

# The Peckham Pioneers:

## The Black Women Councillors in Camberwell and Peckham



*The Rt Hon Harriet Harman QC MP*

June 2008

House of Commons  
London  
SW1A 0AA  
**Tel:** 0207 219 4218  
**Fax:** 0207 219 4877  
**E-mail:** [harmanh@parliament.uk](mailto:harmanh@parliament.uk)  
[www.harrietharman.org](http://www.harrietharman.org)  
[www.blog.harrietharman.org](http://www.blog.harrietharman.org)



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## Black Women Councillors in Camberwell and Peckham



**Cllr Dora Dixon-Fyle**



**Cllr Althea Smith**



**Cllr Mary Foulkes**



**Cllr Sandra Rhule**

Edited by Julie Stoltman

Published with funds from the House of Commons Office Communications Allowance 2008/2009

# Introduction

As Minister for Women I made a statement in the House of Commons on 17th July 2007 setting out the future priorities of myself and Barbara Follett MP, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equality. One of these priorities is to empower black and minority ethnic women to build cohesion within their communities and as a bridge between communities. To read a copy of this paper, please see:

<http://www.official-documents.gov.uk/document/cm71/7183/7183.asp>

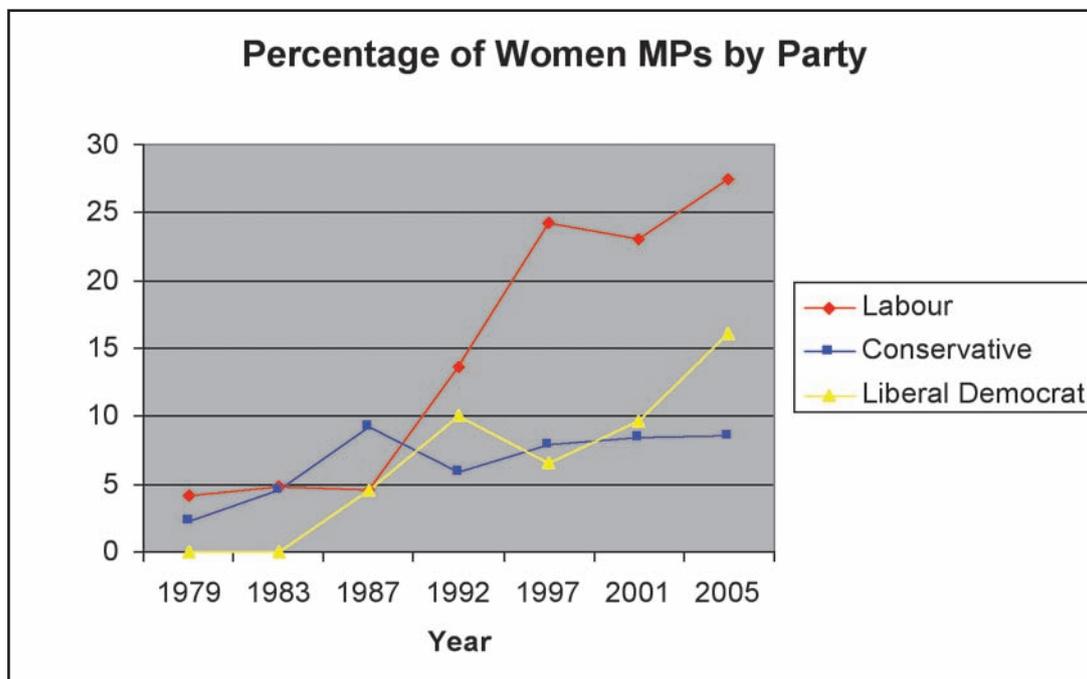
In support of this objective, the Government Equalities Office and the Fawcett Society produced a report entitled "Routes to Power" on ethnic minority women councillors in October 2007. To learn more about this research, please visit: <http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/index.asp?PageID=546>

I wanted to hear about the experiences of black and minority ethnic women councillors in Camberwell and Peckham. The survey aims to gain insight into the challenges and accomplishments of local Councillors, and learn about their experiences in local government.

## Women's Representation in National Government

Though women make up over one half of the population, they are not equally represented in local and national government. Currently only one in five Members of Parliament are women, and only one in six Peers in the House of Lords are women.

Women MPs make up 26.7% of all Labour MPs, 8.8% of all Conservative MPs and 14.2% of Liberal Democrat MPs. <sup>1</sup>

