

The Order of Australia

Its Origins and Organisation

Mr Whitlam's Speech to the Order of Australia Association, South Australian Branch May 3rd 1983.

A dozen or more years ago I discussed with my Parliamentary Colleagues the idea of having a system of Honours in an Order which would be wholly Australian. Apart from this sentiment we felt that Imperial Honours were inappropriate. Even the names of the Orders were capable of being misunderstood.

Canada had had its own Order, the Order of Canada, since 1967, the centenary of Federation. For a number of reasons it seemed appropriate to follow our sister Dominion. We are alike in so many ways. Canada is the second largest country in the world and we are the fifth. We have comparable populations. Much of Canada is tundra, much of Australia is desert, and therefore much of both our countries is uninhabitable. We both have two large centres of population - Toronto and Montreal, Sydney and Melbourne. We both have developed manufacturing industries and both their and our industries are largely controlled by overseas industries. We each have great mineral resources and primary production. We both inherited British Institutions and have adopted the American Federal system. We have almost total resemblance and only small differences.

So it was natural, knowing that Canada had a National system of Honours, that we should consider extending the resemblance in that direction. When I became Prime Minister, I consulted the Prime Minister of Canada. The Canadian Order of Honours proved to be generally quite adaptable for Australia, and we decided to incorporate its features into our proposed Australian Order.

To help us, the Prime Minister of Canada in 1973/74 sent us the Secretary of the Order of Canada. In Canada, the Order of Canada since it was established has been the only system of Honours. Imperial Honours are not used there at all. In this we have not followed their example. Imperial Honours are still awarded in Australia.

When I was in London in December 1974, the Queen received me at Buckingham Palace. There I outlined the proposal to her. She was happy with the concept.

It was planned that there would be no Knighthood in the Order of Australia. A Companion of the Order of Australia would by virtue of his Award hold the highest Honour our country could bestow. So, the AC would rank above Knighthoods in Australia. A model was provided by the Imperial Award, the Companion of Honour. The Companion of the Order of Australia ranks immediately above the C.H. The AC ranks above all Knights Commander and immediately below Knights Grand Cross. This applies throughout; Awards in the Order of Australia are above all Imperial Orders. Officers of the Order of Australia rank immediately below the Imperial Honour of Knight Bachelor. AOs rank above Companions and Commanders of the Imperial Orders. Similarly Members of the Order of Australia rank above Officers and Members of the Imperial Orders. The medal of the Order of Australia ranks above all other Medals.

When a subsequent Australian Government added a Knighthood in the Order of Australia, the Knights and Dames ranked above all Knights and Dames Grand Cross of the Order of St. Michael and St. George, the Royal Victorian Order and the Order of the British Empire.

These degrees or classes of the Order of Australia have counterparts in the Order of Canada. We both have a General and Military Division in our Orders. We are similar in our Cross of Valour, Star of Courage and Bravery Medal. We did not devise it all. We are indebted to Canada.

The establishment of the Order of Australia was announced by the Governor-General on Australia Day 1975. In February 1975 its Constitution and other legal aspects were proclaimed by the Queen in the Australian Government Gazette. In April and May 1975, at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Jamaica, the Queen announced the precedence of the classes in the Order of Australia in relation to the Imperial Orders. It was arranged that the Queen would make the first presentations of Awards in the Order of Australia when she visited Australia for her Silver Jubilee. Since then the Governor-General presents Awards at the levels of Knight, Dame or Companion and shares with State Governors and Administrators the presentation of other Awards in the Order.

The Order of Australia is different from Imperial Orders in an important aspect: the method of selecting recipients. It is not unkind but factual to say that the Imperial Awards are made on the recommendation of Politicians. So such Awards are potentially controversial. Awards in the Order of Australia are not. Federal Imperial Awards are recommended through the political channels to the Prime Minister who makes a direct recommendation to the Queen.

These Awards are made twice yearly: at the New Year and on the Queen's Birthday (except in exceptional circumstances such as the KBE to High Court Justices soon after their appointment). There are no New Year Honours in the Order of Australia. Instead they are announced on Australia Day, 26th January in each year.

State Imperial Honours are awarded similarly. Representations are made to the Premier, but, as the Queen is not Queen of each individual State, a State Premier cannot recommend these awards to the Queen directly. A Premier makes a request to the British Department of Commonwealth and Foreign Affairs. Thus Premiers cannot advise the Queen except through a British Minister of State. State Governors are appointed in that way. The Premier makes the request and the British Minister makes a recommendation to the Queen. There are quotas of State Awards. Some States may not use their quotas.

In contrast with the Imperial system, in the Order of Australia no politician can decide who shall be honoured or when. There is a Council of the Order of Australia. All representations are channelled to the Council and no award is made unless it is considered and recommended by the Council.

Nominations may be made to the Council by any person or organisation. This, of course, includes any Government or party or politician, so a politician can initiate an honour but no politician can decide that it will be given. The Council makes its selection from the nominations it receives and recommends these to the Governor-General who makes the awards with the approval of the Queen.

The Council is widely representative. It consists of the Chief Justice of Australia, the Vice-President of the Executive Council (who is a politician), the Secretary of the Department of Administrative Services (who is a civil servant), the Chief of the Defence Force Staff, a representative of each State Government (usually the Secretary of the Premiers' Department; in Western Australia it has been a past Premier) and three distinguished Australians appointed by the Governor - General.

There have been constant cases of political favours in appointments in Imperial Orders. There cannot be such cases in the Order of Australia. A very clear case of merit must be made out and to a non-political Council.

It is now possible for distinguished persons who are not Australian citizens to be appointed to the Order as Honorary Members in the General Division. They may be foreign citizens who, whether residing in or outside Australia, have rendered service to Australia or to humanity at large. I made the first proposal for an Honorary Honour in October 1975.

It was intended when the Queen presented the first awards in the Order of Australia that she would ordain that henceforth all honours to Australian citizens would be in the Order. No Australian Prime Ministers or Premiers

would thereafter make recommendations or requests for Imperial Honours. Some have contended that this would break out links with the Commonwealth. This is not so. There are 46 Members of our Commonwealth of Nations. In only a third of them is the Queen Head of State. Of these only nine give Imperial Awards, including Australia and the United Kingdom, the others being mostly small or developing Nations. There is nothing offensive in having an exclusively Australian Award. There is no disparagement of the Queen as Head of the Commonwealth.

Those who have been Honoured in the Order of Australia are in an Order which is an adaptation of the Honours of our sister dominion, Canada, in a system which has taken good roots here. The way the Order is conducted and the way in which people are honoured make it a great institution.

By making nominations to the Council of the Order all who have already been honoured in the Order can help to ensure that those who deserve distinction are honoured in it.

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