

WHERE DEMOCRACY *meets* DEVELOPMENT

For Simon Danczuk, the bond with Bangladesh began nearly 15 years ago through the Bangladeshi community he represented as an MP in Rochdale, and it has only deepened since. In this candid conversation, the former British parliamentarian turned political consultant reflects on Bangladesh's democratic transition, the urgent work of tracing stolen assets, and the untapped sectors, from tourism to infrastructure, that could define the next chapter of UK Bangladesh trade. He also shares his frank views on the diaspora's political voice and what a stable, transparent Bangladesh could mean for foreign investors watching closely from abroad.

Simon Danczuk
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Rochdale





Q. To begin, could you please introduce yourself, tell us about your political background in the UK, and explain how your connection with Bangladesh first developed and what brings you back so frequently today?

My name is Simon Danczuk. I have been involved in British politics for nearly 40 years. I started out in the Labour Party in the North West of England, first as a local councillor and then, over time, as the Member of Parliament for Rochdale which is in Lancashire, just north of Manchester.

I served as the Labour MP for Rochdale from 2010 to 2017. It was in 2010 that I took my first trip to Bangladesh, visiting Dhaka and Sylhet. One of the main reasons for going was that a significant number of my constituents in Rochdale originated from Bangladesh, and I wanted to see it for myself.

From that first visit, I quickly developed a genuine relationship with the country. I became Vice Chairman of the All-Party Parliamentary Group in Bangladesh and visited on a number of occasions. My last visit prior to this year was in 2016 but I have now returned, and this is my third trip to Bangladesh in just two months.

My parliamentary career ended in 2017. Since then, I have moved into business, working as a business advisor and political advisor to a variety of organisations. That is what I have been doing ever since, not least in terms of helping and supporting the Bangladesh National Party.

Q. As democracy has been restored in Bangladesh after a significant absence, from the perspective of international investors who typically prioritise stability and the rule of law, how does this political shift specifically translate into a more fertile environment for British foreign direct investment, compared to the previous era?

The return of democracy to Bangladesh is something we must celebrate. I have been campaigning for a long time to see this happen, and we should certainly welcome the general election that took place in February of this year.

DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION



This development certainly helps in terms of foreign investment. Bangladesh needs foreign investment there is no doubt about that and a democratically stable country is far more likely to attract it. Investors want a stable government, and I do believe that is what they are now getting from Mr. Tariq Rahman and his cabinet. However, there are still some financial challenges to address.

Under the Sheikh Hasina regime, there was a great deal of corruption. Billions upon billions of pounds were stolen from Bangladesh and its banks. One of the reasons I have returned to Bangladesh now is to help with asset recovery, that is, tracing those stolen assets, identifying where the money has gone and what has been purchased with it, and then recovering it from those who stole it and repatriating it back into the Bangladeshi banking system. I believe this is a key priority for the government. Mr. Chowdhury, the finance minister, shares this view, and so does Mr. Rahman.

I mention this because foreign investors often look at the history of corruption and ask whether it is being addressed. It is now being addressed, and I think that will result in greater stability and more foreign investment coming into this country. That has to be welcomed.

Q. You frequently use the framework of democracy, trade, and trust. In the context of Bangladesh's current transition, how can the new administration build the institutional trust necessary to reassure risk-averse UK firms about the regulatory and legal frameworks in Bangladesh and how can it help protect their interests?

I think the new government in Bangladesh is taking a leap forward in how it governs the country. Mr Tariq Rahman is a breath of fresh air, he is truly a man of the people. The way he conducts himself and approaches politics is dramatically different from what has gone before, and I believe that gives the Bangladeshi people confidence.

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THE BANGLADESHI DIASPORA IN BRITAIN CARRIES A RARE POLITICAL ENERGY, AND THAT VOICE SHOULD BE BETTER UNITED TO STRENGTHEN TIES BETWEEN THE TWO NATIONS.





That confidence, I think, translates to investors who will come and see Bangladesh for themselves. Just as importantly, we have seen Kahlilur Rahman, the Foreign Minister, become President of the United Nations General Assembly, a development that builds international confidence. We have also seen Humayun Kabir, the Foreign Affairs Advisor to Prime Minister Rahman, globe-trotting around the world to build relationships, whether in Russia in the last few days or through the recently built relationship with Turkey and many other countries. All of that has to be welcomed.

Overall, there is a reinvigorated government in Bangladesh, with a great deal of enthusiasm and energy among the new cabinet, well led by Mr Rahman. I think that enthusiasm and energy will encourage foreign investors from Britain, America, and elsewhere to look at Bangladesh as a serious option for investment. The new government is only a few months old. It came in in February but I believe it is already making real progress in attracting foreign investment.

