

FB's Evidence On The Honours System

To the House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee.

1. In my submission a statement should be produced setting out the future scope and objects of the British state honours system in a society where deference no longer obtains. This should say that in the future state honours will be awarded only for acts by citizens which demonstrate quite exceptional heroism, fortitude or other outstanding qualities. State honours should no longer be awarded merely for long service in a particular office or occupation. Nor should they be awarded because the person has engaged in voluntary unpaid charitable or other service. Such work ought not to be done in the hope of gaining an honour, which is an unworthy and demeaning motive likely to distort behaviour in socially undesirable ways, for example by encouraging kow-towing and inhibiting the utterance of proper criticism.
2. No state honour should in future be conferred which involves a title such as Lord, Baroness, Dame or Sir. As in France, use of such titles by past holders should be permitted at individual discretion, though not recognised officially (as in invitations to state banquets). Such titles are not generally bestowed in other developed countries and encourage the sentiment that Britain is old-fashioned and even faintly absurd.
3. I would not venture to suggest any change in the honours awarded by H.M. The Queen personally.
4. I hope I may be forgiven for presenting my remaining evidence by reproducing Blogs published on my Blogsite.

Tuesday 2 December 2003: The British Honours system

5. A man whom I shall not name¹ has insulted Her Britannic Majesty. She offered to honour him by admitting him to the Most Honourable Order of the British Empire with an award of the OBE. He rejected the honour with contumely, saying mention of the British Empire reminded him of slavery. (He might remember that slavery still flourishes in the part of Africa with which he is associated.)
6. Why do we British cling to our absurd honours system? The London *Times* reported on 25 November 2003 that supporters of the system argue it rewards talented and ambitious civil servants who would otherwise have to be paid much more to prevent them defecting to the private sector. As I said in a letter the *Times* published on 29 November 2003, this suggests that for those civil servants the prospect of an honour from the Queen is in effect a bribe which is practicably quantifiable in monetary terms. I pointed out that in a leading article (same day) the *Times* carried this wider, saying an important motivation for many good deeds is a hoped-for award of honours.
7. I added that, in order not to prejudice a prospective honour, many people feel obliged to tailor their conduct accordingly - as J. B. Priestley brilliantly showed in his play *An Inspector Calls*. I suggested that this appeal to vanity is an unhealthy feature of British society, since its effect is to bolster foolish pride and restrict people's freedom of action.

¹ Benjamin Zephaniah.

Tuesday 16 December 2003: More on the Gong Show

8. I suggested in an earlier Blog that there is a great deal wrong with the British honours system. Now more evidence has come to light against what the London *Sunday Times* for 14 December 2003 calls the Gong Show. A Whitehall whistleblower has leaked a secret Cabinet Office document showing that the whole system is run by a committee of seven top civil servants, with one outsider from the private sector.
9. This small committee decide who gets what. Their conclusions are sent to the Prime Minister (who may or may not tinker with them a little). Then they are passed *for information only* to Her Majesty the Queen. Constitutionally, gongs are supposed to be bestowed by Her Majesty, who is our country's Fount of Honour. In fact, apart from the few which are within her gift, she has no say in the matter.
10. The whistleblower says that the recent award of a knighthood to the ageing rocker Mick Jagger (of 'I Can't Get No Satisfaction' fame) was given to make Prime Minister Blair look cool. People are not put on the list if their political stance is anti-Labour.
11. There is of course nothing new about all this. I recall G K Chesterton's summing-up in *A Ballade of an Anti-Puritan-*

Prince, Bayard would have smashed his sword
To see the sort of knights you dub-
Is that the last of them – O Lord!
Will someone take me to a pub?

Saturday 20 December 2003: Gong Show Part 3

12. Honours for leading scientists involved in animal experiments and GM crop research are said to have been blocked by H.R.H. The Prince of Wales. Following my two previous blogs on the honours system I am now reporting a further item in the *London Times* (18 December 2003). This says that Colin Blakemore, distinguished Professor of Physiology at my own alma mater Oxford University, has been refused a knighthood because of opposition from Prince Charles (who denied the allegation and declined to comment). It is also reported that H.R.H. objected to Professor Blakemore's presence at the launch of a schizophrenia research centre funded by the charity SANE.
13. The item adds that a second eminent scientist, Professor Derek Burke, has also been passed over for honours because of the Prince's objections. The professor has been one of the strongest critics of Charles's opposition to genetically modified crops.
14. The *Daily Mail* (same day) reports that Professor Blakemore is very angry about being excluded from the honours list. He says-
15. 'On the one hand, the Government specifically encourages scientists to engage in controversial issues. But in private, you are regarded as a pariah, marked down as unsavoury and your reputation is diminished. To suffer 15 years of terrorism, as I have, because you are one of the few prepared to stand up for what Government promotes, and then learn that this Government shuns you for doing so is deeply demoralising.'
16. Ironically Colin Blakemore is a long-standing Labour Party member (perhaps he should change his allegiance). He has endured parcel-bomb attacks and death threats from animal rights extremists, and been warned by them that his name is on their murder list. So much for the rule of law.

