

# Black in the union jack

After years of political isolation, black Britain finally has its own champion in the Cabinet in the shape of an Anglo-Ghanaian MP

By **Sylvia Arthur**, London

**H**istory was made in British politics last month when an Englishman of Ghanaian descent became the first black person ever to be appointed a Cabinet minister in Her Majesty's government. Paul Boateng, whose father was a minister in Kwame Nkrumah's post-colonial administration, was promoted to Chief Secretary to the Treasury following an impromptu cabinet reshuffle caused by the abrupt resignation of Stephen Byers, the embattled Transport Minister.

Also thrust into the spotlight was David Lammy, a twenty-nine year old Member of Parliament who was made a junior health minister. Lammy, a black Briton of Guyanese descent was only elected in 2000 following the sudden death of Bernie Grant MP, himself a pioneer of black involvement in UK politics.

The story of Boateng's rise to the top of the career ladder goes back decades. Fifteen years ago, Boateng, Bernie Grant and Diane Abbott broke with tradition and became the first black people to be elected to parliament in almost a hundred years. In his acceptance speech as an MP for Brent in north west London, an area with a large ethnic minority population, Boateng famously declared, 'Brent South today, Soweto tomorrow' in reference to South Africa's racist apartheid regime, against which he was a staunch campaigner throughout the eighties.

In the early days of his career, he was known as a left-winger of the Labour movement at a time when the political landscape was painted navy blue by successive Conservative victories at the polls led by arch capitalist, Margaret Thatcher. Boateng was the kind of activist whose rigid ideals and socialist beliefs turned-off voters and made the Labour party unelectable for almost twenty years.

A barrister by profession, 51-year-old Boateng was born in London in 1951 to a Scottish mother and a Ghanaian father. He completed his early education in Ghana before returning to the UK and reading law at Bristol University.

As a practising solicitor, he became involved in politics by becoming a member of the ill-fated Greater London Council (GLC) in 1981 and chairing its controversial police committee. But the GLC was rubbished by the press on a daily basis for incompetence and bad management. More damaging was the fact that this characterisation was to tarnish the reputations and, ultimately, the careers of GLC hardliners, including Ken Livingstone (dubbed 'Red Ken'), now



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London mayor.

However, Boateng managed to soften his politics and, in the early 1990's, transformed himself from the perception of a loony lefty to an outright Blairite. His commitment and dedication to the New Labour cause made Tony Blair, the party's new leader, take notice of his obvious talent and convinced the Prime Minister that he was a reformed, if not pragmatic, politician. In 1997, Boateng achieved another first when he was made a junior minister, first in the Department of Health and then at the Home Office. His quiet dedication and subtle ambition soon saw him become a regular along the corridors of power and it was only a

matter of time before he would reach his current level of achievement.

Boateng's political dynasty does not end with his father's legacy but still has roots in today's traditional leadership. He is the cousin of Daasebre Omanhene Emmanuel Oti-Boateng, paramount chief of New Juabeng in Ghana's Eastern region, an eminent statistician who has worked for the Ghanaian government and international agencies including the UN and the UK Department for International Development.

While Boateng's success has been universally lauded ('One small step for British blacks, one giant leap for Paul Boateng' was how the *London Times* described it), Lammy has been feted in the national press as a potential candidate for Britain's first black Prime Minister.

Yet in a television interview following his appointment, Boateng dismissed his colour as an issue, declaring that he would ultimately be judged by his performance not his background. 'My colour is part of me but I do not choose to be defined by it. I work in a world in which people are judged not by their colour but by the content of their character. I want to be judged by my work in this position.'

It remains to be seen just how far Boateng will climb up the political ladder but the significance of his appointment has ramifications far beyond himself. There are still just four black MP's in the elected House of Commons, Britain's lower house, and only three black people seated in the House of Lords, the upper chamber and appointed house.

For black Britain as a whole, Paul Boateng's ascent to the higher echelons of government marks a turning point in the history of race relations in a country that has struggled to fully integrate its two per cent African and Caribbean populations in recent years. Perhaps Boateng's greatest achievement is that he has managed to successfully penetrate the most British of all institutions, smashing a glass ceiling reinforced by centuries of race and class bias. ●