

# Reform of the Honours System





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Cabinet Office

Presented to Parliament by the Prime Minister, by Command of Her Majesty -  
February 2005

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## **“A Matter of Honour” – Reforming the Honours System (HC 212-I)**

Report by the Public Administration Select Committee

### **Review of the Honours System**

Report to the Secretary of the Cabinet by Sir Hayden Phillips

#### **Government Responses**

The Government welcomes the reports by the Public Administration Select Committee (PASC) and Sir Hayden Phillips into this important subject.

The Government believes that the honours system continues to play an important and valued part in the life of the nation. The arrangements have evolved over centuries, but the continuing theme has been the wish to recognise exceptional service and achievement and to show gratitude publicly. Honours are valued highly by the recipients, and also by their families, friends and local communities.

Nevertheless, the Government is aware that there are concerns. Some of these have been articulated by PASC in their report. Others have been identified and reported by Sir Hayden Phillips, who was invited by Sir Andrew Turnbull, the Cabinet Secretary, to review the current system to ensure that it is fair, and to make proposals for making it more accessible to the population as a whole.

Both PASC and Sir Hayden Phillips have concluded that improvements can be made. In this note, we describe the conclusions we have reached after careful consideration of the recommendations, and describe the ways in which the work to make changes will be taken forward.

The Government believes that it is right to reaffirm its belief that the honours system is operated by public servants and others who take the work forward in the best traditions of public service and probity. The changes which we believe should be made are proposed in order to improve and bring in line with modern expectations a system which is fundamentally sound.

As to the contrasting approaches of the two reports, the Government accepts Sir Hayden Phillips' view that the important matters to be addressed in looking at reform of the honours system are not those of the outward trappings or its history. They are rather whether the balance of awards feels fair, whether the right processes are there to support it, and whether it is open and commands confidence while properly protecting confidentiality. The Government believes that Sir Hayden's proposals set out a pragmatic programme of change which will address these issues head on. The Government intends to implement these proposals as quickly as possible. The intention is that the new honours committees he recommends will be in place in time to deliver the honours list for New Year 2006.

The Government's responses to the two reports are given below.

## The Public Administration Select Committee's Recommendations and the Government's Response

### Recommendation 1

We recommend that the Government should announce its intention to cease the award of honours in the Orders of the Bath and of St Michael and St George at an early opportunity. The Government should make it clear that in future honours will not be conferred on a person simply because they hold a particular post. Measures should be taken to ensure that these changes do not disadvantage state servants in the general allocation of honours.

The Government does not believe that the case has been made for consigning the Orders of the Bath and St Michael and St George to the category of obsolescence. There seems no good argument for abandoning Orders with distinguished traditions which, in their own way, serve to recognise the distinctive ways in which members of the public service have served The Crown.

The Committee also recommends that the Government should make it clear that honours will not be conferred on a person simply because he or she holds a particular post. The Government notes that the review carried out by John Major, when Prime Minister in 1993, made clear that for the future honours should be awarded on merit; for exceptional achievement or exceptional service over and above that which might normally be expected. There would be no assumption that honours will automatically be attached to particular posts in either the public or the private sector. The Government confirms this judgement.

Sir Hayden Phillips has recommended a reduction from 27% to 20% in the proportion of awards made over the next three to five years to those in the State Sector – the Home Civil Service, the Diplomatic Service and the Armed Services.

The Government is considering this recommendation.

### Recommendation 2

We therefore recommend that there should be no further appointments to the Order of the British Empire. A new Order, the Order of British Excellence, should be founded in its place.

### Recommendation 3

We recommend that the levels of the Order of British Excellence should be Companion, Officer and Member. The only other national honour (i.e. except those awarded for gallantry and those in the personal gift of The Queen) should be the Companion of Honour. Consideration should be given to a substantial increase in awards of the Companion of Honour and to a matching decrease in awards of knighthoods and damehoods, with the objective of phasing out the awards of knighthoods (including knights bachelor) within five years.

