Revamping Australia's Honours: A Republic That Makes the Country Better

#### **Abstract**

The Australian Unity Republic proposes a transformative overhaul of the honours system, shifting it from a colonial relic to a vibrant instrument of national renewal and societal progress under the Australian Executive Council (AEC)—a collective head of state comprising elected leaders. This reform reimagines the Order of Australia by establishing "Living National Treasures" as its pinnacle, supported by substantial stipends to sustain and amplify their contributions, with a strong emphasis on elder knowledge transmission, general community service, arts recognition, and military legacy. Inspired by Japan's cultural guardianship, New Zealand's bicultural framework with Māori advisory councils, Canada's nationalized honours, and the UK's 2005 transparency reforms within the Commonwealth, the system embeds reconciliation as a core principle, prioritizing First Nations recognition and the preservation of elder wisdom—integrating awards like the Deadly Awards and arts stipends—while aligning with ANZAC traditions and future military honours. Leveraging \$25.5–42.5 million in annual savings from abolished viceregal roles, this initiative enhances productivity and social cohesion, addressing the widespread failure to invest in leaders and changemakers whose knowledge and service risk being lost, fostering a republic that makes the country better by empowering them to mentor others.

#### Outline of the AEC Republican Head of State Model

The Australian Executive Council (AEC) redefines the head of state function, replacing the Governor-General and state governors with a collaborative body of nine elected officials—the Prime Minister and state/territory Premiers/Chief Ministers—rooted in subsidiarity and national unity:

- Composition and Authority: Comprising nine members, the AEC exercises federal and state reserve powers (e.g., dissolving parliaments, appointing leaders) via majority (5/9) or supermajority (6/9) votes, with the Prime Minister's tie-breaking role limited to procedural matters, ensuring balanced governance.
- Operational Framework: Focused leaders' meetings address key reforms (e.g., national standards for driver's licenses); quarterly in-person summits rotate among state capitals for strategic alignment; ad-hoc emergency sessions maintain agility without bureaucratic bloat.
- **Financial Efficiency**: Eliminates \$25.5–42.5 million in annual viceregal costs, reallocating funds to productivity gains (e.g., tax rationalization) and cultural projects (e.g., Government Houses as reconciliation museums).
- Democratic Integrity: Guards against demagoguery by anchoring authority in locally elected representatives, facilitating referendums (e.g., local government recognition) with cross-party support; unlike the self-perpetuating Council of Australian Governments (COAG), the AEC remains lean, urging leaders to prioritize national welfare over parochial interests.
- **Unity and Cohesion**: Introduces "Unity Vote Day" (first Saturday in May, every four years) to synchronize federal, state, and local elections, reflecting subsidiarity—national standards with local execution—to strengthen federal harmony.

This model, ready for a referendum ("Do you approve establishing the AEC as head of state?"), embodies pragmatic governance, aligning with Australia's egalitarian roots and preparing for a sovereign future that makes the country better.

#### From Ceremonial Relics to a Living Legacy: The Case for Reform

Imagine an Indigenous elder, not merely bestowed with a medal but given the means to share a lifetime of community wisdom with the next generation—that vision drives the AEC Unity Republic's honours overhaul. Established in 1975 by the Whitlam government to break from imperial ties, the current Order of Australia—encompassing Companion (AC), Officer (AO), Member (AM), and Medal (OAM) in its General Division, alongside a Military Division—has recognized over 50,000 individuals for contributions in arts, science, community service, and public administration. Managed through the Australian Honours and Awards Portal under the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, it invites public nominations, reviewed by the independent Council for the Order of Australia (19 members appointed by the Governor-General), with approvals and investitures conducted by the Governor-General at Government House. Awards are announced biannually on Australia Day (January 26) and the monarch's birthday (June), reflecting merit yet clinging to an outdated framework.

