

# Out of order

By STORY BY Jacqueline Maley STATISTICAL ANALYSIS BY Nigel Gladstone

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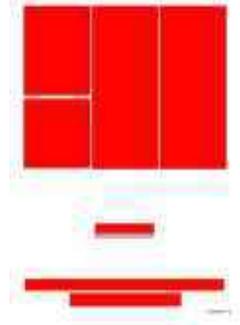
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*Much of the current system's imbalance comes down to who has the resources to nominate deserving others, notes one observer: "If you're trying to stand up your fences and tend your crops, you don't have time."*

12 GoodWeekend



# Out of order

STORY BY *Jacqueline Maley* STATISTICAL ANALYSIS BY *Nigel Gladstone*

Critics of the Australian honours system claim it is too politicised, too weighted towards the wealthy, and too pale, male and stale. Can the growing movement to make it more egalitarian really make a difference?

**J**ULIE BATES well remembers the morning in 2018 when she saw something that made her worry the law was onto her. Drinking coffee in bed in her pyjamas, and scrolling through her emails, she caught sight of a crown insignia. Her chest clenched.

“The crown came up and I thought, ‘What is that? What have I done now?’” she recounts. “And it was, ‘Miss Bates, we are in the process of giving you an AO.’”

Bates, a straight-talking bottle-blond who worked for decades as a sex worker before sex work was decriminalised, was used to being on the other, non-establishment side of the law. Suddenly, here was the Queen – through her Australian representative, then-governor-general Peter Cosgrove – appointing her an Officer in the Order of Australia for her services to sex workers and drug users. The AO was a great surprise – and a big deal. “After the Government House ceremony, you go to a lunch at Parliament House in Sydney,” says Bates, who lives in Sydney’s inner suburbs. “At my table were Mr and Mrs Whoever – and they’d won their award for scouting – sitting next to an old hooker. I think my award broke the mould somewhat, and I hope it did.”

IT DID. A *Good Weekend* analysis of the Order of Australia honours system highlights just how unusual a candidate Bates was for the revered ranks of the AO – the second-highest honour, granted to Australians who have been “of distinguished service of a high degree to Australia or to humanity at large”. Her 2018 award bucks the general trend towards granting the highest honours overwhelmingly to the rich, the powerful, the well-connected and the male.

Australians like to think of themselves as great egalitarians. But the Order of Australia – created in 1975 by then-prime minister Gough Whitlam to replace the politicised British Imperial honours system – is arguably just as class-based as ever. Doled out on Australia Day and the Queen’s Birthday, the honours are arranged according to a strict hierarchy: the highest is the

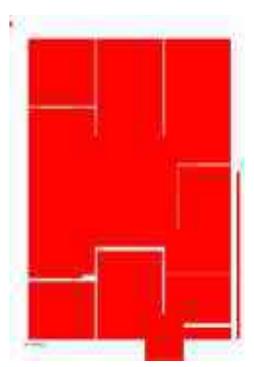
Companion of the Order (AC), then comes Officer of the Order (AO), Member of the Order (AM) and Medal of the Order (OAM). A *Good Weekend* analysis of winners over the 45-year life of the awards shows that a quarter of the top 200 on *The Australian Financial Review*’s 2019 Rich List have an Order of Australia, and they overwhelmingly have the higher-level honours.

About 130 directors of boards of ASX 300 companies have an Order of Australia, and the suburbs AC and AO recipients are most likely to live in are Toorak in Melbourne (which boasts 67 of them) and Mosman in Sydney (57), followed by Melbourne’s South Yarra (45) and Kew (34). Sydney’s exclusive Vaucluse has 39 ACs and AOs. The highest-level award, the AC, has never been given to anyone in the “Multicultural” or “Disabled” fields of endeavour, but of the 30 fields awards are given to, the “Parliament and Politics” category boasts 42 ACs, while “Business and Commerce” leaders have collected 48 of them.

More than 320 state and federal politicians have been honoured with the higher-level awards (AM, AO, AC), with a record 20 bestowed with gongs in 2020, more than half of them from the conservative side of politics. Women account for only 31 per cent of Order of Australia appointments. No statistics exist on the percentage of Indigenous nominees or recipients, but the Council for the Order of Australia, which selects the recipients, has not had an Indigenous community member since 2012.

The statistics paint their own picture, but the last Australia Day honours list, released just before the pandemic distracted everyone’s attention, rendered the idiosyncrasies of the system in technicolour. “That list lost people,” says one former Council for the Order of Australia insider. “It cracked open people’s uncertainty about the honours. It had a few too many rich people and a few too many polities.”

