

Australia

'Out of date'

Australia dumps knights, dames

SYDNEY, Nov 2, (Agencies): Australia has removed knights and dames from the national honours system, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull said Monday, dismissing the ancient titles as "not appropriate" in the modern age.

Knights and dames were unexpectedly revived last year by then prime minister and ardent monarchist Tony Abbott — prompting accusations he was in a "time warp" and out of touch with voters.

Turnbull, an outspoken republican, had been widely expected to dump the titles ever since he replaced Abbott in a conservative Liberal Party room coup in September.

"The cabinet recently considered the Order of Australia... and agreed that knights and dames are not appropriate in our modern honours system," Turnbull said in a statement.

The prime minister said Britain's Queen Elizabeth had agreed to the government's recommendation to remove knights and dames from the Order of Australia, which recognises achievement and service.

"This change will not affect existing knights and dames," he added.

Speaking later to reporters in Sydney, Turnbull said the matter was "a long way from being the most important issue in Australia today".

Anachronistic

But he added: "This reflects modern Australia; knights and dames are titles that are really anachronistic, they're out of date, they're not appropriate in 2015 in Australia."

Abbott's reintroduction of knights and dames in 2014 was questioned, but it was his subsequent decision to knight Queen Elizabeth II's husband Prince Philip which was met with ridicule and disbelief.

Republicans, who favour cutting Australia's ties to the British monarchy, had already accused Abbott of turning the clock back to a colonial mindset, while the Labor opposition said the titles should never have been brought back.

"It was a farce, a joke, a national disgrace," Labor MP Chris Bowen told reporters in Sydney.

"It is not appropriate in modern day Australia... that we are clinging onto imperial Britain through our honours system, and we shouldn't be celebrating the fact that knights and dames are gone, we should be lamenting the fact that they came back under this government."

Australia has long wrestled with the idea of cutting ties to the British monarchy, but a 1999 referendum on the issue kept the traditional model under which Britain's Elizabeth II is head of state.

Support for a republic has ebbed in the years since, with a Fairfax-Nielsen poll in 2014 finding that 51 percent of the 1,400 people surveyed favoured the status quo while only 42 percent supported a republic.

Disappointed

The Australian Monarchist League said it was disappointed and concerned by Monday's development, accusing Turnbull of "republicanism by stealth". "Turnbull is trying to bring on a republic and this is a way of starting it all off," the league's national chair Philip Benwell told AFP.

"We don't forget that Turnbull led republicans into the last referendum." But Australian Republican Movement chair Peter FitzSimons welcomed the demise of knights and dames, saying their reintroduction reflected "Australia of the past, not the diverse and multicultural nation that exists today".

The mis-step over Prince Philip's knighthood was seen as one of the catalysts for a leadership challenge against Abbott in February, adding to flagging opinion polls and an unpopular budget.

He survived the first challenge after awarding the honour to the non-resident duke, dubbed a "knightmare" by the media, but was removed by Turnbull's challenge seven months later.

He has since admitted the decision was a mistake, describing it as "an injudicious appointment, obviously". Knights and dames were introduced into Australia's system of honours in 1976 by then-prime minister Malcolm Fraser, but abolished a decade later by Bob Hawke.

