

When Idiocy Counts: Australia's Knighting of Prince Philip

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Region: [Oceania](#)

Global Research, January 27, 2015

"Prince Philip has been a great servant of Australia, he's been a great servant of all the countries of the Commonwealth." - Australian PM, Tony Abbott, Jan 26, 2015

History can be a register of the pointless and baffling. Australia's politicians have not disappointed in adding to it over the years, and the Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, has proven particularly adept in crowding it. For all of that, it has been all too attractive a proposition to dismiss his actions as those of the "mad monk".

Politicians do have their moments. They have debilitating affairs. They can commit acts that seem all too close to treason. (It may be argued that Australia's politicians, in being so meek about the Trans-Pacific Partnership negotiations, may be sailing close to that wind.) They make inane statements. And they make such proposals as Abbott's on Australia Day: knighting Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh and husband to Queen Elizabeth II.

The move has even greater flavour given that the constitutional head of Australia is, in fact, the Queen of England, with the prime minister and advisors consulting the monarch's representative, the Governor General, over governance. In practice, the GG is essentially a glorified ribbon cutter, silent for the most part, though necessary in the process of dissolving parliament for elections, and giving the royal assent to bills.

That the Queen's representative in Australia is being asked by an Australian prime minister to convey to Her Majesty a wish that a former colony seeks to knight her own husband, is rather rich fare. (The actual name of the award is that of Knight of the Order of Australia.) She could just as easily do it herself, and has not seen fit to do so during their long marriage.

Such actions on the part of Abbott are easy to dismiss as the workings of mild lunacy. But they also suggest the dangers of distraction in politics. The Abbott government has proven to be a spectacular failure in achieving its policy outcomes. Its budgetary ambitions have stalled in the mud of Senate wrangling. It has had to piggyback on the convenient bogey of terrorism and national security. It has resorted to banging up asylum seekers in pacific camps with increasing brutality.

There is also another vital omission in the snorting over Abbott's latest act of state-sanctioned tomfoolery: the role of simple, faith-bound idiocy. This can take various forms, sometimes of the most spectacular sort. The point of mentioning this is that these idiosyncratic marks do little to actually undermine the person in question. Politics often inhabits a world closer to superstition than logic.

The most powerful country on earth sported a Cold War president who made numerous foreign policy moves after hearing out the views of an astrologer. Former White House chief of staff Donald T. Regan revealed how, "Virtually every major move and decision the Reagans made during my time as White House chief of staff was cleared in advance with a woman in San Francisco who drew up horoscopes to make certain that the planets were in favourable alignment for the enterprise."

Exercising a hold similar to that of the monk Rasputin over the doomed Romanovs, that "consultant" in question, Joan Quigley, exercise more power than any cabinet official. That grand Californian charlatan had the most valuable of allies: Nancy Reagan, who fed Quigley's predictions via a verbal drip to Ronald.

Such revelations did very little to undermine the president. Ridicule and disbelief did not destroy him. They may have impaired the office, but hardly the person holding it. Reagan, not necessarily through any self-mastery, demonstrated one of the classic Teflon attributes that prolong, rather than limit, a time in politics.

For all of this, the soothsaying has already commenced, ignoring the cardinal rule in politics that idiocy can fire proof a position, rather than undermine it. Tone did not so much lose the plot in suggesting a knighthood for Prince Philip – he simply followed a rather consistent one.

The fact that an impotent Labor opposition has proven unable to capitalise on Abbott's policy failings is testament to a range of other factors at work. The most opposition leader Bill Shorten could claim was that the conduct was taking place in "a time warp", an anachronism of some scale.

But what of it? Australia retains a British monarch. Many citizens grumble at the inconvenience of becoming a republic. The award, rather fittingly, is going to an individual almost equally out of touch. Few will forget the gasps at Prince Philip's remark on a state visit to Australia in 2002. Did the indigenous people, inquired the prince of an aboriginal businessman, "still throw spears at each other?"

None of this prevented the issuing of predictions. "It could be seen as the turning point for Abbott," suggested radio shock jock Neil Mitchell. Fairfax correspondent Mark Kenny (*The Age*, Jan 27) decided to refer, not so much to actual history as the celluloid version of the Borgia pope, Pope Alexander VI. "Do you know what is more poisonous than failure in war or politics?" poses the pontiff to his son in the Showtime series *The Borgias*, "Ridicule!"

Kenny's assessment suggests that "our monarchist prime minister and former student of the Church of Rome, might well consider" the Borgia predicament. "Already vulnerable over his idiosyncratic revival of British imperial honours – itself a captain's call from a 2014 heavy with poor judgment calls – Abbott can ill-afford to alienate his colleagues right now."

Some of these concerns have trickled through to his party colleagues, who are finding the prime minister in a realm beyond consultation. This defied Abbott's initial reassurance to colleagues earlier this year that he would be adopting a more "consultation-based approach to governing" (*Sydney Morning Herald*, Jan 27). Coalition MP, Warren Entsch, was beside himself at the obvious repudiation of that line. The Philip line was a touch too much. "For the life of me, I can't understand why."

For all of that, Abbott is dismissive. The social media storm about his suggestions have been dismissed as the workings of “electronic graffiti”. Users of social media have decided to ramp up the humour meter, making jokes about Abbott’s next move. Will he appoint Pope Francis “new bishop of Warringah?” Will he give Bill Gates “a subscription to windows?” But until there is a coup, a push, or a heartfelt sense that a resignation is in order, Australia will continue to have one of its stranger prime ministers.

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