Controversial 2020 honours recipients included former Speaker of the House and lifelong Liberal poli-

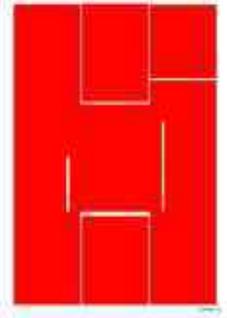


politician Bronwyn Bishop, who left politics following an expenses scandal. Also honoured was Graham Richardson, the former Labor politician and notorious factional headkicker once known as the “Senator for Kneecaps”. Eyebrows were also raised at the honouring

of retired broadcaster Mike Carlton, who often turns the air blue with abuse of his ideological foes on Twitter. But by far the most controversial honour went to Bettina Arndt, the sex therapist and media commentator associated with the men’s rights movement. Arndt was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) for her work on “gender equity through advocacy for men”.

While Arndt has made a significant contribution to sex education and was a strong Australian voice in the 1970s sexual revolution, more recently she stirred controversy with her sympathetic 2017 interview with convicted paedophile Nicolaas Bester for her YouTube channel, and prior to that, her description of a scout master who sexually abused boys as a “good bloke”. Former Australian of the Year and domestic and family violence campaigner Rosie Batty said at the time that she was “sickened” by Arndt’s honour. “It makes me question the legitimacy of the awards system in the entirety across the spectrum,” Batty told News Corp.

Weeks after her award was announced, Arndt tweeted in support of Queensland man Rowan Baxter, who burned to death his estranged wife Hannah Clarke and their three young children, then killed himself. “Congratulations to the Queensland police for keeping an open mind ... including the possibility that Rowan Baxter might have been ‘driven too far’,” she tweeted. The outrage was swift. Victorian Liberal senator Sarah Henderson wrote to the Council of the Order of Australia urging it to revoke the AM, saying Arndt had “seriously crossed the line” and that it was “no longer appropriate” she be honoured. Labor senators Kristina Keneally and Penny Wong moved a Senate motion calling Arndt’s comments “reckless and abhorrent” and “not consistent with her retaining her Order of Australia”. The symbolic motion was supported by all senators except One Nation’s Pauline Hanson and Malcolm Roberts. Then Victorian attorney-general Jill Hennessy wrote to Governor-General David Hurley asking the council to consider cancelling Arndt’s honour on the basis it brought the Order of Australia “into disrepute”.



Many months later, in September, Council for the Order of Australia chair Shane Stone – himself an AC – issued a statement saying the council had “considered requests for the cancellation of appointments to the Order of Australia of Ms Bettina Arndt AM and Mr Mike Carlton AM and will make no further recommendations to the Governor-General”. Further, the statement said, “unanimous community approval is not a criteria for Council to make a recommendation”.

“These are awards from the bottom up ... individuals are neither qualified nor disqualified on the basis of their political leanings, social views or religious convictions.”

The decision of the council was final. But the whole saga led many to ask: how do these people get an Order of Australia in the first place? And, for that matter, how does anyone?

**T**WICE A year, the 19-member Council for the Order of Australia gathers in a nondescript building on the sprawling grounds of the Governor-General’s official residence in Yarralumla, home to the grandly titled Honours and Awards Secretariat of the Office of the Official Secretary to the Governor-General. While it’s run under the auspices of the governor-general, the governor-general has no role in its decisions. That said, incumbent David Hurley is vitally interested in the process and public perceptions of it.

“The Order of Australia is the highest form of recognition for Australians,” says Hurley over the phone. “It is a recognition of significant contribution to the life of Australia at the community, national and global levels.” Hurley rarely gives media interviews and his willingness to discuss the honours is indicative of a soft push for change from within. “One of the big problems we suffer from is awareness of the system itself. I am aware of the criticisms that have been raised. There are considered criticisms of the system that are valid and need to be addressed.”

Appointed for renewable two-year terms, its members are a mix of the community representatives (currently including top-end-of-town Melbourne philanthropist Rupert Myer AO and Sydney corporate board member Jillian Segal AO) and appointees from the states and territories

– usually the secretary to the governor or the chief public servant in the premier’s department. It also includes three “ex-officio” public officer holders – the Deputy Secretary of Governance from the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, the Chief of the Australian Defence Force, and the Vice-President of the Federal Executive Council (the governmental body empowered to advise the Crown, via the governor-general). The chair and seven community representatives are chosen by the prime minister and officially appointed by the governor-general.