The Government has considered these recommendations carefully. The Government believes that the Order of the British Empire continues to play a well understood – and in terms of numbers – predominant role in the honours system. It was founded in 1917 in order to make a space within the honours system for those who had made important contributions to sustaining the life of the nation during the war. It has developed and matured in scope and recognition. There are currently some 120,000 men and women members of the Order, and normally around 1150 - 1200 are appointed at each honours round. A number of existing members of the Order have said that they would be dismayed if there were serious moves to stop new appointments to the Order now, or in some other way to show that it had no continuing place in the life of the nation.

The Government does not believe that the case has been made for change to the Order of the British Empire. It is regarded with affection and respect by very many people, not only in the United Kingdom. But the Government is conscious that for some the title of the Order of the British Empire feels anachronistic in a different sense to other historic titles. The Government will

consider the matter further, without prejudice as to whether there should be any change.

The Government does not believe that the case has been made for phasing out the awards of knighthoods and damehoods or knights bachelor. These play a well respected, understood and valued part in our national life.

#### Recommendation 4

*We recommend that the Commission examines the Australian system and considers whether it is appropriate to adopt the same methodology in order to achieve greater diversity in the UK honours lists.*

The Government has looked at the Australian system of honours. They have a programme to increase public awareness throughout the community. The Department of Administration Services is responsible for the operation of the honours system.

In this country, in order to increase awareness of the system, and encourage diverse participation, the Government is following up Sir Hayden Phillips' recommendation for greater involvement by Lord-Lieutenants and the Government Offices of the Regions. The need to encourage diversity will be addressed in this work and in the operation of the system as a whole.

The Government is glad to see that the Committee has been impressed by the scrupulous work of the civil servants who support the individual committees which advise the Cabinet Secretary on honours recommendations. The Government's decisions on the re-structuring of these committees will address the Committee's concern that more should be done to make the system fairer.

#### Recommendation 5

*We recommend that the honours selection committees should be replaced by an Honours Commission, which would take over from ministers the task of making recommendations to The Queen for honours. It should be established by statute, following the precedent of the Electoral Commission.*

The Government accepts the need for greater transparency in the operation of the honours system. It therefore intends to move ahead with a series of sensible and practical improvements to the existing arrangements along the lines recommended by Sir Hayden Phillips by:

- Introducing a majority of non-civil service experts onto the committees which assess candidates for the Prime Minister's list.
- Making the Chairs of the expert committees (currently civil servants) non-civil servants.
- Arranging for the Chairs and members of the expert committees to be appointed against explicit criteria aimed at providing expert and diverse advice.
- Forming the membership of the Main Committee (which makes final recommendations to the Prime Minister and through him to The Queen) from the Chairs of the expert committees. The Cabinet Secretary or his nominee will chair the Main Committee. The other ex-officio members of the Committee will be the Permanent Secretary of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Chief of the Defence Staff, another Permanent Secretary and the Prime Minister's Secretary for Appointments.
- Making the appointments of Chairs and independent members through a transparent process agreed by the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments.
- Advertising the opportunities for people to take part in the process in the press and on the Public Appointments Unit website.

The Government believes that the changes it proposes will bring about real improvements in transparency and accountability. They will

produce improvements more quickly and cost-effectively than the Committee's recommendation of a Statutory Honours Commission. The Government has therefore decided that work should proceed to implement these arrangements as quickly as practicable. The aim will be to have the new system operational in time for the New Year 2006 honours round.

#### Recommendation 6

The members of the Honours Commission should be independent and appointed through 'Nolan' procedures. There should be a requirement on those appointing the members of the Commission to ensure that, as far as possible, its membership should reflect the diversity of the country.

As explained above, the Government intends to constitute the Main Honours Committee principally from the Chairs of the specialist committees. These individuals will be selected in accordance with principles agreed with the Commissioner for Public Appointments. Bodies and organisations relevant to the specialist committees will be encouraged to alert their members or networks to the opportunities. People will be able to put themselves forward and vacancies will be advertised on the Public Appointments Unit website.

The need to reflect the diversity of the nation will be taken into account in the work to establish the new Committees.

#### Recommendation 7

The names of all members of the Honours Commission should be published and the Commission's Policy on the transparency of its procedures should be based on best practice in similar bodies in other countries.

The Government is keen to increase transparency. It intends that the Chairs and members of the specialist committees will be named.

As regards best practice in other countries, the Government will look with interest to see what useful ideas can be incorporated into the new arrangements being developed.