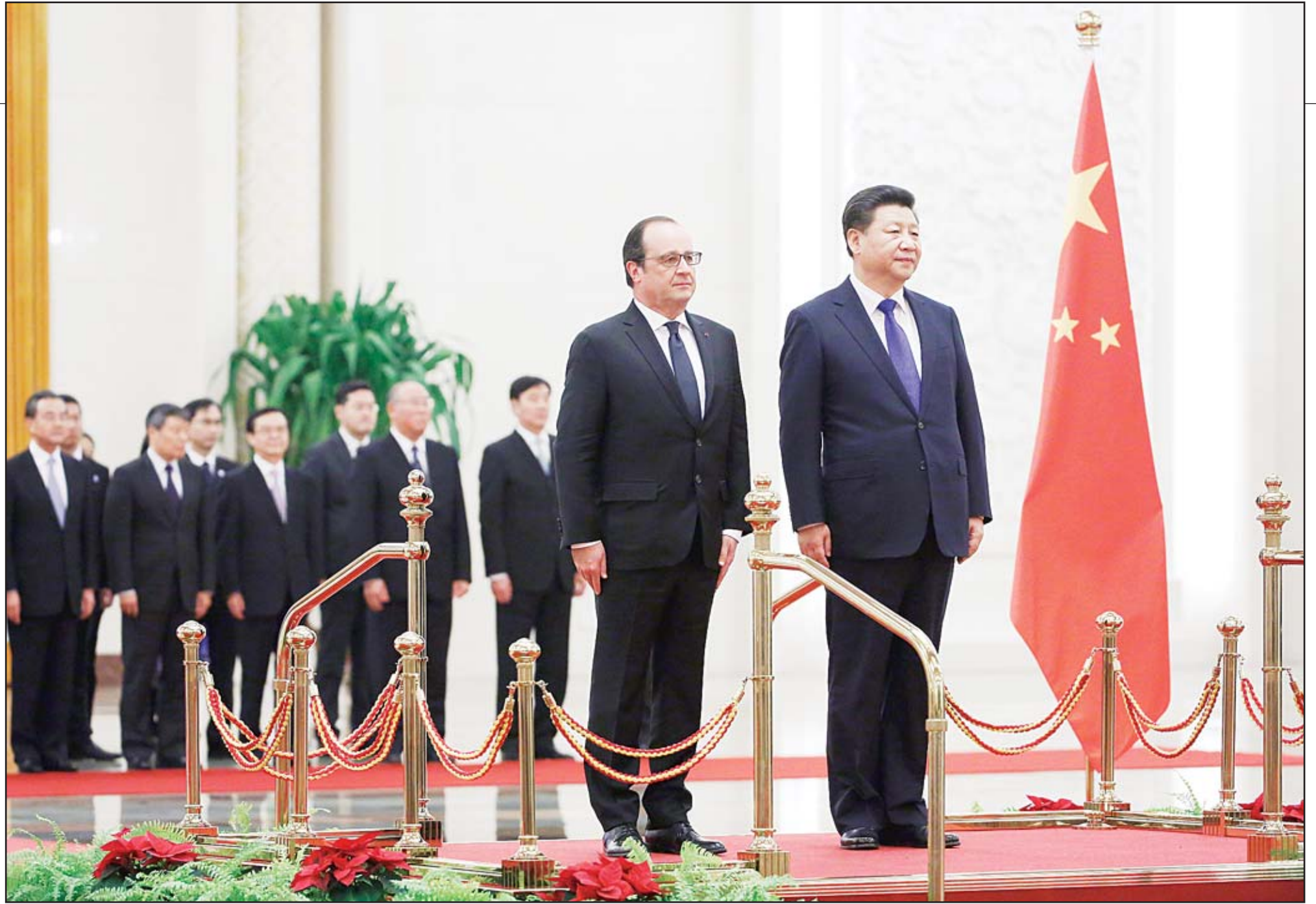
Previously, Australians had been honoured through British imperial awards.

Opposition Greens Party leader Senator Richard Di Natale welcomed the decision, even as he used it to mock the government.

"It says something about the standard of leadership in this country that installing knights and dames was one of the most significant acts of our former prime minister, and undoing that folly is so far one of the most significant acts of our new one," he said in a statement.



Turnbull



French President Francois Hollande (second right) and Chinese President Xi Jinping (right), stand on the podium as they listen to the national anthems during a welcome ceremony at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, China, Nov 2. (AP)

Diplomacy

Sides agree to push for swift resolution of historical disputes

SKorea, Japan break diplomatic freeze

'NKorea an up-close, dangerous, continuing threat'

US, South vow to bolster defense against North

SEOUL, Nov 2, (Agencies): The leaders of South Korea and Japan broke an extended diplomatic freeze Monday with a rare summit at which they agreed to push for swift resolution of historical disputes that have tainted ties for decades.

