



In Focus

The Honours System

On 12 June 2015, the Queen's Birthday Honours [list](#) was published. The list coincides with the [Queen's Official Birthday](#), which in 2015 was held on 13 June. A number of 'honours lists' are published at this time, with the so-called [Prime Minister's List](#) typically the largest. This year, the Prime Ministers' List honoured 1,163 people, with women accounting for 51 percent of those honoured. Despite this, the [Guardian reports](#) that there remains a gender imbalance in those receiving the highest honours, with only seven dames created compared to 33 knighthoods. Some of those [honoured](#) in the recent lists included: a knighthood for comedian, Lenny Henry; a CBE for actor, Benedict Cumberbatch; a damehood for Deputy Governor of the Bank of England, Nemat Shafik; and an OBE for journalist and campaigner, Caroline Criado-Perez. The [Diplomatic Service and Overseas List](#), prepared by the Foreign Secretary, saw 90 people honoured, including the actor, [Kevin Spacey, who was awarded an honorary knighthood](#) for "services to theatre, arts education and international culture". Finally, the [Defence List](#), submitted by the Defence Secretary, saw 161 defence personnel (civilian and military) honoured.

Operation of the Honours System

According to a House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee (PASC) [report](#), the honours system is "intended to recognise exceptional service to the nation and/or exceptional achievement". Honours are announced twice a year—at New Year and on the Queen's Official Birthday—and there are a number of different [honours and awards](#) people can receive, and which have different criteria for receipt. For example, a Companion of Honour is awarded for those making a "major contribution to the arts, sciences, medicine or Government lasting over a long time", while a knighthood can be awarded for "major contribution in any activity, usually at a national level". Honours are tied to particular [orders](#); membership of the Order of the British Empire is awarded to anyone receiving an OBE, CBE and MBE, while membership of the Order of the Bath is reserved for senior civil servants and military officers.

The UK honours system is administered by the Cabinet Office's Honours and Appointment Secretariat. Nominations for honours can be submitted by [Government departments or by members of the public](#). Submissions are then assessed by subject area [honours committees](#), which are comprised of senior civil servants and independent members. There are eight specialist committees which consider nominations in the following areas: arts and media; community, voluntary and local services; the economy; education; health; parliamentary and political service; science and technology; and sport. The [Parliamentary and Political Service Committee](#) was set up by the Prime Minister, David Cameron, in May 2012 to recognise political service, reversing the previous Government's decision not to award honours for political service. After reviewing a nomination, the honours committees will send their recommendations on to the [Main Honours Committee](#)—currently chaired by Sir Jonathan Stephens KCB—which will produce the final recommendations to the Prime Minister. The list is then passed to

the Queen for [informal approval](#). According to the BBC, the list only becomes [official](#) once the nominees have accepted their honour. There have been a number of instances where nominees have rejected a proposed honour (for example, the writer J.G. Ballard [reportedly](#) refused a CBE in 2003, citing dissatisfaction with the concept of the honours system). In response to a BBC Freedom of Information request, the Cabinet Office have published a [list](#) of 277 people between 1951 and 1999 who had rejected honours, and who have since died.

Honour Forfeiture

It is possible to [lose an honour](#) (known as “forfeiture”) if a person has “done something to damage the honours system’s reputation”. The Honours Forfeiture Committee will consider this on a case by case basis, and its recommendations are [passed to the Queen](#) through the Prime Minister. A person can [lose their honour](#) if they are sentenced to prison for at least three months for a criminal offence, if they are censured or struck off by a professional or regulatory body directly relevant to their honour, or upon other reasons being considered appropriate. In January 2012, former Royal Bank of Scotland (RBS) CEO, Fred Goodwin, had his [knighthood removed](#) following criticism of his management of RBS in the run up to the financial crisis of 2008/9. The Government [suggested](#) “the scale and severity of the impact of his actions as CEO of RBS made this an exceptional case”.

Reform of the Honours System?

On 31 August 2012, the House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee (PASC) published a [report](#) calling for reform of the honours system “in order to increase transparency and public confidence”. It [noted](#) that—at that time—only 44 percent of the public felt the system was “open and fair to all” and that there was a perception that “political considerations influence who receives an honour” (including a perceived link between political donations and honours). The report recommended removing the role of the Prime Minister in the honours system and the creation of an Independent Honours Commission. Moreover, it [suggested](#) people should not be honoured for simply “doing the day job”—especially civil servants and businesspeople—and that people “should only be awarded for exceptional service to the community or exceptional achievement above and beyond that required in employment”. The [report](#) also examined the removal of Fred Goodwin’s knighthood. It suggested that the Forfeiture Committee reviewed Goodwin’s case because of a “media storm”, despite the previous Government rejecting suggestions that he should lose his knighthood. It noted that “bringing the honours system into disrepute” was “subjective”, and recommended a “clear and expanded criteria for the forfeiture of an honour”. Furthermore, it recommended the creation of an Independent Forfeiture Committee.

In November 2012, the PASC published the Government [response](#) to its report, and a [further report](#) of their own. While the Government acknowledged that there were concerns over the award and forfeiture of honours, it suggested these “largely arise from misperceptions rather than reality”. In its [further report](#), the PASC expressed “disappointment” with the Government’s response, reiterating that the public do not feel the system is “open or fair” and suggesting that the Government has not addressed concerns over political influence and a lack of transparency in the system.

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