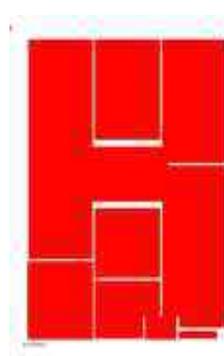
THE COUNCIL’S deliberations are confidential, no reasons are given for the rejection of applications, and there is no avenue for appeal. The sessions run all day, sometimes spilling over two days, and “for some sessions you might be looking at 800 or 900 people”, according to one person familiar with the meetings.

The current chair, Shane Stone, is a former Liberal Party president and one-time Northern Territory chief minister. Described by one former council member as a traditional “bloke from the Northern Territory” and “a really decent human being”, Stone is in Queensland when I speak to him – he travels widely through regional and remote Australia in his other role as Coordinator-General of the National Drought and North Queensland Flood Response and Recovery

Agency. He moves out of the wind to make himself heard on his mobile.

“Every so often you’ll get a recipient who is criticised. People will wring their hands and say, ‘How did that happen?’ But we see the whole picture of someone,” he says. “The 19 people on the council come from across the political spectrum. You have a full suite of opinions of the nominee and their merit, and I’ll keep coming back to that word, ‘merit’, because it’s about merit, not quotas.” Stone says he does get calls from people who have nominated others, asking after the status of the application, but he refers them back to the secretariat.

Stephen Brady, a former secretary of the council and official secretary to the governor-general, explains: “The secretariat does 12 to 18 months of research on each application, validating the information. One of their roles is to approach people who are not on the nomination form as referees. They seek more detail or corroboration – those contacted will often be very honest.” The officials might put the applications into loose groupings of the level of order – AC, AO, and so on. But the council will make the decision, sometimes



thrashing it out and even taking a vote. For example, it is understood Julie Bates' nomination was upgraded from a lower honour to an AO on the urging of some council members who pointed out the number of lives she must have saved through her HIV-prevention work. "It was always interesting that the professionals generally got the higher awards," says Brady. "But the OAM recipients usually were the ones who would say, 'I don't deserve this,' when they had in fact done remarkable work for the community."

Former Victorian College of the Arts CEO Andrea Hull AO served on the council as a community representative from 2008 to 2014. "The secretariat is independent in its research and they have a register of people they will go to," she says. Occasionally it's obvious that a person has self-nominated, which is not *comme il faut*. Then there are the highly networked individuals who nominate each other, not realising their swollen vanity may be exposed. "You could see the email chain – it begins with, 'You nominate me, I'll nominate you, and here is who you should approach as referees,'" Hull says.

"The debates were robust. There was never any sense at the table that people were being pressured to accept certain nominations." Professional and industry associations will

frequently organise and draft nominations for leaders in their field – surgeons and lawyers are well-resourced in this respect. Some former politicians might be officially nominated by an eminent person, but the application bears all the hallmarks of being filled out by party HQ. "I can remember a couple of politicians who were not given awards," Hull says. "There was one in particular I had knowledge of who absolutely did not warrant an award." She won't say who it is, only that she is "keeping an eye out" for that person, to see if they end up getting one.

Human rights lawyer Moira Rayner is a long-time feminist and activist who clashed with Victorian premier Jeff Kennett's government in the 1990s over the issue of women's prisons. In the 1990s she was nominated for an Order of Australia by Father Julian Punch, a Catholic priest who she got to know while working on an inquiry into homeless children in the 1980s. Rayner's nomination was not successful. "I thought Gough Whitlam was a wild optimist in trying to clean up the Imperial honours system, because inevitably it gets down to who does the picking," Rayner says. "The political nature of many recent appointments has been embarrassing. It's not reflective of

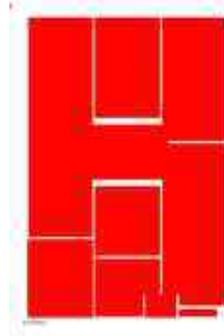
merit at all, it's reflective of who you know." Rayner believes the system should be "taken apart and looked at carefully, and re-established with new guidelines so the networks of those privileged ones fall apart". As for the likelihood of her getting an award now that she's criticised the system: "I'll never be nominated again."

**I**N 1974, before relations between Gough Whitlam and the Crown soured, the Australian prime minister visited the Queen at Buckingham Palace. Whitlam used the meeting to outline his proposal for a new, native Australian honours system. "She was happy with the concept," he recounted in a 1983 speech.