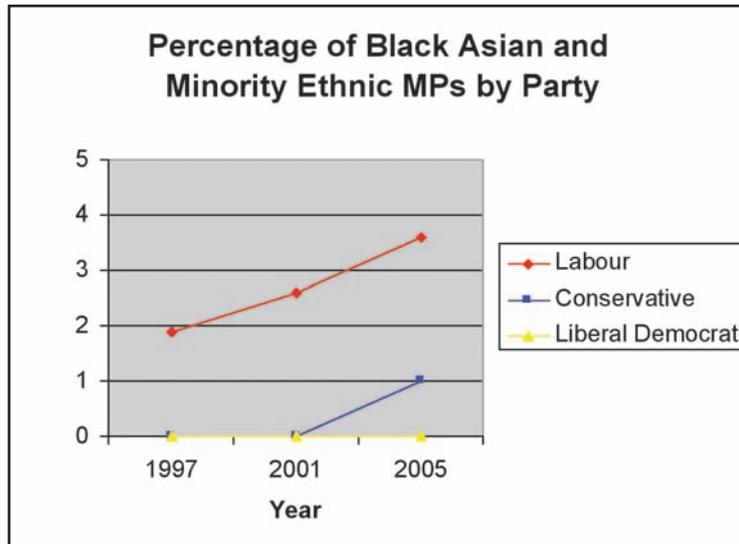


<sup>1</sup> According to the House of Commons Library

## Minority Ethnic Representation in National Government

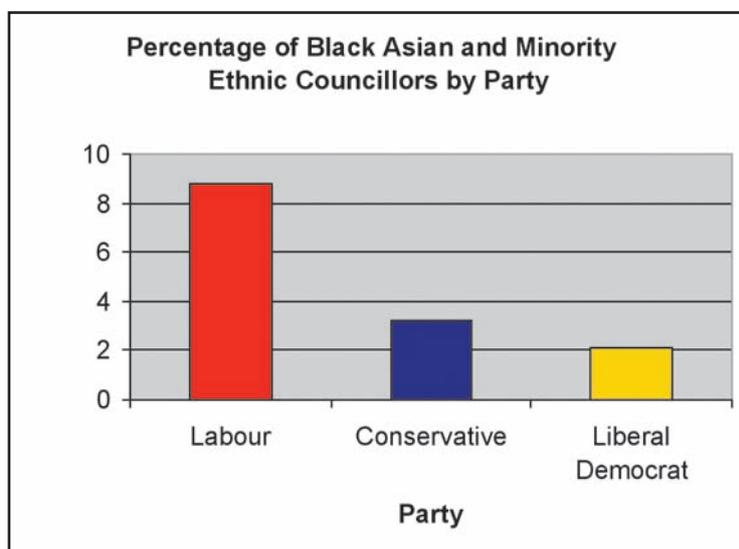
Minority ethnic communities make up 9.5% percent of the country's residents<sup>2</sup>, but are only represented by 2% of all MPs.

Of Labour MPs, 3.7% are members of an ethnic minority group. For Conservative MPs the figure stands at 1% and the Liberal Democrats have no minority ethnic MPs<sup>3</sup>.



## Minority Ethnic Representation in Local Government

Local government affects everyone's lives and councillors are increasingly in the frontline as community advocates and leaders. Therefore, it is vitally important that local communities are fairly represented on local councils. Currently, women make up 29% of local authority councillors in England. 4.1% of councillors came from a minority ethnic background<sup>4</sup>.



<sup>2</sup> Labour Force Survey – Autumn 2006

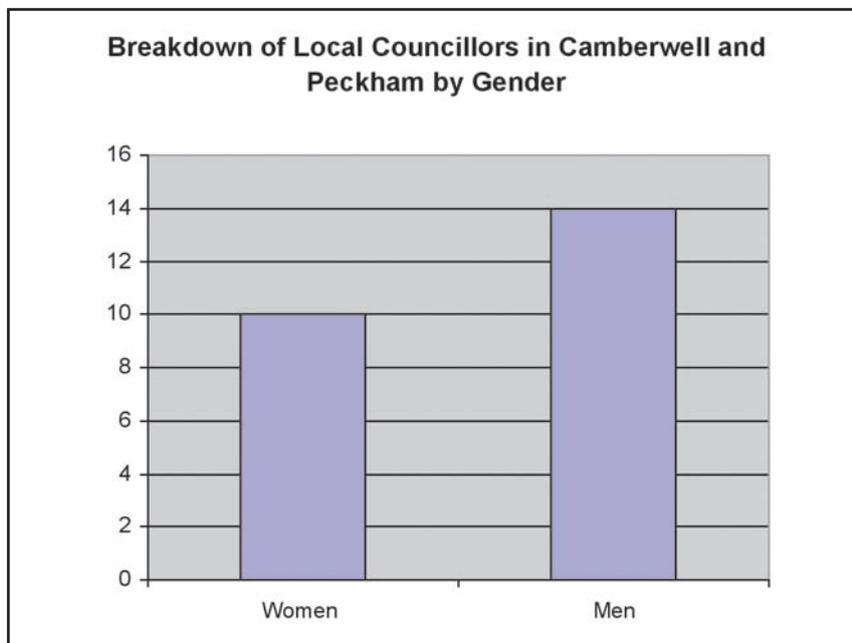
<sup>3</sup> According to the House of Commons Library

<sup>4</sup> National Census of Local Authority Councillors in England 2006

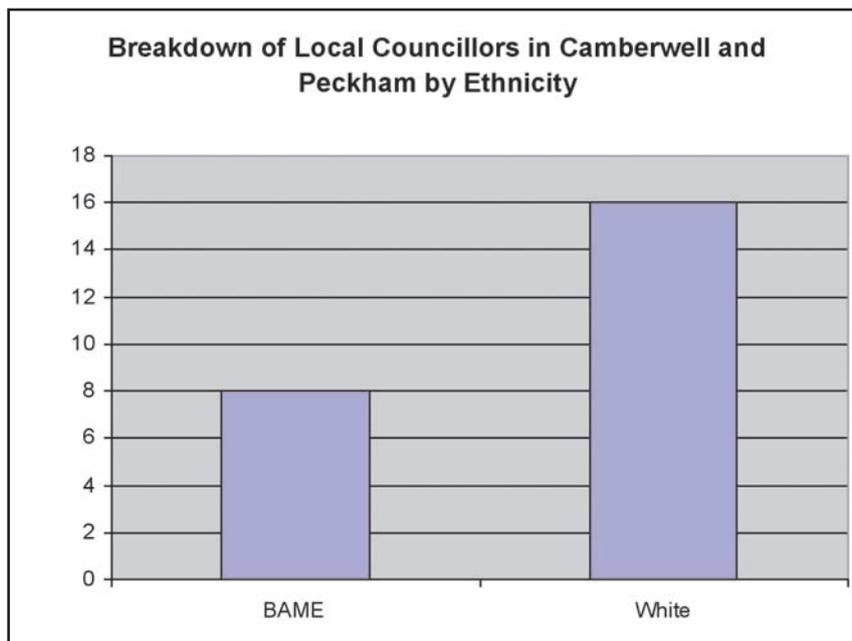
# Local Councillors in Camberwell and Peckham

In Southwark we have a great team of councillors reflecting all parts of Camberwell and Peckham's diverse community. We have councillors whose families came from the Caribbean and from Africa as well as from Turkey.