While the system has achieved milestones—such as increasing female recipients to 45% (from 30% in the 1990s) and growing Indigenous recognition—it falls short in meaningful ways. Urban professionals dominate (70% of awards), processing delays stretch to 18 months, and one-off honours offer little sustained impact. The monarchical connection through the Governor-General clashes with republican aspirations, necessitating a bold renewal. The AEC intervenes, removing royal oversight to forge a dynamic system, redirecting \$25.5–42.5 million in annual savings into a living legacy. Across the nation, the failure to invest in leaders and change-makers is a recurring tragedy: countless Aboriginal elders and community pioneers face challenges or pass away without the support needed to mentor successors, a loss the AEC seeks to prevent by prioritizing elder knowledge transmission to make the country better. By investing in these individuals through stipends, the AEC envisions a ripple effect, empowering them to mentor others and amplify their transformative influence.

At its core are **Living National Treasures**—14 luminaries (two per state: New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, Western Australia, South Australia, Tasmania; one each for Australian Capital Territory and Northern Territory), selected through a rigorous AEC process. Nominations require 1,000 citizen endorsements, evaluated by a reformed AEC Honours Council (15 members blending experts and public nominees), with shortlists subject to a national advisory vote via the AEC's digital platform. Approvals necessitate a 5/9 AEC majority, ensuring equitable representation. Each Treasure receives a \$250,000 annual stipend for a decade—renewable once—transforming awards into sustained investments, with a renewed focus on general community service and elder knowledge transmission, funded from viceregal savings.

#### Integrating Arts Awards, Stipends, and Indigenous Excellence

Beyond the traditional Order, the AEC reform integrates fragmented arts and Indigenous awards into the Living Treasures framework, weaving a cohesive national tapestry that amplifies community service and cultural continuity to make the country better. The Australia Council for the Arts' scholarships—such as \$50,000 grants for emerging talents in acting, ballet, painting, and poetry—would serve as a pipeline to Treasure nominations, with stipend recipients encouraged to take on mentorship roles centered on elder knowledge transmission. Likewise, the AusArt Fellowship (\$30,000 for visual artists) and Arts Fund grants (up to \$40,000) could become stepping stones, where recipients demonstrate sustained community engagement—perhaps through collaborative projects with elders—to qualify for Treasure status, merging artistic achievement with intergenerational learning.

The Deadly Awards (1995–2014), a vital platform for Indigenous recognition across music, sports, arts, and community (e.g., 2011's Outstanding Achievement in Health), offer a model for integration. Revived under the AEC, these awards would nominate impactful recipients—such as artists affiliated with Tjungu Palya—for consideration as Treasures, ensuring 30% of slots are reserved for Indigenous individuals with such backgrounds. This approach honors general service while safeguarding cultural knowledge, with stipends enabling elders to guide Deadly-inspired youth initiatives, challenging the current system's reliance on importing non-Aboriginal educators and its tendency to foster bureaucracy over local leadership.

# Honoring the ANZAC Legacy: Military Awards in the Current and Revamped Systems

Australia's ANZAC legacy is deeply embedded in the honours framework through the Military Division and commemorative medals, symbolizing sacrifice and resilience since the Gallipoli campaign. Presently, gallantry awards like the Victoria Cross (VC, awarded to 66 Australians since 1901) and the Medal for Gallantry (introduced post-1975) acknowledge battlefield bravery, while unit Battle Honours (e.g., "Kokoda Track," "Kapyong") commemorate significant engagements. The Anzac Commemorative Medallion (1967, for Gallipoli survivors) and the Anniversary Armistice Remembrance Medal (1999, marking the 80th anniversary) honor service, administered through the Governor-General. Additionally, the RSL ANZAC Awards annually recognize seven community contributors, reflecting the legacy's broader impact.

Under the AEC revamp, military honours transition to a republican model: the Governor-General's role is replaced by AEC oversight, with Treasures including veteran advocates (e.g., one slot per territory dedicated to ANZAC-inspired peace or leadership initiatives). Future awards will emphasize post-service community contributions—such as stipends for VC recipients mentoring youth on resilience—linking ANZAC values like mateship and courage to elder knowledge transmission and reconciliation. This ensures the legacy continues to inspire a united republic that makes the country better.

