

U3A POLITICAL ECONOMY GROUP, Feb 6th Note of meeting

Honours system

We had a wide-ranging (i.e. sometimes chaotic) discussion on the UK civil honours system. Our general view (as I can best recall):

- There was consensus, I think, that an honours system is needed to recognise excellence and good works. That said we had concerns re specific honours, the grounds for awards and the way nominations are handled.
- Looking at the array of honours bestowed on UK citizens we considered the Orders of the British Empire (we will come to the title) CBE/OBE/MBE to most acceptable as they are awarded for services to charity, arts, science, sports and more after nomination by members of the public.
- All agreed the term British Empire should be dropped. A simple change to Order of Britain was proposed. The current labels Commander of, Officer of, Member of should be dropped. Who knows what the different labels signify?
- Some of us thought awards should only be given for voluntary service. Folk in sport and the arts get awards associated with their occupation. We all agreed that awards to folk for simply doing their job were unwarranted and often seen to be silly – Yes Minister telling Jim Hacker that the Companion Grand Cross (CMG) is known in the Civil Service as Call Me God.
- When looking at other awards we concluded there were both too many and only partly known to the public. None of us could confidently say what the Order of the Garter was for. A few of us (i.e. me) thought the Order of Merit worthwhile as it does what it says on the tin – recognise 24 individuals' exceptional achievement. But it is largely unknown to the public. We weren't sure as to the value of the Companion of Honour partly because it is in the gift of the Prime Minister.
- We had mixed views on Life Peerages. Some are needed to get expertise into the second chamber, less charitably many couldn't see the case for giving peerages to former (often failed) politicians, business leaders and celebrities.
- All award nomination procedures are open to gaming and abuse. Folk seeking peerages and knighthoods have been known to hire PR consultants to publicise their charity work. Prime Ministers give out knighthoods and peerages for political favours.

Our overall view: we need an honours system to recognise voluntary contributions and excellence. The current system is long overdue for reform.

EH/Feb 6th