



Lord Constantine (1901–1971): Profile

Lord Constantine was a West Indian cricketer and politician, who became the first person of non-European descent to be awarded a life peerage. This briefing provides biographical information including an overview of Lord Constantine's career and a summary of his maiden speech in the House of Lords.

Early Life and Professional Cricket

Learie Constantine, born on 21 September 1901, was the son of Lebrun Samuel Constantine, cocoa estate overseer and member of the West Indian cricket teams who toured England in 1900 and 1906, and his wife, Anaise Pascall.¹

Constantine played cricket with his family from an early age on their cocoa estate, and captained St Ann's School, Port of Spain in 1916 and 1917. In 1921 he won a place in the Trinidad team.² In 1923 and 1928 he was selected for the West Indian tour of England. In 1929, he was engaged by the Lancashire league cricket club, Nelson, to become its professional.³ He was the first West Indian player to appear in the Lancashire league. Constantine played for Nelson for eight seasons, and except in 1939, when he joined the West Indies team in England, he continued as a league professional in England until 1948.⁴ In 1963, he was given the freedom of the borough of Nelson.

Public Life and Politics

During the Second World War, Constantine was employed by the Ministry of Labour, in conjunction with the Colonial Office, as a welfare officer.⁵ He was based in Liverpool and had responsibility for West Indian workers in munition factories and the needs of West African seamen.⁶ He received an MBE for his services in 1946.⁷ During this period, he also took legal action against the Imperial Hotel London, after it "fail[ed] to receive and lodge him". In 1944, he was awarded the nominal damages that he sought.

After eight years of trying to qualify as a barrister, in 1954 Constantine passed his bar finals and was called by the Middle Temple; he became an honorary master of the bench in 1963.⁸ He also published his book *Colour Bar* in 1954, which examined racial prejudice and discrimination on a worldwide basis.⁹

When Constantine returned to Trinidad in 1954, he was called to the bar there and was elected to the first Trinidad Legislature as a People's Nationalist Movement member for Tunapuna.¹⁰ In 1956, he became Minister of Works and Transport. However, according to his biographers, he became "disillusioned" with politics and did not stand for re-election in 1961.¹¹

Constantine returned to England when he was appointed High Commissioner for Trinidad and Tobago in London in 1962, a post he held until his resignation in 1964.¹² He also received a knighthood in 1962. His period in office coincided with the increased immigration of West Indians to Britain, and according to the historian Gerald M D Howat, Constantine saw concern for them as his major responsibility.¹³

Following his resignation, Constantine entered the chambers of Sir Dingle Foot and practised in English courts, wrote and broadcast on cricket, was elected rector of St Andrews University in 1967, and in 1968 became a governor of the BBC.¹⁴

Constantine also served on two newly created bodies, the Sports Council (1965) and the Race Relations Board (1966).¹⁵ The Race Relations Board was established under the Race Relations Act 1965. Its purpose was to assess and resolve individual cases of racial discrimination.

House of Lords

In 1969, Sir Learie Constantine was one of four new life Peers named in the New Year honours list.¹⁶ On 24 March 1969, by letters patent, he was created Lord Constantine.¹⁷ On appointment, he became the first person of non-European descent to be awarded a life peerage.¹⁸ He was introduced in the House of Lords on 26 March 1969, sponsored by the Government Chief Whip, Lord Beswick, and Lord Brockway.¹⁹ Unusually, the ceremony was also attended by the two hereditary officers of state, the Earl Marshal of England, the Duke of Norfolk, and the Lord Great Chamberlain, the Marquess of Cholmondeley.²⁰ It was reported in the *Times* that after Lord Constantine had been introduced, “a loud warm growl of hear-hears rolled round the Chamber”.²¹ Speaking about the ceremony, Lord Constantine described it as “terrific”, and said that he proposed to attend Parliament often, stating that “I shouldn’t have taken it on if I didn’t think I could do it properly”.²²

On 10 March 1971, Lord Constantine delivered his maiden speech during a debate on the interests of the Commonwealth and Britain’s negotiations to join the European Economic Community (EEC).²³ In his speech, Lord Constantine advocated the protection of the Commonwealth Sugar Agreement (CSA) if Britain entered the EEC.²⁴ He stated that because of the “historical process” of preferential trade agreements and special arrangements being given to Commonwealth countries and their exports, Britain had “encouraged” the production of certain products and “influenced the orientation of its marketing towards Britain”.²⁵ He argued:

As a result [...] the export afforded by Britain is the sheet anchor of the produce-marketing system of most Commonwealth countries. The great danger of Britain’s entry into an enlarged European Community is the loss of this long-valued outlet without the prospect of any alternatives, unless the conditions on which Britain enters are such as to enable Commonwealth countries to continue to export to the enlarged Community.

