Echoes of our past

A series of reflections on prominent black people, by

Jennette Arnold OBE AM

Foreword

I have been inspired by the work of many black people throughout my life. But, I regularly meet others who don't believe that positive black role models exist; or that black people have undertaken any significant achievement themselves.



I have planned a series of short papers, which I hope will help rectify that situation, by bringing attention to a number of black people who have played key roles in shaping a better society. I wanted to take time to reflect on their achievements, and, importantly, on their continuing relevance today.

I also wanted to ensure that we are all reminded of their significance. Their lives and achievements echo down the years and are lasting testaments to the huge breakthroughs they made, tearing down barriers and inspiring future generations.

We start with a feature on Lord David Pitt.

Jennette Arnold OBE AM

Lord David Pitt



3rd October 1913 to 18th December 1994

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1 Introduction

In 2009, in collaboration with the British Caribbean Association^{1,} I instigated the annual Lord David Pitt Memorial Lecture at City Hall, London. In so doing, I wanted to establish an opportunity not only to remember a great black man; but to bring the learning from his significant achievements to a new generation.

I had been struck by the co-incidence that, as Chair of the London Assembly, I was wearing a badge of office that Lord Pitt had worn when he became Chair of the Greater London Council in 1974. But beyond the badge there were a number of his previous experiences that echoed down the years.

2 Background

Born in Grenada in 1913, David Pitt won the island's only scholarship to study medicine at Edinburgh University in



1932. Whilst he went on to graduate with honours, he was always concerned for broader social issues. He witnessed the poverty of the working classes in the slums of Edinburgh and saw similarities to the rural poverty he witnessed as a

child. Nicholas Rea in the British Medical Journal said of David "it was in the slums of Edinburgh as much as in the Caribbean that he became convinced of the links between poverty, disadvantage, and ill health"². He joined the university Socialist Society and in 1936, the Labour Movement. He returned to the Caribbean to begin his medical career, founding his own practice and in 1943 married Dorothy.

Political Life in the Caribbean

His passion for social justice continued alongside his medical career. In 1941, he had been elected to the San Fernando Borough Council and then in 1943, Pitt became a founding member and leader of the West Indian National Party (WINP) – a socialist party whose main aim was to deliver political autonomy across the Caribbean. Under Pitt, the party demanded self-government for Trinidad and Tobago, constitutional reform and the nationalisation of commodities industries such as oil and sugar.

After decades of campaigning, the people of Trinidad and Tobago were granted universal adult suffrage by the British Parliament in 1945. The first elections took place in 1946. WINP and others formed the United Front with Pitt as one of the candidates. He was not successful but he continued his activism and in 1947 led a group of WINP members to Britain to lobby the Clement Atlee Government for Commonwealth status for a Federation of the West Indies.

Early life in Britain - Medicine and Politics

In November 1947, Pitt returned to the UK and settled in North London. Initially, he was to continue his work in medicine as part of the newly established NHS.

He was later to recall a story from this time, in a 1983 Lords debate. "I had an experience in 1949, which registered with me. I was then an assistant to a Dr. Stoute in Chiswick. He was black; he came from Barbados. Dr. Stoute came to me one day and said, "I have a joke for you. I visited a patient in this block of flats and there were two kids playing in the courtyard. The first one said to the other, 'There goes a black man'. And the other one said. 'Don't be a fool; that's no black man, that's the doctor!' "

In 1950, Pitt opened his own surgery in Euston. He would go on to run it there for the next 30 years, assisted by Dorothy, whom Pitt regarded as the pillar of the practice.

However, the temptation to return to political life was strong. The surgery was based at 200 Gower Street, in the same building that housed the



local anti-apartheid movement, Caribbean independence



activists and students of Africa House. In addition, one of Pitt's patients was Lena Jeger, who had been an active local and county councillor and gone on to become the local MP. She sought his help in the 1955 general election, in canvassing the constituency and he readily accepted.

So, from the mid 1950s, Pitt once again immersed himself in the local politics. After delivering a speech at the 1957 Labour Party Conference, Roy Shaw OBE, the then treasurer of the Tribune, asked if he would stand for Parliament. He was selected as the Labour candidate for the Hampstead seat in the 1959 general election – the first person of African descent to stand for parliament.

