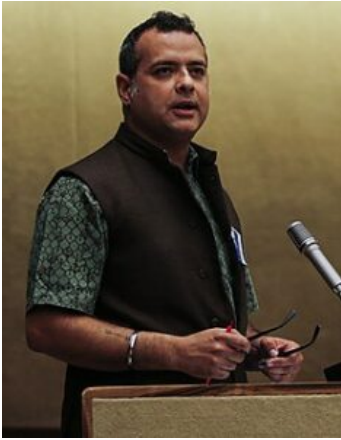


# The Choices That Australia Makes



*Vijay Prashad*

11-14-2024 ~ If you go to the bluff at Kings Park in Perth, Australia, you can overlook the Swan River and enjoy a remarkable view. Across the bay, there is a phalanx of steel and glass buildings that rise to the skies. Each of these buildings carries a sign that glistens in the sharp sun: BHP, Rio Tinto, Chevron, Deloitte, and others. Kings Park no longer survives merely with the patronage of the British King, who continues to claim sovereignty over Australia. Part of it is now named Rio Tinto Kings Park, needing the corporate profits from this enormous mining company to sustain its charms. Down one of the avenues of the park there are trees set apart by a few meters, and at the base of these trees are small markers for dead soldiers from past wars; these are not graves but remembrances that are crowned by Australian flags. The park brings together the three crucial pieces of Western Australia, this province of which Perth is the capital which is the size of Western Europe: the British monarchy, the mining companies and its affiliates, and the role of the military.

## *Of Kings*

A few days before I arrived in Canberra, an aboriginal senator, Lidia Thorpe, [interrupted](#) the celebration of King Charles III to say, “You are not my king. This is not your land.” It was a powerful demonstration against the treatment of Australia ever since the arrival of English ships to the country’s east in January 1788. In fact, the British crown does claim title to the entirety of the Australian landmass. King Charles III is head of the 56-country Commonwealth and the total land area of the Commonwealth [takes](#) up 21 percent of the world’s total land. It is

quite remarkable to realize that King Charles III [is nominally in charge of](#) merely 22 percent less than Queen Victoria (1819-1901).

The day after Senator Thorpe's statement, a group of aboriginal leaders met with King Charles III to discuss the theme of "sovereignty." In Sydney, Elder Allan Murray of the Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council welcomed the King to Gadigal land and [said](#), "We've got stories to tell, and I think you witnessed that story yesterday in Canberra. But the story is unwavering, and we've got a long way to achieve what we want to achieve and that's our own sovereignty." When Captain James Cook (1770) and Captain Arthur Phillip (1788) [arrived](#) on this Gadigal land, they were met by people who had lived in the area for tens of thousands of years. In 1789, a smallpox epidemic brought by the British killed 53 percent of the Gadigal, and eventually—through violence—they reduced the population to three in 1791. It is accurate, then, for Elder Murray to have said to the press after King Charles III left that "The Union Jack was put on our land without our consent. We've been ignored." What remained were *barrangal dyara* (skin and bones, as the Gadigal would have said). Given the value of the land in Sydney, the Gadigal clan would today be one of the richest groups in the world. But apart from a few descendants who do not have title to the land, the ghosts of the ancestors walk these streets.

### *Of Minerals*

Australia is one of the widest countries in the world, with a large desert in its middle section. Underneath its soil, which has been walked on by a range of Aboriginal communities for tens of thousands of years, is wealth that is estimated to be \$19.9 trillion. This estimate includes the country's holdings of coal, copper, iron ore, gold, uranium, and rare earth elements. In 2022, Australia's mining companies—which are also some of the largest in the world—[extracted](#) at least 27 minerals from the subsoil, including lithium (Australia is the world's largest producer of lithium, annually providing 52 percent of the global market's lithium).

On May 24, 2020, Rio Tinto's engineers and workers [blew](#) up a cave in the Pilbara area of Western Australia to expand their Brockman 4 iron ore mine. The cave in the Juukan Gorge had been used by the Puutu Kunti Kurrama people for 46,000 years and had been kept by them as a community treasure. In 2013, Rio Tinto approached the Western Australian government to seek an exemption to destroy the cave and to extend the mine. They received this exemption based on a law called the [Aboriginal Heritage Act of 1972](#), which had been drafted to favor

mining companies. Rio Tinto, with substantial operations in Western Australia and around the world, has a market capitalization of \$105.7 billion, making it—after BHP (market cap of \$135.5)—the second largest minerals company in the world (both Rio Tinto and BHP are headquartered in Melbourne). Hastily, BHP began to reconsider its permission to destroy 40 cultural sites for its South Flank iron mine extension in the Pilbara region (and after its investigation and conversation with the Banjima community) decided to save 10 sites.

Craig and Monique Oobagooma live in the northernmost homestead in Australia near the Robinson River. They are part of the Wanjina Wunggurr, whose lands are now [used](#) for the extraction of uranium and other metals and minerals. The uranium mines in the north are owned and operated by [Paladin Energy](#), another Perth-based mining company that also owns mines in Malawi and Namibia. There is also a large military base in nearby Yampi. Craig told me that when he walks his land, he can dig beneath the soil and find pink diamonds. But, he says, he puts them back. “They are sacred stones,” he says. Some parts of the land can be used for the betterment of his family, but not all of it. Not the sacred stones. And not the ancestral sites, of which there are only a few that remain.

### *Of Militaries*

In 2023, the governments of Australia and the United Kingdom [signed](#) an agreement to preserve “critical minerals” for their own development and security. Such an agreement is part of the New Cold War against China, to ensure that it does not directly own the “critical minerals.” Between 2022 and 2023, Chinese investment in mining [decreased](#) from AU\$1809 million to AU\$34 million. Meanwhile, Australian investment in building military infrastructure for the United States has increased dramatically, with the Australian government expanding the Tindal air base in Darwin (Northern Territory) to hold U.S. B-1 and B-52 nuclear bombers, expanding the submarine docking stations along the coastline of Western Australia, and expanding the Exmouth submarine and deep space communications facility. All of this is part of Australia’s historically high defense [budget](#) of \$37 billion.

In Sydney, near the Central Train station, I met Euranga, who lived in a tunnel which he had painted with the history of the Aboriginal peoples of Eora (Sydney). He had been part of the Stolen Generation, one in three Aboriginal children stolen from their families and raised in boarding schools. The school hurt his spirit, he told me. “This is our land, but it is also not our land,” he said. Beneath the land is

wealth, but it is being drained away by private mining companies and for the purposes of military force. The old train station nearby looks forlorn. There is no high-speed rail in vast Australia. Such a better way to spend its precious resources, as Euranga indicated in his paintings: embrace the worlds of the Aboriginal communities who have been so harshly displaced and build infrastructure for people rather than for wars.

*By Vijay Prashad*

*Author Bio:* This article was produced by [Globetrotter](#). Vijay Prashad is an Indian historian, editor, and journalist. He is a writing fellow and chief correspondent at Globetrotter. He is an editor of [LeftWord Books](#) and the director of [Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research](#). He has written more than 20 books, including [The Darker Nations](#) and [The Poorer Nations](#). His latest books are [On Cuba: Reflections on 70 Years of Revolution and Struggle](#), [Struggle Makes Us Human: Learning from Movements for Socialism](#), and (with Noam Chomsky) [The Withdrawal: Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan, and the Fragility of U.S. Power](#).

*Source:* Globetrotter