
Interview: Baroness Lynda Chalker

On the future of U.S.-British relations and the political crisis in Africa

The following interview with Lady Lynda Chalker of Walseley, Minister of Overseas Development, was done on April 1 by Scott Thompson. As Minister of Overseas Development, Baroness Chalker is the British case officer for Africa policy, and has avowed her close relationship to Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni. According to a spokesman for the British Monarchy's Privy Council, of which Baroness Chalker is a member, the Council relies directly on Chalker for the implementation of its policies. Baroness Chalker's Overseas Development Fund, the U.S. Agency for International Development (AID), and the Save the Children Fund recently held a three-day conference in London on the Great Lakes region of Africa.

Q: There are three parts to my inquiries with you. I've been doing a series on the U.S.-U.K. special relationship still being alive—

Chalker: Oh yes, very much so.

Q: As you know, it's been up and down over the years. It probably reached its high point when Dr. Kissinger said at Chatham House in 1982 that during his incarnation in the White House, he kept the Foreign Office more fully informed and more closely engaged than he did the U.S. State Department.

Chalker: I think that was a slight exaggeration, but never mind. I wasn't in the Foreign Office in '82.

Q: Anyway, the British press attaché to Her Majesty's Embassy in Washington said that you were one of the people who come to the United States frequently, and help keep the special relationship alive.

Chalker: Yes. Well, we have a lot of common interests.

Q: I would like to know if you can tell me who some of the people are within the Clinton administration with whom you discuss policy and practice?

Chalker: Well, quite a range of people, going through the current undersecretary at the State Department, Tim Wirth; George Moose. Certainly, I have had dealings with others. I've gotten to know Madeleine Albright through our work on Bosnia, in which I've been the constant factor in the British

relationship with you. Certainly, at a working level, many other people in the NSC [National Security Council], from Tony Lake downward. I've not met his successor at NSC, simply because there wasn't time when I was over for three days last. I also, of course, look after the IMF [International Monetary Fund], the World Bank, and the UN. So, I'm seeing not only State, but particularly people working in those three institutions.

I see a whole range of people who have an interest in South Africa, particularly, because [I have] 10-11 years experience dealing with them. Basically, we're talking very much about how to develop the ability of countries to stand on their own two feet, to have good government, and to work on a productive partnership basis. And, obviously I talk to U.S. AID.

Q: Now, are there any people in Congress that have been particularly helpful?

Chalker: Well, let's see. [Sen. Nancy] Kassebaum did. She was tremendous. And, over the years, many others. Sorry, you're asking me to dig into my memory bank, and I'm afraid I have an early onset of Alzheimer's when people ask questions. The foreign affairs key people. Robert, ah, it begins with an "L." He's retired now. Matthias, he retired some time ago. There really are a range of people, but they come and they go, depending upon the issue. Obviously, those who have been trying to get some balance in the debate over foreign aid and politics. The Republican majority committee. I'm sorry, I should have dug out all of my reports.

Basically, the thing is, that I have asked, as time permitted on my visits, to talk to the key people who either are standing in the way of progress or who had a hang-up on something, where I thought an exchange of practical views, practical experience, would actually help things forward. And, on one occasion when Vice President Gore was over here, I had quite a good chat with him about development in Africa, in which he is very interested. Down in Rio, I talked with all the key people, while I was down there. But, you know, the contacts are as we need them to do the business. They are not a very chummy-chummy thing. But, they do make business a lot easier to do, because most of the characters know me, and I know them, except when I'm

asked direct questions on a phone line and I'm not prepared for it. I'm sorry. I'm being silly, but I just should have done a bit more homework. I think it's going to be a bad day today.

Q: Now, Baroness Cox has a lot to do with human rights questions—

Chalker: Yes.

Q: She works with both government and private individuals in the United States, through her Christian Solidarity International—

Chalker: Um, hum.

Q: Are there private individuals with whom you collaborate on Africa in the United States, like Randall Robinson, or somebody like that?

Chalker: Not directly, although I have met and had contact with a number of such people. We work very much in this country through the non-governmental organizations. We work also with the leaders of those, and some of the international writers on those issues, we try to keep well abreast of all the human rights issues, political development issues, as well as development issues.

Q: It seems that the United States has heretofore paid too little attention to the question of Africa. I would like to ask you some questions on this for our readers here. First, the situation in Central Africa is undergoing a dramatic change. There is a question whether Zaire will be partitioned. Do you see it being partitioned, and, if so, how?

