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New empire order, 1914–1918

The years leading up to the outbreak of war in August 1914 have been described as a ‘belle époque’, a pleasant time of optimism and enjoyment that was abruptly shattered when Britain, France, and their allies went to war against Germany and its allies in what became known as the ‘Great War’, known to us today as World War I. Australia, like New Zealand and the other British dominions, rushed to support the mother country, and became embroiled in the cataclysm and carnage of this destructive conflict. ‘[T]o our last man and our last shilling’, Australia would stand with Britain ‘to help and defend her’, famously declared Labor leader Andrew Fisher, then in opposition.¹ No formal declaration of war was needed, however: Australia was automatically at war with Germany from the time Britain declared war on 4 August 1914. Initially, the conflict made little difference to the operation of the honours system, but over time, the exigencies of war placed increasing pressure on it. By the time peace returned in 1918, the British honours system looked very different than it had in 1914, being vastly expanded by the creation of a large new order, and at last permitting women to be honoured in their own right in significant numbers.

In Australia, these developments would reignite the tussle over State and federal responsibilities for honours recommendations, as the nation’s involvement in war introduced a new element to the uneasy

1 National Archives of Australia, ‘Andrew Fisher: During Office’, *Australia’s Prime Ministers*, National Archives of Australia, accessed 3 September 2020, www.naa.gov.au/explore-collection/australias-prime-ministers/andrew-fisher/during-office#last-shilling.

truce that had been achieved on this question. Before the war's end, controversy would also erupt over the conferral of a barony on Sir John Forrest—a somewhat surprising award given the tradition of passionate opposition to hereditary titles among some sections of the population, and the wary cognisance at the Colonial Office of such feelings. Yet while Forrest's elevation to the peerage aroused the ire of some democrats, and although the new distinctions were not the class-free innovations initially envisaged, the overwhelming impact of the war upon the honours system would be to bring an element of democratisation to it. Most significant of all, perhaps, was the choice to include women in the new order on equal terms, a decision that was to permanently alter the institution of honours. The terrible conflict of the Great War would bring a new democratisation, and a fresh set of values, to this ancient institution, changing the face of honours in Australia for years to come.

Snakes in Iceland

Initially, the outbreak of war changed relatively little in the operation of the honours system. Twice-yearly lists published the latest awards; premiers and prime ministers rubbed against each other, the vice-regal representatives, and the Colonial Office; and the press scrutinised each announcement, dispensing paeans of praise for some choices and firing off salvoes of outrage at others. Jealousies and complaints among the States were unabated. In January 1914 Adelaide's *Register* had grumbled that '[i]n accordance with curiously numerous precedents, the claims of South Australia have been entirely ignored'. Such a situation, the writer thought, must be because no one had made a recommendation, or because the Colonial Office had refused it, since '[i]t would be an absurd confession of poverty in distinguished citizenship to suggest ... South Australia possesses no men of eminence beyond those whose accomplishments have already been titularly marked'.² The next list, in June, was greeted with hardly more warmth. South Australia had been neglected for several years, the author asserted, and although it had not been completely overlooked this time, 'one can hardly say that its claims to notice have been acknowledged with a hopelessly rash liberality'.³ Indeed the *Register* had something of a bee in its bonnet about South Australia's experience

2 'New Year Titles', *Register* (Adelaide), 2 January 1914, 6.

3 'The Honours List', *Register* (Adelaide), 23 June 1914, 8.

of honours. In January 1915 it was complaining that ‘as usual, South Australia is almost entirely ignored’, and in June the following year that its position in relation to honours ‘suggests that of Iceland in relation to snakes—there aren’t any!’⁴ The complaint was not entirely unfounded. In October 1914 the governor-general, Sir Ronald Munro Ferguson, had written to the secretary of state for the colonies, Lewis Harcourt, that honours were too much concentrated in New South Wales, with the result that the other States were beginning to show signs of jealousy.⁵

Others bemoaned the treatment of Australia as a whole, protesting that the nation was not being recognised in a manner commensurate with its importance in the empire. Alongside its remonstrations about the lack of awards for South Australia in January 1914, the *Register* critiqued the imperial authorities’ approach to honours more generally. Services performed in the colonies, the writer argued, were ‘wholly passed over, or recognised in some relatively inadequate way’, while being ‘appraised at an immeasurably higher rate if performed in the mother country’. Rather sarcastically, the paper suggested that recent lists tended to weaken the theories of ‘Republican scoffers’ who thought honours ‘bribes intended to ensure an otherwise somewhat unstable loyalty to the Throne’, because ‘[i]f fealty to the Sovereign depended upon the number of royal distinctions vouchsafed to Australians ... the prospect of Imperial cohesion on this side of the ocean would be decidedly murky’.⁶ The following year the paper made the same point, this time in the context of Australia’s willing help in a time of crisis.⁷ How Australia fared in the honours lists may have been a particular bugbear of the *Register*, but it was not alone in its opinion that the new nation was not receiving its due share. In his October 1914 despatch, Munro Ferguson had informed Harcourt that he thought the number of awards allotted to Australia ‘insufficient’, particularly when some went ‘by precedent’ to certain office-holders.⁸

4 ‘New Year Honours’, *Register* (Adelaide), 2 January 1915, 8; ‘Birthday Honours’, *Register* (Adelaide), 5 June 1916, 4.

5 National Archives of Australia (hereafter NAA): A2922, NN, Honours 1915, despatch to the Secretary of State for the Colonies from R. M. Ferguson, 9 October 1914.

6 ‘New Year Titles’, *Register* (Adelaide), 2 January 1914, 6.

7 ‘New Year Honours’, *Register* (Adelaide), 2 January 1915, 8.

8 NAA: A2922, NN, Honours 1915, despatch to the Secretary of State for the Colonies from R. M. Ferguson, 9 October 1914.

Alongside these grievances there were wider critiques of the system, its structure, and its operation. Together with other Australian newspapers, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported on a particularly interesting example in early July 1914, just before war broke out. In England, the paper stated, the Women's Freedom League, a breakaway group from the Women's Social and Political Union, had written to the prime minister and the King

complaining of the absence of women from the Birthday and New Year's honours lists, and enclosing a list of names of prominent women who they claim should have honours bestowed upon them.⁹

A month or so later, more details were available. Suffragette Nina Boyle had penned the letter, which insisted—'[i]n tones of some acerbity and with an exquisitely autocratic touch'—that in the future no list of honours should appear that failed to recognise women. Suggesting more than 50 women who deserved honours, Boyle had included names in social services, science, the arts, education, health, and imperial and national services, or with the armed forces.¹⁰ Criticisms of the conferral of titles in a new nation conceiving of itself as egalitarian and democratic likewise continued to appear in the Australian press. From Britain, too, had come reports that a bill for the abolition of hereditary titles had been put before the British House of Commons. Introduced by a Scottish Liberal, Arthur Ponsonby, it would have seen noble heirs succeed only to properties, not to titles.¹¹

Closer to home, the Australian Labor Party, sympathetic to both democratic and nationalistic arguments against the imperial honours system, had become reluctant to continue its use. In October 1914 Labor prime minister Andrew Fisher informed Munro Ferguson that he thought his government would advise him not to make recommendations.¹² Munro Ferguson found this 'self-denying' dictate problematic, writing to Harcourt that since most of the States (including those with Labor governments) would continue to use the system, the result would simply be that Commonwealth servants missed out, while those at the State level received recognition. Moreover, he argued, there was no other avenue by

9 'Women and Honours', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 July 1914, 11.

