

In the Chair, Eric Martlew (Lab, Carlisle)

11 am

Mr. Don Touhig (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): I sought this debate because now more than ever it is vital that we give the achievements of our veterans the recognition that they so richly deserve. At a time when British troops are serving in some of the most dangerous and hard-fought conflicts in the world, some at home are questioning the nation's support for our armed forces. That is why it is nothing less than our duty to ensure that the 5.5 million ex-servicemen and women—our veterans—who have risked life and limb for Britain and defended her when she has been under threat know how much we value their dedication, courage and sacrifices.

When I was Minister for Veterans, I set out my mission statement quite simply, saying, "We will value our veterans, their widows and their families, and we will do all in our power to demonstrate that." How we value our veterans is a measure of Britain today. The care we show them, or in some cases the lack of it, cannot fail to impact upon the morale of today's servicemen and women deployed around the world, including those serving in Iraq and Afghanistan.

I want to draw attention to the disgraceful treatment of the 35,000 veterans who took part in operations in Malaysia from 1957 to 1966. The Malaysia campaign saw British and Commonwealth troops confront Indonesian volunteers infiltrating Malaysia. The conflict claimed the lives of 114 Commonwealth servicemen, with another 180 wounded. The British and Commonwealth force successfully dominated the border area and defeated the incursions, leading to a lasting settlement of the dispute that had threatened regional stability. Like all veterans, the men who took part in that struggle deserve our deepest gratitude and respect. As our forces face similar problems in Afghanistan today, the case of the Malaysia veterans is surely all the more poignant.

Bob Spink (Castle Point) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman is making an important point at a time in our history when we should remember the veterans, because so many of our servicemen and women are serving in dangerous places around the world. However, we are talking about very special veterans, because the Malaysia campaign was the last conflict to be fought by conscript soldiers. These were not volunteers; they were conscripted to serve their country.

Although there were some shocking incidents during that war of which we should be thoroughly ashamed, the vast majority of veterans who served did so with great professionalism and dignity. They served their country not as volunteers, but as conscripts, and in such circumstances it is particularly important to recognise their efforts.

Mr. Touhig: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that point. He is right to say that those were the last conscripted troops and that they deserve our special care and attention.

In January 2006, the veterans were given permission to accept but not wear the Pingat Jasa Malaysia medal—the PJM—which is a decoration instituted by His Majesty the King of Malaysia to commemorate the services of British and Commonwealth forces in safeguarding Malaysia's sovereignty during the conflict. The PJM honours the valour and sacrifices made by forces that served in Malaysia between 1957 and 1966. I welcomed the decision by Her Majesty the Queen, acting on the advice of the Committee on the Grant of Honours, Decorations and Medals, to grant permission to the 35,000 veterans who took part in that operation to receive that medal. However, the decision of that Committee—commonly known as the HD Committee—to advise Her Majesty that the medal could be accepted but not worn is the most disgraceful and insensitive act by faceless mandarins in Whitehall that I have ever encountered.

Sandra Gidley (Romsey) (LD): I have followed this issue carefully. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that there seems to be no consistency in the application of the five-year rule and no transparency in respect of the HD Committee, which seems to make up rules to suit itself at any particular time?

Mr. Touhig: The hon. Lady anticipates some points that I want to make, but I am grateful for her comment because it reinforces some aspects that I want to develop.

The absurdity of that crass and insensitive decision was demonstrated when veterans were allowed to wear the PJM in Malaysia on the occasion of that country's celebration of its 50th anniversary of independence last August. Earlier, in a written statement on 31 January 2006, the then Minister for Trade, who also served as a Foreign Office Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley, South (Ian Pearson), said:

“The Committee on the Grant of Honours, Decorations and Medals...has recommended an exception to two of the long-established rules governing the acceptance and wearing of foreign...awards”.—[Official Report, 31 January 2006; Vol. 442, c. 10–11WS.]

In effect, those exceptions set aside the rule forbidding double medalling when a British award has already been given for the same service, and also set aside the five-year rule preventing the acceptance and wearing of non-British awards for events or service more than five years ago, which the hon. Member for Romsey (Sandra Gidley) mentioned. In other words, the HD Committee waived two key rules so that the veterans could accept the PJM and then re-imposed the same rules to prevent them from wearing it.

Most people—most sane people, that is—would think that fairness and common sense dictate that our veterans, having been given permission to accept the PJM, should be allowed to wear it, but when I was a youngster growing up in Abersychan in south Wales, my mother often used to say to me, “Son, in life you will find that sense is not that common.”

I have a letter from one of the veterans, who told me how proud he was to be invited to the Malaysian high commission to receive the PJM, but how distraught he was at the last sentence in the letter, which said that he needed to remove it when he left the building.

In the last parliamentary Session, I tabled early-day motion 356, which attracted 176 signatures. It called on the HD Committee to change its advice to Her Majesty the Queen on the wearing of the PJM. Also in that Session, the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Mr. Mates) tabled early-day motion 375, which called on the HD Committee to do much the same thing. That, too, received widespread support from all parties in the House.

It seems utter nonsense not to allow veterans to wear medals officially awarded to them. We must bring to an end that confusing and insulting practice. It is wholly wrong that the veterans cannot accept and wear the PJM. At best, that decision is unjust; at worst, it is a disgrace and a shame on Britain.

Bob Spink: Before the right hon. Gentleman moves off the point about consistency, I would like to make a point in case he is not going to mention it. He will be aware that those who served on the Russian Arctic convoys were allowed to receive and wear their medals, as my father did with great pride. He will also be aware that the Governments of other countries, including Fiji, New Zealand and Australia, have given permission for the medals to be worn at any time, so why should our Government not give the same permission?

Mr. Touhig: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point that shows the inconsistency of the approach to accepting medals from foreign nations.

