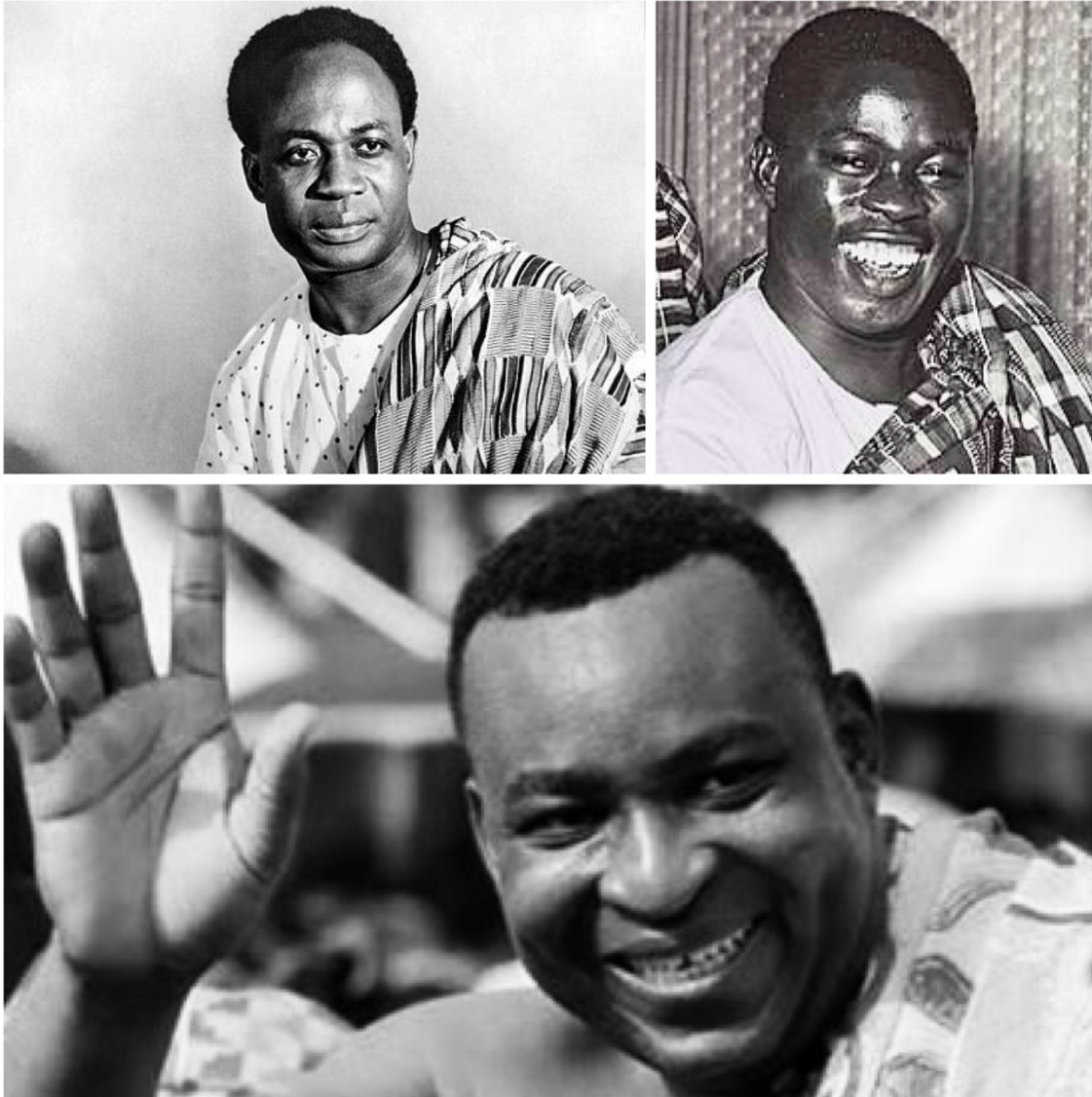


CELEBRATING VERANDAH BOYS IN GOVERNANCE

Kwesi Yankah



I have been a silent student of ‘language in governance’ for a while now, beginning from the revolutionary period when Rawlings’ PNDC formed a blend of elites and grassroots in a Consultative Assembly to draft the 1992 constitution. The proposed constitution framers included non-literates, butchers, market-women, lawyers, dress makers, farmers. In 1991, I was inspired to do an essay for my media column entitled, ‘Butchers and the Constitution.’

