

Uk honours system analysis



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Title: Discuss the purpose of the honours system and the method by which recipients of honours are selected. What improvements, if any, do you think are necessary or desirable in the law and workings of the honour system?

Introduction

This is a highly topical subject, indeed it is one that is the focus of political machination and intense media scrutiny and speculation at the point of writing this paper. The recent furore is discussed below, after an examination of the purpose and *modus operandi* of the honours system, and some considered suggestions for reform.

The UK Honours System

The United Kingdom honours system is a time-honoured mechanism which provides for the public recognition of exceptional achievement, endeavour and service to the country. ^[1] The system rewards conspicuous contributions to the community, pre-eminence within a field of activity and distinguished or innovative work in all areas of UK society.

Honours are usually awarded twice a year in the United Kingdom; one honours list is published on The Queen's Birthday in June and another is published at New Year. Honours Committees meet before the decision as to the constitution of each list is taken to advise the Cabinet Secretary on candidates to put forward. The public have been permitted to make nominations for honours since 1993 and these are put forward for consideration by the Honours Committees. Such nominations require a minimum of two supporting letters and evidence to justify the proposal. The

Cabinet Office suggests that certain criteria should be applied in evaluating the merits of a nomination. [2]

The nominee should have:

- made a significant contribution to their community or field of endeavour;
- distinguished British life and enhanced its reputation;
- improved the lot of those less able to help themselves;
- exhibited vision and moral courage and vision in making difficult choices and hard applications. [3]

There are nine committees in total, covering different fields of achievement.

Committees are appointed to advise on the following areas: State;

Education; Health; Community; Voluntary and Local Service; Science and

Technology; Economy; Sport; Arts and Media. These committees make

recommendations to the Prime Minister who thereafter puts forward a list of recommendations to the Queen, who ultimately decides on the final list. As

Bradley and Ewing describe in *Constitutional and Administrative Law*, [4] the Queen is “ the sole fountain of honour”, and she awards all peerages, but her prerogative is “ only exercised on the advice of her ministers”.

The Cabinet Office Ceremonial Secretariat [5] is responsible for the overall management of the honours system [6] . The Ceremonial Branch of the

Cabinet Office was established in 1937 and takes responsibility for honours policy work across government. It was renamed the Ceremonial Secretariat in 2001.

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The Secretariat prepares the Prime Minister's half-yearly Honours Lists and consults on all honours matters with the Head of the Home Civil Service. The Secretariat also coordinates policy on the award of decorations and medals and advises the Ministry of Defence and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office as required. Moreover the Secretariat deals with the administration of honours nominations made by members of the public and assesses individual cases leading to civilian gallantry awards. ^[7]

Reform of the Honours System?

In 2005 the Government published the paper *Reform of the Honours System* ^[8] which contained its responses to “*A Matter of Honour – Reforming the Honours System*” ^[9], a report by the Public Administration Select Committee and “*Review of the Honours system: report to the Secretary of the Cabinet*” by Sir Hayden Phillips. ^[10] Overall the Government indicated its support for the honours system, but it recognised concerns voiced in the two reports cited above and undertook to review the current system to ensure its fairness and make proposals to render it more accessible to the public as a whole. A selection of the proposals considered are discussed below. ^[11]

In its response, the Government resisted recommendations to abolish such ancient honours as the Orders of Bath and of St Michael and St George, but accepted the point that honours should not be conferred merely because the recipient holds a particular post or office. ^[12] It is submitted that it is essential that honours are only ever awarded on merit, for exceptional service over and above that which could be expected, if the system is to

retain public support and longevity and therefore this decision is supported by this commentator.

Hayden Philips also recommended that the proportion of honours that go to the so-called state sector (including the Diplomatic Service, the Home Civil Service and the Armed Forces) should be reduced. The Government has prevaricated over this proposal but it is submitted that it is a meritorious suggestion. It is necessary to ground the honours system firmly in the public interest and context if it is to receive continued public acceptance and credibility.

The Australian system of honours was (ironically perhaps) suggested as a model for reform of the UK system, and while not embracing that proposal wholeheartedly the Government indicated that it would be pursuing the Philip's recommendation to increase diversity and regional participation in the honours selection process along similar lines to those in operation in Australia. Again it is argued that this is a wise move. As stated above it is necessary to root the honours system deep within the greater community to preserve support and recognition for it and to defeat criticisms that it functions under a metropolitan bias.

