

Australia must break free of ‘Palace letters’-type controls



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Lead Editorial

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The headline from this week's release of the letters between Governor-General Sir John Kerr and Buckingham Palace is "the Queen didn't do it", i.e. the Queen supposedly had no knowledge Kerr was about to sack Australia's democratically elected Prime Minister. Whether that's true, or just a carefully-laid paper trail to hide the Queen's role, is an open question, but at any rate the headline should be "Palace letters reveal Crown's close control"—the 211 letters between Kerr and the Queen in 1974-77 demonstrate the Crown's fingertip control over events in Australia in those turbulent years.

What was the Palace's interest in the events in Australia? The backdrop to the turmoil of the Gough Whitlam government was his agenda to develop Australia with a specific commitment to national sovereignty, instead of foreign ownership and control. This issue is familiar to Australians today, with the hysteria over Chinese investment, but in the 1960s and 1970s the issue wasn't Chinese investment, but American and British investment. In a 1966 speech to the University of New South Wales, Whitlam, then-Deputy Leader of the Labor Party, decried the downside to the resources boom then taking off in Australia:

"Far from taking credit for the mineral discoveries, our governments should hang their head in shame over the price we have been paying, and will have to pay in the future for the exploitation of our mineral resources. The government is condoning and encouraging the sale of our richest mineral resources to overseas interests. Some of the most amazing mineral discoveries in our history are now in foreign hands. Foreigners do Australians the honour of employing them to dig up their own wealth, to be exported overseas ... the whole of our production potential in aluminium is controlled by overseas interests. Almost all the new and rich iron ore discoveries, particularly in Western Australia, have been taken out of our hands. The new coal deposits in Queensland are controlled by overseas interests. Three quarters of the mining and treatment of copper is controlled by overseas interests. Already 70 per cent of the mining of lead and 60 per cent of the mining of zinc is outside our control."

The Whitlam government's agenda to assert sovereign control over these resources, called "buy back the farm", spearheaded by Minerals and Energy Minister R.F.X. "Rex" Connor, was a threat to one company more than any other—CRA (Conzinc Riotinto Australia), now called Rio Tinto, in which the single largest shareholder was Queen Elizabeth herself. At stake was more than just the Queen's financial interest; it was the oligarchical system of financial control by which the British elite and City of London kept their resource-rich territories, including "former" colonies, subservient to their power. Whatever his failings, Whitlam was a patriot whose threat to that system of control set in train the events that saw him removed from office.

What has changed in Australia? Not much, including the source of foreign ownership and control, which, despite non-stop media hysteria about China, is overwhelmingly American and British. And with the same strings attached. The difference is that unlike Whitlam—and even his fierce rival Malcolm Fraser who was complicit in his dismissal but later reconciled with Whitlam and expressed support for his agenda—Australia no longer has political leaders prepared to challenge this system of foreign control. Not only have they sold Australia wholesale, they have committed Australia to every insane foreign war the British and Americans orchestrate to preserve their system.

In this context, two new developments are very significant: the Parliamentary inquiry into diversifying trade and investment, which we can turn into a discussion of a national bank that will enable us to break free of these controls (p. 9); and former Qld Premier Peter Beattie's call to build the Bradfield water diversion scheme in north Queensland—a throwback to "old" Labor's vision of sovereign economic development, which a national bank could fund.

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