



# Balarama Holness: Winning is Overrated

Black on the Ballot  
Episode 4 Transcript

*[Music]*

**Balarama Holness:** during the election, there was a death threat that was investigated by the police who ended up tracking this computer on the outside of, I believe, Quebec City.

**Nana aba Duncan:** Balarama Holness is a politician and former pro football player. He got this death threat in 2021 when he was running for mayor in Montreal.

**Balarama Holness:** It took a toll on me because there are so many other things when you're walking in the streets, people will, uh, kind of yell at you and slurs and, and then you have the media coming down and then other parties.

And you are a target.

So, you're actually extremely vulnerable.

**Nana aba Duncan:** For the past six years, Balarama has run a few times. Montreal is divided into boroughs, and he ran for borough mayor of Montreal North. He also ran for mayor of Montreal, like I mentioned. And he has run in provincial politics. So, Balarama understands campaigning.

**Balarama Holness:** I would say a vulnerability is probably the most powerful thing you can have as a politician because you will be exposed in so many different ways from your family life to your professional life, to your personal life. You are going to be exposed to the world. Exposed to scrutiny.

And if you have thin skin, you will crumble. You will not survive.

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**Nana aba Duncan:** I'm Nana aba Duncan and this is Black on the Ballot, a podcast from Carleton University and Operation Black Vote Canada. We're talking to Black Canadian former politicians about their experiences in politics.

Today, you're going to hear from Balarama Holness. In 2020, The New York Times called him "the man striving to be Canada's Barack Obama." Like Obama, Balarama's early political career has been driven by community activism. Like Obama he is a biracial Black man, and he loves a little pick-up basketball...

But Balarama's story is. His. Own.  
He is a Grey Cup-winning ex-CFL player.  
He's Anglo Quebecois.

And he grew up in an ashram in West Virginia. Balarama was immersed in the teachings of Hinduism along with his twin brother and French-Canadian mom. His dad is a Jamaican intellectual - a cousin to Jamaican Prime minister Andrew Holness.

When Balarama played football in the CFL he was a defensive end. His job was to be able to see the field and pivot, make the right moves at the right time - create opportunities. He did the same thing in politics.

He has led political parties and helped start grassroots campaigns to encourage Quebec to confront systemic racism.

I'll let him tell you the rest...

**Balarama Holness:** My name is Balarama Holness.

I ran for mayor of Montreal North in 2017. I also ran for mayor of Montreal in 2021 and created Bloc Montréal, which is a provincial party that I founded in 2022.

Now I'm a lawyer and a proud daddy of a five-year-old.

**Nana aba Duncan:** Let's start with your name. Bala or Balarama. Where does it come from?

**Balarama Holness:** It's actually a Hindu name. My father, when he immigrated to Canada, uh, he was 20 years old and he came across the Bhagavad Gita, which is Hindu scriptures.

And he saw the names. Balarama and Jagannatha, two Hindu gods. And when he had twins, he just went to the book and said, you're Balarama, you're Jagannatha, but you can call me Bala.

Balarama means omnipotent power.

And when you are playing football, it's especially helpful because you were taught ever since you were, you know, a child that your name means power and it certainly gives you a sense of confidence, but a confidence that's important because I grew up in many ways without a lot of parental guidance. My parents separated when I was younger.

Having a name like Balarama was gave me a deep sense of spirituality, so it's not only power in the material sense but power in the spiritual sense and I think that stayed with me throughout my life and that regardless of the obstacle that I run into or the goal I want to achieve, and there have been many throughout my life, um, I think it's the spiritual power that really roots me in my ability to have a moral compass, to stay grounded, and to overcome anything that's put in front of me.

**Nana aba Duncan:** And your father is Jamaican.

**Balarama Holness:** Yes.

**Nana aba Duncan:** Your mother is not Jamaican.

**Balarama Holness:** French Canadian.

**Nana aba Duncan:** She's a French Canadian. So, with this background of your parents, having your parents as well as this spiritual upbringing. How does all of that influence you? And influence your world as a Black biracial man?

**Balarama Holness:** Yeah, so growing up you see your identity as a liability whether you're biracial or whether you identify solely as Black if you have both Black parents. Being biracial is quite interesting because you don't fit in with the Black kids. You don't fit in with the white kids. It's kind of like this gray zone where you have to navigate yourself, but what you find as you grow older is you don't necessarily label yourself with one individual item. In other words, you're intersectional.

