

A Golden Commemoration

50 Years of the Order of Australia

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An Invited Address to the Order of Australia Association

Queensland Branch



**On the Occasion of the Golden Jubilee
of the
Order of Australia**



**THE
ORDER OF AUSTRALIA
ASSOCIATION LTD**

Held at

Tattersalls Club

Queen and Edward Streets, Brisbane

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This year is the Golden Jubilee Year of the Order of Australia; and the 45th anniversary of our Order of Australia Association. Fifty years ago, on 14 February 1975, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II signed the Letters Patent which established our Order; and in so doing, further reinforced the unique identity of Australia — a Nation of which we are all so proud.

Almost all societies have evolved to recognise exemplary service undertaken by men and women who are citizens of the society. In Canada, which was the model on which our own Order of Australia was based, there was a period of 50 years, from 1917 to 1967, when that Nation decided not to recognise the outstanding contribution of any of its individual citizens. It was a social experiment, but as has been the experience of all societies, individuals collectively began to bring pressure to bear — that any enlightened society would wish to honour those who went far beyond the call of duty and whose example would set an aspirational standard which all might acknowledge. In 1967, the Order of Canada was established. As it transpired, our own Order of Australia, established eight years later in 1975, was influenced by that Canadian experience.

We know about the history of the foundation of our Order of Australia from official archives, but particularly from the personal and frank autobiographical accounts published by Sir David Smith (1933-2022), who held the office of Official Secretary to the Governor General.

Sir David described how he worked with the Prime Minister of the day, the Honourable Mr Whitlam, who has suggested that members of the proposed Order of Australia “would be by merit, independently assessed and free from political interference”. This concept was defended, indeed insisted upon, by Sir John Kerr and by his successors, Sir Zelman Cowen and Sir Ninian Stephen, in their successive roles as Governors General.

The Order of Australia was established as:

“A Society of Honour, to be known as the Order of Australia, in whom membership would be by merit, independently assessed and free from political interference”.

Although the first awards had been bestowed in the Honours List on the Queen’s Birthdays in June 1975, Her Royal Highness, Queen Elizabeth II, had expressed a desire to conduct the first investiture. She undertook that at Government House, Canberra, during her 1977 Silver Jubilee visit — investing those who had received their Awards of the first Order of Australia Honours list in June, 1975.

Commemorations

This year, 2025, is a time for commemorations. Several months ago, in September 2024, we celebrated the Bicentenary of the Foundation of the Moreton Bay Settlement, today the State of Queensland. This year, 2025, in May, we celebrated the Bicentenary of the Foundation of Brisbane, when Lieutenant Henry Miller, a battle-scarred 41-year old veteran of the Peninsula War and the Battle of Waterloo ,

established the military garrison and open-air gaol here, on the banks of the Brisbane River.

This year, on 1 October 2025, we will celebrate the Centenary of the City of Greater Brisbane, a momentous event which amalgamated 20 local authorities — two cities, Brisbane and South Brisbane; six towns; 10 shires and two parts of shires.

We instinctively commemorate centenaries and bicentenaries; and, as we do this evening, half-centenaries or Golden Jubilees. We celebrate these instinctively as part of the decimal system of counting and notation.

The multiples of the number 10, like 50, 100, 200 or 500, is the basis of our Golden Jubilee, Centenary and Bicentenary commemorations. The decimal system, to base 10, is believed to have been founded because most of us have 10 fingers.

The number 10 has only five factors (1,2,5,10) but we instinctively find its simplicity useful.

Another system of counting is the sexagesimal system, not to base 10, but to base 60. It was developed in ancient Babylon, and was in use in 3000 BC, before written language. Our system of 60 seconds in a minute, 60 minutes in an hour, 360 degrees in a circle, and the compass with 360 degrees, derives from that system.

It has 11 factors (1,2,3,4,5,6,10, 15, 20,30,60) and was versatile.

Today, in common practice, we use a mixture of both systems. Eggs are still sold in dozen packs in our local supermarkets. American colleagues still say something is worth “a dime a dozen”.

In 10 years' time, our Association may celebrate the Diamond Jubilee of our Order, 60 years after the foundation of our Order of Australia; and in so doing, revert to the sexagesimal system of commemorations. It was Queen Victoria who popularised the concept of commemoration after 60 years, the Diamond Jubilee. Her Diamond Jubilee commemorations involved the issue of postage stamps, the striking of medals and huge civilian commemorations. Her Diamond Jubilee Commemoration, here in Brisbane, was one of the largest representative events held in the city.

