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Barbeque stopper, 1990–2015

It was the Queen herself who gave the final stimulus to end recommendations for British honours in Australia. A letter from Sir William Heseltine, her private secretary, in February 1990 informed the governor-general of Her Majesty's feeling that, since the most recent British honours list had not included nominations from any Australian Government, the time might be right for the country to consider employing only its own awards.¹ State governors received similar missives.² The Queen's wish was divulged by New South Wales premier Nick Greiner, who explained that she had 'indicated to me privately that it was unseemly to have a lottery depending on which party was in power'. 'She thought that was a ping-pong game', he said, and would rather see 'a commitment to the Order of Australia'.³ Breaking with Liberal Party tradition, Greiner had promised to eschew imperial honours during the 1988 election campaign, despite some resistance from fellow Liberals and members of the National Party, and he had carried that commitment through after his victory at the polls.⁴ The federal Liberal–

1 Review of Australian Honours and Awards, *A Matter of Honour: The Report of the Review of Australian Honours and Awards* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1995), 21; Malcolm Hazell, 'The Australian Honours System: An Overview', in *Honouring Commonwealth Citizens: Proceedings of the First Conference on Commonwealth Honours and Awards*, ed. Michael Jackson (Toronto: The Honours and Awards Secretariat, Ontario Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration, 2007), 41–42.

2 'British Awards Going Going Gong', *Canberra Times*, 18 February 1990, 6.

3 Luis M. Garcia, 'An End to Imperial Honours "Lottery"', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 February 1990, 3.

4 Luis M. Garcia, 'An End to Imperial Honours "Lottery"', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 February 1990, 3.

National opposition was willing to agree to the Queen's request, but intended also to consider reviving the level of knighthood/damehood in the Order of Australia.⁵

Although this initiative for abandoning British honours had come from the Queen, rather than arising out of any one political party's policy platform, it was some time before all States agreed. After seeking renewal of the Queen's request and consulting State premiers and opposition leaders, as well as the federal opposition leader, Labor Prime Minister Paul Keating was able to announce in October 1992 that no further nominations would be made for imperial awards, at either federal or State level. One only among his fellow party heads had refused to agree: Richard Court, the leader of the Liberals in Western Australia, and the son of that vigorous supporter of British honours, former Liberal premier Sir Charles Court.⁶ Keating's well-known support for an Australian republic led to some suspicion that the move was a portent of things to come, but this was a notion the government was quick to hose down. Ending the use of British honours was not, insisted a spokesman, part of a drive to create a republic.⁷

The announcement that imperial honours were finally to be abolished seems to have attracted little attention, perhaps indicating that their appeal had faded significantly over the past decade. A tongue-in-cheek snap poll in the *Sydney Morning Herald* described the AO (Officer of the Order of Australia) as 'sound[ing] ... like a movie classification' [Adults Only], and asked prominent individuals to nominate a more 'Australian' title to replace the familiar British 'Sir' and 'Dame'. Malcolm Turnbull—then an investment banker—responded seriously, suggesting that there was 'something wrong with anyone who wants a handle before or after their name', while broadcaster and social commentator Phillip Adams thought people might be termed 'Nugget' (in gold, silver, or bronze) in honour of public servant H. C. Coombs. Blanche d'Alpuget—biographer of former prime minister Bob Hawke—offered 'Kangaroo, Wombat and Bandicoot' for men and 'Brolga instead of Dame, Kookaburra instead of Lady, and

5 'It's Good Night to the Knights', *Canberra Times*, 1 June 1990, 3.

6 *A Matter of Honour*, 21–22; Jodie Brough, 'Another Tie to Britain is Severed', *Canberra Times*, 6 October 1992, 3; Philip Derriman, 'Keating Works a Knight Shift: No New Sirs', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 October 1992, 1.

7 Jodie Brough, 'Another Tie to Britain is Severed', *Canberra Times*, 6 October 1992, 3; Philip Derriman, 'Keating Works a Knight Shift: No New Sirs', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 October 1992, 1.

Wagtail for those nice young second wives of Kangaroos'.⁸ Some, though, regretted the decision. One such was former minister of defence Sir James Killen, who professed himself 'puzzled as to why there's this anxiety to get rid of the past'. British honours had a history stretching 'back to the Norman Conquests', he said, while 'British authority' remained a key element of the country's legal and parliamentary systems.⁹

Yet notwithstanding such laments, with the abandonment of the dual system and strong bipartisan support for the ending of imperial honours, it might have seemed the Australian honours system had at last entered a halcyon phase, widely accepted and free of controversy. The events of the next 25 years would prove any such hope misplaced. First came a sweeping review of the system, considering processes and practices as well as the awards themselves. Although the most radical of the recommendations would not be acted upon, the review—and the responses of those surveyed through questionnaires and focus groups—revealed both a lack of awareness of the system among the public, and a degree of dissatisfaction with aspects of it. More significantly, a growing chorus of criticism attacked the lack of gender balance in the system, as the proportion of women remained stubbornly low. But most astonishing of all was Prime Minister Tony Abbott's revival of knighthoods and damehoods in 2014, and his subsequent choice to honour the Queen's husband, Prince Philip, with one of the newly resurrected titles. Never before had the honours system been quite so central to national political debate, or to the fortunes of a sitting prime minister. National honours, it seemed, were no more immune to controversy than had been the imperial system.

A Matter of Honour: The 1995 review

Signs of further honorific struggles ahead, indeed, emerged hard on the heels of the announcement that imperial honours would cease to be used. In early 1993 Keating's government announced that, if it were returned at the forthcoming election, the system would undergo a thorough review. Duly re-elected in March, his new ministry proceeded as promised, with a two-stage inquiry announced in May. First would come a review of awards relating to defence; after that would be a full inquiry into the system,

8 'Snap Poll', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 October 1992, 25.

9 'Keating's Newest Anti-Royal Move Disturbs Knight', *Canberra Times*, 7 October 1992, 5.

taking into account the findings of the first stage.¹⁰ The Committee of Inquiry into Defence and Defence-related Awards reported in March the following year, having received more than 800 submissions and considered the issue of equity in the recognition of defence personnel and others in related activities. Of its 40 recommendations, the government accepted 39, including those to establish a Civilian Service Medal 1939–45 and an Australian Service Medal 1945–75. Questions relating to the relationship between the military and the general divisions of the Order of Australia, and to awards for ‘overseas humanitarian service in hazardous circumstances’, the committee suggested be referred to the full inquiry.¹¹

Frank Walker, the minister for administrative services, announced the membership of a committee to conduct the second stage of the review in October 1994. Coming 20 years after Australian awards were established, the inquiry would respond to criticisms that the honours system was ‘one for the elite groups in society’, and that too few women, migrants, and less wealthy individuals were included among recipients.¹² Or, as Leonie Lamont and Adam Harvey put it in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, that the system ‘was slanted in favour of well-heeled, well-educated Anglo-Saxon males in the professions and the Public Service’.¹³ Eight people would sit on the committee, which would be chaired by Clare Petre, a senior officer at the New South Wales Community Services Commission and board member of the Administrative Review Council. It would seek to establish ‘what services, achievements and contributions’ the Australian community wished to see honoured, and whether the system reached the ‘standards of fairness, equity and access’ the nation expected.¹⁴ For ‘the first time’, Walker said, Australians would be able to have ‘a say’ in the shape of the country’s honours system.¹⁵

Senator Rod Kemp, the shadow minister for administrative services, acknowledged that the review would enable ‘any problems relating to fairness and access’ to be tackled, as well as offering a chance ‘to build

10 *A Matter of Honour*, xiv–xvi.

