
Words by SAM ROWE

THE SYSTEM

Twice a year British subjects are rewarded by the Queen for their achievements. But with spin doctors and government cronies seemingly in line for gongs, is it possible to get a fast-track to letters after your name? We asked a man in the know

HONOUR?



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t the time these words are being punched into a MacBook Air, Her Majesty the Queen's birthday honours list is still moist with ink. And as is traditional by this point, the media and society at large are passing judgement on the 1,149 individuals recognised – their virtues and foibles examined with the forensic eye of a crime scene investigator – ultimately giving a thumbs up or down en masse. It's the Roman colosseum for our digital age. Or perhaps a hint to a future, *Hunger Games*-ish dystopia.

For anyone keeping score, 71-year-old Rod Stewart's knighthood – for services to music and charity – is 'well deserved' (or so says Lord Sugar) and 'long overdue' (Piers Morgan). Tim Peake – the first person to be announced for an honour while 220 miles above Earth – scored a CMG (Companion of the Order of St Michael and St George, obviously), to the wide-eyed applause of those on terra firma. There were also OBEs for Ant and Dec ('This will definitely be the proudest our mams have ever been') a CBE for Alan Shearer and British Empire Medal (BEM) for 21-year-old apprentice Gary Doyle, following a vocational championship in Sao Paulo that crowned him the planet's foremost plumber.

Of course, not all recipients escaped unscathed. The naming of Richard Reed – founder of smoothie merchants, Innocent, and deputy chairman of Britain Stronger in

Europe – as a CBE, alongside 21 other pro-EU figures, led to swift and venomous accusations of institutional cronyism. A 'shabby stitch-up' that was 'bordering on the corrupt,' barked Vote Leave's Gisela Stuart during the death-throes of the Brexit mudslinging.

But then it's hardly the first time. From monarchs granting titles to their illegitimate kids in medieval times through to Tory campaign strategist Lynton Crosby (aka 'The Lizard of Oz') becoming a knight of the realm back in January, the honours system is routinely viewed as a byword for, at best, political nepotism. At worst: racketeering that teeters towards criminal.

To detractors, the Queen's honours are a £1 million-a-year, taxpayer-funded white elephant. A putrid, horribly outdated realm where rich, often upper class (46% of recipients are privately educated) individuals Hoover up the top gongs by virtue of working for, donating to or merely orbiting a major political party. Plenty of titles name-check the British Empire directly – an embarrassingly jaunty reminder of this isle's colonisation and slavery regime – something many would sooner forget. This glib standpoint

is probably best summed up by the – disputed, admittedly – legend of James I, who knighted a plate of beef ('Arise, Sir Loin') for no reason other than he was King and the meat was tasty.

And yet, to others, the UK honours system is Great Britain in a nutshell. It's William Shakespeare. Tea and crumpets. A bulldog, dressed as a Beefeater, scoffing a Sunday roast, watching the *EastEnders* omnibus. A centuries-old rewards scheme that acknowledges luminaries and regular folk alike for their extraordinary accomplishments, there is indeed something about the pageantry – of a 90-year-old woman wagging a sword to transform mere men into noble knights – that feels so, well, British.

Love it or loathe it, it definitely seems that carping on about the honours system is a very British pastime. A star can seldom pass away without the press bemoaning the government for overlooking their genius while they were of this Earth, before clamouring for a hasty posthumous honour in death (something that's not allowed, as per the current system). Yet often it's the refuseniks that come off looking cool. Among them David Bowie, Roald Dahl, Stephen Hawking and artist L.S. Lowry (who said 'No thanks' to a record five gongs).

So, in 2016, is the honours list as big a badge of Britannia as the Union Jack's fluttering poly-cotton, a thing to be cherished and defended at all costs? Or instead an awkward, gasping dinosaur of yesteryear – one that's long overdue an appointment with a giant asteroid?

Moreover, with this labyrinthine structure of Dames and Sirs, OBEs and CMGs a cakestand of confidentiality, how does a man go about earning one for himself?

Mark Llewellyn-Slade is a man of honour. Or, more appropriately, honours. Dressed in loud, natty suits with a shaved head, stubble and carefully waxed moustache, the 50-year-old entrepreneur is credited for hundreds of names being etched on Her Majesty's hallowed list. While it's true that any third party can nominate someone for a Queen's honour, Llewellyn-Slade's company, Awards Intelligence, claims to boost an individual's chances from the average 10% rate to the altogether better odds of one in two.

