

Clashes for Dame Cath after knighting 'Sir Greg'

Dame Cath Tizard's impulsive decision to confer a knighthood on well-known Mapua personality Greg Olsen a knight caused one of a number of clashes she had with a Government House official whose job appears to be to keep our governor-generals in order.

Dame Cath never resiled from her action at Totaranui in December 22 1992 when she knighted "Sir Greg" and a friend by dubbing them with a sword during celebrations of the 375th anniversary of Tasman's arrival. In fact, she later sent Greg a signed photo of the occasion and addressed him in a friendly card as "Dear Sir Greg".

Dame Cath never disguised the fact that she had little time for unnecessary pomp, such as using a sword to "dub" a knight. Her whole time as Governor General was marked by a campaign to discard dated British customs and pomp as he tried to make her high office relevant, accessible and supportive.

Soon after her swearing-in ceremony as Governor-General, Dame Cath was in trouble with her protocol adviser, Phillip O'Shea, over the task of devising a personal coat of arms, which, along with a large painted portrait, becomes part of the collected treasures held in a gallery at Wellington's Government House.

Dame Cath wrote in her 2010 that she was advised by Mr O'Shea that her coat of arms would have to be registered with the College of Arms in England. She responded that, because her family was Scottish, she planned to register her design with the Scottish College of Arms, where the cost was half that of the English equivalent. Dame Cath went on to create a highly unconventional coat-of-arms that she called "Cat Among the Pigeons", the same title as her memoir.

"Some people take it (a coat of arms) very seriously," she wrote. "A New Zealand heraldry expert wrote a savage criticism of all the things that were wrong with my shield. No woman, he decreed, could have a helmet on her coat-of-arms. My shield was quite improper! Okay, he can go tell it to the College of Arms. They approved it...In fact they designed it."¹

Like most features of Dame Cath's tenure as Governor-General, her coat-of-arms is very different. It features an emblem of a sailing ship surmounted by a "highland cat with its claw raised" - the crest of the hereditary leader of the Macpherson Clan.

The cat also served as an acronym for her, a play on her initials - Catherine Anne Tizard, C-A-T.

¹ Tizard, Cath, "Cat Among the Pigeons- A Memoir", p233-4 .

“I wanted to tone down the cat’s aggressiveness a bit,” she explained, “so I put a white camelia, the symbol of the women’s suffrage movement, in its paw....”.² Two plump kereru hold Dame Cath’s shield on either side.

Contrary to custom, the design included an elaborate knight’s headpiece, which, instead of a military symbol, carries a giant love heart. Her fanciful heraldic work also features Scotch thistles and ferns, representing Scotland and New Zealand together with some scallops, to recall a former role for Dame Cath as a marine science lecturer at Auckland University. Two upright maces represent her formal roles in public administration - Mayor of Auckland and Governor-General. Her motto is ‘Floreat Felese Felix’, which Dame Cath translates as broadly meaning “the happy cat that had good luck”.³

Despite the objections of the heraldry expert, Dame Cath’s irreverent coat-of-arms was later carved in wood and, along with the coats-of-arms of other governors-generals, is now displayed in Government House.

Dame Cath also later performed another unauthorised mock knighthood ceremony in April 1995, dubbing the captain of a Department of Conservation launch for assisting her when she got into difficulties while diving to see the then recently-discovered Fiordland “white corals”. Like Sir Greg’s knighthood, it was a spur-of-the moment action, but does not seem to have been publicised as Sir Greg’s “knighthood” was. Dame Cath’s memoir records no reprimand for breaching the rules with her Fiordland knighthood.⁴

Dame Cath was ever ready to take part in publicity for good causes in unconventional ways. She famously rapelled down a fixed rope into the daunting Lost World Cave at Waitomo. When the Foundation for the Blind wanted her to do a tandem parachute jump to publicise Braille Week, she refused to accept advice from her officials that it might be undignified or risky. She went ahead, tandem-parachute jumped to launch Braille Week and the Queen Elizabeth subsequently saw a news item on her effort. In response, the Queen sent a brief telegram to Dame Cath: “Well jumped,” it said, and signed “Elizabeth R.”⁵

In a separate incident, when an adviser tried to discourage Dame Cath from attending an event organised by a “Wet Pants” organisation, she chewed the official’s ear and made it clear she would decide whether or not to accept an invitation and that she wanted to meet as wide a range of New Zealanders as she could.

