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Repugnant to the people? 1919–1939

‘Honours. System of Award. Debate in Commons. Commission to be Appointed.’ So ran a series of decreasing-in-size headlines above one article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in July 1922. Hidden below this sober headline was a startling allegation. Two days before, during a debate on the awarding of honours in the British House of Lords, the Duke of Northumberland had read a letter purporting to ‘offer ... a knighthood or baronetcy’ for the price of £12,000 or £35,000, respectively, and promising ‘no nonsense of [the Order of the British Empire] kind’, but something more prestigious.¹ Alarming as the claim was, what was yet more perturbing was the assertion that this was not an isolated case. Newspapers across Australia that year would tell the ignoble story of Britain’s first cash-for-honours scandal. Such sordid transactions might have been long suspected by the system’s most strident critics, but for its supporters, and for much of the Australian public, these revelations must have been shocking. Although the system had attracted its share of scepticism in the past, and although many observers had questioned the suitability of honours and titles to the egalitarian and democratic societies of the New World, the title of ‘Sir’ still held a solemn cachet to the ears of many. What did it mean to learn just how coldly it had been reduced to an item of commerce, and how undeserving were some of those who held it?

1 ‘Honours’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 July 1922, 11.

With the arrival of peace and the decision to maintain the Order of the British Empire on a permanent footing, it might have seemed a new dawn of democracy and inclusivity for Britain's honours system. But the horizon was already dark. Even before the war had ended, there was beginning to emerge an issue with the potential to change dramatically Australian opinions of imperial honours: the sale of titles for political purposes. In the postwar years, disquiet over this practice ballooned into outrage. The resulting scandal fuelled antagonism to the system in Australia and hardened the attitudes of those who already considered it an undemocratic and outdated institution. Tussles between State and federal authorities over the right to nominate took on yet another new dimension, as the Australian Labor Party solidified its opposition to imperial honours, beginning a long contest over the use of British awards that would last almost to the end of the century.

Yet intense though it was, the scandal was soon to fade, leaving the future of the system apparently secure again only a decade later. As the portents of war built up once more in Europe, the honours system entered something of a golden age in Australia: generally accepted and esteemed by nominees, awards were dispensed to a much broader cross-section of the community than ever before. The most dramatic transformation, however, was to the system's gender profile. Having gained admittance at least to some parts of it, women were at last beginning to see their contributions to society recognised alongside those of men. As feminist women in Australia and elsewhere developed the concept of the maternal citizen, the Australian state began officially to acknowledge and reward this newly conceived form of state service. Despite the pitfalls of conceptualising women's services to the nation in terms of their maternal role—which later feminists were quick to highlight—in these years such arguments provided a route for a new appreciation of women's work within the honours system. That ancient institution, it appeared, had begun to move towards a new future as an inclusive means of acknowledging the varied services of the nation's citizens.

Honours for sale

It had not always been considered immoral or corrupt to sell honours; in Britain in the seventeenth century they were openly sold as a way to raise revenue. By the mid-nineteenth century, selling or bartering distinctions

had come to be considered inappropriate, but as early as the 1880s and 1890s standards had begun to slip once more, and the exchange of honours for party political services, support, or significant donations slowly became routine.² During the prime ministership of David Lloyd George from 1916 to 1922, the sale of honours peaked, as knighthoods and baronetcies were sold by touts in the clubs of London, gathering considerable sums of money for Lloyd George's political fund.³ Under Lloyd George, the practice was both more open and more flagrant than in the past. As a later British prime minister, Harold Macmillan, was to observe, earlier bargains had been covered by 'a decent veil', and those who received their titles this way were at least individuals who had long served the party and were largely respected. During Lloyd George's administration, on the other hand, 'the system degenerated into something like an open sale', some recipients were distinctly disreputable, and the money raised went into a mysterious private fund controlled by Lloyd George himself.⁴

Such blatant abuses began to cause alarm. In 1917, the government in the House of Lords accepted a resolution urging that when an honour was bestowed a public statement of the reasons should be made, and that before recommending anyone, the prime minister ought to 'satisfy himself that no payment or expectation of payment to any Party or Political Fund is directly or indirectly associated with the grant or promise' of it.⁵ The King had also become concerned at the number and character of nominees for honours, by Lloyd George's lack of consultation ahead of making promises of distinctions, and by the selling of what was supposed to be a royal prerogative.⁶

It was impossible that such a level of shady behaviour could continue without check. An investigation was demanded. The last straw was the list of June 1922, which included four questionable peerages, one of whom—Sir Joseph Robinson, whose business dealings had recently been condemned in the courts of South Africa and by the judicial

2 H. J. Hanham, 'The Sale of Honours in Late Victorian England', *Victorian Studies* 3, no. 3 (1960): 277, 280–88; T. A. Jenkins, 'The Funding of the Liberal Unionist Party and the Honours System', *English Historical Review* 105, no. 417 (1990): 920–28. doi.org/10.1093/ehr/CV.CCCCXVII.920.

3 Hanham, 'Sale of Honours', 289.

4 Harold Macmillan, *The Past Masters: Politics and Politicians 1906–1939* (London: Macmillan, 1975), 50–52, quotes on 50.

5 National Archives of Australia (hereafter NAA): A11804, 1923/285, Report of the Royal Commission on Honours (1922), 10. The resolution was also accepted in the House of Commons. NAA: A11804, 1923/285, Report of the Royal Commission on Honours (1922), 10.

6 Kenneth Rose, *King George V* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1983), 247.

committee of the Privy Council—was effectively forced to decline the distinction.⁷ In September a royal commission was appointed, not to investigate what had gone on in the past, but to propose new procedures for recommending honours that might prevent future misuse of the system. Reporting in December, the commissioners noted that their task had necessitated some examination of past practices, despite their instructions, and accordingly they had interviewed past and present prime ministers, patronage secretaries, and people ‘responsible for the Party organisations’, as well as receiving memoranda from ‘the Departments of State charged with the duty of compiling lists’ and exploring various other sources.⁸ With many aspects of the system—including the process for receiving and finalising nominations from Australia—the commissioners found no fault.⁹ Nor had they improvements to suggest in relation to the procedure for honouring individuals distinguished in literature, art, science, philanthropy, or charitable work, noting only an expectation that the prime minister would ‘doubtless make enquiries as to what we may call the professional opinion of these cases and as to the general public repute of the persons concerned’.¹⁰

It was political honours that had brought the system into disrepute, and it was to reforming the processes for bestowing political honours that the commissioners devoted most of their report. Even the existence of such honours could be debated, as they acknowledged, but their proposals focused upon ensuring those that were conferred were not the result of corruption.¹¹ A fine line had to be walked: while it could not be a ‘disqualification’ for a person to have contributed to party funds, it was ‘repugnant to honest feeling’ that someone who was ‘otherwise undeserving’ should be honoured ‘simply because he promised to contribute so much’.¹² In order to prevent such an outcome, the commissioners recommended the establishment of a small committee of privy councillors, who would be provided with information on the services of each proposed recipient and the background to the nomination, and who would then make enquiries, reporting any adverse finding to the prime minister; if the prime minister nevertheless submitted the name to the King, the committee’s report

7 Rose, *King George V*, 250–52.

8 NAA: A11804, 1923/285, Report of the Royal Commission on Honours (1922), 4.

9 NAA: A11804, 1923/285, Report of the Royal Commission on Honours (1922), 5–7.

10 NAA: A11804, 1923/285, Report of the Royal Commission on Honours (1922), 7.

11 NAA: A11804, 1923/285, Report of the Royal Commission on Honours (1922), 7.

12 NAA: A11804, 1923/285, Report of the Royal Commission on Honours (1922), 9.

should accompany the recommendation.¹³ Finally, the commissioners proposed legislation imposing penalties on any person either seeking an honour, or offering to procure one, in exchange for money or some other ‘valuable consideration’.¹⁴ After a change of government, the Political Honours Scrutiny Committee was formed in 1923, and the Honours (Prevention of Abuses) Act passed in 1925. In 1933 the notorious tout, Arthur Maundy Gregory, became the first person convicted under the Act.¹⁵ Yet, as Tobias Harper has argued, this was not dramatic reform, but rather a reversion ‘to pre-war mechanisms of patronage that defended against the excesses of Lloyd George’s practices rather than creating a new system’.¹⁶