11 *A Matter of Honour*, xvi.

12 *A Matter of Honour*, xvi–xvii, quote on xvii; Minister for Administrative Services, ‘Review of Honours and Awards’, media statement, 14 October 1994, accessed 31 July 2017, available via parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/search.w3p.

13 Leonie Lamont and Adam Harvey, ‘Two Officers Ask: Is the System Fair?’ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 January 1995, 8.

14 Minister for Administrative Services, ‘Review of Honours and Awards’, media statement, 14 October 1994, accessed 31 July 2017, available via parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/search.w3p.

15 *A Matter of Honour*, xvi.

community awareness', but 'warned' that it must not be used to 'advance the ALP's [Australian Labor Party] republican agenda'.¹⁶ Kemp's view, as he explained in the Senate the following week, was that the inadequate representation of 'women, migrants and the less affluent' could be blamed at least partly on 'the lacklustre effort' of Labor ministers to ensure that Australians understood their honours system. Awards announced in the Australian system, Kemp stated, generally attracted little controversy, and the fact that nominations could be made by any person or organisation meant that the appointment process for the Order of Australia was 'totally democratic and as egalitarian as most members in the community would want'. He again raised the spectre that the review might be used to advance the republican cause, expressing concern that Walker had stated that the country 'need[ed] "a modern system that Australians own"', and had spoken of his desire to see the awards given by a president, rather than by the governor-general. Moreover, while 'finetuning' the system might be defensible, it would be the behaviour of a 'banana republic' to alter it dramatically, when it had existed for such a short time.¹⁷

Whether or not Walker's reference to 'a modern system that Australians own' had indeed referenced a republican desire to remove the Queen's influence from the nation's awards, he did look hopefully to an Australian republic on the horizon, and he did see in that coming republic an imperative for change in the country's honours system. Discussing the review's progress in the House of Representatives in June 1995, he stated that Australians were being asked 'whether the system is still relevant to a nation about to become a republic'. The core question was 'what sorts of contributions deserve recognition and who ... should be recognised and celebrated', but his vision for the future of honours was about something more too: it was about what the system represented. Asserting that '[o]verwhelmingly' the country desired a different system, Walker argued that what Australians wanted 'more than anything else' was 'a sense of ownership over it'. 'They do not want something remote, accessible only to insiders and elites, operating in a shroud of conservative

16 Rod Kemp, 'Review of Australian Honours and Awards', news release, 14 October 1994, accessed 31 July 2017, available via parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/search.w3p.

17 Commonwealth of Australia, Senate, *Parliamentary Debates*, 19 October 1994 (Rod Kemp). Kemp also criticised the make-up of the committee, including its apparent lack of expertise in the matter of honours; Walker, in turn, vigorously disputed these claims. Commonwealth of Australia, Senate, *Parliamentary Debates*, 19 October 1994 (Rod Kemp); Commonwealth of Australia, House of Representatives, *Parliamentary Debates*, 20 October 1994 (Frank Walker).

mystique', he said, and they disliked 'excessive hierarchy'. What they did want was 'something uniquely Australian that operates like Australians operate—openly and fairly'.¹⁸

Whether the majority of Australians would have agreed with this statement, they probably would have accepted that the community wished 'to see ordinary people ... recognised for doing things the community values—that is, working not for reward or prestige but voluntarily to keep together the fabric of our society'. Walker's republican vision was perhaps most evident in his closing claim that the inquiry would advise 'how to put a truly national stamp' on the institution, and his accompanying call for the leader of the opposition to 'put away his ancient views of society ... get up to date, reject his adherence to the imperial system of old, and come up with a truly Australian system'.¹⁹ It was a bold vision, in many ways, for a system of honours that would avoid the pitfalls of elitism and patronage that always threatened, and which would at last be free of controversy and scandal. In its certainty that a republic was just around the corner, it also appears from the vantage point of the twenty-first century, after the failure of the 1999 referendum, too confident, too willing to assume unanimity of dreams for the country's future. Yet even if such unanimity had existed, determining how to implement such a vision was a tall order for the review committee.

The breadth of the task was reflected in the committee's terms of reference. Its overarching task was 'to advise ... what steps need to be taken to ensure that the [honours] system serves the needs of Australian society into the next century'. More specifically, it was to gauge 'community awareness' of the system; ascertain 'the range and types of achievements' that Australians believed deserved honours; assess 'the appropriateness' of the existing system, and of the areas of endeavour which it recognised; consider whether it met 'community standards of access, equity, fairness and social justice', and determine 'any barriers to recognition'; investigate whether any new awards were needed, or any alterations to present ones; explore the issue of precedence, and the question of what kinds of activities received (or should receive) which levels of award; look at the

18 Commonwealth of Australia, House of Representatives, *Parliamentary Debates*, 21 June 1995 (Frank Walker).

19 Commonwealth of Australia, House of Representatives, *Parliamentary Debates*, 21 June 1995 (Frank Walker).

processes by which nominations were made and considered; and ‘make appropriate recommendations’.²⁰ Such a comprehensive brief raised the possibility of a complete overhaul of the system.

When the committee presented its report in November 1995, it was a large and detailed document, coming in at more than 400 pages, including over 100 pages of appendices. After reviewing the existing system and its history, the committee outlined the research and public consultation it had undertaken. An initial survey by the market research company AGB-McNair had revealed that many people knew little about the country’s honours system, with less than half of the respondents able to name the Order of Australia, and more than half unaware that it was possible for them to make nominations. Perhaps unsurprisingly, ‘bravery’ and ‘community service’ were deemed most worthy of recognition, while ‘long service’ and ‘political and public service’ were each considered unworthy by almost a quarter of participants.²¹ Focus group research then sought to delve more deeply into attitudes towards, and knowledge of, the system.²² The results affirmed that members of the public lacked familiarity with it, and were unsure about its processes. They also showed ‘resistance towards’ the conferral of honours upon people perceived ‘to be “just doing their job”’, such as public servants or members of the legal profession, and a desire to see rewarded instead ‘[a]cts of heroism, community service and medical/scientific achievement’. The research suggested to the committee that honours were viewed ‘mainly as the preserve of organisations and powerful or well-connected individuals’, and it showed a desire on the part of the community for awards to go more often to “ordinary Australians” and “quiet achievers”’, as well as for a greater emphasis on ‘community service and the environment’.²³

The committee had also surveyed the Order of Australia Association, learning the opinions of recipients towards their honours, and examined awards and nominations within the order over the preceding five years.²⁴ Among their findings was that while the success rate for nominations of people born overseas was relatively high, the number of nominations was low, and that both the quantity of nominations of women and their representation at the upper levels of the order were ‘concern[s]’. Observing

20 *A Matter of Honour*, xiv.