In particular, South Korean President Park Geun-hye and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said they would step up efforts to settle the thorny issue of so-called Korean "comfort women" forced to work in Japanese military brothels during World War II.

It was their first ever one-on-one meeting. Park previously rebuffed all summit proposals, arguing that Tokyo had yet to properly atone for its wartime past and 1910-45 colonial rule over the Korean peninsula.

While it was never likely to mend all the many broken fences between the two neighbours, the summit was seen as an important step towards a more pragmatic partnership less encumbered by decades of rancour and bitterness.

Park began the meeting by stressing the need to "heal the wounds of the past" and the presidential Blue House said their talks did not shy away from tough issues.

"The two leaders agreed to speed up consultations to try to resolve the comfort women question as quickly as possible", the Blue House said, adding that Park had referred to the issue as the "biggest stumbling block" to friendly relations.

While Abe offered no new apology for Japan's wartime past, he told reporters afterwards that both sides had an obligation to "not leave obstacles for future generations".

Agreement

Japan maintains that the comfort women issue was settled in a 1965 normalisation agreement, which saw Tokyo make a total payment of \$800 million in grants or loans to its former colony.

The summit capped a series of moves in recent weeks — prompted and pushed by their mutual military ally the United States — to normalise relations.

Park met Abe as he arrived at the Blue House and the two smiled as they shook hands before the talks began.

It was a contrast to previous meetings between the two at multilateral events which had been studies in unsmiling, stony indifference, especially on Park's part.

Since taking office in Feb 2013, Park has taken a particularly strong line on the issue of compensation for Korean comfort women.

It has been a politically popular stance in South Korea where Abe remains extremely unpopular, amid suspicions that he wants to water

down Tokyo's past apologies for its wartime aggression.

But there has also been public support for a summit given the importance of the relationship between the two US military allies, who have strong trade links and a mutual interest in curbing the nuclear weapons ambitions of North Korea. During the summit, both leaders reaffirmed their commitment to cooperating on the North Korean nuclear issue.

Their meeting was only confirmed days before amid reports of behind-the-scenes bickering over how Japan's wartime sex slavery might be addressed.

"Remember, this is the first summit between the two countries in nearly four years, so expectations need to be kept in check", said Hong Hyun-ik, an analyst at the Sejong Institute think-tank in Seoul.

"What's important is creating a normal channel for dialogue to pave the way for more working-level discussions and coordination", Hong said.

The South but also to Japan and others. "In the face of increasing threats, especially in the form of nuclear and missile threats from North Korea, we also agreed that the alliance needs to work in various ways to cooperate and to rise against and respond against these threats", the South Korean defense minister, Han, said at the outset of the annual security consultations.

Carter said the alliance "has never been stronger", and he called the American commitment to South Korea "iron-clad".

Also participating in the Seoul talks were the new chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Marine Gen. Joseph Dunford, and the commander of US Pacific Command, Adm Harry Harris. Dunford also was planning to visit the heavily guarded buffer zone separating North and South Korea. Harris was scheduled to fly to Beijing for his first visit to China as commander of Pacific forces. The South Koreans have had peacetime control of their forces since 1994. The US assumed full control of South Korean forces during the 1950-53 Korean War and has kept a sizeable US troop presence here ever since to rebuild South Korean forces, to demonstrate US resolve and to deter another North Korean invasion. The South Korean military now is one of the ablest in Asia.

But the issue of when to return wartime control to the South

Koreans has bedeviled the allies for at least a decade. In practical terms, it means ending the current arrangement in which an American four-star officer, currently Army Gen Curtis Scaparrotti, would take operational control of South Korean troops in the event of war with the North, in addition to leading US troops.

In 2006, near the end of his tenure as defense secretary, Donald H. Rumsfeld argued for pushing Seoul to take more responsibility for its defense and proposed to transfer wartime control of South Korean forces as early as 2009. The South Koreans argued for extra time, and the two sides agreed it would happen by 2012.

But the timetable was pushed back to 2015 amid increased tensions with the North, including North Korean nuclear weapons tests in 2009 and 2013, and an episode in 2010 in which Washington and Seoul accused North Korea of torpedoing the Cheonan, a South Korean naval vessel.

