

2014/08: Should Australia have reinstated Knights and Dames of the Order of Australia?

What they said...

'I believe this is an important grace note in our national life'

The Prime Minister, Tony Abbott

'I just see it as unnecessary'

Sir Graham McCamley, knighted in 1986, commenting on the reintroduction of Knights and Dames

The issue at a glance

On March 25, 2014, Tony Abbott announced that his government was reintroducing the honour of Knights and Dames of the Order of Australia in order to acknowledge and celebrate pre-eminent Australians.

Up to four knights and dames will be appointed in any given year. All future governors-general will be appointed a knight or a dame.

Knights and dames will be approved by the Queen on the recommendation of the prime minister. The chair of the Order of Australia Council will be consulted on any such recommendation.

The change has met with a mixed response. While a range of Liberal Party spokespeople and constitutional monarchists have supported it; others, including many Labor spokespeople and republicans, have opposed the change.

Background

The British Imperial honours system

The Normans, who took England from the Anglo-Saxons in 1066, introduced knighthoods as part of their feudal government. The first English order of chivalry, the Order of the Garter, was created in 1348 by King Edward III. Since then, the British honours system has expanded from a system of rewards to those in favour with the monarch into a means of recognising individuals' personal bravery, achievement, or service to the United Kingdom and the British Overseas Territories.

Under this system, citizens of British colonies and former colonies were awarded knighthoods and other honours directly by the reigning British monarch, mainly on recommendation from the government of the colony or former colony.

The Australian honours system

The imperial system was in place in Australia until 1975, when the Whitlam Labor government created the Australian honours system, which included the AO, or Order of Australia, and other honours. The highest honour under this new system was Companion of the Order of Australia.

Under the system instituted by the Whitlam government, the Federal Government would recommend only the Australian honours to the Queen, who, as the Queen of Australia, would follow her government's advice. However, State Governors could still, on the advice of their State Premiers, submit recommendations for imperial honours, such as the Order of the British Empire, or OBE. (This was a hangover from pre-federation and, despite the former colonies becoming states in the Commonwealth of Australia, the individual state governors were still viceroys, or representatives of the British monarch in the various states.)

When the Whitlam Government lost power, late in 1975, the new Liberal Government, led by Malcolm Fraser, retained the Australian honours, but reintroduced recommendations for some imperial awards. The Fraser Liberal Government advised the Queen to create the categories of Knight and Dame of the Order of Australia. Over the next ten years, twelve knights and two dames of the Order of Australia were created.

In 1986, the incoming Hawke Labor Government advised the queen to discontinue the categories of Australian knight and dame. States governments were given a decade to cease making recommendations to the Monarch that such titles be conferred. Most of the states followed suit. Tasmania and Queensland made imperial honours recommendations in 1989 but, after the defeat of their governments later in that year, no British imperial honours were put forward by any Australian government. In 1992, Prime Minister Paul Keating announced that no more recommendations for British awards would be made. Australian citizens, however, remained eligible for honours in the personal gift of the Sovereign, such as the Royal Victorian Order or the Order of the Garter.

In March 2014, the newly-elected Liberal Prime Minister of Australia, Tony Abbott, announced that he had advised the Queen that the categories of knight and dame of the Order of Australia should be reintroduced. Mr Abbott named the outgoing Governor-General, Quentin Bryce, and her successor, Peter Cosgrove, as the first persons to receive these honours under the new regime.

Mr Abbott has indicated that just four knighthoods and / or dameships would be bestowed each year upon the

recommendation of the prime minister. New and outgoing governors-general would automatically receive the title and other recipients would, generally, be those who have accepted public office rather than sought it.

Note: In reintroducing knights and dames, Tony Abbott was not reinstating imperial honours. The knight and dame of the Order of Australia are purely Australian titles.

Internet information

On December 22, 2014, The Sunday Telegraph published a report titled 'PM Tony Abbott rules out reinstating Knights and Dames in Oz' in which Prime Minister Abbott indicated that he would not reintroduce Knights and Dames in the manner in which New Zealand had done so.

