

Great Expectations

To whom are our MPs accountable? **Ade Sawyerr** compares the class of '87 and 2010

In 1983 some Black candidates who attempted to stand for the Labour Party were deselected because they were involved in the Black Sections, a group within the Labour Party that had not been endorsed by the leadership.

To some of us, 1987 represented the fulfilment of the Black political struggle in Britain when four Black people took their seats in the Houses of Parliament. That this should happen under Margaret Thatcher, who barely ten years earlier talked about the "swamping" of this small island by numerous people from the New Commonwealth, was in itself a remarkable achievement.

The Class of 1987, comprising of Paul Boateng, Keith Vaz, Diane Abbott and the late Bernie Grant, were community activists who championed the cause of racial justice.

We remember Vaz leading many marches within Asian communities, fighting for recognition and acceptance. We remember Boateng's television documentary *May the Force be With You* that dealt with policing at protest marches, and his victory address: "Today Brent South. Tomorrow Soweto!"

We also remember the famous words of Grant after the Broadwater Farm riots, and we remember with fondness Abbott with her full head of Afro hair and a clenched fist talking about racial equality and Black Sections at Labour Party a conference.

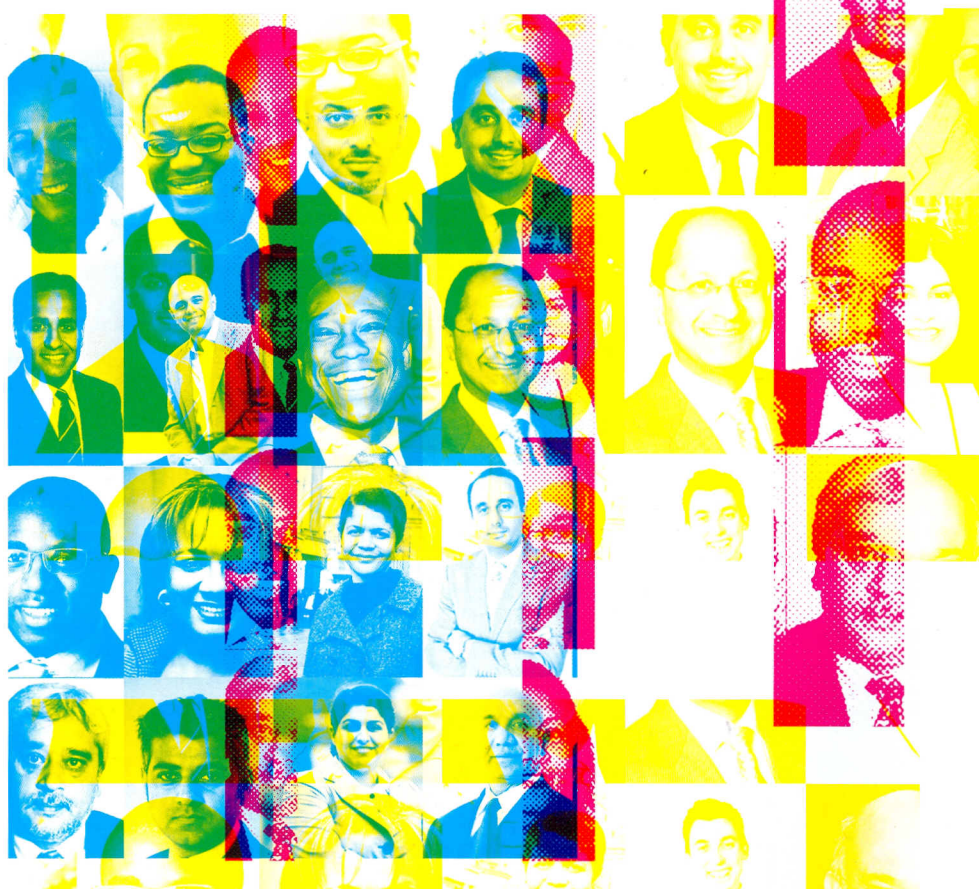
These were people with a passion for the politics of race equality who helped transform racial justice in Britain.

Boateng went on to become a member of the Cabinet and Abbott, Labour leadership hopeful, has continued to battle for the cause of young Black people and their performance in the education system, and for Black women in business.

Vaz continues to be robust in his support of cases where he feels that members of his community have been unfairly treated.

Unsurprisingly at the time, most of them stood in seats that had very high proportions of Black people, and their communities were easily an extension of those constituencies.

Their election effectively shattered the 'glass ceiling' and signalled a new chapter in the course of race equality. It was a coming of



age, and a call for other worthy Black people to seek political office in whatever shape or form.

Some of us had hoped that in 1997, there would have been a call to add a 'Black List' to the 'Emily List' that took a wave of white women into parliament on the basis of women-only shortlists in the Labour Party.

Sadly at that time, Labour's promise was more about gender equality than race equality.

1987 now seems so long ago and we take a lot of things for granted. Gone are the days when Lord David Pitt was the only Black representative in the House of Lords.