So, your identity and the lens through which you see the world, is linked to how you see yourself, right? So, I've always, the reason why I was so politically engaged or thought about political engagement since I was in university, is I was always curious why people that look like me were at the basement of society. It's a question I often ask myself.

Why is it that Black people are overrepresented in prisons? A question I asked myself, I really thought about it a lot. Then I said, "hmm, if there is more violence in some of these impoverished neighborhoods, why?" So, you know, being Black, it influences your questions about the world like these existential questions, that if you're white, you're not gonna ask yourself that question.

**Nana aba Duncan:** Can you tell me a bit about your father's influence on answering these questions around what it means to be Black?

**Balarama Holness:** My father's influence on me is more of a sense of Black empowerment than Black subjugation, which allowed me to fight back. My father would say, walk with your feet straight. Don't spit. Read Noam Chomsky.

You have to know who this person is. Read Michel Foucault. He'll say, "In Jamaica, a man is just a man." He found out he was Black when he came to Canada.

Now, my father gave me this innocent optimism to say, you can overcome all of these things. I found out very quickly as a lawyer that it's hard. I've been rapping about inclusion for a long time, but once you get your law degree, you're like, wait, getting into these law firms are way harder than you would expect.

So, what that means is that even though my father gave me this innocent optimism about how to overcome things, those things are still there.

**Nana aba Duncan:** How does that shape your experience as a politician? How does that shape the way that you approach politics?

**Balarama Holness:** Yeah, that's a great question.

So, in politics, firstly, it gives you courage when you know who you are and when you're growing up and you're a person of color, understanding who you are and the power behind it takes a lot of time. For example, Adele Blackett, who many people may know, she's a leading labor lawyer internationally.

She's Black, and she speaks about the fact that Black people overcame slavery, and the resilience, the determination, and the perseverance it took is part of Black identity. So, it's not just that you were a slave rather we were enslaved, but to overcome that was tremendous. So that's one aspect.

The spiritual aspect is to say all of these material things are temporary and meaningless. What that means is that when I'm in politics, I go in there with a sense of courage, understanding that my ancestors overcame systemic racism, slavery, the civil war, civil rights movement. There was so much that we overcame coupled with an anchor in spirituality.

This becomes a very potent person to go up against in politics because my moral compass is grounded. I know who I am and the policies that I am going to exude are really going to be meaningful.

And why are they meaningful? It's because there are things that I live throughout my life that inform my policies. So, for example, my mother, she's a single parent mother, does not have a lot of money to pay the bus to go to hockey, so I understand getting a rebate or having free public transportation is important for people.

So, my platform is free public transportation. My father, when he came to Canada, had a hard time integrating, so he was in social housing. So, my policy says we need to build 24,000 social housing units because the waitlist is 10 years. And these are policies that I, that I not only speak about, but I embody.

**Nana aba Duncan:** So, speaking of crowds, you were playing in front of a lot of crowds as a person who played football.

But there aren't a lot of politicians who came to it after a career in football. So, what is it about your experience, playing football that prepared you for politics?

**Balarama Holness:** Well, football was more a saviour as it relates to my education. So, when I grew up, I didn't really value education in high school.

I failed secondary four, which is the equivalent of grade 10. I had to go to adult education. I barely passed high school. So, I went to adult ed, passed high school. Um, then I went to grade 12 in Quebec, we call it Cégep, didn't do very well, but football kept me, kept me in school. So, to play football, I had to do well in school.

Then I didn't finish Cégep because you had to take seven classes a semester, but I had enough credits to go to university in Ontario. So, I went to the University of Ottawa to play football. So, football was a way that kept me in the educational sector. And it's when I got to university that I fell in love with education because I'm in class in this course called *Contested Places* about, it was geography, but social geography.

And there were all these studies done in the course, but none about Black people. So, they would analyze, for example, gentrification in Vancouver, how the rise of Asian immigrants in Vancouver led to the increase in housing prices, for example. But in all these examples of studies, I said, like, where are the Black people in your analysis?