#### Recommendation 8

We recommend that the Secretariat of the Commission should be similar in size and functions to the current Ceremonial Secretariat in the Cabinet Office, augmented by staff with experience in publicity, recruitment and community involvement, who would be responsible for increasing public awareness and encouraging appropriate nominations for honours.

As has been explained, the Government does not agree with the proposal for the establishment of an Honours Commission. But the Government accepts that there are ways in which knowledge of the existing system can be improved and more nominations stimulated. Ceremonial Secretariat within the Cabinet Office is working on a range of measures, including the greater involvement of Lord-Lieutenants and of the Government Offices for the Regions. Specialist staff with expertise in publicity, communications and other areas within Government will be deployed to assist in the work.

#### Recommendation 9

We recommend that the Government should, on a regular basis, set out publicly, as guidance to the Honours Commission, its proposals for the allocation of honours between various sectors of the community in the light of public priorities.

The Government believes that it would be right for a report on the honours system to be published every three years. This should include details of the guidance given to the Chairs of committees and others operating the system, as well as statistics on awards made during the period. The Government expects that the Public Administration Select Committee would wish to take evidence on the reports.

### Recommendation 10

[We recommend that the Honours Scrutiny Committee should be abolished.](#)

The Government agrees that it is appropriate to consider the future of the Honours Scrutiny Committee.

The duty of the Committee is to scrutinise any candidates put forward by the Prime Minister personally and to decide if there is anything in the past history or character of the individual which renders him or her unsuitable for an award. They are concerned only with propriety; they do not comment on the merits of an award. The establishment of the House of Lords Appointments Commission has removed the role of the Scrutiny Committee in considering nominations for peerages. In 2006 the Electoral Commission will have and make public information on political donations covering five years; the Committee's role in inquiring into donations will no longer be necessary.

The Government therefore believes that the Committee should cease to function and its work in scrutinising names added to the honours list by the Prime Minister be transferred to the House of Lords Appointments Commission. This change will be put into effect for the Birthday Honours List 2005.

### Recommendation 11

[We recommend that explicit criteria, along the lines proposed by the Australian Government and reported in the Wilson Review, should be published for each level of Award in the Order of British Excellence. Like the Australian proposals, the criteria should emphasise that eminent service at local level would be regarded as being just as meritorious as the same sort of service at national level.](#)

The Government agrees that it is useful for the criteria for awards to be made explicit. Details of the criteria are contained in Sir Hayden Phillips' report, and on the Ceremonial Secretariat's website. For convenience the current criteria are repeated as Annex A to this Paper. These will be kept under review.

### Recommendation 12

[We therefore recommend that the Honours Commission should submit an annual report to Parliament, and that it should be examined by a Select Committee of this House.](#)

The Government believes that it will be appropriate for a report to be made to the Public Administration Select Committee in three years' time after the new arrangements described earlier have had a chance to bed down.

### Recommendation 13

[We recommend that the Honours Commission should maintain and publish as part of its annual report a digest of detailed statistics on the honours system, including the regional and ethnic origin of those who receive awards. The statistical analysis in the Annex of this report could form the basis for such a digest.](#)

The Government agrees that it is appropriate for an annual digest of statistics on the operation of the honours system to be published, including details of the regions in which recipients live. As to ethnic origin, a form is now sent with the letter offering an award asking for information on ethnicity, using the census definitions.

#### Recommendation 14

We recommend that the Honours Commission should set indicative targets to ensure that future honours lists reflect more closely the diversity of the UK population.

The Government believes that it is important to achieve a diverse spread of awards throughout the nation. It describes in the response to Recommendation 8 some of the measures it is taking. It accepts that more needs to be done. But it also believes that it is important to ensure that the over-riding criteria of achievement and service are not lost sight of.

#### Recommendation 15

We recommend that the Honours Commission should implement a strategy to increase public awareness of the honours system and encourage more public nominations, based on the recommendations on publicity contained in the Wilson Review of the system produced in 2000 and 2001. A particular emphasis should be placed on attracting nominations for those whose service has been rendered at local level.