21 *A Matter of Honour*, 94–96, quotes on 96.

22 *A Matter of Honour*, 99.

23 *A Matter of Honour*, 101.

24 *A Matter of Honour*, 114–52.

a 'perception that class, status or wealth play[ed] some role in the allocation of awards and the determination of award level', the committee thought this view would continue 'as long as the current concentration of higher awards in affluent areas and high status occupations continues'.²⁵ Finally, the committee undertook a process of public consultation, seeking submissions, holding public meetings, and meeting interested parties.²⁶ A wide range of issues were pressed by respondents during this process, including a need for better publicising the system, a desire to see more emphasis placed on voluntary work over paid, and 'broader access ... and a fairer distribution of awards at all levels', as well as matters relating to specific awards, suggestions for the revival of British honours or the creation of new distinctions, and a range of other matters.²⁷

Having outlined its research and findings, the committee then dealt with the structure and administration of the honours system, and the issue of accessibility, making a total of 67 recommendations.²⁸ Among the most intriguing was that a group award be created within the Order of Australia, which would allow for the recognition of 'collective effort'; such a distinction 'would have particular value for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities', for whom 'the group is of prime importance'.²⁹ Redrafting of the criteria for awards in the order was also suggested, in order to focus more upon the extent to which the service being recognised went 'above and beyond' what might usually be expected in a specific area of activity, rather than whether it was performed at a local, national, or global level.³⁰ Several recommendations dealt with the question of publicity, suggesting a range of strategies for increasing public awareness and knowledge of the system. The development of materials for school children and new citizens, as well as in translation, was urged, as well as the creation of an information kit about the Order of Australia.³¹ In order to redress inequities, the committee recommended both 'raising awareness of ... imbalances' among those responsible for administering the system or selecting recipients, and 'changes to award processes', as well as 'improved data collection and management'; the possibility of quotas was rejected.³²

25 *A Matter of Honour*, 152.

26 *A Matter of Honour*, 153.

27 *A Matter of Honour*, 155–73, quote on 163.

28 *A Matter of Honour*, xxii–xxxv.

29 *A Matter of Honour*, xxiii, 194–96, quotes on xxiii and 194.

30 *A Matter of Honour*, xxiii.

31 *A Matter of Honour*, xxvii–xxviii.

32 *A Matter of Honour*, xxix, 263–64, quotes on xxix and 264.

Whether the changes would have been implemented and Walker's bold vision realised—if indeed the committee's proposals were enough to accomplish that vision—would never be tested, for the government lost office in March 1996, and the incoming administration of Liberal leader John Howard was not likely to be sympathetic to it. Detailing which of the recommendations his government had accepted in the House of Representatives in October 1997, Howard stated that full assent had been given to 35, while four had been partly accepted, 21 rejected, and seven left to the prerogative of Government House. Four other resolutions 'unconnected with the report' had also been made. Among those dismissed were that the Order of Australia should revert to having three levels only (companion, officer, and member); that the military and general divisions should be combined; that eligibility criteria for the order's grades should be rewritten 'to be clearer and more inclusive'; and that a group award should be created. Nor was the government keen to create all of the suggested new awards, discarding proposals for a Conspicuous Service Order for defence services, a 'community based merit award, outside the Order of Australia', and a Voluntary Service Medal for long-term community work. Unsurprisingly, the committee's recommendation that the prime minister request the Queen to no longer make awards in her personal gift was also rejected, and, probably wisely, the government also refused to insist that 'the nomination and assessment process for awards in the Order of Australia address the nominee's commitment to Australian community values'.³³

Other recommendations turned down included those for the restructuring of the council for the Order of Australia—the intent of which was partly to insist upon a more equal gender balance and greater diversity in that body—and to expect the honours secretariat to play a more active role in seeking nominations from under-represented groups, as well as that the Queen's Birthday honours list be abandoned in favour of announcing all awards in the Order of Australia on 26 January and all defence awards on Anzac Day. Those that did meet with approval tended to be those that represented less far-reaching change—'finetuning', to use Kemp's word, rather than transforming the system. Among them were proposals for the development of a publicity strategy, to make the system part of the civics curricula, and for the extension and enhancement of various

33 Commonwealth of Australia, House of Representatives, *Parliamentary Debates*, 29 October 1997 (John Howard).

defence and other service medals. The committee's emphases on raising the participation of previously under-represented groups, increasing the transparency of the awards process, and better reflecting community values in the types of work being honoured were to be followed largely through the government's agreement to proposals for improving publicity and producing more detailed citations when awards were conferred.³⁴ If it was a shame that the committee's hard work and thoughtful recommendations were not given more support, however, the government's lukewarm response may also have avoided some potential hazards, particularly in the idea that nominees should display a commitment to Australian values, a deeply complicated and slippery concept that could have consumed much effort for little gain.

Holding up half the sky: Women and honours

A significant strand in the review committee's consideration of access to the honours system was the issue of women's lack of representation. This under-representation was not new, and nor, as we have seen throughout this book, was it a novel concern. According to the 1995 review, women were 'under-represented as both nominators and nominees' for the Order of Australia, making up less than a quarter of nominators, and receiving only slightly over a quarter of nominations.³⁵ As we saw in the previous chapter, one common response to complaints about the lack of gender balance in awards in recent years had been that while women received fewer nominations, when they were nominated they had a higher chance of success; thus, the solution was for greater numbers of women to be nominated. The review committee poured some cold water over this idea, observing that while nominations for women were more successful than those for men at the lowest level of the order—the OAM (Medal of the Order of Australia)—it was not so at any of the other grades. In their view, the likely explanation was that community service, in which field women predominated, tended to be recognised at this level. According to their figures, 36 per cent of OAMs went to women, but only 15 per cent

34 Commonwealth of Australia, House of Representatives, *Parliamentary Debates*, 29 October 1997 (John Howard).

35 *A Matter of Honour*, 250.

of the highest grade, the AC (Companion of the Order of Australia).³⁶ Agreeing with ‘many submissions writers’, the committee felt that ‘these outcomes show women are not receiving appropriate recognition ... for their contribution to society’, and suggested that ‘the primary reason’ was ‘[t]he lack of relevance of the system to women’.³⁷

Various factors contributed to women’s low levels of inclusion, in the committee’s view. One was that women were less conversant with the system than men, and ‘less likely to see the Order of Australia as a mechanism for community acknowledgement of the sorts of contributions they make to society’. Another was a lack of access to professional or business networks that could offer guidance on making use of the system. The fact that information aimed especially at women had not been produced was also deemed ‘a significant factor’, while a number of submissions had also observed a lack of female representation on the council for the Order of Australia. More consequential, however, was the way that the criteria for awards were framed. Those for the upper grades emphasised ‘the sphere in which contributions are made’—whether local, national, or global—and were ‘interpreted as relating to contributions in the professional, research and business fields’, where men generally predominated.³⁸ Other areas of activity, in the committee’s view, were equally important, but were being overshadowed. In their assessment, the Order of Australia ‘appear[ed] to contain an institutionalised bias’ that led to community service at a local level being undervalued compared to contributions in professional arenas, ‘regardless of how pre-eminent or outstanding the local contribution is’.³⁹ These observations underlay the recommendations to enhance publicity for the Order of Australia, increase female representation on its council, and rewrite the criteria for its various grades. The latter two proposals not being adopted, it is not possible to ascertain whether or not they would have improved women’s position in the biannual distribution of awards. What is beyond doubt, however, is that the issue has only grown in prominence in the years since.