I interviewed ‘fitters,’ butchers, etc. on their new assignment, and tracked their participation at the consultative forum. My interest in semi-literates in governance peaked in the mid 2000s, when as my contribution to the J B Danquah Memorial Lecturers of the Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences, I plunged headlong into controversy, and dealt with Nkrumah activists with humble education, the ‘Verandah Boys’ and how they coped in Ghana’s English-obsessed parliament. It was a great opportunity to burn candles over official proceedings of parliament, beginning from Gold Coast Legislative Assembly through the days of Krobo Edusei in Parliament. Krobo Edusei, the most famous among Nkrumah’s ‘Verandah Boys,’ was MP for Kumasi North West, and the least educated in Nkrumah’s post-independence cabinet. Known for his wit, sense of humor and pedestrian logic, Edusei alias ‘Moke,’ was hugely popular and had a rare knack for reducing to pedestrian language, concepts that could confuse the ordinary man. To Krobo Edusei ‘socialism’ simply means ‘*Di Bi Ma Mindi Bi*. One Man No Chop.’ He would say, ‘socialism does not mean if you have made a lot of money you cannot chop it.’ And listen to what Krobo Edusei said in a speech at Aflao in the run up to a bye election in October 1958.

‘You think I am a fool to give you water to drink and vote against me? After the election if you vote for CPP, I will give you water to drink.’

My research facilitated my three-day public lectures on the platform of the Ghana Academy of Arts and Sciences, whose President was the venerable Nana Dr SKB Asante, Paramount Chief of Asokore Asante. During my recent keynote speech at Legon on Mother Tongue Day, I tracked legislators’ academic qualifications in Ghana’s 4th Republican parliament: from the beginning of the 4th Republic in 1992 to the current 2024 Parliament (2021-2025). Below is a summary of my findings.

The percentage of parliamentarians holding at least a bachelors’ degree was 46% in the 1993-97 parliament. As of 2024 the eighth parliament, this has more than doubled to 96%, a 109% increase. Additionally, the 30% master’s degree holders in 1993 have risen to 69% as of 2024: an increase of 130%.

In the case of those with Ph.Ds, the 4th Republic started in 1993-97 with as high as 12% Ph. Ds; this dropped sharply to an average of 6% over six subsequent

parliaments; but the figure has almost doubled in the 2021-25 parliament to 11%, almost at par with the base line high of 12% in 1993.

Remarkably, legislators whose highest qualifications were below bachelors' degree (ranging from Middle School Leaving Certificate, High school, diploma, and zero certification) were 54% in the 1993-97 parliament. As of 2024, this has sharply dropped to only 4%. There is currently no non-literate in Ghana's parliament.

The issue of academic credentials in Parliament occasionally cropped up in parliamentary debates at Independence. Time and again, the limited educational status of CPP's Krobo Edusei and Nkrumah's Verandah Boys became a subject of innuendo by the opposition NLM in Parliament. Anytime this was insinuated, Krobo Edusei would sharply retort and defend the Verandah Boys. Hear Krobo in November 1958:

“Honorable members of the Opposition here always think when a person is not B.L, or Ph.D, B.Sc, and so forth, he is not qualified to be the director of a company. Nobody is born stupid. If one does not get the chance (to do further studies) then one is unfortunately looked down upon. If I had had secondary education, and continued my studies in the UK and returned I would have been one of the best lawyers in the country.”

[UPROAR]

“After all I have not been to secondary school; neither have I been to a university. But Mr Speaker, when I stand up to speak, I have command over the English language. I speak with practical common sense, and to the point. It is not a question of graduating from a university...”

From my inquiries, Krobo's favorite language was Twi, in which most of his humorous and controversial statements were made on campaign platforms. In Parliament, where the official language was English he spoke fairly good English, and where necessary broke into pidgin and occasional code switching from English to Twi. There were a few parliamentarians though who spoke no English at all, according to the late veteran politician, CK Tedam, my resource person who was part of the United Party in Parliament until 1964. In this research, I benefitted tremendously from parliamentary reference materials including the Hansard, as

well as Kojo Vietta's book series, Know Your MPs, the latest edition of which I intercepted from the printers a few weeks ago.

Since Ghana's Independence, the greatest sources of party activism and mobilization, have not been the professional elite with university degrees but grassroots firebrands and pedestrian executives belonging to the Krobo Edusei paradigm. In contemporary politics, these would include NPP's Bernard Antwi Boasiako, alias Wontumi (call him the 21st century Krobo Edusei) and others, who are high party executives with limited academic colours. These have over the years vitalized grassroots activism to strengthen Ghana's democracy.

Congratulations, Kwame Nkrumah's Verandah Boys who set the pace.

Happy Independence Anniversary to the Black Star!!!

