



**Order of British Empire Association luncheon
Queensland Club
Monday, 19 May 2003 – 12.30pm**

Chief Justice Paul de Jersey AC

I am very pleased to be with you. I will refrain from saying "honoured", lest I cause confusion! It is however a privilege to speak to a gathering of so many "honoured" people! They include, thanks to the grace and generosity of those of you who are recipients of The Most Excellent Order of the British Empire, appointees to the Order of Australia. But then, grace and generosity are naturally to be expected of those within the Imperial order – that order, after all, has always treated men and women equally and even admitted foreigners!

When I was a child, the Imperial awards were, one perceived, quite well-known within Australia: hardly surprising, perhaps, in a nation led by a monarchist as self-avowed as Sir Robert Menzies. By the time of my birth in 1948, the Order of the British Empire was but three decades old – which is almost the current vintage of the Order of Australia. In the mid-1990's, as part of a review of the Australian honours system, a survey revealed only 44% of Australians knew about the Order of Australia, which had by then been in operation for about 20 years. I suspect the Australian honours system is much less well comprehended by Australians, than the British system is by the English. That is sad, but probably merely a reflection of our egalitarian spirit, that spirit traceable to the arrival here in the 18th century of pioneers from the fringes of the English class system: criminals, Irish rebels and ordinary soldiers for the most part (Sydney Morning Herald magazine: "That's Un-Australian" (M Dapin) 22 February 2003), pioneers determined to build a society of equal opportunity, a society built from the bottom up, as it were, not from the top down. But flattening our social structure fortunately has not excluded official recognition of those who have made a distinctively beneficial contribution to society.



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Until the inauguration of the Order of Australia on the 14th of February 1975, the only avenue for due official recognition of distinctive service by Australians was through the Imperial system, and in particular of course, through the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire. King George V's motivation in establishing the Order in 1917 was as a boost to patriotism, but not confined to military endeavour.

I sense the British awards have in England been attended by a degree of snobbery and social climbing, but not so here – and the expression of that complimentary sentiment has not been dictated by the composition of this gathering here this afternoon!

May I however recount the approach of others less balanced, none other than Harold Nicolson and Vita Sackville-West. "Harold Nicolson accepted a commission to write the official life of George V and must have known perfectly well that on publication he would be offered a KCVO, but according to his wife's biographer, "they were not very pleased; they even thought of turning it down. It depressed them because the honour, so far from being an honour, seemed to them dreary and middle class." (Vita: The Life of V Sackville-West, Victoria Glendinning (1983)). Nicolson had such an inflated opinion of himself he even wrote to Vita Sackville-West: "If I had never been given anything I should have retained my potential repute; being assessed so low diminishes my prestige." The truth is, both he and (Sir Edward) Elgar ached for a peerage. The Nicolsons gave instruction to their servants to continue to call them Mr and Mrs Nicolson, and Vita even dropped "The Hon" from envelopes to Harold (he was the younger son of Lord Carnock) and took to addressing him as "Harold Nicolson". She detested being addressed by anyone as Lady Nicolson. The gift of a knighthood from King George VI, it seems, was simply not good enough for the daughter of Lord Sackville." (M. De-La-Noy: The Honours System, 1985, Allison and Busby, pages 74-5).



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By and large, those who are honoured in this way in contemporary society, and the society we have all experienced, have not sought the honour: the disarming humility evident in the few words of the worthy recipients as presented by the media following the annual lists corroborates that view. George Herbert cynically once suggested "service without reward is punishment". One need only sit through an investiture ceremony to realise the inapplicability of that view to our society anyway.

But things were not always so elsewhere, and it is interesting to recall Napoleon's reputed answer to a query about the cost of waging war with Russia: as he said, "for a few centimetres of crimson ribbon – the Legion of Honour – my legions will march to the very gates of Moscow"! And, history records, that is as far as he got! (Kirkland and Carey, Order of Australia, 1975-1998, page 10).

The humility of our community's achievers should be a source of great inspiration to people generally, and it is regrettable to think that awards of national honours be overlooked or forgotten. But then as our Lord cautioned, "a prophet is not without honour save in his own country". In this context, it is however encouraging to see the work of the honours associations, and I commend you for the palpable vibrancy of your own.