10 'Concerning People', *Register* (Adelaide), 11 August 1914, 11.

11 'Inherited Titles', *Argus* (Melbourne), 22 May 1914, 9.

12 NAA: A2922, NN, Honours 1915, despatch to L. V. Harcourt from R. M. Ferguson, 7 October 1914.

which deserving individuals in the military, academia, or other professions might be given distinctions, while it would mean the loss of ‘an Imperial tie of real value’ to be unable to appoint Australians as privy councillors.¹³ At first, Munro Ferguson hoped that he might still put forward some nominations on his own account, but by March the following year he was writing to Harcourt that he had ‘no names to submit’ for honours, ‘owing to the position taken up by the Federal Government’ and ‘in view of the official regulations’, which did not permit him to recommend ‘without the assent of Ministers’.¹⁴

The ‘official regulations’ were likely ‘Australian No. 224’, a Colonial Office despatch setting out the ‘rules to be observed with regard to recommendations for honours’, dated December 1914. According to this document, recommendations (with reasons spelled out) were to be made by each State premier to his respective governor, with the governor then sending that list, along with his own comments and ‘an indication as to the order in which he thinks each case should be considered’, to both the governor-general and the colonial secretary. Nominations for ‘Imperial or municipal services’, or for ‘public services of a charitable, literary, or scientific character’, might be initiated by either the governor or the premier, but the governor was to seek the opinion of the premier on any such recommendation, and forward his views to the colonial secretary.¹⁵ While this appeared to leave open the question of whether or not an honour of this kind would be granted if the premier did not approve, in practice his agreement seems to have been required. In April 1915 Munro Ferguson cabled the governor of Queensland with the information that it could be ‘tacitly assumed’ that the colonial secretary ‘does not accept recommendations for honours save those made with concurrence of Ministers’.¹⁶ Since premiers and ministers were often jealous of their role, and did not wish any of their choices to miss out in

13 NAA: A2922, NN, Honours 1915, despatch to L. V. Harcourt from R. M. Ferguson, 7 October 1914.

14 NAA: A2922, NN, Honours 1915, despatch to the Secretary of State for the Colonies from [R. M. Ferguson], 26 March 1915.

15 NAA: A2922, NN, Honours 1915, Colonial Office, ‘Australian No. 224: Australia. Rules to be Observed with Regard to Recommendations for Honours’, 24 December 1914. Note that in relation to ‘political services’, the change had already been made. In such cases, the colonial secretary told Munro Ferguson in June 1915, it was ‘a recognised rule that the initiative ... rests solely with the Prime Minister’, and not the governor-general. NAA: A2922, NN, Honours 1915, despatch to the Governor-General, Sir R. Munro-Ferguson, from A. Bonar Law, 23 June 1915.

16 NAA: A2922, NN, Honours 1915, telegram to Governor of Queensland from [R. M. Ferguson], 26 April 1915.

order for one of the governor's to succeed, such agreement was not easy to secure. In March 1915, for example, the governor of South Australia, Sir Henry Galway, noted that his ministers' opposition to his submitting the names of two medical men was 'prompted by the fear that their repeated nomination' for another person, the newspaper editor William Sowden, 'might be passed over in favour of one of the gentlemen recommended by me'.¹⁷ The effective ending of the right of governors and governors-general to make nominations on their own account thus made it possible for a government politically opposed to imperial honours to block their use, at least within its specific purview. This would create considerable tension and controversy in years to come.

'Australian No. 224' also attempted to ease tensions over honours between the States and the federal government. Nominations 'for recognition of services rendered solely to any one State', it said, 'should emanate from the Governor or Premier of that State', and if the Commonwealth Government were to put forward 'a State official, or other person unconnected with the Commonwealth, for services which have not been confined to any one State', the opinion of the relevant State government was to be sought, and conveyed to the colonial secretary. This left room for ambiguity, however, especially in the definition of the phrase 'unconnected with the Commonwealth', and although regularly referenced, 'Australian No. 224' would not be the oil upon troubled waters the Colonial Office might have hoped. Moreover, the document did nothing to remove State objections to the role of the governor-general. After receiving his copies of the State lists, it specified, the governor-general 'acting in his individual capacity'—as opposed to on the advice of his ministers—would 'make such observations on them as he thinks fit', to the State governor and to the secretary of state. If faced with 'a difference of opinion', the colonial secretary would 'naturally attach due weight' to any objection by the governor-general, given 'his position and the advantages which he enjoys in forming a judgement'. In a case where agreement could not be reached in Australia through 'consultation and correspondence', it was up to the colonial secretary to decide the ultimate fate of the recommendation. The governor-general's opinion was vital, the document asserted, 'to assist [the secretary of state] in deciding fairly between the relative claims of

17 NAA: A2922, NN, Honours 1915, despatch to the Secretary of State for the Colonies from H. L. Galway, Governor [of South Australia], 9 March 1915.

various States', given the limited numbers of awards available.¹⁸ As this was essentially a restatement of the practice already being followed, it was unlikely to soothe State frustrations. Nor did it. In July 1916 it was reported that the Victorian premier, Sir Alexander Peacock, had said 'that Victoria would continue to assert its rights as a sovereign State' in making nominations directly to British authorities, 'and he believed that the other States would do likewise'. '[T]he Federal Government had not the right to revise recommendations to the King for honours,' he declared.¹⁹

Catering for war service

As the war dragged on, it began to have a greater impact on the honours system. Regular appointments to the Order of St Michael and St George for colonial service were quickly eclipsed by those made for military service.²⁰ Wars had long created difficulties for those administering honours. At the turn of the century the South African War had caused considerable strain on the system, and the Colonial Office had found itself under pressure from the War Office to use the Order of St Michael and St George to relieve that strain by conferring the order on individuals not deemed worthy of the Order of the Bath, or otherwise unable to be accommodated within the military orders.²¹ In the years of peace after 1902 the issue had faded away, but with the outbreak of World War I it soon reappeared, and with even greater intensity.²² More than any previous conflict, this war involved the mobilisation of large swathes of the populations of Britain and its empire, and it touched the lives of entire communities. Vast numbers of people were contributing to the war effort, but as the honours system was so restricted, especially for those of lower ranks or social classes, there was no way of rewarding most of them. Before long it was evident that the existing system—even with the War Office poaching from the colonial order—could not meet the demands of this war.²³

18 NAA: A2922, NN, Honours 1915, Colonial Office, 'Australian No. 224: Australia. Rules to be Observed with Regard to Recommendations for Honours', 24 December 1914.

19 'Granting of Honours', *Argus* (Melbourne), 26 July 1916, 11; 'Imperial Honours', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 July 1916, 10.

20 Peter Galloway, *The Order of St Michael and St George* ([London]: Third Millennium for the Central Chancery of the Orders of Knighthood, 2000), 196.

21 Galloway, *Order of St Michael and St George*, 183–86.

22 Galloway, *Order of St Michael and St George*, 186–87.

23 Galloway, *Order of St Michael and St George*, 188–204; James C. Risk, *The History of the Order of the Bath and Its Insignia* (London: Spink and Son, 1972), 93.