**Gender** - We have 14 men and 10 women.



**Ethnicity** – We have 8 Black and Asian minority ethnic councillors and 16 white councillors. We have 5 BAME women councillors and 3 BAME male councillors.



Out of 10 women councillors representing Camberwell and Peckham, 5 are from ethnic backgrounds. I sat down with some of these women to learn about their experiences as leaders in their community.

## Cllr Dora Dixon-Fyle



I've been a councillor in Southwark for ten years now and I've lived in Southwark all my life, since primary school age. Before that I lived, was born actually, in Freetown, Sierra Leone which is in West Africa. But I did all my schooling in Southwark—primary, secondary and further education.

In addition to being a councillor, I've got family responsibilities. I've got my Mum, she's elderly and she's not very well, so I've got to look after her as well as organise the family to look after her. I've got brothers, and you have to tell them what to do! I make sure the hospital appointments get made, that she's seen, that she's on the list in the first place. Her heart check-up is twice a year and they've forgotten in the past, so I have to chase that up constantly.

Actually, I became a councillor because my Mum forced me to do it! I would go off to work and then after work she would always ask me to do things for other people like write letters for Mrs Kelly next door, or Mrs Cook across the road and so on. I would say, "OK, fine, fine". But it became an ongoing thing! I'd come home from work and have this second job, helping my Mum helping her friends and neighbours. She would say to them "Oh, don't worry Dora can do that for you". And it got really annoying, because then she'd rope in my brother, he's a plumber and gas fitter, and he would start helping others as well!

Growing up I knew that my Mum talked to a lot of people, so it made sense that I would too. And so she did instill in me a sense of civic responsibility, wider than my family. Also, I'm a bit of a nosy person as well! I would wonder why the lights in the street were not working, I would wonder why the pavements were so bad and I would investigate the reasons why and sort it. I found it's about helping people locally, it's about the environment I live in, making that a better place to live.

I didn't really find it difficult to get into local politics, because when I got involved with my local branch, they always needed good secretaries. I liked to write so I was always snapped up, and so I

became secretary of this branch, secretary of the Local Government Committee, secretary of the trade union coordinating committee and so on. I've always been in the background just scribbling things down. So I'd say that my admin and my writing skills allowed me to get into local politics easily, and I'd keep going along to meetings and of course I'd listen to conversations as well and learn.

I don't think anyone within the council or the party encouraged me forward; I guess I was just useful, I suppose. I didn't have any grand plans to be a councillor. But I think now of my first try as a dry-run because it was someone dropping out for a local seat that gave me the chance. It was Browning ward, Heygate estate area which was a Lib-Dem stronghold, a no-hope seat, but someone dropped out and they looked around to see who could fill in and they thought "There's Dora, useful as can be" and you know I just did it. And after I did that, Ian Wingfield said to me, "Oh, you were very good. You're a very hard worker." And Piers Corbyn also gave me a lot of praise.

They had to see me running for councillor in order to get the idea that I could do it. I was always very quiet and in the background. I think that's still true. With men it's always assumed they can do it, while with women we have to prove we can do it—that's what happened with me. After the Heygate they wanted me to go to another seat, and in those days they did all the winnable seats first, so the next winnable seat was Camberwell Green, so I said "Ok, I'll try" and selection came up and I got it.

Before I was a councillor I was a lecturer. I taught at Brixton College. I was a full-time lecturer, Head of Basic Education courses and I enjoyed that. But I couldn't keep missing lessons for councillor duties.

Yes, I think as a black woman I do bring a different perspective to my job as a councillor, and I do think that as a black woman some people in the community can relate to me in a way they don't relate to male councillors and white councillors. Because as a black woman, first of all your life experience is different, just as being a woman your experience is different. So of course, it's different. I think it's an unspoken thing with people, they know they can come and talk to me about whatever.

I didn't really have any role models or mentors who inspired me to run for office. Well there weren't any black women in local office that I can remember! I think in a way we are the pioneers. The nearest person to a role model, I always say is my grandmother, because she was a strong woman, a real trade unionist, she worked in a toy factory over near Wimbledon area. And to me, maybe because I was her granddaughter, I don't know, but I looked up to her a lot. She was in the GMB union, and I looked up to her because she was always very good with money and figuring things out in her head.

The biggest challenge for me in my role as councillor is lack of time, or not sufficient time to do all what I want to. It's a very demanding role and I want more time! Also, I think, people thinking you can't do things—sort of looking down their noses is also challenging. Presuming you're going to fail before you do anything. And no, it's not my constituents who assume that I'm going to fail. No, it's usually my peers. Blokes usually. I think there is more acceptance amongst the people I'm representing than amongst my fellow councillors, and it's like, I'd sort of say things at meetings two or three times but then someone else would say it and the response would be "Oh yes, yes, right we hear you", which really annoyed me. So, yes, I think there is still a level of invisibility. And I did feel like an outsider at times. I do, absolutely, think it's easier to be heard by others when you fit the traditional councillor model.