Previously, eminent Australians had been recognised under the British Imperial system, which Whitlam considered "inappropriate". He was impressed by the Canadian honours system, established in 1967, and sought to model ours on it. On Australia Day 1975, the Order of Australia came into being.

Knighthoods and damehoods did not figure in Whitlam's reimagining of Australian honours – he wanted the Companion of the Order of Australia to be the highest honour the country could bestow. Not only that, but the Companion, or AC, would rank above all Australian knights and dames previously anointed under the British Imperial honours system. But Whitlam's republican-spirited changes were short-lived, and we have seen an unedifying back-and-forth on Australian knighthoods ever since.

When Malcolm Fraser succeeded Whitlam as prime minister, he added a Knighthood and a Damehood to the Order of Australia. In 1986, prime minister Bob Hawke abolished them again. Then Tony Abbott was elected in 2013, and he re-introduced knighthoods and damehoods unilaterally as prime minister, with no oversight from the council. Already trailing in the polls, when Abbott announced on Australia Day 2015 that Prince Philip would be made a Knight of the Order of Australia, he lost both the public and his party room, commencing a chain of events that led to Malcolm Turnbull toppling him in September that year. There were other noses out of joint, too. "When Prime



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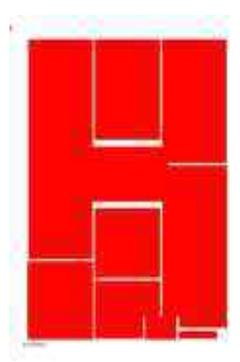


*Left: Julie Bates, who was appointed an AO  
for her services to sex workers and drug users:  
"I think my award broke the mould somewhat."*

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### Controversy and kudos





Graham Richardson



Mike Carlton



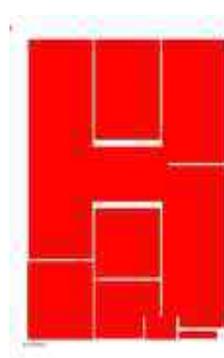
Bettina Arndt



Bronwyn Bishop



Prince Philip



Minister Abbott reintroduced knighthoods and dames, he didn't foresee the level of anger from the ACs," says former governor-general secretary Brady. "Many of them contacted Government House, commenting sharply that they had accepted what they thought was the highest honour!"

Turnbull duly abolished the knights and dames category, although the changes were not backdated – Prince Philip may well have been baffled to receive an Australian knighthood, but he got to keep it. The unused medals left over from Abbott's ill-advised reintroduction of knights and dames cost taxpayers about \$135,000, it emerged at a Senate estimates hearing in October 2020.

This sort of political tinkering was out of keeping with Whitlam's original vision, which was for an honours system that would be out of the hands of politicians and in those of a "widely representative" council that would reflect community values. "The Order of Australia is different from Imperial Orders in an important aspect: the method of selecting recipients," he said in his 1983 speech. "It is not unkind but factual to say that the Imperial Awards are made on the recommendation of politicians ... there have been constant cases of political favours in appointments in Imperial Orders. There cannot be such cases in the Order of Australia."

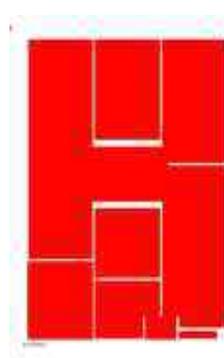
So how well has the Order of Australia lived up to Whitlam's dream of a non-political process? *Good Weekend's* analysis shows politics and politicians still have plenty of involvement in the modern honours system. Former senior politicians are highly likely to be honoured with awards, compared to disability advocates or environmental crusaders – or just about anyone else. While many awards go to community workers, when politicians get gonged, it tends to be at the highest level – 40 per cent of politicians with an Order of Australia are at the AC and AO level.

There is a skew to conservative politicians – 165 Coalition members have received gongs, compared to 130 Labor politicians. (Some high-profile Labor people, notably former Labor prime minister Paul Keating and former Labor minister Jim McClelland, have refused honours.)

And you don't have to have served in parliament to get a gong for services to politics – former Liberal party federal directors Tony Nutt and Brian Loughnane have AOs, and former Labor party national secretary George Wright was made an AO in the Australia Day list in 2020. Former Nationals federal director Paul Davey was given an AM in 2019, and former Nationals federal president Christine Ferguson got the same gong in 2018.