Ideas such as getting the media to publicise the nominations system, improving the form, involving the regional level more and making available a database of past recipients, with short citations, are being considered as possible useful innovations. Some Lord-Lieutenants are encouraging the distribution of nomination forms to public areas such as Post Offices. As recommended by Sir Hayden Phillips the Government is also looking to make more use of Lord-Lieutenants, with their extensive knowledge of their counties, and the Government Offices for the Regions, in increasing understanding of the honours system and encouraging more good quality candidates from the local level.

#### Recommendation 16

We recommend that the citations for all honours should be published.

The Government does not accept this recommendation. It is one of the central tenets of the system that the person being considered for an award should not be approached before a decision to offer it is made. Publication of the long citation would need clearance by the recipient; the finalisation of the list is simply too compressed a process to allow this to be completed. Publication of the information without the consent – or the input – of the individual concerned would be unwise since people are likely to have views on such personal information being made public. Consent could be obtained in the period after the list has been published but the obvious time for publication is when the award is announced, not several months after.

#### Recommendation 17

We recommend that recipients of honours should be presented with a modest badge or brooch suitable for wearing with non-formal dress.

The Government believes that this is an attractive idea. It will study the options and consult interested parties including the Officers of the Orders of Knighthood, and announce proposals as to the way ahead.

### Recommendation 18

Through this [development of a system of collegiate honours] the service and achievement of teams and organisations can be properly recognised. The Queen's Award for Industry provides a useful model here, and could be supplemented by similar awards (e.g. Educational Achievement, Civic Achievement) across a range of activities and organisations. We consider that a development of the honours system in this way would be widely welcomed and valued, and we so recommend.

The Government recognises the importance that individuals acting collectively play in the life of the nation. It will consider the Committee's suggestions for developing the honours system in this way.

### Other Recommendations by Sir Hayden Phillips

Sir Hayden Phillips made a number of detailed recommendations for the future. The Government agrees with the large majority of the recommendations. Their implementation is being taken forward as a matter of priority. The intention is that they should be operational in time for the New Year 2006 honours round.

For the convenience of the Committee, and the public, a summary of Sir Hayden's recommendations is attached at Annex B, together with brief details of the Government's decisions on them.

**CABINET OFFICE**  
**22 February 2005**



## Annex A

# Criteria for the Award of Honours

The overriding principle is that awards should be made on merit. Merit for honours is defined as:

- Achievement
- Exceptional service

In each strand, the standard, and the consequent criteria, should be high. In terms of service, honours should not just go with a job well done or because someone has reached a particular level. They should be awarded because an individual has, in plain terms, “gone the extra mile” in the contribution they have made. For distinction the standard should be that someone stands out “head and shoulders” above his or her peer group in what has been achieved. In some individuals these strands are intertwined.

Specific attention is paid to people who:

- have changed things, with an emphasis on practical achievement;
- have delivered in a way that has brought distinction to British life and enhanced the UK’s reputation in the area or activity concerned or which has contributed in a distinctive way to improving the lot of those less able to help themselves;
- are examples of the best sustained and selfless voluntary service;
- have demonstrated innovation and entrepreneurship which is delivering results;
- carry the respect of their peers and are role models in their field; and
- have shown sustained achievement against the odds which has required moral courage in making tough choices and hard applications.

## Level of Award

Once the Order has been identified the criteria below are used for deciding the level of award. The assessment committees also use precedent to aid their consideration.

### • Companion of Honour

A pre-eminent and sustained contribution in the arts, science, medicine, or government.

### • Knight/Dame

A pre-eminent contribution in any field, usually, but not exclusively at national level, or in a capacity which will be recognised by peer groups as inspirational and significant nationally, and which demonstrates sustained commitment.

### • CBE

A prominent national role of a lesser degree, or a conspicuous leading role in regional affairs or making a highly distinguished, innovative contribution in his or her area of activity.

### • OBE

A distinguished regional or country-wide role in any field, including notable practitioners known nationally.

### • MBE

Service in and to the community of a responsible kind which is outstanding in its field; or very local “hands-on” service which stands out as an example to others. In both cases awards illuminate areas of dedicated service which merit public recognition.

In terms of service the difference is determined by the extent of the person's influence. In terms of achievement the difference is determined by the significance of the person's impact in their chosen profession.

