

# British poet rejects Order of the British Empire award

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When the British state offers a citizen an honour, the acceptance or rejection of that honour is intended to be a private matter between the state and the individual. This prevents any embarrassment to the state if the intended recipient turns it down.

The public rejection of an Order of the British Empire (OBE) by poet Benjamin Zephaniah has caused consternation within establishment circles, and been met with some vitriolic responses.

Zephaniah rejected his OBE because of its association with Britain's history of colonialist oppression and his opposition to the present government's war against Iraq and ongoing occupation of the country. He is one of Britain's best-known poets. A performance poet, his work has transcended the more ephemeral aspects of that genre. A Rastafarian, he is well known as a broadcaster and performer and his written work is highly acclaimed.

Writing in the *Guardian* newspaper, in an article entitled "Me? I thought, OBE me? Up yours I thought", Zephaniah explained his refusal to accept an honour that linked him with the bloody history of the British empire:

"I get angry when I hear that word 'empire'; it reminds me of slavery, it reminds me of thousands of years of brutality.... It is because of this concept of empire that my British education led me to believe that the history of black people started with slavery and that we were born slaves, and should therefore be grateful that we were given freedom by our caring white masters."

He explained that his objections to empire were not based on a crisis of identity, or on the limitations of a racial perspective. Rather, he said, "my obsession is about the future and the political rights of all people.... I am profoundly anti-empire."

He drew attention to the political anomalies in the Labour government of Prime Minister Tony Blair proposing that the Queen bestow an honour on him. Writing has in fact taken up relatively little of his time this year. Instead he has been an active campaigner against the US-led war against Iraq and vocal in his opposition to the Blair government's support for the war. He has spent much of the last two months campaigning around Birmingham for information on how his cousin, Michael Powell, died in police custody in Thornhill Road police station in September.

Self-deprecating about his poetic abilities ("there are a whole lot of writers who are better than me"), he asked, "If they want to give me one of these empire things, why can't they give me one for my work in animal rights? Why can't they give me one for my struggle against racism? What about giving me one for all the letters I write to innocent people in prisons who have been framed? I may just consider accepting some kind of award for my services on behalf of the millions of people who have stood up against the war in Iraq."

He also pointed out that his body of work is clear on his political activity and commitment, suggesting, "Whoever is behind this offer can never have read any of my work."

He saw the bestowing of honours on writers with some record of radicalism as a way of encouraging them to abandon their oppositional stance or of exposing its shallow character. Whilst he particularly cited black writers who accept such awards ("When it suits them, they embrace the struggle against the ruling class and the oppression they visit upon us, but then they join the oppressors' club"), he made it clear that this seduction into the arms of the establishment is something that can befall any artist. The acceptance of such an award compromises the recipient—"They are officially friends."

In a poem "Bought and Sold", taken from his most recent collection *Too Black, Too Strong* (Bloodaxe Books 2001), he denounced awards, prize money and "The lure of meeting royalty" for destroying black poetry. However, from his starting point with black poetry he again makes points suggesting a wider perspective:

*Tamed warriors bow on parades  
When they have done what they've been told  
They get their OBEs.*

*Don't take my word, go check the verse  
Cause every laureate gets worse*

Further on, he makes his political statement more explicit:

*We keep getting this beating  
It's bad history repeating  
It reminds me of those capitalists that say  
'Look you have a choice,'  
It's sick and self-defeating if our dispossessed keep weeping  
And we give these awards meaning  
But we end up with no voice.*

He returned to this theme in his *Guardian* article. He noted the way in which the Blair government had used the notion of popular honours to justify itself, buying off artistic dissent through the "Cool Britannia" project. He was scathing about the rock stars, businesswomen and "blacks who would be militant" who are offered awards to make the government appear inclusive. "Then these rock stars, successful women, and ex-militants write to me with OBE after their name as if I should be impressed. I'm not. Quite the opposite—you've been had."

Zephaniah was aware that he would come under attack himself, particularly on the question of selling out. He continues to do a lot of work for the state-run British Council, but denies that this is a problem. The British Council has never set limits on what he is allowed to say or told him what he must say. He retains the freedom to criticise the government and also to criticise the Council.

The most vituperative response came from Trevor Phillips, chair of the Commission for Racial Equality and a model Blairite, who wrote in the *Evening Standard*. He flatly denied that the award had anything to do with empire. Several newspaper correspondents also argued that as the British Empire is dead, so anything containing its name is simply a throwback and has nothing to do with imperialism.

This not only ignores the ideological heritage of empire and racism that continues to play a retrogressive role in British political life. It also ignores Zephaniah's opposition to the current policies of the government. As the war against Iraq has demonstrated, we are witnessing a new wave of bloody colonial and imperial adventures. Opposition to empire has a renewed relevance that is extremely embarrassing for the Blair government.

