



**Order of Australia Association Annual Dinner
Friday 12 November 2004, 7pm
Parliamentary Annexe**

Chief Justice Paul de Jersey AC

Your Excellency, Mr Thomson, ladies and gentlemen.

An extremely wise person once counselled me that I should begin an address like this by expressing an immutable truth, which all present will accept as such, and preferably with a flavour congratulatory of the audience. Having ever since followed that advice, I will not this evening diverge.

Accordingly, I now advance the view that reality TV is an undoubtedly positive manifestation of contemporary culture – it throws up diverting exemplars, and would be warmly embraced by all of us present here this evening...

I am sorry: a judge especially, should never be duplicitous. But I have at least identified a theme – ephemeral, is the antonym of enduring.

The community contribution evident tonight may be discreet and a tad inhibited, and it may lack the “glamour” of tongue-studs and tattoos. But it has actually advanced society, and its benefit endures.

I am very pleased to have the opportunity to speak with you. It’s uplifting to be among persons who have positively contributed to their community: especially uplifting, if I may say, for a Judge enduring a daily dose of the negativity of the courtroom. Congratulations on your achievement, and your accession to the Order of Australia.

It was instigated by Gough Whitlam almost 30 years ago. As with many interesting things Australian, we find Barry Humphries rather crazily



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associated with its birth, as Mr Whitlam has disclosed (*Order of Australia: the first twenty years*) – in his terms: ‘At the outset of the 1974 election campaign I was persuaded to appear at the climax of the film *Barry McKenzie Holds His Own*. In what I suppose was a cameo role, I was cast to welcome Mrs Edna Everage (a.k.a. Barry Humphries) on her return to Sydney airport. I embellished the script by exhorting Edna Everage: “Arise, Dame Edna.” The title has been used ever since. It was the only Imperial honour my Government ever conferred.’

Many of us are disappointed by limited public awareness of the Order: maybe Barry Humphries could be enlisted to promote it. Wearing the lapel pin we are not infrequently asked to which Rotary Club we belong. The last review of the Order, in the mid-90’s, revealed only 44% of Australians knew anything about it, notwithstanding the Order had by then been in operation for as long as 20 years.

I suspect our system is less well comprehended by Australians, than the British system is by the English. That is regrettable, though the English system has operated much longer. But the slippage probably more reflects 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.¹ These were pioneers determined to build a society of equal opportunity, built from the bottom up, as it were, not from the top down. But flattening our social structure fortunately has not excluded national recognition of those who have made a distinctly beneficial contribution.

¹ M Dapin, ‘That’s Un-Australian’ *Sydney Morning Herald Magazine*, 22 February 2003.



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Some in this egalitarian society nevertheless argue that an honours system creates a 'false elite'.² But I think most Australians will accept 'the need to recognise those who serve, who lead and who inspire runs deep'.³

Like you I am sure, I am always struck and inspired by the modesty of the recipients of these awards, the disarming humility evident in the responses presented by the media.

It is lamentable to think that awards of national honours be disregarded or forgotten. But then as our Lord cautioned, 'a prophet is not without honour save in his own country'. In this context, it is encouraging to see the work of the Association, and I commend you for the vibrancy of your work.

I should say that I believe, by the way, that the awards committee does a good job in selecting recipients, and it must be acknowledged that the committee depends on nominations from members of the public. At the annual dinner in Hobart early this year, the Governor-General encouraged more activity on the nomination front,⁴ and I wholeheartedly agree. We should all be motivated to recognise people who have wrought a significant, beneficial difference in society.

Ideally, the catalogue of those who have received national honours should disclose a fair share of community heroes. From time to time, thinking people bemoan 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 current relief with East Timor, Afghanistan and Iraq.

² 'The paradox of bestowing honours' *The Age*, 4 January 2004
<<http://www.theage.com.au/artivles/2004/01/03/1072908951453.html>>.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Fed: Some Australians under-represented in OAM nominations*, GG, AAP Australian National News Wire, 15 February 2004.



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But of more basic concern, frankly is whether today's community is prepared to seek to identify its truly heroic members, and let themselves be inspired. True it is we think of 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 parliaments, the courts of law, the churches, for example – either abysmal ignorance or careless disrespect. I recall a P D James line, identifying the secular holy trinity as “money, sex and celebrity”.

The Order of Australia at least goes some distance towards identifying a lot of inspiring altruists worthy of emulation – and none of them actors in reality TV.

Another important issue is the paucity, among the recipients, of women and indigenous Australians. In 2002, 35% were women. For the most recent, Queen's Birthday List, the figure was again approximately 1/3. Why is this? One commentator suggests 'that women are less likely to push themselves forward and that their peers – particularly in the community sector – do not think to nominate them'.⁵

Steps have been taken to redress the imbalance. Former Victorian premier Joan Kirner and former Fraser government minister Dame Margaret Guilfoyle, led a campaign in 2000, and that has at least increased representation of women at the AC level.⁶

Indigenous Australians suffer greater disparity. An article in *The Age* earlier this year claimed that 'honours lists reflect not only gender bias, but social and

⁵ 'The paradox of bestowing honours' *The Age*, 4 January 2004
<<http://www.theage.com.au/artivles/2004/01/03/1072908951453.html>>.

⁶ Ibid.



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political bias as well' and that possibly 'we honour those who most resemble others who have already been honoured'. A fresher approach to nominations seems to be warranted. Decades in our recent past have witnessed great strides towards equality and recognition for indigenous Australians and women. It is time for the honours system to catch up.

I've mentioned heroes and celebrities. Those within the Order of Australia are ipso facto treasured, or should be. "Heroes", "celebrities", "treasures" – modern culture delights in labels.

Those on the National Trust list of 100 living treasures have been described as resting 'somewhere between hero and celebrity while possessing qualities relating to one or both of those characters. Heroes (it is said) possess exceptional, perhaps noble, qualities. Treasures are valued and precious, attracting warmth.'⁷

Subtle distinctions...but the Order of Australia, in any event, engrafts another important dimension: honouring volunteers, and as we all acknowledge, billion dollar budgets and complex bureaucracies aside, this country could not begin to function absent the input of volunteers, and how "normal" it is to think they should be gratefully acknowledged.

While we rightly recognise high achievers in their own fields, the signal feature of these awards – it seems to me – is that the 'ordinary', 'average', Australian – if I may use those terms, contributing significantly to his or her community, is substantially acclaimed. Volunteers do not expect to be honoured. But respectful recognition from one's peers does inject a deserved, 'feel-good' element into our national psyche.

⁷ Toby Stephens, 'In search of great Australians' *The Age*, 17 January 2004
<<http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2004/01/16/1073878029383.html>>.



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One of the Association's objectives, and it is glorious and challenging, is to 'promote the development and maintenance of a constructive and positive sense of national unity among Australians'.⁸ It is tempting, in one's slightly less fulfilled moments, to think that in this culture, celebrity – and with reality television, certainly undeserved celebrity – is valued more than service to the nation and the pursuit of personal excellence. But thankfully of course we haven't reached that point.

I commend the Association for its part in drawing attention to our true heroes: and who are they? We see them on TV at least bi-annually, disclaiming any particular distinction, images of unfeigned humility: these are great Australians, and they are so inspirationally represented here this evening, ladies and gentlemen, by – all of you.

⁸ <<http://www.theorderofaustralia.asn.au/>>.