

Turning Down an OBE: A Personal Reflection

When I was offered the honour of an OBE, I was shocked, and deeply moved. It felt humbling to have my work recognised, especially alongside so many remarkable individuals who have dedicated their lives to bettering society. The countless efforts of those honoured in fields ranging from social justice to the arts, education, and community activism, and indeed all of those who remain unnamed and unknown who do endless good acts, are nothing short of extraordinary. I have immense respect for every person whose actions have enriched our communities and upheld the values of compassion, fairness, and progress.

However, I made the decision to decline the award. This choice was not made lightly, nor was it an act of defiance. Rather, it stems from a place of conscience and a commitment to address the complex legacy of the British Empire and the ongoing impact of colonialism.

As a community activist rooted in the heart of Newcastle-under-Lyme and Stoke-on-Trent, my decision to decline the OBE is not merely personal, it is deeply tied to the history and values we share here in North Staffordshire. This land, shaped by the hands of miners, potters, and factory workers, tells a story of resilience against exploitation. Empire, far from being a detached force, reached into our streets, taking the sweat of labour while denying fair wages and dignity. As a Unite member and a former member of the Labour Party and Councillor in the Borough of Newcastle under Lyme, serving a party whose founder, Keir Hardie, stood firmly against the injustices of Empire, I embrace and remain committed to that legacy, and I have seen how the echoes of Empire still shape the challenges we face today.

The devastation wrought by empire is not a distant historical footnote but a profound reality that continues to shape our world. The structures of colonialism, its extraction of wealth, and the human suffering it inflicted have left enduring scars. Communities in the Global South are still recovering from the looting of resources and the imposition of arbitrary borders that fuel conflicts today. In countries like India, the exploitative policies of empire drained economies, leaving a legacy of poverty and inequality. In the Caribbean, the impact of slavery and indentured labour continues to resonate in systemic racism and economic dependency. To accept an honour tied to the "Order of the British Empire" without acknowledging this legacy, would for me, feel discordant with the work I strive to do.

My decision is also a response to the broader cultural context we find ourselves in. Conversations about history, accountability, and justice are often reduced to soundbites about so-called "cancel culture". In truth, what is often dismissed as cancel culture is a growing demand for a more honest reckoning with our past. It is a call to move beyond nostalgic revisionism and to confront uncomfortable truths with courage and integrity. Far-right narratives that seek to sanitise history do a disservice to the potential for growth and reconciliation. For example, the minimisation of Britain's role in the transatlantic slave trade in educational curricula denies future generations the opportunity to learn from these injustices and build a fairer society. We cannot hope to create a better future without acknowledging the complexities and contradictions of our shared history.

There may be those who believe that my decision to decline the OBE is an act of disloyalty or hatred for my country. I would like to reassure them that this decision does not reflect a lack of patriotism. On the contrary, it is rooted in a deep fondness and love for the land of my birth. My firstborn child carries the middle name 'Albion', an ancient and poetic name for England. To me, this name symbolises the best of what our nation can be: a place of creativity, resilience, and diversity, where justice and equality are not just aspirations but lived realities. My vision of patriotism is one that embraces these values fully and seeks to hold us accountable to them.

My decision is also about how we become the right kind of allies, standing against prejudice and hate in our own country and across the globe. For instance, we must challenge the ongoing exploitation of workers in former colonies who produce goods for Western consumption under unjust conditions. We must confront the realities of modern imperialism, such as the exploitation of Palestinian land and resources or the retention of overseas territories where local voices are often marginalised. It requires us to acknowledge, through how our history and heritage is taught and understood, and in our current political actions, the ongoing manifestations of various forms of colonialism. What is not acknowledged cannot be healed. As a nation, we need to confront our past in order to legitimately play our part globally in encouraging justice and peace in place of injustice and conflict.

As a socialist, I believe in the fundamental principles of equality, solidarity, and the collective good. This decision reflects my commitment to those values and to a vision of society where power is shared, not hoarded; where history is not rewritten, but faced honestly; and where justice is pursued relentlessly for all.

Declining the OBE is not a rejection of the principles that underpin the honour—service, dedication, and excellence—but a call to reimagine how we recognise and celebrate these values. I believe we can honour individuals' contributions without uncritically perpetuating systems of power that have caused harm. By doing so, we can begin to build a more inclusive and equitable society. I hope this decision sparks thoughtful conversations about how we can confront the legacies of history while celebrating the best in human endeavour, encouraging people to see their place in our unfolding story, to reflect on the legacies we inherit and the futures we can shape. Ours is a land of resilience and pride, where the hands that worked in industry, the pot banks, steelworks, and that mined the coal, also carried the strength to challenge injustice. Each of us has a role to play in the narrative of our time, whether in confronting the shadows of Empire, amplifying the voices of the unheard, or building a more inclusive and compassionate community. It is only by embracing complexities of our past and the possibilities of our future, that we can move forward, together, towards a more just and compassionate world, ensuring that justice, dignity, and hope are not only ideals, but lived realities for all.

In love, peace and solidarity

Sue Moffat