# Reconciliation as the Cornerstone: Honouring First Nations First and Preserving Elder Wisdom

Reconciliation transcends mere symbolism to become the lifeblood of this reformed honours system, responding to the 2023 Voice referendum's failure with actionable steps. The AEC mandates that 30% of Living National Treasures be Indigenous, recognizing contributions in language revitalization, land rights advocacy, health equity, and cultural arts—areas where First Nations excel yet remain underrepresented (<5% of Order recipients). Stipends, totaling \$3.5 million annually across 14 Treasures, fund "Reconciliation Legacies"—structured programs mentoring youth in Indigenous knowledge, echoing the Uluru Statement's call for voice, treaty, and truth, with a specific focus on elder knowledge transmission to prevent the loss of cultural heritage. For example, a Northern Territory Treasure might guide 50 youth in traditional weaving, sharing ancestral techniques, while a Queensland leader advances land restitution and oral histories.

Across Australia, the lack of investment in leaders and change-makers is a pervasive issue. Take, for instance, an elder like Batumbil Burarrwanga from North East Arnhem Land, a Yolngu djungiar and one of the region's first trained teachers who worked to sustain homeland communities like Mata Mata. Facing resource constraints, she raised funds and walked the Yolngu Road to educate youth, a journey documented in the 2020 film Remaking the Pathway alongside her sisters Daisy and Doris. Her passing at 64 without national recognition left a gap in transmitted wisdom. Similarly, Djalu Gurruwiwi, a Yolngu elder and yidaki custodian from Arnhem Land, gained international respect through collaborations like Yothu Yindi and appearances in Westwind: Djalu's Legacy (2017), yet died in 2022 with little domestic support. Paul Briggs AO, a Yorta Yorta leader from Shepparton, earned an AO in 2024 for founding the Kaiela Institute and Rumbalara Football Netball Club, but struggles to secure ongoing funding, forcing him to plead for resources to maintain these initiatives. Likewise, Aunty Pat Lester, a Dharawal elder serving as Aboriginal Education Officer at Shoalhaven High School for 38 years, mentors students and chairs the local AECG, yet lacks means to bring more elders into the classroom to accelerate cultural education—efforts often stalled by slow administrative progress. The current system, burdened by bureaucracy, often imports non-Aboriginal educators, sidelining local leaders and undermining subsidiarity. Under the AEC, individuals like these could be recognized as Living National Treasures: stipends would empower them to sustain community education, mentor successors, and reduce reliance on external support—fostering self-determination. Investing in such leaders would enable them to mentor others, creating a cascade of positive change to make the country better.

Linked to repurposed Government Houses—recast as reconciliation and multiculturalism museums per AEC plans—Treasures co-curate exhibits and host

"Truth Circles" for truth-telling and healing, utilizing the \$35–70 million setup cost offset by viceregal savings. Governed by a Reconciliation and Multiculturalism Council with Indigenous-led advisory boards, these hubs become educational centers, with stipends enabling remote outreach to address life-expectancy gaps (8.6 years lower for Indigenous Australians, per 2025 ABS). The AEC tracks progress via expanded Closing the Gap targets from the 2020 National Agreement, where only five of 19 measures were on track by mid-2025 (Productivity Commission, July 2025): Target 1 (life expectancy: <3-year gap by 2031, 0.5-year gain in 2025); Target 2 (child mortality: halved to 3.15 per 1,000 by 2031, at 5.2 in 2025); Target 3 (preschool enrolment: 95% by 2025, at 91.5%); Target 4 (Year 12 attainment: 96% by 2031, at 70% in 2025); Target 7 (youth detention: 30% reduction to 18 per 10,000 by 2031, at 22 in 2025); Target 8 (employment: 62% by 2031, at 54.2% in 2025); Target 10 (suicide deaths: 15% reduction to 21.2 per 100,000 by 2031, at 23.5 in 2025); Target 11 (out-of-home care: 45% reduction to 30.5 per 1,000 by 2031, at 48 in 2025); and indicators like land rights (Target 9: 60% recognition, at 52% in 2025), family violence (Target 13), and youth justice (Target 14). New 2025 metrics include digital access (Target 15: 90% remote connectivity by 2030) and cultural participation (Target 16: 50% Indigenous event attendance by 2031, with a sub-target of 25% elder-led sessions), updated in the July 2025 Productivity Commission report with 16 new indicators. This framework prioritizes elder knowledge transmission—ensuring elders like those mentioned are supported to mentor—reflecting subsidiarity: national leadership with local empowerment, making honours a vital link in preserving Indigenous heritage and a Closing the Gap catalyst to make the country better.

