

# TO HONOUR CANADIANS: FEWER AWARDS, MORE FUSS

William Galbraith

*Conrad Black's contretemps with the Prime Minister over his receipt of a British peerage gives us an opportunity to re-consider the role of honours in Canadian society. In general, we should give fewer awards and make a greater fuss over them. The Order of Canada should not be available to public servants (who should have their own separate award) and, like virtually all our awards, should be given less frequently than it is and only for true excellence. Considerations of demographic balance must not be allowed to enter the determination of awards. Finally, Canadians should be permitted to receive foreign awards and even titles.*

*Le refus que M. Conrad Black a essayé de la part du premier ministre canadien après s'être vu offrir le titre de pair du Royaume-Uni nous fournit l'occasion de nous interroger sur le rôle des distinctions honorifiques au sein de notre société. En général, on devrait décerner moins de ces distinctions et faire plus grand cas de celles que l'on décerne. L'Ordre du Canada, en particulier, ne devrait pas être offert à des membres de la fonction publique (auxquels on réserverait une récompense distincte de toute autre). On devrait d'ailleurs décerner cet Ordre, comme la plupart de nos distinctions et récompenses, moins souvent qu'on ne le fait actuellement et le réserver à des cas d'excellence notoire. Et les questions d'équilibre démographique ne devraient pas entrer en ligne de compte dans le choix des lauréats. Enfin, les Canadiens devraient avoir le droit d'accepter des récompenses—et même des titres de noblesse—décernés par un pays étranger.*

**J**ean Chrétien and Conrad Black squared off last year over whether Mr. Black can receive a life peerage in Britain, carrying the title Lord. While some people may dismiss their continuing disagreement as irrelevant or at best quaint, what is at issue lies at the heart of the Canadian character, and has since our early colonial days—the tension between our European heritage and our more egalitarian North American culture. In particular, throughout the past century, the issue of titles and other honours has been a contentious but defining common thread. The Chrétien-Black debate is therefore anything but quaint and should be cause for serious reflection about how we celebrate individual accomplishment in our society and how honours and titles can shape Canadian identity.

The granting of honours is one way a society recognizes individuals who have made contributions deemed worthy, without resort to money. Honours in Canada have always flowed from the Crown—French, British and Canadian. From the mists of the middle ages to the present, orders of chivalry and other honours have been created under the Crown's authority to give celebratory form to the substance of those contributions, lauding honesty, integrity, duty and service.

As Canada matured, particularly after the 1931 *Statute of Westminster*, which gave Canada and the other Dominions equal status with Britain, the basic tension in her character made itself felt whenever honours and titles were discussed. Many sides of the issue were debated but one point on which there was consistent agreement was that hereditary titles, whether “Sir” or “Lord”, had no place in Canada. The debate would then focus on appropriate levels of recognition. And as with anything of value, the greater the frequency and volume with which it is distributed, the more it is devalued.

By 1917, Canadians were receiving knighthoods in such numbers that one commentator noted “Sirs” were becoming “as common as snowballs in this country”! John Ross Robertson, owner of the conservative *Toronto Evening Telegram*, highlighted the issue when he was offered a knighthood in February that year but declined (he subsequently declined an appointment to the Senate, which was as vilified then as it is today).

It was in the context of this surfeit of titles that the Conservative Member of Parliament from Kingston, William Folger Nickle, chaired a special Parliamentary

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Committee "to consider the question of conferring honours, etc. upon subjects of His Majesty resident in Canada," recommending that His Majesty "refrain hereafter from conferring any title of honour or titular distinction upon any of his subjects domiciled or ordinarily resident in Canada..." Nickle stated to the House that the effect of this recommendation would also do away with "what are known as the lesser classes of the various orders." He then also recommended that "it was only consistent and proper that titular distinctions and honours should not hereafter be received by Canadians from foreign rulers or governments." The Nickle motion was passed by the House of Commons on May 22, 1919, but since it was not an act of Parliament it had no legal effect.

Through most of the period following World War I, Mackenzie King's opposition to titles ensured no Canadians received them. In 1933, however, three years after King's defeat to the Conservatives, Prime Minister R. B. Bennett began nominating Canadians for honours, including knighthoods. The Nickle motion was not an obstacle. Bennett stated to the House that it "is not binding upon His Majesty or His Majesty's government in Canada," continuing that the King "can only be deprived of a prerogative right by statute of Parliament." Conforming to the Nickle motion was then, as the current Prime Minister argues in his case against Black, a personal preference of the PM. The motion's limits were in fact confirmed by actions Mr. King himself took while Leader of the Opposition.

In January, 1935, King introduced a motion similar to Nickle's but dealing only with titles. It requested that His Majesty refrain from "the conferring of any grade of the peerage or of any order of baronetcy or of knighthood upon any of His Majesty's subjects resident in Canada." Once re-elected, however, King did not follow through with his motion, on the grounds that he did "not want to delay the discussion of social reform." His presentation of the motion did, however, reinforce Bennett's view that the Nickle motion

had represented the wishes only of the particular House of Commons that passed it and not those of succeeding ones.