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Figure 1

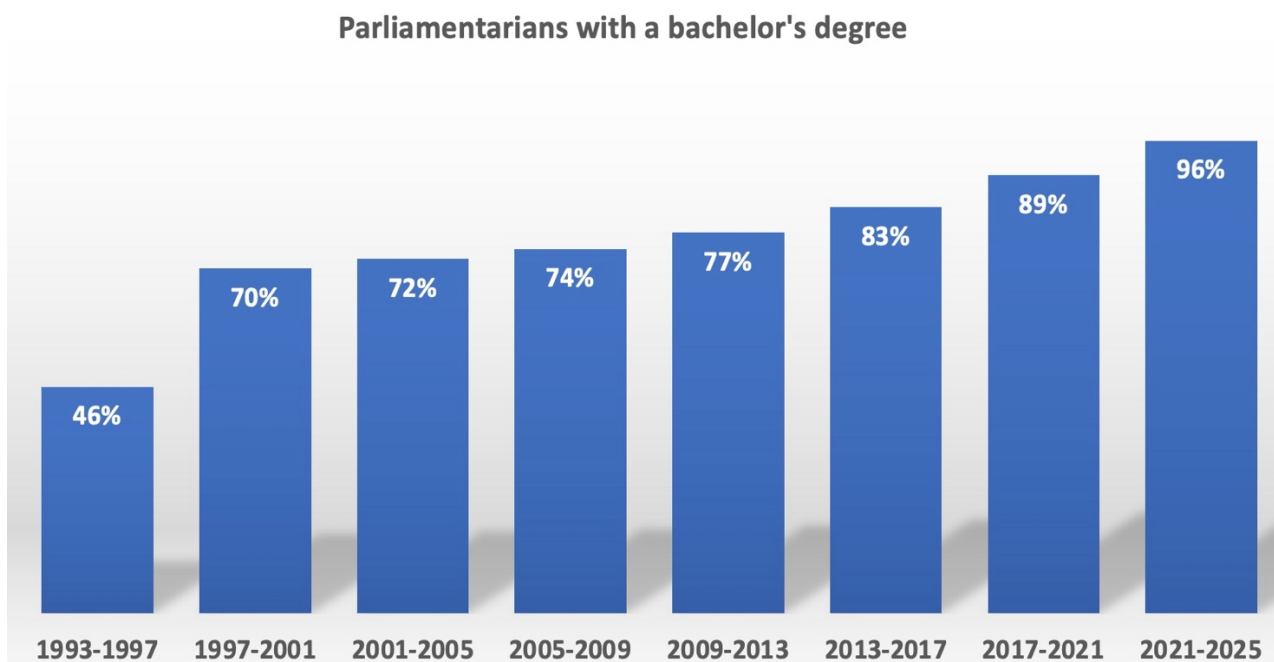


Figure 2

Parliamentarians with a master's degree among first degree holders

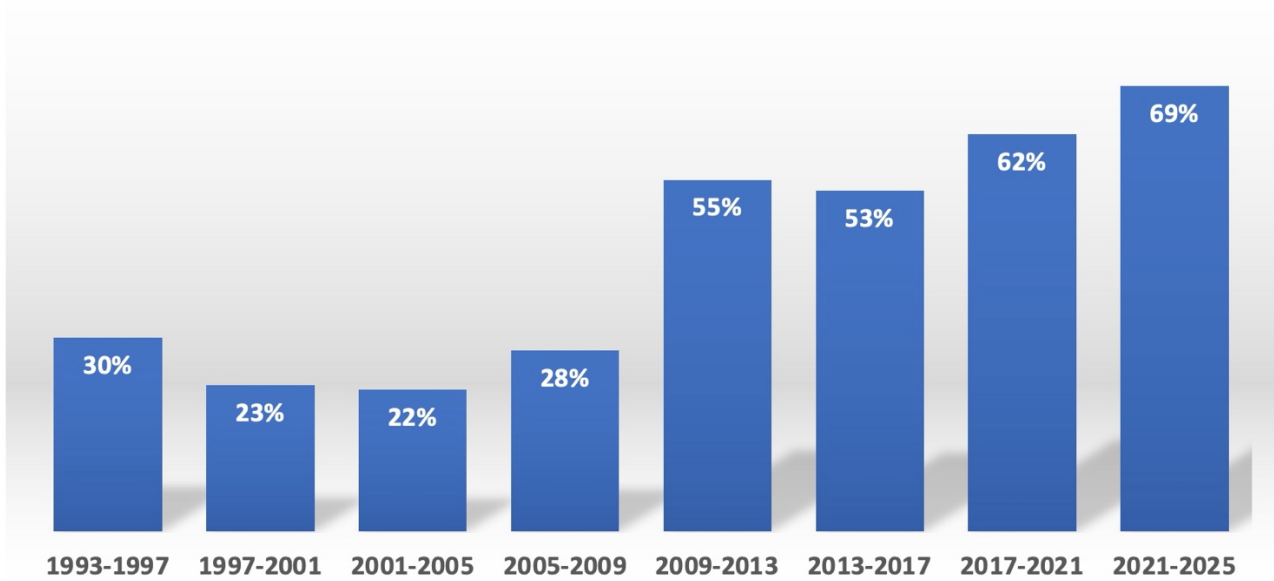


Figure 3

Parliamentarians with PhDs among first degree holders