Being allowed to accept but not wear the PJM is a disgrace and a shame on Britain. Britain's shame was compounded and turned into a farce more worthy of a Whitehall theatre than the highest echelons of government when Commonwealth Governments in Australia and New Zealand advised Her Majesty the Queen that their citizens should be allowed to accept and wear the medal on all occasions. Indeed, the Governor-General of Australia, Michael Jeffery, was presented with his own PJM on 30

January 2006 and is allowed to wear it in public with pride. I am holding a picture of him doing just that. So, the Queen's representative in Australia is allowed to accept and wear the PJM, but the Queen's soldiers in Great Britain are not.

Sandra Gidley: Can the right hon. Gentleman clarify whether the Queen sanctioned the wearing of the medal in Australia and New Zealand? Any advice given to the Queen is not available under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, so it is difficult to be clear about the matter. Does he know whether she was given advice with respect to the other countries?

Mr. Touhig: Her Majesty is the Queen of Australia and of New Zealand, and acts on the advice of her Governments there. They appear to have advised her that their citizens should not simply accept but be able to wear the PJM. Clearly, that has happened with Commonwealth countries, and I, like the hon. Lady, cannot understand why that is not happening in this country.

This Government have done much for veterans. They created the first Minister for Veterans, instituted Veterans Day and created the Veterans Agency, but I want them to do more. In presenting the PJM, the Malaysian Government are thanking the 35,000 veterans who served on operations in that country. Malaysia is a predominantly Muslim country. I know of no other Muslim country that today wants to honour British servicemen and women. What message does it send out to a friendly Muslim nation—an ally and a member of the Commonwealth—when the British establishment is throwing this generous gesture back in its face? I can only hope that the members of the HD Committee do not also serve in the diplomatic service. God help British foreign policy if they do.

The Minister for the Middle East (Dr. Kim Howells): On a point of information, the permanent secretary at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office is a member of the Committee.

Mr. Touhig: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. Let history be the judge is all that I can say.

We in this country have a tradition of showing gratitude to our veterans for their services, and celebrating their achievements, yet veterans of the Malaysia campaign are not allowed to wear the PJM. To add insult to injury, the HD Committee agreed in March 2007 to review its original decision but concluded that it should be upheld. In answer to a parliamentary question, my right hon. Friend the Member for Derby, South (Margaret Beckett), then Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, said:

“After examination of the issues involved, the policies underpinning the operation of the UK honours system and particular application of these policies in the case of the PJM, it concluded that the original decision to allow exceptions to two of the major principles of the British Honours System—the double medalling rule and the five year rule—should be upheld.”—[Official Report, 23 March 2007; Vol. 458, c. 1223W.]

My God, if I could close my eyes, I could imagine Sir Humphrey saying that in “Yes, Minister”.

I raised the matter with my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary. I am grateful for their keen interest in the matter, but I have to say that, so far, I have received the same old tired responses. I was told that it has been a long-standing policy to say that

“the wearing of non-British awards will not be approved or permitted for events or service that took place more than five years before initial consideration or in connection with events that took place in the distant past.”

Again, who says that “Yes, Minister” is not the training manual for the civil service? My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, whom I greatly admire and support, is a radical man. He wrote an excellent biography on the great socialist James Maxton, in which he quoted Maxton talking about poverty:

“Poverty was manmade and was therefore open to change.”

I have no doubt that my right hon. Friend’s Government have little sympathy with those who want Britain to cling to outmoded and antiquated systems that belong in the 19th century, not the 21st.

To paraphrase James Maxton, the system that denies our Malaysia veterans the right to wear the PJM is man-made and therefore open to change. The only conclusion that I can draw from the attitude of the HD Committee is that it seems more important to uphold the British honours system than to honour British servicemen and women, some of whom have laid down their lives for our country. Those soldiers faced some terrible conditions. One can only imagine what it was like fighting in the jungles in those times, so how must they feel when they hear about the attitude that we have taken and our refusal to allow them to wear the PJM?

One veteran wrote to tell me that he had been advised by a MOD civil servant that he could stuff his PJM back in his Kellogg’s packet, because the medal status meant nothing to him. Shame on any official who speaks to a veteran in that way. Many of those lads are now in their 60s and 70s, and they grow fewer in

number each year. The time is right to make a decision and rightly allow them to wear this honour. All they ask is to be able to wear with pride the medal that they earned, alongside other veterans who parade across Britain on Remembrance Sunday.

I have met many of these men and I pay tribute to their campaign. Their quiet dignity is in stark contrast to the actions of civil servants who are hiding behind the actions of some shadowy Committee. I have tried to find out how this Committee operates. I am told that the main Committee meets just twice a year, and its minutes are not made public. The idea of transparency and open government do not apply there.

There are also stories circulating that the Committee often takes decision not by members meeting each other, but by them telephoning or e-mailing each other. It is a good thing that we did not have e-mails in 1957 when some of those conscripted might have not turned up to fight, but sent an e-mail of support. Where would we have been then?

I know that many Malaysia veterans have lobbied parliamentary colleagues, the HD Committee itself and Ministers, and still we are no further forward. The veterans have been left confused and disenchanted by the whole process. They deserve far better, and I believe that we have to deliver that for them. Those veterans have done their bit. We should honour them and recognise that the medal they have been given is not some second-class award, but an award given by an ally and friend in recognition of service provided by British servicemen and women. Their cause is honourable: they simply wish to receive fair and even-handed treatment from the British Government and to be afforded the same right as their comrades in other Commonwealth countries to wear the medal that they have earned.

