

“Where did you copy that essay from?” An interview with Diane Abbott, MP



Pat Gray

In 1987, Diane Abbott made history by becoming the first Black woman ever to be elected to the British parliament. Born in London, she attended grammar school in London and went on to Cambridge where she obtained a degree in history. Over the years, Diane has built a distinguished career as a parliamentarian, broadcaster and commentator. She has also worked as a journalist, TV reporter and public relations consultant.

In 1999, Diane created the London Schools and the Black Child initiative, which aims to raise educational achievement levels amongst Black children. She hosts an annual conference for educators, children and their parents and an annual academic awards ceremony. In 2008, Diane was awarded the *Spectator*/Threadneedle Speech of the Year Award and a Human Rights Award from Liberty. A strong grass-roots activist and campaigner, she is willing to stand up for her beliefs. She has served on a number of parliamentary committees on social and international issues.

Diane is an experienced public speaker and broadcaster, both nationally and internationally, and appears regularly on radio and television. She is currently shadow minister for public health and MP for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (www.dianeabbott.org.uk).

On a pleasant sunny summer afternoon, I had the privilege to talk to Diane about her life experiences

Pat: In 1987, you became the first Black woman to be elected as an MP; and the only one for a decade. How did a girl from Jamaica choose politics over nursing or becoming a teacher, which were, I guess, two of the streamlines for people at that time?

Diane: As a child, I was a great reader; a huge, omnivorous reader of novels. In my summer holidays, I might read a book a day and, in those novels, people went to University, and they mostly went to Oxford and Cambridge. So, I thought, if people in those novels can go to Oxford and Cambridge, I will do that myself. One of the things that I got from going to Cambridge was the sense that, because I had been privileged to go to a good university, I had a responsibility to give something back to society. It is politics as a form of public service that has always motivated me.

As for why did a Black girl think she could join an elite profession like politics – well, that never really held me back. I remember, when I became a parliamentary candidate, I had a lot of media interviews. All the journalists, who were of course white, asked me that question you are asking me. However, there was one white journalist, who wrote for *The Times*, who looked at me and said she wasn't going to ask me “Why you are doing it?” at

all because she herself had been a working class girl who had gone to Cambridge. So, she knew – if you get into a top university from a working class background, you see a hurdle and you take it. I have never allowed other people's racism to constrain what I think I should be doing with my life and I have tried to impart that to my son in the same way.

Pat: How would you describe your experiences in becoming the first Black woman MP? Could you say something about the Black voices that influenced you?

Diane: Well, you have to remember that my parents were part of the early generation that came to this country from the Caribbean. They came here in the 1950s and so there was that sense you had of striking out, of breaking new ground. We started out living in Paddington, one of the places where a lot of Black people lived in the 60s and 70s: there was Paddington, Notting Hill, in and around Harrow, west London, Harlesden and Jubilee Clock. My father took it upon himself to move us out to Harrow, which all of his friends, his Black friends, thought was shocking at the time. They used to say to him, “Reggie, why are you going to live in a bush?” – i.e. why have you gone to live in the deep rural countryside? As far as his friends were

concerned, Harrow was the end of the known world. So, from an early age, I had a sense of not just keeping to the safe and the familiar; that it was important to strike out.

Pat: I can identify with some aspects of that. I think for most of my life I have either been the only Black girl in the top set at school or training in my profession. When I go anywhere, my particular interests will mean that a lot of the time, for example when going to the theatre or the opera, you don't see many Black faces. When you were speaking, it took me back to my early educational experiences where I had a very ambivalent relationship with education and academia. I had it drummed into me that you can only achieve ‘this’, and it was very strong. I was brought up and taught at a primary school in Moss Side. My parents made a deliberate decision to send me to a school out of our area, where there were few Black children (because at that time you had a choice) and, throughout my secondary education, I was the only Black girl in my class.

Diane: Just to touch on what you have said about education, I went to school when children still sat the 11 Plus. I passed my 11 Plus and went to grammar school. I was the only Black child there and I felt quite isolated. I think teachers did, and still do, make a

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lot of assumptions about Black children. I remember my PE teacher used to be baffled that I was so hopeless at sport. She used to say, "All you Jamaican girls are so good at netball". I felt slightly embarrassed because I was always hopeless at sport. I had no natural rhythm or anything like that. Teachers make assumptions about children and it is very hard, sometimes, for children to deal with this in their head.