I think politics in Southwark would give off a totally negative impression if there were not a diverse mix of councillors. How can people relate to you, you know, trust you to fix things and work things out if they don't see you as part of their community? You have to be from the community. If it wasn't a diverse mix they would think that the politicians were totally out of touch.

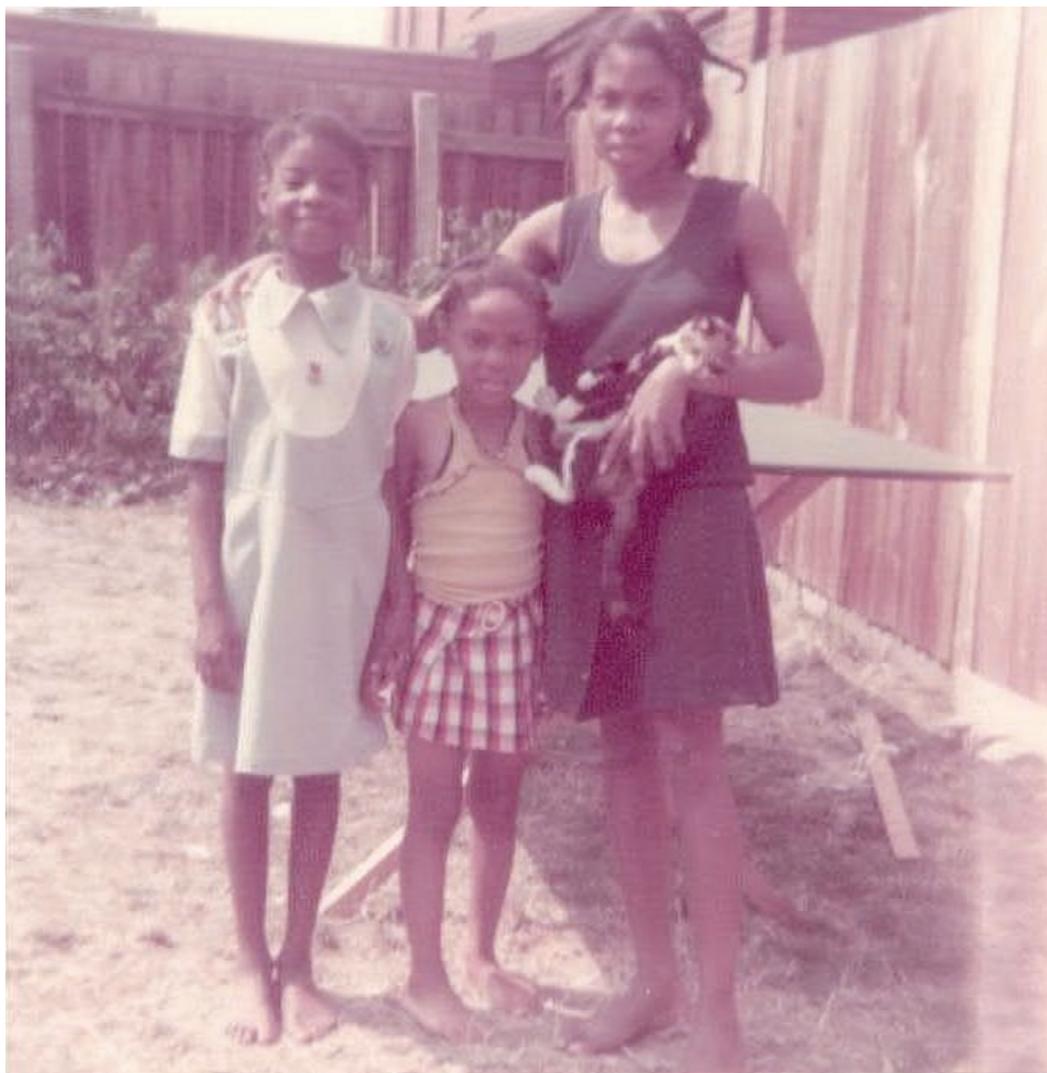
I think my proudest accomplishment as councillor is probably just hanging in there, really, staying power, I suppose. It's also about people—being there for them, and actually making a difference to so many different people over such a long period of time. I'm happy to be there, because I'm actually helping people.

Of course, I believe the Government should encourage more ethnic minority women to become local councillors!



**Dora aged 3 in Sierra Leone**

## Cllr Althea Smith



**Althea (right), pictured with her younger sister and cousin, summer 1974**

I've been a councillor in Southwark since 2006, but I've lived in the area over 31 years. I've been involved in the community for over a decade - giving most of my time voluntary, because I am loyal to the community. And I feel that to be part of the community you have to give up your time. And you can't wait to be in the political arena to serve your community; you got to be serving your community all the time.

I've also had to look after my three children, and one grandson. My oldest is 24, second oldest is 21 and I've got an 18 yr old son and 5 yr old grandson.

I've been trying to be a councillor for quite a long time and I've had obstacles, I've had racism, I've had silly remarks passed by head of party members, which I ignored at the time because at the end of the day I was involved in politics since 13 in the Caribbean, and I saw my cousins become councillors, and I was determined that there was something there for me. I was loyal to the cause because I'm a socialist and I intend to give something back to my community. So therefore, although I had all those obstacles in my way, I was determined that one day, if the time was right, I would achieve what I want.

