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The Queen and [**Prince Philip**](http://www.smh.com.au/national/prince-philip-pokes-fun-at-gina-rinehart-20111028-1mmoz.html) were working their way around a garden party at Government House in Perth last October when the prince stopped to chat to a middle-aged woman in a broad-brimmed black hat. To his genial inquiry about why she was on the guest list, she replied that she was merely a loyal subject. He asked her again. "But she was incredibly modest - refused to say why she was there," says federal Liberal MP Barry Haase's daughter Danielle, who was standing near enough to hear the exchange. "He looked a bit annoyed, in fact, because he was looking for a straight answer. So he came out with something like, 'Perhaps it's because you have the largest hat in Western Australia.' She laughed, and he laughed, and then he moved on."

Prince Philip had just met Gina Rinehart, ranked by US business media company Forbes as the 19th most powerful woman in the world - 30 places ahead of Queen Elizabeth II. Rinehart is the richest Australian in history (and far richer than the Queen), with a net worth of about $10 billion. At least, that is one recent estimate. The truth is, her fortune is growing so fast that it is difficult for financial analysts to keep track of it. The 57-year-old mining magnate could overtake Mexican telecommunications mogul Carlos Slim and Microsoft founder Bill Gates to become the world's wealthiest individual, Forbes says, and she is "wielding her bank account for influence".

Rinehart is a person of strong convictions. Confident she knows what is best for this country, she increasingly seeks to sway public opinion - backing campaigns against Labor's mining tax and carbon tax, for instance, and sponsoring climate-change denialists. She has also begun investing in the media, paying $165 million for a 10 per cent stake in the Ten television network and close to $100 million for about four per cent of Fairfax Media (publisher of Good Weekend). By her standards, of course, these sums are small change. Perth business writer Tim Treadgold points out that if Rinehart were listed on the stock exchange, she would be valued at more than Fairfax, Ten, the Seven network, David Jones and Qantas. Combined.

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Considering her clout, she has a remarkably low profile. The prince isn't the only one to have found Rinehart evasive - she routinely stonewalls journalists' inquiries and declines requests for interviews. What strikes me as I start researching this story is how little we really know about her. That, and how nervous people get at the mention of her name.

"She's a person who likes to keep to herself," says the Nationals' normally loquacious Senate leader, Barnaby Joyce. "I don't think I'll be saying much more than that actually." Rinehart took Joyce to Hyderabad to attend a lavish wedding hosted by a business associate last year. But the senator has no desire to discuss the Indian trip or anything else relating to Rinehart. "I'm mates with her and I know she likes her privacy," he says. "If I was to start talking about her, then I suppose she wouldn't be mates with me."

Rinehart is the daughter of Lang Hancock, the West Australian prospector credited with discovering mountains of iron ore in the state's rugged north-west, where his family had been pastoralists for generations. The Pilbara, as the region is known, is twice the size of Victoria. As an only child and Hancock's sole heir, Rinehart grew up knowing she would one day control vast stretches of mineral-rich outback. "Is she as tough as you?" a television reporter once asked Hancock, who replied, "Oh, tougher. Yeah, by a long way."

Her voice is soft and her manner demure but it has never been a good idea to cross Rinehart. "Gina tries to be nice to everybody," wrote one of her father's biographers, Robert Duffield, when she was 22, but "if they disappoint her, or annoy her, or in any way seem to threaten her, the friendly filter in the opal-clear eyes drops to reveal a more steely blue ... It is not anger, for anger is an uncontrolled emotion and Gina despises people who lose control of themselves, for whatever reason."

**The princess of the Pilbara doesn't shout.** She sues. While her friends stay silent about her for fear of falling out of favour, her critics watch their words because they don't want to get a writ. Lawyer Nick Styant-Browne knows from personal experience how relentless a litigant she can be. "Indefatigable. She does not give up," says Styant-Browne, who acted for Hancock's third wife, Rose, in the epic battle that erupted when the old man died in 1992. Styant-Browne figures that by the time the dust settled more than a decade later, Rinehart had spent tens of millions in legal fees. "She went through an extraordinary number of lawyers, including the best in the country," he says. "She kind of exhausted the Perth bar and then went to the Melbourne and Sydney bars. When she'd lose a round, she would retain a new set of lawyers to dream up some new theory to continue the fight."