[...]

The position is considered so serious in the West Indies that I suggest that Britain makes acceptance of the sugar agreement a condition of her entry into the common market.²⁶

Lord Constantine did not speak again in the House before his death four months later, on 1 July 1971.²⁷ He was aged 69 years old.²⁸ A state funeral took place on 8 July 1971 at Aroica cemetery in Trinidad. He was posthumously awarded the Trinity Cross and there was a memorial service at Westminster Abbey.

Further Reading

- Learie Constantine, *Colour Bar*, 1954
- Jeffrey Hill, *Learie Constantine and Race Relations in Britain and the Empire*, 2018

¹ Gerald M D Howat, 'Constantine, Learie Nicholas, Baron Constantine', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 6 January 2011; and *Times*, 'Lord Constantine', 12 December 2012.

² *ibid.*

³ Jeffrey Hill, *Learie Constantine and Race Relations in Britain and the Empire*, 2019, p 45.

⁴ *Times*, 'Lord Constantine', 12 December 2012; and *Times*, 'Lord Constantine: Spectacular all-round Cricketer and Racial Equality Campaigner', 2 July 1971.

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ *ibid.*; and Jeffrey Hill, *Learie Constantine and Race Relations in Britain and the Empire*, 2019, p 90.

⁷ Gerald M D Howat, 'Constantine, Learie Nicholas, Baron Constantine', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 6 January 2011; and *Times*, 'Lord Constantine', 12 December 2012.

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ Jeffrey Hill, '[Rethinking Learie Constantine](#)', 14 January 2019.

¹⁰ Jeffrey Hill, *Learie Constantine and Race Relations in Britain and the Empire*, 2019, pp 125–6; *Times*, 'Lord Constantine', 12 December 2012; and *Times*, 'Lord Constantine: Spectacular all-round Cricketer and Racial Equality Campaigner', 2 July 1971.

¹¹ *ibid.*; and Gerald M D Howat, 'Constantine, Learie Nicholas, Baron Constantine', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 6 January 2011.

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ Gerald M D Howat, 'Constantine, Learie Nicholas, Baron Constantine', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 6 January 2011.

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ *Times*, 'Sir Learie Constantine Made Life Peer', 1 January 1969. The other three life Peers were: Professor Blackett, then President of the Royal Society; Sir Saville Garner, the first head of the combined diplomatic service; and Sir Donald Stokes, chairman and managing director of British Leyland Motor Corporation.

¹⁷ [London Gazette, 25 March 1969, p 3180.](#)

¹⁸ W D Rubinstein, *The Harvester Biographical Dictionary of Life Peers*, 1991, pp 128–9. The first Peer of non-European descent was Sir Satyendra Prasanna Sinha, who had been a member of the Viceroy's Council and Under Secretary of State for India. On 19 February 1919, by letters patent, he was conferred a hereditary peerage and created Lord Sinha ([Edinburgh Gazette, 25 February 1919, p 1017](#); House of Lords Library, [Membership of the House of Lords: Ethnicity, Religion and Disability](#), 11 June 2014, p 4; and *Times*, 'Sir Learie Constantine Made Life Peer', 1 January 1969).

¹⁹ [HL Hansard, 26 March 1969, col 1259.](#)

²⁰ Philip Howard, 'Sir Learie Triumphs in First Lords Test', *Times*, 27 March 1969.

²¹ *ibid.*

²² *ibid.*

²³ [HL Hansard, 10 March 1971, cols 87–90.](#)

²⁴ The Commonwealth Sugar Agreement (CSA) was signed in December 1951. It committed Britain to purchase for itself and New Zealand specified quantities of raw sugar from the Commonwealth at an annually negotiated price. Producers originally covered by the CSA were: Australia; South Africa; the British West Indies; Mauritius; Fiji; the East African territories; and British Honduras. It was terminated in 1974. It provided the framework for the sugar protocol of the Lomé Convention, a trade agreement first signed in 1975 between the EEC and African Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries.

²⁵ [HL Hansard, 10 March 1971, col 88.](#)

²⁶ *ibid.*, cols 88–9.

²⁷ Gerald M D Howat, 'Constantine, Learie Nicholas, Baron Constantine', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 6 January 2011.

²⁸ *Times*, 'Lord Constantine: Spectacular all-round Cricketer and Racial Equality Campaigner', 2 July 1971.

House of Lords Library briefings are compiled for the benefit of Members of the House of Lords and their personal staff, to provide impartial, politically balanced briefing on subjects likely to be of interest to Members of the Lords. Authors are available to discuss the contents of the briefings with the Members and their staff but cannot advise members of the general public.

Any comments on briefings should be sent to the Head of Research Services, House of Lords Library, London SW1A 0PW or emailed to purvism@parliament.uk.