Now, I found there was a lot of activity around youth issues, and when I go to the town hall I speak as a tenant and as an adult, but there are not a lot of us who speak for the youth. And I thought, if I

dedicate so much of my time to young people, I could be one of the first councillors that could be looking at the issues as they affect young people. So I take them along to conference, meet them in the street, talk to them on street corners. I'm not afraid to confront them if there is trouble. I'm one of the councillors for the youth of Southwark, and they do know me, they call me Auntie, they call me mum, whatever they want to call me. I am a councillor for my ward, Nunhead, but I feel more dedicated and loyal to the young people of Southwark.

I think it makes it easier for some people to engage with me because I'm a mum, and a lot of them come to my house and I knew them from when they were babies, and secondly they look at me as if I'm with them. They say 'You know what we're feeling in the street, how to react to us' -- other councillors only come to talk to them in terms of the vote. When I see them in the street, I will stop, hug and give them a kiss.

I found it difficult at times, when I was trying to get into local politics, because people try to block my way when I speak my mind, they would say 'You shouldn't say things like that'. But I feel, at least when I am honest and open my colleagues know how I feel and I find you have a better relationship...I worked hard, and Sally pushed me to become chair of Consort ward, and when I became chair of Consort ward, a lot of people stop coming to the meetings because a black woman was the chair. And I carried on because I'm here for the community, not for myself.

I was the first black woman to chair that Labour party ward, and although a lot of the men were pushing us women to get involved it was a culture shock to see a woman, it was not only a woman, it was a black woman as the chair.

I'll give you one example of how I think I bring a different perspective to my job because I'm a black woman. I had a tenant on the street complaining bitterly about the pub, I just got elected and she called me and I said, 'Ok I will sort it out'...So what I did, I went to the pub and it turned out that I went to school with the owner of the pub and I said, 'I can't have this, I'm now the councillor for this area, we went to school together, if you're going to run this pub you have to run it by the rules'. So I went back to the tenant and told her I'd been and she said 'You're brave. You were the only one who went to the pub, you went at different times, you went at 11pm and 2am. You're the only councillor who would go to a pub at 2am if someone complained'. I said, 'You complained, I did something'. So that was something I did differently, because other councillors would have written letters.

Some people would say, 'Oh, leave it to licensing officers', because as it's a woman that's concerned, they would leave it to the licensing department or to the police, but because I have so much interaction with the police, and I've been trained, I can risk manage myself—and I found I could challenge the situation by myself, and then ask for back-up.

I think some of the young black mothers in my ward do relate to me in a way they wouldn't if I was a man, and I've heard from some of the other councillors who say they talk to people and they also say I do. And they say 'You're different from the rest of us'.

In terms of people who inspired me to run for local office, I see Michael Manley as my role model, he was the Prime Minister of Jamaica, and when I was young I used to campaign for the party and that's how I got involved in politics because my aunts and my cousins. We were split-family with different alliances, but when it comes to family issues we stick together and we don't talk about politics, so therefore I grew up with that around me. I don't have 10 degrees like some people have, but it's

about determination and I can get inspired by anyone in politics to say I want to carry on, to go further. And I want to inspire young people and I say 'What I didn't achieve, I would like you to achieve' to say, 'Look what I can do, look what I can accomplish, I would like you to achieve it. I would like you to get involved in politics-- if you don't ask questions, you don't know. So, question democracy, because you don't know, question your MP. Ask questions as young people.'

I hope I can inspire other young women to get into politics, especially because I was a single parent for a long time and I can illustrate how I brought my kids up alone for a long time before I had a partner, and I've achieved this and therefore you can achieve this.

I think that makes quite a lot of difference that people see on the voting papers and leaflets that there is a mixed team of councillors for the simple reason, well, let's talk about Southwark. Southwark is so diverse. Now we have a lot of West Africans and they're more involved in politics and to them, that's a great achievement - they can say 'At least one of us is moving forward' and it gives them encouragement, because now there's quite a lot of people who want to run for councillor in Southwark.

I think it is very important that Southwark be represented by a diverse group of councillors because we're a diverse borough, and we need to reflect on the borough we serve.

I think my proudest accomplishment as councillor is giving the youth confidence, and giving them a chance to speak their mind, because if you don't, you don't know what they're thinking.

I think the Government should encourage more ethnic minority women to run for councillor, and to become MP, but I think also, we need to encourage them, not say, 'To do this job, you get an allowance'. They have to want to do this from the bottom of their hearts; they have the inspiration from within. They shouldn't do it because they see it as a career move, but more about how you can deliver and how you be a servant for your people. Because at the end of the day, you're a servant for your people.

The reason I became involved with my tenants association and with the Police is because a lot of the people on my estate said, 'If you want to get your voice heard, you have to get involved in the T&A', so I joined the T&A and when I got there, they said 'The police never come to our estate', so I said I would talk to the police, and I got involved and then the police started to come to me to have tea. And people said 'How come they're coming to see you, when they wouldn't come see us before?' and I said, 'It's the way you approach them'. And I think socialising is a very important thing, because at the end of the day, you might be an MP here, I'm a councillor there, but we're all a family. And I think at sometimes, we have to reach out to the community and say, 'We can socialise with you, we want to get to know your family, you're a distant family to us, but you're the extended arm of our family—the community. And once they trust you, they'll do anything with you—they'll work with you.

## Councillor Mary Foulkes



I've been a councillor in Southwark since May 2006, and I've lived in Southwark for 8 years. Before that I lived in Germany for five years because I worked for Ford Motor Company. At Ford, I was an HR director in the European division. But prior to that, I was born and bred in Battersea, and spent most of my time there. So I am certainly a South London girl.

