7

A system divided, 1975–1990

The Order of Australia had been only one brushstroke in the new vision of the nation Gough Whitlam had sought to create as prime minister, and it was only one of many initiatives in jeopardy as that vision crashed down unfinished on 11 November 1975. Following Whitlam's dismissal by Governor-General Sir John Kerr, Liberal leader Malcolm Fraser took office as caretaker prime minister. Despite Whitlam's exhortations to voters to 'maintain the rage', in December 1975 Fraser and his Liberal and National Party colleagues won the ensuing election with a large swing. Honours were never likely to be a major election issue, but given the longstanding differences of opinion over the system between the Labor and non-Labor parties, the switch of government spelled probable change. By the time of the election, while one list of appointments to the Order of Australia had been announced, no awards had been presented, excepting a companionship for the governor-general, as the chancellor and principal companion. It was thus particularly vulnerable, for it must have been easier to disestablish such a newly created order, whose first recipients were still awaiting their investitures, than one that had been in existence for several years and gained a measure of community acceptance. Australia's own national honour had barely begun its life, and already its survival was uncertain.

Within the context of the new nationalism of the 1970s, however, Fraser's approach to national symbols would be more complicated than simply reversing Whitlam's reforms. His moves to return to traditional forms in the nation's ceremonial life might have been intended to reassure more conservative constituents who felt unsettled by changes in the country's

relationship with Britain and general orientation in the world, but he chose not to revert entirely to a pre-Whitlam ceremonial landscape. While such attempts to have it both ways could appear confused, and drew some ridicule, they reflected the reality that the nation was deeply divided over issues of identity, heritage, and future pathways. As the nation's British identity dissolved in the wake of Britain's decision to seek entry to the European Economic Community, migration shifted its demographic make-up, and the country's leaders increasingly looked in new directions, particularly towards Asia, Australians found themselves attempting to construct a new national image in a period of deep suspicion about the very idea of nationalism. The honours system, as a component in the nation's symbolic repertoire, was a central part of that tussle.

The struggle continued after the election of Labor's Bob Hawke as prime minister in 1983, despite the rise of a more confident—even somewhat brash—Australian nationalism as the nation approached its Bicentennial celebrations of 1988. In part, the stalemate was due to the country's constitutional arrangements, which enshrined the sovereignty of the States and encouraged a dual system of honours, as well as to the party divide that had become entrenched in honours policy. At the same time, in a political and cultural landscape being transformed by social movements such as those seeking women's liberation and Indigenous rights, there were hints of a greater scrutiny of the system's ability to encompass diversity. Critical attention was also drawn to the imperial system by the ways in which the government of Queensland premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen chose to use it. Changing times may have been slowly draining support for British honours, but the honorific decisions of the Bjelke-Petersen administration were quickly discrediting them.

Rolling back the changes ... sort of

Fraser's new government moved quickly to restore federal recommendations for imperial honours. But the Order of Australia—the continued existence of which had indeed reportedly been in doubt—was granted a reprieve.¹ Two key objections to the Australian order had

1 According to Barney Murray in the *Australian*, Fraser had been considering abolishing the Order of Australia, but was attracted by the possibility of adding knighthood to it instead. Barney Murray, 'How a New Knighthood Evolved', *Australian*, 12 June 1976, 9, newspaper cuttings on the Australian honours system, National Library of Australia, Canberra (hereafter NLA cuttings).

threatened its survival: its three grades were considered insufficient for recognising the range of achievements and services deserving reward, and decisions on appointments to it had been placed out of government control. Nevertheless, Cabinet's decision on 14 January 1976 was not only to reintroduce British honours, but to award them in parallel with those in the Order of Australia. Ministers recognised that this decision would necessitate settling on 'criteria to ensure that awards under the two systems were appropriate and compatible'.² Such plurality was a feature of the Fraser Government's approach to ceremonial matters. A few days after Cabinet made its decision on honours, a press release announced that, as well as combining Australian and imperial awards, the government would use the titles 'Commonwealth of Australia' and 'Commonwealth Government' for internal use but 'Australia' and 'Australian Government' in external relations, and event organisers would be able to choose from four national songs, except on vice-regal occasions, when 'God Save the Queen' was to be reinstated.³ As the *Age* noted in some confusion, Australians thus found themselves with 'two systems of honors, ... four national anthems and four official titles for the national Government'.⁴

In February officials from Government House and the departments of Administrative Services and Prime Minister and Cabinet met to discuss the decision to bring back British honours alongside Australian ones. A discussion paper by Steve Wenger at Administrative Services laid out the major issues—how to reintroduce imperial honours most effectively, and how to manage both the relationship between British and Australian awards, and the potential impact of the return of British honours on local ones. Several ways of proceeding were identified. At one end, the prime minister might make recommendations for British awards while leaving the Order of Australia to operate independently, or nominate people for both the Order of Australia and British awards, using imperial honours only where there was no Australian equivalent. Another possibility was to amend the Order of Australia's constitution, either to give an allocation of awards to the prime minister, or to add knighthood to it, with a right for the prime minister to sidestep the council in recommending awards; in that case, only lower-level imperial honours might be needed. A far

2 National Archives of Australia (hereafter NAA): A1209, 1976/2235 PART 1, Cabinet minute, Decision No. 57, 14 January 1976.

3 NAA: A4204, 1985/404, 'Honours, Musical Salutes and the Title "Commonwealth"', press release from the prime minister, 21 January 1976.

4 'Honors and Diversity', *Age* (Melbourne), 26 January 1976, 9.

more dramatic possibility was to abolish the council for the Order of Australia, and to transform it into a five-grade honour, a path that Wenger noted might remove any need to revive imperial awards, for 'two of the objections to the Order of Australia, viz. that it fails to provide awards carrying a title and that its awards are not within the control of the Prime Minister', would thus be eliminated.⁵

Wenger recognised the potential for harm to be done to the fledgling Australian order. But with four States having refused to abandon British honours for Australian ones, returning imperial awards at a federal level would only add one more British list to those already appearing. It would be worse, he suggested, to politicise the Order of Australia, for then 'any advantage ... it has over British awards would be lost'. Concluding that there was 'no ideal answer' to the challenge of operating a 'dual system', he suggested that the best approach would be to retain the Order of Australia as it was—'apart from rectifying certain deficiencies which have become manifest through experience'—while the prime minister made 'a limited and very select number of nominations' for imperial awards.⁶

A report on the best way to implement Cabinet's decision made three main proposals: civil British awards other than the Order of the British Empire should be revived; appointments to the Order of Australia should go on; and a knighthood and a medal should be added to the Order of Australia. Explaining the advice to dispense with the Order of the British Empire, the authors stated that its 'continued use ... is not recommended because of its anachronistic name'. It was also, they suggested, less necessary now that an Australian order existed. Of the Order of Australia, they observed that it had 'become apparent that there are insufficient available levels'.⁷ Both the order's chancellor, Governor-General Sir John Kerr, and the chair of its council, Chief Justice Sir Garfield Barwick, were understood to support the idea of adding an upper level of knighthood and a lower-level medal, and the Public Service Board had contended that relying on the order alone had reduced the number of awards available to

5 NAA: A4204, 1985/404, 'Honours and Awards', discussion paper, S. Wenger, Honours Branch, Department of Administrative Services, 8 February 1976.

6 NAA: A4204, 1985/404, 'Honours and Awards', discussion paper, S. Wenger, Honours Branch, Department of Administrative Services, 8 February 1976.

7 NAA: A1209, 1976/2235 PART 2, 'Honours and Awards—Report of Officers'. The report was authored by A. W. McCasker and Wenger from Administrative Services; David Smith, the official secretary to the governor-general; and A. G. Kerr, assistant secretary at the constitutional and legal affairs branch in Prime Minister and Cabinet.

public servants, especially ‘in the middle and lower levels of the Service’.⁸ Defence authorities had also objected to the order on the grounds that it did ‘not provide knighthoods for Chiefs of Staff’, and had ‘inadequate provision for awards at the lower level’. The proposed additions would produce a five-level honour, which ‘would be in conformity with most British Orders and enable a much wider range of service to be recognised’. There was, however, an obvious difficulty. While adding knighthood would ‘enhanc[e] the prestige of the Order’, it would be necessary to consider carefully ‘the situation of those persons who have already been appointed Companions ... in the belief that that was and would continue to be the ultimate award in the Order’.⁹

Addressing the prime minister’s role, the report recommended that he submit names for the Order of Australia to its council, while also inviting nominations for British honours to be sent to himself. A series of recommendations then addressed military decorations, bravery awards, and long-service medals, advocating that British awards not be revived for these categories, except in the case of wartime bravery, where the possibility of using imperial awards was left open. Once again, a key factor was the ability of the government to decide who received honours. The authors observed that since it was, in effect, the minister for defence who determined distinguished service awards to the forces,

one of the reservations about civil awards in the Order of Australia viz that the Commonwealth Government has no control over who does or who does not get an award, is absent.

