

Tractor tyrants, cheap CBEs, and the Abbacklash begins

The Sunday Times Letters Column, 12th September 2021

Gong for a song

Sir, I was shocked by your front-page story “Prince Charles aides fixed CBE for Saudi tycoon who gave £1.5m” (News, last week). Surely, adjusted for inflation and the probable wealth of the applicants, the going rate should be nearer £150 million.

David Rew, Southampton

Background

The selling of National Honours for cash has been a regularly reported contaminant of trust in the UK political system for more than a century. It was very sad to see how the reputation of the royal family was being cheapened through evidence of such adjacent behaviours and such diminution of the apparent value of a CBE.

The Sunday Times 5th September 2021

Prince Charles aides fixed CBE for Saudi tycoon who gave £1.5m

Key adviser steps down over cash for royal residences

Gabriel Poggrund and Dipesh Gadher

One of Prince Charles’s closest aides quit last night after claims that he had fixed an honour for a Saudi tycoon who donated more than £1.5 million to royal charities.

[Michael Fawcett](#), the prince’s former valet, stepped down temporarily as chief executive of the Prince’s Foundation when he was made aware that allegations concerning the awarding of the CBE would be published.

Mahfouz Marei Mubarak bin Mahfouz paid tens of thousands of pounds to fixers with links to the prince who had told him they could secure the honour.

[Charles](#), 72, gave Mahfouz, 51, his CBE at a private ceremony at Buckingham Palace in November 2016. The event was not published in the Court Circular, the official list of royal engagements.

Aides close to the prince and senior staff in his charities had helped the paid fixers to secure the CBE after Mahfouz donated large sums to restoration projects of interest to Charles, including Dumfries House and the Castle of Mey in Scotland. They co-ordinated the application process and provided official letters in support of it.

Fawcett, whom Charles once said he could not survive without, co-ordinated the application process and helped “upgrade” the proposed honour for Mahfouz from an OBE to CBE, according to leaked emails. Fawcett resigned as a valet in 2003 after a report revealed mismanagement at Clarence House.

Mahfouz was a Saudi national trying to secure British citizenship or residency through a so-called “golden visa” for investment. He had been advised that securing as many honorary roles and awards as possible would help his cause.

As a result, Charles’s aides helped him secure an “honorary” CBE: a special category of award overseen by the Foreign Office for those who are not British or Commonwealth nationals.

The secretive process takes place via the British embassy in a nominee’s home country, with the Foreign Office given the final say on whom to put forward.

Mahfouz has been one of the most prolific donors to the prince’s charities and even has a forest named after him, the Mahfouz Wood at the 15th-century Castle of Mey, formerly the Queen Mother’s home and now one of the prince’s Scottish residences.

The donations of more than £1.5 million helped fund renovations of residences used by Charles, and other charitable ventures. The Prince’s Foundation publicly lists Mahfouz as a patron.

The Saudi businessman’s fixers contacted those close to Charles about the prospect of an honour as early as 2011.

In leaked correspondence, they were explicit about the transactional nature of the arrangement: in exchange for giving large sums of money to Charles’s charities, his team would secure the honour. Mahfouz and his fixers soon attended a meeting with Charles and Fawcett at Clarence House.

In one email dated September 1, 2014, William Bortrick, the owner of Burke’s Peerage and a paid adviser to Mahfouz, told colleagues that once he has “Hon OBE ... then more money will flow”.

The OBE, he said, was “promised to MBM [Mahfouz Bin Mahfouz] to get the £1.5 million he paid for Dumfries [House] and [The Castle of] Mey”.

Bortrick, whose centuries-old publication records the genealogy of the British aristocracy, added: “MF [Michael Fawcett] needs to keep to his side of the bargain and sort out the Hon OBE immediately; then assist with citizenship”.

Within weeks, those close to Charles were writing letters of recommendation to be sent to the ambassador in Riyadh. In addition, they provided detailed feedback on draft letters of support to be provided by other institutions, including one from Pembroke College, Oxford, to which Mahfouz had given a seven-figure sum.

Last week the Prince’s Foundation [launched an investigation](#) following “cash for access” claims in a newspaper centring on another fixer. However, today’s disclosures pose far more

serious questions about the conduct of those close to the prince. They will also prompt renewed scrutiny of the honours system and whether it is open to monetary influence.

One of those who wrote a recommendation letter was Ashe Windham, who publicly stated that, at the time, he was an honorary equerry to Charles and a member of his household. He was also chairman of the charity that runs the Castle of Mey, and serves as a trustee of the Prince's Foundation.

According to a copy of his letter, dated October 2014, he wrote: "I have great pleasure in endorsing the nomination of HE Mahfouz Marei Mubarak bin Mahfouz for an honorary CBE".

He said that Mahfouz had made "two generous donations", which would help restore the castle and replace windows. Windham also name-dropped Charles, saying: "His Royal Highness, the Prince of Wales, our President, has been instrumental in guiding this work."

The Sunday Times has also seen correspondence from diplomats at the embassy in Riyadh in which they deal directly with those close to Charles.

In one email dated February 11, 2015, Richard Wildash, the deputy head of mission at the embassy, responded to Windham's letter saying that it was "gratifying" to learn of Mahfouz's support of the royal family. He added: "Mahfouz is of course well known to us."

That email came 48 hours after Charles had visited Saudi Arabia himself and met the new king. He also met Mahfouz, Bortrick and Fawcett at the embassy.

Bortrick told colleagues that Charles had met Mahfouz's family and that it "all went very well indeed". He said it was "correct" that he was with Fawcett, as well as Charles in the Gulf kingdom, writing: "We had a meeting. He is very keen on lots of ongoing projects with HRH [High Royal Highness] and MBM [Mahfouz Bin Mahfouz]."

Official government documents state that the Queen awarded Mahfouz his CBE "for services to charities in the UK".

A spokesman for The Prince's Foundation said: "The foundation takes very seriously the allegations that have recently been brought to its attention and the matter is currently under investigation."

Douglas Connell, foundation chairman, said he had accepted Fawcett's offer to step down temporarily. "Michael fully supports the ongoing investigation and has confirmed that he will assist the investigation in every way."

Mahfouz denies any wrongdoing and friends say he is a "honourable philanthropist" who has given large sums to charity.

Bortrick confirmed he had worked with Windham on the application but defended his actions. He said: "I have worked tirelessly on behalf of the Mahfouz family for many years ... I certainly did not sell a CBE, which is impossible." He said the honour was in recognition of all Mahfouz's charitable work in the UK.