The Daily Mirror remarked that Pitt's selection for the candidacy was just another example of "fashionable liberalism"³, possibly what might be referred to today a

'political correctness'. In the same article, Pitt accepted "there was always huge applause whenever I got up to speak at the Party Conference, whatever I said". Nevertheless, this was no tokenism – it might have been rare to see an educated and articulate black man occupying a position of authority at this time, but he was there on merit.

Pitt's election campaign was of course taking place against the outcome of the 1958 Notting Hill riots. Pitt's son Bruce recalled for me death threats made against the family during the campaign; together with a bookmaker offering odds of five to one against his father living through the election. Meanwhile, Oswald Mosley had returned to Britain to stand for the London constituency of Kensington North on a platform of anti-immigration, calling for forced repatriation of Caribbean immigrants. Pitt's campaign was a natural target and Mosley marched on Hampstead, leading to what became known locally as the "Battle of Hampstead Town Hall". And, as if that was not enough, the building housing Pitt's surgery was firebombed.

First political offices and campaigns in Britain



Pitt survived the 1959 election campaign but was defeated at the ballot box. Two years later, though, he was elected as a member for Hackney for the London County Council (LCC), becoming the first member of a black and minority ethnic group to be elected to a local government position. The Stoke Newington Observer said he was а addition"⁴ to "welcome the council.

Nevertheless, Lord Pitt himself was concerned about lack of progress for the wider black community. An encounter with Martin Luther King in December 1964, whilst confirming the importance of links to international struggles, reinforced for Pitt the view that much more work was needed in the UK, where he could make a more direct impact. Inspired by this, in January 1965, Pitt helped form the Campaign Against Racial Discrimination (CARD), which he went on to Chair.

CARD consolidated the work of existing race equality groups such as the Federation of Pakistani Organisations, the Indian Workers Association and the West Indian Standing committee. The message was to peacefully agitate for political and social change within the existing institutional structures; to eschew revolutionary idealism and political violence. Such a notion aligned with Pitt's pre-existing sense of what activism should be - well reasoned, patient, and with one eye on the long term.

Pitt had always believed that the British people, despite being largely prejudiced, were ashamed of that prejudice and would abandon their prejudices if they were highlighted to them. So CARD's function was to illuminate racial prejudices alongside its more formal function of lobbying the British government for legislation. It achieved this goal in part, with the Race Relations Act of 1965, which prohibited discrimination upon the grounds of colour, race or ethnic or national origin.

His approach was aimed at infiltrating the British establishment, maintaining his principles and agitating for change from the inside. He defined his version of 'black power' as the "political and economic power of the black population"⁵ to affect political decision-making in Britain. So, he encouraged the black population in Britain to utilise their legitimate, democratic power to preserve their collective interests, rather than to take up an armed struggle.

Nevertheless, the existence of a racial advocacy organisation in Britain run by minority groups, for minority groups, was indeed radical. Nicholas Deakin, in a Runnymede interview, argued this was the exact point of CARD; to progress beyond colonial ideas of white stewardship for black activism and to give minority communities their own leaders. Lord Pitt gladly took on this leadership role in an era of radical change.

CARD subsequently lasted only 3 years. It was a great achievement to have established such an organisation, but such a broad coalition of interests was always going to be a difficult one to manage over the long term.

His own political career continued when he served on the successor body to the LCC, the Greater London Council, formed in 1965. Subsequently, he became deputy Chair from 1969 to 1970 and then Chair in 1974. He also stood again for parliament and in the 1970 general election was selected as Labour's candidate for Clapham. Whilst not successful in getting to parliament, Pitt still remained Deputy Chair of the Community Relations Commission (CRC - the precursor body to the Commission for Racial Equality), a body formed in the light of the 1968 update to the Race Relations legislation. He went on to Chair it in 1977.

Work as a Life Peer

In particular, he became one of the first black parliamentarians when he received a life peerage in 1975. He was created Baron Pitt of Hampstead (London and Grenada) and made his maiden speech on 12th May 1975 during a House debate about Cigarette Sales Promotion. Eschewing tradition, he used the opportunity, controversially, to call for a ban on smoking in public places.