Now Rinehart is embroiled in an even more explosive family dispute. At stake are billions of dollars and the future of what she has referred to, without irony, as "the House of Hancock". Three of her four children - John, Bianca and Hope - are attempting to have her removed as trustee of the Hope Margaret Hancock Trust, which holds about 25 per cent of Hancock Prospecting Pty Ltd, the main family company. Only Ginia, her youngest daughter, has sided with Rinehart. "It's a terribly sad situation," says Gloria Schultz, wife of federal Liberal MP Alby Schultz and a close friend of Rinehart. "Gina loves her children. Adores her grandchildren. I know she is deeply hurt by it."

Others sympathise with the kids, saying they are justified in arguing that they have waited long enough for their inheritance and that Rinehart, who is executive chairman of Hancock Prospecting, has stymied their attempts to play a meaningful role in the family business. "Growing the family company is all I have wanted to do," Rinehart's eldest child and only son, John, now 36, told Steve Pennells of The West Australian newspaper as long ago as 2003, "but my mother's attitude makes this impossible. She does not want to relinquish one ounce of control and has a very narrow view of business and relationships."

When I call Hancock Prospecting, a receptionist tells me pleasantly that she cannot put me through to anyone. "It's company policy, from our chairman," she says. "I'm sure you can appreciate we get hundreds and hundreds of calls."

Yes, but ... why block them? "It's just something that we're asked to do. Everything is sent in via email."

I submit a request to interview Rinehart, without much hope that she will agree to it. A person who has known her a long time says she divides the world into friends and enemies: unless you actively support her, she presumes that you are against her. And since journalists aim for impartiality, they fall into the latter category. "All journalists are communists," he says, summing up his interpretation of Rinehart's attitude, "and all media proprietors are weak." Despite her Fairfax shareholding, she is said to particularly dislike reporters from this company. Waiting to hear back from her, I cross my fingers that she hasn't read an article about the Government House garden party on the websites of The Age and The Sydney Morning Herald. It is headlined "Prince Philip pokes fun at Gina Rinehart", and quotes a bystander who claims to have heard the prince say, "That hat could poke someone's eye out."

Tim Treadgold, who writes for Forbes magazine, says that after Rinehart knocked back one of his interview requests, she sent him a story about her business that he thought read as if she had written it herself. "It purported to be based on my questions and her answers," Treadgold says. "But I'd never asked the questions. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry."

The email that arrives for me from Hancock Prospecting is from "Mark Bickerton, Informa­tion Manager", but the way it is worded makes me wonder whether Rinehart had a hand in composing it. "Regarding the recent discussion with HRH at Government House in West Australia," it says, "other media who were present reported it was a very happy and relaxed discussion between HRH and Mrs Rinehart ... Your publication however chose to make the extraordinary and unbelievable claim that HRH told Mrs Rinehart that her non-pointy hat was pointy and may poke someone's eye out! Obviously HRH would have seen many hats over the years and would not choose to stop to speak to someone for the purpose of criticising their hat, including a hat worn in honour of his wife, the Queen. This is an insult by the SMH to not only Mrs Rinehart, but importantly HRH."

And no, she doesn't want to be interviewed.

**In the film** The Devil Wears Prada**,** staff at Runway magazine skitter about the office in anxious circles when they get word that their editor, Miranda Priestly (Meryl Streep, in ice-queen mode), is about to make her morning entrance. One of Rinehart's former employees says she found the scene too familiar to be funny. "The phone call would come: 'She's on her way', and the staff would go into a panic. It's amazing, really, that someone can have that effect on everyone."

Rinehart is the sort of boss who inspires devotion in some and rebellion in others. "She treats her employees well but you don't cross her: it's 'Yes, Mrs Rinehart', 'No, Mrs Rinehart', " says one who found the atmosphere so oppressive she eventually left. Another person, who insisted on calling her Gina ("I was older than her") and now works for another resources group, says Rinehart's management style did not sit well with some senior staff. "As an executive, you want to have a bit of autonomy and know you've got some areas where you can make decisions," he says. "But she used to make all the major calls. And of course, if you end up disagreeing with her, 'You're outta here!' " He laughs. "Doesn't take 'no' well."