As the row broke, Blair was launching a populist campaign for the "Big Conversation" where he supposedly listens to the voice of the electorate advising him on policy. Zephaniah rubbished this pretence of democratic accountability. He pointed out that he has "been longing for a conversation with [Blair], but he won't come out.... I was there with a million people on [the antiwar demonstration on] February 15". Zephaniah has also been lobbying unsuccessfully for a meeting about the death of his cousin. "Come on Mr Blair, I'll meet you anytime. Let's talk about your Home Office, let's talk about being tough on crime." (It is hardly surprising that a government spokesman has said that Iraq is not part of the big conversation!)

Zephaniah's views have been sharpened by the development of the political situation. He participated briefly, for example, in a consultative committee for arts in the education curriculum under then Education Secretary David Blunkett. But he resigned in disgust at the agenda being pursued by the government. "Every time we had a meeting, Blunkett had his spy there.... basically editing anything we were writing.... People called Thatcher a control freak, but Tony Blair ..."

What remains significant about Zephaniah is his striving to articulate opposition to injustice in the teeth of repeated government attempts to buy off such opposition.

He was born in Birmingham, the eldest of nine children. Disputes between his parents meant he was constantly on the move. He went to 10 schools and drifted into petty crime. From approved school he graduated through detention centre to borstal, finally winding up in prison. Dyslexic, his chaotic schooling left him unable to read or write until he was into his twenties.

He was drawn to the work of Jamaican dub and ranting poets. With friends he began to improvise ranted verse. He did not associate this work with "poetry". When his English teacher gave him Shelley's *The Mask of Anarchy*, he could not understand it. He has summed up his attitude as "Poetry meant stuff by dead white men that we weren't meant to understand."

Later he came across Shelley's poem again and for the first time recognised that this was a work of radical political literature. Shelley's radicalism galvanised his poetry, and he became an admirer of the Romantic movement.

Zephaniah attained prominence through the performance poetry scene of the late 1970s and early 1980s. There was a significant crossover of performance poetry with the burgeoning new cabaret scene, which afforded artists a substantial audience. The political edge to Zephaniah's work fitted with the ethos of "alternative comedy", while dub and ranting styles chimed well with those poets from the punk scene like John Cooper Clarke.

In the late 1980s dons at Cambridge University considered him as a

candidate for the Rossi Fellowship—a one-year, non-teaching post given to a creative artist to facilitate their work. There was a furore amongst senior conservative dons, outraged at the possibility that they might assist a former youth offender and performance poet.

Zephaniah was rejected for the fellowship, but produced a magnificent riposte. He wrote and starred in a television film, in which he travelled by train from Birmingham to Cambridge for the Rossi interview in the company of Keats, Shelley and Byron. Exploring their radicalism and its influence on his own work, he placed himself in a tradition of English poetry in which the grandees of Cambridge University were unwilling to see him. He emerged as a complex, classically grounded poet, while reasserting the dissenting and radical qualities of the greatest Romantics.

He was also considered for the Poet Laureateship in 1999 after the death of Ted Hughes (the Poet Laureate writes for state occasions and is considered as part of the Royal Household). He has now expressed the hope that after his *Guardian* article he shall "never be considered as a Poet Laureate or an OBE sucker again." One don commented that Zephaniah had "done a lot for oral poetry in this country. He should be honoured in the traditional way—posthumously."

Andrew Motion was chosen as Poet Laureate, but the process of selection was marked by an examination of the relationship between poets and the government. Tony Harrison—also a fine reader of his own work, although basing himself more on Latin and Greek classical verse—withdrew himself from consideration. As a republican, he said, he could not countenance taking the post. His long poem announcing his withdrawal contained some memorably scathing images—Andrew Motion's establishment credentials were stamped in Harrison's description of him as "Di-deifying Motion".

Increasingly, the British political environment is having a direct and recognisable effect on poets. Harrison, vocal in his opposition to the first Gulf War, has again produced some effective and interesting work in his opposition to the destruction of Iraq. Harold Pinter, although less distinguished as a poet than as a playwright, continues to write against US imperialism. Even Motion—the respectable, establishment choice in 1999—has voiced his anxieties and ambivalence for the British government's support for the war in Iraq.

For a writer like Zephaniah, with a body of work critical of the establishment already behind him, the significance of this moment is different. His comments about honours, which have cut to the heart of the class system, have met an extraordinary response. Zephaniah has commented that far more people have congratulated him on rejecting the OBE than would ever have praised him for accepting it. Apart from the principled positions he has advanced on the war, and on the question of empire, his actions indicate a deepening of his understanding of an artist's responsibilities in this period.



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