Nicholas Rea, of the British Medical Journal, commented

how "some felt that by accepting a seat in the House of Lords David was becoming an Uncle Tom figure, joining the establishment and deserting his fellow immigrants. But in the house he always spoke eloquently and often passionately on behalf of ethnic and other disadvantaged groups. He quickly made friends with



peers of all political persuasions, effectively disarming much lurking prejudice. Like Nelson Mandela, he believed that the way to change institutions was to get inside them rather than confront them head on from the outside".

In a June 1976 Lord's debate upon immigration, Lord Pitt delivered an impassioned defence of immigration. He proceeded to dismantle Lord Gridley's argument that high immigration levels sours race relations: "The proof of what I am saying can be seen in the fact that the National Front admit that their major support lies in areas near to but not in areas of high coloured concentration. The reason for that is that ignorance leads to fear. Thus, when a person fears that his next-door neighbour will in future be coloured he wants immigration stopped. However, you will find that the least hostility to coloured people is found among the whites who live next to, shop with, travel with, work with and play with coloured persons⁶".

Lord Pitt was clear about the fundamental force driving the anti-immigration discourse: "Of course, the extremist groups who, in this matter, have always led the field, call for 'humane repatriation'. It will not be long before they drop the term 'humane'...Let us cut out the hypocrisy, and stop talking about immigration and face the issue for what it is, because it is an issue of colour. Then let us talk about colour, and let all the major political parties tell the people why it is in their interest to be, and to be recognised as being, a multiracial society...Your Lordships may well ask what is the case for a multiracial Britain. Personally, I think it is very simple. Britain's history and future greatness depends on it". During the 1980s, Lord Pitt's career in the Upper House was one of consistent, progressive advocacy for people from black and minority ethnic groups as well as the white working class.

A key issue for him was opposition to The British Nationality Act 1981. The Act withdrew the entitlement of automatic citizenship to anyone born in Britain. Instead, an individual needed to have at least one parent as a British citizen or permanent resident. If a child's parents did not meet this criterion, they were given "Overseas Citizen status", a status barely recognised in other countries. The net-result was a generation of "stateless children⁷".

Thus, in the subsequent Lord's debate on October 7th 1981, Pitt thundered: "I should like to beg your Lordships to remember that I am talking about youngsters who have spent most of their lives here—the youngsters therefore about whom we as a Parliament should be concerned—and we should be concerned to see that their rights are preserved"⁸. Six days later, Lord Pitt stood firm and proceeded to divide the House upon the same issue because he wanted to prevent British Overseas citizens being deprived British citizenship via the draconian powers of the Secretary of State. He also protested against the increase in the registration fee, which meant that to become a British citizen an individual now had to pay £200. Pitt's progressive stance upon immigration persisted throughout the 1980s. In the 1988 Lord's debate upon the Immigrant Bill, Lord Pitt advocated for the criterion of 'compassionate grounds' to be utilised in all deportation cases, to prevent the unnecessary criminalisation and break up of families, as opposed to the pre-existing ad hoc enforcement of the criterion. In 1993 Lords debate upon the Asylum and Immigration Appeals Bill, Pitt delivered a passionate defence for refugees to Britain. He opened his speech saying that the bill was an "exercise in cynicism"⁹ because of its obstructive measures; he argued that it was



unreasonable to expect refugees to have all the "proper papers" when they are running for their life.

He further objected to the criminalisation of refugees and the encouragement of local authorities to satisfy itself of the status of the individual when they are homeless. He said this would result in the disproportionate targeting minorities of SO the government were essentially "legislating for discrimination". racial Above all else, Pitt argued "the attitude should be that the one situation we

do not want is that a person who has left a place where [they] would be tortured is in fact sent back to be tortured".

In 1985, Pitt summarised his perception of racism: "racial

discrimination is a cancer that undermines the fabric of society. If allowed to grow and flourish, it can destroy the society. Every effort must be made to control it and turn back the tide"¹⁰. Before this statement, in 1981, in a debate upon racial and sexual discrimination, Pitt accused Thatcher's government of "dragging their feet"¹¹ when it came to monitoring and reviewing discrimination in the workplace. In terms of youth unemployment, Pitt cited race as a factor, which compounds the employment disadvantages of black people. He advocated combating racism in the workplace through "a whole range of activities, starting with the provision of more nursery places, more nursery schools, greater attention to the education of minorities with the provision of more black teachers and better motivation of young blacks, and the provision of a second chance for those who miss out during the period of their journey through the school system"¹². He also advocated the funding of more voluntary organisations to provide multi-racial urban communities with vital facilities.

