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## No respect for miners

Miners are too gruff and grubby to command respect in Australia where tailored suits, lab coats and wigs are more highly regarded.

[John Robertson\\*](#) | 09 Mar 2017 | 8:47 | [Opinion](#)

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*A sharp suit and a long lunch are more likely to get Australians noticed by judges than hard graft in far-flung places*

Australia's standard of living relies disproportionately on its resources industry. Minerals accounted for exactly 50% of the nation's merchandise exports in 2016, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS).

Of the 19 classes into which the ABS divides Australian industry, only financial services and the construction industry contribute more than minerals to the nation's gross domestic product.

Even these statistics do not do the industry justice. Australian miners are also at the forefront of exploration and development outside the country.

In many fields, Australians contribute more than their population numbers might suggest. Medical research, artistic endeavours and sporting prowess come to mind readily as occupations in which Australians excel conspicuously.

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Despite an impressive array of outstanding achievements in so many professional and artistic disciplines, it is safe to say, no Australian business sector has operated so consistently at the leading edge of a global industry than Australia's miners.

This record of achievement is at odds with the apparent standing of the mining industry within Australia as was evident, again, in the recently published list of Order of Australia recipients.

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*"Hobnobbing with power brokers goes a long way toward recognition"*

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The Order of Australia awards are given to recognise "individuals who have performed service at a level above that which would be expected of someone in their position, or have made significant achievements", according to the 2016 report of the Australian Honours and Awards Branch of the office of the Governor General.

The four categories of award for non-military personnel are the successor to the imperial honours once conferred on deserving Australians by the British monarch.

Abandonment of knighthoods and other chivalric memberships gave way to more overtly Australian classes of awards in 1975.

The most recent national honours announced on Australia Day recognised 749 individuals of whom 173 were included in the three-highest echelons of awards.

Even a hint that any of the 173 recipients of the most prestigious awards conferred by the nation are undeserving risks appearing churlish but common features in their backgrounds betray a worryingly strong bias in what the judges of the awards most value.

A disproportionate number of recipients are medical researchers, lawyers, academics and members of the artistic and sporting communities.

Lawyers, for example, accounted for 10% of the 173 upper-end awards in January. Well known sportsmen, actors and artists got another 12%. Educators laid claim to 14%. Medical researchers and their supporters were given 31% of the gongs on offer.

Only four in the list of government-endorsed worthies were executives currently engaged in non-government profit-making businesses, only one of whom came from the mining industry.

Some might say business people are simply doing what they are paid to do. Big paychecks and mansions are their recognition.

True, but much the same can be said about well-heeled QCs, consulting physicians, university professors, senior public servants and movie stars.

The awards display a subliminal bias toward well-dressed people with strong name recognition doing clean jobs requiring them to frequent the halls of power.

Large numbers of those being recognised hang on government support, including members of the taxpayer subsidised arts community, sports people, judges and recipients of research grants.

Hobnobbing with power brokers goes a long way toward recognition.

A larger number of awards were given to people who headed up organisations representing their respective industries to government than to the business leaders taking day-to-day decisions who paid to keep them in Canberra.

Someone is more likely to receive recognition lobbying government in a suit and clean shirt for a tax benefit for the mining industry than for making an exploration breakthrough in outback New South Wales or braving Arctic blizzards to build a mine that enhances the living standards of a local community.

Such a misplaced sense of purpose, perhaps inadvertent, displays the extent to which award selectors, supposedly chosen for their understanding of community priorities, have lost touch with what is important in achieving national social and economic progress.

Medical researchers might save lives. Lawyers keep society on an even keel as they arbitrate disputes and dispense justice. Artists and sports people entertain. Some excel.

The awards go beyond simply identifying excellence. The awards are asserting to the broader community that someone engaged in or supporting medical research is 50 times more likely to exceed expectations or do something which qualifies as a significant achievement than someone in the mining industry.

The most recent awards were no aberration. Between 2012 and 2016, officials have confirmed, all categories of honours conferred on those engaged in medicine and science research outnumbered honours to those in mining by 53 to one.

Over the past five years, a library employee was 14 times more likely to be nominated and, if nominated, more likely to receive an Order of Australia than someone in the mining industry.

The Order of Australia awards display an absurdly exaggerated disrespect for the important role of profit-making businesses generally and, more specifically, Australia's most successful business professionals.

The annual prize givings would be easy enough to ignore but for the ominous signs they offer about national priorities.

Companies look set to lose a current debate in Australia about whether corporate taxes should be reduced, for example. Lowered taxes would help keep Australia competitive as an investment destination but advocating policies that may improve profits has become political poison.

Meanwhile, there is cross-party agreement in favour of the Australian government borrowing billions of dollars to establish a national medical research fund.

Medical researchers have an appallingly poor track record in commercialising their endeavours despite an unmatched pull on political levers.

Australia's national awards for excellence offer strong empirical evidence of a deep-seated disdain for profit seekers.

As these anti-business prejudices are regularly and officially reinforced, decisions about who should benefit from government policies and who should foot the bill unsurprisingly favour those in lab coats, wigs and suits at the expense of makers of goods for sale.

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