I also know that if the HD Committee changes its mind, we will be told that that is setting a precedent. I am sure that I am not alone in this Chamber in thinking that, throughout my political life, I have been warned that if I said this or that, or did this or did that, I would be setting a precedent. I am sure that when the first human being stood up and began to walk on two legs rather than crawl around on all fours, there must have been a group of Neanderthals, not unlike the HD Committee, who tut-tutted, wrung their hands and said, "This is setting a precedent." That is precisely what I am asking my hon. Friend the Minister to do now.

My hon. Friend the Minister is a good man and we know each other well. I am extremely fond of him and I hold him in high regard. He is at his best when he is most eloquent, and his most persuasive when he says what he thinks, although from time to time, that has got him into trouble, as I well know. May I invite him to tear up the notes that his officials have given to him and speak from what he feels inside—from what he knows to be right. He will not be alone, because I have received many e-mails from across Britain and from across the world from people who are saying, "We must do something to put this injustice right."

When there is some outrage of this sort, people look to Parliament for a solution. Something so shameful as the way that the Malaysia veterans have been treated deserves our attention. The British people look to this place, the Parliament of Great Britain, to right an obvious wrong. We are privileged to be the elected representatives of the people. If Parliament turns its back on the legitimate claims of the Malaysia veterans, where can they turn after that? In this day and age, we cannot allow a Committee with no ministerial involvement, that appears to meet in secret, that is not transparent and that appears not to be accountable to Parliament to take such arbitrary decisions that affect so many of our brave men and women.

I say this to my Government—no, I say this to our Government, because whatever our persuasion, they are the Government of the whole United Kingdom: if the members of the HD committee will not change their mind and advise Her Majesty the Queen that the medal can be worn, sweep them aside and ignore them. Like the Governments of Australia and of New Zealand, advise Her Majesty the Queen that the medal should be worn.

This is the Government who had the courage to pardon those who were shot at dawn during the first world war. I appeal to the same Government to demonstrate the same sense of justice by allowing the Malaysia veterans to wear the PJM. Then we could send a message to those who served our country in the past, but also to those who are serving our country now in Iraq, Afghanistan and other areas around the world. They would understand that we will always honour, cherish and care for them. We must grasp this chance to deliver justice for the Malaysia veterans.

11.20 am

Bob Spink (Castle Point) (Con): I shall not detain hon. Members long. I start by acknowledging the Government's record on recognising veterans and celebrating their service and their subsequent

contribution to British society in so many ways, including the fact that many veterans turn out in the end to be volunteers—using the skills that they have learned, often in the services, to help others in their community. The present Government have done very well in recognising that achievement by introducing the veterans badge, which many of my constituents wear with great pride whenever they can. Veterans are among the most worthy groups in British society and they well deserve the recognition that the Government have offered them.

The Government have acted honourably and properly in dealing with the issue, so it surprises me that they cannot take a small extra step and allow the PJM to be worn by the Malaysian veterans, who were not volunteers, as I was as a boy, but were conscripted; they were forced to fight and serve their country, which many of them did with great professionalism and dignity.

Dr. Howells indicated assent.

Bob Spink: I see the Minister nodding. While I have his assent, I will conclude my remarks.

Back to top

11.22 am

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East) (Con): I was just checking a fact with the proposer of this excellent debate, the right hon. Member for Islwyn (Mr. Touhig), relating to the introduction of the veterans badge. The reason why I wished to be certain about that was that a few weeks ago, I had the pleasure of receiving my own addition of the veterans badge for some very modest service in the Royal Naval Reserve as an ordinary seaman some years ago. I felt a little thrill of pride, which was no doubt completely unjustified, but it was very nice to feel that a little bit of service to society in the armed forces had been recognised in that way. How much more significant it would be for someone who was involved in risking life and limb in a serious war-fighting campaign to receive recognition in the form of a medal for the risks that they had taken and for their achievements.

I have been involved in one or two similar campaigns in the past, but they were campaigns with a bit of a difference. When the right hon. Gentleman, whom I congratulate on the bravura way in which he presented the case today, was Minister for Veterans, I was heavily involved with the campaign to try to get an Arctic star for the veterans of the Russian convoys. It was remarkable how much resistance there was to that, yet there was a considerable difference between that case and this, because no medal had been given for the Arctic convoys at all, although it was argued unconvincingly that some of the veterans were eligible for the Atlantic star, which made me wonder not only about the intellectual rigour of the case, but about the geographical limitations of the people advancing it.

Eventually, although an Arctic star was awarded, it was in the form of an Arctic star emblem. I do not believe that permission was ever formally given for that to be integrated with the officially awarded second world war medal range, but it was designed to be easily capable of attachment to the ribbons of those second world war medals, and the effect is that everybody happily wears the Arctic star emblem today among the medals and nobody raises a word of objection about it. Therefore, the first thing that I would say to any veteran who has received the PJM medal is, “Put it on your medal range. Wear it proudly and my guess is that nobody will say a word about it.”

Sandra Gidley: I take the hon. Gentleman’s point. I was invited to a medal ceremony, and the pride of the men in their medals was almost tangible. I suggested to them the very same thing that the hon. Gentleman suggested, but it is not quite the same. They want official recognition and official permission to wear the medal, because ultimately they were soldiers and they are law-abiding—they like to abide by the rules.

Dr. Lewis: The hon. Lady anticipates a point that I was coming to. Nevertheless, when it comes to practical advice, the first step should be to say: “You have the medal. Wear it and do so with pride.”

The problem that the Ministry of Defence and the HD Committee face is not that they wish to regard the PJM as a second-class medal—I entirely agree with the right hon. Gentleman that any civil servant who referred to it in those terms is not fit to hold his job—but that it is a second medal. That is where I think the difficulty arises, because some of the medal campaigns that we have fought retrospectively, such as Commander Eddie Grenfell’s campaign for an Arctic star or Captain Peter Kimm’s campaign for a canal zone medal for royal naval personnel—I want to touch on that in a moment—are for cases in which no medal was awarded at all.