These problems were to lead directly to a major change in the British honours system that would shape Australians' experiences of honours for many years: the founding of the Order of the British Empire, and alongside it the Order of the Companions of Honour. By late 1915, informal discussion was taking place in London over the possibility of creating a new honour that would permit recognition of the war work of a wide swathe of the British population.²⁴ From the beginning it was envisaged that women would be eligible as well as men, although whether this would be through inclusion in the planned new order or via the institution of another decoration specifically for women—perhaps an Order of St Margaret, identified as the only female British saint—was not initially certain.²⁵ Considerable debate was to take place between these early suggestions and the final announcement of the new orders. At various moments, there were proposals for one or two new orders; for a single-class or a multi-class order; for knighthood to be included, absent, or optional; and—rather than creating any new decoration—for the addition of extra classes to transform the Orders of the Bath and St Michael and St George into five-class honours.²⁶

Many of these questions arose because the proposed new distinction was intended to be democratic, capable of use to reward people at all levels of society for their contributions to the war effort. The argument over whether the order should contain one or multiple classes was just such an issue. Sir Edward Troup, the permanent undersecretary of state at the Home Office, considered that a single-class order, given regardless of social rank or the nature of the service being rewarded, would avoid the challenge of having to assign recipients to different classes.²⁷ Sir Frederick Ponsonby, the keeper of the privy purse and a driving force behind the new honour, articulated a different view of democracy. In his view, it was easy enough to place recipients in grades:

If an Admiral of the Fleet jumps overboard and saves the King's life, he gets the Grand Cross; if a Midshipman rescues the Monarch from the deep, he receives the lowest class.²⁸

24 Peter Galloway, *The Order of the British Empire* ([London]: Central Chancery of the Orders of Knighthood, 1996), 1–2.

25 Galloway, *Order of the British Empire*, 3.

26 See Galloway, *Order of the British Empire*, chapter 1.

27 Galloway, *Order of the British Empire*, 5.

28 Sir Frederick Ponsonby to Sir Edward Troup, 20 May 1916, in OBE Letters, Box 1, Central Chancery of the Orders of Knighthood, cited by Galloway, *Order of the British Empire*, 5.

For Ponsonby, the way to create a democratic honour was to ensure that everyone could receive something, not that everyone received the same thing. Another suggestion, if the order were to be multi-class, was that all recipients would nevertheless use the same postnominal letters: OBE. Neither King George V nor the Cabinet approved of this proposal, and it was dropped.²⁹ Yet another formulation of the new order as democratic was—as is discussed further below—that it would have multiple grades, but that it would not be a matter of social class where a person was placed in it, but only of the value of their achievements.

Another attempt to make the new order more acceptable to those of democratic opinions was a suggestion that none of its grades carry knighthood. Since there were a number of people in Britain, not only in the Labour Party but more broadly, who did not wish to receive a title, this arrangement would ensure that they could accept appointment to the upper levels of the new order, if that was the appropriate level at which to recognise them. Objections were raised on the basis of precedence, since the innovation would lead to untitled men and women holding precedence over titled individuals, and on the grounds that the order ought to be designed with an eye to its dignity rather than the desires of potential recipients. Still seeking to ensure that the new honour would be supported as widely as possible, the King and the British prime minister, David Lloyd George, suggested that knighthood be instead made optional for recipients of the two upper grades. That way, those who wished for the title could have it, while those who held ideological objections or simply did not want to be titled, could still accept the honour. Problems of precedence and nomenclature remained, however, and after considerable discussion and debate both ideas would be abandoned in favour of the more familiar configuration of a multi-class order conferring knighthood in its upper two levels, accompanied by a second new order that conferred neither titles nor precedence.³⁰

The first whispers of these new distinctions reached Australia early in 1917, and particular interest was taken in the idea that women might be included. The *Adelaide Register* commented favourably in July:

29 Galloway, *Order of the British Empire*, 7.

30 Galloway, *Order of the British Empire*, 7–14.

Even those who most earnestly object ... to women being endowed with the vote can have nothing to say against the bestowal of honours on women who have done magnificent, unselfish and truly patriotic work for the Empire in this time of need.³¹

Any opposition to women's inclusion in the honours system appears to have melted away in the face of their war services. Indeed, the war had brought about something of a change in popular attitudes towards female equality and citizenship. Women's suffrage had been a matter of fierce contestation in the United Kingdom before 1914, but there had been a significant shift in opinion as a result of women's work for the war effort, and the praise their efforts had received.³² Many speeches in both Houses of Parliament in 1917 emphasised that 'women had earned the vote by their work for the war'.³³ In a similar way, women's contributions during the war had rendered their full inclusion in the honours system—at least in an order specifically aimed at rewarding war service—not only imaginable but irresistible. Yet even after the principle was conceded, difficulties remained. One was the question of what title, if any, women should hold when appointed to the upper two levels of the proposed order, which bestowed knighthood and the title of 'Sir' on men. Ponsonby suggested 'Dame', while others thought 'Lady' the best option, but there were also those who opposed the whole idea of a title for women.³⁴ Eventually, however, although the King did not much like the title of 'Dame', in the absence of a better alternative it was selected.³⁵

Official notification of the new honours arrived in Australia shortly after rumours began appearing in the press. On 3 February 1917, a cablegram from the colonial secretary announced that the King had decided to create an Order of the British Empire for recognising war services. It would have five classes, to 'be assigned strictly according to the public value of the war work done', and women were to be eligible. This initial cablegram stated that the order would 'not carry knighthood in any class'. The governor-general was asked to consult the prime minister, and to submit no more than six recommendations for the first list; more would be possible

31 'Equality of the Sexes', *Register* (Adelaide), 20 July 1917, 6.

32 Andrew Rosen, *Rise Up, Women! The Militant Campaign of the Women's Social and Political Union 1903–1914* (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), 256. doi.org/10.4324/9780203104002.

33 Rosen, *Rise Up, Women!*, 263.

34 Galloway, *Order of the British Empire*, 15–17.

35 Galloway, *Order of the British Empire*, 17.

later.³⁶ Prime Minister Billy Hughes delayed, seeking more information.³⁷ A reply from London provided little help. It explained that the order was to cover '[s]ervices primarily those connected with war in widest possible sense other than those in the field', and that it was 'the intention to confer classes strictly according to merit of services rendered', so that 'persons of high social status will often be in lower class than others of no special standing'.³⁸ A despatch from the colonial secretary, Walter Long, arrived soon after, but it too was unable to provide firm information, as the details of the new honour were still being settled, and Hughes sought a further postponement of the task of submitting names, until his anticipated arrival in London for the first meeting of the Imperial War Cabinet.³⁹

The eventual shape of the new order was somewhat different to that foreshadowed in these early communications. In fact, as noted above, two orders were eventually created. The Most Excellent Order of the British Empire was made up of five classes—knights and dames grand cross (GBE), knights and dames commanders (KBE/DBE), commanders (CBE), officers (OBE), and members (MBE)—plus a medal (BEM), which was intended for those whose service did not qualify them for the order, particularly those of a lower class or social standing.⁴⁰ Initially designated the National Service Order, the second new order was that of the Companions of Honour. A single-class award, it bore neither title nor precedence, and it was designed to cater for those whose services rendered them eligible for one of the first two grades of the Order of the British Empire, but who were unwilling to accept knighthood.⁴¹ In this innovation, and in the scale and reach of the Order of the British Empire, the aim of a democratic recognition of the war services of the whole population remained alive. It was a particular vision of democracy, however. Despite early intimations that the grade of a person's award would be determined

36 NAA: A12378, 1/A/1, cablegram from the Secretary of State for the Colonies to [R. M. Ferguson], 3 February 1917.

37 NAA: A12378, 1/A/1, cable to Secretary of State from R. M. Ferguson, 7 February 1917.

38 NAA: A12378, 1/A/3, cablegram from the Secretary of State for the Colonies to [R. M. Ferguson], 8 February 1917.

39 NAA: A12378, 1/A/2, despatch to Sir R. Munro Ferguson, Governor-General, from Walter H. Long, 8 February 1917; NAA: A12378, 1/A/2, telegram to Secretary of State from R. M. Ferguson, 2 March 1917.

