THE BIG DEBATE:
Is it time to scrap the honours system?

Honours

The honours system recognises people who have:

👑 Made achievements in public life
👑 Committed themselves to serving and helping Britain

They’ll usually have improved the lives of other people or been outstanding at what they do, such as a successful sportsperson or scientist. Members of the public are allowed to nominate people for honours, but whether someone gets one – and what type of one they get – is decided by an honours committee (more on that later). The committee’s decisions go to the Prime Minister and then to the Queen, who awards the honour. The list of people who have received honours (known as “the honours list”) is published at New Year and on the Queen’s official birthday in June.

Source: Official Government website www.gov.uk
**THE LOWDOWN**

The official reasons people are awarded honours are for:

🔍 Making a difference to their community or field of work
🔍 Enhancing Britain’s reputation
🔍 Long-term voluntary service
🔍 Innovation and entrepreneurship (running successful businesses)
🔍 Changing things, with an emphasis on achievement
🔍 Improving life for people less able to help themselves
🔍 Displaying moral courage

But, controversially, honours have often been given to people who support prime ministers and other senior politicians, and also to those who have given money to political parties.

🔍 Honours including being made a “Sir” a “Dame”, or being awarded an “OBE” which stands for Order of the British Empire.

🔍 The British Empire no longer exists. It began to crumble in the last century, after the Second World War (1939-1945) as countries gained independence from British rule.

🔍 Monarchs (kings and queens) have always rewarded people for their service, loyalty or bravery with gifts or titles. In the UK, after medieval times, physical gifts such as land or money were replaced by knighthoods and other honours, such as “Orders of chivalry”.

🔍 Until the beginning of the 19th century, only members of the aristocracy and senior members of the military could be appointed to an order of chivalry, but from then onwards appointments were drawn from a wider variety of backgrounds.

🔍 When a prime minister leaves their job, they are allowed to nominate a list of people for honours to reward political and personal service. Two recent PMs didn’t issue lists: Tony Blair (who led from 1997-2007) and Gordon Brown (2007-2010).
THE HONOURS

KNIGHTHOOD (FOR MEN)/DAMEHOOD (FOR WOMEN)
These highest honours are awarded “for having a major contribution in any activity, usually at national level.” It means the person awarded it can use the word “Sir” or “Dame” before their first name. Recent examples include Sir Andy Murray, the tennis player, and Dame Jessica Ennis-Hill, the heptathlete.

OFFICER OF THE ORDER OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE (OBE)
This is awarded for having a major local role in any activity, including people whose work has made them known nationally in their chosen area. The letters OBE appear after the name of the person awarded the honour.

MEMBER OF THE ORDER OF THE BRITISH EMPIRE (MBE)
This is awarded for an outstanding achievement or service to the community which will have had a long-term, significant impact and stand out as an example to others. The letters MBE appear after the name of the person awarded the honour.

HOW A PERSON IS NOMINATED
Anyone can nominate someone for an honour. You just have to fill in a form on the government’s website. After a nomination is submitted, it goes to an honours committee who review it. A decision is made and the nominator will hear back in 12-18 months. All those nominated are checked by government departments to make sure they’re suitable for an honour. The honours committees are made up of senior civil servants (‘official members’) and people who are independent of government (‘independent members’). Most committee members are independent. A representative from the Prime Minister’s office is invited to attend all committee meetings. Honours committees review nominations for people involved in specific activities (like arts and media or sport), and their chosen names are then sent to the Main Honours Committee, who has the final decision.

Source: Official Government website www.gov.uk
IS IT TIME TO SCRAP THE HONOURS SYSTEM?

CONTROVERSIAL HONOURS

Not every decision to reward a person with an honour is popular with the general public. David Cameron has been criticised for giving honours to dozens of people who worked for him or donated money to his party, the Conservatives. Back in 2012, a very wealthy head of a British bank, Fred Goodwin, was stripped of his knighthood after the public became furious with how badly he ran the bank, which contributed to a major financial crisis in the UK. So he went from Sir Fred to plain old Fred after eight years of having the honour.