The full text of this report can be found at <http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/nsw/pm-tony-abbott-rules-out-reinstating-knights-and-dames-in-oz/story-fni0cx12-1226788026229>

On March 25, 2014, the Office of the Prime Minister issued a media release titled 'A New Honour for Pre-eminent Australians'

The press release indicates that 'Her Majesty the Queen has amended the Letters Patent constituting the Order of Australia' such that 'Knights and Dames in the Order of Australia will be approved by Her Majesty on the recommendation of the Prime Minister.'

The full text of the release can be accessed at <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/2014-03-25/new-honour-pre-eminent-australians>

On March 25, 2014, The Guardian published a report on the Tony Abbott's decision to reintroduce Knights and Dames.

The full text of this report can be found at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/25/labor-ahead-in-the-polls-as-canberra-bids-farewell-to-quentin-bryce-politics-live>

On March 26, 2014, an opinion piece written by Petra Starke was published in the Adelaide Advertiser. The comment is critical of the reinstatement of knights and dames.

The full text of the comment can be found at <http://www.adelaidenow.com.au/news/opinion/petra-starke-abbott-has-resurrected-dames-and-knights-dont-be-distracted/story-fni6unxq-1226865598811>

On March 26, 2014, ABC News published a report titled, 'Knights and dames: Tony Abbott says he did not ask his Cabinet or party room before reinstating honours'

The full text of this report can be found at <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-03-26/knights-and-dames-tony-abbott-did-not-consult-cabinet/5345888>

On March 27, 2014, The Sydney Morning Herald published a report detailing Malcolm Turnbull's response to the reintroduction of Knights and Dames.

The full text of this report can be accessed at <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/australia-like-esteemed-republics-peru-and-guatemala-malcolm-turnbull-gently-mocks-reintroduction-of-knights-and-dames-20140327-35jof.html>

On March 27, 2014, The Guardian published a report titled 'John Howard confirms his belief knights and dames are "anachronistic"'

The full text of this report can be accessed at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/27/john-howard-confirms-his-belief-knights-and-dames-are-anachronistic>

On March 28, 2014, The Conversation published the full text of an interview Michelle Grattan conducted with Prime Minister Tony Abbott in which he gave his opinion on a variety of issues, including his reintroduction of knights and dames.

The full text of this interview can be found at <http://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2014/03/28/comment-conversation-tony-abbott>

On March 28, 2014, the ABC's opinion site The Drum published a comment by Barrie Cassidy in which considered some of the political and practical ramifications of the reintroduction of Knights and Dames.

The full text of this comment can be found at <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-03-28/cassidy-a-budget-looms-so-lets-talk-knights-and-bigots/5350266>

On March 31, 2014, a comment by former Liberal Senator Amanda Vanstone was published in The Sydney Morning Herald.

Vanstone presents a range of criticisms of the reintroduction of Knights and Dames, focusing on the manner in which the decision was taken.

The full text of this comment can be found at <http://www.smh.com.au/comment/why-tony-abbotts-royal-finger-on-knights-and-dames-is-wrong-20140329-zqog7.html>

On April 1, 2014, Quadrant Magazine published a comment by historian Keith Windschuttle in which he commented on the importance of British traditions to Australia, in part in the context of the reintroduction of Knights and Dames. The full text of this comment can be accessed at <http://quadrant.org.au/magazine/2014/05/libertys-heritage-squandered/>

On April 1, 2014, The Morning Bulletin published a report titled 'No support for knights and dames from Sir Graham McCamley' which details the views of a current knight on the reinstated honours. The full text of this report can be accessed at <http://www.themorningbulletin.com.au/news/sir-graham-mccamley-doesnt-support-bringing-back-k/2215965/>

On April 1, 2014, The Sydney Morning Herald published a comment by John Warhurst in which he considered the 'disrespect' Tony Abbott had shown his Cabinet by reintroducing Knights and Dames without consulting its members. The full text of this comment can be accessed at <http://www.smh.com.au/comment/prime-minister-tony-abbott-exercises-his-prerogative-over-knights-and-dames-20140402-zqpa.html>