And my teacher said, well, no one did the research. And I'm like, I got you. Don't try to punk me in university where I'm supposed to get the best education and you're saying I'm not represented. Now we have a problem and that's when I said, you know what? I'm gonna get the most education that I can get to empower myself...the more education I get, the more power I get. And football really financed, if you will, my education.

So, it was a way for me to stay in school and in the CFL to make money and post CFL, I got a Bachelor of Education, a Master of Education, and then a Bachelor of Civil Law, common law, which was really funded by my, you know, securing the bag in the CFL.

So, football, politics, and education really all go hand in hand, but football was the glue and without football, I, to be honest, don't know where I would be.

**Nana aba Duncan:** So, at what point did you think that becoming a politician made sense. Like what, what was that moment?

**Balarama Holness:** I didn't grow up with a beautiful, you know, grocery store with all the fruits and vegetables. If I didn't have all these things, well, you know what, I'm going to decide who gets what so for me, it wasn't about being a politician...

*[Music]*

**Nana aba Duncan:** Montreal isn't like most other Canadian cities in that the municipal government has parties, but they're not linked to the federal or provincial parties. When Balarama decided to run for mayor, he started a new party, called Mouvement Montreal. The motto? People before politics.

**Balarama Holness:** When I ran for mayor of Montreal under Mouvement Montréal, the first thing I said to the journalists is, I am not a politician. I'm here really as a political activist, willing to speak truth to power, but to do it in a way that is substantive based on policy, based on research, based on all the education that I was able to acquire, but I'm doing it in a way that is really like a David and Goliath. I have no chance of winning politically.

I am not going to get past the post. I am going to quote unquote lose.

**Nana aba Duncan:** And you knew that going in?

**Balarama Holness:** Yes, lose badly. But on Saint Jean de Baptiste – so June 24th is the Independence Day, if you will, of Quebec – I'll come out and say, I want Montreal to be a bilingual city. If you want a service in English, or if you want healthcare in English, you can get it.

But that's like, I'm really contesting policies that are entrenched in the society that I'm in.

**Nana aba Duncan:** And let's take a moment with that. When you're saying something like that in Quebec, that's big.

**Balarama Holness:** You have annihilated 50 percent of the vote instantaneously.

**Nana aba Duncan:** How did they react?

**Balarama Holness:** Well, I got 7 percent of the total vote. Right?

**Nana aba Duncan:** Right. Okay. But you don't care because?

**Balarama Holness:** Because I'm going to speak my truth.

These kind of policies for me were important and that's why I am not so much a politician. Politicians are going to be deceitful and will tell you what you want to hear so they get elected and eventually a pension. Most politicians, in my opinion, in humble opinion, would be unemployed in the private sector.

Being a lawyer, I don't need to have that political job. Most politicians won't be able to survive in the private sector, or if they are, they might be consultants because of handouts that they gave. So, I'm there in a very free way to communicate my ideas, but best believe that over time, I think these ideas will grow.

They'll develop and the support will increase.

**Nana aba Duncan:** I know that there are some other things that you stand strongly for. Um, but I want to talk about your relationship to the communities that you were working with and for at the time. Because you have, um, this, this, this idea about, about making Montreal, \bilingual but who were you sharing these ideas with at the time?

**Balarama Holness:** Yeah. So prior, so the bilingualism and the city state, these are, um, not necessarily, I would say the focal point of much of my work. Much of my work was getting 22,000 signatures to force the city of Montreal to have a public consultation on systemic racism.

That was the key. And there we addressed issues of unemployment across different communities, in particular, the Black community, immigrant community, we addressed urban planning issues.

So, when you think of heat islands, when you think of all these heat waves in low income areas, less trees, less parks, you're going to higher chance of more morbidity in some of these areas, um, racial profiling, public security, all of these different elements were part of the, my work as an activist, if you will, but these were really the focal points of the things that we were attempting to improve.

So, taxation and language become important issues that the media will grab. But this is where we get to the media. If I say, there is environmental racism in Montreal. That there is a 10-year difference in life expectancy between Montreal North, which is a, a very predominantly Black district versus Outremont, which is a predominantly white district.

If I come out with that, journalists will not take it. Largely because to be quite frank, it's very homogeneous and this story might be taken, might not be taken. And when you're running for office, you have to be able to play the media and push up stories that's going to get you limelight.