I don't have a lot of family responsibilities, only my husband. My husband has three grown children and I have a step-grandson who I see frequently. He's 9 years old, but you'd think he was 19. He is extremely energetic and I love him dearly. I don't have to take care of my parents, because my father, he's 70 years old but he's livelier than me!

My parents came from St. Lucia - they were the Windrush generation. When my father came over, he was firstly a porter at Hackney Hospital and then became a crane driver for British Rail and my mother was a cleaner. It was a strong community where they came to Britain; they lived with family and became part of the community during the 60s.

Before I could become a councillor I felt that I needed to establish myself in my job. I was encouraged for several years but I resisted it. The reason I wanted to become a councillor in Southwark, was because the first time I campaigned in an election Southwark was during the Livesey campaign, and I think it was in 2002. And when George and I, my husband, we went out on the day of the election and we thought it could have been better organised and we should have never had lost the ward. At that point I thought, if I become a councillor this would be the only place I would want to stand.

Because knocking on people's doors, getting to know the environment, something just told me that this would be the place to stand for councillor. A high African population, a high deprivation level, and it reminded me really, of where I grew up in Battersea. So there were some common themes there. And I just felt this was the area where I wanted to stand.

As I said, I felt an empathy with the local area. But I think another reason why I wanted to be a councillor was that I spent a lot of my time doing community work. When I was at Ford I set up a group called the Ford African Ancestry Network and a women's network group. And the reason I did that was because I was the only black woman who was at the director level, and I found that I didn't have the capacity to mentor everyone who sought my advice. There were others with experienced who could mentor. We also did a lot of community work as well as mentoring. We would go out and we did workshops in schools and we helped charities like the Stephen Lawrence Trust, and I so got the bug. I thought, there is more to life than work. My dad had me doing political leafleting from an early age. So even if I didn't want to, it was drummed into me from a very early age. I love Southwark and I love the ward I'm representing.

I was a bit hesitant about getting into local politics because of the commitment. I have a full time job, I'm a director, I'm a school governor in Bacon's College, and I like going to the gym. Also, I'm very family-oriented. So my concern was, would I have the time to do as much as I could as a councillor. But I have to say, I got a lot of support from people like a number of the other councillors, they said, 'Go for it, and we'll support you.' So I did get a lot of help and support from them. And I have to say, George initially had his reservations, but in the end was a source of support. He said 'Go for it, there aren't many bright women, and bright black women around. There are a few, but there are not enough'. He said, 'You should go and do it'. So I thought, 'I'll go and do it'. But what George said at the time was, it's a lot of work so he'd help me with my casework. But it doesn't quite work out like that - there is a lot of casework and he seems to forget saying that!

Before I was a councillor I did a lot of fundraising, for the Sickle Cell society, for the Afro-Caribbean Leukaemia trust. Also, there's an elderly people's home where I live, and so I visited a lady there, every Saturday. And my mother would cook a Caribbean meal every week. And back then they weren't sensitive to the different dietary requirements in those homes, so my mum would cook for her. And I would take it in. She taught me to knit, so it was a two-way process. And I did it for about two years. Unfortunately she did die. But, that was a really fantastic experience for me. And at the moment I'm mentoring a guy who was at Ford. He was an example of someone who was struggling, he was someone who has reformed, but he needs a bit of help. So I was what I'd call a tough mentor for him. And even though I've left Ford, we still meet. So he's working at Ford in the Audit department. I still keep in contact with him—he's had quite a bad temper but he has now managed to control it.

I think as a black woman there is something distinctive about the way I do my work as a Councillor. For example, when I was campaigning, I would knock on people's doors and before, when I would call them, because my name's Mary Foulkes, they thought I would be Scottish. So when I knocked on the door some people were pleasantly surprised to see me and would say 'We're going to support you, we want someone who can empathise with us. I'm so glad you're here'. People were absolutely blunt about it. And one guy, I had to pull him back a little, because what he was saying, when I called him to go round and speak to him, he said, because he thought I was white, so he was quite reluctant to talk to me. But I was quite insistent to speak to him and so when I saw him, he was just so pleased, and I thought, when I get to talk to people, it's not just about being black, it's about relating to the working class residents as well. Because I have been brought up on a council estate, I understand

what it is like to live in quite a tough environment. I had a great father and we were quite poor. So, I can relate to the challenges people were facing. And I think that was another aspect - that they could see a black person, or a woman, but it was also about that we had similar experiences.

I am successful, but I did grow up in difficult conditions. I went to Vauxhall Manor, and it became Lillian Baylis, and it had the record for the highest pregnancy rate in the UK. And I wasn't the best student when I started, but I think what motivated me was that my sister didn't do very well. This motivated me to study. There was a sixth form in my school, but I was the only one to get my A levels in the school. And I went to Nottingham University and did economic and social politics, so I was quite proud of myself. But it was a bit of a shock too because the school I went to was about 98% ethnic minority, and it was not the same in Nottingham so it was a bit of a culture shock. But I did prove myself by drinking a yard of ale quite quickly!

I didn't have any women for role models; the only role model I had was my father, no one else. I can't think of anyone whose footsteps I would have followed in at the time. Now I can, but then, there was no one I could think of. Because in our school, I think it's much better now, but we didn't have any black history, there were only negative images on the television about black people. And in politics, there was no one I could look up to and see how it was done. Might be the wrong answer, but it's absolutely true.