40 The Medal of the Order of the British Empire was established at the same time as the order, and initially recipients were treated as members of it. After 1922, however, it was merely affiliated with the order, and was given for meritorious civilian service or for gallantry.

41 NAA: A12378, 1/A/3, cablegram to [the Governor-General] from the Secretary of State for the Colonies, 25 April 1917.

solely by the value of their services, a scale of eligibility was soon produced that laid out which ranks of the armed services were eligible for which grades of the Order of the British Empire, and similar guidelines would come to direct appointments from the various levels of the diplomatic and civil services.

The first awards

Still not having received names from Australia (Hughes had now become preoccupied with an election) and having little more luck with the other dominions, the imperial authorities decided in May to publish the first batch of awards anyway, with a note that dominion and colony lists would appear at a later date.⁴² Unsurprisingly, when the Australians finally did get around to selecting names for the new order, controversy erupted between the States and the federal government as to the process to be followed. In November, a cablegram from the colonial secretary announced that a list including the colonies and dominions was to be issued at the beginning of 1918. Nominations were to be made only for war-related services, 'mainly' to civilians, and up to specified maximum numbers, with further lists to follow that might cater for 'less urgent cases'. More controversially, the list was to be prepared on the advice of the prime minister, and sent by the governor-general. The quotas stipulated (2 GBEs, 5 KBEs or DBEs, 20 CBEs, 70 OBEs, and 90 MBEs) had been allocated for the whole of the country, and the colonial secretary expected that in drawing up the list the governor-general or prime minister would 'make any necessary consultation with [the] States'.⁴³ Perhaps concerned that Hughes would persist in his lack of interest, Munro Ferguson telegraphed the official secretary at the federal Government House, asking him to '[p]oint out' to Hughes the possibility that if he did not deal with the honours, they would be given through the States. The '[p]restige of [the] Federal Government', he wrote ingeniously, would be 'enhanced' if the recommendations came from that source.⁴⁴ The gambit worked. In February, Hughes wrote to

42 Galloway, *Order of the British Empire*, 21; NAA: A12378, 1/A/3, telegram to Secretary of State from R. M. Ferguson, 2 May [1917]; NAA: A12378, 1/A/3, cablegram to [the Governor-General] from Secretary of State for the Colonies, 3 May 1917.

43 NAA: A12378, 2/B/1, cablegram from the Secretary of State for the Colonies to [R. M. Ferguson], 1 November 1917.

44 NAA: A12378, 1/A/4, telegram to Official Secretary, Federal Government House, Melbourne, from R. M. Ferguson, 24 November 1917.

each of the premiers, informing them of the establishment of the order, providing details about it, and asking that any nominations include an indication of what each person's services were, and how they should be prioritised.⁴⁵ A similar letter from Munro Ferguson went to each of the governors.

The States were predictably unhappy. The governor of Western Australia, Sir William Ellison-Macartney, protested to the colonial secretary. He had received a request for nominations from the governor-general—although, he pointed out, he had not then been officially informed of the new honour—and had treated it in the same manner as any other honours list, simply communicating with Munro Ferguson to let him know the names he planned to submit to the Colonial Office. Having learned that the usual procedures might not be followed, he wished to convey his premier's 'strong opposition to any departure' from past practice. Henry Lefroy, the Nationalist premier, was willing to concede that in wartime his own 'concurrence or initiation' might not be required, since the governor 'was more closely associated with, and had more intimate knowledge of, the working of the special war organisations' than did government ministers, but he was 'absolutely opposed' to anybody other than the governor proposing honours for his State.⁴⁶

Further protests followed. New South Wales premier William Holman told the governor, Sir Walter Davidson, and Hughes that his ministers vigorously objected to the proposed change in the channel of communication for recommendations.⁴⁷ The following day, the governor of South Australia, Galway, wrote to Munro Ferguson, and the colonial secretary, to say that his premier, Archibald Peake, was not inclined to submit nominations until he learned the result of Holman's complaint. Galway expressed 'regret' that he could not send any names, but stated that he felt it was 'my duty ... to support my Ministers in their defence of a privilege hitherto enjoyed by the States ... and which is jealously guarded as a State right'.⁴⁸ All three protests also alluded to the possibility that

45 NAA: A12378, 1/A/4, 'Copy of letter forwarded by Prime Minister to the Premiers of the several States', 28 February 1918.

46 NAA: A12378, 3/E/1, despatch to Walter Long, Colonial Office, London, from the Governor [of Western Australia], [29?] February 1918.

47 NAA: A12378, 1/A/4, letter to the Prime Minister of the Commonwealth of Australia from W. A. Holman, Premier [of New South Wales], 8 March 1918.

48 NAA: A12378, 3/A/1, despatch to the Governor-General from H. L. Galway, Governor [of South Australia], 9 March 1918.

nominations would be sought from organisations such as the Red Cross Society, and each opposed this innovation as well. Galway had told the colonial secretary, Long, that since the governor-general had already asked State Red Cross branches to nominate for the order, his premier refused to make any recommendations 'as [he] is not prepared to submit any names which might be passed over in favour of such recommendations'.⁴⁹ Long's response to all this was unsympathetic. As he told Munro Ferguson, he had replied to Galway that the regulations laid out in 'Australian No. 224' of 1914 did not apply to the new order. '[A]ppointments thereto,' he said, were 'intended as reward for war services and as such can only be dealt with through [the] Commonwealth Government and Governor General'.⁵⁰ Hughes agreed, informing Munro Ferguson that he 'fully concur[red]' with Long that, since it was 'a reward for war services', appointments to the order could 'only be dealt with through the Commonwealth Administration'.⁵¹

Meanwhile, Munro Ferguson had been persisting in the unenviable task of producing a list of recommendations. By the beginning of April, as he informed Long, he had managed to obtain—though only 'unofficially'—names from the South Australian and Victorian governors, but the Tasmanian and Western Australian governors had refused to make any more suggestions, after an official protest from all the State premiers, acting through Holman, had been sent to Long by the New South Wales governor, Davidson.⁵² As it transpired, Ellison-Macartney had instead sent a list of recommendations for Western Australia directly to the colonial secretary:

49 NAA: A12378, 3/B/1, cablegram from the Secretary of State for the Colonies to [R. M. Ferguson], 2 March 1918. Munro Ferguson rejected this complaint, telling Long in May that he had not approached any Red Cross branch, and that 'communication between [the] President [of the] Australian Red Cross and [the] President [of the] South Australia[n] branch] were purely of a personal and informal character'. NAA: A12378, 3/B/1, telegram to Secretary of State from R. M. Ferguson, 16 May 1918. The communications had been between his wife—whom Hughes had asked, as the national president of the Red Cross, to suggest names—the wife of the Western Australian governor, and Galway and his wife, whom she had consulted 'informally and confidentially' in this task. NAA: A12378, 3/B/1, despatch to the Secretary of State for the Colonies from [the Governor-General], 29 May 1918; NAA: A12378, 3/B/1, despatch to the Secretary of State for the Colonies from [the Governor-General], 10 June 1918.

