

# Australian Imperialism in “The Asian Century”

Sunday 4 November 2012, by [BRAMBLE Tom](#), [WARD Liam](#) (Date first published: 1 November 2012).

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It was only appropriate that Prime Minister Julia Gillard launched her Government’s new “Australia in the Asian Century” White Paper [\[1\]](#) at the Lowy Institute, sponsored as the Institute is by Australia’s wealthiest businessman, Frank Lowy. This White Paper is a manifesto for the 1% written, fittingly, by a team headed up by former Treasury Secretary, now National Australia Bank director, Ken Henry.

Speaking in front of a veritable who’s who of the Australian political Establishment, Gillard told the audience that the neoliberal revolution unleashed on the Australian working class by the Hawke Labor Government nearly 30 years ago is only going to continue.

Trade with Asia has been growing rapidly in the past decade. Australian mining companies have made a killing. University vice chancellors have also awarded themselves fat salaries from the extortionate fees charged international students. Pharmaceutical companies and banks have also been doing good business.

The White Paper is all about creating opportunities for the corporate elite to get their snouts deeper into the trough. Further deregulation, “better integration of financial markets”, greater involvement of the private sector in infrastructure provision, “tax reform” and free trade treaties are all designed to lift the fortunes of Australian bosses.

And they want us to work harder to make all this happen – productivity, although high, has to increase further. Enhancing “regional production chains” means more outsourcing. That’s what they mean when they talk about “engagement with Asia” – how to boost the corporate dollar, and to hell with everyone else. Little wonder that Gillard has put Craig Emerson, Minister for Trade and Competitiveness and her most fanatically pro-free market Cabinet colleague, in charge of implementing “Asian Century Policy”.

Much is made in the White Paper of the need for greater “Asian literacy” and increased educational engagement with Asia. Gillard says that “A strong Australia needs a world class education system”. But this is from the same government that has put back any serious funding commitments to educational reform until 2020 [\[2\]](#) and only last week cut \$500 million from research funding in Australian universities. Meanwhile, state governments are attacking teachers and slashing funding to technical and further education [\[3\]](#).

The White Paper’s reference to Australia’s “fair, multicultural and cohesive society” is light years from the reality. Australia is a nation that shamefully offloads responsibility for the tiny numbers of asylum seekers that try to get to our shores to some of the poorest countries in the Asia-Pacific,

continues genocide against its Indigenous people and has pursued a racist agenda towards Muslims for more than a decade.

### **Australia's bloody history in the region**

Australian business has a bloody history in the Asian region, something completely whitewashed by this White Paper. Australian mining companies have been amongst the worst offenders, leaving a trail of devastation in their wake in Bougainville [4], Borneo [5], West Papua [6], Indonesia and the Philippines [7]. British NGOs say of BHP's plans to open up coal mining and build a railway line in central Borneo that "BHP Billiton's promises to leave a legacy of environmental and biodiversity benefits is just a smokescreen for digging the heart out of Borneo forests" [8]. Similarly two Melbourne academics have written recently of the impact of drilling by an Australian company in East Java:

*"Waterways have been contaminated and the exploration drilling has drained water from the agricultural system, leaving corn and other crops desiccated and unproductive. Full-scale mining would radically disrupt the agricultural and fishing industries of the region, transforming the natural vista and destroying waterways."* [9]

Even remote herding communities in the Mongolian desert [10], the new El Dorado of the international mining industry, have not been immune from the depredations of Rio Tinto.

But it's not just mining companies. In Malaysia, Hydro Tasmania has been constructing a series of dams. Indigenous people who were forced out to make way for the Bakun dam say they never received promised compensation from the company or the Sarawak state government [11]. In Indonesia, government agency AusAID (with commercial partners including Australian universities like ANU) has been accused of ignoring their own promises to consult with local communities and indigenous people in the Kalimantan Forest and Climate Partnership, denying them access to their own land [12].

Toll Holdings (and AusAID, again) got entangled in a human rights controversy when the Cambodian Government forcibly removed 1,200 poor families from the site of Toll's new railway [13]. Macquarie Bank has loaned money to giant logging company Samling that is destroying the remaining rainforests of Sarawak in Malaysia [14]. And just last month, sporting goods manufacturer Sherrin was caught red-handed using an Indian subcontractor that used child sweatshop labour to sew their official league footballs [15]. Most famously, perhaps, Woodside Energy has made a killing from its stake in East Timor's energy resources over the past decade [16], something that it hopes to repeat in Burma [17].

Protests objecting to devastation of this kind in South East Asia [18], including displacement of thousands of villagers, have been smashed up by police [19]. In many cases these police and local security forces have been trained and armed by the Australian government. In West Papua for example, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation has recently reported on the activities of Detachment 88, an Indonesian government death squad, responsible for waging a bloody campaign of terror against activists, which is trained and supplied by the Australian Federal Police [20].

