

# The Chagos Denouement: Historic Victory for Mauritius



While the rejoicing is going on and everyone involved in the Chagos Archipelago struggle is being garlanded on the historic victory of Mauritius over the issue of the Archipelago's sovereignty, for the love of the almighty, without trying to cut the ground under the feet of all the players who fought for this successful outcome, please let us spare a thought for the man who revived the whole saga in the mid-nineties (1997?). By then the Chagossian dilemma, locally in Mauritius, was not on the table.

Who was talking of the Chagos issue in Mauritius in mid-nineties? Suddenly at the time, out of the blue arose a man who stirred up the Mauritian people into action. His name was Richard Gifford of the British firm of Sheridans Solicitors, (then of High Holborn, Central London), headed by Bernard Sheridan. Ac-

ording to what Richard Gifford told Peter Chellen then, Managing Editor of Mauritius News, the UK monthly publication, he was new to the firm, and while going through the papers in a filing cabinet in the office he had come across a dormant file on the Chagos debacle.

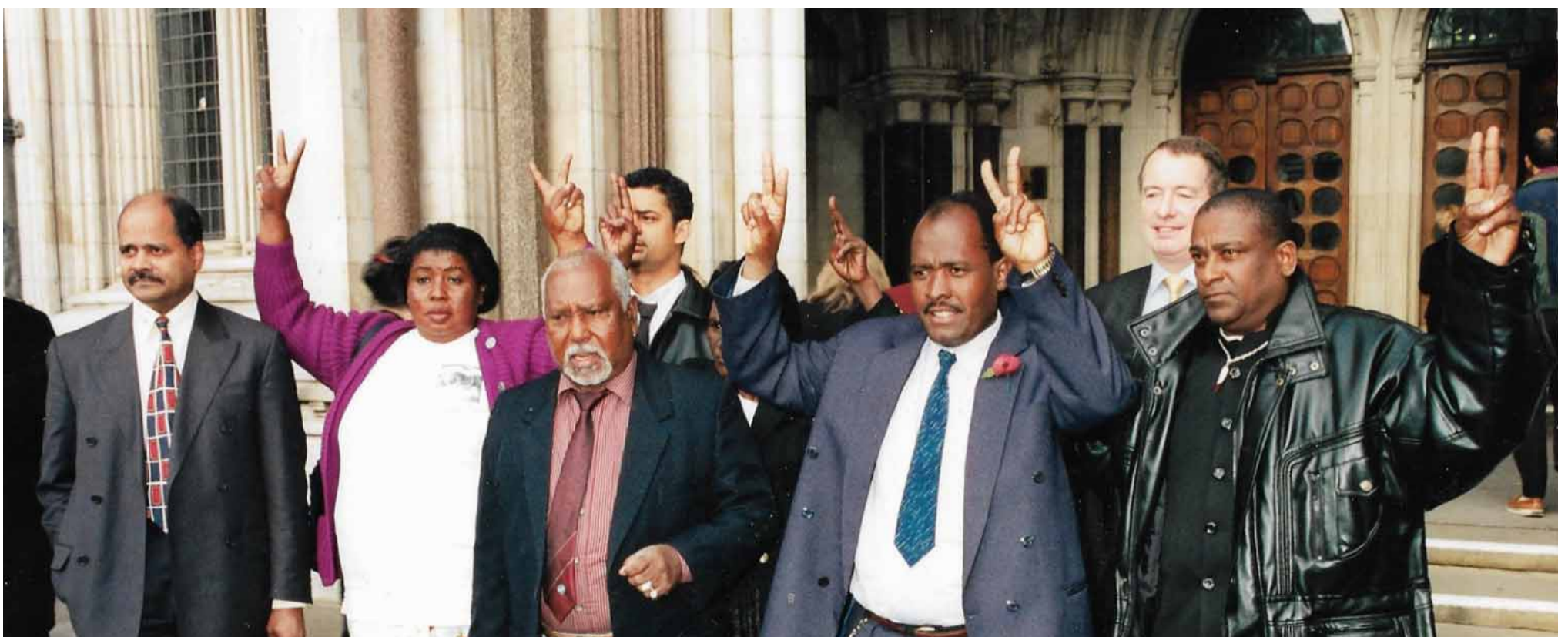
Richard Gifford will have surely seen the papers concerning the involvement of Sheridans Solicitors in an incident in Mauritius in the 1970s when Chagossians were asked to sign away their claim to the islands where they were born. Even though Richard Gifford's own motive in reviving the Chagossians' issue became ambiguous over the years according to some observers, to all intents and purposes, he set the ball rolling, once more, by the various ensuing court actions at the British High Court of Justice in

London by his firm..

### Friend of Mauritians

Richard Gifford had by then become acquainted with the UK Mauritian community while dealing with the immigration problems of several Mauritian nationals, referred to his law firm by the Mauritius High Commission in London. Bernard Sheridan was an old friend of Mauritian parliamentarians Veerasamy Ringadoo and Satcam Boolell, acquainted during their student days in London. It was not surprising that when Bernard Sheridan established his law firm "Sheridans Solicitors, some legal work was

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thrown his way by the Labour Government who, following independence in 1968, set up the Mauritius High Commission in the UK, under the administration of former brilliant Establishment Secretary, Raymond Chasle. Raymond Chasle was the father of the Mauritius Diplomatic Service who would later set up the Mauritius Embassy in Paris, and subsequently the Mauritius Embassy in Belgium with jurisdiction to the EEC. Never received any decoration, though.

Richard Gifford befriending the UK Mauritians had joined the Anglo-Mauritian Association set up by Indian national Ravi Misra who was the very dynamic UK regional manager of Air Mauritius with the airline's office in Mayfair, the posh area of London

## Funding

One question which people may ask of the Chagos saga is "where did Richard Gifford get the money to fly Olivier Bancoult and a few of his compatriots, male and female, to London in the mid-nineties, and to get them hotel accommodation, first at a friend's place in Norwood (south London) and then in Holborn, central London, while he was being briefed by the Chagossians? There was absolutely no money then. How can Richard Gifford, whatever his stand was at the time, be totally ignored today, while the rejoicing goes on,

Having become a friend of Mauritius, Richard Gifford WAS the man who revived the Chagos saga in the mid-nineties, which had by then become

almost as dead as the dodo, locally in Mauritius. Even young Olivier Bancoult, to a question from Monaf Fakira of Mauritius News, at a press conference chaired by Richard Gifford following the first British High Court victory as to whether he would get the Mauritian Government involved in his fight for the Chagossians' rights, exclaimed "What has the Mauritian government done for the Chagossians?". This statement was reported in Mauritius News at the time and later mentioned in an article, by Peter Chellen, that appeared in *Le Mauricien* under the title "Chagos, The Eternal Debate". Monaf Fakira, the former PMSD Secretary-

situation was *au point mort* in Mauritius. When he eventually brought the case to the British High Court of Justice in the mid-nineties for a first time, It was known that the law firm had applied for and obtained legal aid from the British Government itself. It was only then that money was available to meet all expenses and to pay everyone. Richard Gifford took on board Mauritian-born Avoué Robin Mardemootoo as his counterpart in Mauritius to liaise with the Chagossians. Robin Mardemootoo will have known the extent of the contribution of Richard Gifford to the cause of the Chagossians in whatever direction.



General who had settled in London, had no reply to Olivier Bancoult's exclamation! .

It is regrettable that no mention is made of Richard Gifford who took up the Chagossian challenge when the

Richard Gifford created then the Chagossians Welfare Fund with a donation from a British registered Charity whose accountant was a UK Mauritian, Rashid Halkory.