On April 15, 2014, The Canberra Times published a comment by Crispin Hull in which he argues that changes to the honours system should be made by the Australian federal Parliament rather than by Letters Patent. The full text of this comment can be found at <http://www.canberratimes.com.au/comment/royal-honours-returning-we-are-not-amused-20140404-364d5.html>

On April 18, 2014, the Australians for Constitutional Monarchy published a comment supporting the reintroduction of Knights and Dames. The full text of this comment can be found at http://www.norepublic.com.au/index.php?option=com_content&task=blogcategory&id=63&Itemid=66

On April 19, 2014, The Washington Post a report and analysis on the Tony Abbott's decision to reintroduce Knights and Dames. The full text of this report can be accessed at http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/australia-brings-back-knights-and-dames-critics-call-them-a-royal-embarrassment/2014/04/18/af168028-c578-11e3-8b9a-8e0977a24aeb_story.html

Arguments in favour of restoring the titles of Knight and Dame

1. The reintroduction of Knights and Dames will create awards with greater international recognition

Not only Great Britain, but many other nations have an honours system which incorporates knights and dames. These include France, Malaysia, Japan and Spain.

It has been claimed that having knights and dames as our top honour would gain greater recognition for these awards internationally and would be of particular benefit diplomatically.

Professor David Flint, writing in *Quadrant* magazine, contends that

Australia's honours system is faulted without the ability to recommend knighthoods

and damehoods. Flint writes, '... the overloaded Order of Australia was not originally intended to be the exclusive method of recognising Australians ...'

The professor contends that the Hawke government's dispensing with top-ranking honours meant that Australia was diplomatically disadvantaged. This meant that during visits of foreign heads of state it was difficult to engage in the usual courtesy of exchanging orders, as the highest order in Australia, while technically still in existence, could no longer be bestowed.' More significantly, it was less likely to be meaningful to overseas recipients.

The recognition factor has similarly been demonstrated with the abolition and then reinstatement of Queen's Counsel in Queensland and Victoria.

Professor Flint has noted, 'The title of Queen's Counsel (QC) is well known throughout Australia and the Commonwealth. Its widespread recognition is no doubt embedded in our consciousness because it is a rank some four centuries old. On the other hand the title of Senior Counsel (SC) has not taken root in the public mind and is not well recognised outside of the legal profession.'

As an indication of the significance of the longevity and thus recognisability of these titles, supporters of the reintroduction of knights and dames note that New Zealand also reinstated knights and dames in 2009 after their abolition in 2000.

2. The reintroduction of Knights and Dames is an acknowledgement of Australia's British heritage

Supporters of the reintroduction of knights and dames claim that it is no more than an appropriate recognition of the importance to Australia of its British traditions and heritage.

According to this line of argument Australia has inherited from Great Britain a language, a system of law, a system of government and a culture.

There are markers of this indebtedness in every aspect of Australian life. The terminology used in government and law, for example, largely echo that used in Great Britain.

In an article published in *Quadrant* magazine in May, 2014, historian and writer, Keith Windschuttle, noted, 'The reintroduction of an imperial honours system obviously does not rank in the same league as the rule of law, but the principle is the same. It is part of the traditional package that comes with the British constitutional monarchy that

Australians voted for overwhelmingly in the 1999 republican referendum.'

Windschuttle went on to claim, 'The most dismal revelation of this affair is the ignorance of their cultural heritage shared by so many members of our political class and cultural elite.... No other civilisation has produced such a combination of economic, social and individual freedom. Yet the readiness with which our own generation is squandering this heritage is disquieting...'

The Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, reminded the members of the Opposition of the governmental traditions they had inherited from Great Britain when being challenged in Question Time over the reintroduction of knights and dames.

