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In war and peace, 1939–1967

A degree of calm and certainty may have seemed to come to the honours system during the 1930s, but it was another picture in the wider world. Many Australians had suffered greatly during the Depression that followed the 1929 Wall Street crash, and over the following decade the world grew ever nearer to war, until in 1939 Australia found itself once more embroiled in global conflict. Australians learned their nation was again at war on the evening of 3 September, when Prime Minister Robert Menzies announced the commencement of hostilities in a radio broadcast to the country. Over the months and years that followed, nearly a million Australian men and women served in the war, in theatres in North Africa, Europe, South-East Asia, and the Pacific, and tens of thousands were killed in action, wounded, or taken prisoner. War tested positions about honours that had become well established over the preceding decades, especially the hostility of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) to imperial awards, and to titles in particular. The Order of the British Empire renewed its function as a means of rewarding war services, most obviously after the ALP, led by John Curtin, came to power in 1941. Partly setting aside Labor's traditional opposition to British honours, Curtin was willing to nominate servicemen and women for awards, but—apart from one surprise exception—avoided recommending civilians. In the immediate postwar years, Ben Chifley's Labor Government also made use of British distinctions, but took a sterner position, refusing to make any non-operational awards to either military personnel or civilians.

In a pattern becoming familiar to Australians, the election of Menzies's second government in 1949 brought a change of practice. But if war had tested this well-established stasis around honours, so too did a range of events and pressures during the years of peace and prosperity that followed. Often characterised as years of conformity and stagnation, the 1950s were in many ways an era of lively cultural and political debate.¹ During his long period of office as prime minister, Menzies embraced the imperial honours system, and, with quotas for Australia increasing, the biannual lists grew ever longer. Across the country, the pattern of Labor hostility to British awards and Liberal enthusiasm for them became generally entrenched. There were, however, significant exceptions, as Labor premiers interpreted their party's platform in varying ways, and party members were not always averse to receiving distinctions. The tensions in Labor's position were highlighted by a minor controversy during the visit of Queen Elizabeth in 1954, an event more usually recalled by historians as remarkably politically harmonious. Yet the Liberal Party's position of support for imperial awards did not go unchallenged either. Accusations of political patronage were not a new phenomenon, but suspicion around the conferral of titles and other distinctions upon political supporters cast a shadow over the system, perhaps influenced in the 1960s by a fading of respect for monarchy and the institutions of government, and a new mood of satiric challenge to both authority and the link to Britain. Surveying these developments, this chapter also takes the opportunity provided by a relatively stable period in the history of honours in Australia to consider some of the perennial issues of that history—besides the use of awards as instruments of patronage, it also returns to the recurring question of who received what, and explores the attitudes of those who were offered an honour in this era.

The ALP and war: A time for exceptions?

In September 1939, Robert Menzies was relatively new to the prime ministership. Having risen to the leadership of the United Australia Party (UAP) after the death in office of Prime Minister Joseph Lyons, he led a minority government, for Country Party leader Sir Earle Page had withdrawn his party from coalition in response to Menzies's election as UAP leader. Menzies led the nation through the crisis until August 1941,

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1 See John Murphy, *Imagining the Fifties: Private Sentiment and Political Culture in Menzies' Australia* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2000).

from March 1940 at the head of a new UAP–Country Party coalition government, formed after successful negotiations with the Country Party’s new leader, Archie Cameron. Following the federal election of September 1940, however, the UAP–Country Party coalition held the same number of seats as the ALP, and depended for its survival on the votes of two independent members of parliament. Unable to form an all-party national government with Labor leader John Curtin, and with the war situation deteriorating, Menzies’s position became increasingly precarious. At last, at an emergency Cabinet meeting on 29 August 1941, he resigned the prime ministership, to be replaced by the new Country Party leader Arthur Fadden. Barely more than a month later, after the two independents changed allegiance, Fadden’s administration was defeated and Curtin formed a government. He remained as prime minister almost for the duration of the war, until his death on 5 July 1945. For eight days Francis Forde held the position, but it was Ben Chifley, sworn in as prime minister on 13 July, who announced the arrival of peace, when he informed the country on 15 August that the war with Japan had ended.

As prime minister during the first two years of the war, Menzies had limited opportunity to make use of the honours system, either to recognise Australians’ contributions to the war effort or to reward any other kind of services. The first standard list for the war ought to have appeared at New Year 1940, but rather than the usual array of awards, it was reported that King George VI had decided to acknowledge ‘the valour and untiring energy, zeal, and devotion of the fighting men’ through a list of military awards.² June’s birthday list was postponed until July, and when it did appear, it too included only military awards, since it was considered ‘inappropriate’ at that point in the war to honour anyone not in the services.³ Thus it was not until the preparation of the New Year list for 1941 that Menzies—or, for that matter, any State government inclined to give out honours—was able to make the usual range of appointments. Billy Hughes, then attorney-general and minister for the navy, headed the Commonwealth list published in January 1941, being appointed a Companion of Honour. High Court justice Owen Dixon received

2 Tobias Harper, *From Servants of the Empire to Everyday Heroes: The British Honours System in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 108. doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198841180.001.0001; ‘Naval Heroes’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 January 1940, 8; *Supplement to the London Gazette*, no. 34763, 1 January 1940, 1–5.

3 The National Archives [United Kingdom], T 305/7, Note by R. U. E. K., 25 June 1940, Half-Yearly Honours List (Civil), New Year, Birthday 1940, cited in Harper, *Servants of the Empire*, 108; *Supplement to the London Gazette*, no. 34893, 11 July 1940, 4243–69.

a KCMG (Knight Commander of the Order of St Michael and St George), while Harold Clapp, the general manager of the Aircraft Construction Branch of the federal Department of Supply and Development, and Geoffrey Syme, the managing editor of Melbourne's *Age* newspaper, gained KBEs (Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire). Five other men were created knights bachelor, while a large number of men and women received non-titular awards of various kinds, both civil and military.⁴ Another batch of distinctions was distributed in June, with the federal list this time topped by a KCMG for the former speaker of the House of Representatives, Colonel George Bell.⁵

By the time the next list was issued at the beginning of 1942, the ALP was in power at the federal level, and Curtin had decided against making nominations for any civil honours or medals.⁶ In a partial concession to the special circumstance of being at war, however, military awards were made throughout the rest of the conflict, both operational and non-operational (that is, covering both services rendered in action against the enemy or in theatres designated as operational, and those given in other contexts). War had in any case complicated the situation. Besides the usual processes for recommending awards, King George VI had delegated authority to the commanders of the military forces to make immediate awards of some decorations to recognise gallantry in action, and Australians serving in the British forces were permitted to receive awards in British lists. Curtin's decision to permit military but not civilian awards thus avoided a situation in which only some Australian servicemen and women were able to receive honours. It also, however, created a puzzling inconsistency, for individuals working for the war effort in a civilian capacity, no matter how devotedly, were excluded from any recognition from the federal government. While non-Labor governments held power in Victoria and South Australia, this was not likely to offset the absence of Commonwealth recommendations to acknowledge war service, especially as the other States were led by Labor governments. Yet another inconsistency was that, despite ALP opposition to titles, several military knighthoods were conferred upon Australia's military leaders.⁷

4 'The Commonwealth List', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 January 1941, 5.

5 'Six Knighthoods in Honours List', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 June 1941, 7.

6 National Archives of Australia (hereafter NAA): A1209, 1959/206 PART 1, memorandum to Secretary, Department of Commerce, from Secretary [of the Prime Minister's Department], 29 May 1942.

7 John Hetherington, 'Will Fighting Men Now Be Knighted?' *Herald* (Melbourne), 1 March 1950, 4.

Widespread surprise was therefore expressed when newspapers announced in June 1943 that Frederick Shedden, the secretary of the Department of Defence, had been knighted. Shedden had played an influential role in Australia's war effort, including in the War Cabinet, and he had already been appointed a Companion of the Order of St Michael and St George (CMG) in 1941, while Menzies was prime minister. After Curtin took office as both prime minister and minister for defence, Shedden had become his main adviser, described by Curtin as '[my] right and left hand and head too'.⁸ In other circumstances, his knighthood might have seemed not only unexceptional, but highly appropriate. But Shedden was also a civilian, and his honour thus seemed to conflict with the Labor Government's stated policy. More than that, the award was a knighthood. Press reports soon appeared quoting W. M. O'Neill, the New South Wales State president of the Australian Railways Union, warning that Curtin would face questions and criticisms at the upcoming party conference. Knighthoods were unnecessary, O'Neill said, 'in these days, when people are talking of a new social order and a more equitable system of society in general'.⁹ Curtin had 'made a mistake', according to the secretary of the Labor Council of New South Wales, Legislative Council member Bob King, who was quoted explaining that the ALP objected to honours, seeing them as 'idle titles for people to play with'.¹⁰ Refusing to comment, Curtin was quoted saying only that the knighthood fell into 'the same category as every other that his Majesty the King gives'.¹¹ Later that year, he offended a second time when he appointed the Duke of Gloucester, one of the King's younger brothers, as governor-general.¹² At the party's federal conference in December, future ALP governments were 'reminded' of two points of Labor policy: no more imperial honours should be given to Australians, and only Australians should be appointed to the role of governor-general.¹³

8 David Horner, 'Shedden, Sir Frederick Geoffrey (1893–1971)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, accessed 30 October 2017, adb.anu.edu.au/biography/shedden-sir-frederick-geoffrey-11670/text20853.

