

**Here's to Bernie Grant, MP – Champion of Black Representation and Ethnic Minorities of Britain and Beyond – by Alex Pascall Obe**

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MPs Bernie Grant and Diane Abbott, watched by MPs Paul Boateng and Keith Vaz during the debate on the creation of separate black sections within the Labour Party at the annual conference in Blackpool in 1988. Picture: PA - Credit: PA

Can one man make a difference? Bernie Grant MP did. He addressed representation and matters that bedevilled Black and ethnic communities during the Thatcher era. Alex Pascall OBE, co-founder of The Voice newspaper pays tribute.



On April 18, 2000 thousands gathered at Alexandra Palace where a funeral service was held for Bernie Grant MP. Picture: Matthew Fearn/PA - Credit: PA

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the passing on April 8, 2000 of Bernie Alexander Montgomery Grant. On April 18 that year, thousands gathered at Alexandra Palace, where a funeral service was held.

Bernie was born on February 17<sup>th</sup> 1944 and became one of the first 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, in North London.

His work was rooted in tireless community activism, providing a dependable service for all, a respected community organiser and first Black councillor 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.



Bernie Grant MP with Myrna Simpson, mother of Joy Gardner who died after being restrained with handcuffs, straps and a gag during an immigration raid in Crouch End in 1993. Picture: Rebecca Naden/PA Archive - Credit: PA

On April 18, 2000, set on the hilltops of Alexandra Palace, the birthplace of British broadcasting, in a farewell fit for a Black prince, there was a kaleidoscope of tributes delivered on a beautiful sunny day that gave the estimated 3,000 in attendance an almost chartered-flight view of his purposeful and dedicated career and life journey.

Paul Boateng 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, later a Muswell Hill resident, was one of five children who 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, to young and adult learners today. His other alma mater was 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.



The arrival at Alexandra Palace of the hearse carrying the coffin of the late Bernie Grant MP. Pictures: Fiona Hanson/PA Archive - Credit: PA

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

Attendees included Una King, whom he mentored, much as he was mentored by Lord David Pitt of Hampstead on his entry to Westminster.

Other attendees included 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, as well as a tribute from the 'Reggae poet' Linton Kwesi Johnson.

In my work presenting 'Black Londoners', Britain's first daily Black magazine style show aired on BBC Radio London, I took an unexpected on-air call from Bernie. It was one of my most memorable live telephone interventions.



MPs (L-R) Diane Abbott, Keith Vaz, Bernie Grant and Paul Boateng. Picture: PA Archives - Credit: PA



He was then deputy leader of Haringey Council. His message drew the listener's immediate attention to the help needed to safeguard the only programme to represent Black and ethnic issues on a daily basis in the UK. He spoke out to save the radio programme's demise.

Bernie also served for a while as the chairman of the Black Londoners Action Committee, working on critical issues affecting my position while pioneering inroads for cultural community radio programming in the UK; for that I remain most grateful. He discussed with me the value of my programming, its impact and significance for Black communities across the UK. I can share this quote with you taken from my forthcoming publication, *Order In the House*, in which Bernie furnished this commendation: "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...I remember the next generation also needs to be aware of the experiences and impressions of the first generation of Caribbean people in Britain..."

The plight of workers was one of the key issues about which Bernie was passionate. He helped to organise the Union of Post Office Workers (UPW) strike in 1970 and was made an 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 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.



Rev Kwaku Frimppong-Manson and mourners follow the hearse carrying the coffin of Bernie Grant towards Alexandra Palace. Picture: Matthew Fearn/PA Archive - Credit: PA

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 constituencies 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 of the South Africans. He travelled to South Africa to welcome Nelson Mandela on his release from prison.

He dedicated much of his time to the welfare of the young people, housing, discrimination, and the plights of workers across the UK and beyond.



A delegation of MPs (from 3rd left) Tam Dalyell, Tony Benn, Jeremy Corbyn, and (4th right) Bernie Grant and others deliver a letter to No.10 Downing Street today (Monday), in protest at the Government's backing for military action against Iraq. Photo by Tony Harris/PA - Credit: PA

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 today, albeit he might well have been critical of 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 population. Well into the 21st century, we are still fighting against the same injustices he and the African-Caribbean were fighting in the 70s and 80s.

British governments have denied 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, the right of citizenship to remain.



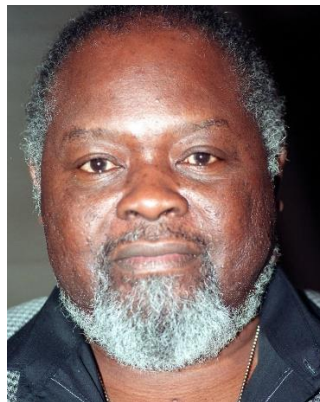
The body of Bernie Grant lies in state at the Freedom Hall, Tottenham Green Leisure Centre, to allow members of his community to pay their last respects to the Labour MP who has died. \* The black rights champion, who suffered a heart attack and died aged 56, is to be commemorated with a ceremony at London's Alexandra Palace. Picture: Andrew Stuart/PA - Credit: PA

Clearly, Bernie's ability to shed light on injustice reverberates within the 21st century's youth in Britain today.

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 that the new generation of successors to Bernie Grant are approaching these repeated injustices with fresh vigour.



MP Bernie Grant. Picture: PA Archive - Credit: PA

In an article about David Lammy, MP for Tottenham, journalist Matt Kelly wrote in the 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 five days before Nelson Mandela's Release available within the Black Audio & Media Archive Alex Pascall Collection (BAMAAP) by appointment, along with hundreds of thousands of minutes of audio interviews, audio visual images and ephemera from WW1 veteran.

When pressures borne out of oppression came to the fore at Broadwater Farm Estate 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 a Black political activist like Bernie Grant is today celebrated for – successfully challenging society and Parliament during his lifetime, 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, Briefing Update for Support Groups and Networks January 2019 facilitated by Serious About Solutions.

Here's to Bernie Grant, Labour MP, finally recognised as a hero of the British Empire whose 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 – for he served all his people honourably.

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

When next you hear a related fairy 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.