Chalker: No, but I think that the best way for Zaire to resolve its problems is to have a government of national unity or transition, to bring together some of the younger, newer politicians from the different parts of the country, and the different viewpoints.

Q: Would you see Kabila's rebel forces as being part of that?

Chalker: Oh, yes. They would need to be part of it. They wouldn't be the whole, but they would certainly be part of it.

Q: There is also a war going on against Sudan. How do you think things are going there now?

Chalker: I'm a lot bleaker about Sudan, strangely, than I am about Zaire, because I think that the control that the NIF [governing National Islamic Front] has over everything is making it very difficult for people who might want to participate in an open democracy, to do so. The SPLA [Sudanese People's Liberation Army] continues their advance. While I have no particular brief for the SPLA and [its leader John] Garang, one can understand why they are doing it when you see the attitude of the Khartoum government. [Sudanese President Omar al] Bashir is perhaps not the key man. There are others behind him who decide what is going on.



Baroness Lynda Chalker.

Q: Do you then believe that it is sheer propaganda that the Khartoum government has stopped the advance of the invasion in the South?

Chalker: Yes. I'm not geographically responsible for Sudan, but because developmentally, I've had to give emergency aid over all the eight years I've been minister here, I've had to try to talk things out. I've met Bashir. I've met Garang. I'm afraid I see that country as going on having big problems for a considerable time.

Q: There was just a regional summit in Nairobi, Kenya. This was a key summit for the Central Lakes region. Who do you think is capable of taking leadership for the region? Nelson Mandela appears to have tried and failed.

Chalker: I would not say he failed. This is something that will take a great deal of time to resolve. It's a little bit like the time it took to get a resolution on the problems in Mozambique. We had years, literally, of negotiations to resolve the problems in Mozambique. I think it is going to take a long time to resolve the problems in Central Africa, particularly in Zaire itself. And, I don't think any of us should expect miracles overnight. What one has to do is see an end to the killing, the arms dealing, and to the breakdown of law and order. It's in the next period that law and order must be established, and then a democratic government established, and that's what we donors should be doing.

Q: Do you see anyone who, as Nelson Mandela played the role in South Africa, would play that role in the Central Africa peace process?

Chalker: Well, I think it will happen in different ways in the different parts of the whole area. Zaire will need to take people from its different geographical areas and different viewpoints and team them together. Rwanda is probably going to continue to be relatively peaceful, as long as we continue to help them with the assimilation of the returnees. Burundi is the one that worries me most. . . . Sorting out the Burundi problem, which is a country much smaller than Zaire as a whole, may prove to take longer than Zaire.

Q: Do you think that the problems are so great that there should be greater intervention by the United Nations. Is that possible?

Chalker: Well, intervention by the UN or anybody who makes up the UN, can only be successful if there is actually a climate which is one of ceasing hostilities and then preparing them to build peace. One of the reasons why I have, in a sense, some more hope about Zaire than I have about small, difficult Burundi, is that there is a will for peace by a lot of people in Zaire. A much greater number, whereas I think people in Burundi are much more entrenched against it.

Q: It seems that none of the powers really want to become involved in a major way through the United Nations.

Chalker: No, it's not that they don't want to, but they are realistic. And, a lot of countries, their electorates—you have only a semi-democratic Kenya and a semi-democratic Uganda—but, what they don't see is that they should be explaining to their electorates why their own soldiers might get killed, if you put them into a country that doesn't want peace itself. And, this is why the UN special representative in the area is absolutely right. . . .

Q: Should there be regional bodies?

Chalker: Well, you've got the building up of regional bodies. I don't think you can force it. I think one of the things we don't and should be doing is to help the OAU [Organization of African Unity] to prepare more to take some positions that a regional body can actually help with. You look at West Africa; you can see the example of Ecowas [Economic Community of West African States], that has actually tried to help the countries' buildup. Now, they haven't been 100% successful. You have the tragedies of Liberia, Sierra Leone, and we have problems in Nigeria. But, Ecowas has done a lot of good for West African countries. But, you can only have that, it will only succeed, with a willingness to accept that when the governments come to a decision to do something that will get implemented. That means having responsive government in the country, but also accountable government in the country.

Q: There's an idea being floated—speaking of regional bodies like the OAU—to create a peacekeeping force in Africa that would be under the command of the UN Security Council. How do you think this would work?