9 'Trouble About Knighthood', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 June 1943, 6; 'Knighthood Criticised', *Sun* (Sydney), 2 June 1943, 2; 'Labour Opposition to Birthday Honours', *Canberra Times*, 3 June 1943, 2.

10 'Trouble About Knighthood', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 June 1943, 6.

11 'Mr. Curtin Silent on Knighthood', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 June 1943, 6.

12 'Debate Expected at A.L.P. Conference', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 November 1943, 6; 'Claim by President of Victorian A.L.P.', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 November 1943, 6; Chris Cunneen, 'Gloucester, First Duke of (1900–1974)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, accessed 20 February 2017, adb.anu.edu.au/biography/gloucester-first-duke-of-10313/text18251.

13 'Governor-Generals of Future', *Argus* (Melbourne), 18 December 1943, 4; 'Honours and Governors-General', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 December 1943, 8.

After Chifley took office as prime minister, and following the end of the war, the federal government retreated further from the conferring of honours. A Cabinet decision of November 1945 determined that henceforth only operational awards would be recommended, and that the highest would be the companionship of the Order of the Bath (CB); in other words, both civilians and those servicemen and women whose military service was deemed non-operational would miss out, and no distinctions conferring knighthood or damehood would be bestowed.¹⁴ While some minor exceptions were permitted, this new policy once again created potentially invidious distinctions, especially as it was not always easy to determine whether an individual's service had been in an operational or non-operational context, and because it extended also to foreign awards, which potential recipients needed government permission to accept.¹⁵ It was not uncommon for allied nations to seek to bestow their own honours upon Australians who had made special contributions to the war effort, but Cabinet's decision sometimes precluded this. General John Northcott, the chief of the general staff from September 1942 until the end of the war, was irritated to find himself barred from accepting an honour from the United States in 1946, protesting unsuccessfully to Chifley against the ruling that his services had been non-operational.¹⁶ Among others to miss out was (Sir) Fred White, the most significant figure in the development of radar in Australia, whose proposed award from the United States was vetoed along with decorations for fellow scientists (Sir) Mark Oliphant, Aubrey Burstall, and Neville Whiffen.¹⁷ On the other hand, Norman Sparnon, a Japanese language specialist who had served in the Australian military forces, including with the British Commonwealth Occupation Force in Tokyo, until mid-1946, and had then become a civilian interpreter at the headquarters of the supreme commander for the Allied Powers, was given the Bronze Star by the United States in 1948.¹⁸

14 NAA: A5954, 1524/3, memorandum to the Hon. J. A. Beasley, M. P., Minister for Defence, from Secretary to Cabinet, 26 November 1945.

15 On the extension of the policy to foreign awards, see, for example, NAA: A5954, 1524/3, memorandum to Secretary, Department of External Affairs, from F. G. Shedden, Secretary [of the Department of Defence], 12 April 1946.

16 NAA: A5954, 1524/3, letter to Lieutenant-General J. Northcott, Governor of New South Wales, from J. B. Chifley, 18 October 1946; NAA: A5954, 1524/3, letter to Chifley from J. Northcott, 31 October 1946; NAA: A5954, 1524/3, letter to [Fred at Government House, Sydney], from J. Northcott, 31 October 1946; NAA: A5954, 1524/3, letter to Lieutenant-General J. Northcott, Governor of New South Wales, from J. B. Chifley, 3 December 1946.

17 Stewart Cockburn and David Ellyard, *Oliphant: The Life and Times of Sir Mark Oliphant* (Adelaide: Stewart Cockburn and David Ellyard in association with Axiom Books, 1981), 197–98.

18 Alison Broinowski, 'Sparnon, Norman James (1913–1995)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, accessed 3 September 2020, adb.anu.edu.au/biography/sparnon-norman-james-21619/text31832.

The denial of awards to military personnel, if not also to civilians who had contributed to the war effort, drew criticism in the press. Responding to Chifley's announcement that there would be no New Year honours list for 1946, due to Cabinet's decision, Melbourne's *Argus* editorialised against the refusal to confer honours on servicemen and women. 'Australian troops of all services are held in the highest respect by friend and foe', the paper stated, yet the government had chosen, 'now that the danger is past, to deny recognition'.¹⁹ In Brisbane, the *Courier-Mail* also disapproved. Noting that the recent British list had been 'the longest in living memory', the writer suggested that the failure of both the federal and Queensland governments to make nominations 'makes us look a small-minded, ungrateful people'. 'Splendid Australians', he or she stated, were thus 'denied some simple honour ... by politicians who are most generous when it comes to giving themselves gold railway passes and helping each other to public sinecures when they retire or are retired'.²⁰ Army officers, too, were reportedly unhappy.²¹ General Thomas Blamey, while stressing that he was not concerned for himself, denounced the decision not to award honours higher than the CB, seeing it as 'tantamount to saying: "Nothing for the generals"', and arguing the change in practice after 1943 had resulted in 'unfair treatment'.²² The *Sydney Morning Herald*, at least, agreed with him. It was 'within the rights of a Commander-in-Chief, and indeed his duty ... to put forward for recognition his senior subordinates', the paper stated, 'and he may well be astonished at the churlish attitude of a Government which during the war was only too glad to lean heavily on its Service chiefs'.²³

Prime Minister Menzies

The first federal election after the war was held on 28 September 1946. Returned to power, albeit with a smaller majority, Chifley's government continued to restrict honours recommendations to military operational awards. In November 1947, when the president of the Australian Literature Society, D. H. Rankin, wrote to Chifley hoping that poet

19 'Honours Dishonour', *Argus* (Melbourne), 4 January 1946, 1.

20 'No Honours For Service', *Courier-Mail* (Brisbane), 2 January 1946, 2.

21 'Army Men Expected New Year Honours', *Morning Bulletin* (Rockhampton), 4 January 1946, 5.

22 'Blamey Hits At Government Over Honours', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 February 1946, 1; 'Labour Switch on War Honours Criticised', *Canberra Times*, 5 February 1946, 1.

23 "Nothing for the Generals", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 February 1946, 2.

Bernard O'Dowd might receive some recognition of his contributions to literature, he was informed that it would be impossible, given the government's decisions only to recommend operational awards, and not to nominate civilians.²⁴ Yet Chifley's opposition to honours was not total. Perhaps inspired by a postwar report that Canada was considering establishing its own national decorations, late in 1949 a federal ministerial committee proposed the creation of a uniquely Australian award to replace British honours.²⁵ The government approved the idea, and a Cabinet subcommittee was formed to consider it.²⁶ Reporting in October, the three committee members—Arthur Calwell, Nick McKenna, and John Armstrong—noted that Australia was 'fast developing a national consciousness', and suggested that it might acknowledge 'outstanding services to the nation' through 'a purely Australian award'. They proposed a relatively small, single-class honour recognising 'meritorious service to Australia' in a wide range of fields, to be given by the King, and to rank among British knighthoods on the Commonwealth table of precedence; it would confer the prefix 'Honourable' upon recipients. Britain already having an Order of Merit and Brazil an Order of the Southern Cross, they had initially leaned toward the 'Order of the Golden Wattle', or something similar, but their final report recommended that the decoration be called the 'Order of the Southern Cross'.²⁷

The committee suggested establishing the new honour at Australia's jubilee celebrations in 1951, but Cabinet deferred the matter for later discussion, and after Labor was removed from power at the December election the scheme was not revived.²⁸ Under Menzies, as the new Liberal prime minister, attention turned back to the use of British honours,

24 NAA: A463, 1959/3382, letter to the prime minister from D. H. Rankin, 18 November 1947; NAA: A463, 1959/3382, letter to D. H. Rankin, president of the Australian Literature Society, from F. Strahan, secretary [of the Prime Minister's Department], 19 November 1947.

25 'Canada to Award Own Decorations', *Argus* (Melbourne), 4 January 1946, 16; 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.

26 *A Matter of Honour*, 13.

27 NAA: A462, 829/112, 'Commonwealth Jubilee Celebrations: Recognition of Meritorious Service to Australia', 21 October 1949, submission for Cabinet, Agenda No. 1609B; NAA: A462, 829/112, memorandum to Rt. Hon. J. B. Chifley, M. P., Prime Minister, from A. S. Brown, Secretary to Cabinet, 25 October 1949; NAA: A462, 829/112, 'Commonwealth Jubilee Celebrations: Recognition of Meritorious Service to Australia', no date.

