

Late Queen's final honours list revealed

The former Play School presenter is among the first two black women to be granted the prestigious honour – a personal gift of the monarch

By [Victoria Ward](#), Royal Correspondent 11 November 2022 • 10:30pm



Baroness Benjamin has become a prominent advocate for the Windrush generation

Floella Benjamin and former nurse Dame Elizabeth Anionwu have become [the first two black women](#) to become members of the prestigious Order of Merit.

They are among six notable figures personally chosen by Queen Elizabeth II as her final honours.

The others named by Her Majesty in early September, just days before she died, are Sir David Adjaye, a leading architect; Sir Paul Nurse, the geneticist and cell biologist; Dr Venki Ramakrishnan, a molecular biologist, and Margaret MacMillan, Canadian historian.

Created in 1902 by Edward VII, the Order of Merit is the personal gift of the monarch.

There can only be 24 living members at any one time, making it a highly exclusive collection of figures from the arts, sciences, culture and military.

Current members include [Sir David Attenborough, the conservationist and broadcaster](#); David Hockney, the artist; Betty Boothroyd, the former Commons Speaker, and Sir Tim Berners-Lee, the computer scientist.

The new appointments, the first since [Sir James Dyson was among three members named in 2016](#) will be awarded by the King.

Trinidad-born Baroness Benjamin first came to prominence as a presenter on the popular BBC children's programme Play School.

She has gone on to write more than 30 books with [her memoir Coming To England](#) now studied in schools.

She has become a prominent advocate for the Windrush generation and helped organise the National Windrush Monument unveiled at Waterloo Station.

When the then Prince of Wales guest-edited a special issue of The Voice, Britain's only surviving black newspaper, to mark its 40th anniversary earlier this year, Baroness Benjamin was among those he invited to write for its pages.

The Liberal Democrat peer wrote about her involvement in the Windrush portraits project, commissioned by the King, in which 10 members of the

Windrush generation are captured in paintings.



Dame Elizabeth is known for her nursing work Credit: PA

Dame Elizabeth, a former nurse and health visitor, was the UK's first sickle-cell and thalassaemia nurse specialist and in 1998 created the Mary Seacole Centre for Nursing Practice at the University of West London.

She was awarded a damehood in 2017 for services to nursing and the Mary Seacole Statue Appeal which erected a memorial to the 19th century nursing pioneer in the gardens of London's St Thomas's Hospital.

Dame Elizabeth was appointed a CBE in the late Queen's 2001 Birthday Honours for services to nursing and is a fellow of the Royal College of Nursing and The Queen's Nursing Institute.



Sir David once criticised the then Prince Charles over architecture Credit: FRANCIS KOKOROKO

Sir David, the Ghanaian-British architect [who designed the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History](#) and Culture in Washington DC, was among the signatories of a letter condemning the then Prince Charles for his "behind the scenes lobbying" on a London housing development in 2009.

The Qatari royal family was forced to scrap plans for a £3 billion housing development on the former site of the Chelsea Barracks after the royal urged the emir of the gulf state to abandon them.

Charles called the design "unsympathetic and unsuitable" and proposed a more traditional design by Quinlan Terry.

His intervention sparked accusations he had overreached his constitutional role. A letter sent to the Sunday Times by leading architects, including Sir David, suggested he had "used his privileged position" to circumvent "the established planning consultation process."

In October 2020, Sir David was announced as the RIBA Royal Gold Medal Winner for 2021, considered one of the highest honours in British architecture for his contributions to the field internationally.



Sir Paul with the late Queen at the Francis Crick Institute Credit: Alamy

Sir Paul, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Physiology and Medicine, is [chief executive of the Francis Crick Institute](#).

He was named president of the Royal Society in 2010 but found himself having to defend its voting system three years later when the Duke of York was elected as a fellow.

Several leading scientists objected to the election, made with just 11 per cent of the vote following a huge number of abstentions, due to his "over-colourful" past and lack of a scientific background.

Sir Paul said he accepted the voting system was "an anachronism" which had to be changed but highlighted the society's "very strong historic link with the Royal family" and said the Duke had always "had a robust defence" of allegations made against him.



Dr Ramakrishnan won the Nobel Prize for Chemistry Credit: Getty

Dr Ramakrishnan is also a former president of the Royal Society.

The molecular biologist shared the 2009 Nobel Prize in Chemistry with two other scientists for their work on ribosomes, the structures within cells that synthesise proteins.

Born in India to scientist parents, Dr Ramakrishnan moved to America for postgraduate studies and spent almost 30 years there before taking up his current position on the Medical Research Council at the Laboratory of Molecular Biology in Cambridge in 1999.

Margaret MacMillan, professor of history at the University of Toronto and emeritus professor of international history at the University of Oxford.

Her books include *Women Of The Raj*, *Peacemakers: The Paris Conference Of 1919 And Its Attempt To End War*, *Six Months That Changed The World* and *History's People*.

Former members of the Order include Nelson Mandela, Florence Nightingale, Henry James, Winston Churchill, TS Eliot, Lucian Freud and Margaret Thatcher.