

Mr Baldry MP and the Indian Moneylender

Elizabeth Filkin has raised the lid on that constantly bubbling pot the Sovereign's Fount of Honour, so often in our history better described as a Fount of Dishonour. In the nether world, Maundy Gregory rubs his hands while reading, printed on asbestos for the local inhabitants, the Eighth Report of the Select Committee on Standards and Privileges. This is concerned with the financial and honorific affairs of Mr Tony Baldry, barrister MP for Banbury. At the time in question Mr Baldry was a minister in John Major's Government.

Our present Prime Minister Mr Blair (another Tony) tells us that we now enjoy open government. To prove it, and his zeal for the computer information revolution (otherwise known as IT), Mr Blair has made available to his subjects a website called www.open.gov.uk. So why, if government is now so open, do we not know more about an interesting matter mentioned in the Eighth Report? I refer to the fact that the Lord Chancellor's Department keeps a list, forwarded from time to time to higher authority, of Persons Deserving of an Honour.

The report endorses a memorandum by the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards (Ms Filkin) relating to a complaint by Mr A. Milne, a solicitor, against Mr Tony Baldry. The report says: "On 2 January 1997 Mr Baldry received the benefit of a loan of £5000 from Mr Sarosh Zaiwalla. On 14 January 1997 he wrote to the Lord Chancellor's Department recommending the inclusion of Mr Zaiwalla in the next Honours List. In that letter he made no mention of his financial relationship with Mr Zaiwalla".

The report includes various documents throwing light on the affair. A letter from Mr Milne reveals that he was at one time a partner with Mr Zaiwalla in a firm of City solicitors. Mr Milne asks Ms Filkin to look into Mr Baldry's booking breakfasts at the House of Commons "in the name of a non-existent organisation, the Asian Business Breakfast, which is simply a marketing label of Zaiwalla & Co, in order to get round the rules for such bookings". He asks "whether it was proper for Mr Baldry to have given a reference for Mr Zaiwalla to receive a CBE, at a time when he hardly knew Mr Zaiwalla, as part of the price for the loan which he received, [or] to have used a ministerial car to attend the offices of Zaiwalla & Co to negotiate the loan".

The report reveals that Mr Milne had written a letter about this to the leader of the Conservative Party, Mr Hague, saying "I believe that Mr Baldry approached Mr Zaiwalla because he desperately needed funds and Mr Zaiwalla had made other payments to politicians and had a reputation as a moneylender. I believe that Mr Zaiwalla's nickname within your party is 'the Indian Moneylender' and I would question whether it was proper for Mr Baldry to use an official car to visit an Indian Moneylender". The key findings by Ms Filkin, endorsed in the report, were these.

"Mr Baldry was not required to register the loan from Mr Zaiwalla because the concession he received did not exceed the threshold of £215. Although clients of Zaiwalla & Co were from time to time invited to the breakfasts I have received no evidence that Mr Baldry booked the dining rooms 'to get round the rules for such bookings' or that the Club was 'simply a marketing label'. *Complaint not upheld.*

"Mr Baldry should have registered Zaiwalla & Co as clients for the purpose of booking House of Commons dining rooms from June 1998. *Complaint upheld.*

“Mr Baldry failed to uphold the Code of Conduct when he provided a recommendation to the Lord Chancellor’s Department that Mr Zaiwalla be awarded an honour without being open and declaring the loan he had received twelve days previously. *Complaint upheld.*”

For the latter sin, Mr Baldry was required to make a personal apology in the chamber of the House of Commons. He duly did this on March 23. We should not be too hard on him. These things happen. Let him who is without sin cast the first stone, and so forth. What really intrigues me is the list kept by the Lord Chancellor’s Department. You won’t find that on www.open.gov.uk.

The report gives just a tantalising glimpse of it. The prime mover in trying (unsuccessfully) to get Mr Zaiwalla on to the list was Lord Feldman, one time chairman of the National Union of Conservative and Unionist Associations and author of *Some Thoughts on Job Creation*. Why did Lord Feldman do this? Was he acting in some quasi-official capacity for Mr Hague?

Shouldn’t we be told more about the workings of this mysterious list?

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