

**A personal response by Dr Aneez Esmail to the consultation paper : 'The Honours System : An issues and questions paper' issued by the Public Administration Select Committee. April 2004.**

In June 2002 I received a letter from the clerk to the Honours committee informing me that I had been nominated for an OBE and asking me whether I would accept this nomination. After careful consideration I declined and in this submission I will attempt to identify the key reasons for both declining the nomination and why I believe that the honours system, as it is currently organised, should cease to operate.

Partly, my reasons for refusing were because I believe that I should not be "rewarded" or honoured for doing my job for which I am already paid and rewarded, when people such as school governors operating on a purely voluntary basis receive no, or little, recognition. In addition, a lot of my work occurs as a member of a team and an award for me personally fails to provide recognition of the valuable contribution made by my colleagues and co-workers.<sup>1</sup>

I also felt quite strongly that a modern honours system should not refer to an imperial past. I believe it is wrong that although the OBE and other related honours recognises a contribution to this country, that it should be done in the context of a system which was developed to reward a contribution to the Empire. Being of Indian origin I think it would be wrong to accept an honour that is so clearly associated with Britain's imperial past.

Whilst I am mindful of the range of questions that the Committee raised, my remarks on the honours system are largely confined to the issues of merit, elitism, discrimination, motivation and fairness. These aspects are also affected by how any such "merit" system is both seen, and perceived, to operate and so some of my comments also relate to the Committee's questions on public confidence and transparency.

**The Merit Issue:** Over the last 12 years, one aspect of my research has examined the use of "merit awards"<sup>2</sup> within the NHS and the discrimination that these award systems have displayed, and continue to display. My research has highlighted how such "merit" schemes have exhibited systematic discrimination on the basis of ethnicity and gender.<sup>3</sup> Earlier research between 1975 and 1980 had also highlighted the discrimination in the awards systems discrimination which led some researchers to call for the system to be abolished because "it remains immutably unfair, divisive, and in its secrecy, contemptible. No other profession would copy this system and consultants would gain respect by scrapping it - especially self-respect."<sup>4</sup>

The criticisms of the NHS merit awards systems mirror the criticisms that have been made of the national honours systems, namely those of elitism, bias, secrecy and in particular discrimination against women and ethnic minorities.

Ministers have stated that the system that allocates Honours operates in such a way that "[All] awards are made strictly on merit"<sup>5</sup>. If such statements are taken in good faith, then the allocation system appears to have a problem finding women and ethnic minorities worthy of merit. As Julie Mellor, chair of the Equal Opportunities Commission, recently stated: "Recent media commentary on the honours system has also highlighted the low numbers of women to receive 'senior' honours. This reflects a wider problem that won't be resolved until Britain's leaders act to make sure women are not prevented from getting to the top."<sup>6</sup>

The similarities between the NHS awards scheme and the Honours system is also evident when examining the statements made about improvements to the schemes, which detail improvements to the number of women and ethnic minorities that are receiving such awards. However, despite the marginal improvements the same patterns still emerge with women and ethnic minorities clustered around the “lower” awards. For example, a 2001 parliamentary briefing on the Honours system stated that:

“Over the last six years there has been a significant improvement in the number of honours granted to members of ethnic minorities (up from 20 to 52 or 160%). **But even in the extended millennium list it proved possible only to find 80 candidates.**<sup>7</sup> [Emphasis added].

Were there truly only 80 candidates worthy of consideration or was it because, as another chapter of the briefing stated: “Nominating bodies and organisations tended to stick with own hierarchical conceptions of who should get what.”<sup>8</sup> Even with the increased number of nominations made by the public it was also reported that: “Departments do not include many of the publicly nominated candidates towards the top of the lists which they submit to Ceremonial Branch.”<sup>9</sup>

The table below uses the data provided in the 2001 briefing on the honours system but has calculated the percentages figures for the allocation of honours as a percentage of the total number of awards made to ethnic minorities between 1995 and 2000.