The unfolding scandal, and the resulting moves toward reform, were closely followed in the Australian press. Like the *West Australian*, most commentators deplored the degeneration of honours from ‘the mark of the King’s recognition of meritorious service to the nation’ to ‘a vulgar commodity to be offered in the market place to the highest bidder’.¹⁷ Indeed, the impropriety of such practices appears to have been sufficiently taken for granted that few felt the need to remark on it. Adelaide’s *Register* declared that ‘[t]he democratic conscience strongly revolts against the monstrous idea’ of a person receiving a title or entering the House of Lords as a legislator through having donated to a political party.¹⁸ For the *Daily Mail* in Brisbane, suspicion was likely to remain while honours lists continued to include awards given for party political services, and a ‘plain citizen’ might well consider that the whole institution needed amendment, while the *Northern Star*, in Lismore in New South Wales, proclaimed that ‘the British race’ would ‘never countenance trafficking in honours, or the odious power that patronage confers’.¹⁹ When the commission’s report was issued, Perth’s *Western Mail* greeted it with the comment that ‘tightening up of the system ... should meet with general endorsement’,

13 NAA: A11804, 1923/285, Report of the Royal Commission on Honours (1922), 9–10.

14 NAA: A11804, 1923/285, Report of the Royal Commission on Honours (1922), 11.

15 See Andrew Cook, *Cash for Honours: The Story of Maundy Gregory* (Stroud: History Press, 2008); Tom Cullen, *Maundy Gregory: Purveyor of Honours* (London: Bodley Head, 1974).

16 Tobias Harper, *From Servants of the Empire to Everyday Heroes: The British Honours System in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 58. doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198841180.001.0001.

17 ‘Titles of Honour’, *West Australian* (Perth), 20 July 1922, 6.

18 ‘Titular Honours’, *Register* (Adelaide), 19 July 1922, 6.

19 ‘Spurs, Won or Gilded’, *Daily Mail* (Brisbane), 1 July 1922, 6; ‘Honours and Titles’, *Northern Star* (Lismore), 11 September 1922, 4.

except from those who might have wished to take advantage of the previous arrangements, and suggested that people deserved 'to know why a fellow citizen is raised above them in rank'.²⁰

Supporters of honours might have advocated reform, but convinced sceptics needed no fuel to add to their fire. As in previous decades, outbursts against the whole idea of titles and honours continued to appear in the pages of newspapers around the country. Describing those who had received titles in Australia as 'a somewhat motley crew', Melbourne's *Herald* believed that '[m]ost sensible folk look upon the system of local knighthoods as ridiculous', thought it heightened 'snobbery and class difference', and wanted it abolished. Knighthood, the writer asserted, was '[u]nlike rabbits, sparrows, and prickly pear'—a rather unfortunate set of examples—in that it could not be 'acclimatised' in Australia.²¹ For the Catholic *Freeman's Journal*, British titles were both out of place 'in a country which is endeavouring to combat snobbery and old-world class distinctions', and unpatriotic, in that they were bestowed by another government 'thousands of miles across the seas'. If 'public-spirited citizens' were to be rewarded, the writer suggested a home-grown 'Legion of Hono,r [sic]'.²² Such views were, as in the past, sometimes strongly expressed in the radical and labour press. The Brisbane *Worker* thought 'hankering after tin-pot "honors" ... a peculiarity of the subservient Tory mind', while militant socialist Percy Brookfield, a member of the New South Wales Legislative Assembly, made sneering reference in the *Australian Worker* to 'knighthoods or some other bauble which denotes ignorance and stupidity'.²³

The end of imperial honours?

Whether or not opinions were changed by the scandal, it is surely not a coincidence that in its wake serious efforts were made to abolish titles and honours in several of the dominions. The constitution of the Irish

20 'Honours and Titles', *Western Mail* (Perth), 4 January 1923, 28.

21 NAA: A6661, 78, 'Aristocracy—Real and Unreal', *Herald* (Melbourne), 12 September 1925; 'Autocracy—Real and Unreal', *Weekly Times* (Melbourne), 19 September 1925, 48.

22 'Titles and Democracy', *Freeman's Journal* (Sydney), 12 May 1927, 24. See also 'English Honors for Australians', *Freeman's Journal* (Sydney), 5 January 1928, 22; 'Australian Honors for Australians', *Catholic Freeman's Journal* (Sydney), 12 May 1938, 24.

23 "'Honors': Have Australians Any Pride?' *Worker* (Brisbane), 12 January 1927, 6; P. Brookfield, 'The Prince's Visit', *Australian Worker* (Sydney), 6 May 1920, 19.

Free State, enacted in 1922, declared in its fifth article that titles of honour could not be bestowed upon its citizens ‘except with the approval or upon the advice of the Executive Council of the State’.²⁴ In South Africa the same year, former Senate president Francis Reitz put a motion in that house that, in light of the revelations in the United Kingdom, the government should not recommend or permit titles ‘bestowed from outside the Union on the citizens of this dominion’.²⁵ Although the motion was defeated, imperial honours were not to survive much longer in South Africa. In December 1924 it was reported in Australia that the South African prime minister, General Barry Hertzog, had refused to put forward nominations for the New Year honours list, as he considered titles—besides academic ones or awards given for civil servants for their services to the state—to be ‘in conflict with the spirit of the people in South Africa’ and with his party’s principles.²⁶ The following year, the House of Assembly adopted a motion that the King be asked not to confer titles on residents of South Africa.²⁷

In Canada too the disclosures may have hastened the end of recommendations for British honours. As early as 1918 the Canadian parliament had begun discussing the possibility of banning hereditary titles, at the least. Poor choices of recipients, along with the honours-selling scandal in Britain, had brought the system into disrepute, and it had become, as Christopher McCreery noted in his history of honours in Canada, ‘identified with eastern domination, party corruption, out-of-date habits of deference, and a servile relationship with [Britain]’.²⁸ William Folger Nickle, a Conservative parliamentarian from Ontario, was the immediate driver of change. In 1918, he introduced into the House of Commons a resolution asking the King to confer no more hereditary titles upon Canadians, and no honours that could be used by someone other than the person receiving them. This latter part of the resolution was intended to prevent women receiving the title of ‘Lady’ when their husbands were knighted.²⁹ Following the adoption of an amended

24 ‘Constitution of the Irish Free State (Saorstát Eireann) Act, 1922’, *Electronic Irish Statute Book*, Government of Ireland, accessed 30 September 2016, www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/1922/act/1/enacted/en/print.html.

25 ‘Titles or Honours’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 July 1922, 9.

26 ‘South African Titles’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 December 1924, 15.

27 ‘Titular Honours’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 February 1925, 9; ‘Opposition to Titles’, *Argus* (Melbourne), 28 February 1925, 33.

28 Peter Galloway, *The Order of the Bath* (Chichester: Phillimore, 2006), 328–29; Christopher McCreery, *The Order of Canada: Its Origins, History, and Development* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 24–48, quote on 24. doi.org/10.3138/9781442627963.

