



Poet Benjamin Zephaniah turned down an OBE in 2003

## It's time to recognise concern over 'Empire' and create a new honour

For many people, particularly those from BAME backgrounds, the use of the word 'Empire' in our Honour's system causes offense. A new 'Order of British Excellence' is long overdue, writes **Baroness Berridge**

**W**hen we honour people for service to this country, their conscientious views on the Empire should not be relevant. So this week I am raising in the Lords the need to review the Honours System, and will suggest the introduction

of an additional honour to the existing awards – the Order of British Excellence.

Of course, it made sense when the current honours system was introduced in 1917 to include the word Empire in the title and for the thousands of people who have accepted these honours since, many don't care about the use of the word empire and hardly give it a second thought.

But for many, particularly those within the Black and Ethnic Minority population, the use of the word empire makes them uncomfortable and for some has led to them refusing an honour on that basis.

It is 16 years since the poet Benjamin Zephaniah refused very publicly on these grounds, and I was asked recently to raise this issue by a senior leader within the Black community who privately refused an honour on this basis.

Detractors say there are some honours that do not include the word Empire such as the Order of Bath, but these are the more senior awards which are much smaller in number. The overwhelming number of awards are the MBE, OBE and CBE, which is a bar to awarding the services of most people who object to the word

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Empire. Matters were also arguably made worse in 2012 when the British Empire medal was re-introduced. Changes to the honours system do not require legislation, which also meant that no one could object to yet another empire-named honour.

There are sensitivities, which I appreciate, around wholesale reform of the system, but surely the introduction of an additional honour, like the Order of British Excellence, would enable those who have conscience reasons for refusal to accept an honour in recognition of their services.

Successive governments have tried to encourage more applications from the Black and Minority communities, with some success. In the 2019 New Year's honours list, those from BAME backgrounds represented 12% of the list, nearly reflecting the national population. However, it is constant work to encourage nominations from these communities and although many people decline without giving their reasons, we know that this is a barrier to some accepting and it should not be. The time for change is well overdue.

Such a new honour would also provide a wonderful opportunity to run a national competition to design and make the new award. A new additional honour could mean, rarely, that everyone could be satisfied. 🇬🇧



**THURSDAY 28 MARCH**

**11:00**

Oral Questions

**Statutory Instruments for approval, including:**

Employment Rights (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2019

**Agency Workers (Amendment)**

**Regulations 2019**

Debate on the Commonwealth and the UK



**Baroness Berridge of the Vale of Catmose** is a Conservative peer