The Order of Australia Association

The Order of Australia Association was formed on 26 January 1980, under the Vice-Regal Patronage of the Governor General, Sir Zelman Cowan, formerly our Vice-Chancellor here at the University of Queensland. Two decades later, on 29 April 1999. The Order of Australia Association Foundation was established — as a collective example and symbol of the spirit of helping others or enriching life — which is the ethos of individual awards within the Order of Australia.

Our Order of Australia Association was founded with three terms of reference:

- 1 To raise awareness of the Order of Australia itself.

- 2 To promote nominations for the Order, nominations which might reflect the diversity of the Australian community.
- 3 To build networks of recipients.

From the outset, our Order was established, free from government and political influence, at Government House in Canberra, with the Governor General as Chancellor of the Order. Sir David Smith in his *The Australian Honours System. In the Beginning*, wrote:

"We set about recruiting staff ... and we converted disused colleges and other out-buildings at Government House into offices and storerooms, and we borrowed office furniture and office equipment... A new, purpose-built building was opened at Government House on 7 March 2007".

Insignia of the Order of Australia

The history of decoration, or adornment for special occasions, dates before written records. Body decoration and tribal scarification, proudly displaying identity with a particular tribal group, was of course a universal feature in the lives of our indigenous forebears; and continues today in the proud facial another decoration of our Maori brothers and sisters in modern day New Zealand.

Medals, as symbols of tribute and esteem, bestowed by the Senate or emperor, dates from Roman times.

Today , the Commonwealth of Australia bestows 60 separate Australian Honours. These range from the Afghanistan Medal, the Bravery Medal, the Centenary Medal, the Cross of Valour, the Star of Courage, the Victoria Cross for Australia and the Vietnam Medal. The grades within our own Order of Australia sit within this system.

The insignia of the Order comprise the wattle blossom and the colours, royal blue and gold.

The floral emblem is the wattle, *Acacia pycnantha* — the Golden Wattle. There are 1350 species of *Acacia*, 960 of which are native to Australia. It is fitting that every part of the Australian wattle trees — wood, gum, bark, leaves and flowers have been used for many tens of millennia by our Indigenous forebears.

The colours in the insignia of the Order are the livery colours in the bearings armorial, officially the Achievement of the Commonwealth of Australia.

The national colours of Australia are green and gold. They were formally proclaimed by the Governor-General of Australia, Sir Ninian Stephen, on 19 April 1984 in the *Commonwealth of Australia Gazette*. The first Australian national sporting team to wear green and gold was the Australian cricket team that toured England in 1899; and the players wore these colours in the opening match of the Ashes series.

All members of the Order regard the physical medal of the Decoration as something precious — and of course as a symbol of the respect of the anonymous colleagues,

fellow volunteers and workmates who were responsible for the nomination which resulted in the bestowal of the Decoration itself.

The physical medals, themselves, are very precious. I am the proud national Patron of the Australian Numismatic Society, the Society which researches and studies historical medals.

Medals are the most enduring of all historical records. As the decades and future centuries will pass, photographs and treasured records decay and are lost. Headstones crumble. Computer passwords are lost or are forgotten; or die with their owner and are forever irretrievable, as a number of bitcoin estates note to their tragic and huge financial cost. New equipment in the unknown future may not be able to interrogate earlier computer discs, as many know already to their cost.

There is a reluctance to put a precious named medal in the skip. My own great-grandfather had a house full of cargo, like that in all our homes today. Within two generations, nothing has survived of his family's physical life but two military medals, dated 1860. So, the medals of our Order, held by every family here this evening, may be, in the long term, the only enduring record of the service which led to their bestowal.

Conclusion

On the occasion of this Golden Jubilee, the 50th Anniversary of the Order of Australia, we dwell on the fact that we live in one of the most privileged Nations on earth; we live in a society at peace, and in one where each of us has a free and secret vote; we live in a nation where no one need be involuntarily hungry or cold; we live in a nation where we can worship as we please, or not; and where we can educate our children as we see fit. These unique blessings have been won by forebears whose service is embodied, today, in the ethos of the Order of Australia. It is a Golden Jubilee more than worthy of commemoration.