#### Comparison with New Zealand Māori Honours

New Zealand's honours system, revamped in 1996 to align with the Treaty of Waitangi's bicultural mandate, offers a compelling contrast to Australia's proposed Living Treasures. The Order of New Zealand (ONZ), capped at 20 living members, awards unadorned ONZ post-nominals, rejecting knighthoods (reinstated 2009, unlike Australia's 2015 rejection), emphasizing egalitarian recognition. With 15% Māori recipients—e.g., Dame Whina Cooper (DBE/ONZ, 1981, for land marches), Dame Tariana Turia (ONZ, 2015, for Whānau Ora health equity), and Sir Tipene O'Regan (ONZ, 2000, for Ngai Tahu treaty settlements)—it integrates Māori perspectives via iwi-specific categories, managed by the Honours Unit under the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. Nominations are public, vetted by an independent Honours Advisory Committee, and approved by the Governor-General, reflecting a shift from Crown to national identity since Dominion status.

#### **Key Differences and Similarities**

• **Cultural Focus and Representation**: NZ's system embeds biculturalism from the outset, with Māori advisory councils ensuring Treaty Article 2 (rangatiratanga) influences governance—e.g., the New Zealand Māori Council and co-

governance bodies like the Waikato River Authority—achieving 15% Māori representation. Australia's AEC proposes 30% Indigenous Treasures, a higher target, reflecting a stronger initial equity push, but lacks the entrenched advisory structures NZ has refined since 1962.

- Elder Knowledge Transmission: NZ honours elder wisdom implicitly through iwi nominations (e.g., Sir Tipene O'Regan's cultural leadership), but lacks stipends or mandates for mentorship. The AEC's \$250,000/10-year stipends explicitly prioritize elder transmission—e.g., supporting elders like Batumbil Burarrwanga or Djalu Gurruwiwi to mentor youth—addressing a gap where NZ relies on cultural recognition without financial backing for knowledge transfer.
- Arts and Community Service: NZ integrates Māori arts via iwi categories, but lacks a broad community service focus like Australia's inclusion of Deadly Awards and arts stipends. The AEC's broader scope—encompassing arts, community service, and military legacy—outpaces NZ's narrower ONZ focus, though NZ's bicultural advisory councils offer a model for co-design.
- Scale and Structure: NZ's ONZ is elite (20 members) with additional tiers, contrasting with Australia's 14 Treasures across all states/territories, reflecting a more distributed approach. Both reject imperial titles, but NZ's system is smaller and less stipend-driven, while the AEC's financial support aims to sustain impact.
- Subsidiarity and Local Empowerment: NZ's councils empower local iwi decision-making, a model the AEC could emulate with Indigenous panels holding veto power on nominations. However, the AEC's even territorial distribution better serves remote Australia, where elders like Batumbil, Djalu, Pat Lester, and Paul Briggs face challenges, compared to NZ's centralized approach.

### Lessons for Australia

NZ's success in bicultural integration—via advisory councils like Te Maruata and cogovernance bodies—suggests the AEC adopt a similar structure, ensuring Indigenous voices shape awards. The AEC's stipend innovation, however, addresses a critical flaw in NZ's model: lack of support for elders to transmit knowledge. By blending NZ's advisory depth with Australia's financial empowerment, the AEC can create a system that not only honors but actively preserves elder wisdom, making the country better.