Finally, the report addressed matters of process. It would be necessary to ensure that people did not receive awards in both systems, for example, and both British and Australian awards should be announced at the same time, on Australia Day rather than New Year’s Day.¹⁰

Near the end of February Fraser requested a report on the situation, instructing that while it was ‘intended’ that Australian and British awards ‘should proceed together ... if there are any problems in achieving this, the

8 NAA: A1209, 1976/2235 PART 2, ‘Honours and Awards—Report of Officers’; NAA: A1209, 1976/2235 PART 1, letter to J. L. Menadue, secretary, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, from A. S. Cooley, chairman, Public Service Board, 23 January 1976.

9 NAA: A1209, 1976/2235 PART 2, ‘Honours and Awards—Report of Officers’.

10 NAA: A1209, 1976/2235 PART 2, ‘Honours and Awards—Report of Officers’.

British system is to be re-instituted forthwith'.¹¹ The Order of Australia was not out of the woods yet, it seemed. One public servant, commenting on the various proposals raised for the prime minister's consideration, had remarked that establishing knighthood within it 'might be the key to preserving [it] as our principal honour'. Recipients and governments that disliked knighthoods, after all, 'need not receive or make awards at this level'.¹² Politically necessary it may have been, but it was also extremely tricky. Any way it was done, it seemed to create difficulties. In a way, it was the same issue that had faced the designers of the Order of the British Empire 60 years earlier: how to ensure that eminent people who would not accept a title could still be honoured? But it was further complicated by the short but significant incarnation of the order as a three-class, non-titular one. What would happen to existing companions? And how would the change be received by people who had accepted the honour on the basis that it did not confer any titles?

Administrative Services proposed to alter the grade of companion so that recipients chose 'either to be a Knight Companion ... or ... a Companion'—in other words, whether or not to use the title 'Sir'. (Women, presumably, would have had the option of being Dame Companions.) Such an approach could be retrospective, covering those already appointed companions. While the unusual nature of the suggestion was recognised, it avoided the difficulties inherent in creating a separate knighthood ranked above or below the companionship:

If the knighthood goes below A.C. [Companion of the Order of Australia] people meriting the highest award but desiring a title cannot be provided for. If a knighthood goes immediately above A.C. the reverse applies. If it goes much higher than A.C. its quota would presumably be very small and its availability would be limited.¹³

Prime Minister and Cabinet too preferred a knighthood 'comparable' to the grade of companion.¹⁴

11 NAA: A1209, 1976/2235 PART 2, letter to secretary from Malcolm Fraser, 25 February 1976. The resulting report can be found at NAA: A1209, 1976/2235 PART 2, 'Changes to the Australian Honours System', memorandum to the prime minister from P. J. Lawler, secretary, 27 February 1976.

12 NAA: A1209, 1976/2235 PART 1, 'Honours and Awards', unsigned memorandum, no date.

13 NAA: A1209, 1976/2235 PART 2, 'Changes to the Australian Honours System', memorandum to the prime minister from P. J. Lawler, secretary, 27 February 1976.

14 NAA: A1209, 1976/2235 PART 2, memorandum to the prime minister from J. L. Menadue, secretary, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 26 February 1976.

But optional knighthood also had its problems, as the framers of the Order of the British Empire had discovered in 1916. For one, the Palace was not receptive. ‘All of us here see considerable difficulties’, wrote Sir Martin Charteris, the Queen’s private secretary, to Geoffrey Yeend, a deputy secretary at Prime Minister and Cabinet. Charteris offered a different solution. A class of knighthood could be introduced with around the same high precedence as the companion, the companion dropped further down the order of precedence, and people already appointed companions be given the chance to move up to become knights or dames. For the British, an important consideration was commensurability between the two systems. As Charteris put it:

If, as we hope, Mr. Fraser intends to make use of the traditional British Orders, we must try to ensure that the two systems ... do not get too far out of kilter.¹⁵

Disapproval from the Palace was moot, however, for Fraser did not like the idea. He agreed with the recommendation to create a lower award, but stressed that a very high upper-level one—with only one or two conferrals a year—must be added as well. Dealing with the other points, he stated that the government should not officially make nominations to the Order of Australia, and emphasised that he wanted the whole range of British honours available, including the Order of the British Empire.¹⁶ The additions were announced by the governor-general at the end of May. At the top of the order was inserted a high-level knighthood or damehood, placed above the GCMG (Knight or Dame Grand Cross of the Order of St Michael and St George) in the order of precedence and known as Knight or Dame of the Order of Australia (AK/AD). At the bottom was a new lower grade, named the Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM). The AK/AD was to ‘be a rare award, for extraordinary and pre-eminent achievement and merit’; no more than two appointments would be made per year. Another change revealed at the same time was that the ‘civil’ division would become a ‘general’ division, meaning that awards within it could be given to those in the defence forces, ‘for services ... not necessarily military in character’.¹⁷

15 NAA: A1209, 1976/2235 PART 2, letter to Geoffrey Yeend from Martin Charteris, 8 March 1976.

16 NAA: A1209, 1976/2235 PART 2, memorandum to A. W. McCasker from A. R. Palmer, 7 March 1976. Fraser was willing, however, to countenance ceasing to use the British Empire Medal.

17 NAA: A1209, 1976/2235 PART 3, press release, David I. Smith, official secretary to the governor-general, 31 May 1976.

The nation reacts

Grafting a medal on to the country's national order was relatively uncontroversial. Adding titles to it was not. Over the next two months, four people who had been appointed to the Order of Australia the previous year resigned in protest. Educator Jean Blackburn and Brotherhood of St Laurence director David Scott had been created officers (AO), while public servant H. C. 'Nugget' Coombs and author Patrick White had been made companions (AC).¹⁸ Having declined knighthood more than once, Coombs stated that he had 'long been opposed to the granting of honours which carry with them titles which differentiate the recipient from other members of the community', and that he had only 'felt able to accept [the AC] ... because the order did not confer such titles at any of its levels'.¹⁹ Although Scott had held the distinction for only a little over a year, he had already threatened to return it once before. In that case, he had been protesting Australia's stance on East Timor.²⁰ This time, he was quoted saying that he felt the order should not include 'titles of distinction'.²¹ White, meanwhile, told the press that the honour had been created as a 'democratic' one, and that knighthoods were 'really quite contrary to the original concept'; besides, he added, he had 'no respect' for the order's head, Sir John Kerr.²²

Coombs's comments drew some ridicule when they were reported in the press. Did he then, asked one letter to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, plan 'to join the band of ordinary people as plain Mr?'²³ 'Nothing is more heart-warming than a well-publicised stand on egalitarian principle', wrote another correspondent, but Coombs's action was 'puzzling'. How had he accepted the honour at all, if he objected to differentiating people from the wider community? And if the difficulty was titles themselves, how did he 'endure' being Dr Coombs?²⁴ However, it appears that many Australians

18 'Dr Coombs Resigns From Order of Australia', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 June 1976, 1; 'Another Protest at Titles', *Canberra Times*, 23 June 1976, 8; 'Resigned Order', *Canberra Times*, 30 June 1976, 13; 'Honour Returned', *Canberra Times*, 7 July 1976, 8; 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), 20.

19 'Coombs Rejects Honour as Protest', *Canberra Times*, 11 June 1976, 1; Tim Rowse, *Nugget Coombs: A Reforming Life* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2002), 360.

20 'Patience, You O of A's, the Medals are Coming', *Australian*, 12 December 1975, 11, NLA cuttings.

21 'Another Protest at Titles', *Canberra Times*, 23 June 1976, 8.

22 'No Knights for Patrick White', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 June 1976, 24.

