

Australia's Hidden Empire

By [John Pilger](#)

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When the outside world thinks about Australia, it generally turns to venerable clichés of innocence – cricket, leaping marsupials, endless sunshine, no worries. Australian governments actively encourage this. Witness the recent “G’Day USA” campaign, in which Kylie Minogue and Nicole Kidman sought to persuade Americans that, unlike the empire’s problematic outposts, a gormless greeting awaited them Down Under. After all, George W Bush had ordained the previous Australian prime minister, John Howard, “sheriff of Asia”.

That Australia runs its own empire is unmentionable; yet it stretches from the Aboriginal slums of Sydney to the ancient hinterlands of the continent and across the Arafura Sea and the South Pacific. When the new prime minister, Kevin Rudd, apologised to the Aboriginal people on 13 February, he was acknowledging this. As for the apology itself, the Sydney Morning Herald accurately described it as a “piece of political wreckage” that “the Rudd government has moved quickly to clear away . . . in a way that responds to some of its own supporters’ emotional needs, yet changes nothing. It is a shrewd manoeuvre.”

Like the conquest of the Native Americans, the decimation of Aboriginal Australia laid the foundation of Australia’s empire. The land was taken and many of its people were removed and impoverished or wiped out. For their descendants, untouched by the tsunami of sentimentality that accompanied Rudd’s apology, little has changed. In the Northern Territory’s great expanse known as Utopia, people live without sanitation, running water, rubbish collection, decent housing and decent health. This is typical. In the community of Mulga Bore, the water fountains in the Aboriginal school have run dry and the only water left is contaminated. Throughout Aboriginal Australia, epidemics of gastroenteritis and rheumatic fever are as common as they were in the slums of 19th-century England. Aboriginal health, says the World Health Organisation, lags almost a hundred years behind that of white Australia. This is the only developed nation on a United Nations “shame list” of countries that have not eradicated trachoma, an entirely preventable disease that blinds Aboriginal children. Sri Lanka has beaten the disease, but not rich Australia. On 25 February, a coroner’s inquiry into the deaths in outback towns of 22 Aboriginal people, some of whom had hanged themselves, found they were trying to escape their “appalling lives”.

Most white Australians rarely see this third world in their own country. What they call here “public intellectuals” prefer to argue over whether the past happened, and to blame its horrors on the present-day victims. Their mantra that Aboriginal infrastructure and welfare spending provide “a black hole for public money” is racist, false and craven. Hundreds of millions of dollars that Australian governments claim they spend are never spent, or end up in projects for white people. It is estimated that the legal action mounted by white interests, including federal and state governments, contesting Aboriginal native title claims alone covers several billion dollars. Smear is commonly deployed as a distraction. In 2006, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s leading current affairs programme, Lateline,

broadcast lurid allegations of “sex slavery” among the Mutitjulu Aboriginal people. The source, described as an “anonymous youth worker”, was exposed as a federal government official, whose “evidence” was discredited by the Northern Territory chief minister and police. Lateline never retracted its allegations. Within a year, Prime Minister John Howard had declared a “national emergency” and sent the army, police and “business managers” into Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory. A commissioned study on Aboriginal children was cited; and “protecting the children” became the media cry – just as it had more than half a century ago when children were kidnapped by white welfare authorities. One of the authors of the study, Pat Anderson, complained: “There is no relationship between the emergency powers and what’s in our report.” His research had concentrated on the effects of slum housing on children. Few now listened to him. Kevin Rudd, as opposition leader, supported the “intervention” and has maintained it as prime minister. Welfare payments are “quarantined” and people controlled and patronised in the colonial way. To justify this, the mostly Murdoch-owned capital-city press has published a relentlessly one-dimensional picture of Aboriginal degradation. No one denies that alcoholism and child abuse exist, as they do in white Australia, but no quarantine operates there.

The Northern Territory is where Aboriginal people have had comprehensive land rights longer than anywhere else, granted almost by accident 30 years ago. The Howard government set about clawing them back. The territory contains extraordinary mineral wealth, including huge deposits of uranium on Aboriginal land. The number of companies licensed to explore for uranium has doubled to 80. Kellogg Brown & Root, a subsidiary of the American giant Halliburton, built the railway from Adelaide to Darwin, which runs adjacent to Olympic Dam, the world’s largest low-grade uranium mine. Last year, the Howard government appropriated Aboriginal land near Tennant Creek, where it intends to store the radioactive waste. “The land-grab of Aboriginal tribal land has nothing to do with child sexual abuse,” says the internationally acclaimed Australian scientist and activist Helen Caldicott, “but all to do with open slather uranium mining and converting the Northern Territory to a global nuclear dump.”