It is also proposed that the Honours Selection Committees be replaced by a new Honours Commission, and that this body should take over responsibility from ministers for making nominations to the Queen. However, the Government did not accept this proposal in its 2005 response, preferring instead to pledge to reduce the civil service participation in selection committees, guarantee non-civil service chairs of those committees and

increase participation and transparency into the existing system by other administrative means. It is submitted that while the Government's proposals represent an improvement on the *status quo*, they fail to grasp the nettle and fully address the frailties and complexities of the existing process. The establishment of a new Honours Commission to assume all duties in this regard would, it is asserted have been the best way forward for the UK honours system.

A Personal Aside

There is clearly much to commend in a system based wholly on rewarding distinguished public service and significant contributions to society if the smack of patronage, bias and imperialism can be removed from its operation. It is true that many second generation commonwealth citizens have sought to reject honours because of the perception that the honours system is an imperialist tool and efforts must be made to restore faith in the system and position it in the minds of the public as a method of recognising only achievement and endeavour. It has also been argued that the honours system facilitates business by recognising Captains of UK industry and rewarding their efforts, but that said the *profit* and *power* motives alone seem to inspire businessmen elsewhere in the world to succeed and prosper without the carrot of an honour dangling before them.

In summation, it is submitted that greater transparency, accessibility and democracy should be introduced into the system for selecting candidates for honours, and that the criteria for nomination should reflect *only* contributions that further the public good in some material way. Given that the awards are

made in recognition of service to the community it is also deemed appropriate that the community itself is better represented on the nomination panels. Moreover, it is also considered prudent to expedite and simplify the process for removing honours in the event of subsequent behaviour incompatible with the title bestowed, such as a criminal conviction.

“ Cash for Coronets” – March 2006

The Labour Government is, at the time of writing, embroiled in a high profile row concerning the perception that those making substantial cash donations and or “ loans” to Labour Party funds have been put forward by the Prime Minister for public honours. ^[13] The Prime Minister has been stung by the accusations of impropriety and bias and has ordered immediate changes to prevent such a state of affairs arising in future, including making loans to political parties publicly declarable. In the meantime, three complaints have been made under the 1925 Honours Prevention of Abuses Act and these are currently being investigated by Scotland Yard. ^[14]

It is submitted that it is completely unacceptable for honours to be effectively bought by political donations rather than earned by good endeavours. ^[15] However, politics is an expensive business, in particular the funding of General Election Campaigns, and it has been suggested that the only way to guarantee that politics is not influenced and that honours are not bought and sold in this way is to provide for the public funding of political parties via general taxation. It is unlikely that this solution will prove popular with the general public, given the general animosity and suspicion that

attaches to politicians, and may even result in the funding of parties that the majority of the public find disagreeable, such as the National Front. However, it is argued that no price can be put on political independence and the integrity of the honours system, if it is to survive the current wave of social reform and modernisation, is also important. Therefore, it is argued that a mechanism for the public funding of political parties on a prudent, measured and transparent scale must be established at the earliest opportunity and certainly in advance of the next General Election.

THE ENDWORD COUNT: 1539 (answer length only excluding footnotes and bibliography)

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Clarke Accused in £14m Loans Row, 22 March 2006: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/4831528.stm

Cash for Peerages Row, 20 March 2006:

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/4812822.stm

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Footnotes

[1] See for an insightful general overview: John Walker, *The Queen has been Pleased: the British Honours System at Work* (1986), Secker and Warburg.

[2] See: <http://www.honours.gov.uk/nominate/>.

[3] Stated at <http://www.honours.gov.uk/nominate/>.

[4] 12th Edition, 1997, p 277.

[5] See for website: <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/ceremonial/>.

[6] See for website: <http://www.honours.gov.uk/index.asp>.

[7] The Secretariat also makes recommendations for the Imperial Service Medal.

[8] *Reform of the Honours System*, Cabinet Office CM 6479 (2005).

[9] “*A Matter of Honour*” – *Reforming the Honours System* (HC 212-I) (Session 2003-4), Report by the Public Administration Select Committee. <https://assignbuster.com/uk-honours-system-analysis/>

[10] *Review of the Honours System, Report to the Secretary of the Cabinet*, Sir Hayden Phillips, House of Commons Papers – Session 2004-05.

[11] With a view to adherence to the word limit it is not possible to offer exhaustive coverage of the issues.

[12] This principle was first endorsed by Prime Minister John Major in 1993 after a review of the honours system: *Reform of the Honours System* , Cabinet Office CM 6479 (2005).

[13] *Clarke Accused in £14m Loans Row*, 22 March 2006: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/4831528.stm

[14] It is submitted that it is doubtful that anything of substance will come from this investigation.

[15] *Cash for Peerages Row* , 20 March 2006: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/4812822.stm.