23 A. Burns, letter to the editor, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 June 1976, 6.

24 A. W. Sparkes, letter to the editor, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 June 1976, 6.

drew a distinction between such titles as ‘Doctor’ and ‘Reverend’, which tended to be perceived as appropriately earned, and that of ‘Sir’, which carried the whiff of a despised aristocratic order. At least one opponent of Fraser’s creation of an Australian knighthood turned to that overworked phrase of Daniel Deniehy’s, which had hovered mockingly over the idea of titled Australians since he first uttered it in 1853. Fraser was attempting, suggested Barrie Unsworth, the assistant secretary of the New South Wales Labour Council, to establish ‘a “bunyip aristocracy”’.²⁵

Restoring British honours also provoked some criticism, largely on the grounds that it was a retrograde step, out of line with the country’s developing identity as a mature and independent nation. In South Australia Labor premier Don Dunstan repudiated any possibility of reviving them in his State, arguing that Britain’s empire was ‘finished’ and it was ‘inappropriate’ to appoint people to ‘the order of the non-existent British Empire’.²⁶ Writer and social critic Donald Horne, in the past several years one of the loudest voices advocating a vigorous new Australian nationalism, argued that imperial honours were ‘immutably linked with branch office definitions of Australia’. He imagined an ‘ideal republic’ where—‘as a reminder of our common humanity’—no titles would be used, not even ‘Mr’, ‘Mrs’, and ‘Miss’, and condemned the continuation of knighthoods as ‘display[ing], at the best, a shabby, provincial elitism and, at the worst, assert[ing] ... that the british empire [sic] still exists’.²⁷ A cartoon by Ron Tandberg showed Fraser as a king dubbing a man a knight, while an onlooker remarked that ‘next we’ll be back to pounds, shillings and pence’.²⁸ One person responded by returning his own British honour. Ian Bisset wrote to Fraser, Kerr, and the Queen in January 1977, relinquishing the OBE (Officer of the Order of the British Empire) he had received in 1968. In his letter to Fraser he explained that ‘[c]hanged circumstances’ had ‘compelled me to take this action’. While his major reason was Kerr’s dismissal of Whitlam—which he described as ‘completely anachronistic’ in a world without the British empire, for Australia had ‘reached maturity’ and ought to be ‘free of any limiting links with its country of origin’—the return of imperial honours had played a part too. He expressed support for a system of honours

25 ‘Committee “Sought Honours Changes”’, *Canberra Times*, 2 June 1976, 12.

26 ‘Era of “Take Your Pick” Pomp and Pageantry’, *Age* (Melbourne), 26 January 1976, 9.

27 Donald Horne, ‘Eureka Flags Wave Amid the Titles’, *Nation Review*, 18–24 June 1976, 875, NLA cuttings.

28 Cartoon by Tandberg, *Age* (Melbourne), 22 January 1976, 1.

that acknowledged those who contributed to the community, but was 'convinced that it should be an appropriate Australian system'. 'In the absence of such a system and as a mark of protest', he wrote, he had returned his OBE.²⁹

Others, however, were pleased with Fraser's changes. Western Australian premier Sir Charles Court told Fraser that he and his colleagues were 'delighted' that recommendations for British honours would be resumed—at the same time pointedly noting that Western Australia had never ceased using them, 'in spite of efforts by your predecessor' to abolish this State right.³⁰ Sir Eric Willis, the recently installed Liberal premier of New South Wales, wrote that while his State had eschewed the Order of Australia during Whitlam's prime ministership, his government was now prepared to consider participating, since Fraser had decided to retain it alongside imperial awards.³¹ And Lance Milne, a chartered accountant from Adelaide, wrote to express 'great pleasure' at the reinstatement of imperial awards. Using both British and Australian awards, in his view, was 'the right way to approach the whole matter of recognition', for '[t]he sudden switch to Australian Honours created much resentment and confusion and destroyed a great deal of the value of the Order of Australia'.³²

Such differences of opinion were symptomatic of wider confusion and disagreement in the matter of national identity, as discussed in the previous chapter. Buoyed by an exuberant mood of new nationalism, some politicians and commentators sought to throw off such symbols of the country's British past as imperial honours and knighthoods. Titular awards had always seemed to some to conflict with the nation's cherished egalitarian ideals, and there was a growing sense that it was anachronistic to receive awards in an order named for a defunct empire, and from a monarch who resided in another country. For others, these winds of change were disorienting, and the breaking of ties to a place that had for so long been 'Home' was a cause for mourning. To many who regretted the reshaping of relations between Britain and Australia, the changes might have been inevitable, but they were also too rapid, and there seemed a disconcerting rush to abandon a heritage that, in their view, had built Australia into the successful and democratic

29 NAA: A1209, 1976/2235 PART 3, letter to the prime minister from Ian J. W. Bisset, 6 January 1977.

30 NAA: A1209, 1976/2235 PART 1, teleprinter message to J. M. Fraser from Charles Court, 22 January 1976.

31 NAA: A1209, 1976/2235 PART 1, letter to J. M. Fraser from Eric Willis, 30 January 1976.

32 NAA: A1209, 1976/2235 PART 1, letter to J. M. Fraser from K. L. Milne, 3 February 1976.

nation it was. Polls reflected this division in public opinion, although support for the Order of Australia appeared to be growing. A Gallup poll of February 1976 found that 50 per cent of respondents preferred Australian honours, and only 39 per cent British honours, compared to 44 per cent each in March 1975. The demographic differences revealed by the poll hinted at the ongoing tug-of-war over the nation's identity, with the vote in favour of Australian honours noticeably higher among younger people than older.³³

Change and change again

As commentators had predicted when Whitlam established Australian awards in the teeth of opposition from non-Labor State premiers and many in the federal opposition, honours had become something of a political football, if they had not been already. With British awards used by Liberal–National Country Party governments, and Labor administrations using only Australian ones, it could have come as no surprise that after Labor won the 1983 federal election the new prime minister, the former union leader Bob Hawke, once again ended federal recommendations for imperial honours, as Labor had indicated it would do during the campaign.³⁴ Initially, however, although making no nominations for the titular grade of the Order of Australia, Hawke's government also did not abolish it. Whether as a result of a government directive, in accordance with the administration's known wishes, or purely by coincidence, the council for the order would nevertheless make no appointments at this level in the following lists, although one knighthood in the order was announced on the June list immediately after the election.³⁵

33 'More Favour Aust. Honours', *Courier-Mail* (Brisbane), 16 March 1976, 11, NLA cuttings. It was also observed that more men than women preferred the new national awards. A second question asked for views on the dual system; it found that 44 per cent of respondents supported maintaining both imperial and Australian honours, and 49 per cent disapproved.

34 'Queen's Honours to Stop', *Canberra Times*, 12 April 1983, 3; 'Hawke Rejects Granting of Imperial Honors', *Australian*, 12 April 1983, 3, NLA cuttings.

35 Since Hawke had said in April that the list for the upcoming Queen's Birthday announcement had been prepared by the previous government, this AK may perhaps have been recommended by the previous administration. 'Queen's Honours to Stop', *Canberra Times*, 12 April 1983, 3.

By 1986, having won a second election, Hawke felt able to officially remove the level of knight or dame from the Order of Australia.³⁶ At the same time, his government introduced new defence force awards to reward gallantry and exceptional service during wartime, and for non-operational service, bringing to an end the use of British awards such as the Distinguished Service Order, which had remained available for use in wartime under Whitlam's changes. The Victoria Cross would be retained as the country's highest gallantry award, due to its historic significance, but it would be rendered Australian through the issue of Australian letters patent.³⁷ In the same year, the Australian and British governments both enacted an *Australia Act*, among other things bringing to an end the ability of the British parliament to legislate for Australia, removing the necessity for it to approve certain State legislation, and terminating appeals to the Privy Council.³⁸ As Anne Twomey has written, these acts abolished the last constitutional links between Australia and the United Kingdom.³⁹ Although they did not themselves contain any provisions about honours, they did have implications for the system. Under the changed constitutional arrangements, British awards conferred on State lists were no longer to be recommended officially to the Queen by a minister of the British Government, but by the premier of the relevant State.⁴⁰

Australians by this stage could have been forgiven for being entirely sick of the back-and-forth battle over titles and honours being waged by successive federal and State governments. Few, it seemed, could muster the energy to care enough to write an editorial or letter to the editor on this latest manoeuvre. An exception was the *Sydney Morning Herald*, which suggested the government was 'doing some curious things' in its desire 'to create a nationalist mood ... appropriate to its vision splendid of the Bicentennial' of European settlement in Australia, coming in 1988.

36 Stanley Martin, 'Perspectives on the Honours of Australia', in *Honouring Commonwealth Citizens: Proceedings of the First Conference on Commonwealth Honours and Awards*, ed. Michael Jackson (Toronto: The Honours and Awards Secretariat, Ontario Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration, 2007), 56–57.

37 'New Awards in Australian Honours System', *Canberra Times*, 27 January 1986, 1. Uniquely Australian awards were also introduced to replace decorations for the police, the fire services, the public service, and Antarctic exploration. The Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory were also granted representation on the council of the Order of Australia, and non-government representation on the council rose from three persons to seven.

38 A. D. Watts, 'The Australia Act 1986', *International and Comparative Law Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (1987): 136–38. doi.org/10.1093/iclqaj/36.1.132.

39 Anne Twomey, *The Australia Acts 1986: Australia's Statutes of Independence* (Sydney: Federation, 2010).

40 Watts, 'The Australia Act', 138–39; Twomey, *Australia Acts*, 355. On the implications of these constitutional changes for honours practices, see also Twomey, *Australia Acts*, especially 154–56.

