



RAISING THE BAR

(Third in the series)

Here's To Bernie Grant, MP – Champion of Black Representation and
Ethnic Minorities of Britain and Beyond

By Alex Pascall, O.B.E

(The living Co-founder of The Voice Newspaper).

Can one man make a difference? Bernie did. He addressed Black representation and matters of deep concern that bedevilled Black and ethnic communities during Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's period with passion and holds a history of carefully strategized unions alliances as a son of Guyana who served Britain and its Parliament well.

This year 8th April 2000 marks the 20th anniversary of his passing. Bernie Alexander Montgomery Grant was born on 17th February 1944 and became one of the first of four British Black and Asian Members of Parliament in 1987. His legacy includes The Bernie Grants Arts Centre, in the heart of his beloved Borough of Haringey, North London.

His work was rooted in tireless community activism, providing a dependable service for all, a respected community organiser and one of the first Black Councillors in Haringey. Bernie served his diverse spectrum of over a quarter of a million constituents of varied hues, religions, cultural backgrounds, many of whom were Black and Caribbean Citizens of the Windrush Generation.

Set on the hilltops is Alexandra Palace, the birthplace of British Broadcasting. In a farewell fit for a Black Prince; there was a kaleidoscope of tributes delivered on this beautiful sunny day in London that gave the estimated 3000 in attendance an almost

chartered-flight view of his purposeful and dedicated career and life journey.

Paul Boateng one of the Black Members of Parliament, explained during the service that Bernie had said "he didn't want anything stuffy or anything churchy. Well, Bernie, this isn't stuffy and this isn't a church - this is a palace".

Bernie Grant, one of five children, attended his father's Primary School. His educational journey included Sacred Heart Roman Catholic School, in Georgetown, Guyana; a scholarship to St. Stanislaw's College, a Jesuit boys' secondary school, to studies at Tottenham's Technical College (now known as the College of Haringey, Enfield and North East London, for young and adult learners of today) his other Alma Mater includes Heriot-Watt University in Scotland where he studied engineering. African drums delivered him ceremoniously ascending the steps of the Palace and a lone highland piper sounded as he descended those same steps en route to his resting place close to the War Memorial in Tottenham Cemetery.

Each attendee played their part in this celebration of his life: prominent political Labour party comrades included: Paul Boateng, Dianne Abbot, Keith Vaz, Ken Livingstone, Jeremy Corbyn, Chris Smith, Clare Short, amongst countless comrades in the struggles for equality and justice

Also present was Una King whom he mentored much as he was mentored by Lord David Pitt of Hampstead on his entry to Westminster. There in attendance were Home Secretary Jack Straw and distinguished trades union comrades from all corners of the world. His widow Sharon and extended family members, friends, the print and broadcast media, music personality Jazzy B, and a tribute from the 'Reggae poet' Linton Kwesi Johnson.

In my pioneering work presenting 'Black Londoners', Britain's first Black and daily magazine style radio programme, aired on BBC Radio London from 1974, I took an unexpected on air call from Bernie. It was for me a timely and memorable telephone intervention. He was then Deputy Leader of Haringey Council, his on air message drew the listeners immediate attention to

the help needed to safeguard the only programme to represent Black and ethnic issues on a daily basis in the United Kingdom between 1978 to 88. He spoke out then to save the radio programme's demise.

Bernie served for a while as a Chairman of the 'Black Londoners Action Committee' working on critical issues affecting my position while pioneering inroads for community radio programming in the UK. For that I remain most grateful. He discussed with me its value, impact and significance for Black communities across the UK. I can share his commendation with you taken from my forthcoming publication, *'Order In the House'*,

'My career took a different course to Alex's but I was always aware of his presence...struggling to ensure that Caribbean people were afforded their rightful place in society... The next generation also needs to be aware of the experiences and impressions of the first generation of Caribbean people in Britain...'

Of the key issues of which Bernie was passionate, the plight of

workers was one. He helped to organise the Union of Post Office Workers (UPW;s) strike in 1970 and was made 'Honorary life Member' of his branch upon leaving his Chairmanship of it. His beloved Tottenham, found in him a committed spokesperson and Councillor. He tackled access for the disabled and Racial discrimination and later on as MP for Tottenham strived to achieve them. Recalling a memorable meeting my wife Joyce had with Bernie, she pointed out that whatever Bernie agreed to do was usually carried out on point, no matter how busy his schedule was.