Lorely Burt (Solihull) (LD): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Lewis: I would like to develop the point a little further, but if the hon. Lady would like to try again later, I will be happy to give way to her.

In the cases to which I was referring, the difficulty related primarily to the amount of time that had elapsed since the campaign took place. That issue is, I think, dead and buried because the canal zone campaign set a precedent for going back into the records and retrospectively awarding a general service medal, which I believe is known nowadays as an overseas service medal, to people who qualified as a result of their service in the canal zone. The reason given for doing that was that it could not be shown that the idea had been put up for a medal or a clasp to a general service medal to be awarded for that service at the time, and rejected, so I went to considerable lengths to try to show the same thing with regard to an Arctic star in the second world war and I could find no record. I went through the HD Committee and through the ceremonial department, as I think it was, that supplied the records that the HD Committee would have considered in relation to the awarding of second world war campaign stars, and I could find no suggestion that a medal for the Arctic had been considered and rejected, either. However, in that case, one had to settle for an emblem, whereas in the case of the canal zone, it was retrospectively decided to award the clasp or, in the case of those who did not have a general service medal already, the medal together with the clasp.

The problem with the Pingat Jasa Malaysia, it is only fair to point out, is that the campaign is not one that has not been recognised. The British Government have quite properly recognised it by awarding a general service medal with a clasp. It raises a question of arbitrariness for a Government who have benefited from the work of British servicemen and women to wish to award a medal retrospectively for service for which a medal has already been awarded. It is possible that somebody who received a general service medal and clasp for service under equally severe conditions—perhaps in another theatre of war where the Government were not as appreciative after our withdrawal as in Malaysia—might feel a tad resentful that their colleagues got two medals and they only got one.

That is the sort of consideration that the Ministry of Defence is doubtless thinking about. I presume—the right hon. Member for Islwyn will correct me if I am wrong—that it must have been with the co-operation of the Ministry of Defence that the Malaysian Government got PJM medals into those ex-servicemen's hands in the first place. Without that co-operation, it would have been impossible to administer the scheme whereby they got the medals. Primary consideration must therefore be given to those people—I do not know whether there are any; I invite interventions to set me right—who served in Malaysia but who for some reason did not get a medal from the British Government. If anyone falls into that category, there should not be the slightest question about their being allowed to wear the foreign decoration.

Lorely Burt: As I understand it, the majority of servicemen who sacrificed and endured during the Malaysian campaigns did not receive a medal for it. Is it not therefore the case that the double medal rule does not apply? Those men have nothing that they can wear in public that recognises their sacrifice and service.

Dr. Lewis: That is extremely helpful. I do not know how many of the people who served in that campaign received no medal or clasp at all. I invite the Minister to concentrate on that point in his reply.

That leads me happily to the fact that I am the proud possessor of a set of miniature medals given to me by the family of the famous airman Flight Lieutenant Kinhead, who is buried in my constituency. He won two distinguished service crosses, two distinguished flying crosses, a distinguished service order and a mention in dispatches between 1917 and 1919, both on the western front and in the intervention in Russia. It is relevant because among those miniature medals are two awarded by the white Russian authorities with whom he fought on detachment—unofficially, as it were, but officially—for the Royal Air Force in 1919 and 1920. Indeed, his DSO was for service in that campaign.

There is therefore a huge precedent for allowing foreign medals to be worn when the British Government have not already awarded a campaign service medal or clasp. I am surprised by the statement of the hon. Member for Solihull (Lorely Burt) that that applies to the majority of PJM recipients. If so, the point is crucial. If not, it is still most important for the minority of people who did not receive an award from the United Kingdom.

I should declare an indirect interest. My partner's father, Frank Souness DFC, was decorated for his service in the RAF during the Malayan campaign in 1955, and I believe that his subsequent service entitles him to

the PJM. Most people will recognise that there is a distinction between those who are awarded nothing for a campaign and those who have already been recognised for it by the British Government. It is not an easy point to make. We all wish to salute the gallantry of people who risk their lives in such campaigns. I look forward to hearing the Minister clarify whether attention will be addressed, at least as a first step, to those veterans of the Malaysian campaign who received the PJM but who never received any other award for their service.

Back to top

11.36 am

Willie Rennie (Dunfermline and West Fife) (LD): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Islwyn (Mr. Touhig) on securing this debate and on the excellent and entertaining manner in which he prosecuted his case. We have also heard some excellent interventions and contributions from the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis), who made a detailed case for a change of heart in the Government. The case is even stronger because the right hon. Member for Islwyn, as a former Defence Minister, has some inside knowledge of such matters. Having been a Minister for Veterans, he has probably seen some of the deliberations on such issues. I presume that he is not allowed to divulge them to this audience, but it strengthens the case for why the Government should reconsider.

The Malaysian campaign is often regarded as the forgotten war. Vietnam and Korea have had greater exposure, mainly through Hollywood and other film-making enterprises, but that does not mean that we should forget Malaysia. Some 35,000 troops were involved, and there were more than 100 deaths. It was a significant conflict that should be reckoned along with the rest, especially when one considers the numbers—we have 7,000 troops in Afghanistan, and the number in Iraq will have reduced to 2,500 by spring. It was a significant effort that the Government should recognise.

Even though it is claimed as a forgotten war, we must not forget the 35,000 veterans who served in Malaysia, including the last conscripted soldiers, as the hon. Member for New Forest, East mentioned. I concur with the right hon. Member for Islwyn—the MOD has done some good work in recent years. It has appointed a Minister for Veterans, introduced a veterans badge and veterans' day and given veterans priority health treatment. It has done some good work, but it is in danger of throwing it all away and losing the credit that it has gained recently. We are talking about an unnecessary slight to a group of veterans who served with distinction in the Malaysian campaign more than 50 years ago, and who have been prevented from appreciating fully the Malaysian Government's thanks on behalf of their people to the veterans who helped give them their freedom.