Indeed, by the early twenty-first century, the issue of gender inequity had become perhaps the strongest strand of criticism of the Australian honours system, and of the Order of Australia in particular. A campaign to address

36 *A Matter of Honour*, 250–51.

37 *A Matter of Honour*, 251.

38 *A Matter of Honour*, 252.

39 *A Matter of Honour*, 253.

the situation was initiated in 2011 by Carol Schwartz, the founding chair of the Women's Leadership Institute Australia and herself a member of the order, supported by Our Community, a group supporting not-for-profit organisations. In February that year Schwartz launched *Advancing Women: Women & the Order of Australia*, a guide to the nomination process intended to boost the inclusion of women in the order, which was sent to all members of parliament, mayors, and shire presidents.⁴⁰ Explaining that they desired to 'challenge and change women's role in society', Schwartz and the group managing director of Our Community, Denis Moriarty, sought to increase women's inclusion in the Order of Australia as part of a larger effort to seek 'systems changes' and 'to empower women at all levels to take their place in all parts of Australian society'.⁴¹ Honours, the guide observed, embodied that which the community considered 'deserving of recognition' or 'honourable'; there was 'no reason why women should not make up half the honours lists'.⁴² Readers were encouraged to nominate a woman—or indeed, someone from another under-represented group, such as those from non-English-speaking backgrounds—and led through the process of preparing a nomination, including identifying potential recipients, gathering material, writing convincingly, and arranging referees.⁴³

The next year, in an opinion piece in the Melbourne *Age* following the announcement of the Australia Day list, Schwartz suggested that, if the list embodied 'the qualities Australia admires and the fields that Australians look up to', it also showed 'that Australians think the things men do are twice as worthy as the things that women do'. Finding women once again honoured more frequently at the lower levels of the order than the upper, and constituting less than a third of the list overall, she was especially 'discourag[ed]' to observe that, rather than improving, women's share of recognition had begun shrinking. It seemed clear to Schwartz that women's inclusion in the system would not reach parity without some form of active intervention. Although she did not claim discrimination in the process of making awards, she suggested the problem was systemic. Fields of activity in which women predominated tended not to receive

40 *Advancing Women: Women and the Order of Australia* (Melbourne: Our Community and Women's Leadership Institute Australia, 2011); Women's Leadership Institute Australia and Our Community, 'New Campaign Launched to Boost the Number of Female Order of Australia Recipients: Business Leader Says Public Recognition of Women Remains Elusive', media release, 25 January 2011.

41 *Advancing Women*, 3.

42 *Advancing Women*, 7.

43 *Advancing Women*, 7, 10–15.

recognition—she cited teaching, nursing, and social work as examples—while women in more frequently recognised areas of activity still received fewer awards than men in those fields. Past award choices, she argued, created ‘stereotypes’ of the kinds of individuals who deserved to be nominated, and these were ‘self-perpetuating’. What was needed was a ‘widening [of] concepts’ as to the kinds of activities that were worthy of recognition, and for women to become better at ‘organising networks’ to recognise each other. The problem would soon disappear, she concluded, if more people simply began nominating women.⁴⁴

Schwartz and others continued to pursue the goal of gender parity in honours lists over the following years, and numerous critiques appeared in media coverage of those lists. In June 2012, enjoining readers ‘to be proud of all our leaders, male and female’, and ‘to act with respect for their efforts and achievements ... with a blind spot to their gender’, Schwartz insisted that there was ‘no reason why our Honours would not be split equally between men and women’.⁴⁵ A couple of years later, after the announcement of the 2014 Australia Day list, veteran feminist activist Anne Summers, who had been women’s issues adviser for the governments of Bob Hawke and Paul Keating and who had been appointed AO in 1989, was quoted asserting that ‘urgent intervention’ and ‘affirmative action’ were necessary.⁴⁶ The chair of the Order of Australia’s council, Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston, was reported to have stated that ‘[w]e need to encourage more nominations for deserving women’ if ‘a 50:50 split’ was to be attained.⁴⁷ A few days later in an opinion piece in the *Age*, Schwartz expressed ‘great disappointment’ that the list had shown no improvement—while in Britain, for the first time, women had outnumbered men—and advocated a ‘50-50 target’ for membership of the order’s council, for the names put forward by nominating organisations, and for each honours list, as well as greater transparency in award criteria.⁴⁸

44 Carol Schwartz, ‘Too Little Honour for the World and Work of Women’, *Age* (Melbourne), 8 February 2012 [online].

45 Carol Schwartz, ‘Women Experts: A Shameful Decline’, 25 June 2012, Women’s Leadership Institute Australia, accessed 22 April 2014, www.wlia.com.au/story_page?sId=32&PHPSESSID=24b4493b29f2e31d5d353aab64d4f78d (site discontinued, available at web.archive.org/web/20150318115341/http://wlia.com.au/story_page?sId=32).

46 Jill Stark, ‘Women Still Short-Changed in the Mystery-Box Honours List’, *Sunday Age* (Melbourne), 26 January 2014 [online].

47 Jill Stark, ‘Women Still Short-Changed in the Mystery-Box Honours List’, *Sunday Age* (Melbourne), 26 January 2014 [online].