29 Canada, House of Commons, *Debates*, 8 April 1918 (W. F. Nickle).

resolution, a Special Committee on Honours and Titles was established, which recommended the ending of all civilian honours. The House passed a motion of concurrence with the committee's report in 1919, causing the relatively limited Nickle resolution to effectively become a ban on imperial honours.³⁰

Australian voices were also raised against British honours, particularly titles. In April 1925 a letter from the Australian Natives Association (ANA) to the governor-general, Henry Forster, advised that at its annual conference the ANA had passed a resolution against titles. The resolution requested that the prime minister would inform the imperial government 'that titles of any description are repugnant to the Australian people', and the letter sought Forster's assistance in ensuring 'that the spirit of the resolution is carried into effect'.³¹ The next year, the association's federal council unanimously passed a resolution approving of the ending of titles in New South Wales, and hoping that they would soon be abolished across the country.³²

Although a little late in coming, the ANA's resolution likely referred to a surprise success enjoyed by the Labor Party in the New South Wales Legislative Assembly in 1923. In September that year, Labor parliamentarian George Cann had sought to have a motion conveyed to the King stating that conferring titles was 'contrary to the sentiment of the citizens' of the State. He noted that Canada had already passed a similar resolution, discussed the report of the British royal commission, and pronounced titles 'a confounded nuisance as far as our parliamentary institutions are concerned'.³³ After an oration that became rather sidetracked into the rights and wrongs of titles and postnominals of all

30 McCreery, *Order of Canada*, 24, 34–37. Although no legislation prevented future governments recommending Canadians for imperial honours, no such recommendations were made until 1933. This change in practice followed the election in 1930 of a Conservative government led by Richard Bedford Bennett, who made recommendations for British honours to be conferred on a variety of people, including for charitable and philanthropic work, and for artistic and scientific activity, until the end of his prime ministership in 1935. McCreery, *Order of Canada*, 51–56. After this, apart from the award of lower-level British honours during World War II and the Korean War, Canada reverted to its former opposition to imperial honours, and remained effectively without an official honours system until the 1960s.

31 NAA: A6661, 78, letter to H. W. Forster from [unreadable signature], General Manager of the Australian Natives Association Ltd, 28 April 1925.

32 'A.N.A. Federal Council', *Argus* (Melbourne), 30 April 1926, 8.

33 New South Wales, Legislative Assembly, *Parliamentary Debates*, 25 September 1923 (George Cann).

kinds (among them military ranks, university degrees, and clergy titles), and speeches in support from Nationalist member Hyman Goldstein and Labor member Mark Gosling, the motion was passed by 39 votes to 24.³⁴

As Labor was not then in power—the Nationalist Government was led by Sir George Fuller, himself a KCMG (Knight Commander of the Order of St Michael and St George)—the motion had required the support of the government’s coalition partner, the Progressives (soon to be called the Country Party), as well as that of one independent member and two Nationalists. Their willingness to cross the floor on the issue underlines the extent of public outrage caused by the revelations in Britain. Indeed, in his speech Goldstein had adverted to the royal commission’s findings, stating that the report ‘contained some scathing remarks’ and arguing that it demonstrated the need for ‘the greatest care’ in making recommendations for honours. If that were lacking, he continued, ‘the sooner we do away with the principle of recommending Australian citizens for honors at the hands of the King the better it will be for democracy’. Going further, he implied that ‘mysterious influences’ had been at work in some awards made in New South Wales in the past, leading to unworthy individuals being nominated, and argued that:

in view of the strong suspicion that surrounds the whole business it would be advisable to pass a motion of this kind and to safeguard ourselves against any further cause for scandal.

Had previous recommendations been unimpeachable, he asserted, he would have opposed the motion, but as he did not believe they had been, he supported it.³⁵

The following year the issue was taken up in the South Australian parliament. Labor Attorney-General William Denny introduced a bill to end the granting of titles to South Australians except where a resolution to recommend a particular person was passed by both the Legislative Assembly and the Legislative Council.³⁶ Speaking to the bill, he stated that the granting of titles was ‘no longer regarded as a reward for merit, or

34 New South Wales, Legislative Assembly, *Parliamentary Debates*, 25 September 1923 (George Cann, Hyman Goldstein, and Mark Gosling). Although not apparently proposed or carried in the Legislative Council, the resolution was accordingly laid before the King, as the speaker of the house reported almost a year later. New South Wales, Legislative Assembly, *Parliamentary Debates*, 1 July 1924.

35 New South Wales, Legislative Assembly, *Parliamentary Debates*, 25 September 1923 (Hyman Goldstein).

36 South Australia, Legislative Assembly, *Parliamentary Debates*, 24 July 1924, 26 August 1924, and 4 September 1924.

distinction, or real public service'. He canvassed the discreditable history of titles in the United Kingdom, including the recent disclosures; Canada's decision to resolve against them; the motion adopted in New South Wales; and the preponderance of wealthy men among those honoured, concluding that the bill would ensure 'that our democratic institution can no longer be sullied by methods [that] merely aggrandise wealth, and gives a false outlook on what constitutes real public work and effort'. Although himself 'utterly opposed' to titles, the bill sought not to abolish them entirely but 'to provide that they shall be sparingly and fittingly awarded'.³⁷

Attacking the legislation, the leader of the Opposition, Sir Henry Barwell, focused first upon the question of whether the sovereign's prerogative regarding honours could be limited in such a way. Soon, however, he turned to the issue of empire loyalty. The bill was 'anti-Imperialistic in design', falling in 'the same category' as

the abolition of State Governors, the doing away with the observance of Empire Day, and the cutting out of our school history books all reference to those glorious deeds of arms on sea and land which have made England respected among the nations of the world, and helped to build up our Empire to what it is to-day.³⁸

Perhaps anticipating this line of assault, Denny had in his own address asserted that it was 'merely puerile to say that the Bill emanates from a party which is not anxious about the Imperial connection', and that throughout his political life he had 'been an enthusiastic advocate for the maintenance of the bond of Empire between Great Britain and Australia'.³⁹ Finally, Barwell took issue with the whole premise of the bill. There had been no public demand for it, he said, and no suggestion that the process of recommendations had been abused in South Australia. He questioned what he considered the socialist premise that 'differences and distinctions' between people were in themselves an evil, and Denny's integrity in proposing the measure, given that he himself held the title 'Honorable'.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, Labor member Henry Kneebone expressed his support for the bill, his 'only complaint' being that it did 'not go quite far enough'. He wished not only to abolish titles entirely, but to 'make it

37 South Australia, Legislative Assembly, *Parliamentary Debates*, 4 September 1924 (William Denny).

38 South Australia, Legislative Assembly, *Parliamentary Debates*, 17 September 1924 (Sir Henry Barwell).

39 South Australia, Legislative Assembly, *Parliamentary Debates*, 4 September 1924 (William Denny).

40 South Australia, Legislative Assembly, *Parliamentary Debates*, 17 September 1924 (Sir Henry Barwell).

retrospective to the landing of Captain Cook'. Among his reasons was what he perceived to be the democratic nature of Australian society. 'Even if honors were properly distributed,' he asserted, 'it would perpetuate and encourage in the community a class distinction' that could not be tolerated in a 'young country' with 'a democratic constitution.'⁴¹ Passed by the Legislative Assembly, the bill was defeated in the Legislative Council.⁴²

A year later, the matter was debated in the federal House of Representatives. Charles McGrath, the Labor member for Ballarat, moved that conferring titles was 'contrary to the sentiments of the citizens of Australia', and that a resolution to that effect should be conveyed to the King. Noting that Labor held power in five States, and that two of those governments had passed resolutions against titles, McGrath suggested the other three would soon follow suit. In a comparison that would become familiar, he pointed to Canada and South Africa, both of which had decided to stop conferring titles, asserting that '[t]heir attitude is easily understood'. There had been sufficient corruption that titles were no longer honours at all, he said, and Australians did not want such corruption in their political life.⁴³ On this occasion the debate was adjourned before the motion could be voted on.⁴⁴ McGrath tried again in 1926 and in 1927, at which time the motion came to a vote and was defeated. Responding to the motion in 1926, Nationalist Prime Minister Stanley Bruce declared that McGrath's arguments provided a case against the misuse of titles, but not against their conferral per se.⁴⁵

Some support was voiced in the press for these legislative attempts to discontinue the use of titular honours in Australia. Melbourne's *Age* approved of McGrath's motion in 1926, commenting that:

If certain Governments and citizens combine in the absurd incongruity of perpetuating titles in this democratic country, they must not be surprised if the Australian people begin to express themselves frankly, even brutally.