This is a bizarre example of British etiquette and rules getting in the way of common sense. It has all the hallmarks of a British farce. To tell 35,000 loyal ex-servicemen and women that they may accept a medal but are not permitted to wear it defies logic. The rules on double medals and events more than five years ago are waived to permit acceptance and then, paradoxically, immediately resurrected as reasons why the medal may not be worn formally. Then, after much prevarication, the establishment permits the wearing of it—but only for a few days and on the other side of the world in Malaysia. Only in Britain could that sort of thing happen.

Mr. Touhig: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis), who always puts a logical and powerful argument; he was very even-handed in his approach, and drew out the difficulties of both sides.

I have been fearsome in my criticism of the HD Committee, as I have seen correspondence concerning the decision to allow our veterans to wear the medal during the 50th anniversary of Malaysian independence. In my view, the decision was taken because Commonwealth veterans would have marched in Malaysia wearing their medals and ours would not. Perhaps more important to the establishment, Her Majesty was represented at those events by His Royal Highness the Duke of York. I believe that there was concern that His Royal Highness might have been subjected to some sort of protest by British veterans if they had not been allowed to wear the medal while other Commonwealth veterans did so. The decision to allow them to wear it for that celebration was totally cynical and wholly unworthy.

Willie Rennie: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that intervention. If the HD Committee is more concerned about the Duke of York's feelings and his possible embarrassment than about the veterans, it is very sad. Perhaps it reflects the ethics of the Committee's members.

What does it say about our relations with that foreign country—a Muslim country? As we heard, we do not have that many friends in the Muslim world, so we should not turn them away when they offer the hand of friendship. What does it say to the King of Malaysia? It is a nation of 27 million people, of whom 60 per cent. are Muslims. It is a newly industrialised country that has a long track record as a trading nation, and it is an important partner for the United Kingdom. When our veterans are offered a medal, it is very narrow minded and rather offensive for us to turn it away. I do not know how the people feel about it, nor do I know the King's view or what he says in private, but I can imagine what it must be like. Surely our relations with that country are far more important than Britain's medal etiquette.

What does it say to our Queen? She is put in the invidious position of allowing the medals to be worn in public by New Zealand and Australian veterans, but not our own. It puts the Queen in a very difficult position. I wonder what she says behind closed doors. We will never find out, but I wonder whether she has had a phone conversation with the King of Malaysia and is rather embarrassed by the whole episode.

I have a few questions for the Minister. Why did the Queen allow Australia and New Zealand veterans—

Mr. Eric Martlew (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Gentleman should not bring the royal family into the debate.

Willie Rennie: I apologise, Mr. Martlew.

Why were New Zealand and Australian veterans allowed to accept and wear the medal, when it was denied to our own veterans? If it is not permitted to receive a medal if five years have passed, then why were veterans of the allied Arctic convoys allowed to receive and wear in public the Russian 40th anniversary of victory medal?

I am puzzled by the Government's intransigence on this issue. As has been said, we are not talking about "bling" hunters—people who have medals all over their uniforms—and the veterans do not want that, either. They want something that is special. The difficulty has been caused by our obsession with etiquette, rules and regulations. We should be celebrating the efforts of our servicemen, not denigrating them. We need a review of the rules so that we can take a sensible approach to the receiving and wearing of medals. I urge the Government to look again at the set-up of the HD Committee and at some of the long-established rules that govern this issue.

I pledge my support for the Daily Mirror's "honour the brave" campaign, which has tried to secure medals and recognition for the injured and those who have passed away in Afghanistan. One of my constituents, Captain McDermid, a long-serving soldier, recently passed away there. Such people should be given recognition, in order that others know the value that our soldiers give to our country.

11.44 am

Dr. Andrew Murrison (Westbury) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Islwyn (Mr. Touhig) on obtaining the debate and on the manner in which he introduced it. I express slight surprise at the vitriolic way in which he attacked the HD committee. At the end of the day, it operates to rules that effectively are handed down by Parliament, and it is to those rules that officials work. If we are unhappy about the committee and how it works, we need to address the way in which it is structured. I shall say a few things about that later.

It is important to establish that medals are important to servicemen and to veterans. Those of us who have not served need to discuss the matter with veterans fully to appreciate the part that medals play in service life and the way that veterans view themselves and their service. It is by no means a trivial issue, and the exchange between my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) and the hon. Member for Romsey (Sandra Gidley) fleshed out some of the problem.

The feeling that the veterans have for their medals cannot simply be dismissed by saying, "Well, you can wear them anyway." People can wear whatever they want. Indeed, those involved with Remembrance day services of one sort or another, which includes most Members here, will have noticed in recent years an increase in the number of medals, emblems and badges—we heard earlier about the veterans badge—which are all worn with a great deal of pride by veterans. Some of them, of course, are officially awarded and endorsed by the HD committee; some are not. Some of them are foreign awards and decorations, and some have the status of emblems or badges; some can be bought, for not very much money, but they have no official endorsement. We need to consider the subject in that modern context.

I want to put on the record my thoughts on veterans badges. Like many innovations, one has to reserve judgment initially to see how things work out. Having presented some, and having been eligible for one myself, like my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, East, I am pleased with them. They were a good innovation and a positive move, something that was appreciated and warmly welcomed by veterans. I congratulate the Government on introducing them.