28 NAA: A462, 829/112, 'Commonwealth Jubilee Celebrations: Recognition of Meritorious Service to Australia', 21 October 1949 submission for Cabinet, Agenda No. 1609B; NAA: A462, 829/112, memorandum to Rt. Hon. J. B. Chifley, M. P., Prime Minister, from A. S. Brown, Secretary to Cabinet, 25 October 1949; *A Matter of Honour*, 13.

although the idea of an Order of the Southern Cross was occasionally raised again by others over the following years.²⁹ One question that immediately faced Menzies was whether or not his government should attempt to redress the lack of honours granted during Chifley's prime ministership. Writing in the Melbourne *Herald*, war correspondent John Hetherington claimed that 'many people' had seen the denial of knighthoods to those who had led the forces during the war as an injustice, which the new government might now correct.³⁰ The *Sydney Morning Herald* too hoped that Menzies would make amends. Commenting approvingly on the birthday list for 1950, in which New South Wales governor and former Chief of the General Staff John Northcott had been appointed KCMG, and on Blamey's promotion to field marshal, the paper noted that there were yet 'other famous war leaders whom the churlish attitude of the Chifley regime [had] deprived of due recognition'. 'It may be hoped,' the paper concluded, 'that this injustice will not be allowed to go unremedied much longer.'³¹

And indeed Menzies did seek to make up for the past. He commented on the difficulty of his task as he put together his recommendations for the birthday list in 1950, noting the small number of awards available to Australia, and remarking that it appeared 'to have been overlooked ... that for eight years there have been [almost] no recommendations for Honours ... from the Commonwealth of Australia'. 'Now that I have come into office', he wrote, 'I find myself appalled by the volume of what might properly be called arrears', particularly in the military division, but also to acknowledge '[t]he enormous civilian war efforts of the country'. He felt himself in a bind: either he 'must write off the efforts of the last eight years and deal merely with current effort, or endeavour for the next few years to pick up some of the arrears, in which case current effort will remain unrecognised'.³² Responding to the announcement of the New Year list in January 1951, the *Sydney Morning Herald* noted 'nine new knighthoods', and remarked that this 'larger than usual' number had

29 See NAA: A462, 829/112. For example, the *Courier-Mail* (Brisbane) and the National Council of Women. 'Australian Honour Award Suggested', *West Australian* (Perth), 2 July 1953, 14; 'No Wonder Labor Party Questions Matter', *Worker* (Brisbane), 11 January 1954, 4; 'Women Support Order of Southern Cross', *Courier-Mail* (Brisbane), 2 January 1954, 3.

30 John Hetherington, 'Will Fighting Men Now Be Knighted?' *Herald* (Melbourne), 1 March 1950, 4.

31 'The Commonwealth Honours List', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 June 1950, 2.

32 NAA: A2924, 1950/1, letter to W. J. McKell, Governor-General, from R. G. Menzies, prime minister, 13 March 1950.

‘enabled belated recognition ... of claims that during the Labour regime were ignored because of a narrow-minded party ban on honours’.³³ There was no avalanche of delayed honours, however, and in later years it would be recalled by the public servants advising Malcolm Fraser, another new Liberal prime minister entering office after a period of Labor government, that Menzies had concluded that such arrears could not be made up. Each government must follow its own policy, and the population take its chances as to whether honours were available at the point when any particular individual rendered services marking them as deserving of one.³⁴

Menzies did, however, make assiduous use of the honours system. An ardent anglophile and avid monarchist, he supported the continued use of British honours, just as he upheld the maintenance of other traditional ties to Britain. Loyalty to the sovereign was, in Menzies’s view, a vital virtue, and indeed, his own devotion to the monarchy has become a central facet in how he is remembered. His declaration during the Queen’s 1963 visit that ‘I did but see her passing by, and yet I love her till I die’ is frequently quoted as an example of the excesses of this passion, but his attachment to the monarchy was much more than sentimental; he considered it a key element in Australia’s constitutional stability and success.³⁵ British honours, for Menzies, were likely thus not merely a token of achievement or a source of personal pleasure to the recipient, but part of a symbolic landscape that both expressed Australia’s character as a British nation and cemented its place within that British world. When he was appointed a knight of the Order of the Thistle (KT)—an extremely rare honour of which he is thus far the only Australian recipient—in 1963, he was ‘delighted’.³⁶ Being aware of the ‘political element’ frequently found in local nominations for knighthoods he had said in the past that he felt it ‘improper’ for a sitting prime minister to accept one. Such considerations did not apply in this case, for the honour was in the personal gift of the sovereign, and neither Menzies nor his Cabinet had known of it before the Queen informed Menzies she wished to confer it upon him. Freed of any such concerns, Menzies was able to fully rejoice in his new dignity.³⁷ Given his own affection both for honours and for the monarchy, as well as the past practices of non-Labor

33 ‘Australians Honoured By the King’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 January 1951, 2.

34 NAA: A1209, 1976/2235 PART 1, ‘Honours and Awards’, memorandum, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, no date.

35 A. W. Martin, *Robert Menzies: A Life*, volume 2, 1944–1978 (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1999), 454–55, quote on 455.

36 Martin, *Robert Menzies*, vol. 2, 456.

37 Martin, *Robert Menzies*, vol. 2, 456.

governments, it is thus not surprising that during his prime ministership imperial honours were fully embraced. Other non-Labor State governments would also make vigorous use of the system.

State Labor governments, meanwhile, generally continued to pursue the party's now equally traditional policy of spurning imperial honours, and particularly knighthoods. Having changed the phrasing of its stance on imperial honours in its federal platform in 1921 and 1930, in 1955 the ALP altered the wording again, to state '[n]o knighthoods or like honours to Australian citizens'.³⁸ By now a standard aspect of Australia's political landscape, this pattern of Labor rejection of British honours and Liberal support for them nonetheless continued to draw both criticism and controversy. Queensland's *Courier-Mail* seems to have felt the unfairness of its State being left out particularly strongly, regularly protesting Labor's stand. In June 1950, for example, the paper noted that there had been no honours list for Queensland because the State's government 'takes the view that no man should thus be signalled [sic] out for distinction or recognition'. 'Such a view', argued the editorialist, was 'mistaken', since distinctions did not 'elevate' individuals, but accorded 'proper recognition' to those who had 'already elevated themselves'. It was 'not a symptom of sturdy democracy' to withhold recognition from those of 'outstanding ability', but 'part of a destructive process of tearing-down that egalitarians throughout the world have practiced at different times'. '[O]utstanding' people were necessary, the writer concluded, and '[t]here is no future for a community which reveres mediocrity'.³⁹

Labor's stance against British honours was never uniform, however. The wording of the party's platform left some room for interpretation, and some Labor administrations chose to make recommendations for awards below the level of knighthood, while upholding the prohibition against those that carried titles. From 1954, for instance, the New South Wales Labor Government of Joe Cahill began submitting nominations for honours under the level of knighthood, the highest award recommended being the CMG.⁴⁰ Others made exceptions to the ban on titles as well. In 1942, Queensland premier William Forgan Smith reportedly recommended the State's chief justice, William Webb, for knighthood,

38 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.

39 'Men or Mice', *Courier-Mail* (Brisbane), 10 June 1950, 1.

40 Lyall, 'Government Patronage in Australia', 194–95.

later explaining that he thought 'our Chief Justice should not rank lower in precedence than the Chief Justice of any other State'.⁴¹ Occasionally, too, ALP members accepted honours, including those that carried titles. Retiring senator Dorothy Tangney accepted appointment as a Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire (DBE) in 1968. Quoted in the *Sydney Morning Herald* observing that 'I suppose I'll be criticised, but I'm pretty used to that by now', she admitted to having found it hard to decide whether or not to accept, but she thought honours were not 'simply handouts for the Liberals', and hoped to make that point by her decision. She also saw the honour as 'not so much a tribute to me as a tribute to the Labor movement, and particularly to the women in the Labor movement throughout Australia', and perhaps felt it should be accepted as such.⁴² Tasmanian Labor premier Robert Cosgrove, meanwhile, not only recommended his wife, Gertrude, for a DBE (conferred in 1947), and several knighthoods, but also accepted knighthood himself in 1959.⁴³

But Labor members' acceptance of honours could provoke criticism, especially in the case of knighthood. One particular controversy came in 1951, when McKell, as governor-general, accepted appointment as a Knight Grand Cross of the Order of St Michael and St George (GCMG). As he was a former Labor premier of New South Wales, his decision was not welcomed by many in the Labor movement. ALP leader Herbert Evatt declined to make public comment, but others were not so circumspect.⁴⁴ One member of the federal executive, parliamentarian J. F. Walsh, was reported to have said that McKell 'had gone against the traditions of the Labour Party', while the combative iconoclast Eddie Ward insinuated in a question in the House of Representatives that the honour was 'repayment' for granting Menzies a double dissolution earlier that year.⁴⁵ McKell himself, on the other hand, 'never had any doubt that his knighthood was appropriate'.⁴⁶

41 'Queensland Has Only Nine Knights', *Courier-Mail* (Brisbane), 10 June 1953, 2.