Mr Abbott stated, '[W]hat happened yesterday...was the restoration of knighthoods and damehoods in the Order of Australia. That's what happened. I say to the Honourable the Leader of the Opposition, a title derived from Britain, I say to the Honourable the Leader of Her Majesty's Opposition, start telling the truth.'

Tony Abbott stated his position on Australia's British heritage more fully in his 1995 book 'The Minimal Monarchy and Why It Still Works for Australia'. Mr Abbott explained, 'In an age when little is built to last, a Crown that can trace its lineage back 1,000 years and - next to the papacy - is the oldest continuing institution of Western civilization, is indeed an anachronism. But perhaps it's the kind of anachronism Australia needs to prevent the complete triumph of Kentucky Fried Culture.'

3. The reinstatement of these awards does not require consultation as it falls legitimately within prime ministerial discretion

It has been claimed that those who have condemned the Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, for behaving unilaterally when reinstating knights and dames have misunderstood his power in this area.

The awarding of imperial honours was traditionally a matter between Prime Minister and Monarch. The Prime Minister makes recommendations and the Monarch confers the honour. On each of the occasions in the past when Australia has altered the nature of its system of honours, the recommendation has been made to the Monarch by the country's then Prime Minister - by Gough Whitlam in 1972, by Malcolm Fraser in 1975 and by Bob Hawke in 1986.

When questioned about this by Michelle Grattan for The Conversation, Mr Abbott stated, 'In the end the relationship between the prime minister and the monarch is very much a personal one and when it comes to the constitution of the Order of Australia, which is headed by the monarch, this is governed by letters patent, which are a matter between the prime minister and the monarch.'

Mr Abbott went on to explain, 'I think the prime minister is entitled to make these sorts of decisions with the monarch. I took a few soundings. In fact I took some quite widespread soundings on this and, as you'd expect, some people were more in favour than others. The soundings that I took obviously didn't deter me from a particular course of action.

Obviously I know there has been a predictable reaction from the usual suspects, but I think it will quickly settle down.' Commenting on Fairfax Radio, Mr Abbott similarly stated, 'I consulted with a number of senior colleagues. I took some soundings in the community but in the end it was my recommendation to the Queen which she graciously accepted.'

4. There are safeguards against political cronyism in the conferring of these awards

Prime Minister Abbott has taken particular care to ensure that the new titles do not become an opportunity for cronyism, the rewarding of political colleagues and supporters.

There is the scope for this type of favouritism because the title of knight or dame is conferred solely on a recommendation to the Monarch made by the Prime Minister. The Monarch automatically accepts such a recommendation.

To guarantee the integrity of the award, only four such titles will be given per year. Further, politicians will not generally be able to have such an award conferred upon them.

When announcing the reinstatement of these titles, Prime Minister Abbott stated, 'My intention is that this new award will go to those who have accepted public office rather than sought it and who can never, by virtue of that office, ever entirely return to private life.'

Thus the award is meant for those who have been appointed to public life rather than those who have sought it through election. This would seem to exclude most politicians.

Mr Abbott further indicated that he expected those people who would receive this award to include governors-general, state governors, chiefs of defence forces and chief justices rather than politicians.

Supporters of the reinstated honours argue that though any title can be abused and awarded for improper motives, the safeguards surrounding knights and dames make them particularly unlikely to be awarded in this manner.

5. These awards do not invalidate existing Australian honours and are not incompatible with republican sentiment

It has been noted that there is a general misapprehension about the awards Mr Abbott has reinstated.

These awards do not take the Australian honours system back to the one which operated prior to 1975 when Prime Minister Whitlam abolished the imperial honours system and instituted an exclusively Australian series of honours.

Prime Minister Abbott has instead reintroduced the system that was put in place by Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser in 1975. Fraser retained the Australian honours system instituted by Whitlam and merely created two additional honours, Knights and Dames of the Order of Australia. These became the highest honours in the Australian honours system and though they borrowed from the imperial system in their use of the words 'knight' and 'dame' they did not represent a return to the imperial system. Thus all previous Australian honours will remain and will continue to be awarded.

It is therefore not incompatible to retain knights and dames within a republic. This point has been made by prominent Liberal republican Malcolm Turnbull who has stated that reinstating the honours should not be seen as a 'monarchical

move'.

Mr Turnbull explained, 'After all there are many distinguished republics that have knights in their honours system - Guatemala for example, Peru, Argentina, Brazil. France and Italy, I mean they are two of the most distinguished republics.

So anyone who thinks this is some kind of slap to the republicans is really misjudging the Prime Minister's commitment to looking after all Australians and bringing us all together."

Arguments against restoring the titles of Knight and Dame

1. The change to the honours system is an anachronism

The reintroduction of Knights and Dames as titles within the Australian honours system has been condemned as out of line with contemporary thinking.

According to this line of argument, such titles no longer reflect Australian views and values. They have been abolished since 1986, nearly thirty years ago, and reflect a British system within which, historically, titles, conferred by the Monarch, were then inherited and the basis of a system of privilege and inequality which does not sit well with modern Australia's regard for democracy and equal opportunity.

On March 25, 2014, Larry Graham, a columnist for The Canberra Times, wrote, 'This is not England - it was once - but we grew up and developed some of our own great strengths. One of which has been to strenuously avoid the pitfalls of entrenched class and privilege.'

Former Liberal Prime Minister, John Howard, has criticised the decision to reinstate knights and dames into the Australian honours system on the basis of it being an anachronism to many Australians and said it was 'unlikely' he would accept a knighthood should he be offered one.

Mr Howard stated, 'For me this was an on-balance decision as in some respects the knighthood system, properly applied, was a way of giving special recognition to certain people. I knew, however...as a strong supporter of the constitutional monarchy continuing in Australia, I did not wish to be seen to be reviving an honour which to many, even conservative Australians, was somewhat anachronistic.'

The Labor Party has been formally opposed to imperial honours as out of step with Australian values since 1918. After Mr Abbott's announcement, Opposition treasury spokesman, Chris Bowen, stated on ABC Radio, 'In a week where the Prime Minister has wound back 20 years of racial discrimination protection and now we're going back to knighthoods, taking us back 30 years.

He may in question time today announce that vinyl records are coming back or that his car plan is to reintroduce Cortinas and Toranas. I don't know what could possibly be next.'

The Greens are similarly opposed. Greens' senator, Adam Bandt, said of the decision, 'This is not Game of Thrones. It shows a government bereft of ideas, and a social policy that isn't even stuck in the last century, it's stuck centuries ago.'

2. The change to the honours system undermines Australian autonomy

One of the purposes of the change to Australian honours that Prime Minister Whitlam made in 1975 was to have a system of honours that was exclusively Australian. Prior to that, the Australian system of honours was the British system, using the same titles, conferred by the same Monarch, albeit in her role as Queen of Australia. The change Whitlam instituted saw the introduction of a new set of honours which, while still conferred by the Queen, was uniquely Australian and did not carry with it the British-sounding titles.

The return to Knights and Dames reinstates titles with traditionally British overtones and as such, in the eyes of many people, undermines the distinctly Australian quality that our current honours system has. Australian Republican Movement national director, David Morris, has called it a retrograde step. Mr Morris has stated, 'This is turning the clock back to a colonial frame of mind that we have outgrown as a nation.'

The honours system is primarily a means of honouring Australian citizens for their services to Australia. Thus, it is claimed, the titles awarded should be uniquely Australian. Mr Morris has further stated, 'Our identity today is Australian, so our national honours should be thoroughly Australian.'

It has been claimed that the failure of the traditional awards to reflect the unique nature of Australia's population can be seen in their lack of recognition of indigenous Australians.

Karen Fox, in an explication of Knights and Dames in Australia, written for the Australian Dictionary of Biography, has stated, 'By the time titles were removed from the Order of Australia in 1986, no Aboriginal women had become dames, and only one Aboriginal man a knight - Doug Nicholls.'

In an editorial published on March 27, 2014, The Brisbane Times stated, 'It's time to ask why Mr Abbott chose to send such an embarrassing message to an increasingly proud and independent nation quite content with its honours system.'

3. The change to the honours system was made without cabinet consultation or electoral mandate

Tony Abbott has been criticised for making the decision to reinstate Knights and Dames without consulting with his Cabinet or the Coalition and without any form of electoral mandate.

Former Liberal front-bencher, Amanda Vanstone, has criticised the decision because she believes it is unnecessary and anachronistic. However, her most substantial concerns relate to how the decision was taken.

Ms Vanstone has stated, 'There is, however, a far more serious issue and that is the decision-making process. Or lack of it. Prime ministers may well deserve a stronger voice in government. The word prime has real meaning. A prime minister on top of his game gives a lot of extra credence to the rest of the government and that brings with it a few

privileges. Having a stronger voice is one of those. Flying solo to indulge yourself is not.'

Ms Vanstone further explains, 'A prime minister who rides roughshod over his cabinet colleagues when there is no security or other imperative to do so is playing a dangerous game...The leader breaks all the rules others are expected to follow because he is betting that the cabinet and party room will let him get away with it.' Amanda Vanstone argues that a prime minister who behaves in the way Tony Abbott has on this issue breaks all the protocols of mutual trust and respect upon which a Cabinet relies to function effectively.

This may well mean that Tony Abbott has begun to lose the confidence of his Cabinet because its members now know that he may well not consult them about the actions he proposes to take and thus they, in future, may be less willing to adhere to either the decisions he takes unilaterally or those endorsed by the rest of the Cabinet.

It has also been noted that Tony Abbott has no electoral sanction for reinstating Knights and Dames. When asked just after the September 2013 election would he reintroduce these titles he answered 'No.'

In an interview given to The Daily Telegraph in December, 2013, Mr Abbott stated, 'It's true that some people have said to me: 'What about doing what New Zealand did [in regard to reinstating knights and dames]...No, no, no. Just a bit of chatter. I don't think New Zealand is a relevant model here...I just don't think that's realistic in this country.'

Though it now appears that Mr Abbott was rejecting the manner in which New Zealand reinstated Knights and Dames rather than the fact that it did so, this is certainly not clear from this interview. Of greater significance is the fact that prior to the election he gave no indication that this was a step he planned to take; therefore, he has no mandate for the action and appears to be flying in the face of popular opinion on the issue.

4. The reinstatement of Knights and Dames does not have support among the Australian electorate

Several of the measures Mr Abbott has taken to reassert Australia's traditional links with Great Britain do not appear to have popular support.

When sworn in as Prime Minister, Mr Abbott swore allegiance to the Monarch rather than to Australia and its people. A poll conducted by the Australian Republican Movement (ARM) found that only 20 per cent of those surveyed supported the Prime Minister in the form of oath he had taken.

It has been claimed that Mr Abbott's actions regarding Knights and Dames similarly lack popular support. In a poll conducted by the Australian Financial Review in April, 2014, a mere 35 per cent of those polled supported the reinstatement while it was opposed by 50 per cent.

Polls conducted by a range of media outlets since Tony Abbott's reinstatement of these honours reflect the same pattern. At the time of publication of this issue outline, a poll conducted in the Queensland Border Mail found 36 per cent in favour of the reinstated honours and 63 per cent opposed.

Even some recipients of the more traditionally titled honour have indicated a lack of support for the reintroduction of these titles. Sir Graham McCamley, knighted in 1986, has stated, 'I just see it as unnecessary.

We moved away from the Imperial system to an Australian honours system, which is recognised everywhere in the world.

That is how it has been for quite a long time. I think that once the decision is made, we should stick to it.'

5. Changing the honours system creates inconsistencies, confusion and scope to bring Australian honours into disrepute

Opponents of the reintroduction of knights and dames have argued that the changes do not meld well with the system currently in operation.