The hardest thing that happened to me was when I went up to grammar school from primary school. At primary school, despite everything, I was very well known for writing stories. They would be placed up on the wall, etc. When I went to secondary school, I remember my English teacher; she gave us an essay to write in lesson one and, in lesson two, we arrived and she read out everyone's grades. She started at the top; A+, A, A-. I was accustomed always to achieving an A so, when she had reached A- and hadn't called my name, I was a bit shocked. She went on to B+, B, B-, C+, C, C-, D+, D and D-. She hadn't read out my name at all. I was really baffled so I raised my hand and pointed out that she had not read out my name. She told me she would speak to me at the end of class. I always remember this. She looked at me then picked up my essay between her thumb and forefinger and asked, "Where did you copy that essay from?" She didn't ask, "Did you copy that essay?" She was absolutely certain that this little chubby Black girl in her little blouse, standing in front of her, could not have written that essay. And here is the point: I was so mortified and so ashamed, I made a point of not writing essays up to the standard that I knew I was capable of; of not using some of the words that I knew. It was only when I moved up a year and had a different English teacher who was more sympathetic that I started to flourish in English. What that taught me was the way children move down to your expectations. I think, in terms of education, that is very much what is happening with Black children today.

Pat: How did you survive what must have been difficult and challenging times, especially in expressing your voice as a Black woman?

Diane: I think my reading and the world of books did a lot to help me be emotionally and intellectually resilient. I had a complicated family life. My father was quite violent and my mother left home just before I sat my O levels and my father, who had not heard of feminism, decided I would have to do all the housework, which was not great news, really,

because I am hopeless at housework. Mum left before I did my O levels, so I had to do all the cooking and washing, etc., and my father, who was a troubled soul, was always ranting about my mother and issuing threats, so it was very difficult. I suppose one important thing is that I am quite a focused person. I focused on my studies and I focused, in particular, on the notion that going away to university could potentially change my life. It was that level of focus that helped me as a schoolgirl. I think, subsequently, that I have always leant heavily on my friends and Black girlfriends for support in difficult times.

Pat: You are seen as something of a Black activist. Where do you see the future (a) for Black families and (b) for Black communities in the UK?

Diane: I think that the Black community has to rediscover the solidarity we had in the 50s and 60s. What has happened is that we have become hooked on the post-Thatcherite model, which is about individual advancement. However, particularly for socially excluded communities, cohesion within the communities is very important. That is why other communities that, like Black people, have suffered from racism, are doing better than we are now. The Jewish community has always been the victim of anti-Semitism and often quite virulent – quotas at university, quotas at schools – but, because the Jewish community has really strong community-cohesion, it has survived and flourished. The same is true of a lot of Asians from east Africa. Internal cohesion, despite the racism, means they have been able to flourish. Our lack of our own internal cohesion is a real weakness for us. We have to come together as a community.

Pat: I read your newsletter on British patriotism and the call for new British patriotism. I wonder what that would mean for some Black families? There are those families that now embrace Britain as their own and would be proud to fly the British flag. However, there are still some families who would say there is still 'no Black in the Union Jack'.

Diane: Well it is a complicated issue, multiculturalism; it is possible to be a very proud American while you are proud to be Italian, Irish or of your Black heritage. It ought to be possible to be a proud British person as well as being proud of your own distinct cultural heritage; that's the idea. We need a new British patriotism because, all too often, the default position makes an

assumption that real British people are white: that certainly is not the case.

Pat: I guess that is still how Britain is perceived; I know that, when I travel, people are surprised that "they have Black people in Britain". The question is, what do we need to do now as a Black community? We talk about diversity and multiculturalism; the high percentage of interracial relationships, marriages within the Black and white communities. Multiculturalism has been criticised in the past because it means it is always the minority culture that has to assimilate and, what it is doing is assimilating into the dominant culture, which still is a predominately white culture in England. Can we ever have a multicultural Britain, which is very respectful of those differences, respectful in terms of equality, so that white people don't actually say, for example, "Oh Diane, I don't see you as a Black person; I just see you as a human being"; but a multiculturalism in which it can be thought, "I am sitting here with Diane and Diane is a Black person and I can acknowledge, appreciate and respect that and also respect what that brings to me as a white person", for example?

Diane: The people that complain about multiculturalism are really people that are complaining about the presence of Black people in society. I think we are, de facto, in a multicultural society because of the people from different cultures living here. The important thing is that there is mutual respect so that there is not an assumption that people with a Black heritage or Asian heritage, for example, necessarily have a culture which is inferior to white culture; which is not to say there is no aspect of white English culture that I don't respect. I am very English in a sense – in moments of crisis I will have a cup of tea, and my default mode is to queue – but it is very important to respect others people's culture. Because of the past, because of the heritage of empire, a lot of white people did not respect cultures other than their own. I think multiculturalism, in the sense of respect for other cultures, is a good thing and I think people who argue against it really have a problem with the Black presence in British society.

Pat: Last night, I saw Lemn Sissay being interviewed in a theatre discussion on 'Black men on the couch'. One of his responses to the question about why Black men don't go for therapy, was that this

country has a problem with Black men; and I guess you could argue this is why Black families don't go for family therapy. This is a view that has been held for some time. What would you say to this? Is this changing?

