

Sketches of Parliament and Parliamentarians Past: The Exuberant Life of Emery Barnes

The Legislative Assembly of British Columbia has had a track star, a football player, a social worker, a piano player and a nightclub owner... all rolled into one individual. Former MLA and Speaker of the House, Emery Barnes, was a man of great stature – a gentleman and a gentle giant.

Chris Stephenson

Emery Oakland Barnes proudly served as a Member of the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia for over 24 years. In 1972, he and colleague Rosemary Brown were the first black politicians elected to BC's Legislative Assembly and Barnes also became the first black Speaker in Canadian history.

Born December 15, 1929 in New Orleans, and later raised in Portland, Oregon, Barnes played briefly with the Green Bay Packers after leaving the US Army and completing his B.Sc. in 1956. He came to Vancouver the following year. Although he ended his professional sports career with the BC Lions in 1964, the year they became Grey Cup champions, he was sidelined with an injury for the last few games.

In a 1987 *Canadian Parliamentary Review* interview, Barnes said, "It seems the first part of my life was more oriented toward athletics and actions. The cerebral part developed later. I began to develop a social conscience." His completion of a social work degree at the University of British Columbia and his subsequent projects with youth and also within correctional services provided evidence of this new path.

April 26, 1975: Premier Dave Barrett after playing in an "old boys" rugby game at Brockton Point in Vancouver against a team from Japan gets his stomach rubbed by Emery Barnes. Man on left unknown.

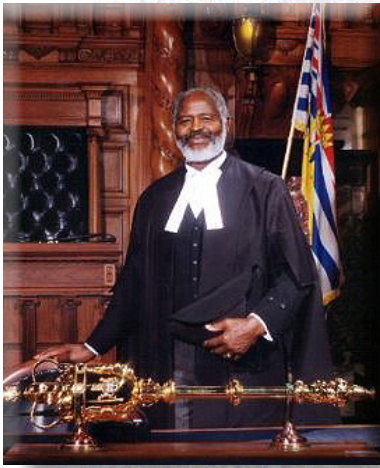
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Following a tough stint opening a night club called 'Emery's Plug,' Barnes eventually accepted future BC Premier Dave Barrett's encouragement and turned towards a career in politics. After an initial attempt in 1969, Barnes won the 1972 election in his Vancouver Centre riding, where he quickly gained the confidence of his community.

Barnes won every subsequent election he contested and served continually as a Member of the Legislative Assembly until 1996. He ended this segment of his career at another high point, appointed first as Deputy Speaker in 1991, and later as Speaker of the House in March of 1994.



Photograph by John Denniston



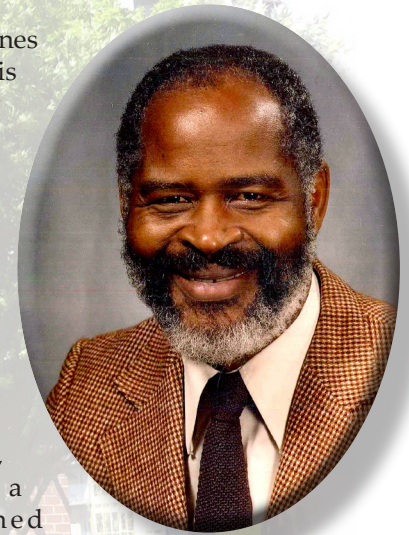
Barnes championed social justice and human rights causes. In 1986 he answered a Vancouver anti-poverty group's challenge to demonstrate, first hand, the hardships of living on BC social assistance. He spent two months in downtown East Vancouver living on welfare, losing 15 pounds in the first three weeks, and emerged more committed than ever to those struggling. He called the experience "shocking" and concluded that doubling the monthly welfare rate was necessary to live at a basic level.

By all accounts Barnes was a hulk of a man; the staff at the Legislative Assembly still recall his towering physical presence and his deep voice. Yet despite his imposing stature, standing at a height of 6 feet 6 inches, Barnes was known as a gentle giant. He regularly welcomed visitors to his office with what long-time staff of the Legislative Library recall as "hands like baseball mitts."

But his were nimble fingers and Barnes was also known for his impromptu performances at the piano in the upstairs Ned DeBeck Members' lounge. During his time at the Legislature, the Library was often filled with the sounds of Barnes' talented jazz improvisations, as he took musical breaks from his political duties.

Emery Barnes died in Vancouver on July 1, 1998 at the age of 68, after a battle with cancer. Today Emery Barnes Park remains as a tribute to this remarkable renaissance man. Located at 1170 Richards Street, in his former district of Vancouver Centre, this park was a decade in the making.

In paying respects to Barnes in the House following his death, former premier Arthur Daniel (Dan) Miller said, "I speak for all members of this House but particularly for my caucus when I note that Wednesday, July 1 -- Canada Day -- was indeed a very sad day as much as it was a day of celebration



for Canadians, in that a distinguished member of this House, Emery Barnes, who was a friend to many of us, passed away."

Gretchen Brewin, the Speaker at this time, closed the remarks by adding, "He was indeed a man with a big heart; he filled this big chair -- big shoes to fill for the current Speaker and others who have followed him."

Emery Barnes Park, located at 1170 Richards Street in the former MLA's Vancouver Centre riding.

Drawing on the knowledge of an established network of Canadian parliamentary librarians and researchers, this column explores Canadian parliamentary traditions, legislators and legislative buildings. We also welcome reader suggestions or questions about interesting parliamentary curiosities of the past and particular parliamentary quirks which could become the basis of future columns.

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