### Global Insights: Lessons from Japan, New Zealand, Canada, and Commonwealth Reforms

Japan's "Living National Treasures" (Ningen Kokuhō), enacted in 1950 under the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties, provides a robust precedent. Designating over 100

artisans (e.g., ceramists, Noh performers) as "Holders of Intangible Cultural Heritage," it offers ¥2 million (\$20,000) annual stipends to preserve crafts threatened by modernization. Selection, budget-constrained, requires mastery and mandates teaching, with ateliers serving as cultural incubators for 1,000-year-old traditions. Australia adapts this, expanding to science and service, adopting Japan's intergenerational focus for Indigenous elder knowledge transmission spanning 60,000+years.

New Zealand's honours system, revamped in 1996 to align with the Treaty of Waitangi's bicultural mandate, excels in integrating Māori and Pākehā identities, underpinned by Māori advisory councils and co-governance structures. The Order of New Zealand (ONZ), limited to 20 living members, awards unadorned ONZ post-nominals, rejecting knighthoods (reinstated 2009, unlike Australia's 2015 rejection), prioritizing egalitarian recognition. With 15% Māori recipients—e.g., Dame Whina Cooper (DBE/ONZ, 1981, for land marches), Dame Tariana Turia (ONZ, 2015, for Whānau Ora health equity), and Sir Tipene O'Regan (ONZ, 2000, for Ngai Tahu treaty settlements)—it embeds biculturalism via iwi-specific categories. Managed by the Honours Unit under the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, nominations are public, vetted by an independent Honours Advisory Committee, and approved by the Governor-General, reflecting a shift from Crown to national identity since Dominion status.

Māori advisory councils ensure Treaty Article 2 (rangatiratanga) shapes governance. The New Zealand Māori Council, established under the 1962 Māori Community Development Act (renamed 1979), comprises 16 District Māori Councils with co-chairs like Harvey Ruru and George Ngatai (2021), acting as a legal entity for iwi and hapū e.g., the 1987 Māori Council v Attorney-General case blocking land sales without Treaty consideration, and 2012 privatization challenges. Sector-specific councils include the Hauora Māori Advisory Committee, advising the Minister of Health on Tiriti-based health policies; Te Maruata, a national Māori collective within Local Government New Zealand with a National Council seat, influencing local governance; and Te Puna under Taumata Arowai (Water Regulator), promoting Te Mana o te Wai. Co-governance bodies like the Waikato River Authority (2010, balanced iwi-Crown board) and Tūpuna Maunga o Tāmaki Makaurau Authority (2014, six tribal/six council reps) extend decision-making power. Māori wards (nine pre-2022, subject to 2025 polls) and iwi rūnanga provide elected representation, addressing underrepresentation (14.6% Māori population, <8% elected in 2007). These structures offer Australia a model: an AEC Honours Council with 30% Indigenous advisory panels, co-designing awards and holding veto power on reconciliation nominations, with a specific mandate to prioritize elder knowledge transmission—mirroring NZ's approach to preserving cultural wisdom.

Canada's honours system, launched in 1967 with the Order of Canada under Lester B. Pearson, offers a Commonwealth benchmark for sovereignty. Reducing British honours

to near-zero by the 1970s, it was restructured in 1972 (Companion, Officer, Member levels) for efficiency, with public nominations managed by the Chancellery of Honours. The 2025 Special Service Medal update and 2022 military inclusivity proposals reflect evolution, with ~10% Indigenous recipients (e.g., Murray Sinclair, CC, for reconciliation). This provides a framework for AEC-managed, stipend-supported awards prioritizing national identity.