41 South Australia, Legislative Assembly, *Parliamentary Debates*, 17 September 1924 (Henry Kneebone).

42 South Australia, Legislative Assembly, *Parliamentary Debates*, 25 September 1924; South Australia, Legislative Council, *Parliamentary Debates*, 2 October 1924.

43 Commonwealth of Australia, House of Representatives, *Parliamentary Debates*, 9 July 1925 (Charles McGrath).

44 Commonwealth of Australia, House of Representatives, *Parliamentary Debates*, 13 August 1925.

45 Commonwealth of Australia, House of Representatives, *Parliamentary Debates*, 29 July 1926 (Charles McGrath, Stanley Bruce); Commonwealth of Australia, House of Representatives, *Parliamentary Debates*, 13 October 1927.

The only people who supported the continuation of the system, the paper claimed, were ‘those groups of tuft hunters that infest every community’, and it hoped that soon ‘all Australian Parliaments will petition [against titles] in unison’.⁴⁶ On the other hand, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, writing of Cann’s 1923 motion, held that poor choices of recipients and misuse of the system not were reasons to abolish it altogether, and that there was an ‘inverted snobbery’ in the stance of those who purported to despise titles. The paper doubted that conferring titles went against the sentiments of the people of New South Wales, who might ‘not set inordinate store’ in them, but who were ‘pleased’ when a deserving member of the community received recognition.⁴⁷ Just how close did Australia come to following the example of Canada and South Africa and banning imperial honours and titles in the 1920s? Although largely failed, these were serious attempts to abolish the system in Australia, and as the example of New South Wales in particular demonstrates, there was sufficient support among the nation’s politicians, fuelled by the revelations from Britain, that success was not impossible. It is not too much to say that in these years Australia came closer to banning the imperial honours system than would be the case for another half century.

Honours and the ALP

By this time, as discussed in the previous chapter, the Australian Labor Party (ALP) had begun to take a policy stance against British honours. Ending recommendations for imperial honours had been part of the party’s federal platform since as early as 1918.⁴⁸ Over the following years, similar resolutions were occasionally passed at ALP conferences. In 1921, for example, the interstate conference carried a resolution calling for ‘[c]omplete Australian self-government’; among several aspects, it included that ‘no further Imperial honours ... be granted in any circumstances to Australian citizens’.⁴⁹ Reports in May 1930 stated that the federal conference had agreed to a motion ‘[t]hat the bestowal of all Imperial honours should be

46 *Age* (Melbourne), 30 July 1926, 8.

47 ‘Titles’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 September 1923, 14.

48 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), 13; Ernest Alexander Lyall, ‘Government Patronage in Australia: The Exercise of the Patronage Prerogative by Commonwealth and New South Wales Governments in the Period 1927–1969’ (Master’s thesis, The Australian National University, 1969), 194.

49 ‘A.L.P. Congress’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 October 1921, 9.

abolished through Parliamentary action'.⁵⁰ Opposition to British honours and titles was a product of the dominant interpretation within the party of its ideals of democracy and egalitarianism, which titular awards were seen to compromise, and of its nationalist orientation, according to which imperial distinctions were viewed as likely to inhibit the independence of Australian politicians in any instance of conflict between British Government objectives and Australian interests.

Labor governments, therefore, generally refused to participate in the imperial honours system. Among the copies of lists of recommendations from the State governors now held in the National Archives of Australia are numerous despatches informing the governor-general that no nominations would be forthcoming from a particular State.⁵¹ Likewise, James Scullin's federal Labor Government declined to make any recommendations during its tenure.⁵² In 1930, in response to a suggestion that aviator Charles Kingsford Smith should receive an honour, the Returned Sailors' and Soldiers' Imperial League of Australia (RSSILA) in New South Wales was told that 'the general policy of the Government is not to make recommendations', and that an exception would not be made for Kingsford Smith.⁵³ Unfortunately for Kingsford Smith, Labor was also in power in New South Wales. The RSSILA State executive was thus no more successful in seeking to have him knighted through the State list, with the premier, Jack Lang, refusing to make the recommendation because it was contrary to Labor policy. Moreover, Lang was reported to have said, since Kingsford Smith's achievements were international in nature, it would be more appropriate that he be honoured by the federal government.⁵⁴ Kingsford Smith did eventually get his knighthood, through the nomination of Joseph Lyons's United Australia Party Government, in June 1932.⁵⁵

This anti-honours stance was by no means consistent across the country, however. Titles were generally viewed with greater hostility than were other awards, and Labor administrations sometimes took a more lenient

50 'Federal A.L.P.', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 May 1930, 15.

51 See NAA: A2924; NAA: A2925.

52 NAA: A2924, 1931/2, letter to Sir Isaac A. Isaacs, Governor-General, from J. A. Scullin, Prime Minister, 11 March 1931.

53 NAA: A1606, A22/1, letter to W. J. Stagg, State Secretary, Returned Sailors' and Soldiers' Imperial League of Australia, from J. E. Fenton, Acting Prime Minister, 25 November 1930.

54 'No Knighthood for Kingsford Smith', *Canberra Times*, 10 January 1931, 1.

55 NAA: A2924, 1932/6.

stance towards non-titular honours than titular ones. Ahead of a visit by the Duke of Gloucester in 1934, Queensland's deputy premier, Percy Pease, stated that the Labor Government would 'not express itself against' the award of honours that did not confer titles, and that it was likely that such distinctions would go to 'one or two leading citizens, and those most closely connected with' the arranging of the tour. This, said Pease, was the same approach as had been adopted for previous royal visits.⁵⁶ Hereditary distinctions, on the other hand, were the subject of still fiercer disapproval. In 1920 New South Wales Labor premier John Storey cancelled a recommendation made by his predecessor, William Holman, that Sir George Fuller be made a baronet, on the grounds that Australian attitudes were opposed to hereditary honours. While permitting Holman's other nominations—which included knighthoods—to proceed, in a departure from the usual standards of confidentiality he also revealed the names of individuals who had been recommended. Explaining his action, he said he had done so to make sure it would be known, if the distinctions were granted, that his government was not responsible for them.⁵⁷

On rare occasions, too, Labor governments did nominate for titular honours. The New Year honours list in January 1925, for example, featured the businessman Alfred Ashbolt, agent-general for Tasmania in London from 1919 to 1924, who had been recommended by Joseph Lyons's Labor ministry in Tasmania.⁵⁸ 'That Tasmania should get a knighthood', crowed the Hobart *Mercury*, when it had a Labor Government, 'is a feather in our cap calculated to turn some of the Mainland sisters green with envy of Cinderella'.⁵⁹ Similarly, in 1932 the list included two knighthoods recommended by the Labor Government in South Australia. Walter Young, the managing director of Elder, Smith and Co. Ltd, who had been financial adviser to the government, was appointed KBE (Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire), and William Goodman, the chief engineer and general manager of the Municipal Tramways Trust for 25 years, was created knight bachelor. Premier Lionel Hill was quoted in Adelaide's *Advertiser* explaining that '[p]olitics do not enter into the question of recognising distinguished public services', and that while his

56 'Labour Ban on Titles', *Courier-Mail* (Brisbane), 31 October 1934, 14.

57 'No Hereditary Honours', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 April 1920, 11; 'Honour List', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 April 1920, 8; 'In the Mother State', *Register* (Adelaide), 30 April 1920, 8.