Some years the party-political bias has been stark – in 2005, when John Howard was prime minister, the Liberals got 14 awards, and just one Labor politician was honoured. Then there are the former polities on the council itself – alongside Country Liberal Shane Stone as chair, another of its community representatives – Cheryl Edwardes AM – is a former Western Australian Liberal attorney-general who has worked as a mining company executive, including for Gina Rinehart's Hancock Prospecting. Stone says neither he nor Edwardes is actively involved in politics. "We are two people out of 19," he says. "I can assure you that the state representatives, particularly the Labor states, wouldn't tolerate that for a minute and there's more of them than there are conservatives. I say to people, 'We leave politics at the door. We don't talk politics in here, we talk contribution.' We assess people on their merits."

According to Brady, the wall between the council and the prime minister's office was "guarded ruthlessly" during his time. "A prime minister could ask how a



particular application was going, but that was about it.” Stone agrees: “The Governor-General and the Prime Minister would not ring me and say, ‘We think so-and-so should get one.’”

That might be so, but there are other ways to influence an outcome, and taken historically, it’s clear the community representatives have not been overly representative. Since 1975, three in every four members of the council have been men, and 96 per cent of “ex-officio” members since inception have been male. Women have been selected more often more recently, reflecting a general social shift towards more women in leadership roles. Yet since the election of Tony Abbott in 2013, there have been no Indigenous Australians appointed to the council.

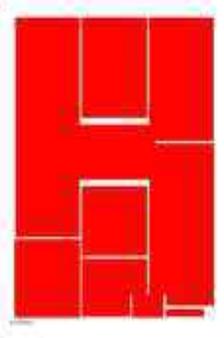
Stone’s great frustration with criticism of the honours system is that many critics never nominate anyone themselves. Prior to his appointment as council chair, he nominated 74 people, he says, and as chief minister he appointed a public servant to lead nominations for the Northern Territory. He particularly wanted more Indigenous and migrant citizens honoured. “I nominated the first Muslim in the Territory,” Stone says. “He was a meat-worker turned imam and a bloody good bloke.”

Stone regularly takes people aside in his stead as flood response coordinator, and tells them to nominate the ordinary people doing extraordinary things in flood and drought recovery on the land. “I am passionate about the whole thing. I have lived and breathed it. I believe there is huge merit in the way we recognise people,” he says. “No one is standing there saying, ‘Hey, it’s perfect.’ Nothing’s perfect, we strive to do better.

We are conscious we don’t get as many nominations for women as we would like. It’s not as if we don’t try.”

Stone defends the honouring of former politicians – something that grinds many people’s gears, particularly given the generous parliamentary pensions many ex-MPs benefit from. “There are plenty of former politicians who are passed over, I can assure you. It’s not an entitlement to an award,” he says. “We try to recognise those who have served their time then re-entered the community to work, when what they’ve done post-politics is hugely commendable. That’s what you want, particularly among those who have the benefit of a parliamentary pension.” He argues that “relative to the overall number, there’s not that many” honours to former polities, but concedes some classes of people have more time and resources to nominate people than others. “It’s almost an urban luxury to sit around on a Sunday afternoon and say, ‘I’ll do a nomination.’ But if you’re trying to stand up your fences and tend your crops, you don’t have time.”

Certainly time, resources and expertise with government processes is a plus. “An inherent weakness of the system is that the professions are able to draw on high-level referees in a way ordinary folk can’t,” says one former council insider. “Most people might struggle to bring together five really good referees. Whereas if your nominator is John Howard and it’s co-sponsored by Kim Beazley, your application jumps off the page.” This one-time insider says the OAM – the lowest-order community honour – “runs the risk of putting ordinary people at the bottom of the honours system, where sometimes their nobility and real sacrifice is equal to or greater than that of your well-paid surgeon. It is almost like the British class system.”



CAROL KIERNAN is an intelligence and communications consultant who has worked with the Australian Federal Police. She was living with her husband in Washington, D.C., working for the World Bank, when a 2017 visit home coincided with the announcement of the Queen's Birthday honours list. What the 63-year-old read enraged her. "There were 14 men and one woman [who] got a Companion. That woman was Cate Blanchett," Kiernan recalls. "I felt like I was stepping back into the '50s with women being so grateful for everything. I had been overseas for a number of years, and I thought, 'What's going on here? We don't recognise that 50 per cent of the population are women.'"

