

FLYING ELEPHANTS AND THE HONOURS SYSTEM

Mike Oliver

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One of my favourite film sequences is from the Walt Disney film Dumbo. It's the one where the crows sing about all the things they've ever seen until Dumbo flaps his ears and takes to the skies flying like a bird. I had a similar experience to the crows when I received my latest mailing from GMCDP. The first thing I saw was the Information Bulletin offering congratulations to Lorraine Gradwell for being awarded an MBE. Not quite a 'flying elephants' moment but then I read Scorpio's comment in Coalition where joy and delight is expressed. It appears that not only is Scorpio pleased with the award but also supports the Honours System as long as disabled northerners get bigger and better access to it. Is that a 'flying elephant' outside my window?

For those interested in disability trivia, what do Colin Low, Bert Massie, Jane Campbell, Rachel Hurst, John Evans and Lorraine Gradwell all have in common apart from the fact that they've all been recipients of gongs from 'Her Maj' as Scorpio likes to call her? The correct answer is that all, in different ways, have justified their decisions to accept by claiming that they accepted the award not just for themselves but for other disabled people as well. My own personal response to such justifications is 'not for me thanks' but such justifications raise serious issues for the democratic disabled peoples' movement who, as far as I know, have never even debated the merits or otherwise of the honours system and certainly have never given disability activists permission to accept awards on its behalf.

Perhaps its time that we had such a debate and in what follows I hope to stimulate one. I should make it clear that I

am not attacking individuals for making entirely personal decisions to accept what are personal awards. Some 5 years ago I wrote a piece for Coalition in which I argued that we needed to stop attacking people personally and to develop supportive mechanisms which enabled us to hold individuals accountable without resorting to insults. In that piece I was defending people who had decided that more could be achieved from working within the political system than from outside of it. My argument was that while we might disagree with their political judgement, we should not use those decisions as an excuse for personal abuse and vilification.

I still hold to this position and respect and admire some of the people who have taken such a decision and are now working with the machinery of government rather than attacking it from the outside. However I do not believe that the honours system is a necessary part of that government machinery and that we can make the same arguments for

those who decide to accept a gong. Indeed I would go further and suggest that the honours system is a corruption of that machinery and the democratic principles on which government is supposed to be based. There are four reasons for this which I wish to explore further.

The first reason is that honours are based upon royal patronage; to accept an honour means accepting the legitimacy of this royal patronage. This does not mean merely accepting that it is better to have a monarch rather than a president or that the monarchy pays for itself through the tourists it attracts. It means accepting that there are dozens of people who by accident of birth alone are entitled to the kinds of care packages that even the most severely disabled people can only dream about: free accommodation, dressers, butlers, cooks, shoppers, cleaners, gardeners and security staff as well as free transport in helicopters, planes, trains, boats and cars though never on the buses. And in

order to get this fantastic care package there is no personally intrusive assessment to decide whether their needs are substantial or critical nor any financial assessment to decide how much of it they must pay for themselves.

The second reason why we should not support the honours system is because its history is intertwined with the history of the British Empire. Indeed many of the awards are still made by reference to it. For many of the indigenous peoples' of the empire their experiences of this history were of exploitation and oppression. These experiences are not dissimilar to those experienced by disabled people over the last two centuries and to accept an honour based upon them is to accept these experiences as legitimate in others while continuing to advocate against them for ourselves.

A third reason why we should not accept honours is related to our own collective past. We know that many of the big charities who were supposed to represent our interests to government were more concerned to ensure their prominent members and staff received their honours than to accurately articulate our views. Thus for many years we experienced incarceration and discrimination while successive governments were told that legislation to protect us was unnecessary. We may even suspect that the big charities today are still putting the interests of themselves first while claiming to have changed and perhaps also some of those activists of today who are now working on the inside are doing the same.

A final reason why we should not accept honours is that they are unnecessary and a corruption of democratic principles. In an era of supposedly open government, there are no published criteria for application, no formal application

procedure, no open decision making process and no accountability for the decisions made. Thus when we accept an honour we are accepting that government has a right to make decisions about our lives behind closed doors. Once we accept that in one aspect of our life it automatically becomes harder to challenge it in others.

I raise all these points not to attack those who have accepted honours but to generate a genuine debate about the issues I have raised. In so doing I realize that many people will dismiss my argument as nothing more than sour grapes because I have not been 'honoured'. Such a response is unlikely to be tested however, because turning gongs down might involve the monarch in political controversy. When we've attempted to build a movement based upon the idea that everything that happens to us is political, it seems rather strange to exempt the head of our

political system. Now that's another reason to oppose the honours system isn't it?

Returning to the theme of things I thought I'd never see, Scorpio supporting the honours system is certainly one of them. What next; aliens landing in Manchester, the Loch Ness monster appearing for American and Japanese tourists and Elvis really is living above that fish and chip shop in Rochdale. All that's left is a prominent member of GMCDP to make their maiden acceptance speech in the House of Lords and then the elephants really will be flying past my window.