58 NAA: A2925, 1925/2; NAA: A2925, 1925/4.

59 'The New Year Honours', *Mercury* (Hobart), 2 January 1925, 4.

government disapproved of ‘the indiscriminate awarding of honors’, they were nevertheless ‘the only method available when it desires to show its appreciation of outstanding national work’.⁶⁰

Outside Labor ranks, criticisms of the party’s policy were frequent. Conservative politicians and commentators valued imperial honours and asserted that there was nothing wrong with awards given to recognise merit. Responding to McGrath’s motion in the House of Representatives in 1926, for example, Bruce thought it good to be able to recognise public service in all fields of endeavour, and believed that most Australians would agree.⁶¹ Likewise, honours were for the *Sydney Morning Herald* ‘Royal recognition ... for public service’, and not at all ‘undemocratic’, since they conferred ‘no special privileges’ that would set recipients apart from their fellow citizens.⁶² Supporters of British honours sometimes also put forth the old argument that the system was a way of binding the empire together, and a means of increasing loyalty to both monarch and empire. In the words of South Australian Liberal Thomas Pascoe in 1925, honours were

one of the things that bring this great Commonwealth of nations in closer touch with the Sovereign, and help to keep the dominions loyal to the Empire and to the throne itself.⁶³

Another common criticism of the ALP’s stance was that the opinion of Labor parliamentarians, however sincerely held, should not be imposed upon everyone, no matter their own political persuasion. As one observer put it, Labor members’ personal opposition to imperial honours was ‘no reason why they should act like the foxes in the fable who cut off their tails and sought to dock others in a similar manner’. Australia was a member of the British empire, flying ‘the British flag’, and the residents of one State should not be excluded from ‘the privileges enjoyed by other subjects of the King’.⁶⁴ As this last remark suggests, dismay at Labor prohibitions on honours was also provoked by the observation that a particular State—or in the case of federal Labor governments, Commonwealth politicians and civil servants—was missing out on rewards available elsewhere in the country. The *Brisbane Courier* asserted in 1933, for example,

60 ‘Knighthoods for Two South Australians’, *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 1 January 1932, 7.

61 Commonwealth of Australia, House of Representatives, *Parliamentary Debates*, 29 July 1926 (Stanley Bruce).

62 ‘Birthday Honours’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 June 1936, 14.

63 South Australia, Legislative Council, *Parliamentary Debates*, 29 July 1925 (Thomas Pascoe).

64 NAA: A6661, 78, ‘Choking the Fountain of Honor’, unattributed press cutting, 4 June 1925.

that Queensland Labor's anti-honours stance was 'a mistake, especially where Australians in other States are being remembered for services not greater than those rendered by persons in Queensland'.⁶⁵ Finally, Labor politicians' use of the title 'Honourable', and their willingness to accept privy councillorships, with the attendant title of 'Right Honourable', drew the ire of critics. It was 'a case of political hypocrisy', suggested one letter writer in the Adelaide *Advertiser* in 1925.⁶⁶

The case of David Gordon, 1925

Labor opposition to honours also added a new dimension to the old arguments over States' rights. The case of David Gordon provides a good example. Gordon, the leader of the Liberal Party in the South Australian Legislative Council and a former federal member of parliament, was knighted in the New Year list for 1925. Reports that the State's Labor Government was displeased by the honour quickly began to appear around the country. The day the knighthood was announced, the *Advertiser* quoted the South Australian attorney-general, William Denny, stating that for the federal government to nominate a citizen of South Australia for an imperial honour when the State government had itself refused to make recommendations—and, indeed, passed a bill against making them without the approval of both houses—raised a 'far-reaching constitutional question'. Before the announcement of Gordon's knighthood, Denny said, the federal government had notified the South Australian Government that it would not allow itself to be limited in its ability to confer honours on South Australians. His reply had been that if recommendations were made by the federal government, the State government might pass a resolution 'disapproving of a particular nomination'. The problem, as he saw it, was that the federal government 'intend to ignore the rights of the State Government in such matters, although it is claimed that South Australia is a sovereign State'. Denny also suggested that if a person held an honour 'obviously disapproved of by the majority of the people of the State', he or she 'must realise that he [or she] is placed in a very invidious position'.⁶⁷ The latter point evidently did not concern Gordon, who accepted the knighthood.

65 'New Year Honours', *Brisbane Courier*, 2 January 1933, 8.

66 'Anti-Humbug', letter to the editor, *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 3 January 1925, 11.

67 'The Conferring of Honors', *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 1 January 1925, 7.

Nor did it convince the *Advertiser*, which took the view that ‘general satisfaction’ would be the public reaction to Gordon’s knighthood.⁶⁸ In an editorial, the paper stated that the knighthood was ‘a well-merited recognition of distinguished service ... both to the Commonwealth and the State’. It was ‘to be regretted’, the writer opined, that Denny ‘should take the ungracious course of entering a protest, on alleged constitutional grounds’. Somewhat caustically, the paper pointed out that the bill to which Denny referred had been rejected by the upper house, and that ALP policy could not restrict the sovereign’s honours prerogative or the federal government’s ability to recommend Australians.⁶⁹ The federal government was likewise unconcerned. As the *Sydney Morning Herald* put it a few days later, federal ministers were ‘not perturbed’ that Labor in South Australia had ‘taken exception to’ the recommendation. A federal minister was quoted stating that where the federal government had chosen to nominate ‘a distinguished citizen of the Commonwealth’ who had ‘rendered such service as to merit recognition’, it was ‘merely impertinence for exception to be taken by a State Ministry’.⁷⁰ British official opinion was also reported to be that the Commonwealth Government could recommend any Australian for an honour, regardless of their place of residence, and that ‘[i]t would be extraordinary’ if a State government could veto a recommendation.⁷¹

Nevertheless, the issue lingered. Denny responded to the comments of the Colonial Office, asserting that while the State government and the federal government each had the right to make recommendations, and no right to veto those of the other, his objection concerned

[the] propriety of the Commonwealth Government in making a recommendation that was turned down by the State Government, and in the face of a Bill which passed the House of Assembly by an overwhelming majority with the object of preventing such appointments in the future.

He asserted that the State government was ‘[s]urely ... the best judge of which of its citizens, if any, should receive distinction’, and he questioned what services Gordon had given to deserve the honour, having been a member of the Commonwealth Parliament for only a short time. Denny’s

68 ‘New Year Honors’, *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 1 January 1925, 7.

69 ‘Sir David Gordon’, *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 1 January 1925, 6.

70 ‘Honours’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 January 1925, 8.

71 ‘South Australian Knighthood’, *Sunday Times* (Perth), 4 January 1925, 1.

suggestion was that this had been ‘a purely party recommendation’, made to reward Gordon’s efforts as leader of the opposition in the State’s Legislative Council, where he had helped ensure bills passed in the House of Assembly were rejected; he suggested that the State parliament should start recommending members of the federal opposition for such honours.⁷² On the other hand, the *Advertiser* suggested that Denny’s and the government’s opposition to Gordon being knighted had itself been motivated by party politics, Gordon being the leader of the Liberal Party in the Legislative Council; no complaint, the paper pointed out, was made about the fact that Archibald Strong, the Jury professor of English language and literature at the University of Adelaide, had also recently been knighted.⁷³

David Gordon’s elevation to the knighthood was not to be the last time the ALP’s stance on imperial honours led to friction between the States and the federal government. As was clear in that case, a State Labor government could be thwarted in its desire not to bestow awards on its residents by a conservative federal ministry, or vice versa. In 1936, Western Australia’s Labor premier, Philip Collier, was reported to have expressed ‘surprise’ that the recent New Year list had included three Western Australian appointments to the Order of the British Empire. He argued that since the end of World War I it had been the custom for the federal government to consult with State governments when making nominations, stating his strong disapproval that this had not been done, and arguing that it was the State government that was best able to judge the services of its residents. Recommendations should not be made by the federal government in ‘secrecy’, he asserted.⁷⁴ In this case, the honours in question were not titular. Rather, three women—Emily Abel, Catherine Elliott, and Bessie Hubbard—had been appointed MBE (Members of the Order of the British Empire).⁷⁵ Although a relatively minor matter among the constellation of irritations that were to cause tension between State and federal governments over the coming decades, honours were

72 ‘A Party Recommendation’, *Register* (Adelaide), 5 January 1925, 10.