48 Carol Schwartz, ‘Lots of Awards, But Too Few Women’, *Age* (Melbourne), 1 February 2014 [online].

In June the Queen's Birthday list provoked further censure, with feminist and writer Clementine Ford questioning why women remained under-recognised, and what assumptions about the relationship between ideas of merit and gender underlay the imbalance. Like so many before her, she called upon the community to nominate more women in future.⁴⁹

By the beginning of 2017 it was being reported that the system required reform, although also that the proportions of women nominees and recipients were higher than at any time in the past five years. Nevertheless, they remained firmly stuck at around a third. Summers thought such a rate of inclusion came 'pitifully short'. Worse, she contended that, with its reliance on nominations from the community, the system was 'cumbersome, onerous and ultimately biased'. It did not help, she suggested, that it did not allow for 'measuring BAME [Black, Asian, and minority ethnic] or disability or how many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders' had received awards. If the country did not 'change radically the way we select honourees' it would not be able 'to maintain our pretensions towards equality', she concluded.⁵⁰ While the 'elderly white well-educated males' who dominated the list were undoubtedly worthy, wrote Vivienne Pearson in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 'surely they deserve to be joined by others who make up our rich society'. Besides the gender disparity evident in the list, Pearson noted that names 'of Anglo-Celtic origin' seemed to predominate. She joined the chorus calling for Australians to use their power to nominate to remedy the problem; as well as women, she encouraged readers to nominate individuals of non-European backgrounds, younger people, those in same-sex relationships, immigrants, and refugees. To those who felt that the system was 'old fashioned and meaningless in this modern day', she replied that this could only be so 'if we allow it to remain unrepresentative of our communities'.⁵¹

Jenna Price, writing in the same paper a little later in the year, was less forgiving of the system's failings. Each new list, she stated, left her 'totally infuriated'. They were catalogues of 'white men getting yet another reward for the jobs they are already paid to do', she wrote, while the process for

49 Clementine Ford, 'Why Are So Few Women Awarded OAMs?' 9 June 2014, *Daily Life*, accessed 6 September 2014, www.dailylife.com.au/news-and-views/dl-opinion/why-are-so-few-women-awarded-oams-20140608-39qyj.html?rand=1402258561372.

50 Anne Summers, 'Our Honours System Doesn't Reflect Who We Are', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 January 2017 [online].

51 Vivienne Pearson, 'The Australia Day Honours List Still Has a Gender Problem. But You Can Help', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 January 2017 [online].

nominating someone was too demanding to make it easy to put other kinds of people forward. She found a ray of hope in the establishment of a group known as ‘Honour A Woman’, which was working to achieve gender parity in the system by supporting those seeking to make a nomination; the group aimed to achieve their goal by 2020.⁵² When the next list, in June 2017, revealed no increase in women’s rate of inclusion, but rather a slight decrease, Price argued that it was time to ‘entirely recast’ the Order of Australia’s council, which itself did not include women in equal numbers.⁵³ As these examples suggest, a new note of frustration had by now begun to creep into calls for gender equity in honours. With the proportion of women seemingly stuck at around a third—a figure that had been achieved, at least at the lower levels of the system, as long ago as the 1920s and 1930s—and little evidence that the dramatic changes in women’s statuses and life experiences since the 1960s were being reflected in the distribution of honours, some critics were no longer willing to adopt a strategy of waiting for the system to catch up to wider social currents. It is too early to tell whether the efforts of individuals and groups such as Price and Honour A Woman will produce lasting change, but it appears clear that the chorus of voices demanding gender parity is growing louder with each passing list. One indication they might be beginning to find success was provided by the June 2018 list, in which women outnumbered men in awards of the AC for the first time.⁵⁴

2014: Return of the knighthood

Prominent as the question of gender equity in awards was becoming, it was not the most arresting controversy over the system in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Few would have guessed when the federal election of September 2013 delivered victory to the Liberal–National coalition led by Tony Abbott that the question of honours would become a defining feature of his government. Yet so it was. To the general surprise of almost the entire country—including most of his own

52 Jenna Price, ‘Fill Out That Bloody Form and Nominate a Woman for an Australian Honour’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 April 2017 [online]. See also ‘Honour A Woman’, Facebook group, accessed 5 August 2021, www.facebook.com/Honourawoman/.

53 Jenna Price, ‘Australian Honours: It’s Time to Ditch the Men at the Top’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 June 2017 [online].

54 ‘More Women Than Men in Top Queen’s Birthday Honours’, *Guardian* (Australia), 11 June 2018 [online].

party colleagues—in March 2014 Abbott announced that the Queen had, at his request, amended the letters patent relating to the Order of Australia to re-establish the grade of knight or dame (AK/AD). Up to four of the new awards could be made in any one year, with the first two recipients to be the departing governor-general, Quentin Bryce, and her replacement, Peter Cosgrove. Asserting that it was ‘fitting that the Queen’s representative be so honoured’, Abbott’s statement declared that the titles would be conferred upon individuals who had ‘accepted public office rather than sought it and who can never, by virtue of that office, ever entirely return to private life’.⁵⁵ Responding to questions following the announcement, he described the titles as ‘an important grace note in our national life’. Charged with having apparently rejected the possibility of restoring titles the previous year, when discussing suggestions that he might follow New Zealand’s example, he stated that what he had then dismissed was doing ‘what New Zealand ha[d] done’, and altering the companionship of the order to become a knighthood.⁵⁶

What New Zealand had done, in fact, was to restore the titles of knight and dame to the upper two grades of the New Zealand Order of Merit, from which they had been removed by the Labour Government of Helen Clark in 2000. After taking office in November 2008, the country’s National Party prime minister, John Key, had announced the following year that the top two levels of the order—which since 2000 had been known as principal companions and distinguished companions, and had not conferred titles upon recipients—would revert to being termed knights or dames grand companion, and knights or dames companion, each carrying the titles of ‘Sir’ and ‘Dame’. Reactions within New Zealand had been mixed. The *Waikato Times* applauded the switch, remarking that the system established in 2000 had been ‘a veritable alphabet soup of honours long in letters but short in standing’. Contesting the idea that it represented a return to the days of subservience to Britain, or was inconsistent with the nation’s egalitarian spirit, the paper contended that New Zealand’s ‘growing cultural maturity and underlying egalitarian

55 Tony Abbott, ‘Press Conference, Parliament House, Canberra’, transcript, 25 March 2014, *PM Transcripts: Transcripts from the Prime Ministers of Australia*, Australian Government, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, accessed 3 June 2019, pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-23367.

56 Tony Abbott, ‘Press Conference, Parliament House, Canberra’, transcript, 25 March 2014, *PM Transcripts: Transcripts from the Prime Ministers of Australia*, Australian Government, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, accessed 3 June 2019, pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-23367; ‘PM Tony Abbott Rules Out Reinstating Knights and Dames in Oz’, *Sunday Telegraph* (Sydney), 22 December 2013 [online].

ethos ... creates a better environment for titles', which were now earned through merit rather than rewards of time serving or birth.⁵⁷ Key's own argument was that the titles were 'a visible sign of celebrating success for a lifetime of service and achievement'.⁵⁸

Certainly the decision was acceptable to many who had received the distinctions of principal or distinguished companion in the interim. Seventy-two (out of a total of 85) soon accepted an offer to be redesignated knights or dames.⁵⁹ But the move did not escape criticism. Describing herself as 'an English-born New Zealander', one correspondent to the *Christchurch Press* expressed concern that the government appeared to be 'hankering after a corrupt system ... based on cronyism and privilege' and decried awards that '[set people] above their fellows'. '[A]s a modern democracy', she argued, the country ought to 'have grown beyond the need for such archaic and feudal recognition of service to country'.⁶⁰ Labour Party leader Phil Goff, meanwhile, was reported to have condemned the revival of titular distinctions as having 'brought back colonial airs and graces New Zealand had worked for decades to free itself of'.⁶¹ Another, more complex, response has been to suggest that titles be retained, but made 'more Kiwi' by the adoption of Māori language equivalents or translations, such as 'Tā' in place of 'Sir', and 'Kahurangi' in place of 'Dame'.⁶²

Resurrection of the titles of knight and dame in the Order of Australia had been advocated occasionally since their abolition by the Hawke Government in 1986. In 1990 it was reported that John Hewson, the leader of the Liberal Party and opposition leader, was considering bringing back Australian knighthoods, and in 1992 a motion to include knighthoods in the order was accepted by the National Party's federal council, though it rejected the possibility of reviving recommendations for British honours.⁶³ Beginning in 2006, the monarchist group Australians for Constitutional Monarchy (ACM) had conducted an energetic if ineffective campaign for

57 'Nothing Like a Dame, or a Sir', *Waikato Times* (Hamilton), 11 March 2009, 6.

