

The motives behind Australian PM's knighting of Prince Philip

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Prime Minister Tony Abbott has been ridiculed and lambasted in equal measure over his decision to have 93-year-old Prince Philip—the consort of British Queen Elizabeth II—named a “Knight of the Order of Australia” as part of the Australia Day celebrations on Monday. Members of Abbott’s own government described the award as “embarrassing” and a “total disaster” as a backlash swept through the political and media establishment.

Abbott did not even consult with his senior ministers before requesting that Queen Elizabeth bestow the Australian knighthood on her own husband. He reportedly discussed the matter with only two people. One was the current governor-general and former head of the military Peter Cosgrove—who Abbott knighted last year when he resurrected the titles of Australian knights and dames, which had been abolished in 1986.

The other was another former head of the military, Angus Houston. Houston was knighted himself on Monday along with Prince Philip. Former Governor-General Quentin Bryce was made a dame alongside Cosgrove in 2014.

Abbott, Cosgrove and Houston could not have been unaware that knighting Prince Philip would be unpopular and provoke a storm of controversy. Much of the reaction to Monday’s knighthoods has been of a nationalist and feminist character, with Abbott denounced for not nominating an Australian woman. Some commentators have condemned the revival of aristocratic titles as anachronistic. Other criticism has focused on Prince Philip. The man has a record of making inane, racist and insulting comments. While in Australia in 2002, he infamously asked a person of Aboriginal background: “Do you still throw spears at each other?”

The short-term impact of knighting the prince has been a further blow to the waning support for Abbott’s government. After barely 18 months in office, it is mired in crisis over its inability to get key elements of its budget austerity program passed through the upper house of parliament, where opposition parties are blocking legislation that is opposed by millions of working class people.

Members of Abbott’s Liberal Party in Queensland have bitterly condemned the knighthood out of fears it will worsen the situation for the state’s first-term Liberal National Party government, which faces potential defeat in an election this Saturday, in large part due to the hostility to the federal government.

Leading media commentator Michelle Grattan asserted in an opinion piece on Tuesday that knighting Prince Philip had “no credible, rational explanation.” Cosgrove and Houston, however, clearly agreed with Abbott that honouring the royal consort was both rational enough and important enough to risk any political fall-out. Under conditions in which the entire parliamentary system is becoming dysfunctional, Abbott, backed by former heads of the military, is seeking to elevate the status of the most anti-democratic institutions—the monarchy, the governor-general and the armed forces.

While derided as a relic of Australia’s past colonial relationship with Britain, the monarchy remains central to the Australian capitalist state and has particular significance to the military and its traditions and ethos. To this day, a person enlisting in the Australian military does not swear to defend Australia, but to “serve Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Second, Her Heirs and Successors according to law.” The governor-general—the representative of the monarchy in the Australian political system—is not only the head of state with constitutional powers to disallow legislation and dissolve parliament, but also the commander-in-chief of the armed forces.

While the governor-general’s command over the military and the relationship with the monarchy is often depicted as “ceremonial,” the institution remains the linchpin of the state apparatus as the defender of capitalism and capitalist rule. In November 1975, amid immense social and political tensions, the governor-general of the day used his “reserve powers” to dismiss the elected Labor government and place the military on standby to deploy and maintain “civil order” in the face of widespread opposition in the working class.

Few Australians are aware of the fact, but Prince Philip

has been the ceremonial highest-ranking officer in all three branches of the Australian military since 1954. He is Admiral of the Fleet of the Royal Australian Navy; Field Marshal of the Australian Army; and Marshal of the Royal Australian Air Force. All three ranks can only be appointed by the governor-general. Throughout their careers, Peter Cosgrove and Angus Houston would on numerous occasions have been required to show deference to Prince Philip's military status, as well to his royal standing.

Abbott highlighted Prince Philip's Australian military ranks when he explained the reasons for awarding him a knighthood. He stated on Monday that "for three quarters of a century Prince Philip has served the Crown and the wider Commonwealth" and "served Australia with distinction." In 1988, Prime Minister Bob Hawke's Labor government honoured the prince with the title of Companion of the Order of Australia for his military "service" until that point. The knighting of Angus Houston was also justified by Abbott on the grounds that his 40-year military career amounted to "extraordinary and pre-eminent achievement."

Through the medium of knighthoods, Abbott, Cosgrove and Houston, expressing a standpoint held more widely in the ruling elite, are asserting the profoundly authoritarian conception that military officers have attributes and training that entitle them to political prominence.

Like Cosgrove, Houston has been appointed to a number of political roles since he retired from the military in 2011. The former Gillard Labor government installed him as the chairman of the Anzac Centenary Advisory Board, charged with drawing up the plans for the Australian state's multi-million dollar commemorations of World War I, which began last August. In 2012, Gillard appointed him to chair a panel tasked with drawing up a draconian anti-refugee policy. Houston's panel recommended—and Labor implemented—the regime under which asylum seekers are denied entry into Australia and imprisoned in detention centres on remote islands and in Papua New Guinea.

Last year, Houston was appointed by Abbott to direct the Australian-based search for Malaysia Airlines Flight MH370, which is believed to have crashed somewhere in the Indian Ocean. In July 2014, Abbott named him his "Special Envoy to Ukraine," responsible for pressing the government's accusations that Russia and Russian-speaking separatists were responsible for shooting down Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 and killing Australian citizens.

As the former Anzac Centenary Advisory Board chairman, Houston, along with Governor-General Cosgrove, Abbott and the British royal family, will be at the very centre of the celebrations being prepared for the 100th anniversary of the landing of Australian and New Zealand Army Corp (Anzac) troops at Gallipoli, in Turkey, on April 25, 1915. Prince

William and Prince Harry—the second and fourth in line for the throne respectively—are scheduled to attend the event that will take place on the beaches of Gallipoli itself.

The war, and the deaths of over 62,000 young Australians, is being shamelessly presented in the state-sponsored commemorations and related films and books as a just struggle by "democracy," represented by Britain and its allies, against German aggression and totalitarianism. The Anzac landing will be celebrated as the "birth of the nation"—the first time that military units created by the Australian state established in 1901 went into battle. The imperialist character of the war and that it was fought on all sides for colonies, markets and capitalist profits is being suppressed and denied.

The promotion of nationalism and militarism is inseparable from the complete alignment of Australia with the United States and its ever more open preparations for a military confrontation to establish its dominance over China in Asia and Russia in Europe. To justify Australian participation in the US war plans, China and Russia are increasingly portrayed as the 21st century threat to "democracy" that must be dealt with—as Germany was in the past.

Opposition to the lies, propaganda and war-mongering will inevitably grow in the next period, under conditions in which there is already mass disaffection from the established parliamentary parties and mounting social and class antagonisms.

Within that context, Abbott's efforts, backed by the two former heads of the armed forces, to elevate the monarchy, the governor-general and those who reach the top ranks of the military is ominous. They are being presented as individuals and institutions that must be accorded respect and, implicitly, obedience. It points to calculations in ruling circles that the suppression of opposition to war and austerity will require the dispensing of democratic forms of rule and the turn to dictatorship.



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