

Rooted in Dishonour?

The very first day I walked into the Parliamentary Counsel Office in Whitehall (PCO) as a tyro legislative draftsman (the year was 1953) the venerable Chief Clerk, Frank Heritage, took pen, as one said in those days, and scribbled a calculation. He then showed me what he had written and said: 'that's the date when, if you keep your nose clean, you will get your KCB'. Those initials stood, and indeed still stand, for the Whitehall award of Knight Commander of the Most Honourable Order of the Bath. Heads of the PCO then, as now, stood to be awarded this prestigious honour, after which they could posture for ever as cardboard Knights of the Realm (horses and swords optional).

I felt uneasy at this dizzying prospect, since it was a rather too obvious way of trapping clever folk into a job that should have paid far more than they were actually getting. I at once saw through this clumsy ploy. It was, I felt, calculated to trap only the second class. And so, in my subsequent experience, it has proved. I gladly escaped from the PCO before any such Whitehall honours were conferred on me

A few years later I was seconded by the PCO to help Kwame Nkrumah produce Ghana's first republican constitution. As a reward for my labours over two years in what used to be called the White Man's Graveyard, the local Attorney General Geoffrey Bing QC (formerly a Labour MP at Westminster) kindly recommended that Her Majesty's Government award me an OBE. For some reason never vouchsafed to me, that recommendation was ignored by the powers that be in Downing Street. To this day I remain chastely undecorated in any way. I make no complaint whatever about that, since it is how I prefer to be. It shows however the chances and hazards of our ridiculous pasteboard honours system.

Should this system exist at all? Harbours grave doubts, Mr Fraser Kemp MP (Houghton and Washington, East) on 22 November 2000 moved in the Commons a 10-minute rule Bill. It would he said replace the arcane panoply of honours currently available, from knighthoods to baronetcies, from the Order of St. Patrick to the Order of the Thistle, including the Star of India, the Order of the Indian Empire, and various other adornments. Replace them with what, you may ask. If they are that bad should they not be swept away altogether?

Well not quite, Mr Fraser Kemp thought. In *Who's Who* he gives his recreations as the cinema and reading, so he is a man of culture. If he has read his Tennyson he might think some current honours recipients reminiscent of Lancelot-

His honour rooted in dishonour stood,
And faith unfaithful kept him falsely true.

Such an outdated honours system, said Mr Kemp, does no credit to a nation that has just entered a new millennium. We should strive to break down social divisions, not reinforce them by clinging to an honours system based on an empire which has ceased to exist. (I have never understood what is supposedly wrong with social divisions, which have been found in every human society so far recorded; and I am and always have been a fervent supporter of the great British Empire.)

Then came Mr Kemp's most powerful *penseé*.

‘How are we to quantify public service, or judge one person’s contribution to society as more important than that of someone else? Why should we honour a first-rate diplomat and ambassador about whom many of us have not heard, rather than an exceptional nurse who has looked after people throughout a professional career? Why should one grade of honour be awarded rather than another? How can we make a judgment about television presenters or celebrities, and whether they should receive an honour of one grade rather than another? The same applies to authors - ultimately a literary judgment would have to be made, which I am not sure the honours unit, the Prime Minister or anyone else, is qualified to make.’

Mr Kemp believed they do things better down under. He told the House approvingly that Australia had replaced the old British-based honours system with one simple Order of Australia. ‘Whether someone worked in the outback as a postman for 40 years or was Prime Minister, he is proud to receive the Order of Australia.’ Surely this is a worse nonsense even than what went before. A nation that really thinks working as a postman is equivalent to serving as Prime Minister can only be called myopic – if not worse. But Mr Kemp did sincerely want us to follow Australia-

‘We should replace the present panoply of honours with an Order of the United Kingdom. That should be the way in which this country honours its worthiest members. I think that recipients would be proud to receive the honour. It would be awarded on the basis of what someone has done to make society a better place, irrespective of where he stands in the pecking order.’

How absurd to ignore the pecking order, and pretend that everyone is as useful to society as everyone else is. Each human community ever known has had its pecking order. Why should we British be so arrogant as to think we can rise above that and dispense with it? It is an obvious nonsense, born of the silly idea that all people are created equal. Obviously, that is very far from being the case. On the contrary, communities need, for their own good, to value as is fitting their cleverest members. To do so will serve them best.

Mr Kemp’s Bill was opposed by Mr. Eric Forth MP, whose social club is the Bromley Conservative. His chief argument was what I can only describe as goo on stilts-

‘Surely, the acid test of whether the current honours system is appropriate is the pleasure with which people accept honours. It is all very well for the hon. Gentleman to patronise people who happily accept various honours, but he does not seem to have given any thought to those recipients who, when they accept, are honoured - and say so - and make no secret of the fact that they are delighted. They reveal the great pleasure that they take in being recognised in many different ways.’

Ah well! Such is the dismal quality of the modern generation of MPs of all parties. I really do not know what to make of the fact that Mr Kemp’s Bill was approved by 153 votes to 58. It went no further of course. Thankfully, our system does filter out nonsense.

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