Last year the two allies agreed to postpone it indefinitely, saying it would happen on a "conditions based" timetable that includes completing improvements and upgrades to certain key elements of South Korean defenses. These include South Korean missile defenses and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, as well as Seoul's ability to counter the North's enormous artillery and rocket forces.

Nothing major came from the trilateral summit in Seoul. But just sitting down together was seen as a positive sign after the gap in such meetings, which used to be an annual affair. A joint statement said the three agreed to try to resolve the issues by "facing history squarely and advancing toward the future", boosting exchanges, and cooperating in economic, cultural and other areas.

Also:

SEOUL: Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe told South Korea's president on Monday he wanted cooperation between the two countries and the United States in maintaining an open and peaceful South China Sea, a Japanese government spokesman said.

Abe has in the past been critical of China's assertiveness in the South China Sea, through which much of Japan and South Korea's trade and energy supplies pass.



South Korean President Park Geun-hye (right), and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe pose for photos before their meeting at the presidential Blue House in Seoul, South Korea, on Nov 2. (AP)

Asia

China to prosecute ex-editor: China plans to prosecute the former editor of the official Communist Party newspaper in the restive northwestern region of Xinjiang, with the party's watchdog body saying Monday that he was corrupt and out of step with government policy.

The Central Commission for Discipline Inspection said in a note on its website that **Zhao Xinwei** was guilty of serious violations of discipline, which usually means corruption.

Unusually, however, it also accused Zhao of failing to toe the party line on the fight against separatism, terrorism, religion, extremism and other sensitive issues. Zhao "openly made statements opposing central government and autonomous region work instructions on major issues," the commission said.

His words and actions were out of step with official policy and he deliberately "violated official decisions on media coverage in the region," it said.

No details were given and it wasn't clear whether Zhao was accused of being too hard-line or not harsh enough. While Beijing warns consistently about the threat of separatist violence by radicals from among Xinjiang's native Muslim Uighur (pronounced WEE-gur) ethnic group, it is also wary of further alienating the general Uighur population with offensive or condemnatory language.

Zhao had already been formally arrested. He has now been kicked out of the party and fired from his job, and his case will be sent for prosecution.

Xinjiang has been under heavy security since deadly riots in 2009 that pitted Uighurs against ethnic Chinese migrants. Those measures were tightened further following a wave of attacks in Xinjiang and other parts of China blamed on Uighur separatists adhering to a radical form of Islam.

Party propaganda has been remarkably consistent in stressing security above all else, and the charges against Zhao likely concern his private behavior rather than any public statements or articles appearing in the newspaper he edited, said **Nicholas Bequelin**, Amnesty International's regional director for East Asia. (AP)

'1 child' stays in effect for now:

China must continue to enforce its one-child policy until new rules allowing all couples to have two children go into effect, the top family planning body said.

The ruling Communist Party said last week that Beijing would loosen its decades-old one-child policy. The plan for the change must be approved by the rubber-stamp parliament during its annual session in March.

Several parents interviewed by Reuters were lukewarm about the idea of having a second child after the new policy was announced last week.

But e-commerce giant Alibaba Group Holding Ltd, which runs China's most

popular online shopping websites and collects reams of data about consumers, said searches for books about conception and pregnancy leapt 100-times the day after the announcement and continued to grow.

The online statement by the National Health and Family Planning Commission contradicts a remark by a family planning official in the southern province of Hunan,



Zhao



Nicholas

who said last week that couples currently pregnant with a second child will not be punished, according to the Hunan Daily newspaper.

"Ahead of (ratification), all localities and departments must seriously implement the population and family planning laws and regulations currently in effect, maintain good order for births and must not act

of their own accord," an unnamed official with the commission said in the statement.

About 90 million families may qualify for the new two-child policy, which would help raise the population to an estimated 1.45 billion by 2030, the planning commission has said. China, the world's most populous nation, had 1.37 billion people at the end of last year. (RTRS)