On the 7th December 1983, in a Lords Debate upon the status of ethnic and religious minorities in Britain, Pitt delineated the socioeconomic trap many people were falling into because of racial discrimination: "If a man is discriminated against in the employment he obtains, it also affects the type of housing he can afford. If there is also discrimination in housing that will probably restrict the area in which he can live. These together will probably decide the type of schooling, which his children will receive. That in turn will determine the sort of jobs they can hold. Thus, there is a vicious circle. It does not stop there. If that cycle goes on long enough, it will be accepted as the norm, and then I can tell your Lordships what will happen and what is already happening. One will find that there are clever academics who will set out to prove that such people are in the position they are in because they are inferior intellectually and in other ways. That is a recipe for social discord and social disaster"¹³. Pitt thus encouraged the elimination of racial discrimination in employment through equal opportunities measures as well as the sponsorship of black business.

In December 1982, upon the topic of the Brixton riots, Lord Pitt said that the Scarman report was a "first class document"¹⁴. He praised the recommendations in the report, which called for greater police accountability. Pitt further commended the recommendation that racial discrimination should become an offence under the police disciplinary



code. He also argued for a more robust appeals system that allows for conciliation.

Pitt said the question of recruiting more black police officers is a "very old one"15 but said, "in the meantime. the black community must be helped to understand how important the police are to them and also how important it is that black people should be in positions of authority at every level of society.

Just as we need more black Members of your Lordships' House, more black Members of another place [The House of Commons], more black councillors, more black teachers and more black magistrates and Ministers of Government, so we need more black policemen. Because just as we need black judges, so we need black officers in the higher ranks of the police services; and we cannot have black commanders or black superintendents if we do not have black constables. That is the point that needs to be got home. I personally believe that the best course is to make maximum use of the cadet scheme and try to get black youngsters fresh from school to go to the cadet college together, and in that way help to reinforce each other".

In a later debate, in reference to stop and search, Pitt stated "West Indians are not mild and meek people. Usually, when a policeman asks a West Indian, "Where are you going? What do you have in that bag?", the West Indian will answer, "What business is it of yours?" That is quite different from the way the average Englishman would answer. That caused a good deal of trouble in the past"¹⁶.

In terms of housing, in a 1987 Lords debate upon the issue of housing stock and repairs, Pitt highlighted the failure of Thatcher's government to improve the quality of London's housing stock. Given the government's laissez-faire reluctance to intervene in the problem, Pitt further highlighted how it would be "the poorest - and by that I mean elderly people, families on low incomes and unskilled workers - [who] are the most likely to live in properties which are in poor condition and they are the least likely to be able to afford necessary repairs. That is the problem and that is the dilemma".

To rectify this issue, Pitt recommended local authorities should intervene and provide grant-aid for those who needed it the most. In a 1988 Lords debate on the issue of the Housing Bill, Pitt criticised Thatcher's desire to decrease local authority and stimulate private sector renting because it would not help alleviate economic and social deprivation. He said: "My Lords, the housing associations were set up not merely to provide housing but also to relieve poverty by providing affordable housing. Why do the Government want to change that?"¹⁷. After all, Lord Pitt was the chairman for

Shelter and voiced his concern of a growing housing crisis and the 'right-to-buy' scheme.

Lord Pitt was also a passionate defender of local government and its role in satisfying the wishes of the people they represent. In a 1988 Lords debate upon the Local Government Bill, Pitt rallied against central government overhauling the decision of local governments to not buy certain imports from South Africa during Apartheid. Pitt stated: "I cannot see how the Government regard as defensible the suggestion that, when local authorities say they will not buy, for example, South African oranges for children, those local authorities are indulging in international politics. That is rubbish. What they are doing is reflecting the views of the people in the area"¹⁸. Lord Pitt was simply arguing for the local authority to be allowed to reflect and serve the demands of people they represent.