	Knight/ Dame	C	OBE	MBE	Total	% of list	Total
Date							
BD 00	-	2	16	34	52	5.9	881
NY 00*	2	8	18	51	79	5.1	1550
BD 99	2	4	10	26	42	4.2	1000
NY 99	2	3	12	36	53	5.3	1000
BD 98	2	2	7	30	41	4.0	1000
NY 98	-	3	3	20	26	2.6	1000
BD 97	3	3	5	14	25	2.5	1000
NY 97	1	1	1	21	24	2.5	960
BD 96	1	1	6	20	28	2.7	1038
NY 96	-	2	3	17	22	2.2	1000
BD 95	-	-	6	16	22	2.2	1000
NY 95	-	2	5	13	20	1.9	1052
* long list							
Total	13 (2.9%)	31 (7.1%)	92 (21.2%)	298 (68.6)	434		12481

Source: Amended table. Original table obtained from.<sup>10</sup>

It is clear that the large majority of awards are made within the MBE and OBE categories (89.8%). Also of interest was that over that time period honours awarded to ethnic minorities only accounted for 3.47% of the total number of awards made. Ethnic minorities are approximately 6% of the population in the United Kingdom.

The same disproportionate level of awards is visible in the way honours are awarded to different groups on the basis of occupation. Despite the current governments stated determination to increase the number of teachers and medical professionals receiving honours the 2001 data showed that the odds for receiving an honour were as follows:

Diplomat:	one in 123,
Armed forces:	one in 1090,
Civil servant:	one in 3125,
Teacher:	one in 15500
Nurse:	one in 20000. <sup>11</sup>

According to a 2001 briefing on the Honours system, “**the criteria we use put achievement before service**. To this extent, there must be a question whether our system fairly reflects the value which the country puts on voluntary service, which tends to find its reward at the MBE level”<sup>12</sup>. [Emphasis added]. I do not agree with such criteria and the impact they have.

**Transparency and reporting:** In March 2004, a parliamentary question sought information on the membership of the advisory committee responsible for recommending the awarding of honours to persons involved in sport. The Ministerial reply was as follows:

“No. Information about advisory committees in the honours system and the advice they give is protected from disclosure under exemptions 2 and 8 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information, and is not made public.”<sup>13</sup>

The question did not seek information on those people awarded, or refused, honours only for information on those people involved in administering the allocation of awards. Exemption 8 (of the Code of Practice) makes no mention of advisory committee’s – the guidance all relates to protecting the individuals nominated for an award.<sup>14</sup>

Such blanket refusals to divulge general information do not sit well alongside statements that in future the Honours system will operate with greater openness and transparency.

**Recognising and celebrating achievement:** I agree that the nation should recognise citizens who have displayed outstanding community service, dedication, discovery or bravery but any such system must be truly “merit” based. The nomination, selection and awards process must operate, and be seen to operate, openly and with clear criteria. For example, the Public Servants of the Year Award scheme, which are supported by the government, provide clear criteria for each award category, the selection and judging process as well as the names and backgrounds of the judges.<sup>15</sup> In addition, this scheme also has awards that explicitly recognise the contribution made by teams of people, and also allows the award recipients to make a donation to a charity of their choosing. I believe that this is a much better system because it recognises the contribution of all team members to the pursuit of excellence. I certainly believe that I could not achieve half of what I achieve without the support and contribution of other team members working in the

deprived inner city area for which I was commended. By all means recognise the individual contribution but some mention of the team would also be important.

### **Conclusion:**

I am glad that the Public Administration Select Committee is investigating the awards system and I hope that recommendations will follow that will make the system fairer, more open and more appropriate to society in the twenty first century.

I can see the importance of recognising a significant contribution to society but I also think that it is a truism that individual contributions cannot be seen in isolation so some mechanism to identify team contributions should be recognised.

I think transparency is critical if people are to have faith in the system.

I think the obvious class hierarchy should be scrapped and there should be one level of award for everyone. If public servants such as judges achieve a certain level of office then by all means give them a title but don't make it out as though it is an 'honour'. But if judges or civil servants are to be honoured, then they should be honoured for their contribution to society and judged for that contribution like everyone else. A monetary reward given to a charity of the person's choice would be a good way of honouring that contribution. We also need to do away with titles such as 'Sir' and 'Dame' and people should just use the designation in their name.

To have modern awards, there needs to be a modern name and doing away with notions of empire is really important.

