

# BARBEQUE STOPPERS

Peter Costello

So here's a question for the history buffs - name the last Australian Knight. The Queen presented the Award at Windsor Castle on 22 April 2015.

OK, so you might get it now but it will be a tougher question in future years. Or maybe not. It is, of course, Prince Philip who is, more properly HRH the Prince Philip, KG, KT, PC, OM, AK, GBE, FRS, FAA, Field Marshal of the Australian Military Forces, Admiral of the Fleet (among many other titles). Previously, Prince Philip was a Companion of the Order of Australia (AC), which was Australia's highest Award until Tony Abbott downgraded it by re-introducing Knighthoods in March last year. Since then only five people have been recognised as Australian Knights or Dames - two Governors-General, one Governor, one Military man and the Prince.

The AK is, to be sure, a very high honour but no-one will be calling HRH 'Sir Philip' as a result. He has much higher honours. Even here the Australian Knighthood ranks below those conferred by the Sovereign in exercise of her Royal Prerogative - Knight of the Garter (KG), Knight of the Thistle (KT). Prince Philip was already both which all goes to the suspicion that being moved up the Order of Australia was not a big moment in his life.

But it was a big moment for the country, on Australia Day, this year. Especially it was a big moment in the life of Prime Minister Tony Abbott. It was the catalyst for a no-confidence motion from his own Party two weeks later (defeated 61-39). Later in the year the fallout from his decision led to the abolition of Australian Knighthoods, this time for good.

Australian Knighthoods were to be conferred on Governors-General 'by virtue of their appointment' - part of the compensation package if you like. There were to be up to four awarded each year. Once the GGs had been recognised there was plenty of room for others. Was the plan to confer them on businessmen, academics, philanthropists, party fundraisers? We will never

know. The appointment of Prince Philip was such a blockbuster it took out all further Awards and brought down the whole system.

As it happened Abbott and I had dinner shortly before Australia day and I asked him whether he had some good nominees coming up for the impending knighthoods (after all they were his personal gift). Lucky he didn't ask me to guess the names. I would never have come up with Prince Philip. To me that was a longer shot than Prince of Penzance for the Melbourne Cup!

The former PM's confidant Greg Sheridan has written (strongly denying the information came from Abbott) that the idea of knighting Prince Philip came from the Queen herself. I find it hard to believe and pretty tough to blame the Queen for all this. Even if it were her idea, Abbott's duty as Australian Prime Minister was to advise against it. As her First Minister with the confidence of the Australian people (as represented in the House of Representatives), he was her adviser on matters to do with Australia.

Monarchist readers of *The Speccie* might be thinking I raise this recent episode out of some Republican malice. On the contrary, I think there were strong conservative reasons against making this appointment. Conservatives believe that the true measure of a policy or political action is its consequence, not its intention. That's why Edmund Burke opposed the revolution in France. It was not those wonderful ideas of *liberté, égalité, fraternité* that he was against so much as all the bloodshed and murder that went on in its name. The Left always excuses failure on the grounds that it was done with the very best of intentions. It's why they opened our borders and lured people to death at sea. Moral vanity is much more important to them than the outcomes for people's lives. Conservatives tend to judge things in terms of outcome, not posture.

Some Conservatives might say, and in these pages have written, that honouring Prince Philip was done with the most noble of intentions. Go on about your intentions all you like, because a conservative will ask another question. What was the outcome? It wasn't much of a success

for Tony Abbott, not to mention the way it re-invigorated the Republican cause.

Conservatives will be familiar with another Conservative PM who conferred honours upon the Monarch with rather more success. It was Benjamin Disraeli who secured the title 'Empress of India' for Queen Victoria. In mid-19th Century Britain, Disraeli, fought a series of epic battles against Liberals under the leadership of William Ewart Gladstone. Gladstone's Reform Bill of 1866, designed to widen the electoral franchise, was anathema to Conservatives. Disraeli fought it tooth and nail. Eventually he brought down the Liberal Government over it. When Dizzy came to office as a result, do you know what he did? He introduced and carried a Reform Bill of his own that went much wider and further than Gladstone's ever had!

Disraeli understood that forces of change were taking hold in Britain. Ultimately, the growing mood for voting rights would end in the universal franchise. He realised that the Conservative Party could either try to stop this mood or harness it to advantage. He saw the opportunity to establish a popular base for the Conservative Party. A strong electoral base would help them defend things they really held dear - much more than the system of rotten boroughs.

There is a difference between thinking conservatism and knee-jerk conservatism. Sometimes you have to change things just to make sure they stay the way they are. The Monarchy itself is a powerful living example of how to change and adapt and survive. Sometimes its followers don't understand that lesson as well as they should. A feel for public opinion also helps.

I'll be spending this summer by my barbeque, just as I did last. I'll never forget Australia Day 2015. When the news came through about Prince Philip, everyone at our event was struck silent. It was, quite literally, a Barbeque Stopper; so far, the Stopper of the Century. It's going to be hard to top that one.