I think I was absolutely breaking new ground. I don't know what motivated me, really. People were trying to get me to go to Sussex University and I don't know why, but I wanted to go to Nottingham. No one actually said it was a good university, but when I got there I knew how good it was. So it was breaking new ground to get A levels and breaking new ground when I got the director job in Ford. So I'm always breaking new ground. And in the job I'm in now, I'm the only black person on the Trust Board.

It is so important that Southwark is represented by a diverse mix of local councillors. If it was just white male councillors...well it sends shivers down my spine. You are a role model to me now, and I think, if you weren't in Parliament now, some of the women's issues wouldn't have been heard. And I think it's the same in Southwark. There's a lot of deprivation, a lot of poor people, there's a high ethnic minority population, and to me, that's why my voice needs to be there. Southwark needs to have diverse voices. And those people in Southwark, they tend to be more open and honest with their concerns. I tend to get to the root cause of a problem.

Some of the challenges though, I find is that I feel I can do a lot more, in my ward. I feel a bit guilty, because I do work full-time and I feel like I could do a lot more, talk to more people, and I would be a bit more of an effective councillor if I had more time. I definitely think the Government should be encouraging more ethnic minority women councillors. I hope when black women see me as a councillor they'll think that's something they can do. I would love to be a role model for women. Because I have had a challenging background and a full time job, but I have had a lot of support. The Labour councillors in Southwark have been really supportive. Even now, when I can't go to certain meetings or I'm struggling, I know I can pick up the phone and talk to one of the councillors so I've got a supportive network there. And one thing I would say is, if you're feeling like you're struggling, don't keep it to yourself. Share. Because I didn't use to share it and that causes a lot of stress. So yeah I do believe I'm a role model.

## Councillor Sandra Rhule



**Sandra, aged 3, outside her family home in East Dulwich**

I've been a Councillor since May 2006, and I've lived in Southwark all my life. I was born in East Dulwich and I lived in Dulwich until I was about 17, and then I moved to Camberwell when I was homeless for awhile. I lived in a single women's hostel there.

I got to be homeless because my Mum had breast cancer and it came back, and she always said she didn't want to die in England, so she decided to go back before time. They were meant to retire back to Jamaica, so she decided to go back earlier. I was 17 at that stage. And about 10 years later she died. But she took my younger brother and sister with her because they were about 13 and 14, so they didn't really have a choice. But I decided to stay, and I turned out alright.

When they left, I stayed in a short-stay hostel in Sydenham which was a converted swimming bath, that was for about three weeks. And then I went to a long-stay hostel which was up to a year, in DeCrespigny Park, in Camberwell, which is still there and that's when I started living in Camberwell. Number five, it's in my ward. And it was great. We used to watch the kids from Fame on TV, we had a big huge open plan kitchen with an aga cooker, living room and dining room. It was good, all girls together. Different backgrounds, different reasons we all ended up there. But it was quite good.

For family responsibilities, I've just got my son Andrew who's 10. My Mum is deceased and my Dad still lives in Jamaica. I am bringing up my son on my own, but his dad is still around--which is good and bad but that's another story! I don't think of things as difficult, I think of them as challenges. Because, although Southwark does provide childcare, the childcare aspect is still there. I met another councillor and he gave up his job as councillor for four years so that he was there for his child while his child was going to secondary school. And he's got a wife, but he still gave up for four years. If being a councillor was a full-time job, even though they say it would reduce councillors from 3 to 1 per ward, I think for women, that would be a good thing. I mean, Andrew is not a baby who will be

going to sleep when I'm going out for a meeting at 7pm. It's about my parental responsibilities, and I always say to people I don't need a husband I need a wife, somebody who can do that side of things, cooking and cleaning, when I am out. Because I don't have a husband or a partner to do that. That's the only thing that will stop me, in 2010, if Andrew needs me.

I study at London Southbank by day, it's a combined honours degree in English and social policy.

Well, I didn't set out to become a councillor in Southwark. I've always been active in politics, I was a young socialist in Dulwich. Then when the branch secretary and her husband moved into the ward, Clare and Declan, they invited people around and they must have found some old list with my name on it, so then they invited people around and I got involved with my own leaflet rounds. And when they were looking for Councillors in 2006 they had another BME women who they asked to be a Councillor, but it turned out this person worked for Southwark already, so I was the number two choice. So they asked me because they knew I was a parent Governor at Lyndhurst, I was a parent rep for West Peckham Sure Start, I was a union rep in Tesco's, and I said 'Yes'. If they hadn't of asked me to be Councillor, I don't think I would have thought about it, actually. But I think Clare saw things in me that I didn't see. And I never set out to be a Councillor or an MP, but think I always would lead by default, not because I was pushing myself or because I was ambitious, just because I was in the right place at the right time. And that's why I will make it to be an MP.

When I left school I did dress and textiles. So when I met Barbara Follet and found out she had arts school training and has now become a Minister I thought, 'Good, she's got the same background as me, she's not the degree type person, so if she can do it, I can do it'. But the only one I knew at the time was Diane Abbott. I was always interested in politics, but I don't think I would have gone the political route, to tell you the truth. I did dress and textiles and I really wanted to do fashion. I really wanted to be a knitwear designer, and I got into Croydon College of Art. I have never not got into what I wanted to. But at that time they wanted to turn everybody into secretaries and bank workers but I went up to the library and I found out all about it and so I got myself on a foundation course and even when I was doing that, all the other girls wanted to do dress fashion degree and I wanted to do the dress textiles degree, so I got myself into Croydon College of Art. So I've always had to push myself.

