

21 May 2008 : Column 322

Committee on the Grant of Honours, Decorations and Medals

12.33 pm

Mr. Don Touhig (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to provide for parliamentary scrutiny of the Committee on the Grant of Honours, Decorations and Medals. The committee is commonly known as the HD committee. This powerful, secretive but completely unaccountable committee has caused grave offence to veterans and to what is probably one of the few Muslim countries in the world that wants to honour British servicemen. My Bill would require the Foreign Secretary, under whose jurisdiction the committee falls, to publish an annual report on its work and to lay that report before Parliament. Within four weeks of its publication, there would be a debate in the House on a motion expressing approval for the report. Through that vote, the House could give its view on the committee's actions during that year.

If the House voted against the motion, a clear warning would be sent to the HD committee, and its chairman could be called before the Foreign Affairs Committee to explain his committee's actions. If the Bill became law, the decisions of the HD committee would become as open and transparent as they are currently unaccountable and arcane.

At present, the situation regarding the honours and decorations awarded to British service personnel and veterans is completely unacceptable. The HD committee is free to make confusing and even whimsical rulings about which medals can be awarded, accepted or worn, without any obligation to give a clear rationale for its decisions. It does not publish its minutes or its correspondence, and it appears that no one outside the committee has anything but the vaguest idea about how its decision-making process works. In answer to a parliamentary question that I tabled to the Foreign Secretary on 13 March, I was told that the committee normally transacts business by correspondence, and only met three times during 2005 and 2006.

No one in this House would disagree that honouring our servicemen and women is a matter of the greatest importance, yet the decisions on who is entitled to recognition are taken by a body that does not answer to any elected authority whatsoever, seldom meets, and never has to explain or account for its decisions. Surely, in an era of openness and transparent Government, it is unacceptable to have a committee that rules on the important matter of decorations and medals which meets on an ad hoc basis and whose discussions are confidential. The arcane workings of this committee might never have been brought to light but for the disgraceful treatment that it handed out to 35,000 British veterans of the 1955-1966 Malaysian campaign. The HD committee advised Her Majesty the Queen to allow the veterans to accept the Pingat Jasa Malaysia medal, or PJM, from the Malaysian Government, and then advised Her Majesty that our soldiers must not wear it—British veterans who fought in the jungles of Malaysia shamefully treated by mandarins who fight in the jungles of Whitehall.

That bizarre ruling has created great offence among British veterans and bafflement on the part of the Malaysian Government. Surely any chance of strengthening our relations with Malaysia—a predominantly Muslim country—should be welcomed at this time.

Colleagues in all parts of the House, veterans organisations, and even Ministers of the Crown, have all made representations to the committee to change its advice, but it has remained obstinate in its refusal to do so. An illustration of the widespread support for veterans wearing the PJM occurred last year when I tabled early-day motion 356. It attracted 176 signatures calling on the committee to change the advice given to Her Majesty the Queen on the wearing of the PJM. The right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Mr. Mates) tabled a similar EDM, and that too attracted a large number of signatures. Both EDMs were met with a wall of silence by the HD committee.

The committee has hidden behind antiquated rules such as the “double medalling rule”, which says that when a British award has already been given for the same service, another one cannot be accepted. Then there is the “five-year rule” preventing the acceptance and wearing of non-British awards for events or

service that took place more than five years ago. Both those rules are being used to stop veterans wearing the PJM, but their application is confusing and anything but consistent. In a written statement on 31 January 2006, my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley, South (Ian Pearson), the then Trade Minister, who also served as a Foreign Office Minister, 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”.

In other words, the committee put aside the rules to allow the Malaysian veterans to accept the PJM, then imposed the rules to prevent them from wearing it on public occasions.

But there is more. The committee then went on to lift the ban on our veterans wearing the PJM for one week during the 50th anniversary of Malaysia’s independence, which it celebrated last year. Why did it do that? Because as Queen of Australia and New Zealand, Her Majesty the Queen has given permission for the PJM to be worn by the veterans of those two Commonwealth countries, and as a large number of British ex-servicemen were expected to visit Malaysia during the celebrations, it was feared that the prospect of Commonwealth veterans parading wearing their PJM alongside British veterans who were not allowed to wear their PJM would cause embarrassment in the media in Malaysia and in Britain. What a shameful way to treat our brave soldiers.

In December 2007, my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Dr. Howells), the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, said in response to a debate in Westminster Hall:

“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.”

He went on:

“Having considered it in such detail, carefully weighing up the arguments for and against... the committee does not plan to reconsider the matter”.—[Official Report, Westminster Hall, 11 December 2007; Vol. 469, c. 43WH.]

My hon. Friend has been very supportive; I know that he gave the news with a heavy heart, and that he is as perplexed as the rest of us by the committee’s decision.

As things stand, a House of Commons elected directly by the people of Britain is powerless to do anything about the committee’s decisions. This House, directly elected by the people of Britain, is unable to scrutinise the decision of a committee of unelected mandarins. I have met and spoken to many veterans of the Malaysian campaign, and their bravery deserves better than the miserable treatment handed out by the HD Committee. It shows more concern for the niceties of precedent and upsetting the status quo than for honouring our veterans. The inability of the House of Commons to debate or scrutinise the HD committee’s decisions is anathema to parliamentary democracy and has no place in the modern world. My Bill would mean that the decisions of the HD committee would at last become subject to rigorous parliamentary scrutiny and debate. It would ensure that the decisions, and the process of how those decisions are made, stand up to examination.

This House is to have the ultimate responsibility of asking servicemen and women to risk their lives for our country in times of war and armed conflict. Surely, then, this House has the right, indeed the duty, to look after their interests and make the HD committee answerable to Parliament for its actions. Some will argue that the issue of medals is sensitive, and should not be brought into the public domain. If they do, I ask them the following question. Every year a report is brought to Parliament on the working of the British intelligence services. If this House can scrutinise the work of Britain’s security services, why can it not scrutinise the work of the HD committee?

There is no excuse for the total unaccountability of the HD committee, and there is no excuse for its behaviour towards our veterans. Its action brings shame on the British nation. It is time to subject its decisions and deliberations to the scrutiny of Parliament and ensure that brave and courageous servicemen, such as the veterans of the Malaysian campaign, can never again be subject to such disgraceful treatment. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Mr. Don Touhig, Mr. Adam Ingram, Jim Sheridan, Linda Gilroy, Mr. Michael Mates, Mr. James Gray, Miss Ann Widdecombe, Mr. Michael Ancram, Bob Russell, Pete Wishart, Malcolm Bruce and the Rev. Ian Paisley.

Committee on the Grant of Honours, Decorations and Medals Mr. Don Touhig accordingly presented a Bill to provide for parliamentary scrutiny of the Committee on the Grant of Honours, Decorations and Medals: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 17 October, and to be printed [Bill 112].