42 'New Dame Says Honour is "Tribute to Labor"', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 June 1968, 6, newspaper cuttings on the Australian honours system, National Library of Australia, Canberra (hereafter NLA cuttings).

43 'Labour Premier Sponsored Titles', *Courier-Mail* (Brisbane), 3 January 1947, 3; W. A. Townsley, 'Cosgrove, Dame Gertrude Ann (1882–1962)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, accessed 21 November 2017, adb.anu.edu.au/biography/cosgrove-dame-gertrude-ann-10015/text17389; NAA: A2924, 1953/6, letter from Robert Cosgrove, premier, to the Governor of Tasmania, 17 February 1953; NAA: A2924, 1954/2, letter from premier to Governor of Tasmania, 8 March 1954.

44 'Labor Hit at Mr. McKell', *Mail* (Adelaide), 10 November 1951, 48; Christopher Cunneen, *William John McKell: Boilermaker, Premier, Governor-General* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2000), 210.

45 "Against A.L.P. Traditions", *Sunday Herald* (Sydney), 11 November 1951, 3; Cunneen, *William John McKell*, 210; 'Question on G.-G.'s Knighthood', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 November 1951, 2.

46 Cunneen, *William John McKell*, 210.

The 1954 royal tour

This difference of opinion over imperial honours between the Labor and non-Labor parties provoked a brief but bitter controversy during one of the most highly anticipated events of the 1950s: the royal tour of 1954. That year Queen Elizabeth II and her husband, Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, visited the country for the first time, in a two-month extravaganza during which around three-quarters of the population turned out to see the couple.⁴⁷ As often during such tours, the Queen made a number of appointments to the Royal Victorian Order in connection with her visit. The governor-general, Sir William Slim, was appointed GCVO (Knight Grand Cross) and the State governors KCVO (Knight Commander), while a range of lesser awards went to some of those involved in organising or running the tour.⁴⁸ For the most part, the tour was a moment of political harmony, with both Labor and non-Labor parties welcoming the royal couple and displaying firm support for the monarchy.⁴⁹ The peace was shattered in early March, however, after it was reported that John Cain, the Victorian Labor premier, had blocked decorations for royal tour staff in his State. Would-be recipients were to receive instead ‘autographed portraits of the Queen and the Duke’.⁵⁰ In explanation, Cain cited Labor’s ‘long-standing’ policy against imperial honours.⁵¹ The *Argus* published a list of people who had missed out on honours as a result, including the State director of the tour, Jack Jungwirth, and Alexander Duncan, the chief police commissioner.⁵²

Bolte, the leader of the Liberal Party in Victoria, castigated Cain’s action as ‘stupid and ridiculous’.⁵³ Refusing the awards, he asserted, had brought the ‘highly successful’ tour ‘down to a parsimonious and petty level’.⁵⁴ Not only had Cain’s decision ‘prevented the Queen from showing her

47 Jane Holley Connors, ‘The Glittering Thread: The 1954 Royal Tour of Australia’ (PhD thesis, University of Technology, Sydney, 1996), 2; Peter Spearritt, ‘Royal Progress: The Queen and Her Australian Subjects’, *Australian Cultural History*, no. 5 (1986): 88.

48 NAA: A5954, 42/1, ‘Honours Conferred by Her Majesty During the Royal Tour of Australia 1954’.

49 Jane Connors, ‘The 1954 Royal Tour of Australia’, *Australian Historical Studies* 25, no. 100 (1993): 373. doi.org/10.1080/10314619308595919.

50 ‘Mr Cain’s Refusal of Honours’, *Cairns Post*, 11 March 1954, 1.

51 ‘Refusal of Honours’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 March 1954, 5.

52 ‘Row on Honors Looming’, *Argus* (Melbourne), 11 March 1954, press cutting in NAA: A5954, 42/1.

53 “No” to Honors Stupid—Bolte’, *Argus* (Melbourne), 3 April 1954, 5.

54 ‘Premier “Petty” on Honors, Says Mr. Bolte’, *Age* (Melbourne), 10 March 1954, 3.

pleasure in her own way', it had barred potential recipients 'from wearing with pride a personal memento of their services to [her]'.⁵⁵ Labor's policy, he thought, could not have been intended to apply in the context of a reigning sovereign's visit.⁵⁶ The leader of the Country Party in Victoria, Jack McDonald, also criticised Cain's stance. He had long thought the ALP's honours policy 'mean and paltry', it was reported, and he considered that '[t]he good services of Royal Tour officials should have been recognised', particularly as the Queen had wanted that.⁵⁷ Some senior army officers were reported to be irritated because two fellow officers had missed out on awards, and the Returned Sailors', Soldiers', and Airmen's Imperial League of Australia protested as well, with State president N. D. Wilson reported to have said that '[t]o stand between Her Majesty and the one it is desired to honor was not democratic, it was dictatorial'.⁵⁸

Among the wider community opinion was split, though the *Argus* claimed that a 'surge of public opinion against' Cain's move was evident in the correspondence it had received.⁵⁹ Letters to the editor published in the paper reveal several common themes. Some argued that Cain could hold any view he liked of honours, but he ought not to force that view on other people. '[I]f I were recommended for an honor,' wrote Miss P. Henderson, 'I would be sadly disappointed if you refused it on my behalf without even giving me the chance to speak'.⁶⁰ Another view was that the royal visit was a special event, into which politics should not intrude. M. J. K. Twaites felt that awards were 'the Queen's way of saying a personal "thank you"', and that politics should have been put aside, while another correspondent, although acknowledging that the decision had been an issue of party policy rather than of personal spite, thought that 'surely on this unique occasion, this non-political occasion, Caucus influence could have been laid aside'.⁶¹ Others took the line that the refusal was ungracious, or insulted the Queen. 'If Mrs. Cain entertains a guest in her

55 'Cain to Give Reason for Honours Ban', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 March 1954, 6.

56 'No Review on Awards, Cain Says', *Herald* (Melbourne), 11 March 1954, 2.

57 'No Review on Awards, Cain Says', *Herald* (Melbourne), 11 March 1954, 2.

58 'Mr Cain's Refusal of Honours', *Cairns Post*, 11 March 1954, 1; 'Army Angry at Honors Rejection', *Herald* (Melbourne), 10 March 1954, 1; 'Labor Divided on Honors Question', *Age* (Melbourne), 11 March 1954, 3.

59 'The Premier Still Says "No" on Honors', *Argus* (Melbourne) 13 March 1954, 4; 'What Do You Think About the Honors?' *Argus* (Melbourne), 10 March 1954, 2.

60 P. Henderson, letter to the editor, *Argus* (Melbourne), 11 March 1954, 2.

61 M. J. K. Twaites, letter to the editor, *Argus* (Melbourne), 12 March 1954, 4; R. Herbert, letter to the editor, *Argus* (Melbourne) 13 March 1954, 4.

home,’ asked A. D. Mims, ‘and that guest presents her with some small suitable gift, does Mr. Cain rob them both of their pleasure in that gift by churlishly forbidding it?’⁶²

Some correspondents, however, supported Cain’s action. One reason given was that those who had organised the tour were well paid, and were not deserving of special honours. ‘The satisfaction of a job well done should be enough reward’, stated one.⁶³ Tour organisers were also said to be undeserving of honours because there had been errors in the planning. Pointing out that most people could not attend the official events and had had to ‘stand for hours’ merely ‘to catch a glimpse of our Royal visitors’, one letter writer asked what the tour organisers had ‘done to deserve any honors?’⁶⁴ Others felt it was not fair to single out certain people for reward. In the opinion of Mrs Myrtle Canning it was ‘quite wrong’ to give awards to ‘a few people’, when ‘[c]redit and thanks were due to thousands’.⁶⁵

Much more unanimous was editorial comment, which was largely negative. In Melbourne, the *Argus* considered that although Cain warranted credit for having handled the visit ‘well and handsomely’, it was the ‘right’ of potential recipients to make the decision on accepting or refusing awards, while the *Herald* deemed honours—or at least these ones, which were in the Queen’s personal gift—‘tokens of a Sovereign’s thanks’ that ‘should be accepted as graciously as they are bestowed’.⁶⁶ The *Sydney Morning Herald* argued that, regardless of whether one supported honours or not, the Queen’s desire ‘should have been the only guide’.⁶⁷ The *West Australian* too held that Cain had displayed ‘a distinct lack of courtesy’ to the Queen.⁶⁸ A number of editorials also pointed out that the Victorian Government had taken a harder line than other Labor administrations. Other ALP leaders, snapped the *Sydney Morning Herald*, had not been ‘so self-righteous’.⁶⁹ Vince Gair’s government in Queensland was reported to have ‘no objection’, and Western Australia’s Albert Hawke stated that if the Queen decided to bestow awards upon tour officials his

62 A. D. Mims, letter to the editor, *Argus* (Melbourne), 12 March 1954, 4.

63 L. Anstey, letter to the editor, *Argus* (Melbourne), 12 March 1954, 4.

64 W. Haines, letter to the editor, *Argus* (Melbourne) 13 March 1954, 4.

65 Myrtle Canning, letter to the editor, *Argus* (Melbourne), 12 March 1954, 4.

66 ‘Due Honors’, *Argus* (Melbourne), 11 March 1954, 2; ‘No Awards to Victorians’, *Herald* (Melbourne), 9 March 1954, 4.

