

Former army chief named “Australian of the Year”

Oscar Grenfell
29 January 2016

The Australian political establishment used the national “Australia day” celebrations on Tuesday to further elevate the military to centre stage in social and political life, bestowing “Australian of the Year” honours on former army chief David Morrison.

The decision, made by the National Australia Day Council, a body appointed by the federal government, was highly political. It took place amid US-led provocations against China in the South China Sea and followed the release of a report commissioned by the Pentagon, outlining detailed plans for a US-led war against China in which Australia would be required to play a central role.

Morrison’s appointment is of a piece with the hundreds of millions of dollars being spent by successive federal governments on the “celebration” of the centenary of World War I. The campaign, which is particularly directed at school children and youth, is aimed at rewriting the history of Australia’s predatory military operations over the past hundred years, and overcoming the deep-seated opposition to war in the working class in preparation for new and even bloodier conflicts.

A significant aspect of this ideological and political offensive is the deployment of the reactionary nostrums of identity politics, aimed at enlisting the political support of sections of the upper-middle-class and providing the promotion of militarism with a faux-progressive veneer.

Accordingly, Morrison—a 36-year military veteran who retired as chief of the army in 2015—has been recast in the unlikely role of a champion of women’s rights and “diversity.” One of the other finalists widely tipped to win the award was Catherine McGregor, the highest ranking transgender individual in the armed forces.

Morrison came to media prominence in 2013 with a carefully crafted speech responding to revelations of sexual misdemeanours, exploitative relations and backward behavior in the army. In the course of the speech, he declared that he would “be ruthless in ridding

the army of people who cannot live up to its values.”

The entire affair was an exercise in damage control, aimed at defending the army, which Morrison called “a great national institution.” It was also aimed at obscuring the fact that backward and degrading behavior within the army is the inevitable product of the essential character of the military itself—a machine honed for the express purpose of violently subjugating and oppressing entire populations. In order to be prepared to kill and be killed, recruits are thoroughly brutalised, with all the attendant consequences.

The speech was nevertheless hailed as a triumph by a significant layer of feminists and “progressive” journalists. Morrison was feted, and invited to join panel discussions with the likes of feminist author Anne Summers.

In his Australia Day acceptance speech, Morrison played to the specific concerns of this upper middle-class layer, declaring that “too many of our fellow Australians are denied the opportunity to reach their potential,” because of race, gender, religious discrimination and sexual orientation. Morrison stated that pay inequality, domestic violence and the establishment of a republic were his “priorities for the year.”

All the major parties backed Morrison’s appointment. Coalition Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull presented the award, while Labor leader Bill Shorten and Greens leader Richard Di Natale extended their congratulations online.

A host of commentators likewise hailed the former army chief. Peter FitzSimons, a prominent media pundit and chairman of the Australian Republican Movement gave a fawning response that was typical of the general tenor of the media coverage. FitzSimons, who has written a series of popular books glorifying Australian involvement in the first and second world wars, declared that Morrison “would make an outstanding president or prime minister” in a future Republic.

Morrison's role as a senior figure in the military during its involvement for the past 15 years in one criminal US-led war after another has been predictably absent from the official media coverage. Also overlooked have been the profoundly anti-democratic implications of the promotion of military, and ex-military, figures to top civilian positions.

Morrison joined the army in 1979, just four years after the US defeat in Vietnam, amid widespread anti-war sentiment among students and youth. In 1999, he served as commander of operations for the Australian-led International Force for East Timor (INTERFET), which carried out a predatory military occupation aimed at securing control of the tiny nation's oil and natural gas resources.

Having served as deputy chief of the army in 2008, Morrison was elevated to chief of the army in 2011, an appointment that coincided with a major shift in geopolitics. In 2011, Julia Gillard's Labor government formally embraced the Obama administration's "pivot to Asia," a US-led military, economic and diplomatic campaign in the Asia-Pacific region directed against China. Gillard signed a military deal with Obama, allowing the expansion of US basing arrangements, heightened "interoperability" between the Australian and American armed forces, and a host of other measures in preparation for a US war against China.

The following year, in 2012, Morrison launched an extraordinary intervention into political life, campaigning publicly against the prospect of any cut to the country's defence budget under conditions of deepening economic crisis, and major cuts to social services. In one speech, delivered at the University of Canberra, he declared, "The strategic environment in our region in the aftermath of Vietnam was actually much less ominous than it is now ... This is not the time to reduce our deployable military capability."

Continuing this theme, Morrison bluntly stated, "We cannot assume that state-on-state conventional war is a thing of the past." In other words, Canberra had to commit all the necessary resources for a war between major powers that would, inevitably, pose the risk of a global conflagration. The "tectonic shifts in the global system associated with the rise of China," he emphasised, were a factor in military planning.

Morrison's speeches in 2012 reveal the real agenda behind his sudden rise to public prominence. The far greater press coverage given to his 2013 "anti-sexism" speech has been aimed at creating a constituency of

support among "progressive," affluent pseudo-left layers for this particularly conscious representative of the Australian military establishment.

Morrison's elevation follows that of a series of other retired military personnel. In 2014, Peter Cosgrove, former chief of the Australian Defence Force, was appointed governor-general. As such, he is effectively the head of state with powers to command the armed forces and dismiss sitting governments.

In 2011, Angus Houston, another former chief of the military, was appointed to head the Anzac Centenary Advisory Board, which oversaw the planning of the government-funded "celebration" of the centenary of World War One, and in 2012, he was appointed by the Gillard Labor government to chair an "expert group" to advise the government on its mandatory detention of asylum seekers.

A host of lesser military figures, including Ben Roberts-Smith, who was awarded the Victoria Cross for killing two Taliban machine-gunners in 2010, have also been widely promoted. Roberts-Smith is chief of the National Australia Day Council, which selected Morrison for the 2016 award.

The promotion of Morrison and other such military figures to the heights of public life constitutes a warning of the advanced stage of the preparations for war. Above all, it is aimed at marginalising and silencing the mass anti-war sentiment that exists among millions of ordinary workers and young people, who have no voice whatsoever within the official political establishment.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact