

Why we're going so gong-less

June 11, 2016

When Cassius Clay, better known later as Muhammad Ali, proclaimed he was the greatest in the world, most of the world recoiled. Especially us Kiwis: you don't go round saying that kind of thing about yourself, we said at the time (1964).

The recently departed Ali went on to prove his point. Meantime, we've carried on being as modest as ever, particularly here in Taranaki. We're reminded of that humility twice a year when the honours list is published and we see how few of us are named.

On statistical grounds alone (always dicey, but bear with me) we're twice as humble as the rest of the country. The size of Taranaki's population suggests we ought to get eight or nine gongs of the 400 or so handed out annually, but this year we got six and last year only four. Only a single person was honoured for New Year 2015.

Only one local Taranaki woman has been given an honour in the last two years. Not a single Maori name has been apparent.

We got four accolades this week, which is better than usual, right on the mark if we're sticking to averages, but we've been especially shy over recent years. Why? It's not as if we're short of material. Look around you. How many people do you know who give hours of their time to good works, unpaid and happy to do it? I'll bet it's plenty.

I have only to be out collecting the mail in the late morning to see such people: the volunteers who deliver meals-on-wheels to the elderly in our neighbourhood. They've been doing it for years, some of them.

They're completely unheralded, of course, but part of an invisible army of voluntary workers who keep this province running, a group that is becoming even more vital to public wellbeing as bodies like the New Plymouth District Council cut back on community funding (it was that or get dirty water occasionally, remember?).

Getting some recognition via the honours list ought to be the least we can do for them. Because it does rely on us. You can't do an Ali and nominate yourself. Others need to rally round quietly behind your back and let the powers-that-be know you're worthy.

Then, by some mysterious process known only to a few bureaucrats and politicians in Wellington, you're rewarded with a gong of supposedly appropriate rank.

How that actually works is beyond me. If you hop online, you'll find an august-sounding body called the Honours Unit of the Cabinet Office (here you go: <https://www.dPMC.govt.nz/honours/overview>) and you'll get an explanation of sorts, but it fails to elucidate on how they decide who gets what, other than by applying some wonderfully vague guidelines on the "seniority" of the various awards.

Basically, it depends on whether your case applies internationally, nationally or in your own back yard. But it's confusing: there seem to be two sets of awards, one harking back to the days when we rushed off to war for Britain at the sound of a pistol shot, and the other an attempt to edge ourselves towards republicanism.

How do they decide what's of national significance and what's meritorious regionally? Who knows.

The last thing I want to do is embarrass a couple of our recent recipients, but frankly what do we have to do to get a knighthood around here? When someone devotes a lifetime to the creation of an internationally significant art museum, a tourist attraction in the making that will draw people from around the world, shouldn't that have been recognised with a "Sir"?

It's not as though we're overwhelmed with knights and dames. The only living Taranaki ones I can think of are Peter Snell and Malvina Major (forgive me if I've left anyone out). Even neighbouring King Country, who can't even muster a decent rugby team these days, does better with the shearing bloke, the rugby legend and a former prime minister.

I can think of another awardee, embarrassed at getting a gong, who spends hours of his time in Wellington on unpaid work that will produce nationally important strategies, but being recognised as though his work is of purely local significance.

MP Johnathan Young, who helps people put together nominations and usually supplies a letter of support, says he, too, feels Taranaki is under-represented: "We need more people nominated."

So let's do better. Let's remind everyone that, yes, it's true - we're the greatest (possibly in the world).