This “top end” of Australia borders the Arafura and Timor Seas, across from the Indonesian archipelago. One of the world’s great submarine oil and gas deposits lies off East Timor. In 1975, Australia’s then ambassador in Jakarta, Richard Woolcott, who had been tipped off about the coming Indonesian invasion of then Portuguese East Timor, secretly recommended to Canberra that Australia turn a blind eye to it, noting that the seabed riches “could be much more readily negotiated with Indonesia . . . than with [an independent] Timor”. Gareth Evans, later foreign minister, described a prize worth “zillions of dollars”. He ensured that Australia distinguish itself as one of the few countries to recognise General Suharto’s bloody occupation, in which 200,000 East Timorese lost their lives.

When eventually, in 1999, East Timor won its independence, the Howard government set out to manoeuvre the East Timorese out of their proper share of the oil and gas revenue by unilaterally changing the maritime boundary and withdrawing from World Court jurisdiction in maritime disputes. This would have denied desperately needed revenue to the new country, stricken from its years of brutal occupation. However, East Timor’s then prime minister, Mari Alkatiri, leader of the majority Fretilin party, proved more than a match for Canberra and especially its bullying foreign minister, Alexander Downer.

Alkatiri demonstrated that he was a nationalist who believed East Timor’s resource wealth should be the property of the state, so that the nation did not fall into debt to the World

Bank. He also believed that women should have equal opportunity, and that health care and education should be universal. "I am against rich men feasting behind closed doors," he said. For this, he was caricatured as a communist by his opponents, notably the president, Xanana Gusmão, and the then foreign minister, José Ramos-Horta, both close to the Australian political Establishment. When a group of disgruntled soldiers rebelled against Alkatiri's government in 2006, Australia readily accepted an "invitation" to send troops to East Timor. "Australia," wrote Paul Kelly in Murdoch's Australian, "is operating as a regional power or a potential hegemon that shapes security and political outcomes. This language is unpalatable to many. Yet it is the reality. It is new, experimental territory for Australia."

A mendacious campaign against the "corrupt" Alkatiri was mounted in the Australian media, reminiscent of the coup by media that briefly toppled Hugo Chávez in Venezuela. Like the US soldiers who ignored looters on the streets of Baghdad, Australian soldiers stood by while armed rioters terrorised people, burned their homes and attacked churches. The rebel leader Alfredo Reinado, a murderous thug trained in Australia, was elevated to folk hero. Under this pressure, the democratically elected Alkatiri was forced from office and East Timor was declared a "failed state" by Australia's legion of security academics and journalistic parrots concerned with the "arc of instability" to the north, an instability they supported as long as the genocidal Suharto was in charge.

Paradoxically, on 11 February, Ramos-Horta and Gusmão came to grief as they tried to do a deal with Reinado in order to subdue him. His rebels turned on them both, leaving Ramos-Horta critically wounded and Reinado himself dead. From Canberra, Prime Minister Rudd announced the despatch of more Australian "peacemakers". In the same week, the World Food Programme disclosed that the children of resource-rich East Timor were slowly starving, with more than 42 per cent of under-fives seriously underweight - a statistic which corresponds to that of Aboriginal children in "failed" communities that also occupy an abundant natural resource.

Australia is engaged in the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea, where its troops and federal police have dealt with "breakdowns in law and order" that are "depriving Australia of business and investment opportunities". A former senior Australian intelligence officer calls these "wild societies for which intervention represents a blunt, but necessary instrument". Australia is also entrenched in Afghanistan and Iraq. Rudd's electoral promise to withdraw from the "coalition of the willing" does not include almost half of Australia's troops in Iraq. At last year's conference of the American-Australian Leadership Dialogue - an annual event designed to unite the foreign policies of the two countries, but in reality an opportunity for the Australian elite to express its historic servility to great power - Rudd was in unusually oratorical style. "It is time we sang from the world's rooftops," he said, "[that] despite Iraq, America is an overwhelming force for good in the world . . . I look forward to more than working with the great American democracy, the arsenal of freedom, in bringing about long-term changes to the planet." The new sheriff for Asia had spoken.

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