Then there is criticism of giving honours to people when they are still young. Andy Murray recently became a Sir, meaning he has the highest possible honour at just 29 years of age. Several members of the GB Olympic and Paralympic teams were also honoured this month despite the Rio Games being their first. But it’s impossible to please all the people all of the time; although some feel honours go to undeserving people, others feel those who are honoured are entirely deserving of their award.

THE UPCOMING CHANGES

Five priorities for the honours system will be introduced, including: recognising those who boost the economy; those who support young people in achieving their potential; those who aid social mobility (helping people get on in life) and those who help their local communities; and those who tackle discrimination. Critics of the honours system argue that these changes are too little, too late, and they don’t address some of the more old-fashioned aspects of the system.

DEFENDING TRADITION

So there may no longer be an empire and therefore the titles might be a little misleading, but the idea behind the honours system is good and the tradition is an excellent one. So much about our society changes so quickly, yet the honours system is an old and special British tradition that keeps going. It is a way for ordinary people to be recognised for their achievements by the head of the British state, the Queen. Those who receive an honour are invited to Buckingham Palace (left) and receive a medal. It would be a shame to lose this tradition because some people see it as old-fashioned.
WHAT OTHER COUNTRIES DO

Other countries honour their successful citizens in different ways. Here are a few examples:

**FRANCE**
The French have a number of honours that their president awards to both members of the military and civilians. The highest award is the Legion of Honour, which was established back in 1802 by Napoleon Bonaparte. They also have an award called the National Order of Merit, which has been given to several famous French writers, actors, politicians and singers since it was introduced in the 1960s.

**USA**
The president can give out various awards, including the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest award a civilian can receive (though it is also given to military personnel). There are also medals given out to people who have achieved great things in areas such as science, the arts and voluntary work, and for firefighters, paramedics and police officers who show great bravery. Just like in France, the president is voted for by the people in elections.

**JAPAN**
The Japanese have an honour so special it has only been given to six leaders or members of Japan’s royal family – the last of which was in 1928! The Supreme Order of the Chrysanthemum is awarded by the emperor, a role that is similar to a king or queen. More commonly awarded is the Order of the Rising Sun, which is given to citizens of Japan and other countries who have made big achievements in areas such as promoting Japanese culture and protecting the environment.

DID YOU KNOW?

Hundreds of people have turned down honours over the years. Among them are children’s authors Roald Dahl (below) and CS Lewis, the painter Lucien Freud, film director Danny Boyle, comedians Dawn French and Jennifer Saunders, TV cook Nigella Lawson and scientist Professor Stephen Hawking.
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Friday 20th January 2017

YES, IT’S TIME TO SCRAP THE HONOURS SYSTEM

1. It’s totally outdated – The idea that the Queen gives people honours related to the British Empire – which hasn’t existed for decades – is very odd. The honours system in Britain is a very old-fashioned one; it could be replaced with a straightforward American-style system of rewarding both military bravery and civilian achievements, without any talk of “empires”.

2. Too many undeserving people receive them – It is not right that a Prime Minister can recommend his friends and supporters for honours, and it is not appropriate that very young people are awarded while many older people who are more deserving are ignored. There are not enough rules for the awarding of honours and this leads to undeserving people receiving them.

3. It only rewards a minority – There are so many incredible people who do so much for society, yet most go without any kind of official reward. The honours list is too narrow and it doesn’t recognize the achievements of millions of people.

NO, IT’S NOT TIME TO SCRAP THE SYSTEM

1. The system works well – Members of the public make suggestions, an expert committee decides, and the Prime Minister has the final say: the honours system is clear and a good way of rewarding those special people who give most to our society.

2. It’s a special tradition – A trip to Buckingham Palace and a chance to meet the Queen or other senior members of the Royal family: the British honours system is a unique and special tradition and it would be a real shame to lose it.

2. No better alternative has been suggested – It’s no good scrapping the current honours system without a much better alternative – and none has been put forward. Improvements can be made to the current system, as has been suggested, but there is no need to throw out the baby with the bath water.
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QUESTIONS

Do countries need honours systems?

Is it important to celebrate ordinary people’s achievements?

What is the point of the honours system?

Should honours be given out by the Queen, or Prime Minister? Why does it make a difference?

What changes would you make to the honours system?

Should the honours system be reformed, or scrapped altogether?

Should celebrities be given honours, or only ordinary people?