The make-up of the HD committee is curious. It has eight officials. There are representatives of the Prime Minister, the Home Office, the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence. They are senior officials. To say that there is no political input may be a little wide of the mark. Indeed, they can feed in the views of Ministers, according to a letter of 20 December 2005 sent by Mr. William Chapman, the secretary of appointments at No. 10. That is clear evidence that the committee is influenced by politicians. In considering whether the committee is fit for purpose, we need to remember that. I suspect that the right hon. Member for Islwyn, when he was a Minister at the Ministry of Defence, will have had some input to the HD committee through the MOD official.

In the context of a partly political committee, we need to discuss whether we should reconstitute the way in which honours and decorations are recommended to Her Majesty the Queen. I would be interested to hear whether the Minister feels that, informed by some of the issues raised in this debate, we could look again at the committee to see how it can be brought up to date.

The rules that the committee is obliged to work to are contained largely in Foreign and Commonwealth Office orders passed in 1969, which have since been updated. The first rule prohibits UK citizens from accepting or wearing a foreign award without the sovereign's express permission. In a sense, we are making a rod for our own back, because, unusually for British law, those orders state that a person may not do something unless given permission to do so. In the context of our armed forces that is very clear: a person cannot wear any item on their uniform unless it is contained within uniform regulations.

However, this is not a debate about whether servicemen and women representing this country in uniform may wear particular awards or decorations—one would assume that they may not, unless they bear the image of the sovereign or specific permission is given. We are talking about veterans and civilians. It seems strange, particularly given the plethora of badges, medals and awards of various sorts that veterans are accustomed to wear, to forbid, in those regulations, the wearing of the PJM. That seems rather odd and a little capricious.

Mention has been made of Sir Humphrey. Although I would not accuse the committee of acting like Sir Humphrey, this situation appears somewhat Humphreyesque. Many will look on our country, perhaps from Malaysia, and ask, "What on earth are the British playing at? Why are they failing to give any official endorsement of the award of this medal?"

We heard eloquently from the right hon. Member for Islwyn and from the hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Willie Rennie) about the possible effect on Malaysia. At a time when we are trying to build bridges, particularly with countries with a substantial Muslim population, it seems churlish to open ourselves up to the accusation of being unhelpful and unfriendly. The committee resides within the Foreign Office, which is why a Foreign Office Minister is replying to this debate, but we seem to be scoring a diplomatic own goal.

One of my principal concerns about the HD committee is that it appears to have been inconsistent in its judgments, which I suspect might be partly the result of political interference. It seems that two major rules override its considerations in this arena: double medalling and five-year retrospection. However, we have heard about the commemorative Russian 40th anniversary medal and how that event was marked by the British war medal. More specifically we might consider the Malta 50th anniversary commemorative medal, which is similar, but covered directly by the British Africa star.

The committee's determinations appear to be inconsistent, and although the rules that govern it suggest that it is not necessarily a problem that precedent does not guide or dictate future decisions, if we do not rely on precedent, I am afraid that we are likely to fall into the trap of randomness that gives rise to a sense of injustice on the part of veterans when they find that their medal has not been officially endorsed. That endorsement is important to veterans, for reasons pointed out by the hon. Member for Romsey. They are ex-servicemen, accustomed to abiding by rules, and they feel uncomfortable if approval is not given to what they did, particularly when that concerns medals.

The rules, which state that one may not wear a medal unless it has been officially approved, are standing in the way of common sense. It might be far more helpful to replace those rules with a more permissive line that might run: “UK citizens may wear awards from foreign powers at their discretion unless they are requested not to.” That would get the Government and the HD committee out of the fix in which they unwittingly find themselves. It would be a sensible way forward.

The sovereign must remain the fount of all honour. That lies at the heart of the matter and is the bedrock of the work of the HD committee. However, those strange little rules generated in 1969 are standing in the way of what, to most of us—including friends and allies abroad who have approved this medal—appears to be common sense. However, just because New Zealand and Australia approve of its wearing, we are not necessarily bound to follow suit. As I understand it, approval was given to wear the medal by Her Majesty following recommendations made to her as Head of State of those countries. She cannot be bound to make the same determination in respect of the United Kingdom.

To use the vernacular, I am arguing for some “chilling out” on medals to avoid the blind alley down which the HD committee has been forced, by virtue of the 1969 Foreign and Commonwealth orders and regulations, which have been so unnecessarily proscriptive and caused so much unhappiness, bewilderment and misunderstanding, and which, I suspect, have had diplomatic consequences in respect of the PJM.

11.57 am

The Minister for the Middle East (Dr. Kim Howells): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn (Mr. Touhig) for giving us the opportunity to debate this very important subject. I welcome his close interest in it. In my opinion, he was one of the best Veterans Ministers, and I congratulate him on the work that he did during his tenure of that post and on the commitment that he has shown to veterans ever since.

My right hon. Friend seldom makes Ministers’ lives trouble-free and harmonious, and he certainly has not done so in this debate. As he pointed out, I have been in great difficulties many times—as a climber, on the great north walls of the Alps, and as a swimmer I have swum too far out to sea. I also got into difficulties on picket lines outside power stations and pits a quarter of a century ago. I have been in grave difficulties in this place many times, as well. However, this is the most difficult case I have had to argue against—I am not sure that I am up to it really.

I know only too well that debating Chambers in the Palace of Westminster can be very inhospitable for Ministers. Indeed, my right hon. Friend and hon. Members have contributed in a fine way to the debate, and I find myself confronting as effective a resistance to the continuation of established Government policy as I have faced on any issue. It is very difficult to construct an argument that resists their case in defence of servicemen being allowed to wear the Pingat Jasa Malaysia medal alongside other awards that they may have won for courage and tenacity displayed in circumstances far more dangerous than any climbing route, swimming adventure, picket line or, indeed, Dispatch Box that a Minister might stand next to.