Prices range from around £3,000 to £20,000 (plus VAT) – with the nomination professionally drafted and up to 20 letters of recommendation sought – but so assured is AI that they offer a 100% money back guarantee, should clients be left unsatisfied. The company does not divulge the names of former customers, though it was reported last year that former 'Dragon' James Caan did business with them – to the tune of £5,000 – prior to being awarded a CBE.

At first glance, your first impression of Awards Intelligence's site may be that it's a fitting advert for the UK's crooked honours system: slip them enough dosh and, yes sir! They'll sure make sure you're soon a Sir. Yet, within minutes of picking up the phone to Llewellyn-Slade, I realise AI is anything but a plaything for cash-rich, title-poor tycoons.

'No one, realistically, can become a knight of the realm without deserving it,' he says, earnestly. 'If someone came to us and said, "Look, I've got four Ferraris and a house in Monte Carlo, but I don't have a knighthood – I'd like one please," I or my colleagues would immediately ask about their work and achievements. Then we would give them an honest assessment of their chances.'

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'It doesn't matter to us whether someone is rich or not – our fees are our fees. If the richest guy in the world walks into Tesco and picks up a bottle of wine, it's the same price you and I would pay, and it's the same with us. We don't change our fees to suit the pockets of people that ring up, and if we started putting no-hopers forward, our success rates would fall through the floor.'

Llewellyn-Slade confesses that for every Sir Lynton Crosby, there's inevitably a kickback of cynicism from the public. But rather than his clients representing semi-skimmed to the mighty teet of corruption, he believes Awards Intelligence shines a light on deserving applicants, in turn bringing more honesty to the honours game.

'It's about helping people, and making the honours system accessible to as many people as possible,' says

Iconic comedian Ronnie Corbett, (left) who died earlier this year, was demanded by a group of entertainers to become knighted earlier than scheduled because of his chronic motor neurone disease. However, it was later revealed after Corbett's death that he did not want to receive the royal recognition because his lifetime colleague, Ronnie Barker (right) could not be alive to receive the same honour





THE 2016 HONOURS LIST

Rod Stewart was awarded a CBE in 2007 for his contribution to the music industry, and had it upgraded to a knighthood this year; the first British ESA pilot, Tim Peake, was awarded with a CMG for service to space research and scientific education; Alan Shearer, the retired Newcastle and Southampton striker, who was made an OBE in 2001, becomes a CBE in recognition of his charitable services to the community in north-east England; Gary Doyle was awarded a BEM at the age of 21 following a vocational championship in Sao Paulo that gave him the title of the planet's most foremost plumber; Dame Vera Lynn was given the privilege of adding CH to her name this year for her services to entertainment and charity; Richard Reed, who founded the popular Innocent Drinks brand, was awarded a CBE this year for his contributions to the food industry; Ant and Dec were both awarded with OBE status this year (to their surprise); Alastair Cook was appointed CBE for his contribution to cricket



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of nine specialist committees (eminent teachers to the education committee, doctors to the medical one and so on). Once shining nominees are separated from shoddy, remaining candidates are looked over by the Main Honours Committee, chaired by the Cabinet Secretary, Sir Jeremy Heywood. Then, and only then, final recommendations are made to the Prime Minister, before being rubber-stamped by Her Majesty and letters sent to successful nominees, to accept or spurn the proposed honour. Start to finish, the process can take up to two years.

Despite this multi-layered system, and honours expert Mark Llewellyn-Slade's belief the system is 'in good health', seldom does a list get published without the whiff of something fishy. 'The honours system smacks of corruption and cronyism,' says Peter Tatchell, who has declined repeated honours overtures for his work as a human rights campaigner. 'Under the current system, the elite rewards the elite, with the rich and powerful giving honours to the rich and powerful. They often know each other and nominate each other. Too many recipients are donors to political parties. This is tantamount to nepotism and corruption.'

Indeed, then Prime Minister David Lloyd George traded honours for party donations in the 1920s, with resigning PM Harold Wilson also gifting ones to his monied pals in 1976's infamous 'Lavender List'. The 'Cash for Honours' debacle of the mid-Noughties was particularly creative in its deception – an electoral loophole exploited to reward political donors that 'loaned' vast sums with life peerages.

Llewellyn-Slade. 'We don't do anything that isn't publicly accessible or that no one else can do. We don't lobby. We're not wining and dining the judges or anything like that. It's a publicly accessible process – it's very clear and very transparent – we just do it a lot better.'

'Also,' he adds, 'some people just approach a Queen's honour in the wrong way – they treat it like a CV. You need to capture the interest of the judges, hook them in and tell a story. We'll spend 150 hours on the average nomination.'

