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**Politically correct zealots want to bin OBEs and MBEs because they ‘tarnish’ our reputation. Nonsense – the British Empire changed the world for the better.**

**By Jane Warren**

**Daily Express, 8 May 2012**



*Kylie Minogue shows off her OBE at Buckingham Palace []*

It seems about as likely as a seasoned steeplechase trainer declaring the Grand National inhumane, yet none other than the lords lieu- tenant of Cheshire, Cumbria and Clackmannshire – those pillars of the British establishment responsible for advising the Queen on who should be awarded KBEs, OBEs, MBEs and CBEs – have come out in opposition to the continued use of the word “Empire” in honours.

One even went so far as to describe the Order of the British Empire and its variants (Knight, Member and Commander) as “anachronistic and inappropriate to a post-imperial UK”.

For almost 100 years the honours system has recognised exceptional achievement and service to Britain. Huge numbers of people from the famous to unsung community volun- teers have been delighted to be nominated. But the proud tradition is now under threat following deep “unease” because of its links to British colonial history and class.

Sir James Cropper, Lord Lieutenant of Cumbria, suggested there should instead be a “title more meaningful for the present times”, such as the Queen’s Commonwealth Medal. The final decision, according to Buckingham Palace, is said to be “a matter for the Lords Lieutenants”.

Critics of the suggestion believe removing the word “Empire” from the honours instituted by King George V in 1917 is politically correct meddling. There is also unease at the suggestion that so doing will continue the erosion of 400 years of British history. Shameful things may have been done in the name of imperialism but this was also one of the most vibrant, energetic and creative periods in the history of the world.

“Why not celebrate the Empire and not keep discarding it as if it was nothing?” wrote outraged blogger Jason Patchett at the weekend. “Keep the word in the awards in recognition of our great past. I for one am not ashamed of the British Empire and only wish our children could learn more about it and in a positive fashion as opposed to us being tyrants.”

Our complex colonial history evidently makes those in 21st century multi-cultural Britain feel so uneasy that the only museum dedicated to our imperial past – Bristol’s British Empire and Commonwealth Museum – closed down in 2008, just six years after a high-profile opening by HRH the Princess Royal.

The collection of half a million artefacts, established to “preserve, explore and study Britain’s cultural heritage associated with the former Empire and today’s Commonwealth”, included 250 gifts on loan from the Royal Collection. These had been presented to members of the Royal Family as they toured the colonies and dominions. Even so the museum suffered a lack of visitors. Evidently many felt too squeamish to visit.

All of this infuriates broadcaster Jeremy Paxman, author of Empire: What Ruling The World Did To The British and presenter of the successful TV series of the same name. “The history of the British Empire is full of amazing stories of adventure, of war, of greed and plunder, cruelty and courage, heroism and low cunning. It explains so much about who we are now yet we increasingly pretend it never happened,” he says.

“It’s nothing short of a scandal that this history is not taught in schools. It may be unfashionable to say so but building, securing and running an empire was the biggest international preoccupation of this country for generations.”

Empire may have become a dirty word in our post-imperial culture but the positive legacy of our political control overseas is reminiscent of the famous scene in the Monty Python film The Life Of Brian, in which a freedom fighter played by John Cleese asks: “What have the Romans ever done for us?” His listeners then out- line all the positive aspects of the Roman occupation, including sanitation, roads, irrigation, medicine, education, public order, the fresh water system and public health...

What have the Brits ever done for us is a question that might reason- ably be asked in any of our former colonies which saw large amounts of British investment, or in any of the dozen or so odd specks on the map, such as Pitcairn and Bermuda that remain British Dependent Territories.

BRITAIN may have looked at her colonies always with an eye as to the material profits that could be extracted from them but British colonies saw huge amounts of capital investment and commit- ment to public infrastructure projects, including roads and railways.

“Imperial history explains both why Britain has a seat on the UN Security Council and the readiness of British prime ministers to commit British troops to overseas wars,” points out Paxman. “But it goes much further too. Of course there were many things that were bad. But there were others that were rather admirable.

“The slave trade may have been unforgivable but are we also to condemn the campaign to abolish slavery? Once the British had become the first European nation to wake up to its cruelties they enforced an inter- national ban on the trade. Hundreds of thousands of people were saved from slavery by the Royal Navy.

**“What was wrong,” he adds, “with attempts to map Africa, to ban sati (the custom of burying widows when their husbands died) in India, to lay roads, railways and drains, to make trade follow internationally agreed laws, to try to create a system of incorruptible administration?**

“And, when the time came to leave, the British largely departed when asked to do so – unlike the French in places like Algeria.”

And at least we didn’t force our conquests to become British, unlike the French...

“From about 1870 onwards the purpose of the French Empire was in contrast to the British. The purpose was not the pursuit of trade, not the plunder of mineral riches, not agricultural opportunism... France’s idea was to use empire to expand France by creating replicas of France in far- distant places and by creating replica French citizens,” said broadcaster Jonathan Meade in his recent documentary assessment of the French, BBC Four’s A Biased Anthology Of Parisian Peripheries. What he terms “cultural osmosis” had at its core a belief that the peoples of the countries invaded or annexed could have “the privilege of being French thrust upon them”.

**“The British Empire was less presumptuous. It did not assume a Gujarati dirt farmer could think of nothing better than becoming a civil servant in Bexley- Heath... Britain sought to preserve cultural, religious and racial purity,”** he said, concluding his examination with the spectacle of a group of bored sub- Saharan schoolboys languishing in the full glare of the sun while being forced to study the comparative rainfall of Grenoble, Lyon and Bordeaux.

Of the British and French colonial conquests who’s to say who got off more lightly?