Diane: I have a son and he is eighteen years now and, the thing is, that you see the world more through a Black man's eye. There is no question in my mind that society sees Black men, de facto, as threatening and, even in society as a whole, there are still issues about institutional racism. I think that, because the people with the power in society are largely male and largely white, they are more likely to give a Black woman a break rather than a Black man. I speak as a feminist but, in my working life, I have seen that, where people who are running an institutional organisation are white male, they are more likely to give a Black woman who they see as attractive a break than they would to Black men.

My son went to sixth form in Ghana and, when he came back after his first term, he was totally taken aback by the prevalence of everyday racism, which he had taken for granted until he went to live in a Black country. Even simple things like going to a shop, having security all over young Black men asking what you want. He had got so used to being in a Black country that the kind of everyday racism you experience as a young Black man in Britain came as a shock to him. It is that everyday racism which sometimes people don't even acknowledge as racism, like "The cabbie didn't see me that is why he drove off", is actually very corrosive to your self-esteem. It is a big problem and I think society does find Black men threatening.

I run a programme for young Black people in education and, every year for the past few years, I have run an award ceremony for young Black people who are doing well academically. We have tried, for instance, to get it reported in *The Evening Standard*, which is the London evening newspaper and, the last time we rang them to say we have these young people who have got 11 A* grades, all they asked me was "Are any of them ex-gang members?" Unless you fit into their paradigm about what Black children are about, they are not interested. When young, Black children have those assumptions reflected back at them, it is corrosive because you get young Black children who say to me, "Oh, I am not interested in education; education is a white thing". I become quite angry. When did maths or music or sciences become white subjects? They are really just

reflecting what white society tells them about themselves.

Pat: Let me come back to something you said earlier, when you referred to your childhood and the difficulties you experienced. How do you think your parents might have responded to being encouraged to seek, or being referred for, family therapy? What do you think their response would have been and what do you think Black families would think now about going to family therapy for help with their difficulties; for their family problems?

Diane: My parents would have rejected it; partly because they came from a rural community that is quite cohesive and where you solved your problems within that community; partly because they would have feared that, if you go and speak to white people, the next thing will be that they are taking your children away; and partly because that generation of West Indians didn't deal with abstractions and states of mind. They went out to work; they brought home a wage packet at the end of the week, and they did their best to look after their family the best way they knew how. The idea of therapy would not have entered my parents' minds and would have been seen as both threatening and just not relevant to them.

Pat: what about Black families now?

Diane: I think Black families now, to a certain extent, have similar attitudes, although perhaps not as pronounced as in my parents, but the same belief in sorting problems out inside the community; the belief that you have to be careful and not have too much to do with authority. I think this leads to a notion that it will make things problematic.

Pat: Do you think it would make it easier if they knew there are actually Black therapists, because I have been in that position?

Diane: I think there is no doubt that Black people would be more willing to go to therapy if they thought they could have a Black therapist. Their default question must be, "How can a white person understand your problems?" I have a lot of sympathy with that position, because I don't think they necessarily can.

Pat: That is one of the things we in AFT are trying to address, that is, establishing

a more culturally appreciative and culturally sensitive awareness.

Predominantly, the therapists in my field are white so, in terms of who is going to be available, it is a lottery. If you are working in London, there are more Black therapists; so Black families could have more of a choice about seeing a Black therapist. Elsewhere, the therapists are predominately going to be white. There is a need to raise awareness in professional education for people who are working with Black families. We need to ensure this takes place. It is not unlike teachers in the educational system who need to have more awareness and sensitivity to the needs of Black children understanding how their voices are silenced; having an awareness to speak to encourage those young kids to take part, to feel a part and have a part in the system.

Diane: I think it is particularly important that therapists are culturally aware. Black families would be unwilling to approach a therapist unless they felt they were culturally aware.

Pat: I watched *Newsnight* on 27th May 2011, which included Beverley Knight, and you were talking about your roots and how they helped give you a narrative. In what ways were your roots important in determining who you are?

Diane: My family come from Clarendon in Jamaica, and it is not a parish that tourists go to that much. It's a parish in the centre of Jamaica that is green and hilly. The point about Clarendon and the hills is that the Black people that went there were basically the Black people who assumed that slavery was abolished – this was before slavery was abolished – and they ran to the hills because they were not prepared to continue cutting cane for the white man. So, the people in the hills earned a living there for several generations, from agriculture and cash crop from banana and coffee and, of course, they grew a lot of what they ate. The people from those parishes were particularly independent and confident, if you like. They were people who were not going to cut cane anymore. I think that helped to characterise me; coming from generations of rural Jamaicans who were about self-possession.

Pat: What message would you give to a would-be Black family and systemic therapist contemplating entering a field

that some would still consider to be a white and elitist field?