By the time Bennett's government was defeated in October, 1935, the careful revival of honours was gaining acceptance. Certainly, no one begrudged the knighthoods conferred on the eminent Dr. Frederick Banting or the composer Ernest MacMillan. But Mackenzie King's return to office killed the revived practice.

The advent of WWII drew Canada closer to Britain, and as a result, in July, 1942, a Special Committee of the House of Commons recommended that Canadians be eligible for British honours and decorations, but not those conferring titles. The then-prevailing situation high-



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lighted the fact Canada did not have its own homegrown honours system. Vincent Massey, Canada's High Commissioner in London during the war, had been consulted on the matter, and had been involved in discussions about awarding the Canada Medal, which in fact had been approved in 1943, but was never awarded. Mackenzie King told his Cabinet: "I had never experienced more pain and anguish over any public matter than I have on anything that has to do with decorations and honours ... (I am) all against them."

Vincent Massey's involvement in the wartime discussion of Canadian honours foreshadowed a request that his Royal Commission on the Arts, Science, and Letters, which reported in 1951, conduct a special study of honours in Canada.

The Massey Commission study was the genesis of the honours we now have. Its recommendations drew what now seems refreshing, cool water from the well of our nation's history, proposing the imaginative and significant name of "Order of St. Lawrence," which was in fact originally proposed by Canada's first Governor-General, Lord Monck. Similar to British orders of chivalry, the Order of St. Lawrence would have five grades (the highest being "Grand Cross") but no titular distinctions—no knights. In the end, however, Canadian compromise prevailed, and

the unimaginative “Order of Canada” was adopted, with only two grades, “Companion” and “Medal of Service,” when it was established in 1967. In recommending the creation of the “Order of Canada,” Prime Minister Lester Pearson stated that it would not involve titles since titles were inconsistent with the “egalitarian philosophy which prevails in this country.”

Since 1967, the OC was amended to include three grades, Companion, Officer and Member, which are awarded for varying degrees of achievement. The highest grade, Companion, is for “outstanding achievement and merit of the highest degree” to Canada or humanity, and can be held by only 165 persons at a time. The “Officer” level of the OC is awarded for national service of a high degree while the grade of “Member” recognizes contributions to a particular group, locality or field of endeavour.

In 1984, the Canadian honours system expanded with the creation of the Meritorious Service Decorations (MSD), first for military recipients and subsequently, as of 1991, in a civilian version. The MSDs are awarded for specific achievements or contributions over a specified duration. The Caring Canadian Award (CCA), established in 1996 by Governor-General Leblanc, recognizes voluntary contributions at a local level.

**T**he Order of Canada has now been awarded more than 4,000 times, while the MSD and the CCA add another 700 members to a growing roster of the recognized. This proliferation of honours and awards over the past two decades now also includes provincial honours (including Order of Ontario, l’Ordre national du Québec, and the Saskatchewan Order of Merit). Doubtless the number of rewards and recipients may have multiplied because of a Canadian desire to ensure representation based on demographics, though this ultimately dilutes pursuit of a high standard of achievement.

The maximum of 165 Order of Canada Companions, however, contrasts with some British orders which are much more limited for a much larger population. The Order of the Garter (founded in the 14th century) is limited to 25 in its only grade (Knight), while the Order of the Thistle (dating from 15th century), is limited to 16 Knights. The Order of Merit (OM), for which Canadians are eligible, is limited to 24 living recipients. Mackenzie King accepted his OM in 1947, anguishing over the obvious contradiction with his reputation as being

against all honours. After hearing friends approve the idea, he rationalized away his objections with the argument that “in the light of history” this most prestigious of direct honours from the Sovereign was really due “to the name of my grandfather and my father and mother, and indeed also to the Liberal Party.” His acceptance would be, he thought, “a very strong answer to all that the Tory Party has sought to do to monopolise Royalty and to seek to make out that my grandfather was disloyal and that I have been anti-British, etc.”

Finally, Britain’s Order of the Companions of Honour (CH) is limited to 65, and currently includes Pierre Trudeau and General de John Chastelain. Vincent Massey, who just missed receiving a knighthood during John Diefenbaker’s time as Prime Minister, was also a Companion of Honour.

While the British honours include the title “Sir” with their knighthoods, other jurisdictions, including both France and the Vatican, confer the grade of knight in their orders, but without the title. The Order of St. John in Canada includes knights but without the title. Several Canadians have been awarded both Papal and French honours, including a number of “chevaliers” by the French government, among them the husband of our current Governor-General.

**T**hough titles have not been part of honours in Canada for over sixty years, they nonetheless persist as part of our heritage, but not only on buildings or parks. Sir William Stephenson (“Intrepid”) remained a Canadian citizen, received a knighthood and was subsequently invested as a Companion in the Order of Canada by then Governor-General Schreyer in the early 1980s. There is also a Canadian-born knight or two around the tables of Canadian corporate boards of directors. Also familiar are peerages for Canadians who have shown the British how to run newspapers over the past century.

Outside our honours system, we continue to use titles with every sense of tradition and importance of the form and order these give to both our government and society: for our Governor-General and ambassadors, “His/Her Excellency”; for judges, ministers and prime ministers, “the Honourable” and “the Right Honourable”; for mayors, “Your Worship”; “maître” for lawyers in Quebec; and analogous titles for officials of various churches.

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