

# Who decides who gets the gongs?

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## Who decides who gets the gongs?

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The process of awarding Australia's highest honours is hardly transparent - but what's clear is we need diversity on the selection council as much as we need diverse recipients.

I AM not entirely sure why I originally got worked up about the Australian honours system. My parents, new arrivals in 1951, thought they were very important so guess it rubbed off.

Pretty confident though that I wrote my first ever story about the lack of women on the list sometime last century.

That part has improved - there are now many more women being honoured than there were even 10 years ago. Partly that's due to the work of Honour a Woman, a lobby group comprised of three grumpy women and many supporters who have been making their case for gender equity for years. They have also been going state to state, territory to territory, asking politicians and public servants to work harder on nominating women for Australia's highest awards (even higher honours than AFL finals or Olympic gold medals).

So what does it take to score one of these honours? Turns out, you don't have to be particularly perfect. The honours system will take you and your achievements, warts and all, so long as you haven't committed a crime.

Shane Stone, the chair of the Council for the Order of Australia, said this week honours would not be stripped from recipients unless the awardee has had a criminal conviction. "Short of a criminal conviction, we are not going to be arbiters of what people can or can't say," he said.

But there are rules around the awards - for example, an award can be removed if the recipient "has behaved or acted in a manner that has brought disrepute on the Order" - which make it sound broader than a criminal conviction. Much broader.

Shane Stone has a long history of public service (and yes, I still believe most politicians do it because they think they can serve the public). He was the president of the federal Liberal Party, chief minister of the Northern Territory and now runs the new National Drought and Flood Agency. He is probably best known for his leaked letter which described the Howard government as "mean, tricky and dysfunctional and out to get its own supporters" (so, he is capable of speaking truth to power).

And maybe that's why he has come out in his role as chair of the council to say it needs to be more transparent and open about the way it operates. That does not mean all of us will like what we see.

Why is he telling us about the council's position on criminal convictions now? This year, we have had serial controversies about those who receive awards. In January, renowned men's rights activist Bettina Arndt scored a gong. A few weeks later, she was condemned in the Senate for her comments on the murders of a Queensland mother and three children. She tweeted: "Congratulations to the Queensland police for keeping an open mind and awaiting proper evidence, including the possibility that Rowan Baxter might have been 'driven too far'."

Mike Carlton also copped a serve for his Queen's Birthday award, the serve relating to his abusive tweets, according to Stone. He told me it was as controversial as the award for Arndt, but that's not what the news reports say. When I used the news database Factiva to compare the pair, the search for Arndt's award revealed 246 results compared to 37 for Carlton's, using the number of newspaper stories as a measure for fury

(although this sample also includes the original story of the award).

There hasn't yet been a formal announcement about the Arndt and Carlton awards, although Stone's comments are a clear indication.

"We dutifully go through [all the complaints]. The base rule is unless you have committed a criminal offence, you don't lose an award ... I will be the nodding head when it all happens."

He says there is a view that he can deal with controversy: "Send Shane out, he's got broad shoulders, he can do it."

But as he points out, most of the thousands of awards are non-controversial, which means the broad shoulders aren't required very often. Mostly this gig is about spreading pride in the achievements of Australians, which might explain why even people who have criticised the system don't knock back an honour when it comes their way. Stone estimates maybe one or two people a year decide not to accept.

But as Stone points out, there is much more we can do to make the whole process

more understandable. The community representatives, for example, are appointed through the Department of PM&C, and last week two new people found themselves on the council, Jillian Segal and Melinda O'Leary. Stone says he is not "the picker".

Segal has a long history of public service, while O'Leary is far less well-known. Segal



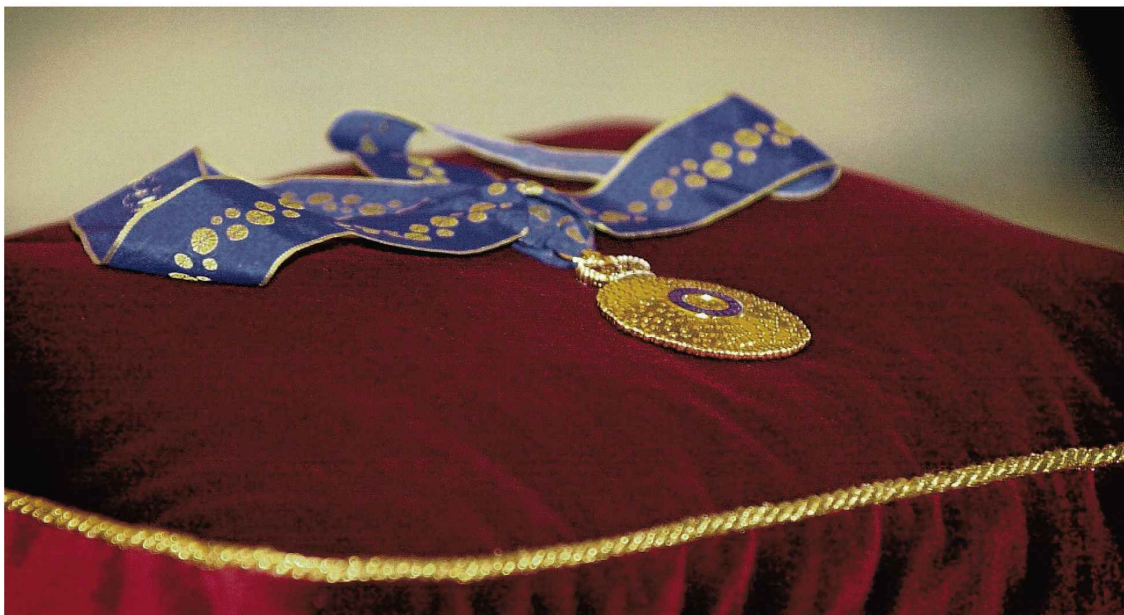
and O'Leary replace Elizabeth Broderick and Gabrielle Trainor, both of whom are understood to have opposed the Arndt award. Although Stone has told reporters that the vote for awards must be unanimous, others on the council have said it is only a majority. Which you can imagine, remembering that Bronwyn Bishop has also been on the receiving end of both an award and a controversy.

As David Hardaker pointed out in his excellent series on the awards for *Crikey*: "The stacking of the awards has come at the same time as more politically partisan appointments are made to the core group of 'community representatives' - the seven individuals who consider nominations and advise the Governor-General."

So it is very welcome to hear Stone say he wants the process to be more transparent. So do the fabulous folks at Honour a Woman. It would be great to see more diversity of background among the members of the council. Look right and left before crossing. Stone has overseen a shift to gender equality of council members during his tenure, a very good thing. The next move is to make sure that those who vote on Australia's highest honour (bar the rugby league grand final) reflect who we are across Australia, not just on the right across Australia.

■ Jenna Price is an academic at the University of Technology Sydney and a regular columnist.

**Turns out, you don't have to be particularly perfect. The honours system will take you and your achievements, warts and all, so long as you haven't committed a crime.**



Australia's honours system has many critics - but few people will knock back a medal if it's tossed their way. **Picture: AAP**