

The Fountain of Honour: Directing the Spray

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THE PUBLIC Administration Committee of the Commons is a body with an excellent name for serious exertion. It is serious and reflective—the sort of institution which if more widely known, would go some way to offset the current grossly overdone hostility to politicians. It does though sometimes seem like a place of respectable internal exile for people, many of them rather too open-minded and enquiring for the grateful subordination of advancement. Membership often suggests a deadly compliment.

It has, in Select Committee made a long, painstaking enquiry into the honours system, has taken a great deal of evidence, written and verbal, on every aspect of the question: from the letter 'E' in 'OBE', to the rewards of money subscribed to political parties, to the nominating function of Lords Lieutenant (something urged in evidence by a Lord Lieutenant), to the social division of receivers of honours, to the usage of 'Right Honourable,' and to what might usefully be learned from the example of New Zealand. Finally, it has enquired why 2 per cent of people offered honours, have refused them—all that and so much more. It has been a serious and conscientious undertaking and worth while. But while taking it in here, I would like to be altogether more historical/cosmic/broad-brush in what follows. My own view of the honours system is less specific and remedial. I want to go back, take in a much longer historical perspective. To start with, we should consider the nobility as well as knighthoods, commanderships of orders and the rest. I have

written about Lords here before, but did that to address the collective noun, the Lords as legislature. Here and now the business is to consider them as ornament, as *lordships*, as indeed, honours!

Ennoblement is best seen as geological drift—*historical* geological drift. An American academic, Dr Timothy Parsons, asserted in an engaging, if somewhat downright, study (*The Rule of Empires: Those Who Built Them, Those Who Endured Them and Why They Always Fall*, Oxford University Press, 2010) that eventually, all empires fail. Reviewing the book, I civilly dissented. What worse thing happened, I asked, to all the Ranulphs, Odos, Fulkes and Alains given tracts of Anglo-Saxon England in the late 1060s than to become the generational upper class of England?

The pitiful connection with the Normans dreamt of as ancestors by John Durbeyfield in *Tess of the Durbervilles* reflected what Thomas Hardy knew to be true outside fiction—that people, or at any rate English people, did their deepest yearning backwards. They longed for that distinguished descent from robbery with violence which now underwrote acres, social election and quiet, natural authority. William the Bastard took no guidance from a committee about the wise distribution of honours. He sliced off and handed out land belonging to the Saxon Thaness he expelled, if he hadn't already killed them, and distributed it to leaders of the armed bands which had helped him destroy the Saxon Kingdom. When the North of England resisted, he conducted the Harrowing of the North—an

operation not very different from Russian and German models of the 1930s and early 1940s.

Seen with historic dispassion, 'honour' is disreputable. It is loot, it is merit strictly Darwinian. As for the titles, they were bangles and bobs signifying the great tranches of land taken by violence. The charm of honour derives from much later chivalric delusions about a golden Middle Ages, something which would possess the Romantic era. It was mocked rotten by Thomas Love Peacock, but gilded in the historical novels of Harrison Ainsworth and the yearning architectural Gothicism of Pugin, also and especially by John Ruskin. Art critic as revivalist preacher, Ruskin, hating the milling-out and selling everywhere of the mucky present, looked back to a chaste, unpolluted, godly and knightly era 'When chivalry lifted up its lance on high'. That was the line of Keats, one anterior dreamer, placed by another, Edward Elgar, over the score of his concert overture, 'Froissart.' The Anglo-Catholic Tractarians were part of the same nonsense, yearning to emulate the aggrandising and political but wonderfully apostolic bishops of the 'Age of Faith'. The whole absurdity was put together in a little verse by Lord John Manners, sentimental Tory (and son of a Duke):

*Let wealth and Commerce, laws and learning die,
But leave us still our old Nobility.*

As for the *ding an sich*, the original nobility of the eleventh to fifteenth centuries, it was a brutish thing, having more in common with 1930s Chicago or current drug cartels in Colombia and Mexico. In a fine *Guardian* piece a few years back, Martin Kettle pointed out that the battle of Towton on 29 March 1461 exceeded in its ferocious cull the first day of the Battle of the Somme on 1 July 1916. When soon after, the victor, Edward IV, married Elizabeth Woodville from the arriviste middle, he created furious resentment among the nobility. William the Con-

queror had been the illegitimate grandson of a tanner. The killers and takers of the fifteenth century still killed and took, but they had developed a sense of what was socially proper, *comme il faut*, the decent thing.