**Nana aba Duncan:** So that's a bit of your gameplan. I want to get into your trajectory. The first time you ever ran for political office was in 2017, in a municipal election. You were courted by Valérie Plante, who became mayor of Montreal, to run with her for borough mayor in an easily winnable riding, but you didn't accept. You did run, but you chose Montreal North. Why?

**Balarama Holness:** Yeah, that's the intuition, right? Um, I had a few older mentors, really just my neighbors and, and a friend, these older women. And I was asking them saying, hmm, I don't know what I'm going to do. Should I run here? Should I run there? And after a while they said, every time you talk about Montreal North, I see your passion, right.

**Nana aba Duncan:** What were they seeing, what was that passion about?

**Balarama Holness:** When we came to Canada for the first two years of, of my time in Canada. So, I came here in 1993, my mother was on welfare we were literally eating lentil soup and pita bread for dinner on the regular.

So, am I going to go take the easy borough or am I going to go fight for the same, uh, demographic of persons that I feel connected to, based on how I grew up, but there's a kicker.

And this is where I, I figured out, you know, the diversity within the Black community is that, um, I'm Jamaican and Anglo. Montreal North or Black or Haitian. So, they're like, what the hell are you doing here? Why are you coming to our hood to run for mayor of Montreal North? T'es pas Haitien! You're ...

**Nana aba Duncan:** C'est quoi ça?

**Balarama Holness:** I'm not Haitian. I'm not French. You're, you're half white, half Black and you're Jamaican. Now, I'll go on the radio show and some of these, you know, Haitian radio shows like the, the KK show and other thing. And then I'll go up on stage. And I grew up listening to Tupac, and I'm pretty raw. Even though I have a shirt and tie, I'm pretty raw.

I'll go up on stage and say, all right, you run, you run, you run. I'm calling out names of all the leaders in Montreal North. I say, yeah, you don't want, you don't want me. I'll step down right now if you step up.

**Nana aba Duncan:** How did they respond to that?

**Balarama Holness:** Crickets. What do you mean? They're talking heads, and this is something that you'll see a lot in any community.

This is the kicker. The kicker is that the talking heads in many communities do not represent those communities. So Black elite activists do not necessarily go to the quote unquote hood. Or to those communities.

**Nana aba Duncan:** So how are you different from them?

**Balarama Holness:** I'm going to go cross over, play basketball, go get my barber shop, go get my cut.

And they're like, what's this guy? We love this guy. Turns out that the person that told me not to run because he was the top dog of the, whatever, he ends up running in that same district four years later. And I doubled his vote.

Oh damn. So how did an outsider go and double the vote in the same area that you said was your territory that you ran in four years later with the incumbent mayor?



It's because when you're a man of the people, you go on the ground, you'll gain more, more and more credibility. You gain more and more trust.

I'd literally go to the high schools, and we have videos and pictures of it. And I would just hoop with everyone, go to the barbershops, go to the different restaurants, go to the different events, go to the radio stations and over time, they say, oh wow, this person is credible.

**[Music]**

**Nana aba Duncan:** Credibility, authenticity, identity. Balarama's story points out the elephant in the room.... Black people are not all the same. Especially in a country like Canada. Black people are spread out all over, and our stories are not uniform. Our backgrounds are different, our way of approaching our Blackness is different.

Our politics reflect that.

Yet the *research* shows Black Canadians who get into politics express a strong sense of collective identity. 84% of Black candidates surveyed in a recent study said that being Black was an important part of their identity. A large majority – 85% – understand their personal fortunes to be tied to the fortunes of other Black Canadians.

But as Balarama would say, this is the kicker...When asked whether it is best to work exclusively with the Black community or to work across groups, fully 90% said that gaining political power requires working across groups, regardless of race or ethnicity.

In 2017, Balarama lost his bid to become borough mayor of Montreal North. Montreal is made up of 19 boroughs each with its own Mayor and council. Representatives from these borough councils also sit on the wider city council; the head of that council is the Mayor of Montreal.

In the run-up to that election, one of the mayoral candidates, Valérie Plante, asked Balarama to run as a part of her slate in a borough she thought he could win. Instead, Balarama ran in Montreal North, the neighborhood he grew up in.

He lost that election. Valérie Plante wins and becomes mayor. But even though he's defeated, Balarama still cares deeply about his community, so he approaches the mayor's team to see if he can play a role.

