

# Britain: Cash for access scandal dogs Blair's Middle East envoy

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Over the last weeks there have been allegations that the multi-millionaire businessman Lord Levy has been paid up to £250,000 over a three year period, by the Australian shopping-centre group Westfield to provide access to ruling circles in Britain. Levy claims the payments were for business consultancy regarding Westfield's expansion drive in Britain and not for political access.

Levy is a key player within the government. He is often described as Labour's chief fundraiser and has procured millions in donations for Prime Minister Tony Blair's private office. He also acts as Blair's personal envoy to the Middle East. Coinciding with his three-year service for the company, he made 45 trips to 19 countries in the Middle East.

There were accusations that Lord Levy did not register his income from Westfield. But it was subsequently reported that his contract with the company was terminated the day before new rules concerning the registration of peers were enacted, enabling Levy to claim he has done nothing wrong legally. This is not the first time that Levy has been accused of financial wrongdoing. In 2000 he came under criticism for his tiny tax bill of just £5,000 during one tax year. At that time as well, legally Lord Levy had done nothing wrong.

A public discussion over the question of whether what Levy's conduct was legally above board, or even whether he was giving access to politicians or not becomes almost a side issue, however.

Once again, the degree to which Labour has become enmeshed with big business figures has been vividly demonstrated—adding to the pervading stench of corruption emanating from a government many already believe is for sale to the highest bidder. The timing of this latest scandal is especially bad for Blair, since there

has been a string of allegations of political favouritism involving Labour Party donors.

On the question of providing access, moreover, whatever he might say, having Lord Levy on the books automatically provides contacts with the highest echelons of government—for these are the circles in which he mixes.

The head of Westfield's UK arm, Peter Allen, admitted freely that the company regards access to governing circles as essential for their plans to expand in Britain. Allan has said that he has been to "different Labour Party events at Downing Street," and that the company spends a "long time working with local authorities and central government in terms of building and developing relationships, which should bode well in getting planning permission."

He told an undercover investigative reporter, "I'm developing relationships with ministers within the DTI (Department of Trade and Industry) and other departments on a one-to-one basis. A relationship in the UK comes down to my influence with the central government."

What has been given less attention is the question of what Lord Levy's leading political role reveals about Labour policy in the Middle East. Levy is a prominent Zionist who counts former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak as his personal friend and tennis partner. He is a leading member of such organisations as the Jewish Agency and the Joint Israel Appeal. Levy also has a business and a house in Israel and his son worked for the former Israeli justice minister under Barak.

Even if his business practices are impeccable, the media virtually ignored the obvious question: what is a man whose political outlook is so clearly pro-Zionist doing as a special envoy to the region? After all the Blair government claims to be impartial and even

handed in Israel's conflict with the Palestinians.

There has been only one serious article on the relationship between Levy's appointment as Blair's Middle East envoy and Labour's tacit support for Israel—by John Pilger, entitled, "Blair's disguised support for Sharon and the Zionist project", reprinted in the *New Statesman* January 14, 2002.

Pilger claims that British support for Israel repression has accelerated under Blair and he backs this up by hard facts. "Last year alone, the government approved 91 arms export licences to Israel, in categories that included ammunition, bombs, torpedoes, rockets, missiles, combat vessels, military electronic and imaging equipment and armoured vehicles."

The article notes that according to the authoritative Jane's Foreign Report, "Britain and France had given 'the green light' to Sharon to attack Arafat if the Palestinian resistance did not stop. The British government was shown a plan for an all-out Israeli invasion and reoccupation of the West Bank and Gaza 'using the latest F-16 and F-15 jets against all the main installations of the Palestinian Authority [and] 30,000 men or the equivalent of a full army'."

According to the Palestine Solidarity Campaign, the British Labour Party took a full-page advertisement in the *Jewish Chronicle* last year to boast of its support for Israel. The advertisement read, "Since 1997 a record 57 Labour MPs have visited Israel, mostly with Labour Friends of Israel, swelling the number of MPs willing to ensure balance on the Middle East in the House of Commons. More Labour MPs have visited Israel than from any other party."

The advertisement explained, "Trade between Britain and Israel has grown incredibly by 20 percent, while there have been 34 official trade missions to Israel from the UK since 1997. The unique BRITECH agreement means there is now a £15.5 million joint fund to encourage cooperation between British and Israeli hi-tech industries in research and development for their own benefit."

Blair has stood by Lord Levy, not simply because he is a cash cow for the party who can rake-in millions due to his business connections, but because his Mideast role sends a signal to the Israeli government, Britain and Israel's main ally, the Bush administration in the United States, as well as many of Labour's key financial backers who are to be found amongst the

highest echelons of British Zionism, that Britain will not stand in the way of Sharon's offensive against the Palestinians, whatever its occasional public criticisms.



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