73 ‘The Granting of Titles’, *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 27 July 1925, 8.

74 ‘New Year Honours’, *West Australian* (Perth), 4 January 1936, 14.

75 ‘New Year Honours’, *Argus* (Melbourne), 6 January 1936, 8. Each of the three had been engaged in charitable or social welfare work: Abel was honoured as secretary of the State division of the Red Cross, Elliott for her work in infant and maternal welfare, and Hubbard for her services to social welfare. 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/1087458; honours.pmc.gov.au/honours/awards/1085136; honours.pmc.gov.au/honours/awards/1084339.

always a possible source of friction. The hardening of Labor opposition to British awards, combined with the continued support for those awards by non-Labor governments, and the nature of the country's federal system, ensured it.

'A tribute to the women of Australia'

The honours granted to these three Western Australian women elicited a protest over the respective powers of the State and federal governments, but in England during the interwar years it was the lack of female recipients that provoked dismay.⁷⁶ Women's poor treatment in honours lists was a grievance of the Women's Freedom League, and their complaints on the subject in Britain were regularly reported in Australian newspapers. In 1924 the league wrote to Stanley Baldwin, the prime minister, objecting to the exclusion of women from the New Year list. Women's services should be recognised equally with men's, the letter argued.⁷⁷ Reports in 1930 revealed that the league had written again to the prime minister, then Ramsay MacDonald, expressing disappointment that Amy Johnson had received only 'so inadequate and inappropriate' a reward as a CBE (Commander of the Order of the British Empire) for her solo flight that year from England to Australia. A CBE might be appropriate for 'the secretary of the Northumberland Miners' Association or the honorary technical adviser to an area gas supply committee of the Board of Trade', but the organisation declared it far too lowly an award for such a feat. Honours lists did not include enough women, in the group's opinion, and did not recognise the extent of women's services to the nation.⁷⁸ Four years later the league was reported to have protested the omission of women from the higher levels of the Order of the British Empire. '[E]ven for a lifetime's political or public services', the league was quoted as saying, women were 'fobbed off' with OBEs and MBEs (respectively, officers and members of the order), while men were given 'peerages, Privy Councillorships, baronetcies, and knighthoods'.⁷⁹

76 On feminist critiques of women's treatment in the honours system in Britain, see also Harper, *Servants of the Empire*, 81–82.

77 'Women an [sic] Honours', *Register* (Adelaide), 5 January 1924, 10.

78 "'Unsuitable Honor'", *News* (Adelaide), 4 June 1930, 1; 'Amy's Honor', *Evening News* (Sydney), 4 June 1930, 9.

79 'Honours for Women', *Argus* (Melbourne), 3 January 1934, 7.

Published two days after the New Year list had been announced, this report attracted some editorial comment in Australia, not all of it supportive. More information would be required to determine whether or not women had been treated fairly in the list, asserted the *Argus*. Perhaps there had been no woman deserving appointment to the order's upper levels this time. In any case, the writer argued, women had received such high honours in the past, and a whole new order with provision for women's inclusion had been created as a recognition of their war service. Women may receive fewer honours than men, but they had fewer opportunities to perform public services, and the honours system was not always just to men either. At least it should be a comfort that those women who had been honoured had been truly deserving of the distinctions they had received. Complete equality between men and women in all arenas of life, the writer concluded, would take time, if it was even to be desired, and after all, '[n]o victory worth having is easily won'.⁸⁰ On the other hand, 'Hestia' in Hobart's *Mercury* 'sympathise[d] heartily' with the Women's Freedom League. As well as the case of Amy Johnson, she declared, there were

other works for the welfare of humanity, long years spent in self-denying humanitarian work ... which, in comparison with some deeds and contributions of men for which high titles are given, are as a glorious star to a penny dip.⁸¹

Across the continent in Perth, 'Ixia'—the pen name of author, artist, and botanist Emily Pelloe—responded to the protest in the 'Woman's Interests' section of the *West Australian*.⁸² Having noted several Australian women who had been appointed to the order, Pelloe suggested that the women in England 'clamouring for woman's advancement' did not realise 'how great an honour is the despised O.B.E. or M.B.E. awarded for actual individual merit', the implicit contrast being with the courtesy titles accorded the wives and children of peers and knights, or perhaps some of the less well deserved of the accolades bestowed upon men. Nevertheless, while true worth did not require honours, and she could not 'wish for a multiplicity of Dames in the Commonwealth', more numerous conferrals of the title, where merited, 'would be welcomed as evidence of royal appreciation for the part Australian women undoubtedly play in building up and

80 'Women's Rights—and Wrongs', *Argus* (Melbourne), 4 January 1934, 6.

81 'Hestia', 'A Woman to Women', *Mercury* (Hobart), 10 January 1934, 3.

82 Noël Stewart, 'Pelloe, Emily Harriet (1877–1941)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, accessed 5 October 2016, adb.anu.edu.au/biography/pelloe-emily-harriet-8012/text13963.

strengthening the British Empire'.⁸³ Meanwhile, in the same paper, 'Philos' suggested that since women were generally 'fonder of ornamentation than men', the whole arena of honours might be abandoned to them.⁸⁴

Yet however it may have seemed to commentators at the time, with the benefit of hindsight the decades of the 1920s and 1930s appear something of a high point of women's participation in the honours system in Australia. In these first years after women's admission to the system in their own right, a reconceptualisation of what constituted service to the state began to take place. Besides the forms of service traditionally rewarded with honours—those in the armed forces, government and the public and foreign services, industry, science, and the arts—a new and different type of activity was coming to be seen as service that deserved official honour. Grounded in the motherly ideals of nurturance and morality that animated the maternalist model of citizenship then being developed by feminist women in Australia and elsewhere, this newly acknowledged kind of service was gendered feminine. Through the concept of 'maternal citizenship', as Marilyn Lake has argued, feminists could 'reconceptualize' women's service in the world as being 'not to an individual master/husband, but to the abstract entity of the state'.⁸⁵ That the Australian state reciprocated by approving this reimagining of women's role is suggested by the patterns evident in the conferral of honours on women in these decades.

Indeed, at times in these first years after the creation of the Order of the British Empire, women were appointed to it—at least, to the three non-titular levels—in proportions rarely to be equalled in later years.⁸⁶ Women represented 27 per cent of appointments to the fourth grade of

83 'Ixia', 'Honours for Women', *West Australian* (Perth), 5 January 1934, 6.

84 'Philos', 'From China to Peru', *West Australian* (Perth), 5 January 1934, 16.

85 Marilyn Lake, 'A Revolution in the Family: The Challenge and Contradictions of Maternal Citizenship in Australia', in *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States*, eds Seth Koven and Sonya Michel (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 388. doi.org/10.4324/9781315021164-12. Joan Eveline has similarly noted that white feminist women in the first half of the twentieth century cast motherhood 'as a service to the state'. Joan Eveline, 'Feminism, Racism and Citizenship', in *Women as Australian Citizens: Underlying Histories*, eds Patricia Crawford and Philippa Maddern (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2001), 158.