Let us remind ourselves that it is a great testimony to our veterans that His Majesty the King of Malaysia, the Malaysian Government and people wanted to honour them with that medal. The veterans played a valorous role supporting Malaysia—Malaya, as it then was—in its early days. Our veterans provided the support that the Malaysians so desperately needed in the 1950s and early 1960s, and it was only a short time before some were back there supporting the newly independent Malaysia in her armed conflict with Indonesia, which ended finally in 1966.

In the past 50 years since Malaysia’s independence, our bilateral relations have gone from strength to strength. We have extensive and positive links on a range of issues, from education and climate change to sustainable development and defence. We have a shared history and culture, and many Malaysians have developed extensive links with the United Kingdom. I am delighted that His Royal Highness the Duke of York represented the United Kingdom at Malaysia’s celebrations of its half century of independence in August this year.

I am also delighted that a large number of British veterans attended the celebrations, and that an exception was made to our rules, as laid down by the Committee on the Grant of Honours, Decorations and Medals, to allow those veterans to accept His Majesty the King of Malaysia’s generous gesture in awarding the PJM. Those people who were able to travel to Malaysia for the 50th anniversary celebrations were, as my briefing puts it, exceptionally permitted to wear the medal in Kuala Lumpur. However, I fear that there are no plans—I am told this by the HD committee—to allow unrestricted wear of that medal, which, it argues

would be contrary to some important rules governing the acceptance and wearing of honours and decorations, which have been long-standing practice in this country. That is what I want to consider in the time left to me, because I have got to try to explain why it is so.

I am informed that allowing the PJM medal to be accepted required the HD committee to agree a special exception to two principles governing the acceptance and wear of foreign awards. The first, which we have heard about, is double medalling, whereby a British award has been given for the same service. The second is the five-year rule, which does not allow medals to be accepted for events that took place more than five years ago.

The following point struck me when the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) spoke. I do not know the exact date when British soldiers went to Afghanistan, but it must be getting on for six—certainly five—years ago. It was probably February 2002. That is almost as long as the second world war, and although some acts of valour will have been rewarded already, it might be a long time before some of the ongoing events there receive full recognition. The question of the time span is important, and we must consider it in the future. Indeed, we must consider much else besides.

Both rules—it is argued—long standing and fundamental to the integrity of the British honours system. The five-year rule, and an earlier two-year rule, date back to 1855, and the double medalling rule is also long standing. I was very grateful to the hon. Member for Westbury (Dr. Murrison) for his compelling description of why some rules are in place. He gave us a fair and balanced description.

The British honours system—I am told—has a long history of recognising meritorious service and of preserving the integrity of Crown servants. It guards against something that the HD committee calls medal proliferation—a very interesting term. The committee should go to some of the countries that I go to occasionally if it wants to see medal proliferation. I understand that the tradition has been upheld by numerous reviews. As my right hon. Friend told us, our practice differs from that of some other countries. The British honours system is truly meritorious. Honours and decorations are highly valued, and the system is administered scrupulously, as the hon. Member for Westbury told us. However, I have also been led to understand that it allows flexibility for special circumstances. My right hon. Friend gave us some examples, such as allowing veterans of the Malaysian campaign to accept but not to wear the PJM medal.

In my view, that situation adds an anomalous variable to an equation that is already extremely difficult to understand. The HD committee's argument is that the vast majority of the veterans who have received the PJM medal have also been awarded the British general service medal for the risk and rigour of their service in Malaysia. I do not know whether this will provide an answer to the hon. Member for New Forest, East, but there was only a short period, from 1960 to 1962, when the risk and rigour in Malaysia was not deemed—by those who do the deeming—sufficient to award a medal to British troops stationed there. For the rest of the period covered by the PJM medal, between 1957 and 1966, those who were thought to merit recognition by the award of a medal, and who fulfilled the appropriate time criteria, were awarded the general service medal with the appropriate clasp, the Malaya bar.

The qualifying periods were different for service afloat and service on land. Some naval personnel did not receive a naval general service medal for their time served off the coast of Malaysia, and they do not consider receiving the PJM medal to be double medalling, because they do not have a British medal for their service. I am told that the qualifying periods were carefully considered at the time, and there were obviously good reasons for making the naval qualifying period longer. However, the HD committee argues that the absence of a general service medal should not, in itself, mean automatic qualification for a foreign award.

The HD committee advises Her Majesty the Queen on all honours matters.

Dr. Julian Lewis: What the Minister has just said is hard to understand. It is not for the committee to decide whether British service personnel who did not qualify for the British award should be eligible for a foreign award. The Government of Malaysia have decided that all those service personnel are eligible to receive the award. Surely the point is that those who for any reason did not receive the British general service medal and Malaya clasp should therefore be eligible to wear the PJM medal because it is not a case of double medalling. Will the Minister focus on that when he takes away the argument, which he is evidently quite unhappy to have been given by his officials?

Dr. Howells: The hon. Gentleman has put the matter clearly, and that is why I described it as an anomalous variable in an already difficult equation. It is difficult to understand why that exception should be made. I shall argue that it should not.

As I said, the HD committee was established formally in the 1930s to provide what is described as “independent and non-political advice to the sovereign”.

However, for the past century, the sovereign has called on his or her private secretary, in consultation with senior civil servants, to give advice on the honours system. Although the Committee is non-ministerial, it takes the views of Ministers into account—or so it says. It seems that it does not always take a great deal of account of the views of Ministers, as my right hon. Friend pointed out.

Mr. Touhig: Will my hon. Friend provide us with evidence that the committee has ever taken the views of Ministers into account? I was never aware of that, and the correspondence that I have seen with colleagues who are no longer Ministers but support the veterans’ campaign does not show it. The hon. Member for Westbury (Dr. Murrison) thought that I was vitriolic about the HD committee, and I was not sure whether the Tory party was on the side of the veterans or the HD committee until the end of his contribution. Can my hon. Friend provide us with evidence that the committee has taken notice of Ministers? We are living in a day when things are much more transparent. Can we, as Parliament, tolerate a body that makes decisions in secret without any reference to elected representatives? Surely we cannot.