50 NAA: A12378, 3/B/1, cablegram from the Secretary of State for the Colonies to [R. M. Ferguson], 2 March 1918.

51 NAA: A12378, 3/A/3, letter to the Governor-General from W. M. Hughes, 17 April 1918.

52 NAA: A12378, 3/A/2, despatch to the Secretary of State for the Colonies from R. M. Ferguson, 1 April 1918. For the protest by the State premiers, see NAA: A12378, 3/C/2, cablegram to the Secretary of State for the Colonies from Davidson [Governor of New South Wales], 15 March 1918; NAA: A12378, 3/C/2, despatch to Sir Ronald Munro Ferguson, Governor-General and Commander-in-Chief of the Commonwealth of Australia, from W. E. Davidson, 19 March 1918.

‘doubtless’, Munro Ferguson told Hughes, he would be “snubbed”.⁵³ As for Queensland, its governor, Sir Hamilton Goold-Adams, rarely communicated with Munro Ferguson, ‘and, if despatches are being written, the copies are not reaching me’. The governor-general explained that he had ‘pointed out’ to the governors ‘the reasonableness of the course adopted ... seeing that the Order is bestowed for War Service and that to attempt to regulate recognition by geographical areas was impossible’, and noted that he had ‘reminded’ Davidson that the New South Wales Government had ‘shown a constant disposition to trespass upon the Federal sphere in matters pertaining to Defence and External Affairs’, meaning that the federal ministry was ‘unlikely to disagree with’ the method adopted for nominations for the new order. Hopefully, he stated his view that the States would ‘come to accept the position and that already excitement on the question is dying out’, although ‘much’ would ‘depend’ on the awards eventually given by the Commonwealth Government. In this, his trouble was the mercurial Hughes, whose ‘inaccessibility and the impossibility of getting him to devote time and consideration to the lists’ was rendering the task ‘difficult’. Nevertheless, he hoped that the majority of the honours were ‘quite as satisfactory as this kind of thing ever is’, and was reassured that ‘mistakes’ could be set right in future lists.⁵⁴

Far from the matter dying quietly away, however, it was discussed at a premiers’ conference in May, and the States stuck to their guns. New South Wales and Tasmania had proposed that ‘the States should, by resolution, protest against any departure from the established constitutional usage’ for making honours nominations, and the wider issue of Commonwealth encroachment into the domain of the States was also discussed.⁵⁵ A unanimous resolution asserted that, while the premiers ‘recognis[ed] that the bestowal of honors in recognition of war services is a matter for the decision of the Federal Government’, they held that State governments ‘should not be asked to accept the responsibility of making nominations’; that if they were asked to do so, those nominations ‘should be made in the accepted constitutional manner through the Governors of the States’; and that ‘where the State Governments are requested to

53 NAA: A12378, 3/A/3, memo to the Prime Minister from the Governor-General, 17 April 1918.

54 NAA: A12378, 3/A/2, despatch to the Secretary of State for the Colonies from R. M. Ferguson, 1 April 1918. In fact, it appeared that Goold-Adams was as dilatory in his communications with London as he was in those with Canberra. Acknowledging Munro Ferguson’s letter, Long told him that he had not heard from the Queensland governor about the matter. NAA: A12378, 3/A/2, despatch to the Governor-General, Sir R. Munro Ferguson, from Walter H. Long, 4 June 1918.

55 ‘Premiers’ Conference’, *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 10 May 1918, 3.

make nominations, no nominations should be invited from persons or associations who do not share the responsibilities of the Government'. Copies were sent to the acting prime minister and the colonial secretary.⁵⁶ But no sympathy was forthcoming from London, or from Hughes, and the selection of recipients continued to be the responsibility of the federal government.⁵⁷

Yet even now the issue was not finally resolved. As late as September 1919 Munro Ferguson was informing Goold-Adams that 'nominations to the British Empire Order must be submitted to the Secretary of State by my Government'.⁵⁸ There are none so deaf, however, as those who will not hear. Goold-Adams claimed he had 'neither mental or written records' of Munro Ferguson's request for nominations, with which he would have cooperated had he known of it, and implied the governor-general was preventing deserving Queenslanders from receiving awards by 'blocking' his recommendations in their favour.⁵⁹ Clearly losing patience, Munro Ferguson responded that both Goold-Adams and his prime minister had certainly been sent information about the order, and that Goold-Adams's

failure to provide me with the views of your Government ... and the fact that my Government's communications ... remained unacknowledged were unquestionably responsible for recognition being given only to those Queensland citizens whose services were brought to the notice of the Secretary of State through the Federal Government.

He closed by reiterating that he would draw Hughes's attention to any individuals Goold-Adams wished to suggest 'unofficially', and with a mild rebuke. 'I am sure Your Excellency cannot seriously have meant to suggest that I am "blocking your recommendations"', he wrote, since he had only requested that they be submitted to him according to the instructions laid down by the colonial secretary.⁶⁰

56 NAA: A1606, A22/1, letter to the Acting Prime Minister of the Commonwealth of Australia from W. A. Holman, Premier [of New South Wales], 22 May 1918.

57 On this dispute over the new order, see also Christopher Cunneen, *King's Men: Australia's Governors-General from Hopetoun to Isaacs* (Sydney: George Allen and Unwin, 1983), 144.

58 NAA: A12378, 3/D/2, despatch to Sir Hamilton Goold-Adams, Governor of Queensland, from R. M. Ferguson, 26 September 1919.

59 NAA: A12378, 3/D/2, despatch to the Governor-General from Hamilton Goold Adams, 1 October 1919.

60 NAA: A12378, 3/D/2, despatch to Sir Hamilton Goold-Adams, Governor of Queensland, from R. M. Ferguson, 15 October 1919.