The White Paper is also a manifesto for war and imperialism. It states squarely that "Australia's alliance with the United States and a strong US presence in the region will support regional stability". Regional "stability" is code for continued US domination of Asia, with China invited to play a role so long as it is willing to accept its subordination to the US in both economic and military matters.

This regional “stability” is the kind of phrase that successive Australian governments used in past decades to support a string of pro-Western dictators, from the South Korean military junta to President Marcos of the Philippines and President Suharto in Indonesia [21]. Today it means rolling out the red carpet for authoritarian rulers in the Philippines [22] and Sri Lanka [23] and selling uranium to India.

“Stability” means the suppression of national liberation movements, whether of the Vietnamese and the East Timorese in the 1970s or the West Papuans and Sri Lankan Tamils today. “Stability” also means the imposition of “structural adjustment programs” on countries of the South Pacific [24], at the behest of business in Australia and other wealthy countries. Little wonder that in the White Paper’s 312 pages, human rights only merits one paragraph, on page 249.

## **An Asian Century for the 99%**

The Gillard Government has set out the ruling class agenda for the next decade in the Asian Century White Paper. Conservative Opposition leader Tony Abbott has “broadly welcomed” it, noting its “common sense” and “laudable goals”. The Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Business Council of Australia and the National Farmers Federation have all lent it their support [25]. Why wouldn’t they, it’s gift-wrapped for them!

Our side, the working class and the downtrodden peasants and landless of the Asia-Pacific region, need our own vision of an alternative “Asian Century”, one not dominated by the interests of the region’s parasitical 1%.

Thankfully, when we look at our region, we can see the beginnings of such an alternative. Just this year we have witnessed a general strike of 100 million in India on 28 February [26], hundreds of thousands of garment workers walking off the job in Bangladesh in June [27], a massive strike of more than 2 million in Indonesia on 3 October and the ongoing fight by workers at Philippines Airlines against outsourcing [28]. China too, despite massive state repression, has seen big demonstrations against corporate environmental vandalism in the Pearl River Delta [29] and a rising curve of workers’ struggles in the factories [30].

These are not something remote from the experience of Australian workers. We are all facing a world of government cut-backs, privatisation and mass sackings. And sometimes the target of popular anger is an Australian company: thousands of Malaysians have taken to the streets in recent months [31] to protest against plans by Australian company Lynas Corporation to open a radioactive waste treatment plant [32].

Our Asian Century has to be built on solidarity of the 99% across the Asia-Pacific. We have seen evidence of just this kind of solidarity with the support lent by Philippines Airlines workers to Qantas workers late last year. In their statement of support they wrote “PALEA is not alone. And Qantas workers are not alone. Our supporters in the Philippines say ‘We are all PALEANS.’ To you, we say ‘We are all Qantas workers.’” Representatives from PALEA have spoken to unionists in Melbourne and Sydney this year and are asking for much needed financial support to continue their struggle [33].

There’s a proud tradition of this kind of solidarity in the Australian working class movement – from the support by maritime workers for the Indonesian independence struggle after World War II to the involvement of trade unionists in the campaign against Australian involvement in the Vietnam War. This is the kind of “engagement” that works for our side, not the “engagement” that would have us trying to cut each other’s throats in the competitive struggle waged by the fat cat 1% who are

interested only in their own enrichment.

**Tom Bramble and Liam Ward**

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*Thanks to Jon Lamb, James Olley, Zoe Edwards, Evan Rees and Liz Ross for suggestions on research used in this article.*

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## **P.S.**

\* Originally published at the Socialist Alternative website:

[http://www.sa.org.au/index.php?option=com\\_k2&view=item&id=7540:asian-century-whitepaper-a-manifesto-for-the-1&Itemid=393](http://www.sa.org.au/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=7540:asian-century-whitepaper-a-manifesto-for-the-1&Itemid=393)

\* Socialist Alternative's Marxism 2013 conference next year will host speakers from around the Asia Pacific, including: the Labor Party of Pakistan, Nava Sama Samaja Party of Sri Lanka, the Philippines Labor Party, and the People's Liberation Party of Indonesia.