Scrapping titles, the paper observed, was merely ‘an open invitation’ to a future Liberal–National Government to restore them, as well as being likely to encourage State governments that supported the use of titles to prefer the imperial system to the Australian one. Nor could the *Herald* see a good reason to exchange highly respected and well-known military honours for new decorations, particularly when both old and new were given ‘in the name of the Queen of Australia’. What irked the editorialist most of all, however, was the ‘force-fed patriotism’ of these actions. With neither public pressure to jettison the AK/AD, nor popular displeasure at the maintenance of British gallantry awards, he or she accused the government of stubbornly attempting ‘to create an aura of nationalism’, no matter how ‘contrived or artificial’, in time for the Bicentenary.⁴¹ Some years later, Anglican bishop and scholar Tom Frame would characterise the abolition of the AK/AD as ‘an action flavoured by vindictiveness’. Not only had it supplied a means to reward the further achievements and service of companions who went on to higher and greater things, by conferring a courtesy title on the wives of knights it had acknowledged their part in their husband’s success; the husbands of dames, he suggested, should be similarly recognised. ‘The days of a bunyip aristocracy buying knighthoods are over’, he concluded, and bringing the title back ‘would prove to Australians that they can take something from the past, something that had merit, and refashion it into something useful and proudly Australian’.⁴² It would not be the last time such arguments in favour of titles would be heard. Advocates for titles may have resembled a voice crying out in the wilderness in the 1990s, but the issue of titles had life in it yet, and it would provide one of the more surprising twists in the story of honours in Australia in coming years.

Despite the *Sydney Morning Herald*’s scepticism of enforced nationalism, historians have since seen the ‘remembered’ 1980s as an era of ‘a newly confident Australian nationalism’.⁴³ A range of events, from the victory of *Australia II* in the 1983 America’s Cup and the resulting euphoric national celebration, to the enormous success of the film *Crocodile Dundee* in 1986, demonstrate the increasingly assertive and lively nationalism of the era. The Bicentennial celebrations struck a chord of national pride

41 ‘Definitely Beyond the Call of Duty’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 January 1986, 10.

42 Tom Frame, ‘Time for Knights Once More to Venture Forth’, *Canberra Times*, 22 October 1990, 9.

43 Frank Bongiorno, *The Eighties: The Decade that Transformed Australia* (Melbourne: Black Inc., 2015), xii, quoting (in part) Graeme Turner, *Making It National: Nationalism and Australian Popular Culture* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1994), 3–4, quote on 4.

in many Australians, notwithstanding the highly visible protests of those who felt left out of the nation (especially Indigenous Australians), the crass commercialism, and the sneers of some cultural commentators.⁴⁴ Hawke was—as his exuberant performance after the America's Cup victory showed—a master of recognising and taking advantage of this national fervour, and along with the often rash entrepreneurship of the period, it is perhaps the rise of such confident nationalism the decade is best remembered for.

In such a context, it is perhaps not surprising that support for the Order of Australia appeared to have grown in the community, while that for British honours had declined. Even in 1979, a *Sydney Morning Herald* survey had showed only 5 per cent of respondents preferring imperial honours alone, while more than three-quarters supported the use of Australian honours, either alone or in combination with British awards.⁴⁵ Yet as this survey demonstrated, neither had support for British honours entirely evaporated, particularly as part of a dual system. An unnamed spokesperson for the honours secretariat in the Department of Administrative Services told the *Australian* in 1980 that British honours retained an appeal for those who continued to think of Australia within the context of the wider Commonwealth of Nations. These, he said, were people who had possibly 'fought in a world war', and who 'remember[ed] the strong ties with Britain which are no longer as bonding as they used to be'.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, even Fraser had reportedly been considering a gradual move away from British awards by the end of his prime ministership. In 1980, when Queensland's imperial honours list was half its usual size, the *Courier-Mail* reported that although Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen had not given a reason for the reduction, 'senior government sources' had said that Fraser wished for 'less emphasis on Imperial awards'.⁴⁷

44 On this sense of pride among Australians as they marked the Bicentenary in their various ways, see Frank Bongiorno, 'Inaugural Professorial Lecture—Is Australian History Still Possible? Australia and the Global Eighties', *ANU Historical Journal II*, no. 1 (2019): 207–8. doi.org/10.22459/ANUHJII.2019.15.

45 'Strong Backing for Aust Honours System', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 December 1979, 2. Support for Australian honours alone and for the dual system of British and Australian honours was almost even, at 39 per cent and 38 per cent respectively. As usual, a political and demographic divide remained, with Labor voters more likely to support Australian honours, and Liberal and National Country Party voters either British and Australian honours together or British honours alone, and the strongest support for British honours by themselves to be found among older people.

46 Jane Brumfield, 'To the Top with Honors', *Australian*, 18 February 1980, 7, NLA cuttings.

47 Peter Morley, 'Honors Slashed by Half', *Courier-Mail* (Brisbane), 1 October 1980, 1, NLA cuttings.

National versus imperial

During the years of Fraser's and Hawke's prime ministerships, the honours system, like other national symbols such as the anthem, was caught up in a struggle over ideas of nation and national identity. James Curran and Stuart Ward have argued that from the 1960s, as Australia's British identity broke down, with Britain entering the European Economic Community and the relationship between Australia and Britain shifting irrevocably, Australians faced the difficult task of constructing a new national image, in an era when nationalism was often looked upon with suspicion as a force that was potentially threatening to world peace. Older British symbols could not continue to be drawn on as they had been, but, as Curran and Ward show, it was no easy task to create new national symbols and markers of identity to take their place.⁴⁸ John Rickard has suggested that 'the Australian temperament was uneasy with nationalist gestures', and observed that '[t]he complexity of the relationship with Britain meant that any assertion of Australian identity ran the risk of being interpreted as a rejection of the British heritage'.⁴⁹ Yet, as argued above, this was for the honours system an intensification of an existing dilemma rather than a new predicament. Arguments against imperial honours and titular awards, and calls for distinctively Australian ones, had a very long history. What was new was the overt tug-of-war between two existing systems, one national and one imperial. In such a climate, the gradual process of shifting from older British symbols and creating new Australian ones in their place was a site of political drama and manoeuvring during the 1970s and 1980s, as can be seen in the example of the honours system. Awards, like other symbols such as the national anthem, were in this period a site of this identity drama, caught between the necessity of acknowledging Australia's independent status as a nation, and the continued existence of ties to Britain, both in terms of residual constitutional links, and in terms of the emotional and sentimental attachments of many, especially older, Australians.⁵⁰

48 James Curran and Stuart Ward, *The Unknown Nation: Australia After Empire* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2010).

49 John Rickard, *Australia: A Cultural History*, 3rd ed. (Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2017), 207.

50 For a further discussion of this, in relation to both the official honours system and the Australian of the Year award, see Karen Fox and Samuel Furphy, 'The Politics of National Recognition: Honouring Australians in a Post-Imperial World', *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 63, no. 1 (2017): 93–111. doi.org/10.1111/ajph.12317.

Such duality about honours and the national identity was obvious every January and June, particularly in January with British awards continuing to be announced on New Year's Day and Australian ones on Australia Day. Reflecting the different priorities of the two major political groupings, non-Labor State governments generally continued to use British honours (although also having representation on the council for the Order of Australia and thus participating at least on a minimal level in the Australian system as well), while Labor State governments usually eschewed British honours and resolutely supported the Order of Australia. As in the past, however, the divide was not as stark as might have been expected. In New South Wales, the Labor Government of Neville Wran chose to make recommendations for imperial honours below knighthood for the New Year list in 1977, with Wran explaining that the decision was in conformity with the practice of previous Labor governments in his State. He added that he would end the use of British honours when it became clear that the public no longer found them attractive.⁵¹ Going further—as the governor-general, Kerr, explained in a report to the Palace—Wran also recommended Joan Sutherland for a damehood within the Order of Australia, on the rationale that she would have received this honour had it existed at the time she was appointed a companion in 1975. Kerr found it 'all a little puzzling', and wondered if the Australian Labor Party (ALP) were 'coming to realise how popular the two Honours systems really are and ... how popular all aspects of our monarchical system remain'.⁵² Such flexibility of choice, for Labor ministries at least, would not last long, however. In 1979 the party's national conference decided on a policy of abolishing British awards for Australians, departing from its more flexible past platform, which had banned titles but supported suitable recognition for services to the community and to humanity, thus leaving room for a Labor ministry to decide to nominate individuals for non-titular, lower-level imperial honours. An amendment ensuring that Labor administrations would also not bestow knighthoods in the Order of Australia was also accepted by the conference.⁵³

51 'Wran Defends Nominations for Honours', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 January 1977, 3.

52 NAA: AA1984/609, PART 5, letter to Sir Martin Charteris, private secretary to the Queen, from John [Kerr], 11 November 1976. Intriguingly, Sutherland was instead appointed DBE (Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire), in the 1979 New Year honours.

