and institutions do you see in Great Britain that make achievements and success stories like that of your own possible?

Kamall: I feel very privileged to have been brought up in London. I believe it is the best city in the world and its diversity and acceptance of so many different cultures and faiths inspires me each day. I believe Great Britain to be a tolerant and open society and that is why I have been able to achieve the political goals I have.

Bardia: In the political discourse of the last 150 years or so, the subject of poverty and the less fortunate has been viewed as the exclusive territory of the Left. In fact, it is universally agreed that only the Left cares for the needy and has plans to tackle the problem of poverty (through the system of welfare state, taxation etc.) From a political standpoint, you are the complete opposite of the Left, and yet, you're renowned for your devotion to the subject of penury and its relief. Please tell us about your observations and experiences in this field and how your approach to tackle the problem of poverty differs from that of the Left.

Kamall: I believe that both the left and the right have failed the poor. The left, in their desire to tackle poverty, have taken away the desire to help oneself and we see people trapped in poverty and completely reliant on the state to look after their needs. The right instead roll back the state in the belief that people will help themselves, and while many do, too many others are stranded without the help and skills they desperately need to help themselves.

My view is that the state should be seen as the last resort and not the first resort and as a trampoline to catch and lift back up people who have fallen on hard times. It can play an important part in people's lives temporarily. However, it is ultimately up to individuals and

communities themselves to make the decisions that govern their lives. I think it is important that people are equipped with the necessary skills and support to live their lives to the full, with the knowledge that the state is there for those people who genuinely need it.

I am passionately interested in how individuals and local communities tackle, and solve, the problems that society on the whole scratches its head about. People every day are helping themselves, and each other, quietly and unassumingly. I regularly meet with a variety of projects who in their own way make life better for the residents in their community and I would like to see this happen on a much wider scale. I believe the solution ultimately rests with a bottom up approach, and not the top down state that the left offers, but to complement the trickle down of wealth that the right advocate.

Bardia: What part has your Muslim faith played in the development of your political views and the policies you support?

Kamall: The essence of Islam to me is the personal relationship between the individual and God, rather than hierarchies between them. This demonstrates to me the importance of being responsible and accountable for our own actions. I therefore believe in a free market, an education system that inspires children to be whatever it is that they want to be and in a society that encourages people to be accountable for their own actions and take charge of their own lives.

I also take much from the sentence from in the quran 'Lakum dinukum wa-liya dini', which means 'Unto you is your religion/belief/faith and unto me is mine. Tolerance and understanding are integral to my beliefs and at the heart of what I do as a politician.

Bardia: What are your views on Globalization? Do you think countries like Iran would benefit from joining the globalization trend? Is there anything to gain in a competition where, technologically, your rivals are far ahead of you?

Kamall: Globalization is happening whether we like it or not. It is a fact of modern day life and countries can both adapt and embrace the opportunities it offers up, or to ignore it and



ultimately be left by the way side as other countries develop and grow at their expense.

It makes no sense for Iran to shut itself off from this because other countries are more advanced at the moment. The point of new technology is that it is fast moving and constantly changing. We can see today developing countries who are

far more advanced in certain areas of technological development than the western world. It is important to be a part of this trend and not a by-stander.



Bardia: *Some argue that in order to live in a more open and globalized world it is inevitable for countries to form and enter trading blocs. You are the leader of Britain's ruling party in the parliament of one of the world's most famous trading blocs, the EU. But then, you are a politician known for his Euro-sceptic views, who wants to see either Britain out this trading bloc or the terms of the bloc changed substantially. Would you please explain about your visions of a global market and a world of free trade without trading blocs?*

Kamall: Prior to being a politician I used to lecture on international trade. One of the common myths of trade is that countries trade with each other. In fact, it is people and businesses in one country that trade with people and businesses in other countries for mutual benefit. Governments can either get in the way or get out of the way. Trade blocs can facilitate the lowering of barriers to trade between companies in countries of that bloc but also put up barriers between them. Blocs are not necessary for trade. There are many companies from Britain that trade with companies in the USA even though they are not in a bloc together.

I think the EU needs to approach the way it sets the terms of trade differently if we are to make more progress in opening markets and facilitating economic growth. Rather than trying to fuse together sets of rules and standards that are becoming ever more complex, we should be looking to mutual recognition of each others' rules and standards where possible. In the 21st century, the case for open international trade is stronger than ever. A border used to impose additional costs such as tariffs, time costs due to border delays and costs associated with country differences such as language, legal systems or culture. Now, many of the traditional and additional costs associated with international trade are falling away. Through the internet and international legal frameworks enforced by institutions like the WTO, we are learning to connect and trust each other, transaction by transaction, wherever we happen to be geographically based.

Bardia: *The majority of the news reflected in Iran's newspapers on a daily basis concern economic issues such as interest rates, food prices, and subsidies. There is a growing demand for government to intensify its controls over the prices of essential commodities, from wheat to petrol. Any call for easing these controls is interpreted as a lack of care for the lowest-income families who suffer the most from the usual price hikes immediately following an easing-up of price controls. Should a call for reducing government intervention in a heavily subsidized economy like Iran be regarded as a lack of care for the most needy?*

Kamall: In a word, no. I would argue that it is responsible governance to call for easing controls over the price of essential commodities, especially when the country is facing rising

inflation. In a heavy subsidized economy you are essentially trapping families into a co-dependent relationship with the state. This is not what I believe the role of the state to be. I believe people should call on the state as a last resort not the first, and by subsidizing the economy the state is intervening in the first instance without allowing people the freedom to make their own decisions. It can also cause detrimental problems to the everyday lives of hard working families if the government of the day calls it wrong. Such heavy handed control of a countries economy ultimately threatens the freedom of the people it is there to serve.

Bardia: You have worked and published extensively on the subjects of management and telecommunication policies. How important are telecommunications to development, and what lessons could Iran learn from other countries that help them in this area?

Kamall: There is a clear relationship between economic growth and telecommunications infrastructure. Iran should ensure there is a competitive market open to local and international companies.

Bardia: As one of the most high profile politicians in the European Parliament, what are your general views about Iran and its people, and what do you think is the best way forward for the EU in general and Britain in particular to improve relations with Iran?

Kamall: Again this goes back to my general view that a thriving and healthy society is a tolerant and understanding one. I think the key to forging good relations between Iran and the EU is by keeping the communication channels open and flowing and by mutually respecting each other's cultures. In 2013 a delegation from the European Parliament visited Tehran and I think this willingness to engage in a dialogue is important.

If the Iranian government should address many of the concerns expressed in Britain and the EU, there could be better relations between them.

Bardia: Dr Kamall, I should thank you again for taking the time to answer our questions for this interview and I wish you success in life and politics.

Kamall: I too wish you and your magazine success.