In a 1981 debate upon local authority privatisation, Lord Pitt acknowledged the importance of efficiency within local authorities but remained skeptical of the scope and efficacy of rampant privatisation of public sector services. Pitt said, "In my view, by and large we are better served by a local authority-controlled organisation, except for certain large projects or in specialist fields"¹⁹, but he still wanted to see "the public sector to go out and compete with the private sector, and then let us see who can provide the most efficient service". Lord Pitt's stance upon Thatcher's privatisation was more balanced.

In a 1979 Lords debate, Pitt argued against the poor resource allocation for the NHS in London saying, "the allocation is never adequate"²⁰. He argued that, in this case, central government should step in and provide funds for special units. He said that the government would need to be pragmatic and hire agency nurses to meet staffing requirements. In a 1985 Lords debate upon NHS reform and

social security, Lord Pitt proceeded to scrutinise the government's performance in providing comprehensive healthcare to the country. He said that government were needlessly continuing to "fail the community in the field of renal dialysis"²¹ when all that was required was a mild resource allocation increase. He also argued for greater investment in the medical care for those with sickle-cell disease and heart conditions.

Other work



Bruce told me that Lord Pitt's highest achievement, from his own perspective, was to become President of the British Medical Association (BMA) from 1985 to 1986. He had succeeded Prof Douglas Black,

whose report on inequality and health had so challenged the Thatcher government. Typically, Pitt used the opportunity of the presidential address to reinforce key messages about ensuring equality in health service access, under the title of 'Politics is good medicine'.

Pitt lived to meet Nelson Mandela in 1993, 3 years after his release from prison. He lived to see the first multiracial elections in South Africa in 1994. Decades of seemingly futile struggle, that had



been built and delivered by a coalition of dedicated activists like Pitt across the world, had finally culminated in a historical success for racial harmony, peace and liberty.

Bruce recalled his father remembering the dark days of apartheid and the anti-apartheid meetings, debates, appeals and protests at 200 North Gower Street; but also he remembered the joy brought about by Mandela's release.

Bruce also told me about his father's life-long fondness of Rudyard Kipling. A socialist colleague had told Pitt that the reappraised Kipling, with allegations of jingoism, didn't actually write for "people like them". As was Pitt's custom, he empathetically looked beyond the obvious and politely disagreed with his colleague. He believed Kipling offered essential insights about life, which needed to be understood. Some lines from the poem 'If' stood out to Pitt and he made sure his son learnt them by heart. They were;

"If you can dream - and not make dreams your master; If you can think - and not make thoughts your aim; If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster And treat those two impostors just the same; Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it, And - which is more - you'll be a Man, my son!"

3 Legacy

"Some black people regard me as an Uncle Tom, while some whites regard me as a Black Power revolutionary, so I imagine I got it about right"²²

Key elements

There are as yet no biographies of Lord Pitt, nor books written by him. However, transcripts of his speeches to the Lords provide us with a key historical record. I have used some extracts in this paper, but much more exists and they remain available to everyone. To supplement this, Appendix 1 provides a summary of his key appointments.

Despite being little mentioned in general discourse, Lord Pitt's influence remains significant and the issues he fought so hard on still ring true today - from his work on race equality to awareness raising about the wider social determinants of health; from campaigning for a ban on smoking in public to his support for localism and increased representation of black people in the police and politics; from his campaign for affordable housing to his radical opposition to Apartheid in South Africa.

But, for me, I want to focus on three elements of his *approach* to achieving change, which speak about the character of the man and provide lasting lessons for today;

- Race equality through legislative change
- Tackling prejudice by addressing fear and ignorance
- Achieving change from within

Race equality through legislative change

The fundamental issue was one of equality – the absolute right as a black person to be treated as anyone else; and the key building block was to establish that right in law. As we have seen, with Pitt as Chair, CARD played a significant role in lobbying for and achieving legislative change. His work on successor bodies (including the CRC) emphasised his personal commitment to the continuing process of change.

Tackling prejudice by addressing fear and ignorance

Whilst the new legislation would require changes in people's behaviour, Pitt was also concerned about hearts and minds. The old adage is that you can't legislate for good manners.

But Pitt realised that for a number of people their prejudice arose from a lack of experience of mixing with people of different ethnic backgrounds, which fed irrational fears.

He confronted these fears on a day-to-day basis, through his work as a GP and through his campaigns. He showed the importance of personal resilience, the ability to confront this issue again and again.