Dr. Howells: No, I cannot give my right hon. Friend any evidence that the committee has ever listened to a Minister. In the case of the PJM, the Minister with responsibility for veterans, my hon. Friend the Member for Halton (Derek Twigg), and a former Minister at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Mr. McCartney), wrote a joint letter to the HD committee before its deliberations earlier this year, in support of wearing the medal. The committee’s members, however, were not sufficiently exercised by that correspondence to change their minds. I am told, nevertheless, that arguments for exceptions to our rules on the acceptance and wearing of decorations and medals are considered carefully—that is what the committee says—to preserve the integrity of the honours system.

In reaching its decision on the PJM, I am told that the committee considered the importance of British involvement in the Malaysian campaign in the histories of both Malaysia and the United Kingdom in the years between 1957 and 1966, the generous gesture of the King of Malaysia and the principles on which the UK honours system is based. I hope that the committee’s members heard what my right hon. Friend the Member for Islwyn said: that the generosity of the people of Malaysia, His Majesty the King of Malaysia and the Government of Malaysia carries with it a great deal of political significance.

We heard that other exceptions have been made which were probably based on considerations with such political significance. For example, I know about the sterling work that the hon. Member for New Forest, East did on the Murmansk medal and the Arctic convoys. The agreement to award the medal was seen as a gesture of our increasing friendship and relationship with the newly emerging Russian democracy. That is an important point to make, and my right hon. Friend reminded us that not many countries that could be described as overwhelmingly Islamic have decided to honour us in such a way and honour veterans who helped to carve out those countries in the first place. That is an important and significant political fact.

Bob Spink: I am sorry to intervene on the Minister when he is making such an important point. He mentioned the significance of the Malaysia conflict, and I thought at first that he meant its significance as a war, rather than the political significance that he has moved on to. On its significance as a war, I remind him that 545,000 tonnes of bombs were dropped in 4,500 air strikes, 34,000 people were interned, defoliant was sprayed on hundreds of acres of land and 5,000 people were killed. It seems to me a more substantial and consequential conflict than many for which medals have happily been awarded.

Dr. Howells: Yes, indeed. The hon. Gentleman reminds us of some important facts, and I am remiss in not having commented on the central point that he made: that in many ways it was the last serious conflict to be fought by conscripts as well as professional soldiers. It was a substantial and difficult war. I grew up in a family that knew well the details of the Burma campaign in the second world war, much of which was fought over similar territory. People suffered greatly in the Malaysian campaign, most of all the indigenous people. It also had extremely significant ramifications for the wider world. It could be argued that it was a hot war fought by the major cold war combatants by proxy, and we ought to remember that.

As I said, some exceptions have been made for veterans to be awarded foreign medals as well as a British medal. For the HD committee to argue that those exceptions do not set precedents is difficult for a humble Minister such as me to understand. After all, if it is right to allow one small group of veterans to wear two medals for one period of service, in contravention of what is now called standard practice, there is a good case for arguing that exceptions should also be made for many other veterans, including the rest of those who fought in the Malaya campaign. It is not fair that many veterans find themselves not permitted to enjoy such an exception.

I am told that the HD committee has considered the case of the PJM three times, the third time to agree to wearing the medal in Malaysia during the 50th anniversary celebrations. Having considered it in such detail, carefully weighing up the arguments for and against, I am told—having read, I assume, the correspondence from the Veterans Minister and my right hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield—that the committee does not plan to reconsider the matter and that Ministers do not plan to overrule the committee's advice to the Queen. I would be the last person in the world to want to overrule any committee, but I shall say something in a moment that might worry it a little.

Dr. Murrison: I cannot wait. Of course the committee will not reconsider the matter, because it is obliged to work to the rules that are set down in the 1969 regulations. It is the business of Ministers to amend those regulations, so I am afraid that the Minister cannot get off the hook.

Dr. Howells: This Minister has never tried to get off any hook. This is the last time that I shall ever give way to the hon. Gentleman when I am on the last page of my speech, because he has just stolen my lines—an awful thing to do.

I have been told that the committee does not plan to reconsider the matter. As we have just heard, that plan is subject to the House's deliberations on the subject, because there is political input to the committee via the high-ranking and distinguished public servants appointed to it. I shall read out the list: the private secretary to the sovereign, the defence services secretary, the permanent under-secretary to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the secretary to the Central Chancery of the Orders of Knighthood, the appointments secretary to the Prime Minister, the permanent secretary to the Ministry of Defence, the permanent secretary to the Home Office and the ceremonial officer of the Cabinet Office. The HD committee's plans will ultimately be determined by decisions of Parliament.

In March 1944, Winston Churchill observed:

“The object of giving medals, stars and ribbons is to give pride and pleasure to those who have deserved them. At the same time a distinction is something which everyone does not possess. If all have it, it is of less value. There must, therefore, be heartburnings and disappointments on the borderline. A medal glitters, but it also casts a shadow. The task of drawing up regulations for such awards is one which does not admit of a perfect solution. It is not possible to satisfy everybody without the risk of satisfying nobody. All that is possible is to give the greatest satisfaction to the greatest number and to hurt the feelings of the fewest.”

Those are wise words, but they were designed not just to make the central point that we must take great care in awarding medals and honours, which we do, but to ensure that there must be flexibility and sensitivity as events unfold and circumstances and perceptions change. That is why I shall try to communicate to my colleagues in the Government and to the HD committee that flexibility is needed in this case. I hope that they will take the testimonies that we have heard this morning and my words seriously.