Essentially though, class rested upon land, as today, authority (and the deference of politicians) rests upon money. Titles blossomed from the crude baronies of Norman heavies like Alain de Bretagne, big in Yorkshire and half a dozen other places. The refinements of precedence: Dukes, Marquesses, Earls and Viscounts, members of the Most Noble Orders of Garter and Bath flourished rather later, and they would quite captivate late Georgian and Victorian society. Consider the frisson of aspirational rapture at the social call of a noblewoman, in the cry of Elizabeth Eliot in *Persuasion* 'She is a Viscountess!'. Sophie Nichols, playing the role in the BBC's superlative first (and only necessary) production, hit the last syllable as if manifesting a religious experience. This index of social precedence is what the honours system had become at a time when Public Administration Committees of the *lower* house would not have presumed to exist, never mind enquire politely after possible improvements.

The aristocracy of the later seventeenth and most of the eighteenth century was more matter of fact, less romantic; these grandees had a smoother edge and a lighter touch. The Duke of Newcastle, a civilian nobleman and kindly man, never hurt anybody, but he did own sixteen seats in the Commons. He might, in doubtful contemplation of inviting William Pitt to his house, put the oblique into obliquity by murmuring that 'The peaches at Claremont are not yet ripe', but lordship then was practical business, the right obliged people put into the right seats and lobbies. The criminality had slipped out of social grandeur which by Newcastle's time, was building away beautifully for the National Trust. Nobility

lity was just far enough away from the resentful everybody else, not to feel threatened. It was, moreover, too much engaged in the practical trade of small places of reward, to take the baubles seriously. Even so, except for a successful lawyer taking a peerage with the Wool-sack, social ascent came glacier-like, with enlarging acreage. Though it could also be accelerated by large ministerial office or successful military command.

The lesser largesse of politics was commonly cash. The clerkships of the Irons and the Pells, swallowed not very gratefully by the appalling Bubb Dodington, carried large annual payments for no public service at all—the equivalent of a ghost shift in the great days of the Fleet Street printing unions. In Dodington's and most similar cases, they rewarded the steady, correct voting of small-salaried placemen in the seats flatly owned freehold. Dodington was finally elevated as Baron Melcombe, commemorating a suburb of Weymouth where he commanded three, sometimes four seats. But most commonly, in the parliaments of Walpole and the Pelhams, public money from a treasury of sinecures was paid to politicians as simple, if hardly pure, inducement.

Simons Schama put it sweetly in a television lecture, describing the options held out by Sir Robert to every new Member of Parliament. 'You were invited in and sat there with a glass clutched in your fat little hand while the First Lord of the Treasury leaned forward and spoke of the things which, given co-operation, could readily be yours.' It was, in a peculiar way, straight. Honour bought things, so did money; both were available. It was Walpole who remembered the antique Order of the Bath, fallen into disuse by the 1720s, but recalled as having been conferred generations back on a remote Walpole. George I, finding his way, was persuaded by his minister to re-establish the order. Walpole sampled it himself and held it out, a new and glitter-

ing thing for the politically reliable or open-handed.

At least that most noble order was not a charge on the Secret Service and did not involve the distribution of money for a non-function. When liberal reformers, seventy years after Sir Robert, talked insistently about 'retrenchment', they were not anticipating Mr Osborne's assault on the money to be spent on *public* services. They meant the clerkships with no clerking and the salaried secretaryships, echoing Cervantes, of various Baratarias, which went to the needy nephews of people able to do political favours back. Witness the diarist. Charles Greville, relieved under the Reform Parliament of the 1830s to remain paid, absentee Secretary of Jamaica. It was Gilbertian four generations before Gilbert, terribly un-Victorian, a rough-and-ready anticipatory fixing of people useful to fix for parliamentary majorities to be kept that way. Robert Walpole had been cruder yet, working through his confidants, Nicholas Paxton and John Scrope, with Secret Service money to confer better than honour and confer it quietly.

Adam Sisman's vastly enjoyable *Boswell's Presumptuous Task* includes the episode when the biographer—also a notable sycophant of the upper echelons—accepted the office of Attorney General for Carlisle to swear in the town Freemen who under Freeman Tenure would vote in one of Lord Lonsdale's five boroughs as instructed by his Lordship for the candidates who, duly elected, would also vote as his Lordship instructed. This was the nobility of Enlightenment and/or Regency. This major patron had demonstrated the cash crudity of honour, rising in two years from Sir James Lowther to Earl of Lonsdale. Honour was, in great and little form, a currency.