53 'No British Titles by Labor', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 July 1979, 2.

Not only governments but also potential recipients divided on the question of which set of honours the country should use. Whether because it was still relatively new, or due to its politically divisive birth, the Order of Australia had not yet gained universal approval as a desirable reward. To some it seemed ‘second prize, not quite having the cachet of something from the Old Country’.⁵⁴ Others—among them supporters of the republican cause—found a national award far more acceptable than an imperial one. Author Kylie Tennant had twice refused the OBE, but accepted appointment as AO on the 1980 Australia Day list.⁵⁵ For the ‘fiercely republican’ and ‘[o]utrageously pugnacious’ writer Xavier Herbert, however, even the Order of Australia was too closely linked to the monarchy.⁵⁶ In 1984 he declined the AO as being ‘still an Imperial award’ emanating from the Queen of England, ‘even if she were also the Queen of Australia’.⁵⁷

Unsurprisingly, the dual system of honours also did nothing to resolve the longstanding friction over whose right it was to make nominations, of whom, and for what services. Almost since the moment of Federation, as discussed in earlier chapters, tensions had periodically arisen between federal and State governments over honours. This situation was largely due to the creation of a federal system that emphasised the sovereignty of the States, leaving State governments considerable powers over anything not explicitly surrendered to Commonwealth control. The operation of a dual system of awards, with the two sides of politics favouring different awards, only added further potential for disagreement. One instance of such discord took place in January 1977, after the announcement of the New Year list of awards. A South Australian agriculturalist, Robert Herriot, had been appointed OBE on the Commonwealth list, and acting premier Des Corcoran wrote to the prime minister to complain, and to seek a change in federal policy. In Corcoran’s view, Herriot’s career had been largely as a State employee, and the federal government had appropriated a State responsibility by putting his name forward, as well as embarrassing the State’s Labor administration, which did not use British honours.

54 Sally Loane, ‘Australian Honors Stand Alone at Last’, *Age* (Melbourne), 29 May 1991, 2, NLA cuttings.

55 Kylie Tennant, *The Missing Heir: The Autobiography of Kylie Tennant* (Melbourne: Macmillan, 1986), 165.

56 Russell McDougall, ‘Herbert, Albert Francis Xavier (1901–1984)’, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, accessed 24 July 2017, adb.anu.edu.au/biography/herbert-albert-francis-xavier-12623/text22741.

57 ‘Xavier Herbert Knocks Back a Royal Honour’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 June 1984, 5.

Several other awards involving local government service also struck him as questionable.⁵⁸ Unmoved, Fraser responded merely that prime ministers had long nominated people for honours, and these particular recommendations had been ‘justified and [the] awards fully deserved’. He saw ‘no reason’ for any change in practice.⁵⁹ Premier Don Dunstan, back in the saddle some weeks later, was not willing to let the matter drop. Reminding Fraser that it had been usual for the federal government to avoid nominating State public servants, and vice versa, he asserted that previous ministries in Canberra would not have nominated Herriot, and sought a return to a past practice he described as ‘not nominating people who have served Governments other than our own’.⁶⁰ No reconsideration was forthcoming. Fraser’s brief reply said only that the comments had been noted, and he had nothing to add to his previous letter.⁶¹

Equity, diversity, and inclusion

The late 1970s and 1980s were not merely a time of shifts in Australians’ conception of their place in the world, but also years of transformation in other, perhaps even more profound, ways. How far did the biennial lists of new awards—British or Australian—reflect the social and cultural movements and changes sweeping Australia, from women’s liberation and second-wave feminism, to intensifying Indigenous activism and the rise of multiculturalism? Gender inequity, in particular, had long been a target of feminist critics of the honours system, and such criticism seems only to have increased during the 1970s and 1980s. By the end of the period, it was almost a staple of commentary on honours announcements. In 1987 David Smith, the secretary of the council of the Order of Australia, wrote to various newspapers observing that ‘[o]nce again, publication of the [honours] list has been followed by a spate of complaints—not enough women, not enough migrants, scientists, industrialists, engineers, farmers ...’. His response was simple: ‘If our honours lists fail to include all the achievers in our community it is because the community has failed to nominate them’.⁶² Not everyone was impressed with this stance. Writing to the *Canberra Times*, J. D. Stanhope—presumably the future Australian

58 NAA: A1209, 1976/2235 PART 3, letter to J. M. Fraser from Des Corcoran, 6 January 1977.

59 NAA: A1209, 1976/2235 PART 3, letter to D. A. Dunstan from Malcolm Fraser, 7 March 1977.

60 NAA: A1209, 1976/2235 PART 3, letter to J. M. Fraser from Don Dunstan, 22 March 1977.

61 NAA: A1209, 1976/2235 PART 3, letter to D. A. Dunstan from J. M. Fraser, 26 April 1977.

62 ‘Reply to Medals Complaints’, *Canberra Times*, 23 June 1987, 3.

Capital Territory chief minister—labelled it ‘defensive’ and argued that that whatever the situation regarding the other groups, there were certainly too few women receiving honours. If a shortage of nominations was the problem, he asked, had the government or the order’s council made any effort to solve it? Instead of ‘blaming the community’, the government and the council ‘should at least mount an advertising campaign ... or, heaven forbid, take some other affirmative action’.⁶³

The following year Stanhope used the occasion of International Women’s Day to invite ‘reflect[ion]’ on the Order of Australia’s performance in relation to gender equity. Assessing the proportion of women included in the most recent Australia Day awards as ‘paltry’, he suggested that if the order’s council ‘persists in delivering its insults to the women of Australia ... it may be just as well to abolish it altogether’.⁶⁴ Smith defended the order in a letter to the *Canberra Times*, noting that—as he had already informed Stanhope—the council had in recent years recommended women for around 25 per cent of awards, while only 20 per cent of the nominations it had received had been of women.⁶⁵ Stanhope, however, was not to be convinced that the council was blameless, arguing that something further needed to be done, such as a publicity drive to increase nominations of women.⁶⁶

An examination of the numbers of awards going to women would certainly not have lifted the spirits of feminist critics of the system. As I have suggested elsewhere—and unlike the picture on the other side of the Tasman in New Zealand—there is relatively little evidence to suggest that the emergence of women’s liberation and the second wave of the feminist movement had any significant impact on the numbers of women receiving awards, possibly due to some reluctance among left-wing women in Australia to accept imperial honours.⁶⁷ Between 1975

63 J. D. Stanhope, letter to the editor, *Canberra Times*, 6 July 1987, 2.

64 J. D. Stanhope, letter to the editor, *Canberra Times*, 14 March 1988, 2.

65 David I. Smith, letter to the editor, *Canberra Times*, 26 March 1988, 2.

66 J. D. Stanhope, letter to the editor, *Canberra Times*, 10 April 1988, 2. A further reply from David Smith dealt largely with a suggestion made by Stanhope that he had been unable to mount his own drive for increased nominations of women by Smith’s reluctance to assist. David I. Smith, letter to the editor, *Canberra Times*, 18 April 1988, 2.

67 See Karen Fox, ‘Dames in New Zealand: Gender, Representation and the Royal Honours System, 1917–2000’ (Master’s thesis, University of Canterbury, 2005), 70–78; 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), 176.

and 1989, while 310 men were knighted, only 28 women were granted the honour of damehood—only 8.3 per cent of the total number of titles conferred. At the third level of the Order of the British Empire, the CBE (commander), women remained below 10 per cent of awards in each of the five-year periods from 1975 to 1989, and indeed the proportion of awards going to women fell, from 9.2 per cent between 1975 and 1979, to 5.4 per cent between 1980 and 1984, and 4.8 per cent between 1985 and 1989 (see tables in Chapter 4). Even at the fifth level of the order, the MBE (member), women did not receive more than a quarter of awards made in each of these five-year periods. Perhaps most concerning and surprising, the trend of a fall in the proportion of awards going to women was repeated for both the OBE and the MBE. Yet the situation was no more promising in Australia's own order. A mere two women were appointed AD during its brief existence, and women consistently received less than 10 per cent of awards of the AC during the five-year periods from 1975 to 1989. At the lower levels of the order, women fared only marginally better: in the five-year period between 1975 and 1979, for example, they received 16.7 per cent of AMs (Members of the Order of Australia) awarded, a proportion that decreased to 13 per cent between 1980 and 1984, and 15.2 per cent between 1985 and 1989.