86 The statistics in this section were prepared using data from the Australian Government's online honours database, as it stood in 2011, and may not be comprehensive (see Author's Note). For further discussion of women's place in the honours system in Australia see Karen Fox, "'Housewives' Leader Awarded MBE": Women, Leadership and Honours in Australia', in *Seizing the Initiative: Australian Women Leaders in Politics, Workplaces and Communities*, eds Rosemary Francis, Patricia Grimshaw, and Ann Standish (Melbourne: eScholarship Research Centre, University of Melbourne, 2012), 171–84.

the order (OBE) in the five-year period from 1920 to 1924, 38.5 per cent between 1925 and 1929, 34.4 per cent from 1930 to 1934, and 18.1 per cent between 1935 and 1939 (see Table 1). In the order's third grade (CBE), representation of women was more uneven, reaching 25 per cent in the years from 1930 to 1934, but entirely lacking between 1920 and 1929, while in the fifth grade (MBE), near parity was achieved in the period from 1930 to 1934, with women gaining 46.2 per cent of awards. Although the figures are inconsistent, fluctuating between relatively high and distinctly low levels of inclusion, what is most startling is that these peaks were to be the pinnacle of women's inclusion in the honours system in Australia in the twentieth century, at least in numerical terms (see Table 2). Comparing women's share of honours bearing titles to that of men is more difficult, since the total numbers are too small to be statistically significant (see Table 3). Nevertheless, it is worth noting that in the five-year period from 1920 to 1924 one of the three grand crosses (GBE) conferred in Australia was received by a woman (Mary Hughes, the wife of Prime Minister Billy Hughes), while between 1925 and 1929 the only one of these distinctions—the highest within the Order of the British Empire—awarded in Australia went to a woman (the opera singer Nellie Melba).

Ever alert for the human interest factor in honours announcements, the press sometimes remarked upon women's new visibility in the biannual lists. Australian women would be 'delighted' with the representation of women in the latest group of recipients, thought Brisbane's *Telegraph* in 1934, noting that such levels of inclusion were 'becoming more and more inevitable with the advance of woman in all fields of public activity'.⁸⁷ The following year the *Sydney Morning Herald* declared that more Australian women had been included in the King's Birthday list than in any previous list, demonstrating their increasing participation 'in the affairs of the world'.⁸⁸ Similarly, Enid Lyons, then the wife of the prime minister, regarded her appointment as GBE (Dame Grand Cross of the Order of the British Empire) in 1937 not as an acknowledgement of personal effort or achievement, but as a broader recognition of women's work and place in the community. 'I can only regard this,' she was quoted as saying, 'as a tribute to the women of Australia.'⁸⁹

87 'Honoured by the King', *Telegraph* (Brisbane), 4 June 1934, 10.

88 'Australian Women Honoured', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 June 1935, 12.

89 'Dame Enid Lyons', *West Australian* (Perth), 13 May 1937, 18; 'Tribute to Womanhood', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 May 1937, 4.

Table 1: Awards of the MBE, OBE, and CBE to Australians, 1915–1994

Period	CBE			OBE			MBE		
	Male	Female	% Female	Male	Female	% Female	Male	Female	% Female
1915–1919	52	15	22.4	182	29	13.7	124	8	6.1
1920–1924	34	0	0.0	73	27	27.0	44	19	30.2
1925–1929	30	0	0.0	8	5	38.5	7	1	12.5
1930–1934	21	7	25.0	21	11	34.4	14	12	46.2
1935–1939	52	2	3.7	113	25	18.1	132	73	35.6
1940–1944	86	0	0.0	189	14	6.9	224	36	13.8
1945–1949	79	4	4.8	244	22	8.3	364	46	11.2
1950–1954	95	4	4.0	239	38	13.7	315	126	28.6
1955–1959	179	5	2.7	312	59	15.9	413	168	28.9
1960–1964	189	10	5.0	360	60	14.3	465	220	32.1
1965–1969	199	10	4.8	464	58	11.1	672	240	26.3
1970–1974	157	14	8.2	433	60	12.2	722	255	26.1
1975–1979	167	17	9.2	475	100	17.4	857	285	25.0
1980–1984	87	5	5.4	246	43	14.9	465	129	21.7
1985–1989	20	1	4.8	55	5	8.3	101	20	16.5
1990–1994	0	0	0.0	0	0	0.0	0	0	0.0

Note: CBE, OBE, and MBE indicate Commander, Officer, and Member of the Order of the British Empire, respectively. No awards were made in the 1990–1994 period, partly because agreement had been reached by late 1992 that no further nominations would be made for imperial awards (see Chapter 8). Source: Author's summary, prepared using the Australian Government's online honours database, as it stood in 2011 (percentage figures given to one decimal place).

Table 2: Awards of the AC, AO, and AM to Australians, 1975–1999

Period	AC			AO			AM		
	Male	Female	% Female	Male	Female	% Female	Male	Female	% Female
1975–1979	34	1	2.9	162	5	3.0	458	92	16.7
1980–1984	25	2	7.4	216	8	3.6	643	96	13.0
1985–1989	73	5	6.4	347	45	11.5	1,031	185	15.2
1990–1994	61	10	14.1	312	60	16.1	982	223	18.5
1995–1999	27	6	18.2	208	38	15.4	779	215	21.6

Note: AC, AO, and AM indicate Companion, Officer, and Member of the Order of Australia, respectively.

Source: Author's summary, prepared using the Australian Government's online honours database, as it stood in 2011 (percentage figures given to one decimal place).

Table 3: Awards of the GBE, KBE, and DBE to Australians, 1915–1994

	KBE	DBE		GBE		
Period	Male	Female	% Female	Male	Female	% Female
1915–1919 ⁹⁰	11	2	15.4	0	1	100.0
1920–1924	16	1	5.9	2	1	33.3
1925–1929	9	1	10.0	0	1	100.0
1930–1934	3	0	0.0	1	0	0.0
1935–1939 ⁹¹	14	4	22.2	0	1	100.0
1940–1944	6	0	0.0	1	0	0.0
1945–1949	2	1	33.3	0	0	n/a
1950–1954	25	2	7.4	0	1	100.0
1955–1959	34	2	5.6	0	0	n/a
1960–1964	21	6	22.2	0	0	n/a
1965–1969	27	8	22.9	0	0	n/a
1970–1974	25	8	24.2	0	0	n/a
1975–1979	34	16	32.0	0	0	n/a
1980–1984	17	9	34.6	0	0	n/a
1985–1989	1	1	50.0	0	0	n/a
1990–1994	0	0	n/a	0	0	n/a

Note: KBE, DBE, and GBE indicate Knight Commander, Dame Commander, and Knight/Dame Grand Cross of the Order of the British Empire, respectively. No awards were made in the 1990–1994 period, partly because agreement had been reached by late 1992 that no further nominations would be made for imperial awards (see Chapter 8).

Source: Author's summary, prepared using the Australian Government's online honours database, as it stood in 2011 (percentage figures given to one decimal place).

Who gets what

If in Australia the numbers of women receiving honours during these years might have seemed the march of progress—perhaps not as swift as might be desired, but nonetheless moving in the right direction—not all criticism of the make-up of the lists was silenced. As well as continuing critiques of the use of imperial honours generally, and especially titles, the system drew expressions of dissatisfaction for a range of other reasons. One perennial criticism, which would continue to be heard in years

90 The figures for this period have been updated to include a GBE to Florence Reid.

91 The figures for this period (and those for 1955–1959) have been corrected, as the Australian Government's online honours database incorrectly displays Enid Lyons receiving a GBE in 1957; she in fact received it in 1937. *Supplement to the London Gazette*, no. 34396, 11 May 1937, 3095.

to come, and which is discussed further in the next chapter, related to political awards and patronage. Moving his resolution in the federal House of Representatives in 1926, McGrath had made reference to knighthoods in Australia as ‘the result of political patronage’, while a 1934 article in the Launceston *Examiner* suggested that honours ought to be ‘reserved as acknowledgements of outstanding work in fields far removed from politics’.⁹² A related, and equally familiar, concern was that those who most deserved awards missed out, while influential and wealthy individuals regularly received distinctions. While supportive of the idea of honours, the *Canberra Times* stated in 1934 that there were ‘far too many examples in our midst of men who have deserved well of Australia and who have done great things for the British Commonwealth, who have fallen in the race for honours’. At the same time, the paper asserted, ‘there ha[d] been undue favouritism of the less deserving, of political supporters and of the wealthy class’.⁹³

