OUR STORY, OUR COMMON HUMANITY

SPEECH AT THE BHM@40 PRESS ANNOUNCEMENT

SPEAKER

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DELIVERED

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My Lords, Members of Parliament, Mayors, Councillors, members of the media, distinguished guests, friends:

Ye ma mo akwaaba. We welcome you all in a warm embrace.

I stand before you as the Sankofa bird, retrieving the past to help us shape the future in the present.

June 1987 was a landmark in British political life. At that year's general election, Diane Abbott, Paul Boateng and Bernie Grant entered the House of Commons as Black MPs. Keith Vaz was elected alongside them as an Asian MP. Together, they were four MPs from minority ethnic backgrounds.

Their election mattered because representation matters. People who had too often been spoken about, or left out of the national story, were now also present in Parliament: representing constituents, contributing to debate and helping shape decisions. Their presence did not complete the work of equality. It made visible both the progress possible and the work still to do.

A few months later, in October 1987, African Jubilee Year gave birth to Black History Month in Britain. The purpose was to correct a national memory: to affirm that Black history is British history, African history is world history, and every child should be able to find themselves in the story of the nation - not as a footnote, but as a maker of history.

These two moments belong in the same story. Representation in Parliament and representation in our history, our classrooms, our institutions and our public life all speak to who is recognised as belonging and contributing.

Forty years on, we have reached a milestone. It is a moment to take stock: to recognise how far we have come in our relations with one another, honour the people who sustained Black History Month, and decide what we want to build together next.

For four decades, teachers, librarians, families, volunteers and community organisers have carried this work forward, often in their own time and with limited resources. We honour their commitment. Now we have an opportunity to strengthen that work

through lasting institutional support - in education, archives, cultural institutions, policy and public life.

Our vision is for 2027 to become a four-nation moment of recognition, representation, knowledge, conscience, fellowship and celebration. We want the anniversary to belong to the whole United Kingdom - not only London, and not only the communities that have carried Black History Month until now.

We want it to leave a legacy: one in which every child growing up in this country can appreciate the contributions of Africa, Africans and people of African descent to world civilisation, and to the development of Britain and Europe, from antiquity to the present.

Wales offers an example from which the rest of the country can learn. Its curriculum gives greater place to Black, Asian and minority ethnic histories, helping children understand that these histories are part of Welsh history. We hope BHM@40 will encourage every nation to consider how it can strengthen that recognition in its own schools and institutions.

The Human Rights Act 1998 and the Equality Act 2010 set out principles of rights, dignity and equality. BHM@40 is an opportunity to bring those principles further into daily life - in our classrooms, workplaces, civic institutions and relationships with one another. In doing so, we can give enabling and enriching meaning to the word "United" in the United Kingdom.

Let me outline the programme we hope to develop.

At its heart is a Knowledge Village: a welcoming space for exhibitions, oral and family histories, film and digital archives. We envisage activity in London, Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast, with pop-ups in other cities, bringing institutions and communities together to help people discover the histories that connect us.

A Sankofa-Ubuntu Torch Relay would carry a message of remembrance and shared humanity to historic landmarks and communities across all four nations. Sankofa invites us to retrieve what is valuable from the past; Ubuntu reminds us that our lives are connected.

We hope to hold football and cricket festivals that bring young people and communities together through sport. We envisage a regatta connecting the boating traditions of the River Niger and the Thames through remembrance, fellowship and celebration.

An equestrian celebration would recognise African, Caribbean and Black British contributions to horsemanship and racing, including the jockeys, grooms, trainers and riders whose stories deserve wider recognition.

A national music celebration would bring together the sounds that have helped shape Britain - from gospel, highlife, reggae, calypso, soca and jazz to grime, Afrobeats and classical music. It would celebrate achievement, creativity and joy across generations and communities.

These are ambitious proposals, and they will require careful development and partnership. We intend to bring together a Delivery Consortium drawing on the knowledge, skills and resources of public institutions, communities, cultural bodies, education and business.

We invite local authorities, mayors, councils, schools, universities, museums, libraries and other public institutions to consider a policy decision recognising and marking forty years of Black History Month. They can build on what they already do and consider how to amplify it in 2027 - through teaching, exhibitions, events, staff engagement, archives or community initiatives.

Local government helped create the civic space and infrastructure for African Jubilee Year and Black History Month between 1985 and 1988. That history offers a foundation for new partnerships. We invite councils, city regions and mayors to bring their experience, people and resources to this work.

We also warmly invite the financial and business sectors into the conversation. Britain's economic history includes the Atlantic slave trade, its human consequences and the wealth it generated. We believe this history merits thoughtful public engagement. Institutions can bring knowledge and perspective, support education and archives, and help widen opportunity for the next generation.

Our approach is one of invitation and partnership. We want to develop practical contributions that are meaningful, well organised and suited to each institution's role. The community helped bring Black History Month into being; together, we can help secure its future.

Friends, in 1987 a candle was lit in London. For forty years, many hands have kept it burning. Today, in this Parliament, we invite the whole country to help it shine further – to turn it into a beacon of recognition, representation and shared purpose.

Let London be remembered as the birthplace. Let Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland be full partners. Let every region and community find its place in this year of recognition and celebration.

Let 2027 be a year in which we celebrate progress, deepen understanding and build a lasting legacy together.

Forty years on: from recognition to representation, from memory to movement. Yes, movement powered by the younger generation who will enrich and defend the narrative.

Our narrative is a continuum because of the significance of the parent to human life. To the Akan of Ghana, the human being is constituted of the blood of the mother and the spirit of the father. The umbilical cord of humanity that connects us all is therefore sacred. The umbilical cord of Diane and the spirit of Paul have manifested Dawn and Bell. The umbilical cord of Linda, Mia and the spirit of Ansel and Bernard have manifested Michael, Curtis, Brent, Stephen, Tatianna, Victoria, Suzzane and Eden. Dawn, Bell, Tatianna, Curtis, Victoria, Michael, Suzzane, Eden, Brent, Stephen and

those to be brought on board to constitute the new generation holding on to the baton of responsibility. They are to construct the lighthouse of knowledge and conscience, the beacon of Our Story, Our Common Humanity.

During Black History Month, we pay tribute to Our Common Humanity and celebrate the diversity of Our Common Human Heritage.

BLACK HISTORY MONTH @40 - OUR STORY, OUR COMMON HUMANITY.

Thank you.

11TH NOVEMBER 2026, GRIMOND ROOM, PORTCULLIS HOUSE, HOUSES OF PARLIAMENT