67 ‘A Fatuous Ban by Mr. Cain’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 March 1954, 2.

68 ‘Royal Honours’, *West Australian* (Perth), 12 March 1954, 2.

69 ‘A Fatuous Ban by Mr. Cain’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 March 1954, 2.

government ‘would not “step in the way”’.⁷⁰ In fact, there was reported to be disagreement within the Victorian ALP, too. While some members of the party held that its policy must be followed in all situations, others saw the royal visit as a special case. According to the *Age*, the division in opinion was generational: older party members were inclined to think that Cain ‘might have stretched a point’, since the Queen herself wished to confer the honours, while younger people ‘were not particularly concerned whether the Royal tour organisers received any awards’.⁷¹ Cain himself was unmoved by all the fuss. ‘We have made our decision,’ he said, ‘and we will abide by it.’⁷²

Honours and patronage

In a review of Australia’s honours system in 1995, the committee conducting the process would remark that ‘strong sentiments against British awards’ had emerged during the 1960s, and suggest that these views were ‘probably fuelled by the perceived overuse of the system for political reasons during the 1950s and 1960s’. By way of illustration, the report noted that, excepting Larry Anthony and Harold Holt, who both died in office, all of Menzies’s first Cabinet ‘ended up with at least a knighthood or were appointed Privy Counsellors’.⁷³ Whether or not opinion against imperial honours and titles was indeed more intense or widespread in these years than in earlier periods, these comments are significant. Patronage relationships and political uses of honours had long been a feature of the system—although almost certainly never to the extent that its more vocal detractors claimed—but such uses and abuses perhaps became the target of greater scrutiny and more assertive criticism during these decades. In postwar Britain, criticism rose over the ‘administrative and quantitative domination’ of the civil service in honours lists, and the possibility that a civil servant might gain an honour ‘for simply doing

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70 ‘No Objection to Decorations’, *Morning Bulletin* (Rockhampton), 16 March 1954, 1; “No Objection” to Queen’s Honours’, *Canberra Times*, 18 March 1954, 7; ‘WA Will Accept Honors’, *Argus* (Melbourne) 17 March 1954, 1.

71 ‘Labor Divided on Honors Question’, *Age* (Melbourne), 11 March 1954, 3.

72 ‘Cain Adamant on Honors’, *Argus* (Melbourne), 12 March 1954, 5.

73 *A Matter of Honour*, 13. This statement appears to overlook George McLeay, who also died in office without receiving an honour, as Lyall notes. Lyall, ‘Government Patronage in Australia’, 216. It should also be noted that Holt was appointed a Companion of Honour, as were a number of other prime ministers.

their job without distinction'.⁷⁴ In Australia, newspaper and magazine commentary sometimes dissected the occupational and political make-up of lists, pointing out the numbers of Liberal and Country Party politicians to receive awards, and the system—along with loyalty to the monarchy and other attitudes and behaviours perceived as outdated, subservient, or not sufficiently independent or Australian—was sometimes subjected to ridicule.

Some of this criticism simply continued longstanding labour opposition to the honours system. In 1954, for example, an article in Brisbane's *Worker* suggested that '[t]oo often honours are awarded to men whose only claim to service appears to be a close affinity with a Tory political party'. Many labourers did more to benefit the country 'than the nebulous contribution [made] by some Tory knights', the writer argued, asking whether it was 'any wonder' the Labor movement treated the system 'with such scepticism'.⁷⁵ Other commentary was more considered journalistic examination. Under the headline 'Is The Honours List Worth Preserving?', F. B. Morony wrote in the *West Australian* in 1967 that it had 'become the fashion ... for senior Federal civil servants and some waning politicians to get knighthoods almost as fringe benefits'. Gently sceptical about the 'implication of a dual standard' implicit in weighing the contributions of 'a housewife who has given many years of voluntary service to the community' and 'a middle-grade functionary who is doing the job for which he is paid', Morony nevertheless thought the system 'hurt nobody'.⁷⁶ Less sure of this was Western Australian Labor leader Albert Hawke, who observed in 1953 that 'it was a "grave and undeserved reflection"' upon everyone who was not a politician that, since the Liberal Government had come to power in the State in 1947, a mere two out of eight knighthoods conferred had been granted to non-politicians. Rather than ending the system altogether, however, he advocated giving the right to make recommendations to an independent committee made up of the chief justice and two Supreme Court judges.⁷⁷ Federal Labor senator Bill Ashley was harsher still, reportedly claiming in 1958 that '[t]he high office of the Queen had been demeaned' through Menzies's "scandalous abuse"

74 Tobias Harper, 'Voluntary Service and State Honours in Twentieth-Century Britain', *Historical Journal* 58, no. 2 (2015): 652. doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X1400048X.

75 'No Wonder Labor Party Questions Matter', *Worker* (Brisbane), 11 January 1954, 4.

76 F. B. Morony, 'Is the Honours List Worth Preserving?' *West Australian* (Perth), 22 June 1967, 4, NLA cuttings.

77 'Hawke Sees A "Reflection" In Knighthoods', *West Australian* (Perth), 30 January 1953, 2.

of imperial honours'. Ashley commented on the number of knighthoods being given for political services, and stated that '[t]he Monarchy was being belittled by the obvious use of imperial honours as a means to confer party patronage'. Going further, he was quoted suggesting that an investigation would 'reveal a scandal similar to the Lloyd George sale of honours in Britain'.⁷⁸

But was there indeed, as so many at times suspected, such political use of honours? Were awards indeed used as tools of political patronage? The question is a difficult one to answer, in part because, in the absence of clear evidence that any given appointment was a reward for political support or an act of political patronage, it is never possible to be certain that any individual award was the result of such manoeuvrings. As one student of government patronage put it:

When we come to the vital question of assessing why a particular individual was awarded or denied a particular favour ... we are reduced substantially to conjecture on the basis of known affiliations, general political considerations and the assumed predispositions of the 'patron'.⁷⁹

The matter is complicated further still by the fact that there was—and remains—a wide discrepancy in different individuals' knowledge and awareness of the honours system. While some organisations and groups (including civil service and professional organisations) were aware of the system and knew how to navigate the process of bringing an individual to the notice of the prime minister or premier, others were no doubt unaware they even had such a right. Some occupational groups were also privileged in more concrete ways. Not only did the permanent heads of government departments know the system well, but nominations were actively sought from them. At least by the time of Menzies's administration, letters were sent to each permanent head and to others in similar roles in the public service and government bodies before each list was prepared, asking for any nominations they might wish to make. This practice inevitably brought the names of many more public servants before the prime minister than could the occasional nomination from professional organisations and private individuals, and was thus likely a significant factor in the relatively high proportion of awards conferred upon public servants.

⁷⁸ 'Ashley Criticises Honours List', *Canberra Times*, 3 January 1958, 6.

⁷⁹ Lyall, 'Government Patronage in Australia', 4.