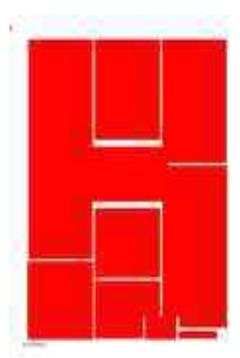
On a flight from Melbourne to Sydney a few days later, still fuming, Kiernan picked up a copy of *The Age* and read a letter to the editor from education academic Dr Elizabeth Hartnell-Young, in which she too complained of the gender disparity in the honours list. Kiernan contacted her, and soon after they met in a Melbourne cafe to discuss what they could do. Hartnell-Young roped in Ruth McGowan, a former country mayor and champion of rural Australia, and after a brainstorming session involving lots of butcher's paper, the trio founded the Honour a Woman group.

"Short and sharp," says Kiernan of its 2017 launch. "We just went all day and said, 'What are we angry about? What steps do we want to take? How can we get there?'"

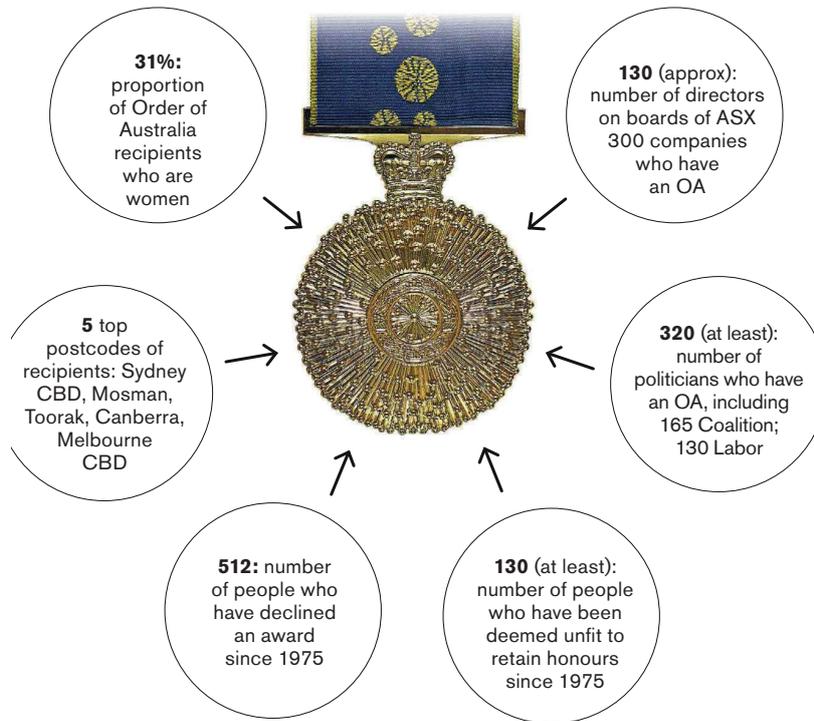
As a movement rather than an organisation, it has 70 "ambassadors" from public life and the media. Its goal is to raise awareness and lobby governments for structural change to the honours system.

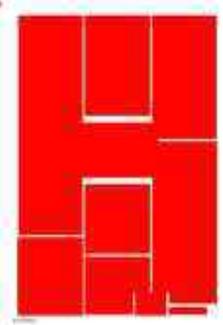
The gender disparity in the awards system is stark – a breakdown of all recipients between 1975 and 2016 shows 70 per cent were male and 30 per cent female. Kiernan says it is "accepted" that women have generally been given the lower awards. Only since 2017 has the secretariat published a gender breakdown of which level awards women are mostly honoured with, but they show she is right. Between 1975 and 2019, women received only 19 per cent of ACs, 21 per cent of AOs and 24 per cent of AMs. They were better represented among the lowest "community level" honour, the OAM, where they made up 35 per cent of recipients. Lobbying governments and the Governor-General, Honour a Woman wants nothing less than 50-50 gender parity.

Things improved in the Australia Day 2020 list – 41 per cent of recipients were female, and women received 62 per cent of ACs. But, Kiernan points out, only eight of the maximum of 35 ACs were awarded in 2020, so the sample was small.