Making a list, checking it twice

A series of files in the National Archives of Australia document the selection of recipients. In the letters and telegrams that went to and fro, and the draft lists covered with annotations, additions, and crossings-out, a degree of back-and-forthing is evident. One reason for the indecision was likely an attempt to forestall jealousies between the States, especially given the tensions provoked by the procedure chosen for recommendations. In January 1918, for example, Munro Ferguson suggested Hughes might consider changing the class of award envisaged for several women who were to be recognised for their work for the Australian Comforts Fund, on the grounds that the existing list appeared to treat the Victorian ladies more generously than those from New South Wales.⁶¹ Another was haste and lack of information, which occasionally led to errors. The businessman and member of the newspaper dynasty James Oswald Fairfax appears to have received an award somewhat against his will: in an unusual lapse, it seems he was not sounded beforehand as to his willingness to accept, and would have preferred not to have received anything for his Red Cross work.⁶² Another person was nominated, but the telegram adding his name to the list was received in London too late to be acted upon, and before the next list was announced Munro Ferguson had received information that made him 'doubt [his] suitability on [the] score of character'.⁶³ And 'Miss

61 NAA: A12378, 6/A/11, memorandum to the Prime Minister from the Governor-General, 10 January 1918.

62 Fairfax had been appointed OBE on 15 March 1918. In a letter dated 29 March, Munro Ferguson explained that he had just cabled London to 'rectify errors' in the list, one of which was to place Fairfax among the CBEs rather than the OBEs. He had evidently seen Fairfax shortly after sending the cable, and discovered to his consternation that 'your acquiescence had not been obtained'. He hoped, however, that Fairfax would allow the correction 'as one involving the prestige of the Red X and its standing v.a.v other organisations'. NAA: A12378, 6/A/9, letter to J. O. Fairfax, Esq. from R. M. Ferguson, 29 March 1918. Fairfax, for his part, reiterated that he would 'have preferred not to receive any distinction for Red Cross work', but agreed that since it was, as Munro Ferguson had noted, 'a matter affecting the Red Cross Society', he would leave the issue with Munro Ferguson. NAA: A12378, 6/A/9, letter to the Governor-General from J. O. Fairfax, 30 March 1918. He was appointed CBE on 24 May 1918. Australian Government, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 'Australian Honours Search Facility', *It's an Honour*, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, accessed 13 June 2021, honours.pmc.gov.au/honours/awards/1065399.

63 NAA: A12378, 5/D/2, telegram to the Secretary of State for the Colonies from R. M. Ferguson, 17 December 1918. The individual in question was Hugh Ward, probably Hugh Joseph Ward (1871–1941). See Martha Rutledge, 'Ward, Hugh Joseph (1871–1941)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, accessed 13 May 2021, adb.anu.edu.au/biography/ward-hugh-joseph-8983/text15811.

Scobie' was omitted from one list because the governor-general had 'never heard of the lady', and had been unable to learn any details regarding either her or her war work.⁶⁴

Even without these pressures, it would have been a difficult task. Selecting a relatively small number of people from among a population that had been widely mobilised was a challenge in itself, and the necessity of drawing distinctions between their contributions so as to allot them to the order's various classes could only increase the complexity. 'It is almost impossible,' wrote Munro Ferguson to the colonial secretary in January 1918, 'to differentiate between the merits of workers all engaged on similar tasks.'⁶⁵ He summed up the difficulties in a despatch the following month, suggesting the assignment was even more testing in Australia:

It is probable that in no part of His Majesty's Dominions is the selection of persons ... more difficult than it is in Australia. The fact that there are six States and the Federal Territories, in each of which all the various patriotic organisations are represented by equally energetic Committees with President, Secretary and other officials, all having equal claim to recognition for exactly the same work, makes it difficult to discriminate between them without exciting not merely personal, but what is worse, State jealousies. There is the further difficulty that the Prime Minister and all Politicians are rarely in touch with the persons carrying on patriotic work, and are apt, if they include any such names in the list, to recommend persons who have but inferior claims to recognition because they happen to have come in contact with them. Such persons get precedence which it is difficult to dispute, for, in most instances, they have done good work though of a kind which in a general and impartial survey of the situation would rank them behind many who remain unrecognised ...⁶⁶

64 NAA: A12378, 7/A/5, 'Memorandum on Certain Nominations made by Mr. Watt'. The omission appears to have been only temporary. On 4 October 1918 Grace Lockie Scobie was appointed OBE. Australian Government, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 'Australian Honours Search Facility', *It's an Honour*, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, accessed 13 June 2021, honours.pmc.gov.au/honours/awards/1108100.

65 NAA: A12378, 2/E/1, despatch to the Secretary of State for the Colonies from the Governor-General, 8 January 1918.

66 NAA: A12378, 4/B/1, despatch to the Secretary of State for the Colonies from [Munro Ferguson, the Governor-General], 5 February 1918.

Nevertheless, the lists were drawn up, and a total of 369 men and 54 women received awards in the first lists issued in 1918 and 1919, their services covering a wide range of types of work, as well as being scattered across the continent.⁶⁷ Further lists would be issued in the early 1920s, adding many more to the roll of people recognised for their war services.

Among those appointed to the new order were Nellie Melba, Australia's famous operatic soprano, who received a DBE for her labour '[o]rganising patriotic work' and fundraising during the war; Rear Admiral William Clarkson of the Royal Australian Navy, whose KBE recognised both his navy service and his efforts 'in connection with the control and re-organisation of coastal shipping'; Hugh McKay, the man behind the famous Sunshine Harvester, who was granted a CBE for his 'services in connection with war industries', especially through 'the improvisation of machinery required ... in connection with the War'; Reginald Edward Weigall, given an OBE for his work as 'President and Organiser of an Honorary Motor Service for the reception of returned and wounded soldiers'; and Millicent (Lily) and Alice Fiskens, sisters, for their services to the Australian branch of the British Red Cross Society overseas.⁶⁸ After a military division of the order was instituted in December 1918—to date from the order's establishment in June 1917—recipients were allotted either to it or to the newly delineated civil division, and existing recipients eligible for appointment to the military division were transferred into it. Military division awards included men serving in the various branches of the armed forces, individuals working for the War Office or other war-related government departments, those in the nursing services, and women working with any of the women's auxiliaries.⁶⁹ The resulting division between civil and military awards would play a part in a controversial chapter of Australia's experience in the next great global conflict.

When the first recipients were announced in the *London Gazette*, the Australian press naturally reported on the list. The awardees were 'drawn from every walk in life', noted the Hobart *Mercury*, and were 'persons

67 Australian Government, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 'Australian Honours Search Facility', *It's an Honour*, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, accessed 4 May 2021, honours.pmc.gov.au/honours/search. These figures do not include two awards conferred in 1917: a KBE to Thomas Bilbe Robinson and a GBE to Florence Reid.

68 NAA: A12378, 6/A/5, 'Short Statement of Services of Nominees to British Empire Order'.

69 NAA: A1606, A22/1, extract from the *London Gazette*, no. 31084, 27 December 1918, Central Chancery of the Orders of Knighthood, 27 December 1918.

whose services during the war have won particular notice'.⁷⁰ Many of the reports were positive, appreciating both the services given by the awardees and the desire to reward them represented by the new order. In the British context, Tobias Harper has also noted the pleasure of recipients, for many of whom their honour 'was celebrated as an important sign of inclusion in the war effort and in the nation and empire more broadly'.⁷¹ But not everyone was impressed. The Perth *Sunday Times* observed rather cuttingly that the distinction had been established

with the object of recognising the services of war workers, but truth to tell it is cutting no ice to speak of. Nobody cares a row of pins whether Mrs. So-and-So or Mr. Such-and-Such is a D.B.E., a K.B.E., a C.B.E., an O.B.C., [sic] or a plain M.B.E.⁷²

What precisely lay behind this sneer at the order is not clear, but it may have reflected the belief of a number of observers that it was being distributed far too liberally. In late 1918 it was reported that New Zealand's Greymouth Patriotic Association had passed a motion to inform the government of 'the dissatisfaction' found among New Zealanders at the conferral of the order in that country, and to request that the British authorities be asked to refrain from bestowing it further.⁷³ Responding to the report, John Peerybingle in the Victorian *Weekly Times* observed that the order was 'now known as the Order Belong to Everybody', and suggested that:

The trouble in New Zealand as in Australia, appears to be that it looks as if it is only a matter of time before 50 per cent. of the population will have the doubtful privilege of attaching the letters O.B.E. to their names.⁷⁴

Other 'jeering remarks and music-hall jokes' included references to it in Britain as 'the "Order of the Bad Egg" or the "Order for Britain's Everybody"'.⁷⁵ Indeed, as the order's historian, Peter Galloway, has acknowledged, it was dispensed in numbers 'unprecedented within the United Kingdom', with membership reaching 25,419 persons by February

70 'British Empire Order', *Mercury* (Hobart), 25 August 1917, 7.