Diane: I don't think anybody should hold back from doing something just because a lot of people who do it are white. That goes without saying, otherwise we would still be doing jobs like our parents. My mother was a nurse and my father a factory worker. I remember trying to counsel a young Black girl in Hackney, whose school thought she was good enough to try for Oxford or Cambridge, but she said she didn't want to go there because it was not diverse enough for her. I said to her, if you want diversity, you can go and work behind the check out at Tesco. If you want to do something that is fulfilling and aspirational, then you have to forget about only wanting to do something that is done only by Black people. We can ghettoise a community if we say we are not going to do something unless a lot of other Black people are already doing it.

Pat: I wonder if some of us might still be a bit frightened in feeling we have a responsibility to take that first step. It can be a burden thinking, "I am going to be the first Black person to do that". I think that is why Black mentorship is important to encourage Black people; to say to them, "You can do that; you have a right to do it; don't let those things hold you back".

Diane: I think it is going to depend on whether or not you really want to do it. I didn't think I was going to be the first Black woman member of parliament. I just thought I was going to be a member of parliament. I think people need to decide what they want to do and then just go for it.

Pat: I often get asked the question, "How would you describe yourself? Is it as a therapist who happens to be Black or a Black therapist?" I see myself as a Black female therapist. Are you ever asked to make those distinctions about how you would describe yourself?

Diane: Particularly when I was a new MP, I would get asked "Are you a Black MP or an MP for everybody?" What I would say then, and still do, is that no one ever asks a white MP if they are an MP for everybody. It is always assumed that being white, in some sense, is universal. So, what I say is, professionally and politically I represent everybody, but part of my identity is the fact that I am Black. Society is not going to let me forget that so it would be foolish for me to try and forget it.

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The struggle for self love in a White world

Adrienne Riofrio

"Mommy", my daughter suddenly said: she had been sitting quietly in the backseat of the car examining her shoes.

"Si?" (I only speak Spanish to her).

"Yo quiero ser blanquita" (I want to be white), was her response.

After a moment of complete surprise, I started to talk to her about her lovely skin-colour, but she cut me off;

"No, I want to be white, like you".

My husband is Jamaican, with a mix of African and South Asian ancestry. I am phenotypically white, of Ecuadorian and German/Jewish parents. My father is Ecuadorian; my mother was born in Ecuador of Jewish parents who escaped Germany and found their way to Ecuador, where they settled. My parents came to the United States when they married, and my siblings and I were born here. When I was young, I was somewhat ashamed of being Latina – of my family speaking a different language, of my parents' accents, of calling my dad "Papi". Once I became a teenager and then moved onto college, though, I began to see my difference as a strength; I became proud of being Latina, improved my Spanish; started working with Latino families. And, suddenly, I was faced with a new shame: that of being white. As I learned about the historical context for current race-oppression, I felt more and more comfortable with being Latino and less so with being white. When the subject of race came up, I never allowed myself to identify with a white perspective, always seeking that part of my experience that could identify with people of colour. I ran from my whiteness and even from being Jewish and sought refuge in my family's experiences with oppression, immigration, of otherness, even though my experience – looking white, being upper middle class – was, by and large, one of privilege. I struggled for many years to find a place for myself, identifying with all things Latino, but looking so very white. I wanted to be darker. And here was my daughter telling me she wanted to be white.

I have always challenged myself around issues of race, culture and oppression. I have felt more comfortable than my white colleagues discussing issues of race and oppression with clients. White friends and other therapists have often sought my counsel about issues related to race in their sessions and in their lives. I have a diverse group of friends, both personally and professionally, and I never hesitate to bring up issues of race. I feel competent responding to questions about my identity and don't fear, as some other white folks do, that I will be "misunderstood" by people of colour if I speak about racial issues. Although I knew that my children would face challenges being mixed race, I didn't think that I would have a difficult time helping them.

In her three-and-a-half short years, my daughter has grown up surrounded by people of colour, white people, Spanish-speaking people, English-speaking people, etc. I have read books about raising bi-racial children and have learned that parents make a mistake when they pretend that race doesn't exist. I gave her a name for her skin colour – Morenita – and talked about the beauty of her skin tone, the colour of cinnamon. I take care to do her hair and show her all the styles she can wear. Despite this, she has a constant fantasy of being white. When the wind hits her in the car, she says, "This wind is making me white"; when she puts cream on, she wants it to be thick so that her skin looks white; she often takes a paintbrush from her arts and crafts area and pretends to paint herself white. And on starting pre-school, she tells me she doesn't like to play with the two girls in the class who are brown skinned. And she wants straight hair like her white friend. And now, if she sees a black woman or girl on TV, she says, "I don't like her" or "I like her" about a white girl or woman. It is painful to think of my daughter, at her age, struggling with not loving her whole self. There is a part of this that is about her desire to identify and be the same as me. But there is another part: a way that white supremacy, that is