

Order of Australia

Through the Australian Honours system we have an opportunity to celebrate excellence, contribution and qualities that make for a more cohesive, caring and fairer community. Through honours the nation gets to say 'thank you'.

That said, Honours are optional – you don't have to accept one if offered. We live in a democracy. However, in my experience – as Chairman of the Order of Australia Council and previously as someone who has nominated or acted as a referee for well over 100 nominations – nothing compares to the Honours system when it comes to acknowledging achievement, celebrating service and saying 'thank you'.

I welcome the invitation and opportunity to give you an insight into the process, the role of the Council and provide some guidance in nominating a fellow Australian for an Honour.

About the Order of Australia Council

I became Chairman of the Order of Australia Council with a breadth of experience spanning over 35 years. In understanding a nomination there is no substitute for living the process. By that I mean as nominator, referee and assessor. Between 1990 and 2016, I submitted 74 nominations and acted as referee in 35 others. As President of the Order of Australia Association for over 5 years I travelled Australia (at my own expense) promoting the Order and in the process proof reading hundreds of nominations. When I was first appointed to the Order of Australia Council as a community representative my learning was elevated to a new level.

As a Council we strive for efficiency and accuracy and, by reforming the nomination process, we have in some ways become a victim of our own success. Greater promotion, online nominations, and more complex and efficient software means we attract and process nominations more efficiently than in times past. The Council meets twice a year; in the past we considered 700 to 800 nominations. Nowadays we have gone well past 1000.

The Council comprises 19 members – the Commonwealth, State and Territories are all represented. The makeup of the Council is diverse and includes an even gender balance amongst community representatives. We rarely vote and only as a last resort; overall awards are determined in a consensus and, most importantly, on the merits.

The Council comes together to collaboratively assess on the merits the relative contribution of our fellow citizens and whether we recommend an award. No one tells us how to vote. No Prime Minister, Premier, Governor or department head can direct. In my experience there is no interference – merit is our guide and we are ferocious in our independence in advising the Governor-General as to awards and the level. Politics, favours, status, political donations and position do not come into it.

My approach to assessing a nomination

In the hallowed halls of the honours system I am considered a soft touch. It is a reputation I wear with pride!

My starting point is 'what's right with the nomination', not 'what's wrong with the Nomination'. If I am heading towards No Award, I will weigh very carefully whether we have it right. Sometimes this means deferring a decision so further work can be done on a nomination. After all someone has gone to a lot of trouble to nominate, the case workers have spent time and effort researching and preparing the nomination and it is therefore the Council's responsibility to be absolutely sure.

I was delighted to see in the 2018 Australia Day Awards the success rate had lifted to 72.5%. When I first joined the Council, it was around 50%. One long term Council member kept reminding me "we don't give them away in minty wrappers you know".

By way of comparison, in the United Kingdom's most recent Honours List (on 1 January 2019), 1,148 people received an award out of a population of 66.6 million. On Australia Day 2019 the number of awards are 1,127, considerably up from 2018 (as were a record number of nominations) out of a population of 25.1 million. More work is needed to increase awards to Australian women but that will only come with an incremental increase of nominations of women.

Tips for nominating someone

Now to some quick observations, guidelines and rules to help you make a Nomination:

1. I believe that everyone who has received an honour has an obligation to nominate;
2. Don't leave it too late: an award can only follow a nomination and posthumous Awards only occur when the nominated person has sadly passed on *after* a nomination has been received and the process has not yet completed;
3. Provide the Honours Secretariat with as much information as possible about the person nominated; if you don't know something, for example a date of naturalisation, say so and the case officer will do the rest;
4. Do not – under any circumstances – discuss the nomination with the person nominated;
5. Stress the confidentiality to all who are assisting you with the nomination – family, friends and colleagues;
6. Self-nominations or those made by immediate family are not precluded but to be frank a third party nomination has greater veracity;
7. There are no State or Territory quotas – it's a myth. The Companion (AC), Officer (AO) and Member (AM) have numerical quotas. The Medal is quota free and typically represents the largest number. These are our community heroes, the glue that holds us together.

