

AFRICAN CONCORD

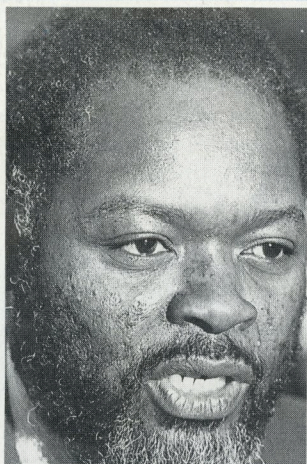
11 June 1987 No 144

The Premier Pan-African WEEKLY

Britain: Black candidates



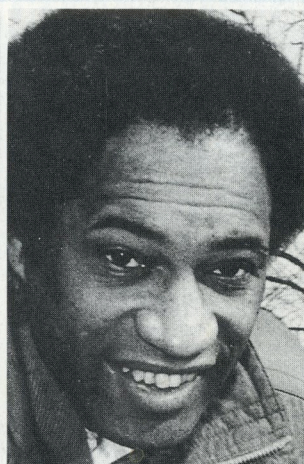
Diane Abbott



Bernie Grant



Paul Boateng



Russell Proffitt

Will they be elected?

USA:
Africans and
the new
immigration
policy

Nigeria:
Benefits of
states creation

Algeria AD10
Angola 60KW
Barbados B\$3.00
Belgium 60BF
Botswana 100p

CFA Zone 500CF
Egypt E£1.00
Ethiopia EB4
France 12FFr
Gambia D3

Ghana C.150
Italy L1700
Kenya Shs25
Liberia L\$2.00
Malawi K1.50

Nigeria N2.00
Sierra Leone L30.00
Somalia Shs30
Tanzania Sh50
Uganda Ush5,000

UK 75p
USA \$2.00
W. Germany DM3.00
Zambia K4.00
Zimbabwe Z\$1.50

The chances of blacks as MPs

Britain's black community has come a long way in emerging as a political force. Now, in this election, we are likely to see some black candidates become Members of Parliament. **Joel Kibazo** examines the possibilities.

The British general election of 11 June promises to be different not only for the reasons given here but also because it is the first election in which we are likely to see a number of black candidates in Parliament.

It is important to note that the term 'black' means different things in different societies. In Britain it means, more or less, anyone who is not white (often, this may even include Chinese and Arabs) but in the main it refers to people of Afro-Caribbean backgrounds or Asians from the Indian sub-continent, thus singling out the two main groups which immigrated to Britain in the 1950s and 60s. For the purposes of this article the term 'black' shall refer to people of African or Caribbean descent.

The ruling Conservative party is fielding John Taylor, a 32-year-old barrister born and bred in Birmingham, whose father was a well-known cricketer. The Social Democrat and Liberal parties, known together as the Alliance, do not have any black candidates. The main socialist opposition, the Labour Party, leads the way with six black candidates.

These are: Diane Abbott, Paul Boateng, Bernie Grant, Russell Proffitt, Ben Bousque and Crispin St Hill. With the exception of Mr St Hill, the other candidates are standing in London constituencies, with large black populations.

The first three candidates are almost certain to be elected as they are standing for seats with big Labour majorities. Mr Russell Proffitt is standing for a seat which is held by the Conservatives, but with only a small majority of less than 2,000, so he stands an outside chance of making it to the House of Commons.

The election of three or possibly four blacks to the House of Commons will be a remarkable achievement — and yet logic dictates that it should not be seen as anything remarkable. When you consider that black people have been in the British Isles for more than 200 years through slavery, colonialism, as immigrant workers or as students, many would argue that it is high time that the House of Commons lost its aura of "an all white, male-dominated middle class club."

Comparisons with the political situation in the USA, where there are black Congressmen and Senators, are unfair and at best misleading. In the UK, blacks make up at least three per cent of the overall pop-



Afro-Caribbean immigrants arrive in England just after the last World War on the Empire Windrush

ulation. In the USA the figure is 15 per cent; but in the UK, the black population is concentrated in the inner city areas of London, Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool and Bristol. If life was fair, then this concentration should have led to the election of black Members of Parliament long ago.

The reasons why this is not so are many and varied, but briefly, when immigrants arrived in the UK, many came to a society where the environment, way of life and customs were in many ways different from their own. The odds were against them in every possible way.

In their struggle to build a new life many of them worked unsociable hours for a meagre wage and lived in conditions which were sub-human in comparison to whites.

Add the element of racism which pervaded many aspects of British society, and there was enough for black people to worry about without his becoming involved in British political life.

