

'I'm proud of my roots and I hope Indians are proud of me'

As a Labour party nominee for Britain's House of Commons, Valerie Vaz traces her Goan ancestry while she talks politics to **Alexandre Moniz Barbosa**

If she wins the British general elections, expected some time in early May, she could be the first woman of Indian origin to sit in the House of Commons. If her brother retains his seat, it could make a rare sibling team in the British parliament. For, nominated as the Labour party candidate from Walsall South in west central England is Valerie Vaz, who traces her ancestral roots to Goa and is the sister of Britain's longest serving Asian MP Keith Vaz who has been returned to parliament from Leicester East in south east England since 1987.

"It is a privilege to be able to be

actively involved in public service at this level particularly as my origins are not from Britain. However, I have lived here (Britain) for over 40 years. It will be an honour to represent the people of Walsall South," says Valerie.

Of Goan ancestry, lawyer/politician Valerie was born in Aden and migrated to the UK when the family moved there. She currently works as a solicitor for the government legal service at the treasury solicitor's department. Prior to that, she set up her own firm Townsend Vaz Solicitors and has sat as a part time deputy district judge in the county court on the Midland and Oxford

circuit. She also worked for the BBC on the television programme Network East.

Walsall South is in the West Midlands, not far from Birmingham, and was the centre of the steel industry that has now largely disappeared. It has an ethnic minority population of 26%, the second generation of which has been born in the UK.

Valerie expects the main issues in the election will be jobs and education. "In some areas of the constituency, the key performance indicators of GCSE's (exams taken by 16-year-olds) vary from one ward to another. I will try to ensure that all children have access to resources to enable them to achieve top scores irrespective of their background," Valerie promises.

"Owing to the global crisis, there has been an increase in unemployment but the Labour government has brought in measures to ensure that particularly young people stay in training until they can secure jobs. It has a large manufacturing base and a leather industry that although reduced, still makes the Queen's handbags," says Valerie.

Though she hasn't had a chance

to nurse the constituency and was selected only on March 17 after sitting MP Bruce George decided to retire, the Labour majority of 7,900 and George having represented it for 39 years, should help Valerie hold the seat pretty easily.

This is not Valerie's first attempt in politics. She was deputy leader and elected councillor of the London Borough of Ealing. "This will prove very helpful in running my campaign and I hope ultimately to support a Labour government," says Valerie.

With brother Keith putting all he has behind Valerie's campaign, the Vaz siblings in the UK parliament is a very likely possibility. "I am extremely proud of Keith's achievements, and he is a mentor. I was first elected to the council in 1986 and Keith to parliament in 1987, so our political activity has run in tandem," says Valerie.

Four decades in Britain haven't watered down Valerie's attachment to India. "My father and my mother's uncles worked for The Times of India a while back, so I am proud of my roots and I hope the Indian people are proud of me," says Valerie.

Once elected, she looks forward

to working with Indian MPs. "I was selected from an all-woman shortlist so I am keen to establish a network with other women MPs in India. I understand there are a number of seats that are reserved for women and I applaud the positive action taken to ensure women are represented at all levels of government. I would be keen to exchange ideas so that we can support each other," says Valerie.

Keith and Valerie aren't the only members of the Vaz family to be passionate about politics. "Politics appears to run in the family, but that is only because we want to serve and we were told if much is given to you, much is expected from you. In addition, we want to make sure that the difficulties we have faced are used in a positive way so that other people do not face those same difficulties," says Valerie.

The Vaz siblings' mother Marilyn too dabbled in politics and was Leicester's first Asian woman councillor and championed the cause of pensioners' rights. She died in 2003.

With family supporting her in this latest venture, Valerie hopes to take her place among Britain's lawmakers a few weeks from now. 100

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