4. As a former MP for Rochdale, a constituency with a vibrant Bangladeshi community you have seen the power of the Bangladeshi diaspora first-hand. How can the UK-based Bangladeshi business community better leverage their position as a bridge for trade, and what role do you see for economic diplomacy in turning cultural ties into tangible bilateral trade flows?

I think the diaspora in Britain, the Bangladeshi diaspora, is very vocal in terms of politics. Generally speaking, Bangladeshi people enjoy politics much more, perhaps, than British people do. Whatever political side of the fence you sit on, people in Bangladesh enjoy politics, and that is the same for Bangladeshis living in the United Kingdom. I think they should utilize that energy more in Britain. We should bring them together better so that they can press the British government to have stronger relations with Bangladesh. The Bangladeshi diaspora in Britain carries a rare political energy, and that voice should be better united to strengthen ties between the two nations.

BILATERAL TRADE

It is fair to say that with Keir Starmer in 10 Downing Street as Prime Minister, tensions have arisen because of his strong association with Tulip Siddiq, another Labour MP and former minister. She was very closely aligned with Sheikh Hasina, and I think that has soured the relationship between our two countries a little. I do not think Keir Starmer will remain Prime Minister very much longer. That is a quietly confident prediction on my part, and I believe it will be better for the relationship between the UK and Bangladesh. I will be pleased to see him go firstly, because I do not think he is a very good Prime Minister, and secondly, because I think it will help British-Bangladeshi relations.

So, the diaspora in the UK can push forward to have a new Prime Minister. They can push to get their voice heard, to encourage British politicians to take a very positive outlook on Bangladesh, to visit the country and learn more about it as I did when I was a Member of Parliament. That is something the diaspora can clearly do. They can also invest in the country themselves. There has been a change of government; there is a freshness here, and corruption is much reduced. It is not how it used to be, so I would encourage them to start doing more business back home, as it were. I think there are real opportunities, and I believe that will help the Bangladeshi economy. I really do.

5. Now that the political landscape has shifted, how has your own strategy evolved from advocating for external pressure to facilitating internal economic development and strategic consultancy?

Much of the work I did over the last 15 years with Mr. Tariq Rahman in the United Kingdom was about pressing British politicians to be aware of what was going on in Bangladesh making them aware of the lack of democracy, the human rights



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A BANGLADESH FIRST VISION CREATES THE FOUNDATION FOR STRONGER FOREIGN RELATIONS AND SUSTAINABLE INVESTMENT.

abuses, the disappearances, and the extrajudicial killings that were occurring under the Sheikh Hasina regime. We had a real impact in alerting British politicians to those facts, to the point where they were applying international pressure to help bring about change in Bangladesh.

I like to think that in those 15 years working with Mr. Rahman in London, I made a small contribution to what is a big achievement that we see today not least because of what the students and protesters did in August 2024, but also what the BNP and other politicians have done to bring about change. So I like to think I played a little part in that.

Now, however, the situation has changed dramatically. We have a new government that we have been working for. It has been a long journey, and I am pleased to say that I can now help contribute by bringing inward investment into Bangladesh, by helping trace stolen assets, and by bringing in professionals who have a great deal of experience in that field. I work with a company called Animus Associates that is who I am out here with at the moment. They are experts in asset recovery: getting the money back that has been stolen from the country so it can be returned to its people. That is the role I currently play. I meet on a regular basis now with Bangladesh National Party politicians here in Dhaka and throughout the country, for that matter. I am pleased to be doing that, pleased to be making a small contribution, but in a different way than I did before.

6. What specific reforms would you suggest to the Bangladeshi leadership to ensure a transparent and competitive market environment for global trade players?

I think Mr. Rahman has a clear agenda, and that is one of the things he provides. He has a vision for where the country is going and how it will be achieved, and he set out a 31-point plan, which is quite dynamic. He also had a manifesto on which he stood in the February general election. He placed the financial sector very much among his top five priorities in terms of sorting out the economy, and that has been done very ably by Mr Chowdhury.

Even with the best-laid plans, however, there are situations that can arise such as the Iran war, that come as a surprise to any government. But I do believe he is dealing with that very ably as well. Addressing energy concerns is a key issue for Bangladesh, both for the people themselves and for investors and businesses who want to come into the country. So trying to reduce the price of energy in Bangladesh is, I think, crucially important on many levels, and I know that is a priority for this government.

Good foreign relations are also vital, and we are already seeing outreach from Bangladesh. Mr Rahman himself, the Prime Minister, is focusing very much on a domestic agenda. He talks about “Bangladesh first,” and I think that is a really key point in terms of his vision. He is putting this country first not India first, which you might have thought Sheikh Hasina was doing when she was leading the country. He is putting Bangladesh first, and I think that is crucial to his vision and to getting foreign investment into this country and to getting the country going back in the right direction. A Bangladesh First vision creates the foundation for stronger foreign relations and sustainable investment.

