

## **Does Comrade Clark want us all the same?**

Noel Cox says the decision to dump knighthoods and damehoods from the honours list defies the realities of New Zealand's history and culture

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Many people will have been disappointed with the announcement by the Government that knighthoods and damehoods will no longer be conferred upon New Zealanders. Not only was this decision lacking a popular mandate, but it also shows a blatant disregard of our history and culture.

Today a man appointed to the two highest grades of the New Zealand Order of Merit is automatically knighted. The Government proposes that the Knights Grand Companions of the New Zealand Order of Merit be renamed Principal Companions, and Knights Companion will become Distinguished Companions. Such styles inherently lack the impact and international recognition of knighthoods.

The argument used by Ms Clark to justify this change is that such titles do not reflect modern New Zealand society, as they are of British origin. This is a peculiarly narrow and jaundiced view of our history. The titular styles Sir and Dame were inherited from Britain, along with many other aspects of our New Zealand culture. It is also true that nowadays only those countries which derive their honorific traditions from Britain use titular styles for members of orders of chivalry. The French and German equivalents to Sir, Chevalier and Ritter, are now generally confined, if used at all, to the hereditary knights of those states, dignitaries approximately comparable to Baronets. But many countries, republics as well as monarchies, still create knights. What is wrong with retaining an established part of our history, whether it is common or unique to New Zealand?

For politically-motivated reasons Canada stopped awarding knighthoods in 1935, and South Africa did so in 1924. Australia continued with knighthoods until 1986. New Zealand can however make up its own mind on this issue. There are no compelling reasons why New Zealand should not keep knighthoods.

In 1980 Barbados created a new honours system including Knights and Dames of St Andrew, entitled to the styles of 'Sir' and 'Dame' respectively. In 1996 New Zealand introduced the New Zealand Order of Merit, including knights and dames. All other realms of the Queen retain knighthoods. Canada and Australia are the exceptions, not the rule.

The dignified and prestigious style and title of a knight is not confined to any one country. It is a universally recognised and respected mark of honour. It should be maintained. Indeed, problems can arise with abolition. Since Australia abandoned official knighthoods there has been a considerable growth in self-styled knights.

It has been suggested in the past that knighthoods are contrary to the supposedly egalitarian New Zealand society. If this argument were followed to its logical conclusion the whole honours system would have to go. Perhaps this is what some members of the present Government would like to see. Some members of Parliament do not believe that anyone should be singled out in any way for an award, no matter how deserving they may be. Actually, New Zealanders have been particularly keen on knighthoods, with Maori leaders especially welcoming this form of public recognition. There is no logical reason why knighthoods should now be singled out for abolition.

The argument that knighthoods should be abolished to raise the status of the Order of New Zealand is baseless. That order was deliberately intended as a non-titular award, and modelled on the Companions of Honour and the Order of Merit. Those British orders have never been regarded as being in any way inferior for being non-titular. The status or prestige of any award depends upon the careful choice of recipients. The Order of New Zealand cannot be raised up simply by destroying potential rivals.

The Government is also looking at abolishing the titles Right Honourable and Honourable. The former involves the issue of ending the practice of appointing senior politicians to the Privy Council, whose members thereby gain the style Right Honourable. The Privy Council, which was created 1100 years ago by King Alfred, today consists largely of politicians and judges. On a population basis there are more New Zealand members than British. As in Britain, the distinction is essentially honorific, but while New Zealand retains appeal to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council (something which no doubt will soon be under attack from the Government) judges from New Zealand must continue to be appointed to the Council.

Because of its judicial functions it would be inappropriate to consider the question of Privy Council membership as purely one of honours. Notably all the Prime Ministers of states which recognise Elizabeth II as their Queen are customarily made Privy Counsellors, again except for Canada and Australia, and Australia only ended this practice very recently. Why should we follow their example? New Zealand is independent enough to make its own decision.

The style of Honourable, enjoyed by members of the Executive Council, by judges and by former ministers (with the approval of the Governor-General), is also threatened. Almost every country in the world allows its Government ministers some title, and this is frequently 'the Honourable'. Does New Zealand want to be uniquely austere?

Perhaps the Government wants to end all titles (whether they be Sir, Dame, Right Honourable, Honourable, or just plain Mr/Mrs/Miss/Ms) and simply call everyone 'Comrade'.

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