By the beginning of the 1990s, women's low rates of inclusion in the honours system were starting to receive serious attention from the federal government. In September 1990 Senator Margaret Reynolds—until that April the minister assisting the prime minister for the status of women—presented a report on women's position in relation to the Order of Australia. Finding that women were under-represented, the report suggested the inequity might be 'a factor of the number of nominations made, rather than the selection process', with '[o]nly a quarter of the nominations received' being for women.⁶⁸ Reynolds asserted that women's organisations had 'a unique responsibility to alert their members and encourage them' to improve the situation.⁶⁹ The following year the government announced that, as part of an ongoing Inquiry into Equal Opportunity and Equal Status for Australian Women, an investigation would be held 'into whether or not the ... system is fair to women'.⁷⁰

68 Margaret Reynolds, *Women and the Order of Australia* (Canberra: September 1990), 1.

69 Reynolds, *Women and the Order of Australia*, introductory letter from Reynolds.

70 'Govt to Look at Honours and Equality', *Canberra Times*, 12 April 1991, 12; House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs, *Half Way to Equal: Report of the Inquiry into Equal Opportunity and Equal Status for Women in Australia* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1992), 1.

In June, Attorney-General Michael Lavarch, the chair of the House of Representatives standing committee conducting the inquiry, was quoted describing honours as ‘a mirror to our society’ that was ‘tarnished’ by the under-representation of women, which was ‘yet another example of how we underrate and undervalue the contribution women make to society’.⁷¹ Titled *Half Way to Equal*, the final report issued in April 1992 included a section on recognition, in which one subsection dealt specifically with the Australian honours system.⁷² Having found that ‘only a little more than 24 per cent of all awards’ made in the Order of Australia since 1975 had gone to women, the committee recommended a ‘public awareness campaign’ to increase knowledge of the order and ‘encourage nominations’; that an investigation be carried out as to how to ‘mak[e] the process more accessible to the public to ensure that the contribution of women, particularly in the voluntary sector, is recognised and nominations are made’; and that consideration be given to ‘the order of precedence’, and especially to the question of ‘whether Long Service Awards should take precedence over Merit Awards’.⁷³ This last was a relatively radical recommendation that, predictably, appears to have sunk without trace.

Another potentially radical solution, which was raised during the discussion around the inquiry but does not appear in the final report, was quotas. This possibility, however, was rejected by significant figures connected with the system. Robin Rawson, the director of the honours secretariat, was quoted in the media agreeing that nominations of women needed to increase, but opposing ‘enforced quotas’. It needed to be remembered, she said, that women had historically had fewer opportunities than men to rise to the level of achievement represented by the AC, the highest grade of the order.⁷⁴ Establishing quotas for women was also not an option in the view of the order’s instigator, former prime minister Gough Whitlam. Speaking at a conference on ‘Recognition for Women in Australia’ held as part of the inquiry in July 1991, he was quoted explaining that ‘[y]ou don’t want the position where women get honours because of a political decision’. ‘I would think it insulting that people would think: “Oh, she only got it because she is a woman”’, he stated, asserting that honours

71 Sue Neales, ‘Tarnished Society Mirror in Need of Some Polish’, *Australian Financial Review*, 1 June 1991, 63, NLA cuttings.

72 *Half Way to Equal*, 168–74.

73 *Half Way to Equal*, xxxv, 169, 177.

74 Sue Neales, ‘Tarnished Society Mirror in Need of Some Polish’, *Australian Financial Review*, 1 June 1991, 63, NLA cuttings.

should be awarded for an individual's 'qualities', without gender, race, geography, religion, or another such factor being a consideration.⁷⁵ In the committee's final report, Whitlam was quoted making similar comments to those of Rawson:

It is an unfortunate fact that the qualifications which have to be borne in mind for the Order do mean that many women have not yet had the opportunity to meet those requirements in as great numbers as men ...⁷⁶

As the committee noted, however, not everyone found this kind of response convincing. 'Rather than accepting that women do not fit the current standards for awards,' the report noted, 'many submissions ... suggested that perhaps the rules should be changed so that a broader range of values and activities should be recognised with equal merit.'⁷⁷ As with so many aspects of women's unequal participation in public life, views were sharply divided between those who advocated such interventionist methods of creating gender equity, and those who advocated a strategy of waiting and allowing the imbalance to resolve naturally, as women gained new opportunities to make their marks.

Although considerably more muted, issues of ethnic inequity in the system, or in Australian society more generally, also made their presence felt on occasion. In 1981 Nick Zervos, the assistant secretary of the Greek Orthodox Community of Melbourne and Victoria, asserted that the awards announced for Australia Day that year were skewed towards individuals of Anglo-Saxon descent. Although the government was 'pushing the concept of a multi-cultural society', he argued, it was 'consistently ignoring members of that society', while giving honours specifically for services to migrant communities, rather than to migrants in other fields of endeavour, implied a 'cultural straitjacket'.⁷⁸ Responding to the criticism in a press statement, Smith stated that Zervos was 'plainly wrong' and that if he felt there were other people who ought to be honoured, he should put their names forward.⁷⁹

75 Kylie Davis, 'Whitlam Sees Insult in Honours Quotas', *Australian*, 26 July 1991, 3, NLA cuttings; *Half Way to Equal*, 5.

76 *Half Way to Equal*, 169–70.

77 *Half Way to Equal*, 171.

78 "'Honors List Bias to Anglo-Saxons'", *Mercury* (Hobart), 27 January 1981, 2, NLA cuttings.

79 'Top-Level Denial of Honors Bias', *Mercury* (Hobart), 29 January 1981, 2, NLA cuttings.

Several Indigenous Australian leaders, on the other hand, made use of the honours system as a vehicle for expressing their dissatisfaction with Australia's treatment of its Indigenous people more generally. The poet Jack Davis threatened in 1977 to return the BEM (British Empire Medal) he had been awarded the previous year, in protest against a proposed amendment to Western Australia's *Electoral Act*, which would have restricted the rights of illiterate voters, among them Indigenous Australians.⁸⁰ In 1987 fellow poet Oodgeroo Noonuccal (formerly Kath Walker) did send back her MBE, which she had received in 1970, as 'a protest against what the Bicentenary "celebrations" [stood] for'.⁸¹ Assessing the position of migrant or non-Anglo-Celtic groups in the honours system is next to impossible, as data on ethnicity was not collected and names are an imperfect marker of ethnic identity, but such examples do suggest that at least some members of the community felt that official commitments to multiculturalism and Indigenous self-determination were not yet being reflected in the country's honours system.

Then, too, there continued the old criticisms that had always been voiced. In a scathing piece directed largely but not entirely at the imperial system, in June 1976 in Melbourne's *Age* Peter Cole-Adams dismissed the whole institution of honours as an 'odd anachronism'. Titles in particular drew his ire: they were 'totally at odds with the principle of egalitarianism which Australians are apt to proclaim'. Although he acknowledged that non-titular awards had a use, for they allowed recognition to be given to people who had done charitable or other such work, the problem was that 'the system is so appallingly arbitrary'. There were many more deserving people than received awards, he said, and he questioned the possibility of ever fairly or appropriately comparing the achievements of people in diverse fields so as to assign them to particular grades.⁸² Another familiar critique focused upon the question of occupational balance—and with it, relatedly, class bias. In 1987 the federal government whip, Ben Humphreys, complained that honours were 'becoming something of a farce'. He was reported to have raised the issue of public servants and

80 'Black Leader: I'll Protest', *Age* (Melbourne), 11 November 1977, 4.

81 Oodgeroo Noonuccal, 'Why I Am Now Oodgeroo Noonuccal', *Age* (Melbourne), 30 December 1987, 11. For more on these, and other instances of Indigenous Australians' responses to the offer of an award, see Karen Fox, 'Ornamentalism, Empire and Race: Indigenous Leaders and Honours in Australia and New Zealand', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 42, no. 3 (2014): 486–502. doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2014.895480.

82 Peter Cole-Adams, 'The Puzzles of the Honors System: Who, How and Why?' *Age* (Melbourne), 19 June 1976, 15, NLA cuttings.

politicians receiving awards at the Labor caucus meeting, arguing that as they were well rewarded already with good salary and superannuation packages, they did not deserve honours, except in cases where they had retired and then given voluntary service to the community. According to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Humphreys's protest struck a chord with David Smith, who was quoted speaking disapprovingly of a public service committee 'specifically established to ensure that public servants received their fair share of honours'. It had, he stated, 'interfered with the proper functions of the council'.⁸³ A similar point arose during the inquiry into women's status and opportunity. 'A general criticism' of the system, according to the committee's final report, had been 'that awards tend to go to people who have already been recognised', with 'a heavy preponderance of people who have imperial honours amongst the ranks of recipients of ... the Order of Australia', and 'a feeling that awards are given for positions which the recipient occupied rather than personal achievement'. The National Women's Consultative Council, the committee stated, had observed that '[m]any men seem to obtain this recognition for service to government, public service and industry—often for doing a job for which they were well paid', while '[u]npaid or voluntary work ... [had] less apparent value'.⁸⁴

Such criticisms, as we have seen, were not new, and nor were they surprising, given the continuation of established patterns in the conferral of awards. Glancing through the names of those who received the highest levels of awards, those bestowing the title of Sir or Dame in the imperial system and the AK/AD and AC in the Australian system, it is hard to escape the feeling that little had changed in patterns of award since the years of the second Menzies prime ministership. The creation of the Order of Australia was in this sense not transformative. While it was innovative in many ways, in its highest awards it too tended to perpetuate these older patterns of award. The 14 AKs and ADs awarded between January 1976 and June 1989 were three governors-general (John Kerr, Zelman Cowen, and Ninian Stephen), former prime minister Robert Menzies, premier of Western Australia Charles Court, governor of New South Wales Roden Cutler, politician Enid Lyons, High Court chief justice Garfield Barwick, medical researcher Macfarlane Burnet, professor of physiology and University of Melbourne chancellor Pansy Wright, Walter and Eliza Hall

83 Milton Cockburn, 'How Bureaucrats Gather Their Gongs', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 February 1987, 1.