Sinclair Davidson, writing in The Catallaxy File on March 26, 2014, stated, 'The 457 recipients of the Companion of the Order of Australia - which was until yesterday the number one honour (excluding bravery awards such as the VC, CV and SC) - have been demoted at a stroke to second class.'

The same view has been expressed by Petra Starke in a piece published in The Adelaide Advertiser on March 26, 2014. Ms Starke states, 'Now it seems we also have to have AK and AD, which will take precedence over everything and so immediately devalue all of the above titles. That's a nice slap in the face for all past AC recipients who thought they'd been awarded Australia's highest honour. Not anymore.'

Similarly, Michael Shmith, writing an opinion piece published in The Age on March 27, 2014, has stated, 'All those named ACs (Companion of the Order of Australia), who were awarded the country's highest civil honour, are suddenly down a notch: second-class citizens. And so on, through the OAs, AMs and OAMs.'

Troy Bramston, a columnist for The Australian, has expressed very much the same view. In an opinion piece published on March 31, 2014, Bramston stated that 'Adding a new echelon of Australian honours degrades the existing honours awarded.'

Also concerning to many critics of the recent change is the manner in which Australia's top honours seem to have become caught in a political revolving door.

Including the fundamental changes instituted in 1975, Australia's honours system has been significantly modified four times in less than forty years. Critics are concerned that the frequency of these changes will create a sense of instability and undermine the regard in which such awards need to be held to be of any value as an acknowledgment of the service of recipients.

This point has been made by Barrie Cassidy on March 27, 2014, on the ABC's opinion site, The Drum. Cassidy has stated, 'There's a pattern here. The system is adjusted according to the politics - or the political dominance - of the day.'

Cassidy has highlighted the concerning consequences of these changes. 'Honours should be above politics, given out

according to a community consensus...Those awarded the top honour should know that the recognition of their life's work is both bipartisan and consistent with past practices.'

Further implications

The issue of whether Australia should reintroduce Knights and Dames reflects the confusion in this country surrounding national identity and the nature of our connections with Great Britain.

Support for remaining a constitutional Monarchy is currently high, as is the popularity of the Monarch and her family, especially the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge. The significance of such support is uncertain. Queen Elizabeth II appears to represent a stabilising figure for the Australian public, someone securely above the vagaries of politics who is revered for her long years of public service. The young royals, on the other hand, have the glamour of any attractive celebrity couple, as well partaking of the gloss associated with royalty. The fact that Catherine Middleton was a commoner creates the possibility in the public mind that any suitable young person can aspire to marrying into 'the Firm', as the Royal Family is ironically known to its members.

The principles of egalitarianism and inherited privilege which once lay at the heart of debates surrounding the imperial honours system seem to have become obscured. Even in Britain awarded honours are no longer inherited and at no point in the 38 years since Prime Minister Gough Whitlam removed the imperial honours system from Australia has anyone contemplated re-establishing it. What has been done, first by Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser and now by Prime Minister Tony Abbott, is to reinstate some of its terminology, namely 'Knights' and 'Dames'. What, sociologists are likely to ask, is the purpose of such an exercise?

The title of Tony Abbott's 1995 book on Australia as a constitutional monarch is instructive in this context. The work is titled 'The Minimal Monarchy and Why It Still Works for Australia'. What this seems to acknowledge is that Australia is no longer a colony, nor yet has it fully separated itself from its British heritage. It is a country within which a 'minimal' monarch, shared with its mother country, can be accepted and allowed to function. Unlike the United States, Australia (in common with the fourteen other Commonwealth countries that call the Monarch of Great Britain their monarch) has never fought a war of independence. Therefore, these countries display a stronger tendency than they would otherwise to hang onto the cultural and political trappings of the country from which their culture and political structures originally derived.

The difficulty resides with the imperfect fit that sometimes occurs between British traditions and an evolving sense of Australian identity. 'Dames' and 'knights' may well prove to be an example of such an imperfect fit.

