

# Insubstantial Men

By Theodore Dalrymple

In 2014, the man who is now in charge of Britain's foreign policy, David Lammy, then 42, [appeared on a television quiz show](#). He was asked, among other things, for the surname of the couple whose first names were Pierre and Marie who won the Nobel Prize for their research into radiation.



“Antoinette,” he replied. Evidently, he thought that Pierre Antoinette had won a Nobel Prize.

Asked for the name of the fortress built in the 1370s to defend the gates of Paris that was later used by Cardinal Richelieu to imprison enemies, he replied, “Versailles.”

Asked where the “Rose” revolution that had overthrown the government of Edouard Shevardnadze took place, he replied, “Yugoslavia.”

Asked for the successor to Henry VIII, he reflected for a moment and replied, “Henry VII.”

Lammy was by then a graduate both of London University's

School of African and Oriental Studies and of Harvard Law School.

Commentary is both redundant and impossible. I can't help thinking of what Karl Kraus, the Viennese satirist, said of Hitler: "When the name 'Hitler' is mentioned, nothing occurs to me." For Kraus, Hitler was below criticism.

But far worse than poor Lammy's ignorance (one almost felt sorry for him) was his appointment as foreign secretary by Prime Minister Keir Starmer. It was fully consistent, however, with the Starmer government's evident policy of historical destruction.

Starmer has removed the portrait of William Gladstone from 10 Downing Street because of the Gladstone family's involvement in slavery. He has removed also the portraits of Margaret Thatcher and Queen Elizabeth I—the latter, perhaps, because Virginia was named after the Virgin Queen, and Virginia was a slave state. Finally, he removed the portrait of Shakespeare, perhaps because the Bard was not fully on board with correct political views, or maybe because he would serve as a perpetual and reproachful reminder of the prime minister's mediocrity.

Meantime, Starmer's next door neighbor, the chancellor of the Exchequer, Rachel Reeves, has taken down the pictures of *all* men in her residence, 11 Downing Street, to be replaced by women. This is surely ironic, in view of the prime minister's removal of the pictures of two of the most significant women in British political history. But of course, what counts in these gestures is not truth but the ideological purity of the intention behind them.

If Starmer and Reeves had been born in an Islamic country, they surely would have been Islamists of statue-destroying propensities, because they would have regarded all that was not of their doctrine as mere *Jahiliyyah*, the product of the

age of ignorance. Therefore, it does not matter that the foreign secretary thought that Henry VIII was succeeded by Henry VII, because all that happened before the advent of the present government was but a featureless morass of ignorance and oppression.

*First published in [City Journal](#)*