58 Tracy Watkins, 'Arise New Zealand', *Dominion Post* (Wellington), 9 March 2009, 1.

59 Mandy Wong, 'Royal Honours System', *Te Ara—The Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, accessed 8 August 2017, www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/royal-honours-system/print.

60 Diana Bradley, letter to the editor, *Press* (Christchurch), 10 March 2009, 10.

61 'Nothing Like a Dame, or a Sir', *Waikato Times* (Hamilton), 11 March 2009, 6.

62 Dean Knight, 'New Zealand Order of Merit: Te Reo Appellations', 31 December 2010, *LAWS179 Elephants and the Law*, accessed 8 August 2017, www.laws179.co.nz/2010/12/new-zealand-order-of-merit-te-reo.html.

63 Tracey Aubin, 'Knighthoods on Hewson Agenda', *Australian*, 1 June 1990, 3, newspaper cuttings on the Australian honours system, National Library of Australia, Canberra; Michael Gordon, 'Bring Back Knights—Nats', *Sunday Age* (Melbourne), 6 September 1992, 7.

the restoration of the AK/AD. David Flint, ACM's national convenor, authored several posts on the subject for the group's website, arguing that Australia's highest achievers lacked the recognition on the world stage afforded by a knighthood or damehood, and that the AK/AD level of the order should be restored, either allowing recipients who objected to titles to refuse them, or without conferring the title or accolade.⁶⁴ Another to support the idea was columnist Rex Jory, who suggested in the *Adelaide Advertiser* in 2009 that there was 'surely ... no harm in our leading citizens being recognised by being given a simple honorific in front of their names'. Noting the argument that titles were elitist, Jory asked, '[i]sn't that precisely the point?' 'Aren't Australia's leading citizens, people, who have made a unique contribution to society,' he continued, 'entitled to be instantly recognised?' Moreover, he pointed out, a range of other titles were accepted and used in Australian society, including in the army, academia, the church, and politics.⁶⁵

Abbott, as many commentators were aware, had been ACM's inaugural executive director in the early 1990s, and perhaps this goes some way towards explaining a decision that many found inexplicable. His mentor, former prime minister John Howard, had during his time in office explicitly ruled out restoring either knighthoods or imperial honours in Australia. Quoted in 2002 saying that he considered 'imperial honours and imperial descriptions' to be 'something in the past for Australia', he gave it as his opinion that neither imperial honours nor titular awards 'suit[ed] the egalitarian Australia of which I am prime minister'.⁶⁶ Journalists delighted in noting that he had stated in his autobiography, *Lazarus Rising*, that although he had been encouraged to resuscitate knighthoods, he had chosen not to do so, believing that they were seen by 'many, even conservative Australians, [as] somewhat anachronistic'.⁶⁷

64 See, for example, David Flint, 'Order of Australia: A Canadian View', 12 February 2006, *Australians for Constitutional Monarchy*, accessed 5 August 2021, norepublic.com.au/order-of-australia-a-canadian-view-2/; David Flint, 'Knights and Dames', 28 January 2008, *Australians for Constitutional Monarchy*, accessed 5 August 2021, norepublic.com.au/knights-and-dames-2/; David Flint, 'There is Nothing Like a Dame', 25 April 2007, *Australians for Constitutional Monarchy*, accessed 5 August 2021, norepublic.com.au/there-is-nothing-like-a-dame/. The accolade is the traditional touch on both shoulders with a sword that accompanies knighthood.

65 Rex Jory, 'Hypocrisy and a Lack of Political Courage Will Block a Return to Knighthoods', *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 31 August 2009, 18.

66 'PM Not Interested in Knighthood', *Age* (Melbourne), 12 April 2002 [online]. A decade later, however, Howard was appointed to the Order of Merit, an honour in the Queen's personal gift. 'John Howard Appointed to Order of Merit', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 January 2012 [online].

67 John Howard, *Lazarus Rising: A Personal and Political Autobiography*, revised ed. (Sydney: HarperCollins, 2011), 240.

A wave of criticism from across the political spectrum followed the announcement that the AK/AD was to be awarded once more. One target was Abbott's lack of consultation, even within his own party room.⁶⁸ Another line of critique, which had arisen when the award had first been established under the Fraser Government, focused upon the position in which other recipients were placed. Michael Shmith noted this change to their status, describing those who had been appointed companions as 'suddenly down a notch: second-class citizens', with officers, members, and medal-holders likewise downgraded.⁶⁹ For both media commentators and members of the public, however, it was the symbolism and meanings of Abbott's action that drew the most attention. Many saw the revival of knighthood as embodying a desire on Abbott's part to return to a more comfortable past, free of the uncertainties over identity, and the social and cultural upheaval that had transformed Australian life since the 1960s. This was the theme of one letter to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, which portrayed the move as part of a 'headlong race towards the Good Old Days', and, among other things, pondered if an 'Abbottian Calendar, in which 2014 becomes 1954' would be next.⁷⁰ Similar jokes were rife in newspapers and social media. Another letter 'look[ed] forward to the sight of Sir Peter Cosgrove greeting visitors in a suit of mail', while still another was eager 'to spend the new shilling and for the declaration of war on Germany'.⁷¹ Labor's Mark Dreyfus, meanwhile, wondered if the country was 'rushing back to a reintroduction of slavery or some other institution from the 19th century'.⁷²

Part of this association with the past was a perception that the titles were themselves outdated, relics of a bygone era that conjured images not only of medieval knights on horseback, but of a long-defunct British empire. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, if not before, the term 'imperial honours' was often applied not only to British awards, as it had been in the past, but also to knighthoods (and, by extension, damehoods) more generally. Counting out the possibility of reviving

68 See 'Abbott on Back Foot Over Knights and Dames', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 March 2014 [online].

69 Michael Shmith, 'Abbott Drags Us Back in Time to a Knights' Realm', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 March 2014 [online].