The contemporary honours which the Committee and its witnesses talk of reforming are by contrast a decadent, not to say niminy-piminy sort of thing. Until the great tinkerer, Harold

Macmillan, the model of elevation had been dynastic nobility. Tell 'Watkinson' says a recently discovered memo of 1962 'that he can have a Viscounty at once or later, whenever he wants it'. The Watkinson involved was the rather capable Harold Watkinson, Minister of Defence, brave enough and realistic enough to have earlier cancelled the ruinous 'British Independent Deterrent', *Blue Streak*. He was being sacked though simply as part of Macmillan's wholesale panic response to Selwyn Lloyd's unpopular and sensible high interest rates. The Viscounty was a soothing gesture, 'a little something to put under your tie'. This, so Bill Deedes reported, was his customary civility to departing ministers. Hereditary honours had by then descended (or risen) from the valuable exchange of the eighteenth century. However Macmillan, a mercurial, reactive man, would slyly redirect the stream of honour in the thinner, but far more ductile form of the life peerage.

This shifted the nature of the whole concept of honour, surely in the eyes of the hereditary element, diminished it. Charles Greville had shaken his head at the ennoblement of a legal figure. 'Another peerage without the money to keep it up.' An unkind view would be that a life peerage was an alternative, cheaper sinecure. The device would moreover, fall into the hands of successor Labour governments who might and did give it to trade unionists, something even more Gilbertian, specifically *Iolanthean*. But Harold Macmillan was a man in whom cynicism, despair, old enmities and a tinge of benevolence erratically contended. He was a Conservative who believed that the forces of the Left, including the Soviet Union, would triumph. His comment on the society around him was: 'I think it will last my time.'

In creating a temporary nobility he was assuaging a political problem as James I had eased a financial one. Maundy Gregory before the letter, King James, Scot-

tish and for royalty, poor, lowered the tone and debased the orders of chivalry for cash on the nail. A baronetcy in the early seventeenth century cost £300, rich commoner's money, major clothier's wherewithal, tax farmer's accumulation, ready money without questions. It looked a touch naff at the time, but it went prosperously on, every award a base for further assent with the precedent set for further purchase. And the effect over time was caught in one of the greatest passages of prose in our literature: *Persuasion* again, the account in its first two pages, of Sir Walter Eliot's consolation when his copy of the *Baronetage* fell open at 'Eliot of Kellynch Hall in the County of Somerset'.

Honour is solace. Mr Macmillan knew that, taking credit in retirement for ironic scorn at the traffic, before taking an Earldom in his last months—something for his grandson to put under his tie. Accordingly, his practice over life peerages risked long-term devaluation for the unfixable future and traded briskly in handy political sweeteners here and now. Ironically, not only has the life peerage done just that *and* consolidated itself; it has proved a warm and comfortable handle to party managers ever since. The two-step abolition of voting for hereditary peers, almost the only even superficially left-wing act ever undertaken by Mr Blair, flowed naturally from the institution of that user-friendly ersatz, the life peerage. Indeed, the entire institution of the peerage should be discussed here purely in terms of political honours because that is what the peerage is. For all the wonderful tirades made in defence of aristocracy in the Parliament Bill debates of 1911, the one segment of the older order to have been permanently sidelined is the hereditary peerage. That social order clashes with the demotic language which politicians must use toward an electorate, still subordinable, but *chippily* subordinate.

Historically, the hereditary peerage reflected land—witness Greville's tutting at *another* landless peer. Today pre-eminence which signals a new lordship means money, including money given to political parties, and rather differently, career politics—Michael Foot's institution of the 'working peer', a good indentured backbencher to carry coals to the voting lobby and chip into debate—plus those people brought *instanter*, and pretty shamelessly, into government. This is a development stronger under New Labour than the Conservatives, though they too made fair use of the device, yet it commands too little attention from the Committee's enquiry. Let's be plain, this is a major constitutional departure or worse. Honours are now twisted out of all understanding of constitutional practice to appoint a so-called 'junior minister' (often with major powers) straight into the executive of government without the tedium of party selection, public contest or electoral majority.

This is something done at the flip of a writ so that an imperious leadership may recruit *non-representative* ministers. Like so much that we get wrong, it is a low bow in the direction of the United States whose constitution drafters had saluted Montesquieu with candidly separate executive and legislature. That at least was coherent. What we now have is a piebald separation of powers, done at the convenience of a prime minister, a separation which tends toward concentrating more power in the hands of a prime minister. One says 'tends' only because the casual intake of the Upper House *without* office—academics, lawyers and like rif-raf—have in practice made an off-setting impact. They have displayed an admirable willingness to vote against and delay the bad ideas of governments of either party.

In comparison, the lesser honours, starting with knighthoods, though a little time-amended, have changed function much less, probably because

although political, they are *less* political. The Committee were keen to distance present practice from the glorious corruption of Lloyd George and Maundy Gregory—as with the £ 5,000 at 1921 values straight to Lloyd George's private fund from a Randlord with form for fraud. We don't do that, but we still need money, regular, steady money or quick dollops in a crisis. And the need is lodged deep in the condition of political parties. New Labour must never be allowed to forget its first act in government. Unable to appreciate that the second election of the 1990s must, thanks to Tory backbench Euronioia, be a stroll, they ran up large, unnecessary debts. They spent the money in creating an election machine of apparatchiks, publicity men and futile consultants, and they moved into the shuddering Xanadu on Milbank, since abandoned. Fearfully broke at the moment of triumph, New Labour then took a million pounds from Mr Bernie Ecclestone, the motor racing magnate, in return for breaking an election commitment to ban cigarette advertising from the motor races.