## Annex B

# Phillips Report: Summary of Recommendations with Government Responses

### Transparency

- R1: A report on the honours system should be published by the Prime Minister every three to five years. *Accepted.*
- R2: The Public Administration Select Committee should re-examine the honours system every three or five years, following the report of the Main Honours Committee on its stewardship. *Agreed that the Public Administration Select Committee should re-examine in the light of experience in running the new system.*
- R3: The Ceremonial Secretariat's website should be reviewed and expanded. *Accepted.*
- R4: There should be a short explanatory leaflet on the system, in languages appropriate to different parts of the country. *Accepted*
- R5: The names of the chairs of specialist honours committees should be made public. *Accepted. The names of the members of the committees will also be made public.*
- R6: Once the Main Committee has been re-constituted, its membership should be made public. *Accepted*
- R7: Nominators should be told of the likely timescale for consideration of their nominee and offered the opportunity of feedback on their candidate when that point has been passed. *Accepted*
- R8: Long citations should not be published. *Accepted*

R9: While the criteria for the award of honours are the correct ones, they should be publicised in a way that allows greater understanding of how the system works. *Accepted*

R10: There should be a badge or pin to allow people to display their award in everyday circumstances. *Accepted in principle; detail being worked out.*

### Independence and governance

R11: The current arrangements for recommendations for awards should be reformed rather than replaced with an Honours Commission. *Accepted*

R12: Committees should contain a majority of non-civil service experts. *Accepted*

R13: Committees should have non-civil service chairs. *Accepted*

R14: Main Committee should be chaired by the Cabinet Secretary or his nominee and should comprise the chairs of the sub-committees and the Permanent Under Secretaries at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Ministry of Defence. *Accepted. The Chief of the Defence Staff rather than the Permanent Under Secretary of State at the MOD will be a member. Another Permanent Secretary will also serve on the Committee.*

- R15: Chairs and members of expert committees should be appointed from names suggested by relevant bodies and organisations, against criteria aimed at providing expert and diverse independent members and chairs. *Accepted*
- R16: Appointments to the committees should remain unpaid. *Accepted*
- R17: These changes should be tested and evaluated over a three to five year period. *Accepted*
- R18: Appointments of non-civil servants should be for a period of three years, renewable for a further three years with agreement of both sides. Initial periods of appointment should be staggered to allow for annual turn over rather than wholesale change of membership. *Accepted*
- R19: The remit of the sector committees should be revised as set out in annex 7. To assist on transparency, I have set out in some detail which areas of life would fall to which committees. *Accepted*
- R20: The Honours Scrutiny Committee should be wound up when the register of political donations covers a full five years (2006) and its work in scrutinising names added by the Prime Minister transferred to a sub-committee of the House of Lords Appointments Commission. *Accepted*
- R21: The Diplomatic Service and Overseas List and the Defence Services List should be considered together with the Prime Minister's List at Main Committee before being sent to the Sovereign. *Practical implications being considered.*
- R22: There should be a form sent with the letter offering an award which asks for information on ethnicity, using the census definitions. Statistics should be collected on the same basis for the Defence Services List. *Accepted*
- R23: The triennial report should explore matters underlying the statistics on the award of honours, and particularly whether there seem to be unwarranted discrepancies. *Accepted*
- R24: The proportion of awards to State servants overall should decrease to 20% over the next three to five years. *Being considered.*
- R25: Further research is needed on the reasons for the imbalance geographically in public nominations. *Accepted*
- R26: The suggestions for encouraging greater numbers of nominations should be investigated and pursued. *Being considered.*
- R27: There should be a system of local assessment panels, to consider local nominations and identify suitable nominations for consideration centrally. *The need for greater local involvement is accepted. Detail of how would work being examined.*
- R28: The three to five yearly report process should consider departmental systems and whether nominations are coming through properly from all sectors. *Accepted in principle, subject to working out the detail.*
- R29: The guidance on awards in retirement should be re-written so that these can be given greater consideration. *Accepted*
- R30: The guidance on awards to those within five years of a previous award should be re-written so that these are not so frequently dismissed from consideration. *Accepted*
- R31: Main Committee should have a number of awards at its disposal to award to candidates who have made an excellent contribution across a number of fields and might be passed over by the more specialist sectoral committees. *Accepted*

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