I think I did have to be more independent-minded because my parents weren't around. One of my friends, Brenda, would say I've got an old head on young shoulders. And the other day I was talking to Councillor Veronica Ward and we were talking to young people in Camberwell and I thought, 'Funny, some of them are 17 and why are they, some of them, going to go towards gang crime and I was left on my own at 17 and I turned out ok'. I wasn't a teenage pregnancy statistic and I had my child when I was in my 30s. So it's funny how life changes will push you in different directions.

I actually didn't finish Croydon because that's when I got homeless. I was in the Civil Service for awhile, I worked with the Deputy Chief Executive at Marsham Street, John Rowcliffe, who was with DEFRA then, and I did a lot of shop work. And all my jobs seemed to last 5 years before I got bored and decided I wanted to do something else. I became a parent Governor at Lyndhurst because there was a woman there, she was a bit radical and she was encouraging any black parent to be parent Governors because they needed representation, and she thought I could do it. So I went forward, but I didn't get in the first time, but I got in the second time. At Tesco's I was the union rep because all the women decided to vote for me. And that was good at the time

because at the time USDAW were looking for women and BMEs to be Union reps. I think I was the first BME women union rep at that Tesco's, on Old Kent Road.

I don't know if I bring a different perspective as a Councillor. The only thing I think is that as a woman and as a mother, that's different. I don't know about BME coming into it.

I think in Camberwell and Peckham it is important to have a diverse mix of local councillors, but I'm sure that there are some places in the country, where it isn't. But in Camberwell and Peckham, yes. I know that since I've been a councillor I get lots of older West Indian people coming up to me, and saying how proud they are that a local girl made good. So for somewhere like Camberwell and Peckham, I would say, 'Yes, it is important'.

Yes, I do agree that it's not just that people think I'll understand their concerns and be a good local representative, but they do seem proud of me in the community. When I was going out on the Estates campaigning with Harriet in the local elections, knocking on doors, I remember one African man came to the door and called out and had the whole family come out and said, 'Oh this is Sandra, she's going for councillor'. They didn't know me before, but they were quite proud to see me, as a BME woman, going for councillor.

Yeah, I do think I represent the community and it's a big responsibility. It is a bit scary sometimes. I think the best thing I do as a Councillor is represent people. Because some days you get fed up and think, 'Why am I doing this? I could be at home with my Andrew, watching TV or on the computer or something'. And so the other day I was walking back to the Town Hall from Camberwell, down Peckham Road and I met two people walking up the other way. One was in a wheelchair, that was Herman, and another woman, and they both stopped me. And I tried to speed up, but they stopped me to thank me because I helped them with their casework to do with housing. And I thought, 'Oh, that's why I do it. Because some people do appreciate it'. So I think that's what I like. People ask why I'm good and I think I'd say, 'Because I get angry about something and then I want to do something about it.' Clare would say I've got a can-do attitude, and I think it's true. Some people just get depressed about it, but I just get on with it and question it and want to help. And I think that's what happened as the union rep, because many of the women got caught with their hands in the till. Because when they were pregnant and when they got back to work they were short of money and I'd have to talk to them because they couldn't talk for themselves. I think that's what I like doing, representing people.

I don't think I remember following in anybody's footsteps as a Councillor. Because the people I admire, the people like Anita Roddick and Rosemary Conley, Karen Brady from Birmingham Football Club, business women who succeed, I always read their autobiographies. And I like Oona King's book, I have to say. So, inspirational women who've excelled in their field I look to—and Richard Branson! I think you've also been a good role model as well, Harriet. I know people like Mandy Henry, who knew you from when you'd go around in the crèche in Peckham Settlement and they love it, working with you Harriet. And you used to live next to that Jehovah's Witness woman, Wendy, who was my friend, so I've always seen you around. So I'm very defensive of you, when people say you're not around I always say, 'Well she's a Minister now, and that's good for Camberwell and Peckham.' In terms of councillors I look up to, I'd say Aubryn Graham; he's been around a long time. He's been around working with the youth in Peckham for years.

I think the Government should encourage more women to run for local councillor because I always

think, and I talk about this with my other BMEs councillors, men and women, that because when you're a woman, you have to work twice as hard as the men, and when you're a BME woman you have to work three times as hard. I don't know, maybe sometimes I get annoying, but I just say 'You just got to be better. You can't be like the average middle class white bloke, you've got to be better'. I do think it's important that we push for BME short-lists because I believe it's got to be radical. It's got to be radical, just like you did with the women's short lists, if you want to get anywhere with getting more BME councillors and MPs.

## Next Steps

On May 19th 2008, as Minister for Women and Equalities I launched a new taskforce to help more black, Asian and minority ethnic women to become councillors, and so make councils more representative of the community.

The taskforce will be chaired by Baroness Uddin, the first Muslim woman in the House of Lords and a prominent figure in the black and Asian community. Members will include councillors from across Britain, from all ethnicities and political parties.

Only around 168 out of 20,000 councillors are black, Asian or minority ethnic women. This is less than one per cent, despite the fact they make up more than 5% of the population. To be fully representative this needs to increase more than five fold to around 1000 minority ethnic women councillors. At the current rate of increase this could take more than 130 years.

The taskforce will take practical action to address this under-representation, such as provide mentoring, hold outreach events in community centres to make the role of councillors more widely known and better understood, working with organisations such as the Local Government Association, Operation Black Vote and the Fawcett Society to develop awareness training, establish networking groups, conduct research, work with local councils, political parties and organisations like IdeA to improve the recruitment, training and selection and support given to candidates as well as working with others producing guidance and advice.