8. When preparing the Nomination keep referring back to the published benchmarks so that you are eliciting the critically important information in support;
9. If anything changes refer to the case officer who first acknowledged your Nomination or ring the Honours Secretariat direct.

What to consider in a Nomination

Our merit based system has benchmarks to help the Council reach a recommendation. The benchmarks, which are published online are frequently referred to by Council members.

In addition to the benchmarks and the above insights, in considering whether or how to nominate someone I suggest keeping a few things in mind. Firstly, a recipient doesn't have to be a saint – most successful nominees have made a solid contribution that is over and above others and made a defining difference. Secondly, when looking at recipients of awards some people might form a view that an award is all part of the lap of honour prior to or following retirement from a profession. Some professions and organisations are very organised in putting their colleagues forward. That is not a criticism but rather an acknowledgement that some better understand the Nomination process and the importance of the Australian honours system than others. It is important to realise that while certain professions are well-represented in Awards, the system is agnostic: merit trumps everything.

We want to encourage nominations from all fields of endeavour. To assist I thought it would be worthwhile providing some additional guidance informed by my experience as a nominator, referee, assessor and now Chairman of the Council. In addition to the published benchmarks we consider:

1. Has the nominee's contribution pushed frontiers of knowledge; alternatively does their service exceed what one might expect of someone at that level;
2. Has the nominee impacted the national agenda and policy;
3. Has the nominee mentored others whether in the workplace, supervising and/or collaborating on research efforts;
4. The extent of peer reviewed published papers; editorship of professional journals; the level of participation on the Conference circuit;
5. Has the public benefited directly from the nominees endeavours;
6. Is there an international component; has Australia's standing been enhanced;
7. Has the contribution, whether through professional bodies and Government roles, been voluntary and largely unpaid;
8. If in the commercial sector (industry and economy) to what extent have they demonstrated commitment to customers, the public, employees and community;
9. Is the level of volunteering and philanthropy commensurate with that person's circumstances;

10. If academic positions are held (teaching and/or research) are they salaried, adjunct, honorary;
11. Has the nominee been acknowledged by their profession or industry evidencing innovation, leadership and collegiality;
12. Is the nominee in that category of citizen who has made a local contribution and can be assessed as the very glue that helps hold our community together;
13. Nominate someone for recognition – not a particular level of award.

I want to stress the importance of confidentiality. We don't share nominations or part thereof including references outside the Council and Secretariat. All media inquiries are referred to the Director of the Honours Branch. Interest groups (despite best intentions) have no special standing and any lobbying does not influence the process.

In regards to referees, I want to make the following point. When a referee suggests that there are more worthy people (whether in an organisation or the broader community) it is a complete misunderstanding of the question. For starters a person cannot be considered unless they have been nominated hence to deny one in favour of another who has not been nominated is grossly unfair. If the referees think someone is worthy of recognition, then they should nominate these others and at the same time tell us whether the nominated person has merit even though others might be more meritorious in their view.

Further a response like "I don't want to say" are not helpful. If the referee doesn't want to support, then say so in plain language. Confidentiality is sacrosanct. If you want to discuss your concern with the Honours Secretariat ring the nominated case officer or send an email and the Director will ring you back.

In conclusion, the Council alone are the arbiters of who is recommended within the confines of the rules that have been set for us. We are all deeply committed to the Honours system. We are also deeply committed to continuously improving the system. We are insensitive to concerns, criticisms and commentary directed at our work. We are all working hard to meet the challenges around diversity - more women, more Australians of ethnic backgrounds, more indigenous Australians and more young Australians. While the process will always be guided by merit we want to encourage more nominations to engender even greater diversity.

I hope this article is helpful. Subject to availability I remain available to attend and address Association meetings.

The Honourable Shane L Stone AC PGDK QC

Chairman

Council of the Order of Australia