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## **Footnotes**

[1] <http://asiancentury.dpmc.gov.au/>

[2] [http://sa.org.au/index.php?option=com\\_k2&view=item&id=7482:gillard-fails-to-deliver-on-education-reform&Itemid=395](http://sa.org.au/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=7482:gillard-fails-to-deliver-on-education-reform&Itemid=395)

[3] [http://sa.org.au/index.php?option=com\\_k2&view=item&id=7353:education-is-under-attack&Itemid=394](http://sa.org.au/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=7353:education-is-under-attack&Itemid=394)

[4] [http://sa.org.au/index.php?option=com\\_k2&view=item&id=3946:bougainville-australian-capital-dressed-up-to-kill&Itemid=389](http://sa.org.au/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=3946:bougainville-australian-capital-dressed-up-to-kill&Itemid=389)

[5] <http://www.downtoearth-indonesia.org/story/world-s-biggest-mining-company-bhp-billiton-holds-its-annual-meeting>

[6] <http://ramumine.wordpress.com/2011/07/03/australian-nickel-mining-destroying-west-papua-paradise/>

[7] <http://intercontinentalcry.org/philippines-thousands-protesting-open-pit-gold-mine/>

[8] <http://www.downtoearth-indonesia.org/story/world-s-biggest-mining-company-bhp-billiton-holds-its-annual-meeting>

[9] <http://theconversation.edu.au/the-australian-assault-on-indonesias-riches-8775>

- [10] [http://indigenouspeoplesissues.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=16309:mongolia-world-bank-and-others-poised-to-invest-in-rio-tinto-s-flawed-mongolian-mining-project&catid=31:asia-indigenous-peoples&Itemid=64](http://indigenouspeoplesissues.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=16309:mongolia-world-bank-and-others-poised-to-invest-in-rio-tinto-s-flawed-mongolian-mining-project&catid=31:asia-indigenous-peoples&Itemid=64)
- [11] <http://www.sbs.com.au/dateline/story/about/id/601522/n/The-Last-Frontier>
- [12] <http://www.redd-monitor.org/2012/09/11/controversy-surrounding-australias-kalimantan-forest-and-climate-partnership-redd-project-deepens/>
- [13] <http://www.phnompenhpost.com/index.php/2012100959183/National-news/relocated-cambodian-families-appeal-to-australia.html>
- [14] <http://www.wrm.org.uy/bulletin/117/Malaysia.html>
- [15] <http://www.smh.com.au/national/afl-may-sack-sherrin-over-child-labour-20120922-26de8.html>
- [16] [http://directaction.org.au/issue23/australian\\_oil\\_company\\_bullies\\_east\\_timor](http://directaction.org.au/issue23/australian_oil_company_bullies_east_timor)
- [17] <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/business/mining-energy/woodside-petroleum-invests-in-burma-oil-and-gas-field/story-e6frg9df-1226499621271>
- [18] <http://www.downtoearth-indonesia.org/story/protesters-blockade-australian-coal-mine>
- [19] <http://www.icem.org/en/5-Mining-DGOJP/4956-Thiess-Operating-in-Indonesia-Uses-Police-to-Bludgeon-Striking-Coal-Miners>
- [20] <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-08-28/papuans-claim-australian-link-to-death-squad/4228710>
- [21] <http://johnpilger.com/articles/east-timor-a-lesson-in-why-the-poorest-threaten-the-powerful>
- [22] <http://www.aawl.org.au/content/protest-against-president-aquino>
- [23] <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/julia-gillard-has-said-sri-lankan-president-mahinda-rajapaksa-enjoys-immunity-in-australia/story-fn59niix-1226176388575>
- [24] [http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/Islands/Imperialist\\_SouthPacific.html](http://www.thirdworldtraveler.com/Islands/Imperialist_SouthPacific.html)
- [25] <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/breaking-news/asia-strategy-needs-joint-effort-business/story-fn3dxiwe-1226504775075>
- [26] [http://www.sa.org.au/index.php?option=com\\_k2&view=item&id=7233:100-million-strike-in-india&Itemid=389](http://www.sa.org.au/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=7233:100-million-strike-in-india&Itemid=389)
- [27] See on ESSF (article 26812), [500,000 Workers Strike in Bangladesh: Ask Wal-Mart to Help](#).
- [28] [http://www.sa.org.au/index.php?option=com\\_k2&view=item&id=7442:the-harshest-of-times-and-the-worst-of-typhoons-wont-break-palea-workers&Itemid=389](http://www.sa.org.au/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=7442:the-harshest-of-times-and-the-worst-of-typhoons-wont-break-palea-workers&Itemid=389)

- [29] [http://www.sa.org.au/index.php?option=com\\_k2&view=item&id=7437:china's-class-struggle-environmentalism&Itemid=389](http://www.sa.org.au/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=7437:china's-class-struggle-environmentalism&Itemid=389)
- [30] <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/06/27/us-china-riot-idUSBRE85Q07G20120627>
- [31] <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/06/27/us-china-riot-idUSBRE85Q07G20120627>
- [32] <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/lynas-licensed-to-import-store-rare-earths-ore-court-told>
- [33] [http://www.sa.org.au/index.php?option=com\\_k2&view=item&id=7528:help-palea-win-the-fight-against-outsourcing&Itemid=389](http://www.sa.org.au/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=7528:help-palea-win-the-fight-against-outsourcing&Itemid=389)