Curiously, it is probably the inevitable annual debate about the worthiness of some recipients which enhances public interest in the awards system. There has traditionally been understandable resistance towards honours for members of the legal profession, or for the public service, or anyone else perceived to have done "no more than their job" (A Matter of Honour, Report of the Review of Australian Honours and Awards, December, 1995, page 101). I note, by the way, that of the recipients of the Companion of the Order of Australia, when last reviewed in 1995, Judges outnumbered others by more



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than 400%! That is explained by judges' extensive involvement in a broad range of community endeavour – rebutting that rather tired "ivory tower" tag.

I believe the awards committee does a good job in selecting recipients, and it must not be forgotten that the committee depends on the receipt of nominations from members of the public.

Ideally, the catalogue of those who have received national honours should disclose a fair share of national heroes. From time to time, thinking people bewail the sparseness of our truly heroic rank. It is sometimes said to be difficult to perform acts of heroism in times of peace, and we have certainly gloried in recent years in the heroic achievement of our servicemen and women over the decades of the last century, brought into relief now with Iraq. But peacetime is not incompatible with singular personal achievement: the lengthy peace of the Victorian era spawned a legion of true greats (Johnson: A Land Unfit for Heroes, The Spectator, 22 February 2003).

What concerns me more is whether the community is prepared to seek to identify its truly heroic members and let themselves be inspired. True it is we immediately think of General Cosgrove, Dr Fred Hollows, Dr Victor Chang, Cathy Freeman...But an obsession with celebrity is, I fear, denying many people an appreciation of the value of really great personal achievement; and associated with this narrow focus, is another feature which thinking people also bewail: in relation to fundamentally important institutions – the parliament, the courts of law, the church, for example – either abysmal ignorance or careless disrespect.

I was pleased when Churchill topped the BBC's poll late last year to identify the 100 greatest Britons: but what of the related findings, which rank, in terms of cultural contribution, Boy George and Robbie Williams ahead of Turner and Keats; and David Beckham and Sir Cliff Richard ahead of Constable and



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Wordsworth (The Times, September 2002)? Yet it is, I suppose, difficult to struggle against widely read pop magazines which reserve to themselves the right to declare annually what and who are "in" or "out".

Speaking of the inspiring example of achievers who have been honoured by the State, the nation, I am reminded in this room of an incident relating to the giant ceramic vase which adorns its extremity: three winged cherubs on the brim bending over the cavity, and two children supporting at the base. Dr John Campbell AM, a distinguished member of this Club, has recently reported that "there used to be a pair of them, which graced (the Club's) entrance hall at around the level of the receptionist's desk. In about 1952 the night steward found a very radical and very drunk university student in the hallway...he was shouting obscenities and describing the members as "capitalist b...s". The night steward grappled with him and in the process, the left vase crashed to the ground and into a thousand pieces. The police took the offender to jail where he was informed, in the morning, that the Club would not press charges and that he was free to go. He wrote a fine letter of apology and thanks to the President extolling the virtues of the Club and wishing it a successful future. Perhaps (Dr Campbell muses) he is now a conservative – maybe even a member!"

Ladies and gentlemen, the aggregation of personal achievement and beneficial community contribution present in this room today must be of immense proportion. No doubt you have all been a source of inspiration to many others. We can only hope that that sort of inspiration continues to lift the spirit of the community to a point where all may strive for the public good.

But then again, you are right, also, to delight in your personal achievement. "None other than Sir Winston Churchill, probably the only man in history to have turned down a dukedom, but who did become a Knight Companion of the Most Noble Order of the Garter, a member of the Order of Merit and a



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Companion of Honour, had this to say about the purpose of the honours system: "The object in presenting medals, stars and ribbons is to give pride and pleasure to those who deserve them." His wartime Deputy Prime Minister, Earl Attlee, commenting in his own modest way on a life of not inconsiderable achievement, perhaps deserves the last word, for doodling one day in retirement he came up with that hardest achievement of all, the perfect limerick:

"Few thought he was even a starter

There were many who thought themselves smarter

But he ended PM

CH and OM

An Earl and a Knight of the Garter." (M. De-La-Noy, *supra*, pages 180-1).