It remains notable that Bernie was the only Black MP amongst those appointed to the Home Secretary's Race Relations Forum in 1998. Upon his becoming an MP, Bernie dressed to represent, his large African and African-Caribbean constituents by wearing traditional African ceremonial dress at the State Opening of Parliament, signalling the change and image he intended to establish, pertaining to key issues of the people of the African Diaspora in the UK, Africa and the Americas, central to his vision for change and demands for equality.

Bernie's impact extended to the struggles for the freedom of South Africans here in the UK and went to South Africa to welcome Nelson Mandela's release from prison February 1990.

He dedicated much of his time to the welfare of the young people, housing, discrimination, the plights of workers across the UK and beyond. Here's to Bernie Grant, the statesman who established an information technology centre amid the townships in the Free State in South Africa, which I understand is named after him.

Although I trust there will be many tributes celebrating numerous aspects of his life, I choose to highlight herein a wish of Bernie's, touched on by his sister in her speech in celebration of his life at Alexandra Palace that still reverberate today in the actions and powerful performances incorporating the oral tradition in multimedia performance statements made most recently, by Black British artists Dave and Stormzy at The Brits 2020 Awards..

I feel certain that Bernie would have been proud to witness their dynamic delivery had he been alive. Albeit, he might well have been critical of the British society he strove to change that is still grappling with lessons that should have been learnt including racial injustice, inequality and governments neglect of the issues facing the black British population. Well into the 21st century, we are still fighting against the same injustices himself and the African-Caribbean's were fighting in the 70s and 80s. British governments denying British citizens of hue and their descendants from former Empire territories their right as citizens who came with endorsed proof, void of any criminal records and therefore gained their right of citizenship to remain. Clearly, Bernie's ability to shed light on injustice reverberates within 21st century's youth in today's Britain.

His understanding of leadership and British Caribbean struggles pushed through by Sir Learie Constantine and Lord Pitt, are strenuously echoed in MP David Lammy's addresses

to the House on the Windrush Scandal in 2018. Lammy cites the link between this country, the 'West Indies' and the Caribbean as 'inextricable' and in a tweet in 2018 stated:

'The Windrush Generation and their children were citizens when we invited them here 70 years ago. Their citizenship is theirs by right and it should never have been taken away. I am proud to have fought to right this historic wrong. I will never stop fighting for justice.'

It appears therefore, that the new generation of successors to Bernie Grant are approaching these repeated injustices with fresh vigour. In an article about David Lammy, MP for Tottenham, journalist Matt Kelly wrote in the New York-based men's magazine, GQ:

'It wasn't the quality of his words, which were powerful enough, but the quality of David Lammy's rage that blew apart the conspiracy of quiet callousness defining this Windrush scandal. Rage, uncontrolled, is a pathetic spectacle, leaving little behind it but a hollow echo. But

rage restrained has the power to shake walls’.

In rewinding to fast forward, Bernie Grant’s many speeches and parliamentary interventions can be found in the Hansard website and within the complete press materials related to 5 days before Nelson Mandela’s Release available within the Black Audio & Media Archive Alex Pascall Collection (BAMAAP) that can be made available by appointment as well as thousands of minutes of audio interviews, audio visual images and ephemera from World War 1 veterans,

When pressures borne out of oppression came to the fore at Broad Water Farm Estate in October 1985, decades before Bernie contextualised the issues faced by the youth as needed at that time. Again as current events explode and evolve today, serious and deep research for understanding needs to be applied which was just what gave rise to the contents of the Black performers at The Brits Award 2020 and what Black

political activists like Bernie Grant is today celebrated for - successfully challenging society and Parliament during his life time, for the ultimate betterment of the nation and all its people. To gain further insight into Windrush from me, read an online copy of: Impact into Action, A Briefing Update for Support Groups and Networks **January 2019 facilitated by 'Serious About Solutions'**.

Here's to Bernie Grant, Labour MP, finally recognised a hero of the British Empire who's photorealistic portrait by Kevin Okafor was fittingly unveiled by The Right Honourable Jeremy Corbyn MP, Leader of the Opposition, together with David Lammy, Labour MP for Tottenham that now hangs within the walls of Parliament, hallmark of Bernie's honourable service.

Here's to Bernie Grant, a highly valued departed brother of merit, member of Britain's Windrush Generation.

When next you hear a related fair tale or you are asked the question 'Mirror mirror on the wall who is the fairest of them all'? Spotlight their response to the legacy of Bernie Grant, his

strengths as defined in the struggle, put his name in the hat for that as well. Encourage deconstruction of divisions, the likes of US Trump's negative race agendas; preferably, join the race to kick out racism in all fields and institutions; vote not to embrace it further on these, or any other shores, for once - and for all.

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