71 Tobias Harper, *From Servants of the Empire to Everyday Heroes: The British Honours System in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 48. doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198841180.001.0001.

72 'Perth Prattle', *Sunday Times* (Perth), 31 March 1918, 17.

73 'Order of British Empire', *Argus* (Melbourne), 14 October 1918, 6.

74 John Peerybingle, 'Peerybingle Papers', *Weekly Times* (Victoria), 2 November 1918, 30.

75 Ivan de la Bere, *The Queen's Orders of Chivalry* (London: Spring Books, 1964), 157.

1921.⁷⁶ While noting that new honours are often greeted sceptically or viewed as less illustrious than older, more established distinctions, Galloway and others have tended to agree that the vast scale of the Order of the British Empire as compared to other British orders made it a particular target of such criticisms.⁷⁷ One side effect of this disdain for the Order of the British Empire was to raise the status of the Order of St Michael and St George. As Galloway put it:

If one single event removed the phrase ‘inferior colonial Order’ from conversations about the Order of St Michael and St George, it was the creation of the Order of the British Empire.⁷⁸

A peerage for Australia: Sir John Forrest

Australian scepticism about honours had—as discussed in previous chapters—long centred particularly upon titles, and still more so upon hereditary titles. In 1911, at the same time as proposing an Australian ‘Order of the Wattle Blossom’, William Sowden had asserted ‘that Australians will never approve of the bestowal of hereditary distinctions’.⁷⁹ The whole idea, he thought, was ‘essentially wrong and mischievous’, for ‘[a] son has no more right to be titularly distinguished because of his father’s eminent deeds than to be hanged because his father had committed murder’.⁸⁰ Despite this, Western Australian and then federal politician Sir John Forrest was created Australia’s first native-born peer in 1918, when a barony of the United Kingdom was conferred on him ‘in recognition of his long and distinguished services to the Empire’.⁸¹ Seeking a title ‘as free as possible from anything that might give rise to controversy’, he took the name Lord Forrest of Bunbury, in the State of Western Australia, thus retaining his own surname, and choosing Bunbury as it was not only his birthplace and the home of his parents, but also his electorate during his time in State parliament.⁸² The idea for the peerage had been floated several years before. Sir Gerald Strickland, the governor of Western

76 Galloway, *Order of the British Empire*, 19.

77 de la Bere, *Queen’s Orders*, 156–57; Galloway, *Order of the British Empire*, 19, 38.

78 Galloway, *Order of St Michael and St George*, 204.

79 Will. J. Sowden, *An Australian Native’s Standpoint: Addresses* (London: Macmillan, 1912), 114.

80 Sowden, *Australian Native’s Standpoint*, 115.

81 NAA: A2923, H3, cablegram to [the Governor-General] from the Secretary of State for the Colonies, 6 February 1918.

82 NAA: A2923, H3, letter to Sir Ronald [Munro Ferguson], the Governor-General, from John Forrest, 10 February 1918.

Australia, had put forward the recommendation in 1909, and renewed it in 1913.⁸³ On the latter occasion it had failed to win the support of the governor-general, Lord Denman, who informed London that he had reached an understanding with Labor prime minister Andrew Fisher that he would not make nominations for hereditary titles, and who foresaw '[g]rave difficulties' in his relations with the federal government should he bring up the idea.⁸⁴

The proposal had been renewed, however, in 1918. Early in January, the governor-general, by then Munro Ferguson, had cabled Long, the colonial secretary, suggesting that Forrest—the 'most outstanding figure in Australia and universally popular'—should receive a peerage. Prime Minister Hughes, he assured Long, supported the idea.⁸⁵ In a 'very strong personal recommendation ... accepting full responsibility' for the nomination, Munro Ferguson said, Hughes had stressed Forrest's achievements as an explorer and political leader, his part in the Federation movement, his exemplary private life, and his age and declining health, ending with his belief that the distinction would be well received in Australia.⁸⁶ This represented something of a change of heart. Only a few months before, Munro Ferguson had told Long of his desire to recommend Forrest for a peerage, lamenting that Hughes did not support it—a communication that led to confusion at the Colonial Office when the nomination arrived in January.⁸⁷ Wisely, Long requested the recommendation from Hughes, taking responsibility for it, before proceeding.⁸⁸

83 NAA: A2922, NN, Honours 1909, despatch to the Earl of Crewe from G. Strickland, Governor [of Western Australia], 25 July 1909; NAA: A2922, NN, Honours 1913, despatch to Lewis Harcourt from G. Strickland, Governor [of Western Australia], 21 February 1913.

84 NAA: A2922, NN, Honours 1913, despatch to the Secretary of State for the Colonies from [Lord Denman], 2 April 1913.

85 NAA: A2923, H3, despatch to Secretary of State for the Colonies from R. M. Ferguson, 9 January 1918.

86 NAA: A2923, H3, despatch to Secretary of State [for the Colonies] from R. M. Ferguson, 15 January 1918.

87 NAA: A2923, H3, memorandum to the Secretary of State for the Colonies from R. M. Ferguson, 8 October 1917; NAA: A2923, H3, telegram to [R. M. Ferguson] from Long, Secretary of State [for the Colonies], 12 January 1918.

88 NAA: A2923, H3, telegram to [R. M. Ferguson] from Long, Secretary of State [for the Colonies], 12 January 1918. Indeed, Hughes must have changed his mind just before making the recommendation, since in a letter to Munro Ferguson on the 6th, he had stated that he thought that recommending Forrest for a peerage could be 'open to misconception' and should not go ahead. NAA: A2923, H22, letter to Governor-General from W. M. Hughes, 6 January 1918.

Reports of the honour highlighted its novelty, identifying Forrest as the first Australian elevated to the peerage. Many responses were positive, effusive in their praise for Forrest and surprisingly free of animosity to hereditary distinctions. More than 300 telegrams flooded the new Lord with congratulations. Among them were messages from the Western Australian Chamber of Mines, the editor of the *Bunbury Herald*, the Adelaide Stock Exchange, the United Commercial Travellers' Association of Australia, the mayor of Brisbane, the 88th Perth Infantry regiment, the Bunbury Harbour Board, the staff of the National Bank in Perth, the Royal Military College at Duntroon, and Fairbridge Farm School. Henry Lefroy, the Western Australian premier, sent:

congratulations ... on the distinguished honor of becoming [the] first Australian Peer—a distinction which all will recognise as a fitting tribute to the great and honourable services rendered to your country.