And, of course, members of particular occupational groupings sometimes alleged that their profession was being overlooked. In 1936, for example, a correspondent to the *Sydney Morning Herald* using the pseudonym ‘Teacher’ complained that ‘[f]or some time past I have been struck by the official lack of recognition of the teachers’ work’. There were many deserving teachers, the writer claimed, and their omission from honours lists was ‘symptomatic’ of a broader lack of appreciation for ‘intellectual and cultural interests’.⁹⁴ The arts, indeed, was an area often considered ill-treated in honours lists. After Kate Baker—the great campaigner for Joseph Furphy’s writings—was appointed OBE in 1937, one of the congratulatory letters she received noted that the award must be especially ‘gratifying’ since ‘Australian literature ... is a branch that so seldom receives the recognition it deserves’.⁹⁵

Some of these laments of ill-treatment were probably well founded. Although the retention of the Order of the British Empire after World War I had opened new space for a wider range of activities to be recognised,

92 Commonwealth of Australia, House of Representatives, *Parliamentary Debates*, 29 July 1926 (Charles McGrath); ‘Bestowal of Honours’, *Examiner* (Launceston), 23 March 1934, 6.

93 ‘Honours’, *Canberra Times*, 4 January 1934, 2.

94 ‘Teacher’, letter to the editor, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 January 1936, 10.

95 National Library of Australia, Canberra: MS2022, Papers of Kate Baker, 1893–1946, Box 1, Folder 8, letter to Kate Baker from Helen and Daisy Fowler, 11 May 1937, 618; John Barnes, ‘Baker, Catherine (Kate) (1861–1953)’, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, accessed 12 September 2017, adb.anu.edu.au/biography/baker-catherine-kate-5104/text8527.

the figures suggest that earlier patterns persisted.⁹⁶ Knighthoods conferred upon men, particularly within the Order of St Michael and St George, still tended to cluster in fields of endeavour such as politics, public service, and the law, with a smattering also of businessmen, medical and university men, and philanthropists. For men, the lower grades of the Order of the British Empire were used most often to reward services during World War I or military veterans, public servants, local government service, and services to social welfare. Awards to women show a somewhat different pattern. Of the nine women who received damehoods between 1920 and 1939, two were rewarded for their wartime services, two were eminent in the arts, and the remaining five had given either community or public services. Lower-level awards to women tended to be concentrated either in community service, nursing, and teaching—occupations traditionally gendered feminine, and thus acceptable fields in which women could work and excel—or in areas historically attracting honours, such as public service and the professions, where the women in question stood out as exceptions to the rule in largely male-dominated fields.

Yet there were also signs of a broadening of the reach of the system. Besides the incorporation of women in relatively large numbers, two notable developments are evident. First, according to the citations given in the government database ‘It’s an Honour’, a significant number of men were appointed to the lower grades of the Order of the British Empire for social welfare activities, a field also common in awards made to women, but for which few men in Australia had been honoured in the past. Second, for the first time in Australia, men and women began to be honoured—albeit in very small numbers—for their achievements in the arts. Thus, if the statistics largely reveal expected patterns, it is nonetheless the case that the distribution of honours in Australia had undergone significant change since the end of the war, and new departures suggested that old patterns might be beginning to shift.

Moreover, whatever complaints in the press might seem to suggest, it appears the majority of potential recipients were grateful to have their efforts recognised, and happy to accept a proffered distinction. Files in the National Archives of Australia include numerous letters from nominees expressing surprise and delight at the news they were to be

96 Research by Tobias Harper also demonstrates the resurgence of old patterns in the conferral of awards during the interwar years, in part as a result of a deliberate effort in Britain to reduce the numbers of honours bestowed. See Harper, *Servants of the Empire*, 71–80.

recommended.⁹⁷ Some also expressed their loyalty and allegiance to the monarch from whom the award ostensibly came, either unconscious of or rejecting the arguments of critics who charged that the monarch was unaware of most of those who received honours, as it was really politicians who distributed them. Journalist and charitable worker Zara Aronson, for example, wrote in 1935 after being offered an OBE that:

in serving My King and my Country I have only given in 50 years what I consider is a very small emblem of loyalty and service to an Empire which in its magnitude of Imperialism stands pre-eminent.⁹⁸

Only a small minority declined. Their reasons were varied, and as often personal as ideological, at least as far as can be ascertained by the explanations they sent in reply to the offer, or which have survived in other sources. Novelist Miles Franklin, for example, refused an OBE in disgust, considering it an insult when compared to the DBE conferred upon poet Mary Gilmore; charity worker Ruby Board declined an MBE on the grounds that it was not a high enough honour to fit her position as president of the National Council of Women in New South Wales; and poet Bernard O'Dowd refused a knighthood likely because of his radicalism and association with the Labor Party.⁹⁹ Others gave no explanation, simply asking to be allowed to decline the award, or stating that their reasons were personal.

⁹⁷ See NAA: A2924; NAA: A2925.

⁹⁸ NAA: A2924, 1936/4, letter to J. S. Lyons, Prime Minister of Australia, from Zara Baar Aronson, 25 June 1935; Martha Rutledge, 'Aronson, Zara (1864–1944)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, accessed 12 September 2017, adb.anu.edu.au/biography/aronson-zara-5059/text8411.

⁹⁹ Paul Brunton, ed., *The Diaries of Miles Franklin* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin in association with the State Library of New South Wales, 2004), 67–73; NAA: A2924, 1937/11, letter to Captain L. S. Bracegirdle, Military and Official Secretary to the Governor [General] from [L. A.] Robb, Official Secretary [to the Governor of New South Wales], 10 June 1937; Jill Roe, *Stella Miles Franklin: A Biography* (Sydney: Fourth Estate, 2008), 373; Andrée Wright, 'Board, Ruby Willmet (1880–1963)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, accessed 12 September 2017, adb.anu.edu.au/biography/board-ruby-willmet-5276/text8895; Chris Wallace-Crabbe, 'O'Dowd, Bernard Patrick (1866–1953)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, accessed 12 September 2017, adb.anu.edu.au/biography/odowd-bernard-patrick-7881/text13701.

Conclusion

No sooner had the British honours system opened to women and embarked on a process of democratisation than it was engulfed in scandal. Revelations over the selling of honours in Britain provoked resolutions against their continuance in most of the parliaments of the old dominions, successful in Canada and South Africa, but at most temporarily so in Australia. Yet the scandal was surprisingly short-lived, quickly left behind once the royal commission had reported and new structures had been established to prevent the recurrence of such corruption. By the 1930s, the honours system appeared secure once more in Britain, and, despite Labor opposition, its future seemed almost as assured in Australia. Women were receiving awards in increasing numbers, and in 1936 gained entry to another honour when the Royal Victorian Order was opened to female participation. The ideal of the maternal citizen had provided a route for their labours as wives, mothers, and community workers to be more easily conceptualised as service to the state, and thus for women's public activity on behalf of mothers, children, and housewives to come within the ambit of the honours system. Thanks to the large size of the Order of the British Empire, and the broad range of grades contained within it, many more Australians—both women and men—were able to receive awards, and for a widening range of achievements and service, than in the past. Most offers of honours were accepted with gratitude, and often with expressions of loyalty to the monarch. Thus, by the end of the decade, it might have been assumed that the honours system was in the process of transitioning into a democratic and inclusive system suitable for a modern democracy. The taint of scandal would never quite disappear, however, and accusations of honours-selling would be heard again in the years to come. Nor would these early moves to encompass women's contributions to their communities easily translate to full gender equality, with the interwar years soon a largely forgotten high point of women's inclusion. However it might have developed, the peacetime trajectory of the honours system was about to be interrupted once more, as the outbreak of a second global conflict returned it to a war footing.

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.2022.04