

London gets new mayor, BNP takes first assembly seat

A former journalist with a privileged upbringing who was forced to apologise after calling blacks "picanninies" Saturday became the mayor of London - the world's most ethnically diverse city.

Conservative candidate Boris Johnson ousted Labour's leftwing veteran Ken Livingstone, who had held the job since it was created in 2000 and is a familiar face among the British capital's large and diverse ethnic minority population.

Johnson's victory came as the far-right British National Party (BNP) won its first seat on the London Assembly after crossing the five percent voters share threshold needed to take a place.

One in every six London voters is an ethnic minority, with Indians - a wealthy and influential group - making up the largest minority group in a city of 7.5 million people.

In his acceptance speech Friday night, Johnson, a former editor of the pro-Conservative Spectator magazine, referred to disputes about "the true meaning of multi-culturalism" that marked the battle for mayorship.

"I will work flat out from now on to earn your trust and dispel some of the myths that have been created about me," he told cheering supporters.

Johnson, who read at Eton - Britain's most exclusive public school - and is said to be familiar with the Greek classics and an admirer of the ancient Greek city-state Athena jokingly referred to his multicultural credentials in a recent radio interview.

He said he came from Turkish stock, was "down with the ethnics" and, referring to his wife, whose mother is Indian, declared his children are "a quarter Indian, so put that in your pipe and smoke it".

However, Johnson faced constant criticism over his reference to Blacks as "picanninies" in an article he wrote for The Spectator, forcing him to apologise.

He also strongly rejected the BNP's endorsement of his candidature, saying he had 'no desire whatsoever to receive a single second-preference vote from a BNP supporter'.

The BNP's success in securing a seat in the 25-member London Assembly - a key group that helps run the British capital - was described by the campaign group Hope not Hate as a victory for "hatred, violence and stupidity".

Voters select parties rather than individuals in the assembly election, and the party's mayoral candidate Richard Barnbrook is expected to take the seat.

Barnbrook had said he believed immigrants who have arrived in the past 15 years were taking more than they were giving.

The BNP campaign had prompted other politicians to call for voters not to elect the party.

In contrast to many of his rivals, Livingstone is a well-known face among London's large ethnic

minority population.

He is widely admired for his swift and decisive actions following the July 7, 2005 terrorist bombing that killed 52 innocent Londoners. Building a quick platform with the police and the national government, Livingstone ensured that there was very little backlash against Muslims.

He became a favourite with Indians after leading a 50-strong business delegation to India in order to attract Indian investments.

In 2006, Indian visitors to London spent more than Japanese and there are today 10,000 Indian-owned businesses in the capital.

Livingstone was also a key figure in helping to bring the Olympics to London for the 2012 games.

Analysts as well some key members of the ruling Labour party put down his loss to voter disenchantment with the national government led by Gordon Brown, rather than any overriding local reasons.

Home Secretary Jacqui Smith said that Livingstone lost because of a "combination of national and local issues", but the outgoing mayor declared: "I'm sorry we couldn't get the extra two percentage points that would have taken us to victory. The fault is entirely mine."

Dipankar De Sarkar (© IANS / India eNews)