Chalker: Well, I think it could work. And, we and others have been involved in building up skills of African peacekeepers in their own countries. We have held a number of seminars with military and political figures in Ghana, in Cameroon, in East Africa, as well to look at how we build up the ability of Africans to police their own country, and countries. But, particularly if there is an outbreak of terrible fighting, you have to have a Chapter Seven Resolution from the UN, which would lead back to those Africans. And, it may be that the donor nations need to do more as donors with the provision of equipment or, indeed, it may be airlifting troops, something like that. But, there is a greater willingness in Africa now than when I came to do the Africa job over 11 years ago, to help themselves. They just need a bit more support.

Q: So, you are talking about giving technical assistance in order to bring together such a force.

Chalker: That's right. And, that's what I find. . . . I think it's very important. . . . I mean, your country had a really bad experience in Somalia. Not only because of the technical situation, that I think was not fully understood before they went in. But, also, because there was no real willingness to have peace in Somalia at that time. Yes, thousands of babies and old people were kept alive by having tremendous forces, but the mission went into a country not really ready to receive it. Now, in Haiti, you worked extremely hard to make sure in that much smaller area, the Haitians could actually accept—there was a will for peace, there was a will to actually calm the whole situation down. Unfortunately, in Mogadishu, particularly, there wasn't.

Q: Now, my last question about Africa, before I move into the future of the world in general is, what kinds of reforms do you think need to be carried out in African countries in general for them to stabilize?

Chalker: Oh, golly. Well, first of all, economic reform, which is beginning to happen. First of all, structural adjustments that take account of the social needs and development needs of the country. That is, the government of the country concerned must put money—basic health care, basic education, not doing it all for them but, at the same time—the payback of the balance-of-payments which it gets from donors, through the proper structural adjustment program. The second thing is building up the Parliament, democracy, and the openness, the openness and transparency of [being] accountable, because the government has to be seen. And, different countries need a bit more of this and a bit less of that, so they all need capacity building: the ability to manage their own resources.

Q: In terms of the world in general—if you take the situation in Africa, where hundreds and hundreds of people are dying each day—what sorts of developments do you think need to take place in the world in general for there to be a future for the children and grandchildren of ourselves into future generations?

Chalker: Well, I think one needs a partnership between the donors and the African countries, one-by-one, a tailor-made program to fit the needs of that country. In nearly every one of those—certainly where there has been a great deal of drought—one needs not only very substantial water programs, health programs, education programs, and also food security programs, and above all one needs a boundary planning program: a voluntary boundary planning program.

Q: What about infrastructure and industry? Do you see these as two key questions for these countries, or, do you think it is too early to become engaged in such activity?

Chalker: Well, some infrastructure is very necessary, because where we're getting good development of vegetable and food crops, which are good for export; hence you need the lorries and at least a modicum of road to take those perishable goods to an airport to transport those goods out of Africa, to markets that are crying out for them. So, a great deal of basic infrastructure needs to be maintained. There is also the need for the use of dams, in order to build up the water that can be saved. I mean, in general I don't like flooding land, but at times, unless the water is collected and sanitation properly done, you are going to have crisis after crisis.

Q: Would you consider such things as desalination or reverse flows of rivers?

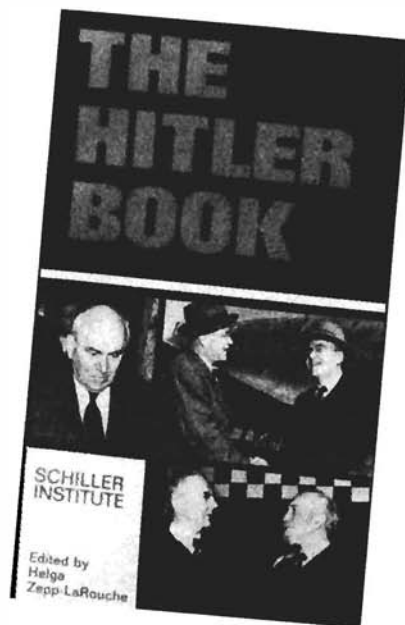
Chalker: I think one has to look at the potential of the river basin very, very carefully before you start to reverse its flow, because you can actually change the whole ecology. I am very keen that we protect the environment.

Q: You may not be in a position to say much about this—although you are in the House of Lords and a minister. I'm certain you've given consideration in Britain of the princes that would become the future kings of the British Empire. And, I was wondering if you have given any thought to the kind of education you would like to see them have, in order to be able to deal with the sorts of problems that will emerge in the forthcoming period?

Chalker: Well, the most effective education for anybody who would take a leadership role—whether they be royal or normal like us—is actually to get out in these countries and actually see what is the example, what is being done, what can be done, what needs to be done, and getting advice from people who have managed effectively to improve the situation for large numbers of people in their own countries.

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