Such caveats aside, the numbers of politicians to receive knighthoods, and the direction of their political sympathies, may be considered suggestive of a political patronage function for the system. Certainly these patterns could give rise to suspicion, or bring the system into disrepute, as the examples above suggest. Ernest Lyall considered the question in some detail in a Master's thesis completed in 1969, examining the use of the patronage prerogative by the federal and New South Wales governments over the previous 40 years. Hampered by the brief nature of award citations, and the fact that a recipient's political or parliamentary services were not always mentioned in citations, he was nevertheless able to discern a number of recipients with 'clear political affiliations', be that as a member of parliament or through some other affiliation with a political party.⁸⁰ Each of the presidents of the federal Liberal Party to that point, for example, had received honours.⁸¹ The attitude of the ALP to the system, however, complicated the analysis. While he found that 'the greatest share of' titular honours had gone to 'the segments of society most sympathetic to non-Labor views', Lyall concluded that such a distribution was inevitable, given Labor's disavowal of the system as well as '[t]he implicit social differentiation on which the structure of awards is based'.⁸² Moreover, Labor's refusal to make use of the system had left the field open for the non-Labor parties to draw loyalty not only from recipients, but from anyone hoping to receive an award, in any field of endeavour.⁸³

Despite being unable to draw firm conclusions about the extent of political use of the system in Australia, Lyall nonetheless saw the danger of such abuse, both to the system itself, as a means of rewarding service to the community, and to effective governance. If it was to be retained and 'awards ... to be made for genuine services to the community or the State', he suggested, 'there seems no valid reason why the choice should be made at the political level'.⁸⁴ Others, less circumspect, have been more certain that honours were sometimes used inappropriately for political or financial gain. One well-known allegation was made by David Hickie in his 1985 book *The Prince and the Premier*. Hickie alleged that New South Wales premier Sir Robert Askin had sold knighthoods to businessmen for

80 Lyall, 'Government Patronage in Australia', 210–20, quote on 210.

81 Lyall, 'Government Patronage in Australia', 218.

82 Lyall, 'Government Patronage in Australia', 207.

83 Lyall, 'Government Patronage in Australia', 203, 262.

84 Lyall, 'Government Patronage in Australia', 293.

between \$20,000 and \$60,000.⁸⁵ Similar claims would later be made about Queensland's premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen (see Chapter 7). True or not, such suspicions—an inevitable result of the power of nomination lying in the hands of political leaders—did nothing to enhance community opinion of the system, and a great deal to tarnish it.

Who gets what

Whatever the real extent of political patronage or corruption, it is important to acknowledge that it was possible for anybody to nominate someone for an award, either by writing directly to the prime minister or premier, or by communicating their suggestion via another member of parliament. Files on individual honours held in the National Archives of Australia reveal that this did occur, certainly by the time of Menzies's prime ministership, if not earlier in the century. Beulah Bolton, for example, was recommended three times before being appointed MBE (Member of the Order of the British Empire) in 1962. The secretary of the Victoria League in New South Wales and the honorary secretary of its national committee, she had been nominated in 1958 by the chair of the league in London, Sir Cuthbert Ackroyd; in 1960 by its chair in New South Wales, Mrs H. B. (Jean) Farncomb; and for a second time in 1961 by Ackroyd.⁸⁶ Elsa Chauvel, the wife and collaborator of film director Charles Chauvel—who had died without recognition—was appointed OBE (Officer of the Order of the British Empire) in 1964, having been nominated in 1960 by H. C. McIntyre, former managing director for the South Pacific at Universal Pictures, and in 1963 by Winifred Browne, a grazier and promoter of Australian wool who had contributed funding for several Chauvel films.⁸⁷ And Thistle Stead, a biologist, teacher, and conservationist who was a past president of the Wild Life Preservation Society of Australia, and its then current honorary secretary, was nominated unsuccessfully by the society through the minister for air, Leslie Bury, in 1962; she would later be appointed a Member of the Order of Australia (AM).⁸⁸

85 David Hickie, *The Prince and the Premier* (Sydney and London: Angus and Robertson, 1985), 83–84.

86 NAA: A463, 1960/6311, 'Miss Beulah Bolton—Honours'.

87 NAA: A463, 1965/2317, 'Late Charles Chauvel and Mrs Chauvel—Honours'. On Browne's connections with the Chauvels, see Catherine Kevin, *Dispossession and the Making of Jedda: Hollywood in Ngunnawal Country* (London: Anthem, 2020), 23–28.

88 NAA: A463, 1962/3342, 'Mrs Thistle Y Stead—Honours'; Joan Webb, 'Stead, Thistle Yvette (1902–1990)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, accessed 6 December 2017, adb.anu.edu.au/biography/stead-thistle-yvette-15520/text26732.

Notwithstanding the possibility of such nominations from the community, however, there is no doubt that some occupational groups received proportionally many more awards than others. One reason for this, as indicated above, was likely that certain organisations and professions knew more about the system, and were more adept at engaging with it. As well, the fact that the power of recommendation lay in the hands of the prime minister or premier not only made it more likely that politicians or political supporters would receive honours, but it also meant an individual leader's personal interests and sympathies could potentially influence the make-up of the lists.⁸⁹ Some awards, too, had become essentially—or actually—automatic. From 1958 it became customary to confer knighthood upon justices of the High Court at the time of their appointment.⁹⁰ Permanent heads in the public service, too, could generally expect to receive awards in due course, with those who ranked highest being granted titles, while governors and governors-general might look for a knighthood in the Order of St Michael and St George, and possibly, if a royal visit took place during their tenure, also one in the Royal Victorian Order.⁹¹

Over the years of Menzies's prime ministership, at least 374 awards conferring knighthood were announced on either the federal or State honours lists, or occasionally as extra appointments outside those occasions.⁹² Among the recipients were at least 45 current or former politicians, including premiers, ministers, and members; 36 judges at various levels; 8 governors-general, governors, or designates to those positions; 18 ambassadors, high commissioners, or agents-general in London, or their deputies; and 16 lord mayors or mayors. These awards constituted almost a third of knighthoods bestowed during this period, by any measure a significant proportion of distinctions conferred. Much of the remaining two-thirds of the total went to public servants or individuals who had served on government bodies, or—as it was often phrased in the brief citations—for services to medicine; to education or in university roles; to industry, commerce, or a specified sector of the economy, such as 'the sheep breeding industry', mining, or 'the aircraft

89 Lyall, 'Government Patronage in Australia', 203.

90 Lyall, 'Government Patronage in Australia', 208.

91 Lyall, 'Government Patronage in Australia', 208.

92 This number, and the figures that follow, are drawn from the Australian Government's online database of honours as it stood in 2011 (see Author's Note). Included in this number are awards made outside of the usual biannual lists, but not awards in the Royal Victorian Order, which were not given on the recommendation of the prime minister or premier, but were in the Queen's personal gift. It does, however, include Menzies's KT.

industry'; or military services, including both civil division awards for activities such as supporting returned servicemen and women, and military division awards. Each of these areas of activity—along with some difficult-to-categorise awards recognising similar services—was by this time a familiar feature of the country's honours lists. Only a small percentage of awards (around 10 per cent) seem to have been conferred for work in other fields of endeavour, as is discussed further below. While it is not always easy to determine the precise reasons for an individual award, and thus to categorise it appropriately in such a schema, it is clear that the ranks of Australia's knights were heavily concentrated in certain occupational groups.

Examining appointments to the highest levels of the system in these years reveals another, far more startling, pattern. Alongside the 374 knighthoods conferred between June 1950 (the first list of Menzies's prime ministership) and January 1966 (the last), one finds 12 damehoods, a mere 3 per cent of the total number of titles awarded.⁹³ Clearly, the complaint that women's services were not rewarded with higher-level honours had fallen on entirely deaf ears. Many lists during these years did not include a single woman at the upper two grades of the Order of the British Empire, and women remained ineligible for the honour of knight bachelor, by far the most frequently awarded title for men, as well as for the Order of St Michael and St George (until 1965) and the Order of the Bath. The awards themselves were split between honours given for services in traditionally male fields that mirrored those predominant among the knights, and those given for labour in traditionally female areas of activity. Three of the 12 could broadly be categorised as political services, with two going to serving politicians and one to May Couchman, a political activist in the conservative Australian Women's National League—by the time of her award the women's section of the Liberal Party of Australia—who had a great influence on Menzies.⁹⁴ Another two were the wives of prominent politicians: Menzies's wife Pattie, and Annie Mills McEwen, the wife of the deputy prime minister, John McEwen. The remaining seven included four awards for 'social welfare' or 'charitable' work, one for

93 Note that 13 damehoods appear in the Australian government's online honours database across this period; one of these, however, is a GBE (Dame Grand Cross of the Order of the British Empire) conferred on Enid Lyons that is mistakenly dated to 1957; it was in fact bestowed in 1937 (see Chapter 4).

94 On Couchman, see Judith Smart, 'Couchman, Dame Elizabeth May (1876–1982)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, accessed 19 July 2019, adb.anu.edu.au/biography/couchman-dame-elizabeth-may-ramsay-12359/text22205.

‘service to nursing in Victoria’, one for ‘service to country women’, and one for ‘service to the performing arts’. Each of these represented an area of activity traditionally dominated by women, or which had long been open to women’s success.

Even more disturbing for any feminist readers scrutinising the biannual lists must have been that the numbers of women included had fallen at the lower levels of the system, where in past decades women had received a larger share of awards. While women had made up more than a third of appointments to the fourth grade of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in the five-year periods from 1925 to 1929 and 1930 to 1934, for example, that proportion never rose above 16 per cent in the five-year periods between 1950 and 1969. Likewise, while the proportion of women in the order’s third grade (CBE) had reached as high as 25 per cent in the past (between 1930 and 1934), it remained at 5 per cent or less in the five-year periods between 1950 and 1969 (see Table 1 in Chapter 4). Women’s workforce participation may have been increasing, and opportunities for women to pursue their ambitions in diverse fields much greater than in centuries past, but there remained many obstacles to their full participation in Australian society. One of the most significant for the history of the honours system was the ‘marriage bar’ in the public service, which prevented women from retaining their employment when they married, effectively closing off one of the most common avenues to distinction. Only after Menzies’s retirement would this barrier to women’s equal participation be removed in the federal public service, and thereafter in the States too.