### **End Notes**

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<sup>1</sup> The recognition of the "team" is a key part of the Public Servants of the Year Award scheme. See [www.cipfa.org.uk/awards](http://www.cipfa.org.uk/awards)

<sup>2</sup> The merit award scheme was introduced in 1948 at the beginning of the NHS and consisted of distinction awards and discretionary points awards. As part of the new NHS Contract, these two awards are to be replaced by the Clinical Excellence award.

<sup>3</sup> See for example: Esmail, A. & Everington, S. 1993, "Racial discrimination against doctors from ethnic minorities.", *British Medical Journal*, vol. 306, no. 13 March, pp. 691-692; Esmail, A., Everington, S., & Doyle, H. 1998, "Racial discrimination in the allocation of distinction awards? Analysis of list of award holders by type of award, specialty and region", *British Medical Journal*, vol. 316, no. 17 January, pp. 193-195 and Esmail, A., Abel, P., & Everington, S. 2003, "Discrimination in the discretionary points award scheme: comparison of white with non-white consultants and men with women", *British Medical Journal*, vol. 326, no. 29 March, pp. 687-688.

<sup>4</sup> Bruggen, P. & Bourne, S. 1982, "The distinction awards system in England and Wales 1980.", *British Medical Journal*, vol. 284, no. 22 May, pp. 1577-1580.

<sup>5</sup> Lords Written Answers, 16 January 2004: Lord Lester of Herne Hill asked Her Majesty's Government: What are the safeguards against bias and discrimination in the honours system?

Baroness Amos: Every effort is made to find good honours candidates from every walk of life and field of activity. All awards are made strictly on merit. Column WA105

<sup>6</sup> Equal Opportunities Commission, January 2004, 'Sex and power: who runs Britain?', [www.eoc.org.uk/cseng/news/5\\_jan\\_sexandpower.asp](http://www.eoc.org.uk/cseng/news/5_jan_sexandpower.asp)

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<sup>7</sup> Honours: Criteria for levels of Honours, 2001, page 9,  
[www.parliament.uk/documents/upload/JP%202wilkdodoc%20Criteria%20for%20Levels%20of%20Honours.doc](http://www.parliament.uk/documents/upload/JP%202wilkdodoc%20Criteria%20for%20Levels%20of%20Honours.doc)

<sup>8</sup> Honours: Criteria for Nominations, 2001, page 5  
[www.parliament.uk/documents/upload/JP%202wilkdodoc%20Criteria%20for%20Levels%20of%20Honours.doc](http://www.parliament.uk/documents/upload/JP%202wilkdodoc%20Criteria%20for%20Levels%20of%20Honours.doc)

<sup>9</sup> Honours: Nominations, 2001, page 3,  
[www.parliament.uk/documents/upload/JP%201wilkdodoc%20Nominations.doc](http://www.parliament.uk/documents/upload/JP%201wilkdodoc%20Nominations.doc)

<sup>10</sup> [www.parliament.uk/documents/upload/JP%204wilkdodoc%20Oversight.doc](http://www.parliament.uk/documents/upload/JP%204wilkdodoc%20Oversight.doc)

<sup>11</sup> Nursing standard, 3 December 2003, 'Honours list overlooks nurses.'

<sup>12</sup> Honours: Criteria for levels of Honours, 2001,  
[www.parliament.uk/documents/upload/JP%202wilkdodoc%20Criteria%20for%20Levels%20of%20Honours.doc](http://www.parliament.uk/documents/upload/JP%202wilkdodoc%20Criteria%20for%20Levels%20of%20Honours.doc)

<sup>13</sup> Sports (Honours): Mr. Hinchliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if she will list the membership of the advisory committee responsible for recommending the awarding of honours to persons involved in sport; what the background is of each member; how long each has served on the committee; what their sporting expertise is; and if she will make a statement. [161216]

Mr. Caborn: No. Information about advisory committees in the honours system and the advice they give is protected from disclosure under exemptions 2 and 8 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information, and is not made public.  
*22 Mar 2004 : Column 579W*

<sup>14</sup> 8(c) Information, opinions and assessments given in relation to recommendations for honours. <http://www.cfoi.org.uk/pdf/copguidance.pdf> (page 48)

<sup>15</sup> See [www.cipfa.org.uk/awards](http://www.cipfa.org.uk/awards)