Liberal Democrat members of the Coalition, taxed with abandoning pledges on university tuition fees, can at least argue that the national economy suffers under a great burden of debt. Mr Blair could only argue that the Labour party suffered under a great burden of debt. Having spent more money than it owned or could repay, so it did. Lesser men exchange money over time for a social status they think useful. Mr Ecclestone being a sensible chap, took something more palpable than knighthood or life peerage, and demonstrated the true nature of honour. This was still brown envelope country. He took moneysworth, lots of it, the million he paid over being a minor expense set against the revenues from legalised promotion of substances acknowledged poisonous. It is all corrupt, cannot be defended and will continue.

Another act of Mr Blair in the spring-time of New Labour come into fashion and power, concerned nothing more sinister than parties—drinks and nibbles parties serving political parties. For invitations by politicians are also a form of honour. They are, as the phrase goes, 'sought after' and can of course be perfectly innocent, general socialisation and enjoyment. They are, though, firmly urged by backstairs as one more essential labour to be undertaken by slightly glazed-over prime ministers. 'Did you notice her spring-loaded handshake?', an insufficiently loyal Conservative MP asked me at a Downing Street reception in Margaret Thatcher's time. But a major part of such entertainment concerns who comes, concerns which resonant daily celebrated or libelled name is reported present.

Noel Gallagher of Oasis was the most prominent name at the first Blair party. Years later, Mr Gallagher said some very disobliging things. But immediacy is the name of this game. On the day, his presence was everywhere put about as a bright and shining sign of that *rebranding* of this *young country* of which Messers Mandelson and Blair had spoken. Rebellious youth and pop culture come to drink Downing Street's single malts and estate reds—so vibrant-democracy, breath-of-fresh-air, national liberation: this was an honour worth five brace of OBEs, the holy spirit of Right Now making its light to shine over a bunch of politicians lately put in power.

I was scornful just now of OBEs and cannot see my way to show much more reverence to CBEs. The recipients, yes; at this level there are enough scientists, runners of real business, artists and generally meritable people to command only respect. But I remember an ill-advisedly candid television programme about the mechanics of patronage, during which a bored operator at the Honour-face opened a drawer and displayed full rows of cards set out side by side, each

with its coloured ribbon and cupro-nickel bar or disc. Costume jewellery indeed, Ratnerage, and stacked like it, these were the objects of desperate desire and warm sustaining pride. The monarchy is the fountain of honour, the duly elected politicians direct the spray. It is now so large an undertaking, so routine a sprinkling of grace and distinction, that *ennui* palls as readily as rapture.

Yet witnesses heard by the Committee were much exercised by the question of the letter 'E' in 'CBE' and 'OBE'. In more triumphalist days, it had stood for 'Empire'. We didn't approve of that sort of sounding off today. Besides we don't have one. Perhaps it should stand for 'Excellence'. 'Order of British Excellence' sounded alright, so what about 'Commander of British Excellence?' Hardly. That had a distinctly military air to it and bomb Baghdad as we have lately done, militarism simply isn't what we want to convey.

So much high-mindedness is out of place in the trade of honours. They are an inducement, a friendly wave to the truly deserving, a way of keeping borough treasurers honest, a little something to wear under your tie. Like the Conservative MP's knighthood estimated to me a year or two back as coming after an average of sixteen-and-a-half years neutrally tinted service, and like a certain kind of hand gun, the parliamentary knighthood is semi-automatic. It could be the Order of British Elephants or the Order of Best Eggs. Such an award is indeed all vanity, though hardly, to pursue *Ecclesiastes*, vexation of spirit. That spirit leaps up in child-like pleasure as it did for James 1 and Sir Robert Walpole. It is an innocent vanity and people like it. As for bringing it up to date, all low politics is against. One of the multitudes of distinction between Margaret Thatcher and Edward Heath was that in an impulse of austerity, he virtually cut off one stream in the fountain of honour, the one soothing people for 'political and

public services'. Fifteen to eighteen well considered knighthoods accumulated among waverers in the parliamentary party over Ted Heath's three-and-a-half years might have saved him. *She* turned it on full. By all means let us discuss reform

of the honours system, hold seminars, assemble data, take evidence from the paladins of academe. We could do much the same, following very similar procedures and deliver a very sound report on the equally pertinent topic of Sin.

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