

# Which entrepreneurs deserve a knighthood?

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Gina Rinehart, Rupert Murdoch and James Packer are no doubt awaiting the Prime Minister's call.

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Is Gina Rinehart expecting Mr Abbott's call? *Photo: Bloomberg*

It's a little-known fact that in his time of need Tony Abbott was rescued by a chivalrous knight. Years ago, newly married and planning a family, Abbott reluctantly decided it was time to quit writing about and participating in politics and secure his financial future by entering the business world. Sir Tristan Antico, a migrant success story and part of Abbott's Jesuit network, got him a job managing a concrete plant in western Sydney. Of course, Abbott couldn't stay away from his true vocation for long and, as things have turned out, he's now in a position to make Antico's contemporary equivalents knights and dames. But will he?

Australians don't venerate those who've demonstrated "extraordinary and pre-eminent achievement and merit" in building businesses the way, say, Americans do. Since 1960, precisely three (four if you count Ita Buttrose) business people have been named Australian of the Year.

Back in the days when Sir Frank Packer, Sir Arvi Parbo and Sir Hudson Fysh dominated the business pages, it was expected that those who made an outsized contribution to the economic life of the nation would be appropriately recognised. In recent decades, Australia has shifted to a more populist honours system, in which individuals are far more likely to be rewarded for the ability to kick a football or hold a tune than creating an enterprise that generates thousands of jobs and hundreds of millions of dollars in export earnings.

So is the shake-up in the honours system an opportunity to better acknowledge the nation's enterprising individuals? If four exceptional individuals each year are going to receive the highest honour in the land, should at least one of them be a business person?

Professor David Flint, Australia's pre-eminent monarchist, believes business people "should be considered because business is the heart of the nation ... and the sort of things we want to do on the basis of a rich economy can't be done without a sound system of business."

So, as the comment threads have been insisting in recent days, could Rupert and Gina be given the ultimate prize by a grateful Prime Minister? While not referring directly to either of those individuals, Flint says he would be comfortable with a polarising figure becoming a knight or a dame, as long as they had achieved something above and beyond being successful in business.

"In New Zealand just being a captain of industry could be considered enough for a knighthood but it would be more difficult here; by the criteria the Prime Minister has established there would have to be something more than that," Flint observes. "People such as Andrew Forrest who have [worked for the betterment of] indigenous people and [campaigning against] slavery, I think they should be considered."

Not that Twigg should be making arrangements to travel to Buckingham Palace just yet. There are three reasons why it our elite business people may receive no more recognition under the new system than they did under the old.

Firstly, today's magnates far more less likely to be title-hungry monarchists than their Menzies-era predecessors. It's hard to imagine James Packer lusting after a knighthood the way his grandfather did, for example.

Secondly, if business people aren't going to lobby on their own behalf it appears they can't expect their usual champions to do it for them. Both the Business Council of Australia and leading free-market think tank the Centre for Independent Studies showed no interest in advocating knighthoods and dameships for notable wealth-creators when approached for comment by Fairfax.

Thirdly, Tony Abbott will no doubt be hoping to bed down the controversial new arrangements by conferring titles on widely respected figures who are seen to be above the political fray. In practice, that means the Prime Minister will presumably steer clear of rewarding his backers, financial or otherwise, with the country's top gong. That rules out the much-touted Rupert Murdoch and Gina Rinehart as well as a host of other prominent business people, including Andrew "Axe the Tax" Forrest, seen to be supporters of the Coalition.

So, if you're a budding or successful entrepreneur who aspires to prefix your name with sir or dame, your best bet would seem to be engaging in plenty of good works while steering well clear of partisan politics.

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