70 David Barrett, letter to the editor, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 March 2014 [online].

71 Don Wormald, letter to the editor, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 March 2014 [online]; Andrew Dillon, letter to the editor, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 March 2014 [online].

72 Stephanie Balogh and Pia Akerman, 'Good Knight to a Dame as Tony Abbott Revives Titles', *Australian*, 26 March 2014 [online].

either British honours or titular awards in 2002, Howard had used the phrase ‘imperial honours and imperial descriptions’, but many others were not so nuanced. By nature, knighthoods were for many observers imperial awards, redolent of and indistinguishable from the aristocracy that had been so much a part of empire, and equally unsuited to an independent and egalitarian Australia. Commentary on Abbott’s revival of the AK/AD sometimes blurred the distinction in precisely this way. ‘God Save the Queen’, cried the front page of Brisbane’s *Courier-Mail* the following morning, announcing that the ‘[i]mperial honours system’ had been ‘reintroduced’.⁷³ James Jeffrey, writing in the *Australian*, also referred to ‘the restoration of imperial honours’, while Chris Uhlmann, presenting the *AM* program on Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) radio, described Abbott’s action as ‘restor[ing] a hybrid of the British honours system’.⁷⁴

Such was also the association behind the many negative responses that suggested the titles were inherently aristocratic and thus unsuited to an egalitarian society—the selfsame arguments that had been made more than a century earlier, and with which this book began. Bringing back these titles, argued one correspondent in the *Australian*, ‘show[ed] that the Abbott government is hell-bent on returning to a society with lords and ladies and all the petty social snobbery and class distinctions that are an inevitable concomitant’.⁷⁵ Former Western Australian Labor and then independent member of parliament Larry Graham wrote that Abbott had ‘woke[n] up back in 18th century UK and re-introduced the class system here’; he lamented the weakening of what he considered one of Australia’s ‘great strengths’, its avoidance of ‘the pitfalls of entrenched class and privilege’. Like many others would do, he turned to Daniel Deniehy’s famous phrase—‘bunyip aristocracy’—to decry the move.⁷⁶ The *Sydney Morning Herald* did the same, with a front-page headline reading ‘Welcome to Abbott’s Bunyip Aristocracy’.⁷⁷ Although not himself using the phrase, Labor’s Sam Dastyari seemed to be seeking to

73 ‘God Save the Queen’, *Courier-Mail* (Brisbane), 26 March 2014, 1.

74 James Jeffrey, ‘Knight and Dame’, *Australian*, 26 March 2014 [online]; ‘Bemusement in the UK Over Australian Plans to Reintroduce Knighthoods’, *AM with Chris Uhlmann*, story reported by Mary Gearin, 26 March 2014, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, accessed 27 March 2014, www.abc.net.au/am/content/2014/s3971472.htm.

75 Barry Fox, letter to the editor, *Australian*, 27 March 2014 [online].

76 Larry Graham, ‘Abbott is Seeking a World That Simply Doesn’t Exist’, *Canberra Times*, 26 March 2014 [online].

77 Tony Wright, ‘Welcome to Abbott’s Bunyip Aristocracy’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 March 2014 [online].

emulate Deniehy's scathing rhetoric in a mocking speech delivered in the Senate. 'What greater honour could the subjects of this land girt by sea aspire to', Dastyari asked, in a later edited version published in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, than to have their 'tasselled shoulders touched in accolade, kneeling before the court of a distant Queen'?⁷⁸ But Deniehy's phrase had come a long way since he first uttered it. As it had come to be used during the twentieth century, it was no longer a critique of hereditary title and privilege alone, but also of the non-hereditary titles attached to knighthood and damehood.

In a similar way, many people found the titles of 'Sir' and 'Dame' too evocative of monarchy, and critiqued them—and those who received them—on the grounds that they were incompatible with a future Australian republic. One correspondent to the *Australian*, for example, found Bryce's acceptance of the title of 'Dame' irreconcilable with her declared support for an Australian republic, describing it as 'an honour that reeks of the monarchy'.⁷⁹ Indeed, much of the debate that followed Abbott's announcement revolved around the issue of an Australian republic, with monarchist and republican advocates squaring off throughout the media. David Morris, the national director of the Australian Republican Movement, was quoted saying that reviving the titles was returning to 'a colonial frame of mind that we have outgrown as a nation', while Flint argued that reviving 'knighthoods and titles such as Queens Counsel' was 'appropriate while we remain a constitutional monarchy'.⁸⁰ Introducing a televised debate between Flint, as the monarchist voice, and former republic referendum political campaign director Greg Barns, as the republican one, the ABC's 7.30 host Sarah Ferguson stated that reviving the titles had '[brought] the Queen back into the centre of Australia's highest order', describing it as a step that had 'delighted monarchists and brought howls of dismay from Republicans'. The conversation that followed centred on the question of whether such titles were a suitable way

78 Sam Dastyari, 'Knighthoods Return: Welcome to the Game of Tones', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 March 2014 [online].

79 Ewan McLean, letter to the editor, *Australian*, 27 March 2014 [online].

80 Matthew Knott, 'Tony Abbott Reintroduces Knight and Dame Honours for Australians', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 March 2014 [online].

to recognise achievement and service, and part of the country's tradition, or merely silly and inappropriate in a modern, independent country no longer tied to Britain.⁸¹

Such was the passion aroused by this contest that relatively few acknowledged—or, perhaps, realised—that the AK/AD was an Australian award, within the country's own national honour, and as able to be awarded by any future president as the other grades of the Order of Australia, of which the Queen had been sovereign ever since its inception in 1975. One who did was Malcolm Turnbull, by this time a former leader of the Liberal Party but an emerging rival for the prime ministership, who had once led the country's republican movement. Observing that a number of republics had orders of knighthood, including France, Italy, Argentina, Peru, Guatemala, and Chile, he advised supporters of an Australian republic not to 'lose too much sleep over the Prime Minister's decision'.⁸² Some commentators took his reference to Peru, Argentina, and Guatemala to be a concealed criticism, however, and it almost certainly was. In the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Lisa Cox suggested that he was 'gently mock[ing]' the decision.⁸³ Such a focus on the split between monarchists and republicans was probably inevitable, when Abbott himself was known to be a committed monarchist, and his main rival for the party leadership, Turnbull, a former leader of the republican movement. Whatever the legal or constitutional status of the revived titles, however, they carried with them too much baggage from the past to be evaluated simply as a mode of recognition for deserving individuals.

Yet it is important to remember that, as ever, community views were not unanimous, and there were those who supported the resurrection of titular honours. For one correspondent to the *Australian*, the issue was one of heritage. Praising Abbott's move, he stated that '[i]f we throw off the past, eventually we will be left with nothing'.⁸⁴ Another appeared

81 Sarah Ferguson, David Flint, and Greg Barns, "'Juvenile Baubles" or "Appropriate Recognition"—Knights and Dames Debated', transcript of debate on 7.30, 25 March 2014, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, accessed 11 August 2017, www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2014/s3971393.htm.