17. This Blog is already too long, but I can't resist adding some comments made by readers in yesterday's *Times*. Dr John Rae says there's no reason other than social climbing why life peers and knights should not be content with letters after their name. Professor Christopher Clapham thinks the honours mole I mentioned is so disgusted with Government duplicity that he is prepared to run great personal risk in order to reveal it. Finally Dr Michael White wryly says that 'whoever blew the whistle on our obnoxious honours system should be given a medal'.

Tuesday 30 December 2003: Gong Show Part 4

18. The great interest currently being shown in the honours system encourages me to place on record, in case it is of use in reforming the system, three instances where I have had direct experience of its workings.
19. In 1951 I entered what was then called the Office of Parliamentary Counsel to His Majesty's Treasury, where Government Parliamentary Bills are drafted. It is the custom to make the Head of the Office, the first Parliamentary Counsel, a Knight Commander of the Bath (KCB). 'Keep your nose clean' said Frank Heritage 'and you will in due course become First Parliamentary Counsel'. It was my first day in the Office. Frank, the chief clerk, did some hasty calculations and told me that the magic year would probably be 1979. I kept my nose clean, but resigned long before the crucial date and went on to do other things.
20. No honour has come my way from all that.
21. For two years (1959-61) I was seconded by the Parliamentary Counsel Office to help Ghana become a republic and draft its new constitution. At the end of that time I was officially informed by the Ghana Attorney General, a former Westminster Labour MP named Geoffrey Bing QC, that I had been recommended to Whitehall by Dr Nkrumah the President for the award of an OBE.
22. No honour has come my way from all that.
23. The first time I resigned from the Office of Parliamentary Counsel (I am the only person who has resigned twice from that Office, having been invited back in 1973) it was to take up an appointment as Chief Executive (then called Secretary) of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS), where my predecessor Sir Alexander Killick DSO MC had been knighted for his services. Like similar professional bodies, the RICS was required to have a secret committee which recommended honours to be awarded by the Monarch to chartered surveyors. I served as its secretary, and recall earnest discussions about who deserved what and when. This sometimes involved manipulation. For example it was early decided that the knighthood expected for the President in 1968, the year of the Institution's centenary, should go to Oliver Chesterton MC, a distinguished relative of the writer G K Chesterton. The RICS had three Vice Presidents, who then (usually) went on in turn to be President for a year. It took some manoeuvring to insert Chesterton in the desired order.
24. No honour has come my way from all that.
25. One thing is clear about the honours system. If you stay in the same job all your life you may get an MBE for services to say the Stretchford Fine Arts and Tramways Committee. If you move around and sit on many stools (as I must confess I myself have done) you will fall between all of them.

Monday 5 January 2004: Gong Show Part 5

26. My final word on the Honours system is contained in a letter from me published in today's London *Times* Debate:
27. 'We should not try to reform what is a rotten system. Instead we should abolish it.
28. '[The honours system is rotten for the following reasons.] It caters to, and inflates, human vanity. It is used to obtain the services of civil servants, members of the Armed Forces and other state employees on the cheap, paying them less than they could get in the private sector. It degrades the Queen, who nominally [(but not really, except for a few)], awards the honours. It encourages a debased political system, where honours are awarded to pay off party hacks and party donors. It cheapens charity, encouraging people to do charitable work in the expectation of being honoured rather than for true philanthropic motives. [It distorts the behaviour of those who hope for honours, making them kow-tow and 'keep their noses clean'.]
29. 'Instead of bestowing titles and letters after one's name (to be used only for swank), we should borrow from a military tradition which does neither: mention in despatches. Let those who act beyond the call of duty be officially mentioned in the nation's despatches. That would be honour enough.'
30. The *Times* left out the bits in square brackets.

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