**Balarama Holness:** After the election, I kind of said, "Hey, I'd love to be your connection between you and the community."

And they're like, "get out of here." You know, like, well, you're not elected, we don't need you, you're, you're disposable now.

**Nana aba Duncan:** So how did you react to being put aside like that?

**Balarama Holness:** So, when I looked at the administration, I said, what can I do to ensure that I hold them to account in regard to employment, you know, consider that in the economy, housing, public security, urban planning, inequality.

How am I going to see a correction of the exacerbation of systemic racism in this institution, in this administration?

*[Music]*

**Nana aba Duncan:** “Systemic racism” was still kind of new in the cultural conversation. Not to many of us, but to many politicians. Then, in 2020, when the murder of George Floyd sparked a racial reckoning around the world, people in Quebec were marching for change too. Meanwhile, Quebec’s premier at the time, François Legault, insisted that systemic racism did not exist in the province.

Balarama Holness used his knowledge of Quebec law and an organization he founded, called Montreal in Action, to force the province to confront racism and discrimination in Quebec.

**Balarama Holness:** Through my research, like the good student that I am, I came across the Montreal Charter, and it said any citizen that gets 15,000 signatures can force the city to have a public consultation.

It was this participatory democracy clause. that stated any citizen that gets 15,000 signatures force a public consultation. How can I ensure that this administration is accountable? Got 22,000 signatures, 50 volunteers. Forced a public consultation.

**News clip W5:** “In June of 2020, after 18 months of hearings, Montreal’s Mayor, Valerie Plante finally acknowledged the existence of systemic racism.”

**Valerie Plante:** “The collective awakening that systemic racism does exist.”

**W5 Host:** Along with 38 recommendations the report forced Montreal's police service to change the way street checks are performed... they now say they will stop people on observable facts and not skin colour. It’s a major shift after years of resisting reform and accusations of racial profiling...”

**Nana aba Duncan:** That clip was from CTV’s W5. It was a victory for Balarama Holness and Montreal in Action. Delivering 22 000 signatures that forced change and forced the city to confront issues like racial profiling by police and representation within the city's workforce.

**Balarama Holness:** So, it's not about a relationship between one or two persons. It's also about the advancement of public policy, of societal life, if you will. And we won long-term because of the changes that are currently within the city of Montreal. So individually you take a hit. And that's the big message that I would say to many Black politicians.

You have to be willing to take a hit.

**[Music]**

**Nana aba Duncan:** One thing that - I do want to talk about as well is how people framed your race. How people framed the media specifically framed you as a biracial Black person, and how do you think that affected the way that you were seen?

**Balarama Holness:** Yeah, that's a great question.

When I came out, I spoke about innovation, spoke about urban planning, spoke about housing, never even said I was Black because I knew they would use that and to say, this is a Black mayoral candidate running on a systemic racism policy.

And I said, no, don't, want to be pigeonholed like that. I just spoke about innovation, spoke about technology, spoke about 21st century.

First line of *La Presse*? He wants to be the first Black mayor of Montreal. Right? So, they're going to label you as the first Black mayor or a Black mayor. When white people run, do they say this is going to be the first white woman to run? No. So you want to be treated in a way that is fair.

You can identify who I am, but they make it seem like I'm going on stage and saying, "Hey, I want to be the first Black mayor," right?

Also, they called me a student. I graduated and I had to literally go on Twitter and like call out the journalists from *La Presse* to be like, hey, buddy, I graduated and like so you're going to get small kickback or pushback,

That kind of thing fuels me. And you know what? Maybe it's that, and I, I would say this for all Black politicians, is don't bank on your specific demographic or your specific team to crown you.

**[Music]**

**Nana aba Duncan:** You ran for mayor by starting Mouvement Montreal, a new political party. And then you went on to create a provincial party called Bloc Montréal. What is Bloc Montréal?

**Balarama Holness:** Bloc Montréal was established to continue the policies of Mouvement Montréal. So, a lot of the policies that we spoke about at the municipal level have provincial jurisdiction. So, for example, whether it's language, whether it's health. So, if I said, you know what, Montreal North was the epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic, that's a health issue.