82 Malcolm Turnbull, 'Australian Knights and the Republic', 25 March 2014, *Malcolm Turnbull*, accessed 15 June 2021, www.malcolmtturnbull.com.au/media/australian-knights-and-the-republic. He repeated the comparison in a speech at Parliament House. Lisa Cox, 'Australia Like Esteemed Republics Peru and Guatemala: Malcolm Turnbull Gently Mocks Reintroduction of Knights and Dames', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 March 2014 [online].

83 Lisa Cox, 'Australia Like Esteemed Republics Peru and Guatemala: Malcolm Turnbull Gently Mocks Reintroduction of Knights and Dames', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 March 2014 [online].

84 Paul Chandler, letter to the editor, *Australian*, 27 March 2014 [online].

to agree with Abbott's characterisation of the awards as a 'grace note' in society, writing that the return of titles was 'to be welcomed, as a way of bringing back a form of cultural etiquette that recognises long-term and committed service by our citizens'. For that writer too it was also a matter of being able to feel part of, and to be proud of, a past heritage. 'Not all aspects of Australia's monarchical [sic] history have to be dumbed down, or cringed at, in order for us to feel proud or patriotic', he wrote.⁸⁵ Moreover, while it may have appeared from much of the public discussion—in both old media and social media—that support for the move was rare, the dramas of Britain's Brexit vote in June 2016 and Donald Trump's election as United States president that November must make us wary of easy assumptions about community opinion. One indication that support was not as entirely absent as it might have appeared was an online poll on News.com.au asking whether bringing knighthoods and damehoods back was '[a] suitable honour for great Australians' or '[a]n imperial anachronism'. While such polls are problematic sources and cannot be taken at face value, not least because respondents are self-selected consumers of a particular media source, it is noteworthy that at the time of access, more than 40 per cent of a total of 7,541 respondents had plumped for the former.⁸⁶

Conclusion

Whatever measure of acceptance the revived titles might have gained over time, however, one choice of recipient probably ended that possibility. Unlike the other levels of the order, the AK and AD would be conferred not on the recommendation of the council for the order, but at the prime minister's nomination, although the council's chair would be 'consulted'.⁸⁷ This arrangement in itself had led to some concern, but when it was announced on Australia Day 2015 that the prime minister's choice had fallen upon the monarch's consort, Prince Philip, Duke of

85 Peter Waterhouse, letter to the editor, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 March 2014 [online].

86 See Jennifer Rajca, 'Labor Slams Tony Abbott's Decision to Bring Back Knights and Dames', 26 March 2014, *News.com*, accessed 28 March 2014, www.news.com.au/news/national/labor-slams-tony-abbotts-decision-to-bring-back-knights-and-dames/news-story/4e85d23cd49dc691f751258bd3a950c7.

87 Tony Abbott, 'Press Conference, Parliament House, Canberra', transcript, 25 March 2014, *PM Transcripts: Transcripts from the Prime Ministers of Australia*, Australian Government, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, accessed 3 June 2019, pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/release/transcript-23367; Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 'Reinstatement of Knights and Dames in the Order of Australia', factsheet, March 2014.

Edinburgh, concern became outrage. A key criticism was that the nation's highest honour, announced on the country's national day, had gone to a member of the British royal family, rather than to one of the many deserving Australians who might have been selected. Such was the view of Labor leader Bill Shorten, who was quoted saying that he saw it as 'anachronistic' to 'giv[e] our top award to a British royal', and wondering why 'someone who is Australian in character and activity' had not been picked.⁸⁸ National Party deputy leader Barnaby Joyce too expressed his 'preference ... that these awards go to Australians'.⁸⁹ Yet there were also voices of support. Scott Coleman saw it as 'only right' that someone who had 'devoted his life to the service of the Commonwealth and the people of Australia' should be recognised, while Kevin Andrews, the minister for defence, saw the prince's years of service as 'a phenomenal contribution' and suggested that 'we should just be generous about it'.⁹⁰

Nevertheless, opposition to the award was sufficiently widespread that the media were soon asking whether Abbott's 'knightmare' could spell the end of his prime ministership.⁹¹ Attempting to undo the damage, he stated that in the future all appointments to the Order of Australia, including the AK/AD, would be chosen by the order's council.⁹² No further appointments were made, however. Having survived a leadership spill only a fortnight after the debacle of Prince Philip's award, in September Abbott was replaced as prime minister by Turnbull, and very soon after that, the AK/AD was dropped once more from the honours system. Announcing its removal from the order once again, Turnbull stated that Cabinet had agreed, and the Queen had approved the move. 'Knights and dames', he was quoted as saying, were 'titles that are really anachronistic ... they're

88 Rosie Lewis, 'Prince Philip Knighthood: Tony Abbott Defends Decision', *Australian*, 26 January 2015 [online].

89 Jared Owens, 'Prince Philip Knighthood: Awards "Should be Reserved for Australians"', *Australian*, 27 January 2015 [online].

90 Scott Coleman, 'Prince Philip is a Great Bloke Who Deserves This Knighthood', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 January 2015 [online]; Anna Henderson and Alexandra Kirk, 'Prince Philip "Extremely Deserving" of Australian Knighthood, Says Minister; PM Facing Continuing Backlash From Party Colleagues', 27 January 2015, *ABC News*, accessed 14 June 2021, www.abc.net.au/news/2015-01-27/abbott-facing-growing-backlash-over-prince-philip-knighthood/6047750?nw=0.

91 See, for example, Mark Kenny, 'Tony Abbott Foolish If He Ignores Leadership Rumblings in Wake of Knighthood Decision', *Canberra Times*, 28 January 2015 [online]; James Law and Charles Miranda, 'Tony Abbott's Nightmare Could Be Fatal If His Government Fails to Change Tack', *Courier-Mail* (Brisbane), 27 January 2015 [online].

92 Mark Kenny and James Massola, 'Tony Abbott Moves to Head Off Critics', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 February 2015 [online].

out of date, they're not appropriate in 2015 in Australia'.⁹³ In the ensuing analysis of Abbott's prime ministership, several writers agreed that the decision to bestow the resurrected title on Prince Philip was a significant factor in his downfall. For Wayne Errington and Peter Van Onselen it was 'the catalyst' for the unsuccessful spill motion against Abbott in February 2015; to Niki Savva it was 'the last straw' that brought on the motion.⁹⁴ Surely the honours system had never been so central to public debate, or so controversial, as at this moment, when the choice of one recipient had threatened the political future of a sitting prime minister.

93 Rosie Lewis, 'Knights and Dames Removed From Order of Australia by Malcolm Turnbull', *Australian*, 2 November 2015 [online].

94 Wayne Errington and Peter Van Onselen, *Battleground: Why the Liberal Party Shirtfronted Tony Abbott* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2015), 11, 128, quote on 11; Niki Savva, *The Road to Ruin: How Tony Abbott and Peta Credlin Destroyed Their Own Government* (Melbourne: Scribe, 2016), 147.

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