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## The Power Index: the rich crusaders exerting influence

By Paul Barry

We're calling them rich crusaders because they use their power and money to make a difference. These wealthy Australians don't just give to charity or donate to political parties; they use their cash to crusade for what they think is right. Sometimes it's their self-interest, sometimes it's the public interest. But always, their power is in their passion.

Gina Rinehart is a prime example. A billionaire 20 times over, the iron ore magnate is trying to buy influence in the political debate. Whether her 14% stakes in Fairfax Media and 10% of Network Ten will give her the voice she wants is not yet clear. But she already has Andrew Bolt as her TV megaphone and a right-wing shock jock from New Zealand, Paul Henry, as Ten's new morning TV host.

Graeme Wood is another rich person hoping to buy political change. His \$1.6 million donation to the Greens bankrolled the party's TV ad campaign during the 2010 federal election and helped them win the balance of power in the Senate. Wood also laid out \$10 million to buy a woodchip mill from forestry company Gunns so he could close it down and put an end to logging of native forests in southern Tasmania.

The irrepressible Dick Smith also qualifies as a rich crusader, with his tireless campaigns against greedy banks and ruthless supermarkets, and his latest push for a cap on population growth. Dick gives \$1 million to charity each year, and is constantly bullying other rich people to do the same. He's the noisiest, though not the richest, of the bunch.

But with other contenders it can be hard to know how to draw the line. Should someone like Geoff Cousins be included for his famous 2007 campaign against the Gunns pulp mill and his current war on Woodside's Kimberley gas hub? Or is he disqualified because he does not put much of his money on the line?

And should the Myer Foundation, one of Australia's most generous givers to charity, be included for funding Asialink and supporting indigenous programs, or are they simply philanthropists?

And what about that other mining billionaire, Twiggy Forrest, who has fought so long and hard against the mining tax but also spends so much time and money fighting Aboriginal disadvantage?

Such decisions are always hard, but crusades need a banner and a cause, so we've tried to limit our list to people or organisations that advocate change, or that try to sway the political debate. And, strangely enough, there aren't all that many of them.

Australia doesn't have anyone like the Koch brothers, the billionaire oilmen in the USA who fund America's ultra-right-wing Tea Party and have given \$100 million in the last 30 years to conservative think tanks like the Heritage Foundation and **Cato Institute**.

Nor, in fact, do we have many think tanks. A recent international survey could find only 29 in this country that were worthy of the name, which puts Australia on a par with Turkey (27) and the Dominican Republic (28), but well behind Argentina (137), the UK (286) and the USA (1815).

So don't we like thinking about stuff, or have we got the answers already?

At the risk of being howled down, **The Power Index** suggests two possible explanations for our paucity of political debate. One is that Australia has never been deeply divided: the socialist tradition was never strong here, and the spectrum of views has always been narrow. The second is that we don't have the same intellectual tradition as Britain, the USA and much of Europe. Maybe life was too hard for many years and we were too busy surviving. Maybe we're now too comfortable. But whatever it is, Australia hardly needs think tanks when its national motto is "she'll be right".

And no one's itching to fund them anyway.

When battle lines are drawn in this country, we rarely fight the age-old battles - between collectivism and individualism, or socialism and the free market - as many still do abroad.