If we want funding for the sports center, that's going to come from the provincial government, right? Cause your municipal budget is very limited. So, Bloc Montréal was a way to say, we are going to continue talking about the issues that we care about.

The thing with Black voters is that the disenchantment is so entrenched in the community, and things have never changed, that you would literally, I mentioned before, have to ask for a revolution for Black people to come out and vote.

**[Music]**

**Nana aba Duncan:** Let's take a look at the numbers: When we compare across racial groups, voting rates are among the lowest for Black Canadians, especially at the municipal level. Just 58% of Black Canadians report voting in the last local election. That compares to 72% of white Canadians, and 67% of other racialized Canadians. There are a lot of reasons for that disparity, but one of them is a feeling that local politics isn't relevant or accessible.

How did you reach Black voters?

**Balarama Holness:** Yeah, that's what a politician would do. We would just more hear their concerns. It wasn't so much.

**Nana aba Duncan:** It wasn't a goal necessarily.

**Balarama Holness:** No, it was more like I'm here to listen to what you have to say. I'm gonna hear you out and I know that you're thinking that you're never going to see me again, but that you'll see me the following week playing pickup with everyone.

We announced our provincial campaign in Little Burgundy at a basketball court, and I was playing pickup basketball.

So, I'm not there on the court saying, "Hey, like, please go out and vote for me." I'm saying, "Hey, like, we're, we're here for you. And that hole that's in the court that's been there forever, even if I'm not elected, I'm going to speak to Benoit Doré, who's the mayor, to try to fix it. And if you need anything, let me know."

Go speak to everyone. And at the end of the day, your team and the people that support you will be your team. Guess what? At the end of the day, we didn't get the specific demographics, but I know based on the districts that we were high, that we got the Black and the minority vote.

**Nana aba Duncan:** Looking back at your career as a politician, what would you say you're most proud of?

**Balarama Holness:** Oh, it's such hard work. It's really hard work. Very hard. It's the hardest thing I've ever done by far. Yeah.

**Nana aba Duncan:** So, you're proud of the work itself, the hard work.

**Balarama Holness:** Yeah. Yeah. It's the hardest thing I've ever done. Way harder than football training camp. Way harder than making the CFL. It's really hard. It's exceptionally difficult. Exceptionally difficult.

**Nana aba Duncan:** What's difficult?

**Balarama Holness:** Because when you aim for the power centers, you will be proverbially shot at.

You will be undermined. You are going to be contested. You're going to be misrepresented. It is not a walk in the park. You are openly telling the governing institution that is based on, let's just call it what it is, academically or not, white supremacy. You are coming for the power structure.

**Nana aba Duncan:** Did that lead to challenges for you?

**Balarama Holness:** Yeah, so during the election, there was a death threat that was investigated by the police who ended up tracking this computer on the outside of, I believe, Quebec City. And there is a criminal investigation that was put into place.

**[Music]**

Now, the person in question was...they couldn't prove by direct evidence that it was his computer. But yeah, it took a toll on me because there are so many other things when you're walking in the streets, people will, uh, kind of yell at you and slurs and, and then you have the media coming down and then other parties. It's really, and you are a target.

So, you're, you're actually extremely vulnerable.

**Nana aba Duncan:** The Samara Centre for Democracy has been tracking online abuse in politics since 2021. Although media attention tends to focus on the toxicity and heckling that happens in the House of Commons, Samara's research shows that municipal politics is no kinder or gentler: candidates there have to deal with threats, attacks on their identities, and more.

How were you during that time? How did you manage?

**Balarama Holness:** Laying on my couch, staring at the ceiling, uh, just like in a, almost like a mummy state, just like frozen, you know, just kind of pause, like almost like a meditative state.

And then, back to one of the great questions you had about football. Now, when I have a French debate coming up and all this is happening, I can't crumble at the debate in front of tens of thousands of people. That's not happening.

So, what do I do? Prior to the debate that afternoon, I got into my sweatsuit, and I did a warmup. So, how I prepare for a football game, my running A's, my running B's, running C's, my stretch.

So, I prepared in the same way I prepare for a game, and we go to the debate, and I have like a 2018 like Honda Accord with like rims and I'm blasting Jay Z and Frank Ocean and I'm blasting this track as we pull up, and my speakers are blaring, and we're like, we are here.