84 *Half Way to Equal*, 169.

Institute of Medical Research president Colin Syme, businessman Gordon Jackson, author and historian (and wife of a former governor-general) Alexandra Hasluck, and Charles, Prince of Wales. Of the 143 awards of the AC made during the same period, at least 43 were bestowed either wholly or partially for political or public services, or for services to the Crown or government. Another 19 were for services to the law, 26 for services to business or industry (including industrial relations), and 29 for services to the community (again, in each case, either wholly or partially).⁸⁵ While such broad descriptions conceal as much as they reveal, it is fair to say that each of these categories was an area of activity commonly rewarded with honours under the British system. The extent to which existing patterns of awards continued is also evident in that only nine citations mentioned contributions to the arts (music, art, literature, and so on), a mere two citations mentioned conservation or the environment, and one AC was awarded for services to a sport (Donald Bradman, for cricket).

Moreover, there was also a degree of class hierarchy still inherent in the honours system in Australia, at least in relation to awards for public and military service in the imperial system. It is clear from material held in the National Archives of Australia that a person's position in an occupational hierarchy still played a part in determining the level of award made, at least in the late 1970s. A list produced in 1977 placed particular positions against particular grades of award, presumably as examples of the kinds of persons who might receive each category of honour. Governors-general might expect a GCMG and justices of the High Court a KBE (Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire), while 'First Division officers' of the federal public service might receive knighthood at the level of knight bachelor or the non-titular CBE, and 'Second Division' officers could hope at best for an OBE. Those in the 'Third Division' and 'Fourth Division' were confined to the ISO (Companion of the Imperial Service Order), MBE, and BEM, depending on their level of seniority.⁸⁶ By this time, however, there was clearly a degree of unease about such formulaic and class-ridden scales. Responding to the list, Geoff Yeend, the deputy

85 These figures have been compiled using the citations given in the Australian Government's online honours database. 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 6 May 2021, honours.pmc.gov.au/honours/search. Note that these figures include honorary awards, and that one award has since been terminated.

86 NAA: A1209, 1976/2235 PART 3, 'Imperial Awards in the Commonwealth List', attached to letter to G. J. Yeend, deputy secretary, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, from P. J. Lawler, 29 June 1977.

secretary of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, cautioned against sending it to government ministers and public service heads, noting that '[s]ome of the descriptions might need another look if they were to go out'.⁸⁷ Whether similar questions of position, and the appropriateness of using occupational hierarchies as a proxy for award levels, occupied the council for the Order of Australia cannot be determined, as records remain unavailable. It seems likely, however, that such scales of award were a legacy of British practices, to which the new Australian order may not have been subject.

Corruption in the sunshine state

The worst examples of the operation of the honours system, which brought a spectre of the ill-repute that Lloyd George's honours-selling scandals had visited upon the British system in the 1920s, were found in Bjelke-Petersen's Queensland. Premier since 1968, Bjelke-Petersen was a larger-than-life figure in Australian politics. Described by the historian Geoffrey Bolton as '[a]n ungenerous fundamentalist, but financially shrewd', and by the political scientist Rae Wear as 'an authoritarian' with little tolerance for opposition, he was capable of both great courtesy and terrible rages.⁸⁸ He had become leader of the Country Party, and premier, in August 1968 after the death of Jack Pizzey, and would remain in power until December 1987. Many aspects of his time as premier were controversial, even notorious, and one of those aspects was his use of honours.

In their history of the Queensland parliament John Wanna and Tracey Arklay state that '[t]he conservative government had long favoured the awarding of knighthoods to its own senior members' but that 'the tradition ... was accelerated' after Bjelke-Petersen became premier.⁸⁹ Moreover, according to Wanna and Arklay, '[b]y the 1970s' there was 'a new dimension' to 'the government's practice of awarding knighthoods to its members' as 'local successful businessmen close to the Premier, and often with close associations with the National Party itself' were granted

87 NAA: A1209, 1976/2235 PART 3, letter to P. J. Lawler, secretary, Department of Administrative Services, from G. J. Yeend, deputy secretary, no date.

88 Geoffrey Bolton, 1942–1995: *The Middle Way*, vol. 5 of *The Oxford History of Australia*, 2nd ed. (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1996), 224; Rae Wear, *Johannes Bjelke-Petersen: The Lord's Premier* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 2002), xi, 87, 133–36.

89 John Wanna and Tracey Arklay, *The Ayes Have It: The History of the Queensland Parliament, 1957–1989* (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2010), 402. doi.org/10.22459/AH.07.2010.

titles.⁹⁰ This did not go unnoticed. An article in the *National Times* in 1986 investigated the continuing use of knighthoods in Queensland, noting that the upcoming Queen's Birthday list was 'sure to bring renewed accusations of political cronyism from the Labor Opposition', followed by 'retorts of "sour grapes"' from the government. After suggesting the State seemed to be receiving more knighthoods than it was technically entitled to, journalist Murray Hogarth noted that Bjelke-Petersen's own electorate, Barambah, also seemed to be 'disproportionate[ly]' favoured. He quoted Queensland Labor MLA Bob Gibbs alleging that it was 'commonly touted' that 'to get a knighthood you perform a major service for the National Party' or contribute 'nothing less than \$120,000', and listed some of 'the brave defenders of the National Party ... called to Bjelke-Petersen's round table'. Among them were Edward Lyons, a 'friend and mentor' of Bjelke-Petersen as well as a powerbroker within the National Party, who had been knighted in 1977; the National Party State president, Robert Sparkes (1979); party treasurer William Allen (1981); and former party trustee Frank Moore (1983). According to Hogarth, 'at least half' of the knighthoods included on the Queensland honours list since Bjelke-Petersen became premier had—or afterwards came to have—'links to the Government', including as party members, public servants, or members of the Liberal Party, the government's past partner in coalition.⁹¹

Hogarth also named several who had made significant donations to the National Party, such as Justin Hickey, a Sydney businessman who was knighted in 1979, before in 1980 being revealed as the source of a donation of \$100,000 to the premier's preferred charity (a hospice at Kingaroy).⁹² The allegation was also made in the federal Senate in September 1992: referring to a federal National Party council decision to seek the reintroduction of titles into the Order of Australia, Chris Schacht claimed that '[p]eople could get a knighthood for a \$100,000 donation to the National Party or Bjelke-Petersen Fund'.⁹³ Wanna and Arklay are quite clear that 'sycophantic business leaders' were also able to 'purchase knighthoods' through 'mak[ing] significant donations to the National Party through its fundraising arm'. Hickey was, as they say, a 'celebrated

90 Wanna and Arklay, *Ayes Have It*, 403.

91 Murray Hogarth, 'It's Knighthoods Galore in the Realm of Sir Joh ...', *National Times*, 6–12 June 1986, 4, NLA cuttings.

92 Murray Hogarth, 'It's Knighthoods Galore in the Realm of Sir Joh ...', *National Times*, 6–12 June 1986, 4, NLA cuttings.