Although there is still under-representation of Black people in politics, we have made a lot of progress, but not nearly as much as we should have done. We now have Black people

who are on both front-benches in Parliament.

Before the recent elections we had over 38 peers, four MEPs and 15 MPs representing the different shades of political opinion in the country and elected in different types of constituencies, from urban areas to those that are seen as lily white suburbia and rural rustic areas.

The perception of race equality is still as important as the reality. The political parties, barring the BNP, are steadily increasing the number of Black elected politicians. Black people viewed the 1987 intake as our own; we expected them to attend our functions... even when we had not bothered to invite our local MPs.

We found ways of trying to talk to them about our problems outside their surgeries that

were meant for their constituents, and we felt hard done by when we were rebuffed with the kind suggestion that we approach our own MP.

So what do we feel about the new crop and what do we expect of them?

I doubt whether we feel the same euphoria as in 1987. I doubt whether we see them as special, and I doubt whether we expect them to champion our race equality causes. But, we should!

With the subsuming of the race agenda under the banner of 'equalities and human rights' and the new-fangled terminology of 'diversity' that only serves to put race at a competitive disadvantage, there is now even more reason to champion and promote race equality.

Whilst the increase in representation was all that we craved for in 1987, what we demand

criminal justice system, and to eradicate underachievement in the educational system.

We know that there will be exceptional and talented ones amongst the new class of Black MPs and we wish that they will rise to the highest ranks in the ministries and in the Cabinet, but we ask that in so doing they ensure that their individual aspirations are congruent with the aspirations of the whole Black community.

Their individual successes should lead to the upliftment of all Black people in Britain.



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now is for that representation to be translated into tangible benefits because we cannot afford the gains of all that hard work and sacrifices to be rolled back. We need more than the symbolism of their representation. We need an effective campaign and fight for racial justice.

We should remind them that as visible minorities their obligations extend beyond their constituencies to the wider Black communities and they must at all times lead on race issues.

We should task them to work towards removing the ethnic penalty in earnings suffered by Black people in the labour market, and ask them to work towards curing the inequalities in the health sector.

We must alert them of the need to decrease the over-representation of Black people in the

Why we expect our Black MPs to stand up for us



Many of the new intake don't understand the struggle, says journalist Marc Wadsworth

A decade after the death of Britain's most prominent Black MP veteran politician Bernie Grant, it is fitting that Diane Abbott threw her hat into the ring to become leader of the Labour Party and won enough backing to be on the ballot paper.

Grant audaciously stood for deputy leader in 1992 but his campaign was more symbolic than realistic.

He could not muster enough nominations

to get as far as Abbott who won the support of 33 of her Labour fellow parliamentarians to get to the final stage of the contest, that ends in September.

When Grant stood he was one of just four Black MPs, including Abbott, elected in 1987. Now there are 27 – 16 of them Labour, half of whom are newcomers. Just four of the 16 backed Abbott who, like me is a founder member of the Labour Party Black Sections, the activist organisation set up to fight for greater Black political representation.

By contrast, the vast majority of Black congress people put their weight behind Barack Obama when he ran for the US presidency.

Grant, Abbott, Keith Vaz MP and Lord David Pitt formed the Parliamentary Black Caucus (PBC) in 1988 to make sure that the Black perspective was present in the Palace of Westminster.

They believed that by uniting together in this way the Black community could have a strong voice to which powerful white leaders would have to listen. Unfortunately, personality clashes – and Paul Boateng MP's refusal to join – meant the PBC lasted just a couple of years.

MPs Abbott, Vaz (Keith and Valerie), Virendra Sharma, Sadiq Khan and David Lammy would like to see some such grouping set up again (Barack Obama belonged to the Congressional Black Caucus before becoming president.)

But I could not gainsay whether all the Black Labour MPs would be so keen. With a few exceptions, their route to parliament relied more on white patronage than Black self-organisation.

They are therefore essentially individualist, Labour MPs who happen to be Black and see their allegiance as being to the party leadership first and foremost, much like Boateng. But that does not mean that we should write them off because, like life itself, politics is full of contradictions.

The MPs may be pulled in one careerist direction by the party leadership, but they will be tugged in another by the demands of Black people in constituencies where we make up a large section of voters. Black MPs might, like Boateng, say "I'm not monochrome, I represent all my electorate, Black and white" but their skin colour and background will say otherwise, and the expectations of African Caribbeans and Asians will put pressure on them.

For example, Operation Black Vote has put in sterling work stating the logical case for all-Black shortlists, to increase minority ethnic political representation, and help produce a Black Manifesto of sound policies. OBV, like many other leading community organisations, supports the reformation of a parliamentary Black organisation.

Black communities will watch to see how the MPs who look like us respond. We will vigorously support those who back our causes inside and outside parliament. And we will cast our votes to remove those who do not.

Marc Wadsworth was Chair of the Labour Party Black Sections (1986-88) and is the editor of the citizen journalism website www.the-latest.com