

Australian government reintroduces imperial honours system

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Prime Minister Tony Abbott last week announced that on his recommendation, Britain's Queen Elizabeth II was amending the Order of Australia official honours system to bring back knights and dames.

The titles were abolished in 1986 by the Labor government of Bob Hawke. Not even arch-monarchist John Howard thought it viable to revive them during his 11-year term in office between 1996 and 2007. Now, however, Abbott has declared that "this is an important grace note in our national life." He explained that up to four knights or dames may be created each year, with the first two titles to be bestowed on the outgoing and incoming governors-general, Quentin Bryce and Peter Cosgrove.

The announcement has been widely mocked. *Sydney Morning Herald* commentator Tony Wright wrote: "Clive Palmer and Gina Rinehart [mining magnates], you'd imagine, would be holding their breath for the announcement that His Grace Tony the Abbott, Duke of Australia, has quietly decided there should be a new title for Lord and Lady Wardens of the Iron and Coal Ports."

The Greens complained that the Liberal-National government was attempting to create a "Bunyip aristocracy." Labor Senator Sam Dastyari delivered a sarcastic speech in parliament welcoming "the Game of Tones", in which "together we will stop the moats" and promote the "carriage industry" as an alternative to the auto sector.

Elements within the government were similarly derisive, most notably Abbott's colleague and leadership rival, Malcolm Turnbull the former head Australian Republican Movement and current communications minister.

The ridicule, however, only serves to trivialise the issue and obscure the definite political calculations

behind the prime minister's move. Just months before the centenary of World War I, which is being accompanied by an extraordinary campaign promoting militarism and war, the government has revived the central elements of the old imperial honours system as another means of glorifying the army and its commanders.

Both the Labor Party, which initiated the preparations to glorify Australian involvement in World War I before it lost office last year, and the Greens have no differences whatsoever with the Abbott government over this agenda. This "people's celebration" involving an expenditure of more than half a billion dollars will mark every Australian military action in the imperialist slaughter in which 62,000 Australian troops were killed.

The entire parliamentary apparatus is on board as the government seeks to condition public opinion, especially young people, in preparation for predatory new wars alongside the US in the Asia-Pacific and internationally.

The first new knighthood is being awarded to the incoming Governor-General Peter Cosgrove, former chief of the military. Cosgrove's elevation as effective head of state, being the formal representative of the British Queen in Australia, was coordinated by the Abbott government as part of its celebrations of World War I. Cosgrove, a decorated Vietnam War veteran, was elevated to public life in 1999, when he led the imperialist takeover of East Timor. He subsequently led the Australian military's participation in the invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, establishing a record of unconditional support for the US alliance.

Abbott declared that for governors-general, knighthoods would "add dignity and stature to what is a very important office."

The Australians for Constitutional Monarchy (ACM) organisation claimed credit for Abbott's move, explaining that it was "the culmination of a long campaign" they waged. ACM head David Flint also emphasised the military aspect of the new awards in an interview on ABC television's "7.30" program last Tuesday. Flint declared that knighthoods were previously "the sort of thing that was awarded to the greatest general in the First World War—General [John] Monash was knighted on the battlefield by the King himself." The first Australian damehood also derives from World War I, with Flora Reid, wife of fourth Australian PM George Reid, given the title for assisting wounded Australian soldiers being treated in London.

Flint went on to insist that Peter Cosgrove ought to have been knighted in 1999, following the "liberation of Timor." These remarks point to the enduring significance of the Australian intervention in East Timor and the political calculations behind the promotion of Cosgrove as a national hero. The neo-colonial operation in 1999 was centrally driven by the then Howard government's aim of maintaining Canberra's illegal control over lucrative oil and gas deposits following the downfall of the Indonesian dictator Suharto.

The pseudo-left organisations, however, provided the "humanitarian" rationale, organising "troops in" demonstrations to demand that the Australian military intervene to "save lives" in East Timor threatened by Indonesian forces. This marked a major turning point, with the ruling class enthusiastically hailing what it saw as the end of the "Vietnam syndrome", that is, the intense public hostility generated by Australian involvement in the US war in Vietnam.

The intervention of East Timor paved the way for the subsequent build-up of the Australian military, the stepped up promotion of Anzac Day and other militarist touchstones, and Australia's participation in the US-led imperialist interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. The Timor operation will undoubtedly serve as a reference guide as the US and its allies seek to ratchet up the pressure on China, and manipulate public opinion at home, on the cynical basis of defending the human rights and "self-determination" of different ethnic minorities within China.

Abbott has now declared that he is considering also changing military honours, dropping the Australian

medals introduced in 1975 in favour of the old British imperial honours system.

The government is seeking to glorify the sordid history of Australia's repeated military contributions to the maintenance of the British colonial empire, including the Maori wars in New Zealand, Sudan, the Boer War, the suppression of the Boxer Rebellion in China, as well as World War I. After switching its allegiance to the US during World War II, Australian forces have committed just as many crimes in US-led wars aimed at ensuring American imperialism's global hegemony.

Abbott has spoken of his belief in a strategic "Anglosphere", an alliance of English-speaking countries led by the US. His government, following in lockstep with its Labor predecessor, is now actively working with Washington to diplomatically isolate and militarily encircle China. The Obama administration, identifying Beijing as a threat to US geostrategic domination of East Asia and the Pacific, is preparing for a potential war in the region.

All of Abbott's celebrations of the first world war, and revival of old British imperial traditions like knight and dame honours, are a part of conscious efforts to foster a climate of reaction and militarism ahead of the outbreak of war.



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