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**TITLE: *Knighthoods a distraction from the big questions***

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Like his decision to spend \$5 billion a year on a new paid parental leave scheme, Tony Abbott didn't seek cabinet approval to restore knights and dames to Australian society. While Joe Hockey might want to end "the age of entitlement", the Prime Minister certainly seems to feel pretty entitled to do as he pleases.

Like fairness and justice, the definition of the word entitlement is complex and highly political. But the problem for members of the Abbott government is that they don't have an agreed sense of what they want to do, and who they want to do it for. The restoration of medieval honours this week highlights the philosophical and political tensions that the Coalition is yet to resolve.

Conservatives typically use the term "entitlement" in a derogatory sense. They use it, for example, to draw a distinction between the income support that a single mother relies on (a welfare entitlement) and the income that rugged, hard-working individuals "earn". Needless to say, conservatives are typically silent on whether inheriting a fortune from your dad is best thought of as an "entitlement" or "earnings".

But the term entitlement was not originally used to demean or belittle. On the contrary. In the medieval Britain that originally gave us knights and dames there was nothing more embarrassing than having to earn a living. In that era titles were everything, and with your title came your entitlements.

It wasn't until the industrial revolution that things began to change. The new wealthy of the 19th century made their money from factories rather than from vast land holdings to which they were entitled. And the new wealthy needed a workforce, and a society, that was willing to work hard. While peasants had no chance of working their way to a lordship, the industrial revolution created the possibility, but not the probability, that hard work might result in "improving your station".

By the late 20th century the term had almost completely changed its meaning. Today the so-called "wealth creators" like Gina Rinehart and Twiggy Forrest have gained the spotlight and the squattocracy, while still doing nicely, seem happy to play second fiddle.

But the restoration of knights and dames has the potential to upset the symbolic apple cart. Having been elected to "govern for all", the Prime Minister, without talking to his cabinet, wants

some of us to bow and curtsy to others. It is not a good look and it is not good politics. It sends confusing signals, and it highlights divisions in the coalition.

Symbols are to politicians what airbrushing is to models. It is what makes them who we think they are.

Whenever the issue of same sex marriage arises, an issue on which the Prime Minister's conservative Catholicism sets him apart from the libertarians that once dominated the Liberals, Tony Abbott has been able to say that he is more focussed on the economy than symbolic issues such as the government's determination to prevent some people who love each other from marrying. After this week he can no longer hide behind that excuse.

At a policy level, in the lead up to his first budget the Prime Minister would usually be putting all his effort into clearing a path for the budget priorities his Treasurer will soon be announcing. But rather than support his Treasurer, Tony Abbott is wasting precious news grabs and front pages.

And at a political level the Prime Minister risks undermining 15 years of hard work by John Howard to reposition the Coalition in the eyes of blue-collar voters in outer suburban electorates. While such seats were once the safest of safe Labor seats, the Liberals have transformed the electoral map by focussing on the message that they, and not the ALP, were the party that would reward hard work.

But no matter how hard a building contractor works, they know they will never be made a knight or a dame. While the wealthy and the well-to-do do well out of our current systems of honours, so too do the hard working community volunteers, the aged care workers and junior sport stalwarts. The Australian honours system is hardly a level playing field, but at least everyone has a chance to run onto the paddock.

The Abbott government was elected on the basis that the Rudd/Gillard/Rudd governments were out of touch and too focussed on "elite issues" such as same sex marriage, climate change, and the Gonski education reforms.

Since coming to power the Coalition has sought to cut superannuation benefits for the lowest paid workers, announced plans to cut the wages of child care workers, told us that we are free to be bigots and end the bonus welfare payments to the children of war veterans injured or killed overseas.

At the same time he has cut the mining and carbon taxes so loathed by our mining barons, is set to spend \$5 billion per year on a paid parental leave scheme that delivers up to \$75,000 to women earning more than \$150,000 and is determined to water down the regulations that protect retirees from being gouged by the big banks via dodgy fees and commissions.

The Prime Minister may feel entitled to announce policy before consulting his colleagues, but in turn, his colleagues may feel entitled to cross the floor to vote against policies that could cost them their seats. The National Party know that few of their constituents will get a cent out of the Prime Minister's \$5 billion worth of new entitlement. And the Liberals in the outer suburban seats know the same thing.

The Abbott government has some big decisions to make in the lead up to its first budget, but their biggest decision is will they deliver better services for the regional and outer suburban voters who put them into office, or will they deliver lower taxes for big business and the

executives who work in them? Knighthoods aren't just a distraction from the big questions; they also give us a hint about the likely answer.

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