A Somali Born in Westminster: A Moment of Pride and a Lesson in Democratic Inclusion

Sagal Abdi-Wali won the Holborn and St Pancras by-election for Labour with **12,292** votes, 45.17% of the vote cast, ahead of Green Party leader Zack Polanski, who took second with **8,928** votes. Her majority was 3,364 (Sunday Guardian Live, 2026). The seat has been Labour's since it was created in 1983 and was vacated by former Prime Minister Keir Starmer (Yahoo News, 2026). The result matters beyond party politics. It is about participation, belonging and who gets to lead in a democracy.

Abdi-Wali fled the Somali civil war as a young child in 1991 and came to Britain (The Jewish Chronicle, 2026). She became a Camden councilor in 2022 and leader of the council in May 2026 (LabourList, 2026), the first Black woman to hold that post (Fitzrovia News, 2026). She arrived as a child seeking safety; today she serves as a Member of Parliament. Her journey shows what inclusive institutions and equal opportunity can make possible. Too often, those who have sought protection are remembered for the circumstances that forced them to leave, rather than for the contributions they go on to make. Her story reminds us that the search for refuge is where a journey begins, not where it ends. Democracy is more than casting a vote. Dahl (1971) identified two dimensions of a working democracy: public contestation, meaning open competition for power, and inclusiveness, meaning the share of the population entitled to take part in politics. International law reflects both. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations General Assembly, 1948, Art. 21) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (United Nations General Assembly, 1966, Art. 25) protect the right to take part in public affairs, to vote and to stand for office. These principles helped make Sagal Abdi-Wali's election possible. She was able to seek her party's nomination, campaign and compete on the same terms as any other citizen, and the voters decided the outcome. Equal participation is a democratic principle, not a privilege reserved for any one community.

Political theory helps explain why her election resonates. Pitkin (1967) distinguished descriptive representation, where representatives share the background of those they represent, from substantive representation, where they act in their interests. Phillips (1995) argued for a "politics of presence", holding that who sits in the legislature matters as much as which policies are adopted. Mansbridge (1999) added that descriptive representation can strengthen trust and legitimacy, particularly for groups with a history of exclusion. For immigrants and minority communities, seeing a former child of similar background take a seat in Parliament can therefore carry real weight. Presence alone is not enough, however. As Member of Parliament, Sagal will be judged less by her biography than by how well she serves all her constituents, which is the test of substantive representation.

Her selection also drew some unfounded criticism. Reform UK's home affairs spokesperson, Zia Yusuf, posted that Labour's frontrunner had been born in Somalia and asked whether people understood what was happening, and he was accused of racism (LBC, 2026a). Another senior politician, Robert Jenrick, defended him, saying the question was whether she would put the country first (LBC, 2026b). Candidates from minority and immigrant backgrounds often face questions about identity and national belonging. Voters and the media are right to scrutinize a candidate's record, policies and conduct. Judging a candidate by their place of birth is a different matter. Allport (1954) argued that prejudice declines when people meet on equal terms, share common goals and are supported by institutions. Democratic institutions that open the door to people of all backgrounds create exactly those conditions. The electoral process settled the question, because the voters of Holborn and St Pancras chose their representative.

Her victory also bears on a wider debate about diversity and cohesion. Putnam (2007) found that diversity can reduce trust in the short run but argued that successful societies build broader forms of

shared identity over time. Kymlicka (1995) argued that citizenship can accommodate cultural identities within a common civic framework. People can keep their heritage and their links to their communities of origin while contributing to a shared civic life built on equal rights, mutual respect and common responsibility. The task for political leaders is to build trust across communities so that differences in identity do not become barriers to participation.

For Somalis at home and abroad, Sagal Abdi-Wali's election is a moment of pride and a reminder of what the diaspora contributes to public service and governance around the world. She is not alone in this. Ilhan Omar, who fled the Somali civil war as a child and spent four years in a refugee camp in Kenya, was elected to the United States Congress in 2018 as its first Somali American member (UNHCR, 2018). Their different paths in two democracies show that Somalis who found safety abroad are now serving their second countries at the highest levels of public life. Both women show young Somalis that a difficult beginning need not decide their future, and both broaden a picture of Somali communities that is too often limited to conflict and displacement. Their achievements are best understood in context. Each was elected to represent her own constituents, and together their careers point to what Somali-heritage politicians and business leaders have accomplished, despite criticism that supporters describe as racially motivated and rooted in fear.

Her story also holds practical lessons for African democracies. Her rise was not the product of luck alone. She was first chosen through a party selection contest with rival candidates and public hustings, and she then faced the voters in a competitive election (Camden New Journal, 2026). What carried her forward was a system of rules that applied to everyone. Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) argue that nations prosper when political and economic institutions are inclusive and spread opportunity widely, and that they fail when power is concentrated in a few hands. Huntington (1968) argued that political stability depends on institutions strong enough to absorb the demands of citizens entering political life. For African democracies, the lesson is clear: credible elections rest on credible institutions, including independent electoral bodies, transparent candidate selection, fair resolution of disputes and respect for the results.

For Somalia, this lesson carries weight. In my view, Somali leaders must build strong institutions enshrined in the constitution and guided by a long-term vision, including independent electoral bodies, a professional civil service, an impartial judiciary and security institutions that adhere to the rule of law. Institutions of this kind outlast individual officeholders and provide continuity beyond any one administration. Such institutions pave the way for young people, women, minorities and citizens from every region to compete and serve on equal terms. Today, many with talent and commitment still lack that opportunity, because access depends heavily on personal connections and informal arrangements rather than on rules that apply to everyone.

Her journey is also a moral lesson for the world, for Africa and for Somalia. It teaches that dignity is not determined by birthplace, that service to the community is the surest path to public trust, and that societies grow stronger when they reward effort and merit rather than privilege. The test of any political system is whether a child born in hardship, anywhere, can hope to lead one day. The countries that can answer yes, through the strength of their institutions rather than the generosity of individuals, are the ones most likely to endure.

Electoral success brings obligations to represent every constituent fairly, uphold democratic principles and turn the promise of inclusion into results. Congratulations to Sagal Abdi-Wali. May her journey inspire many, including future generations, to take part in public life and help build societies where dignity and equal opportunity are real for everyone.

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Abdiaziz Abdirahman Yusuf *is a governance and electoral specialist, the Founder and Chief Executive Officer of Baashamgroup.com (**Baasham** Research & Consulting) and IDEAL-Africa, the Institute for Democracy, Equity, Accountability and Leadership. He has observed elections across Africa and works on electoral integrity and democratic governance in Somalia and the Horn of Africa.*