Soon after her appointment in 1990, Dame Cath ordered staff to stop the practice of bowing to the governor-general and told them to stop calling her “Your Excellency”. She let cleaning

² Tizard, Cath, Ibid, p233-4

³ Tizard, Cath, Ibid p234

⁴ Tizard, Cath, Ibid, p252 “I did a mock investiture and ‘knighted’ the skipper for services to his country, or some such bit of nonsense”.

⁵ Tizard, Cath Ibid p242

staff know that they were not to stop their work when she came into a room, as had been customary, and said that as a woman she perfectly understood that housework was an essential routine. She dispensed with the title of “lady-in-waiting” as an anachronism and gave her “dresser” more important duties because she said “I made my own decisions about what to wear”⁶.

Dame Cath said she tried, with only modest success, to persuade staff to address her and fellow staff members, by first names and not surnames. She also introduced a practice of military staff in the household following traditional Maori rituals for welcomes to diplomatic guests, representatives of foreign countries and, of course, other Maori. She hosted numerous social gatherings for staff, including a toga party.

She later reflected that during her two terms as governor-general, “Government House has progressively become less formal in style, but I hope no less dignified or significant. I certainly wore no feathers, nor tiaras. I gently discouraged the bended knee and the sweeping curtsies”.

Phillip O’Shea – a member of two top households

Phillip O’Shea, the New Zealand Herald of Arms Extraordinary who criticised Dame Cath’s mock knighthood of Greg Olsen was appointed by Queen Elizabeth in England. In a 2016 article in *The Listener*, Mr O’Shea described his appointment as: “A personal one from the Queen....I am a member of the Royal Household and an honorary member of the Governor-General’s Household.

“In the Royal Household, there are six Heralds-in-Ordinary (full-time Heralds), five Heralds, One Pursuivant Extraordinary...There are three Kings-of-Arms, and four Pursuivants or Junior Heralds. The Queen also appoints people with specialised knowledge in, for example, ceremony, peerage law and genealogy.”⁷

Clarification about Herald Phillip O’Shea’s role at Government House was sought from the Prime Minister’s Office. Mr Michael Webster, the clerk of the Executive Council, advised that:

- Mr O’Shea was appointed by Queen Elizabeth II as the “Herald of Arms Extraordinary” on Waitangi Day (February 6) 1978 by a Royal Warrant. Because of his role, he is an “ex-officio member of the Governor-General’s household”.
- His role includes responsibility for advising the government on heraldic matters, advising individuals on grants of (coats of) arms and the “attending the Sovereign and Governor-General on ceremonial occasions”.

⁶ Tizard Cath, Ibid, p220

⁷ De Lore, Clare, Interview with the New Zealand Herald of Arms Extraordinary, Phillip O’Shea, *The Listener*, 2 May 2016.

- Mr O’Shea is not paid by the Government for his role at Government House. However, he is “separately employed on a part-time basis by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet to give advice on a range of matters”.
- In April 2014, Mr O’Shea was appointed a Commander of the Royal Victoria Order (CVO) with the insignia presented by Prince William during a visit to New Zealand, a lower order of the title that does not entitle him to be a “Sir”.
- The CVO is a particular order of knighthoods created by Queen Victoria in 1896 for distinguished personal services to the Monarch. The top two classes of the order grant orders of knighthood. Women were not admitted to the order until 1936, and awardees of the top two classes could adopt the title Dame. According to the official lists of CVO honours awards, some typical recipients in the years 1994-1995 were two of the Queen’s doctors, a “Lord-in-Waiting to the Queen”, two “ladies of the bed chamber” and a keeper of the Royal Stamp Collection.
- Mr Webster said that Mr O’Shea’s term of office Herald of Arms Extraordinary is “not for any fixed duration and continues until the warrant of appointment is revoked”, presumably by the reigning British monarch.

NZ Knighthoods and Dame awards were abolished by then Prime Minister Helen Clark 2005. They were restored in 2009 by the then PM, John Key and in August 2017 he was knighted after serving 8 years and 23 days as PM.

David Mitchell, 2018