Although it's often seen as a clandestine process, there are broadly two types of honours recipient: selfless folk that give to society for no financial gain, and those who are proven winners in their field. Once submitted, the Cabinet Office sends each application to the Honours and Appointments Secretariat, who in turn shoots it to one

Lord Levy (left) was arrested in 2007 for a 'cash for honours' scandal. The politician was accused of being involved in the connection between political donations to the Labour Party and the award of life peerages. However, after a long review of the police file, all charges were dropped against him due to a lack of direct evidence



SIR LENNY & SIR MICK

Comedian Lenny Henry was awarded his knighthood for services to drama and charity, an experience he described as 'like being filled with lemonade.' He may now be known as the frontman for Premier Inn ads, but to another generation he's a comedian who fronted his own TV series and appeared in films and sitcoms. Meanwhile, Sir Mick Jagger also only became known as such in 2003 after he was put forward for the honour by Tony Blair. His knighthood was accepted, but the Queen reportedly did not have 'the stomach' to present the Rolling Stone's frontman with the award after the out-and-out anti-establishment views that Jagger has always been so vocal about. So it's hardly surprising that she passed the job onto her son, given how Jagger once called the Queen 'Chief Witch' saying 'anarchy is the only glimmer of hope.'

Political honours themselves were kiboshed in 1997, but resurrected by David Cameron in 2012 under the Parliamentary and Political Service Honours Committee, to reward people in politics who 'demonstrate selfless commitment for the good of the nation'. Like Lynton Crosby, perhaps, who masterminded the Conservatives' freak majority win in last year's election. That's not to say alleged cronyism was stubbed out in the interim. Civil servants seemingly receive honours as one in another career might receive a leaving card and House of Fraser vouchers. Tatchell also points to recent knighthoods for the bosses of British Airways and British Gas, as well as honours for the Queen's pastry chef and David Cameron's barber (for – you guessed it – 'services to hairdressing').

King James' Sir Loin of Beef is beginning to look altogether uncontroversial, isn't it?

And yet, amidst progressively noisy calls to scrap our creaking honours system – or at least, as Peter Tatchell suggests, 'reform and rename it', to dispense of anachronistic titles such as knight and damehoods ('absurd relics of feudalism') as Australia did last year – of the 2,000 or so people acknowledged each year, many of these remain model recipients.

'It was a total surprise,' admits John Edmunds, a leading infectious disease expert who, in January, was awarded an OBE for his tireless work in the field, particularly during the Ebola outbreak. 'I got a letter to the office and at first I assumed it was a tax demand. Initially I wasn't sure – it wasn't just me but my entire research group who worked unbelievably hard over the Ebola crisis, so I felt a bit embarrassed – but my partner was like "Are you mad?" and filled it out for me. It was obviously very nice to get some recognition for the work we'd done.'

Granted, an epidemiologist having a medal pinned on by Prince Charles doesn't generate as sexy a headline as an athlete revelling in the afterglow of Olympic gold, but perhaps herein lies the true meaning of the modern Queen's honour. Away from the sleazy politicians, divisive celebs and entitled grandees that are harangued for 'not saving lives' with their day jobs, here are people that, quite often, are doing just that. It's why the popular notion of reforming the system by placing the deciding vote in the hands of the public might in fact be hollow and undemocratic – tireless individuals like these that would all too often slide under the radar. Besides, says Llewellyn-Slade, society wields power in abundance, if only they'd use it.

'Anyone – you, I or anyone on the street – can

nominate a friend, family member or business contact for an honour,' he beams. 'If I want to have my say about someone I truly believe deserves one, then I should get off my backside and nominate them, not moan about it and say it's not fair. The whole system is driven by the general public, it's just that they don't know or can't be bothered to do anything about it.'

As for this writer, Awards Intelligence was kind enough to forego its fees and appraise my chances of a knighthood, CBE, BEM – anything Her Majesty was partial to – for services to (I guess?) journalism. Following an abridged, yet babbling, version of my life's work – GCSEs, A-Levels, that time I helped the Ocado man upstairs with my groceries – the line fell silent. And then...

'I can't understand why you haven't got a knighthood yet,' says Llewellyn-Slade. 'Maybe I need to rethink – I mean what is going wrong with the system if you haven't been recognised?'

Really?

'No,' he replies, breaking into a booming laugh. 'By all means go on to the government's Queen's honours website, download the forms and take care of the process yourself. But my advice would be to keep your wallet in your pocket.' GJ