93 Commonwealth of Australia, Senate, *Parliamentary Debates*, 9 September 1992 (Chris Schacht).

case'. Some time later, in 1982, he was asked about his knighthood in an episode of the Australian Broadcasting Commission's television program *Four Corners*, and said that he had made a substantial donation to a hospice located in the premier's electorate; he was quite clear that he had done so before his honour was granted.⁹⁴ The most recent addition to the group at the time of the *National Times* article was the police commissioner, Terence Lewis, who, according to Evan Whitton, had 'relentlessly' pursued a knighthood.⁹⁵ Lewis was later dismissed and jailed for forgery, corruption, and perjury, as well as being stripped of his title.⁹⁶

When Bjelke-Petersen himself was knighted at Queen's Birthday 1984, he told journalists he would not reveal who had written the laudatory citation, which described him as 'not only an inspiration and a guiding light' as premier, but 'a living embodiment of the spirit of self-sacrifice and service' who had in his career displayed 'integrity', 'dignity', and 'humility, the true mark of greatness'. Responding to the citation, the Labor Opposition leader, Keith Wright, 'suggested that whoever was responsible for the wording ... "deserves a knighthood for services to creative writing and comedy"'.⁹⁷ Bjelke-Petersen's title, and his use of honours more generally, even aroused comment in the British House of Commons, with Scottish Labour member Bryan Williams tabling a motion asserting that Bjelke-Petersen 'and his cronies' had 'discredited the honors system'.⁹⁸ Wanna and Arklay agree, suggesting that 'such abuses of state-nominated honours [as occurred under Bjelke-Petersen] merely helped discredit the imperial honours system'.⁹⁹

Bjelke-Petersen also played a part in another honours scandal during the Fraser years, which erupted in June 1976 when the president of the Queensland Labor Party's central executive and senior vice-president of the federal ALP, Jack Egerton, accepted a knighthood. According to

94 Wanna and Arklay, *Ayes Have It*, 403; 'Farewell, Sir Joh, the Great Divider', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 April 2005 [online].

95 Murray Hogarth, 'It's Knighthoods Galore in the Realm of Sir Joh ...', *National Times*, 6–12 June 1986, 4, NLA cuttings; Wanna and Arklay, *Ayes Have It*, 567; Evan Whitton, *The Hillbilly Dictator: Australia's Police State*, revised ed. (Sydney: ABC Books, 1993), 104–7, quote on 105.

96 Wanna and Arklay, *Ayes Have It*, 607.

97 'Queensland Premier Knighted', *Canberra Times*, 16 June 1984, 1.

98 Hedley Thomas, 'Scottish MP Hits Joh Over Honors', *Courier-Mail* (Brisbane), 15 December 1989, 1, NLA cuttings. An earlier version of the motion had specifically condemned the knighthoods received by Bjelke-Petersen 'and his cronies', but it had been amended in order not to appear to criticise the Queen.

99 Wanna and Arklay, *Ayes Have It*, 403.

Johannah Bevis, Bjelke-Petersen's government had deliberately sought 'to manufacture problems within Labor ranks' by nominating Egerton.¹⁰⁰ At the least, however, Fraser must have been a willing accomplice, since Egerton's name appeared on the federal list. The governor-general, Kerr, noted this recommendation with surprise, remarking in correspondence with the Palace that a surprising aspect of that batch of recommendations was the inclusion of three current or former members of the Labor Party. Along with Egerton, Fraser nominated Lance Barnard, a former Labor Cabinet minister who was by then ambassador to Sweden, and the secretary of the Trades and Labour Council of New South Wales, John Ducker.¹⁰¹ If his desire was discord, Bjelke-Petersen certainly got his wish. Many Labor figures reacted to Egerton's honour with shock and anger, and Egerton was removed from his positions in the movement and expelled from the party.¹⁰² At the South Australian party convention, which passed a motion condemning his action, he was denounced for 'outraging principles', going 'above the workers', and abandoning those he was meant to represent.¹⁰³ Nicknamed 'Jumping Jack' and pilloried as a 'Labor Rat', Egerton himself thought his detractors 'a narrow vocal minority' and argued that the title was 'recognition of the work I have done within the trade union movement, and recognition of the whole trade-union movement'.¹⁰⁴ He asserted that he was 'not aware that I have broken any rules of the trade-union movement or the Labor Party', and observed that '[a]ll honours, imperial or otherwise, emanate from the same source'.¹⁰⁵ Despite persistent efforts, however, he was never permitted to rejoin the party he had once served.¹⁰⁶ Salt was later rubbed in Labor wounds by the fact that the person to confer the title on Egerton was none other than Kerr.¹⁰⁷ Nevertheless, according to Kerr himself, it had been commented that 'on balance', Fraser had 'lost from the recommendation'

100 Johannah Bevis, 'No More Labour for the Knight: An Overview of Sir Jack Egerton's Leadership', *Queensland Journal of Labour History*, no. 21 (2015): 5.

101 NAA: AA1984/609, PART 3, letter to Sir Martin Charteris, private secretary to the Queen, from John Kerr, 4 May 1976.

102 Bevis, 'No More Labour for the Knight', 5.

103 'Knight Called on to Quit Party Posts', *Canberra Times*, 14 June 1976, 3.

104 Bevis, 'No More Labour for the Knight', 5; 'Critics "Narrow" Says Egerton', *Sun-Herald* (Sydney), 13 June 1976, 3.

105 'Critics "Narrow" Says Egerton', *Sun-Herald* (Sydney), 13 June 1976, 3; NAA: AA1984/609, PART 4, press cutting, John Bragg, "'Gough is Not Loyal'", *Mail* (Brisbane), 20 June 1976.

106 Bevis, 'No More Labour for the Knight', 5.

107 Barry York, 'Knighthoods and Dames', 3 November 2015, Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House blog, accessed 14 June 2019, www.moadoph.gov.au/blog/knighthoods-and-dames/#.

of Egerton, for ‘a very strong leader of moderate persuasion’ had departed the labour movement, leading to ‘the strengthening of the left in the ALP and ACTU [Australian Council of Trade Unions]’.¹⁰⁸

Egerton himself was later reported to have declared ‘that not all his fellow knights deserved the honour’, and that ‘[i]t was common knowledge ... that knighthoods could be obtained for a fee’, whether ‘in the form of a political donation’ or ‘a bribe to a government official’. He went so far as to claim that ‘the going rate’ in the early 1980s ‘was \$60,000’, and that he personally knew of someone who had paid \$70,000 in the hope of obtaining a title.¹⁰⁹ Such bold claims, however, have been rare in Australia, and—given the clandestine nature of any such transactions—it seems nigh impossible to prove or disprove them. While such claims have been most often made regarding honours in Queensland, occasional claims of impropriety—undeserved awards or cronyism if not outright sale of honours—have also been made regarding other parts of the honours system. In 1991, for example, it was reported that the royal commission then investigating the WA Inc era in Western Australia had learned that Labor premier Brian Burke had telephoned the person in charge of arranging the State’s nominations for the Order of Australia, Les Smith, in 1986, aiming to help the chair of the collapsed Rothwells merchant bank, Laurie Connell, achieve appointment to the order.¹¹⁰ If there has occasionally been suspicion of such practices, however, this was never more so than in relation to the corrupt and cowboy-like Bjelke-Petersen era in Queensland.

Conclusion

The 1970s and 1980s were a confused time in Australian honours policy. Two discrete systems of award operated alongside each other, with State and federal governments able to pick and choose between them according to their political flavour. This confusion in large measure reflected the nation’s own uncertainty about its identity, and its future, an uncertainty that, together with the approaching Bicentennial celebrations, provoked

108 NAA: AA1984/609, PART 4, letter to Sir Martin Charteris, Private Secretary to the Queen, from John R. Kerr, 22 June 1976.

109 Philip Derriman, ‘Keating Works a Knight Shift: No New Sirs’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 October 1992, 1.

110 Deborah Light, ‘A Call to the Golf Course and Laurie was on his Way to an AO’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 June 1991, 5.

a flurry of thought and reflection on the subject. Such a mix-and-match approach to the country's ceremonial life was never sustainable, however, and these years of operating a dual system merely provided time for a more durable solution to be formulated. By the end of 1989, imperial honours had fallen out of use around Australia. When Queensland's new Labor premier, Wayne Goss, withdrew the 1990 New Year list prepared by the previous administration, the *Australian* sought comment from Sir Robert Norman, whom it expected would be 'Australia's last knight'. Norman reportedly 'said that while he was proud to have been recognised and knighted by the Queen, it was time imperial honours gave way to a new order'. 'I believe it is all part of a process of growing up', he was quoted as saying, '[a]nd as a nation we can't feel like we are fully through with it until we sever the ties with the parent'.¹¹¹ Indeed, opposition to British honours was no longer a Labor preserve. Bipartisan support for concluding their use had been growing for some time. New South Wales Liberal premier Nick Greiner, for instance, had been reported stating in 1988 that the country 'had grown up enough to settle on one system of local honours'.¹¹² Sentiment and electoral politics seemed to be aligning against imperial honours, which were increasingly viewed as the preserve of elderly conservatives, not to mention being tarnished by their association with corruption under Bjelke-Petersen. Yet, particularly in the growing chorus of criticism around the place of women in the system, there were hints that the future would not be all smooth sailing, even after the resolution of the long tug-of-war over imperial and national awards.

111 Peter Morley, 'Macrossan, Kennedy Miss Out on Knighthoods', *Courier-Mail* (Brisbane), 5 December 1989, 1, NLA cuttings; Anne Jamieson and Jamie Walker, 'Knights Out in the New Dawn', *Australian*, 6 December 1989, 1–2, NLA cuttings.

112 'Row Over Greiner's Knight Shift', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 January 1988, 4.

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.2022.07