However, it is to be hoped that before another government, probably of a different political persuasion, once again removes the honours of Knights and Dames, that the question is put to the Australian people. At no point, including in 1975 when these honours were first removed, has that been done.

Once the view of the people on the matter is known through an election at which the proposal is tested, the changes should be made through parliamentary legislative process, not through Letters Patent from the Queen. It should cease to be easy to change Australia's honours system on the whim or fixed belief of a Prime Minister.

Newspaper items used in the compilation of this issue outline

The Australian: March 27, 2014, page 13, editorial, 'Restoring knights and dames'.

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/opinion/editorials/restoring-knights-and-dames/story-e6frg71x-1226865684367>

The Age: March 27, 2015, page 20, comment (with Spooner cartoon), 'Abbott drags us back to a knight's realm'.

<http://www.theage.com.au/comment/abbott-drags-us-back-in-time-to-a-knights-realm-20140326-35inb.html>

The Age: March 27, 2015, page 18, editorial (with cartoon on opposing page), 'Abbott's vision is fixed in the 50s'.

<http://www.theage.com.au/comment/the-age-editorial/abbotts-vision-is-fixed-in-the-50s-20140326-35iv1.html>

The Age: March 27, 2015, page 7, news item by Knott and Kenny, 'PM's honours move revives republican movement numbers'.

<http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/pms-honours-moves-revives-republican-movement-numbers-20140326-35iwd.html>

The Australian: March 26, 2014, page 1, news item (photo) by Balogh and Akerman, 'Good knight to a dame as Abbott revives titles'.

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/good-knight-to-a-dame-as-tony-abbott-revives-titles/story-fn59niix-1226864791548>

The Age: April 1, 2014, page 20, comment (with Spooner cartoon) by James Curran, 'No honour in Abbott's leap back to Britain'.

<http://www.theage.com.au/comment/knights-and-dames-are-sorted-but-will-tony-abbott-see-the-centenary-of-world-war-i-through-british-eyes-20140331-zqowj.html>

The Herald-Sun: March 31, 2014, page 21, comment by Frank McGuire, 'Security and jobs, not Sirs and Dames'.

http://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/opinion/suburbs-such-as-broadmeadows-need-jobs-and-security-not-sirs-and-dames/story-fni0ffsx-1226869114487?from=herald+sun_rss

The Herald-Sun: March 31, 2014, page 20, editorial, 'Arise, Sir Peter'.

<http://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/opinion/arise-sir-peter/story-fni0ffsx-1226869118365>

The Australian: March 31, 2014, page 10, comment by Troy Bramston, 'How modernity was be-knighted'.

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/opinion/columnists/how-modernity-was-beknighted/story-fnbcok0h-1226869049552>

The Age: March 31, 2014, page 16, comment by Amanda Vanstone, 'Why Abbott is wrong to give the "royal finger"'.
zqog7.html

<http://www.theage.com.au/comment/why-tony-abbotts-royal-finger-on-knights-and-dames-is-wrong-20140329-zqog7.html>

The Australian: March 29, 2014, page 20, comment by Peter van Onselen, 'Abbott trying to turn back the tide'.

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/opinion/columnists/abbott-trying-to-turn-back-the-tide/story-fn53lw5p-1226867879856>

The Australian: March 29, 2014, page 14, comment by Gerard Henderson, 'Republicans may feel entitled to sneer, but it won't help their cause'.

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/opinion/columnists/republicans-may-feel-entitled-to-sneer-but-it-wont-help-their-cause/story-fnkqo7i5-1226867876260>

The Herald-Sun: March 28, 2014, page 38, comment by Baz Blakeney, 'Tony, I thought the age of entitlement was over'.

<http://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/opinion/tony-i-thought-the-age-of-entitlement-was-over/story-fni0ffsx-1226866758202>

The Age: March 28, 2014, page 18, letters, incl, 'No greater insult to our national pride / This won't knock out our spirit' (with Leunig cartoon).

<http://www.theage.com.au/comment/the-age-letters/no-greater-insult-to-our-national-pride-20140327-35llo.html>