Yet while in many respects the mid-twentieth century was a time of relative conservatism in the honours system, with a smaller percentage of awards going to women than in the 1920s and 1930s, and lists dominated by politics, public service, business, and the (male-dominated) professions, there were also some new departures. One was that awards related to sport were increasingly conferred at the highest levels. After the announcement of the Coronation honours list in 1953, newspapers proclaimed that the young Queen had ‘saluted the new Elizabethan age with honors for those who represent its adventure, achievement, and spirit’. Particular mention was made of the knighthood conferred upon Gordon Richards, described as ‘England’s champion jockey’, and Jack Hobbs, who had been a ‘hero of world cricket’. Both were claimed to be firsts: the first jockey and the

first 'cricketing professional' to be knighted.⁹⁵ This commentary, however, missed the fact that Australia had already gained its first cricketing knight four years previously, in the person of Don Bradman.⁹⁶ During Menzies's second prime ministership there were five knighthoods conferred upon men involved in securing and organising the 1956 Olympic Games in Melbourne, as well as one relating to the 1962 Commonwealth Games in Perth, and three that referenced horse racing in their citations. Another sign of change was that, as far as can be ascertained for the first time, an honour was conferred upon an Indigenous Australian. Doug Nicholls—who would later become the first Aboriginal person to be knighted and the first Indigenous State governor—received an MBE in 1957; he would be elevated to OBE in 1968, the same year Aboriginal boxer Lionel Rose was appointed MBE.

More broadly, the citations for knighthoods conferred during these decades suggest a greater variety of services was being rewarded with titles than in the past. Not only did medical men, educationists, and business leaders make up a greater proportion of titular awards than previously, but there were also religious leaders (including Frank Rolland, the moderator-general of the Australian Presbyterian church, in 1958; James Duhig, the Catholic archbishop of Queensland, in 1959; and Reginald Halse, the Anglican archbishop of Brisbane, in 1962), newspaper editors (such as Harold Campbell in 1957 and Frank Packer in 1959), and an architect (Arthur Stephenson in 1954). Rolland's knighthood was particularly noteworthy, as it was said to be 'the first conferred on an Australian minister of religion'.⁹⁷ Several men were also knighted for their services to the arts, including the theatre (Frank Tait in 1956), music (Eugene Goossens in 1955), and art (among others, Hans Heysen in 1959). These were not entirely new developments—artists Lionel Lindsay (1941) and

95 See, for example, 'Honors Hail Dawn of New Era', *Argus* (Melbourne), 1 June 1953, 1.

96 A former jockey and a former tennis player had also been knighted in the past in Australia: Colin Stephen, in his younger years '[a] noted amateur rider' who won a number of victories, was knighted in 1935 while chair of the Australian Jockey Club, and Norman Brookes, a champion tennis player and former president of the Lawn Tennis Association of Victoria, was knighted in 1939. Martha Rutledge, 'Stephen, Sir Colin Campbell (1872–1937)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, accessed 3 November 2020, adb.anu.edu.au/biography/stephen-sir-colin-campbell-1285/text15099; W. H. Frederick, 'Brookes, Sir Norman Everard (1877–1968)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, accessed 11 June 2021, adb.anu.edu.au/biography/brookes-sir-norman-everard-5373/text9091.

97 B. R. Keith, 'Rolland, Sir Francis William (Frank) (1878–1965)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, accessed 19 July 2019, adb.anu.edu.au/biography/rolland-sir-francis-william-frank-8261/text14469.

Arthur Streeton (1937) had both been knighted in the preceding decades, for instance—but they suggest a gradual opening up of the system to a wider variety of fields of endeavour.

Over the years many complaints have been expressed about the occupational balance of honours lists. At times, objections have focused narrowly upon certain occupations or fields of activity. In June 1950 a correspondent to the Perth *Daily News* wondered why ‘none of our outstanding scientists and doctors and only one of the noble women of the nursing profession’ had featured in the latest list. ‘Does anyone do more for humanity than these unassuming, tireless workers,’ she asked, ‘and does anyone deserve honour more?’⁹⁸ The same month in the *Sydney Morning Herald* a letter commented upon the ‘extremely small numerical representation’ of clergy, with the writer arguing that they too deserved honours, and not merely rewards in the next world.⁹⁹ Another letter in June 1953 asked why the country’s ‘leading pastoralists, some of whom produce the finest wools, wheat, and stock in the world’, did not receive more awards, while the following year a correspondent suggested that teachers were ‘a glaring omission’.¹⁰⁰

Other critical assessments, however, took a broader view, often taking aim especially at the proportion of honours conferred on politicians, public servants, and other professionals, who were perceived to be well remunerated already, and not in need of further reward. The political scientist Don Aitkin, in 1968, found ‘the whole business’ somehow ‘ineffably dreary’, with ‘the sword fall[ing] on to the shoulders of the same old occupational groups’ each time. Only four knighthoods among more than 200 conferred in the final eight years of Menzies’s prime ministership, he lamented, had gone to figures associated with literature, art, and culture. In his view, it was ‘time for ... a new Honours system which gives credit where it might otherwise be overlooked’. Rather than awards for ‘parliamentarians, public servants, company directors, [and] academics’—all of whom had ‘achieved success already’—he advocated ‘knight[ing] the unsung and the underpaid’. Perhaps with tongue in cheek, he added that ‘a couple’ might be ‘given out at random, for services to Australia, which we would all be eligible for, just by living here’.¹⁰¹ Four

98 Mrs. S., letter to the editor, *Daily News* (Perth), 19 June 1950, 6.

99 A. O. Robson, letter to the editor, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 June 1950, 2.

100 F. A. Lindsay, letter to the editor, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 June 1953, 2; John Kelso Hunter, letter to the editor, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 June 1954, 2.

101 Don Aitkin, ‘Between the Lines’, *Canberra Times*, 16 October 1968, 2.

years later, in the *National Times*, he again discussed the lists produced during the last eight years of Menzies's time as prime minister. Of those receiving a title for the first time, he said, 48 out of 216 had been company directors, 37 public servants, 30 members of parliament, 25 academics, 22 other professionals, 16 judges, 12 military figures, and 8 graziers (18 he classified as miscellaneous). It was time for the system to be abolished, in his view, and he was not persuaded by 'the argument that the MBEs are a useful way of rewarding people who give years of unselfish community service'. Not only did he not believe 'the great volume of community work would stop tomorrow if the honours system did', but there were far more deserving people than there were awards available, and 'if hardworking people are doing all this yakka for the chance of an MBE when they are 70 then they show surprisingly little wit'. If honours were to be retained, on the other hand, they should be 'destuffify[ed]', and 'opened ... to all who had achieved fame through their own efforts, especially where they had given real service to the community or done things for Australia's image abroad'.¹⁰² The call for awards to recognise those perceived as truly serving the community (particularly in a voluntary role), rather than merely doing their jobs well, was and remains a staple of commentary on the honours system, as we shall see.

Offers, acceptances, and refusals

A different insight into public opinion comes from the reactions of those offered honours. Throughout the period of this study, potential recipients were informed of the award intended to be bestowed on them, and asked, confidentially, whether they wished to accept or decline. This process of 'sounding', as it was termed, was intended to avoid the embarrassment of announcing an honour, only to have the recipient publicly refuse it. Those who did decline were asked to keep both the offer and their response strictly to themselves, a directive that appears generally to have been followed. It is possible, however, to gain a sense of the numbers of people who refused awards, and of their reasons for doing so, from the files of 'sounding' documents held in the National Archives of Australia (NAA). Although these communications were written in a formal manner to officials administering the system, rather than privately to friends and

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102 Don Aitkin, 'Now, if I were King, There'd be a Different Honours List', *National Times*, 10–15 January 1972, 12, NLA cuttings.

family, they nonetheless provide some idea of the varied reactions of individuals to the offer of an honour during these years, and of the range of reasons for which one might be repulsed.