The UK's 2005 honours overhaul, spurred by the 2004 Public Administration Select Committee (PASC) review and Sir Hayden Phillips' inquiry into "cash-for-honours" scandals, tackled cronyism (e.g., 40% political appointees). Reforms diversified selection committees, introduced a three-stage validation (public checks, external vetting, independent scrutiny), capped political nominations at 30%, and mandated quinquennial reviews for equity (e.g., 50% women, increased BAME representation by 2023). The 2012 British Empire Medal revival emphasized community service, aligning with the 2023 Fifth Report's societal focus. This transparency informs the AEC's public voting and audits, ensuring merit over patronage.

Commonwealth trends—e.g., Papua New Guinea's 1975 local honours and Jamaica's 2023 republican proposal—reinforce decolonization. Australia's AEC reform integrates Japan's preservation, NZ's bicultural councils, Canada's sovereignty, and UK's accountability into a distinctive, inclusive framework.

Aspect	Japan	New Zealand	Canada	UK (2005 Reform)	AEC Australia
Focus	Intangible heritage (arts/crafts)	Bicultural service (Treaty-driven, advisory councils)	National merit + reconciliation	Transparency + anti- cronyism	Reconciliation + innovation
Financial Support	¥2M stipend; teaching required	Ceremonial; iwi equity focus	Ceremonial; military updates	None; validation processes	\$250K/10yrs; mentorship mandated
Scale	100+ holders; budget- limited	20 ONZ max; tiers below	7,000+ living; three levels	Biannual lists; regional quotas	14 Treasures; even distribution

Aspect	Japan	New Zealand		UK (2005 Reform)	AEC Australia
' '	Cultural preservation	sovereignty via	Indigenous;	50% women; BAME increase	30% Indigenous priority

# Economic and Social Dividends: A Republic That Thrives, Especially in the Regions

This reform transcends a token gesture, emerging as a catalyst for progress. The equitable allocation (two per state, one per territory) counters urban dominance, uplifting rural figures and boosting electoral engagement via Unity Vote Day. Stipend-driven mentorships, prioritizing community service and elder knowledge transmission, could yield \$5 billion+ in economic ripple effects (e.g., Indigenous ecotourism), per the 2025 Productivity Commission. Reconciliation targets—e.g., 10% annual gains in healthy birthweight, education, and employment—align with Labor's \$842 million Closing the Gap investment.

The impact shines in regional and remote Australia, where 20% of Indigenous populations endure 20% lower service access (2025 ABS). Territorial representation (e.g., Northern Territory's slot) highlights remote excellence, channeling resources to neglected areas. A Warlpiri ranger in Yuendumu, NT, might earn Treasure status for fire management protecting 1 million hectares and creating 50 jobs via Savanna Burning; her stipend could expand carbon credits, adding \$2-3 million yearly and training 100 more rangers in traditional land care. A Martu elder in WA's Western Desert, celebrated for 136,000 sq km native title (2002), could mentor youth in cultural mapping and tourism at Punmu Art Centre (40% visitor growth in 2024), retaining 30 artists against a 15% youth exodus. In Queensland's Cape York, a Wik health worker might enhance mobile clinics for 5,000 residents, linking to \$842 million NT Remote Aboriginal Investments—e.g., John Moriarty Football's academies training 1,000 youth, with stipends funding Aurukun facilities, lifting attendance by 25%. In South Australia's APY Lands, a Pitjantjatjara elder could bolster Tjungu Palya (70 artists, \$1.5 million sales), expanding literacy by 20% and passing down oral histories. These initiatives spawn hubs—language preservation (\$10 million extended), cashless debit cards cutting child neglect by 30%, and solar microgrids in WA's East Pilbara reducing costs by 15% for 500 households—fostering retention, vitality, and a potential doubling of remote GDP by 2030.

Challenges include selection bias or stipend misuse. The AEC's transparent voting and audits address bias; stipends tie to measurable outcomes (e.g., apprenticeships and elder-led sessions). Costs merge into the \$30 million viceregal savings, with museums yielding \$10–20 million annually. This system mends, unites, and propels, making the country better. As Japan preserves, NZ balances via advisory councils, Canada asserts, and the UK refines, Australia ignites a republican dawn. Vote yes: For Treasures that endure, reconcile, and lead.

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