### Glory by numbers





Governor-General David Hurley does not dispute that the Order of Australia has a woman problem. “The data supports it,” he says. “You can’t walk away from that. I don’t think it’s appropriate, I don’t think it’s right, and I want to change it. We need to ensure we have a system that’s sustainable, that attracts the nominations of women.” Hurley has met with the Honour a Woman group, and while he doesn’t agree with their proposal of a quota for female recipients, he is working to boost nominations of women from the grassroots. “In recent years we have worked hard to redress that balance and the numbers have changed.” To this end, Hurley has written to 59 peak bodies in Australia over the past few months, armed with data on their 20-year history of male versus female nominations, encouraging them to examine their nominations process for gender balance. “To some of them, I have said quite candidly, ‘I don’t think you’re doing well enough.’”

Now she’s been radicalised, Kiernan sees Order of Australia injustice everywhere she goes. She rattles off a list of eminent women who’ve never been honoured as their male peers have, including former Western Australian premier Carmen Lawrence, anti-nuclear campaigner and Nobel Peace Prize nominee Helen Caldicott, who has 21 honorary degrees (her nomination for an Order of Australia in 2020 was rejected), and the recently deceased Helen Reddy. “I did a quick check of other musicians of her era and found that her male colleagues were not forgotten,” Kiernan says. “Normie Rowe AM, Ronnie Burns AM, Glenn Shorrock AM, John Farnham AO, Angry Anderson AM, Slim Dusty AO MBE, Brian Cadd AM, Smoky Dawson AM, Athol Guy AO, Keith Potger AO and John Williamson AM. The Gibb brothers got CBEs [Commanders of the Orders of the British Empire]. None of them are feminist icons!”

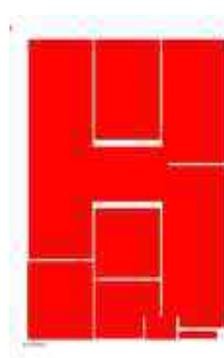
Elizabeth Broderick has spent a lifetime fighting for gender equality, as Australian Sex Discrimination Commissioner and Chair-Rapporteur of the UN Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls. She is an Officer of the Order of Australia and a former Australian of the Year. She recently stepped down from the Council of the Order of Australia after four years’ service and says the council “does need people arguing the toss for women”. In many of the award categories, she notes, professional associations “predominantly” put men forward. Some progress has been made by state governments like Victoria,

which in 2017 appointed a public servant within the Department of Premier and Cabinet to actively search for female nominees, but there’s clearly more work to be done. “The question is, how do we get more nominations for women? You can only make decisions based on the nominations you have in front of you.”

**T**HERE MAY be a new sense of activism around the awards, but criticism of the system dates back decades. In 1994, the Keating government commissioned an inquiry into the Order of Australia system. Frank Walker, then Minister for Administrative Services, spoke of “complaints that the system is one for the elite groups in society – that to be recognised you need to be a doctor, a lawyer, a business leader or senior government official”. He noted the view that “not enough women are receiving recognition through the system”. Led by Clare Petre, who has held various leadership positions in the not-for-profit community sector, the inquiry found that Australians value their honours system “as a signpost to our national identity, our values, our aspirations and our heroes” but that “access to awards is currently seen mainly as the preserve of organisations and powerful or well-connected individuals”.

I track Petre down and she invites me to her Coogee home in Sydney’s east to pick up a copy of her report, *A Matter of Honour*. She seems glad someone is taking an interest. Petre says many members of the inquiry committee “went in wondering whether we needed an honours system at all”. They heard from thousands of Australians in every state and territory, through submissions, public forums, and face-to-face meetings with community and interest groups. “The response from the community was, ‘Yes, we do.’ The main thing was people thought it should reflect community values and be above and beyond what was your job.”

Petre’s report found many Indigenous people objected in particular to the Queen’s Birthday honours announcements. “People in the Indigenous community did not relate to the system. There was a failure of the honours to reflect Indigenous values.” University of Canberra chancellor Tom Calma received an AO in 2012 for his service to the Aboriginal community. “As a recipient, I am also a supporter of it,” he tells me. “But there is not a great representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, particularly in the higher-order awards.” Professor Marcia Langton was made an AM in 1993, and upgraded to an AO in 2020. The main reason she accepted the honours, she says, was “to be gracious towards those very kind people who noticed



my unpaid, voluntary work, and took the time to nominate me – an onerous task that involves a lot of work on their part”.

When asked if Indigenous Australians have been well represented in the honours, Governor-General Hurley is frank. “No, they haven’t been,” he says. “It’s not easy. I’ve had conversations with Indigenous leaders. Some are of the view that this is not a system for them. Some are of the view that, ‘We don’t recognise people as individuals.’” So should an Indigenous person be appointed to the Council for the Order of Australia? “I think it would be useful,” Hurley responds. “You need the perspective.”