Rejections were, however, rare. The files consulted for this research show that for most lists only one or two individuals, if any, chose to refuse the award they were offered. Many of the replies to ‘sounding’ letters held in the NAA, therefore, are only short telegrams indicating willingness to receive the award, in the requested form of ‘gratefully accept’ (those refusing were asked to write ‘beg to decline’). Some recipients chose to follow this official response with a more personal letter, expressing their delight, and often asking that their gratitude be conveyed to the sovereign, or to the governor-general. One person in 1959, for example, wrote that ‘[a]ny service rendered by me has given me much pleasure over the years but it has been most exciting to be singled out for recognition’.¹⁰³ Another, in 1953, stated that he was ‘deeply moved & appreciative’, and asked that his ‘humble & grateful acknowledgment’ be communicated to the governor-general.¹⁰⁴ Rabbi Jacob Danglow, the rabbi of the St Kilda Hebrew Congregation and the Jewish chaplain to the army since 1942, asked that the King be informed of his ‘humble and profound appreciation’ at being granted an OBE in the June 1950 list. In the context of the recently revealed horrors of the Nazi Holocaust, he wrote that both he and his congregation ‘deeply appreciated’ the award, and he felt

sure that Australian Jewry, as a whole, are equally gratified by this further manifestation of that broad vision and benign toleration which have always shed so much lustre upon the Throne and Person of our beloved Sovereign.¹⁰⁵

As discussed in relation to an earlier period in Chapter 4, such letters of thanks sometimes expressed sentiments of loyalty to the monarch as well as personal pleasure. In 1959, one woman expressed her gratitude for the OBE she had received, writing that she accepted it ‘with a strong sense of humility, & gratitude for this great Kindness shown to the women of Queensland through me’. Her letter concluded with a declaration of ‘my most loving loyalty to Her Majesty, and ... my wish to serve her and our

¹⁰³ NAA: A2924, 1959/2, letter to the Governor-General from Lillian Mitchell, 15 June 1959.

¹⁰⁴ NAA: A2924, 1953/4, letter to M. L. Tyrrell, official secretary, from Thomas G. Carter, 6 June 1953.

¹⁰⁵ NAA: A2924, 1950/1, letter to M. L. Tyrrell, official secretary and comptroller to the Governor-General, from J. Danglow, 8 June 1950.

country'.¹⁰⁶ John Jensen, created knight bachelor in 1950, similarly asked that the governor-general 'place before His Gracious Majesty my humble duty and my deep sense of gratitude for this signal mark of the Royal favour, of which at all times I shall endeavour to be worthy'.¹⁰⁷

Those who did decline were asked to follow their telegram with a letter explaining their reasons. Not all did so, and some wrote only that their reasons were personal. But those who did choose to explain presented a variety of reasons, both personal and political. Writer Vance Palmer, for instance, refused an OBE in 1952, stating that although 'deeply sensible of the Honour' he wished to refuse because 'those who work in my particular field—that of the Arts—are traditionally critical of such distinctions, and to be singled out would prove embarrassing to me'.¹⁰⁸ Bertha, Lady Leitch, who had practised medicine before marrying the businessman Sir Walter Leitch, and who was a long-term member of the board of the Women's Hospital in Melbourne, declined the same award in 1953 on the grounds that 'I do not feel that I have done anything to deserve an Honour being bestowed upon me'. 'I admit that I have always tried to be a good citizen and as helpful as possible for the welfare of others,' she wrote, 'but hundreds of others have done the same—and none of use [sic] are looking for awards.'¹⁰⁹ Public servant Fred Whitlam, the father of later prime minister Gough, declined an ISO (Companion of the Imperial Service Order) in 1951 because 'such service as I have been able to render to His Majesty and my country has been rendered willingly and with full loyalty, and the service itself has been entire satisfaction'. He wished it to 'continue to be unattended by external marks of distinction'.¹¹⁰ Mining engineer and businessman Lindesay Clark refused a CBE (Commander of the Order of the British Empire) in 1958 on the grounds that he was 'engaged in negotiations of great difficulty & importance' in relation to his companies, and '[a]ny personal distinction bestowed on me would be a hindrance', while (Sir) Marcus Oliphant—who would accept a knighthood in 1959—declined an initial offer in

106 NAA: A2924, 1959/5, letter to the official secretary from Kathleen A. Mylne, 26 May 1959.

107 NAA: A2924, 1950/1, letter to the official secretary to the Governor-General from J. K. Jensen, 20 July 1950.

108 NAA: A2924, 1952/9, letter to Sir Arthur Fadden, acting prime minister, from [William Slim?], 5 June 1952.

109 NAA: A2924, 1953/4, letter to Sir Arthur Fadden, acting prime minister, from W. J. Slim, 19 May 1953. On Lady Leitch, see D. T. Merrett, 'Leitch, Emily Bertha (1873–1957)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, accessed 25 March 2021, adb.anu.edu.au/biography/leitch-emily-bertha-7754/text12383.

110 NAA: A2924, 1951/5, letter to R. G. Menzies, prime minister, from M. L. Tyrrell, 28 May 1951.

1954 because he was ‘a comparative newcomer to Australia’, working in a newly created university (The Australian National University) and a newly founded organisation (the Australian Academy of Science), and:

[i]f I were to accept an honour which carried a title, at this critical stage in the early history of these bodies, I might well lose the confidence of colleagues who have striven devotedly for many years in causes to which I am a comparative newcomer.¹¹¹

Antarctic scientist Phillip Law and theatre director Hugh Hunt, meanwhile, both refused OBEs in 1959 on the grounds that the awards were not high enough to uphold the prestige of the organisations they served. Honours, in Law’s view, were ‘offered in recognition not so much of the man but of the work and accomplishments of the organization of which he is the head’, and in his view an OBE ‘does not do justice to the work of the ANARE [Australian National Antarctic Research Expedition]’. In any case, he did not want to receive an honour ahead of those whom he had led.¹¹² Hunt, similarly, was concerned because the only previous awards of the OBE to people involved with theatre in Australia had been to two women who performed for charity, and he worried that others involved in the Elizabethan Theatre Trust, which he headed, might think it was seen as comparable to amateur theatre.¹¹³ In both cases the governor-general, Sir William Slim, was inclined to agree, commenting privately on Hunt’s case that there was ‘rather a habit of offering Honours in too low a category to distinguished persons in the artistic and cultural world and for that matter, in other spheres’.¹¹⁴ Two men would refuse the Queen’s Silver Jubilee medal in 1977—an award that was not ‘sounded’, presumably because of the sheer number of people receiving it—because they opposed Australia’s continuing connection to the monarchy. Left-wing Labor member of the New South Wales Parliament George Petersen reportedly described himself as ‘a socialist’, and ‘said he could see no

111 NAA: A2924, 1958/14, letter to M. L. Tyrrell, official secretary to the Governor-General, from G. Lindesay Clark, 19 May 1958; NAA: A2924, 1954/11, letter to the official secretary to the Governor-General from M. L. Oliphant, 14 May 1954.

112 NAA: A2924, 1959/5, letter to the official secretary to the Governor-General, [M. L.] Tyrrell, from Phillip Law, 23 May 1959.

113 NAA: A2924, 1959/5, letter to Field Marshall Sir William Slim, Governor-General, from Peter [Carington?], high commissioner for the United Kingdom in Canberra, 26 May 1959.

114 NAA: A2924, 1959/5, unsent letter to Lord Carrington from [Sir William Slim], 2 June 1959.

reason to celebrate 25 years of rule “by the most overpaid Civil Servant in the world”, while author and journalist Craig McGregor was reported to have ‘said that as a republican he would not be accepting’.¹¹⁵

Conclusion

The 1950s have often been seen by Australian historians as a staid period of conformity and cultural stagnation, albeit this characterisation of the decade has been challenged in recent years.¹¹⁶ In some respects, the history of the honours system during this period bears out such a portrayal. These were years of relative stability for the system, with even the controversies—be they over Labor policy towards honours or the ratio of awards going to politicians and public servants—having an air of the routine. During the long years of Menzies’s prime ministership, many hundreds of Australians were honoured, and most of them received the offered distinctions gratefully. While some declined, their reasons were as varied as the services for which the awards were given. Yet at the same time, just as World War II had tested the Labor Party’s opposition to British honours, both Labor and Liberal positions on the system were tried during the decades that followed. From the outcry over John Cain’s decision to deny distinctions to royal tour officials in 1954 to expressions of scepticism over Liberal governments’ bestowal of awards upon political supporters, both parties found their stances challenged. By the later part of the 1960s, an air of change had come over the country, and its ties to Britain and the British monarchy were being questioned afresh by a younger generation. Menzies’s heartfelt declaration of love for Queen Elizabeth during her 1963 tour, often quoted as an example of his Anglophilism and monarchism, drew forth cringes and scorn in equal measure, so greatly had the nation’s mood shifted since 1954. In this changing atmosphere, in 1966 Menzies handed the prime ministership to Harold Holt, who held the office only for a short time before disappearing, presumed drowned, in the surf at Cheviot Beach in Victoria. The honours system, as always, was no exception to the currents of national opinion, and the years to come were years of upheaval, both for the honours system and for the wider nation.

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115 ‘Two Refuse Jubilee Medal’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 August 1977, 1.

116 For example, in Murphy, *Imagining the Fifties*.

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