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Honours without a shared sense of honour

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It is one of the paradoxes of the modern world that while the concept of honour has about as much influence on daily life as that of chastity, honours abound, and — as this week's polemics showed — so does the controversy that surrounds their award.

Of course, what is meant by honour has varied enormously between cultures and over time; even so, anyone in today's society who complained that their honour had been impugned would be considered a relic of a bygone era, eliciting less sympathy than bemusement.

That it was not always thus is obvious. In effect, viewed in historical perspective, few values have operated on human affairs with greater force than has honour. And the fundamental issue with which generations of thinkers grappled — setting the intellectual basis for the transition from "honour" to "honours" — was not how to kindle the passion for honour but how to quell its flames.

No one faced that issue more squarely than Thomas Hobbes. Writing in the 17th century against the backdrop of the English civil war, Hobbes was painfully aware of the tension between Europe's absolutist monarchs, who were moving to consolidate their control, and the nobility, whose advocates claimed that any erosion of feudal privileges was an assault on the aristocracy's honour. Convinced that only the triumph of absolutism would bring enduring peace, Hobbes brilliantly rebutted those claims.

He began by flatly denying the prevailing view that "anybody could possess reputation, but only men of rank could possess honour". Far from being limited to the aristocracy, he wrote, the desire to be honoured is a human trait that acts as irresistibly in "cooks and scullery maids" as in knights and kings.

However, the mere fact that the trait is natural doesn't imply that it is socially beneficial; rather, the competition for distinction, like that for power, corrodes the social fabric, increasing the risk of a "war of all against all". As a result, Hobbes concluded, the desire for distinction needs to be reined in by making it the sovereign's right, and the sovereign's alone, to bestow recognition on those who deserve it and remove it from those who don't.

In that sense, Hobbes began the process of "nationalising" honour; but it was Jean-Jacques Rousseau, writing towards the end of the 18th century, who brought the intellectual transition to fruition. Like Hobbes, Rousseau believed all human beings crave flatteries and accolades; and also like Hobbes, he viewed vanity as individually corrupting and socially destructive. But while Hobbes relied primarily on repression to prevent those harms, Rousseau's approach was more light-handed.

His first step — anticipating almost precisely the eventual trend — was to recast honour as a private, rather than public, matter, effectively defining it away. Genuine honour, he argued, does not lie in conforming to an externally imposed code of conduct; it lies in personal integrity and authenticity — that is, being true to oneself, regardless of society's dictates. It is therefore an individual attribute, which, like goodness, has nothing to do with social standing.

However, while honour, properly understood, is subjective, achievement can be observed and rewarded. Indeed, by carefully designing institutions, society could use that fact to harness the craving for esteem to commendable purposes. In particular, rather than leaving judgments of worthiness to public opinion, which would invariably favour what we now call "celebs", responsibility for those judgments should be vested in an authority tasked with awarding "badges of merit" made of different metals and carrying inscriptions that indicated a person's rank in a meritocratic hierarchy.

A bronze badge, for example, would go to a champion turnip-grower and a silver badge to the

superintendent of a leading school, while gold — the symbol of eminence — would be reserved for the foremost magistrates and inventors.

Dispensing those awards with all the dignity of a court, the authority's impartiality would encourage socially laudable endeavour while removing honour from contention.

Whether Rousseau would have approved of Napoleon's Legion of Honour, which was the first of the modern orders of merit, and (having been established in 1802) is now the oldest, is unknowable; but had he seen today's world, he could certainly have felt vindicated.

On the one hand, honour, defined as fidelity to an established social code, has virtually disappeared in the advanced societies, replaced — as he recommended — by the "interiorised" (and much less constraining) sentiments of integrity and authenticity. On the other, literally every UN member state has honours schemes that, to at least some extent, reflect the ideas Rousseau crystallised.

But ubiquity hardly means that the schemes are unproblematic. On the contrary, as societies shed any broadly accepted concept of honour, merit or achievement, decisions about honours have invariably become intensely controversial, inducing perverse responses.

In few places is that truer than in Australia, where our instinctive egalitarianism, and the incessant demand for the honours system to become more "inclusive", have led to a situation in which the number of honours awarded has increased at over twice the rate of population growth, undermining the goal of recognising distinctive merit.

Moreover, award inflation seems set to accelerate, as special awards are issued for the "war on COVID" — and future Labor governments are sure to follow suit, honouring causes that range from gay rights to climate change.

Yet the clamour for the honours system to be "inclusive" certainly does not imply tolerance for a broad church. Rather, with the rise of "cancel culture", many of the leading proponents of "inclusiveness" have swerved seamlessly to the other extreme.

Echoing Robespierre — who, in the lead-up to the Terror, declared that those who opposed "the progress of freedom and the rights of man" could never be considered "men of honour", and hence, regardless of their achievements, deserved to be treated as "murderers and rebels" — they have added to the scythes of our tall poppy hunters the tumbrel and guillotine of the fanatics.

To lament those trends is not to suggest that our current scheme is perfect. There are plenty of changes worth considering — for example, capping its growth and imposing greater disciplines on who can be appointed to its governing body. More generally, with the last systematic review taking place in 1995, it would benefit from a careful reappraisal.

But as the scheme approaches the end of its first half century, its prospects of meeting the high expectations Rousseau had for his proposal seem about as bright as those of a renewed passion for chastity. In our culture of prescriptive correctness and yelling advocacy, to have honours without any shared sense of honour may prove just another utopian dream.