Achieving change from within

Some of the criticism of Pitt related to his focus on changing the system from within – a supposedly naïve approach that also seemed to suggest that by becoming part of the system, he could no longer stay in touch with his roots.

His stance was relative, though. Looking at, say, South Africa, he knew the approach would not work there and was a keen supporter of the armed struggle. The context in the UK was different and was capable of being changed by peaceful means.

The process still required a set of key principles – which he never lost. He wanted to ensure access for everyone in business, political and public life. We wanted to see black people in the police force, in numbers, not to gloss over the racist behaviour of the organisation in the past, but to change the service, forever. He wanted to see more legislators who were black, as well as educators, senior managers, bankers, lawyers - people in positions of power. It was about ensuring full access for all.

4 Conclusion

Like the other people in this series whose lives and work we will be highlighting, the scale of Lord Pitt's achievements may surpise those not familiar with his life and work.

For me Lord Pitt remains a fierce campaigner and a tireless humanitarian, always ready to understand and explain, but never to compromise. He had an unshakable self-belief with an ability to ignore negativity in anyone around him. The results of his work, his character and his approach to achieving change provide continuing lessons to us all.

5 Acknowledgements:

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- Harlan Davies for the background research
- Duncan Maclean for initial editing
- Steve Arnold, my guide and mentor

6 About Jennette Arnold OBE

After a career in nursing, senior roles within the Royal College of Nursing and working as a training and development consultant, Jennette found her natural home as a campaigner within political and public life.

She was a councillor in the London Borough of Islington for eight years, including a term as Deputy Mayor, and was then elected to the London Assembly as a London-wide Assembly Member in 2000.

Since 2004, she has proudly represented North East London on the London Assembly, covering the Boroughs of Hackney, Islington and Waltham Forest.

She has fought inequality all her life and been an active campaigner on Race, Gender and Social Justice issues.

Jennette was awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Eats London. In 2009, she was awarded an OBE for services to London and Local Government. In 2014, she became a Life Vice President of the British Caribbean Association.

http://jennettearnold.com

Appendix 1 David Thomas, the Lord Pitt of Hampstead

3rd October 1913 to 18th December 1994

Summary of Key Appointments

- 7 Member of San Fernando Borough Council, Trinidad, WI - 1941 to 1947
- 8 President of the West Indian National Party, Trinidad, WI - 1943 to 1947
- 9 Deputy Mayor, San Fernando, Trinidad, WI- 1946 to 1947
- 10 Member of London County Council, London 1961 to 1965
- 11 Member of the National Committee for Commonwealth Immigrants - 1965 to 1967
- 12 Chair, Campaign Against Racial Discrimination 1965 to 1968
- 13 Member of Greater London Council, London 1965 to 1977
- 14 Justice of the Peace 1966
- 15 Deputy Chair, Community Relations Commission 1968 to 1977
- 16 Deputy Chair, Greater London Council, London 1969 to 1970

- 17 Advisor to Trinidad and Tobago delegation to the United Nations 1970
- 18 Chair, Greater London Council, London 1974 to 1975
- 19 Created Life Peer, with the title Baron Pitt of Hampstead in Greater London and Hampstead in Grenada - 1975
- 20 Hon Deputy Secretary to the University of the West Indies 1975
- 21 Member, Post Office Board 1975 to 1977
- 22 Chair, Community Relations Commission 1977
- 23 Member, Standing Advisory Council on Race Relations - 1977 to 1979
- 24 Chairman, Shelter National Campaign for the Homeless - 1978 to 1990
- 25 Chair of the Commission Investigating Disturbances in Bermuda 1978
- 26 President of the British Medial Association 1985 to 1986
- 27 Member of the Board of Governors of the National Institute for Social Work - 1986 to 1994
- 28 Deputy Lieutenant of Greater London 1988 to 1993
- 29 Vice President, Shelter National Campaign for the Homeless 1990
- 30 Chair, Advisory Committee Exhibition on Atlantic Slave Trade, Maritime Museum of Merseyside

- 31 Chair, Race Equality Unit, the National Institute for Social Work
- 32 President, African-Caribbean Medical Society
- 33 President, Open Door Youth Advisory Service
- 34 President, Psychiatric Rehabilitation Association

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