7. As a political consultant, how do you think Bangladesh can leverage its position in the South Asian market to maximise trade benefits with the UK specifically, without becoming entangled in broader regional rivalries?

Yes, I think Bangladesh is very well placed to play a regional role for sure. Its location is crucially important, its access to the sea is crucially important, and its population size is crucially important. People going to work abroad and paying remittances remains an important issue, and the number of people in the garment industry remains a crucially important export opportunity for Bangladesh, so that should continue to be utilized.

But I think Mr Rahman brings a freshness to Bangladeshi politics that is not what has gone before. There was often talk internationally about the “Battling Begums” as they became known these two fierce ladies, both of whom I have met, and I have admiration for Khaleda Zia, God bless her. But we had these Battling Begums who did very old-style politics, and I think Mr. Rahman is very different from that. He has a very different approach, collaborative, conscientious, and reasonable and I think that will come across internationally.

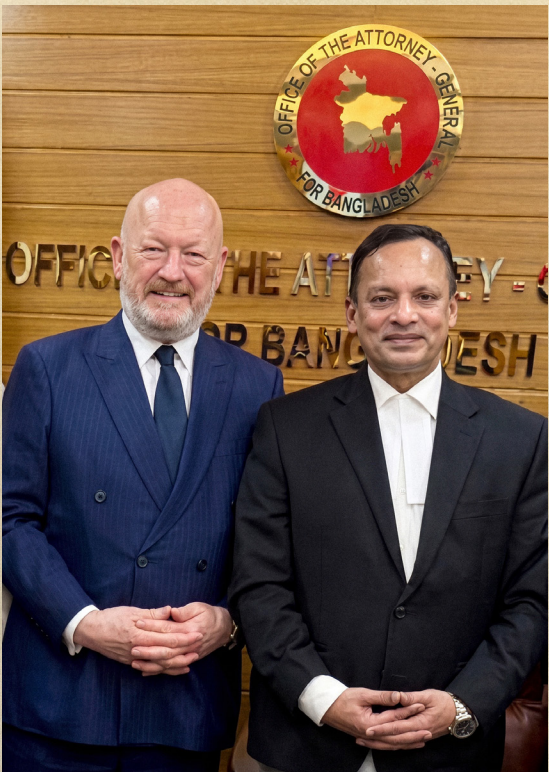
He has a lot of experienced talent around him in the cabinet, and so through the way he does politics, both within and outside Bangladesh, I think he will count for a great deal in bringing in foreign investment, diplomats, and politicians from other countries. And we have already seen that the trade envoy, Baroness Winterton, visited Bangladesh in the last few weeks from the United Kingdom to try and improve trade between the two countries, and I think we will see much more of that.

With any change in government, I do think it stimulates interest and opportunity. And if diplomats and politicians arrive here and see a more jubilant country, a people more excited by the democracy in which they live, led by a prime minister with vision, then I think they will feel invigorated enough to start investing here. So it is about consciousness and about what you can create simply through the opportunity of the change that is happening. I think that is really significant for Bangladesh.

8. Looking ahead at the future of UK-Bangladesh bilateral trade over the next five years, which specific sectors beyond the readymade garment industry do you believe hold the most untapped potential for collaboration, and how are you personally working to facilitate these new investment corridors?

I think there is a wide range of opportunities. I suspect Bangladesh sometimes gets a little bit tired of talking about the garment industry, though it is significant, but there are opportunities going both ways. Infrastructure is crucially important to Bangladesh, and I think that is something Britain could still help with. Technology is crucially important as well.

I think one of the big opportunities for Bangladesh that rarely gets significant conversation is tourism. It could be a matter of a couple of years before people start coming to Bangladesh for tourism reasons. There is so much to see in the



ASSET RECOVERY

country, so much to celebrate. Obviously, hospitality is something Bangladesh is very good at. Agriculture also remains crucially important, so becoming more self-sufficient in food production but also exporting more food whether seafood, vegetables, or fruit is something that could be built upon even more, not necessarily with Britain alone but with other regional and sub-regional economies as well. Tourism remains one of Bangladesh's most underexplored opportunities, with the potential to become a major driver of global attention within just a few years.

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So there are lots of opportunities to develop. But from Britain coming into Bangladesh, I think in terms of construction, infrastructure, running airports and seaports, there are many opportunities to collaborate.

So how can I help? I am doing the work around asset recovery, which will build confidence among British and other international investors I am sure of that. But I also speak to significant investors on a weekly basis back in London, where I am based, and I am always singing the praises of Bangladesh and encouraging people to come out here and have a look for themselves. I will continue to do that.