*[Music]*

**Nana aba Duncan:** Would you say your time in politics was worth it?

**Balarama Holness:** So, the famous saying, you know, equality is a pursuit, not a destination. It's the pursuit that's enjoyable. So, it's not whether it's worth it or not.

It's the experience you gained throughout that process. But what happens is that you get gems that pop up later on. Back to the, you know, geography teacher, is the way that gems or gold or any other, you know, valuable metal comes to the surface is through, at times, volcanic eruption or tectonic plates shifting.

So, I get a message many years after, there was a Black candidate, Nickenson, who ran as an independent, who told me that he heard me on that first radio show telling people to step up and he steps up and runs as an independent. And he doesn't look for no one to support him. He's an independent. So, what you get is a lot of people that come back around to tell you what you mean to them.

*[Music]*

I think, you know, we often talk about healing the Black community and repairing the Black community. My daughter is half Jamaican, a quarter Italian, a quarter French Canadian.

There's a lot of love, time, and attention that, you know, we share. She's, you know, the love of my life.

So, I would think that the way that I can impact society the most might not be being a successful Black politician.

It could be being an extremely successful father and ensuring that she has the best future.

So, I would say to anyone thinking about whether something was worth it or not. It's more so the blood, sweat and tears you put onto something that is the reward.

**Nana aba Duncan:** Thank you Balarama

**Balarama Holness:** thank you so much for inviting me on this podcast. This is a great way to advance public policy, advance dialogue, share ideas, controversial or otherwise. And it was a true pleasure.

**Nana aba Duncan:** If you follow the news, it would be easy to think that there is only one way of doing politics. There are winners, and there are losers. But you could argue that even though Balarama Holness has not been elected, he is still a political player. His political activism has shifted policy and brought people together under a common cause. He jumped into politics knowing that he might not win, but it mattered that he was there...

And it matters that he had other Black politicians that came before him...

Alvin Curling served as a Liberal MPP from 1985 to 2005. He was Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of Ontario until he resigned in 2005, when he became Canada's envoy to the Dominican Republic.

**Alvin Curling:** I think to measure it by whether we have colour inside of there or so Black MPP or so, it is, not quite misleading, but not completely the whole story. If people can represent the cause and the purpose and their intent, that is enough Blackness or that is enough Canadian-ness. As a matter of fact, if you see now what I have seen, I've been fortunate to be in that process of history. Where in that, I was born in Jamaica, got elected and, uh, and then I got appointed and become the Speaker of the Parliament and become the representative of Canada to tell you that I belong. .... Well, if he can do it, what makes him different? And then they realize, he's not different than we are. It's just that he stepped forward...

**Nana aba Duncan:** That interview clip was from The News Forum. Alvin Curling now sits on the Advisory Board of Operation Black Vote Canada, an organization that works to increase the number of Black Canadians in public office.

Last year, Operation Black Vote Canada worked with Carleton University to interview more than 30 Black Canadians who had run for and served in office. When they asked those folks what advice they would give to others thinking about entering politics, one of the most common responses was just do it. Understand your power. Be comfortable in your own skin, take space. Don't just try to fit in: change the place to fit you.

This podcast is a love letter to Black Canadians who are making a difference in Canadian politics. It's also a reminder that their stories haven't always been celebrated.

In a preface to the autobiography of former MP Howard McCurdy, his friend and former parliamentary poet laureate, George Elliot Clarke, puts it bluntly: "Canadians do a lousy job of remembering Black Canadians." This podcast shines a light on those stories.

Thank you to Balarama Holness for sharing his.

### **Credits**

This podcast was produced by Media Girlfriends for Carleton University and Operation Black Vote Canada

This show was produced by Garvia Bailey. Executive producers are Garvia Bailey and Hannah Sung.

Additional production assistance from Joyce Tran and Erin Tolley.

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Black on the Ballot is a companion to Black Canadians in Electoral Politics – a research partnership between Carleton University and Operation Black Vote Canada.

Again, you can find out more about the research at [blackcanadianpolitics.ca](http://blackcanadianpolitics.ca). Learn about Operation Black Vote Canada at [OBVC.ca](http://OBVC.ca)

We'd love for you to share, subscribe and tell all your people about Black on the Ballot. Let's keep the conversation going...

I'm Nana aba Duncan, thanks for listening.