The president and members of the West Australian Chamber of Manufactures telegraphed '[h]earty congratulations', while the former mayor of Perth, Thomas Molloy, wrote that '[a]ll Western Australia will be delighted that your immense services to the Empire and Western Australia have been recognised'.⁸⁹

Nevertheless, the public reaction was far from the 'unanimous approval' predicted by the *Brisbane Courier*, as the paper's own report made clear. While the Melbourne City Council passed a motion 'expressing gratification' at the barony, the New South Wales branch of the Australian Labor Party passed one stating that its executive 'strongly resents the attempt to establish an hereditary aristocracy in Australia' and 'considers it a direct affront to our democratic interests'. Articulating a hope that 'the first Australian lord will be the last', the motion suggested that 'the time has arrived when no title should be bestowed on any Australian citizen'. The Queensland Labor State treasurer, Ted Theodore, was also reported to have spoken 'in a condemnatory tone of privileged castes and old-world aristocracies'.⁹⁰ A little later in the year, the Australian Natives' Association would also register its displeasure. A letter from its general

89 NAA: A2923, H3, typescript of '... telegrams received by Lord Forrest congratulating him on the bestowal of the Peerage by His Majesty'.

90 'Australia's First Peer', *Brisbane Courier*, 11 February 1918, 6.

secretary informed Hughes that at its annual conference the association had passed a resolution stating that it 'strictly disapproves of the conferring of hereditary titles on Australian Citizens'.⁹¹

Press reactions were likewise mixed. Some, like the *Bunbury Herald*, were thrilled. No one was more worthy, declared that paper, certain that individuals of all political stripes would concur in that belief.⁹² Others, like Melbourne's *Truth*, were not so pleased. Although shying away from criticising Forrest or his honour per se, *Truth* concluded that 'all true Australians' would look with 'distrust' on the conferral of hereditary titles in the antipodes.⁹³ In the *Adelaide Mail* there appeared a thoughtful piece by journalist and Hansard staffer—and compiler of *Johns's Notable Australians*, later to become *Who's Who in Australia*—Fred Johns, previously published in the *Public Service Review*. Blending approval for Forrest's award with displeasure at the arrival of peerages for Australians, Johns wrote:

I don't know that a very large number of our people would welcome the planting of an hereditary aristocracy in the Commonwealth, but if they had been invited to nominate or elect an Australian to sit in the gilded Chamber at Westminster the popular vote would have been cast overwhelmingly in favour of [Forrest].⁹⁴

Similarly, the Catholic *Freeman's Journal* deprecated the use of British titles, viewing them as detrimental to Australian independence and nationhood, but nevertheless considered that '[n]o one will begrudge Baron Forrest his new title, if it gives him pleasure'.⁹⁵ But not everyone was willing to temper their opposition of hereditary titles in the case of Forrest. Broken Hill's *Barrier Miner* thought Forrest not 'unworthy' of receiving a title, but vigorously critiqued the practice of inheriting distinctions as undemocratic. Forrest was an elderly man with no children for the title to descend to, but this made no difference to the writer, who observed that whether or not he had descendants was 'a matter of detail', for '[t]he principle is the same in either case, and even if Lord Forrest has no heirs

91 NAA: A2, 1918/2998, letter to the Prime Minister from the General Secretary of the Australian Natives' Association, [S. W. Griffith?], 17 September 1918.

92 'Lord Bunbury?' *Bunbury Herald*, 9 February 1918, 4.

93 'Oh, Lord!' *Truth* (Melbourne ed.), 16 February 1918, 7.

94 Fred Johns, 'Forrest of Bunbury', *Mail* (Adelaide), 2 March 1918, 3.

95 'In and Out of Parliament: Should Our Public Men Look for English Titles?' *Freeman's Journal* (Sydney), 14 February 1918, 23.

to-day he may have one to-morrow for all anyone can know'.⁹⁶ This was an unlikely scenario, given that he was then aged 70, and seriously ill; he would die only a few months later, before the letters patent creating him a peer had arrived from London.⁹⁷

Conclusion

In 1918 the *Kalgoorlie Miner* opined that:

the old idea—that only military and naval service or high political distinction should be recognised by ‘handles’ to names, and that only great territorial possessions or diplomatic standing justified a peerage—has been revolutionised since Edward VI. ascended the British throne.

‘Titular distinctions’, the paper said,

have been democratised, by conferring them upon men of mark in all professions and walks of life—on poets, novelists, scientists, journalists, captains of commerce and industry, explorers and philanthropists, eminent financiers, and colonial Lord Mayors.

Not only that, but ‘[t]he war also has both increased and extended the area and scope of personal distinctions, and multiplied the reasons and causes why they should be conferred’.⁹⁸ Seen by some as the order of British democracy, the Order of the British Empire had indeed greatly widened the reach of the honours system, and increased the numbers of people who held distinctions, notwithstanding that it ‘contained more rather than fewer hierarchical distinctions’.⁹⁹ From the beginning of discussions about a new order, it had been anticipated that it might be used after the war to remedy some of the inadequacies of the honours system, such as the lack of a general decoration that could be given for services to the arts and sciences, or to recognise charitable and philanthropic work, or to women.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ ‘Lord John Forrest, Baron’, *Barrier Miner* (Broken Hill), 9 February 1918, 4.

⁹⁷ F. K. Crowley, ‘Forrest, Sir John (1847–1918)’, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, accessed 3 November 2015, adb.anu.edu.au/biography/forrest-sir-john-6211/text10677.

⁹⁸ ‘Imperial Honours and the Dominions’, *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 7 June 1918, 4.

⁹⁹ See Harper, *Servants of the Empire*, 62–67, quote on 65.

¹⁰⁰ See Galloway, *Order of the British Empire*, 2–6, 46.

Clarification of the nature the order would take in peacetime came with the gazetting of new statutes in 1922. Awards in the civil division, it was stated, would acknowledge ‘prominent local or general services, whether of an official or unofficial character’, while military appointments would reward both ‘combatant or non-combatant duties’, but would be restricted to ‘commissioned officers’. The medal of the order would be given to those who were not eligible to be appointed to the order, but who had ‘performed acts of gallantry, or have rendered such meritorious service as to deserve recognition’.¹⁰¹ The Order of the Companions of Honour was also retained, transformed into an honour for recognising ‘services of national importance’; it has come to be ‘[s]ometimes regarded as a junior class of the Order of Merit’.¹⁰² If these measures were not a wholesale democratisation of Britain’s honours system—as the graded nature of the Order of the British Empire and the existence of a medal for those deemed ineligible made clear—they nevertheless changed the honorific landscape in both Britain and its empire, making the receipt of such a distinction seem a plausible aspiration for many more people. Arguably the most transformative consequence, however, was that women gained a permanent place within the system. Beyond the mere fact of their presence, the inclusion of women would contribute to a change in the very nature of the system, as activities traditionally gendered feminine became services meriting official approbation. With the shadow of war passed, and a more inclusive future envisaged for it, it might have seemed that the prospects were bright for the honours system. For those with eyes to see, however, a new cloud of coming scandal lay on the horizon.

101 NAA: A12378, 21/A/3, memorandum, [1922?].

102 de la Bere, *Queen’s Orders*, 170; The Royal Household, ‘Companion of Honour’, *The Royal Family*, accessed 13 October 2020, www.royal.uk/companion-honour.

This text is taken from *Honouring a Nation: A History of Australia's Honours System*, by Karen Fox, published 2022, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/HN.2022.03