Not even in areas such as trade unionism was there a glimmer of redress from the totally white environment. In her 1987 book *Black People and Party Politics in Bri-*

tain, Marian Fitzgerald stated that the same government which invited blacks to work in the 'mother country' now passed "successively more stringent measures to ensure that people like themselves would as far as legally possible, not again be allowed to settle in this country; measures which surrounded family reunions with the bitter taste of bureaucratic suspicion and downright hostility."

Gradually though, as the blacks became more settled and more sure of their way in British life, they started to become more involved in political life. First it was through organisations of their own, such as anti-racist and anti-colonial groups.

In the 1970 general election David Pitt, now Lord Pitt, a medical doctor from the West Indies, stood for the safe Labour seat of Battersea and saw a safe Labour majority disappear in an 18 per cent swing to the Conservatives. It is believed today that the only reason why Pitt did not win was because he was black. Even though on three previous occasions the British had elected Asians, this time the mood was quite different. It simply 'wasn't on' to elect a black person.

In the 1970s more and more blacks stood

COVER STORY



Sharon Atkin who was suspended by the Labour Party

for and won seats in local council elections. Russell Proffitt stood in the 1979 general election and received a respectable 25 per cent of the vote in the City of London and Westminster constituency. Paul Boateng stood for Hertfordshire but, as with his two predecessors, was not elected. His situation was not helped by the local Labour Party in his constituency failing to campaign for him actively because they saw him as a candidate of the Labour party nationally. "At least that was the official reason they gave for not supporting him," one observer said.

It was also in 1983 that the Black Sections grouping within the Labour Party first emerged at the Labour Party conference. Within the party the group's main body of support is from the far left. The argument advanced by Black Sections is that for years the Labour Party has been happy to receive the vote of the black people but do nothing to address the issues of particular concern to them such as racism in housing, education, immigration and the general advancement of blacks in Britain as equal members of society.

They wanted affiliation to the party in the same way that women and Jewish people have official affiliation to the party. Twice the group sought affiliation and twice it was rejected.

Neil Kinnock gave the group publicity in 1985 when he entered the debate and he has maintained consistently that there is no room in the Labour Party for a grouping based on a person's colour. But Labour did set up a working party to study the issue and while it accepted the claims made by Black Sections, it chose instead to set up its own body — the Black and Asian Advisory Committee. This lacked the support of many blacks and is now defunct.

Yet Black Sections have continued to wage a public campaign. On the positive side it has highlighted the fact that con-

tinued support from the black population for the Labour Party is still predominant. In 1983 about 63 per cent of all blacks voted for Labour. But Labour had yet to realise that if blacks voted for them they had to be seen as being promoted through party ranks.

The right wing press and those to the right of the political spectrum once again lampooned the demands of Black Sections as another form of left wing extremism. Faced with opinion polls showing that

be working within the confines of the Labour Party rules and would be working for a Labour victory at the next election. What happens after the next election is anybody's guess.

What is interesting, though, is the gaining of power at local government level. It is not totally by accident that the three London boroughs which first elected black leaders are those with the highest black population in London.

These are Brent with Merle Amory,



Lambeth Council leader Linda Bellos (facing camera) protesting for Black Sections and Sharon Atkin

Labour could not win an election and in a bid to demonstrate who was 'boss', Neil Kinnock, with support from the Labour Party, suspended Sharon Atkin last April. Ms Atkin is a black prospective Parliamentary candidate from Nottingham East — a seat which she was due to contest at this election.

Her 'crime' was in calling the Labour Party racist and claiming not to give a damn about Mr Kinnock. Not quite the stuff one would expect of a would-be Parliamentarian but then again, not the worst thing that has been said about the Labour Party or its leader.

Anyone with a questioning mind might have enquired whether there was anything in Ms Atkin's statements, and on careful consideration, one must admit that there must be at least a grain of truth in her outburst.

The four black candidates most likely to be elected have kept quiet over the suspension of Sharon Atkin and on the movement in general. This is particularly curious because they are well-known supporters of the grouping. They instead issued a joint statement to the effect that they would all

Lambeth with Linda Bellos and until two weeks ago Bernie Grant in Haringey. The power of these black leaders aligned with their colleagues on the left of the Labour Party has in many ways redressed the imbalance suffered at a national level, especially under the Conservatives.

In many ways these local authorities have carried on the legacy left by the GLC in 1981. Black political power is meaningless without positive action, as opposed to positive discrimination, in the everyday lives of black people. If we examine education in Britain, this is an area where there has been a mass drop-out and underachievement among blacks.

This would not, perhaps, raise alarm bells were it not for the fact that in areas such as Brent, more than 50 per cent of school children come from the New Commonwealth. Not addressing an area such as this would be consigning a generation to the margins of society — 'black and uneducated'.

It is to their credit that boroughs such as Croydon and Brent have sought funding from central government under section 11 of the 1966 Local Government Act to