Says Petre: “If you took this 25-year-old report, I fear it would be no different today. The top awards would be dominated by professionals. I look and still see all the people who have been awarded for community services are at the OAM level.” She notes that lots of expoliticians still receive the awards, “so there is a system there that operates at a political level”. “It is an important system, the community does value it, but the accessibility of it still needs to be addressed.”

**WHAT IS** an honours system for? Most countries have some form of it. In India they give out the delightful-sounding Jewel of India (Bharat Ratna). South Africa created the Star of South Africa in 1975 – knights are called “ridders” in Afrikaans. The US has its Medal of Honor, Presidential Medal of Freedom and Legion of Merit (recently awarded to Scott Morrison by Donald Trump). Indonesia has the Star of the Republic of Indonesia and France has the highly coveted Legion d’Honneur.

Some scoff at honours altogether. Says former foreign minister and NSW premier Bob Carr: “I’ve always been struck by how distressed people get that their award is inferior to that of a colleague or acquaintance. So often they’re deeply unhappy. Still, as Napoleon said, ‘Men are led by baubles.’” He notes that aside from the above-mentioned medals, the US “republic” doesn’t do them. “That just strikes me as interesting ... [they] probably view them historically as a residue of monarchy.”

Certainly, the brandishing of Order of Australia pins is a subject of mockery or pride, depending on your audience. There are official guidelines on how to wear the medals and pins, and while recipients are not mandated to wear them, they are encouraged to be proud of their honour. “The ACs and the AOs get round-the-neck medals,” says the former council insider. “You can only really wear

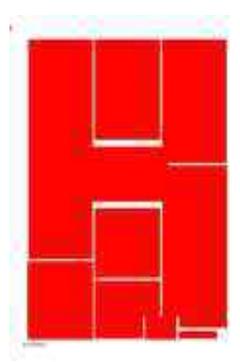
them once, at your investiture, so the pin is the thing. In the Qantas Chairman’s Lounge, the eyes are looking.”

Such cynicism aside, former governor-general secretary Stephen Brady says the investiture ceremonies bolster faith in the system. “The longer I was there, the less ambivalent I became as I saw the great pleasure at the investitures – the joy was always greater, the lower the award,” he says. “And it is always the OAMs who get the loudest clap.” He recalls seeing the recipients spill out across the lawn of Government House, following their ceremony. “It was the epitome of Australian egalitarianism, recipients feeling acknowledged by their country, surrounded by their family, wanting a photo with the governor-general.” Governor-General Hurley says those ceremonies are the “highlights of the year” for him and his staff. “They really are a joyous occasion where you’re celebrating so much that’s good about Australian life.”

**THERE ARE** signs of change. The emergence of awareness-raising by groups like Honour a Woman has meant there was a significant increase in the number of nominations made in the Order of Australia during 2018–19: a total of 2909 nominations were submitted. “When it works well, it’s as good a system as anybody could conceive,” says Brady. “Confidentiality is key, but ultimately whether or not the community accepts the awards system depends on the calibre and impartiality of the council.”

Governor-General Hurley concedes there are valid criticisms of the system. “You would be foolish to say there weren’t, there are,” he says. “We can correct them, they’re solvable.”

Former Liberal Victorian premier Ted Baillieu believes the system “generally does work well”. He concedes there may be some gender disparity, but puts that down to the lack of women nominated in the first place. “There are women all around leading things. I would not walk into a room and think, ‘Oh my god, there’s a whole lot of women,’” he says. “The presence of women in senior roles is all around us. I would hope the number of nominations grows.” Baillieu received his own AO in the Australia Day honours in 2020, even though, he says, “I’ve never been much of a gong person myself.” As we speak on the phone, more than six months later, he rummages in his desk and unwraps his Order of Australia pin for the first time. Its plastic sleeve makes a satisfying crunching sound. “I don’t



wear jewellery at all,” he says, “not even a watch.”

Baillieu believes the hundreds of worthy honours recipients announced every year are overlooked because of a few controversial awardees. “Way too much criticism is earmarked at the awards system based on some names which might be controversial for some people who have high media profiles.” As for any perceived biases in the system, the former premier has a simple message. “It’s easy to do something about it. Just nominate someone.” ■

*Jacqueline Maley is an Honour  
a Woman media ambassador.*



*Above: an investiture ceremony at Government House. “They really are a joyous occasion,” says Governor-General David Hurley (at far right).*