At the headquarters of Hancock Prospecting in West Perth, there is a fingerprint-recognition security system and the glass in the reception area is rumoured to be bulletproof. Former employees describe a corporate culture so guarded and secretive that they sometimes suspected Rinehart was the only one who really knew what was going on. Fred Madden, who resigned in 1994 after nine months as chief executive (and, unlike most departing employees, refused to sign a confidentiality agreement), says he found dealing with Rinehart extremely difficult. "You didn't know where you stood with her," he says. "You just didn't know where she was coming from, or where she was going."

The fortress mentality appears to extend to the Hancock family compound in the expensive Perth suburb of Dalkeith. Set in verdant grounds overlooking the Swan River are two large houses - one of them bought by Hancock in the 1950s, the other built for Rinehart during her first marriage. Cameras are mounted above the closed front gates, and signs say "Danger High Voltage" and "Electric Fence".

Rinehart is rarely seen out and about. Many were surprised when in June 2010 she joined fellow iron-ore tycoon Andrew Forrest in addressing a rally against the federal government's proposed mining tax. She even led an "Axe the Tax" chant. Tim Treadgold says drily: "The billionaires, united, will never be defeated. Who told her it was okay to stand on the back of a flatbed truck in her pearls - very large pearls - and protest about a tax which is designed to spread the revenue from Australia's resources boom through the community?"

But she got her message across. Two weeks after the rally, Labor dumped prime minister Kevin Rudd, the tax's chief advocate, and replaced him with Julia Gillard, who immediately announced her intention to reach a compromise with the mining bosses. It has been estimated that Gillard's watered-down tax, which was passed by the House of Representatives last November, could bring $10 billion less into the government's coffers each year. Meanwhile, according to BRW magazine, Rinehart's net worth more than doubled from $4.75 billion in 2010 to $10.3 billion in 2011.

**From her father, Rinehart inherited** an income stream that at the current iron-ore price - about $140 a tonne - amounts to around $100 million a year. This flows from a deal struck in 1962 by Hancock and his business partner, Peter Wright, who transferred leases in the Hamersley Range to mining giant Rio Tinto (then CRA) in exchange for a royalty of 2.5 per cent of the revenue from ore sales. Hancock never realised his burning ambition to own iron-ore mines, but Rinehart is making up for that. In 2007, in equal partnership with Rio Tinto, she opened the huge Hope Downs mine in the Pilbara. Her next project, the even larger Roy Hill mine, 277 kilometres south of Port Hedland, is expected to start exporting ore in 2014.

She also has valuable coal leases (though she sold most of her assets in Queensland's Galilee Basin to Indian conglomerate GVK for $1.3 billion last year) and she is a partner in Jacaranda Alliance, which explores for uranium, lead, gold, diamonds and petroleum. Not that she really needs any of these sidelines. Treadgold calculates that the Hope Downs mine alone is likely to deliver her an annual profit of more than $2 billion (about $40 million a week) when it reaches full production of 45 million tonnes a year. "There's no doubt she has the potential to be the world's richest person," he says. "It depends on China. If China's demand for iron ore, coal and other commodities continues to grow, then she's perfectly placed to ride the dragon to incredible wealth."

Despite this, she has a reputation for penny-pinching. One former employee tells of being instructed to phone suppliers of office equipment to haggle over even the smallest bills. Another says he got the impression that Rinehart personally scrutinised staff expenses claims. "She had a thing in the back of her mind that everybody, and I mean everybody, was out to do her down, to take a dollar off her," he says. "She trusted nobody and assumed the worst of everybody."

What no one questions is Rinehart's work ethic. She reportedly employs two personal assistants, one to start early and the other for the late shift. "There is no downtime whatsoever for Gina Rinehart," says Liberal MP Teresa Gambaro, one of three parliamentarians - along with Barnaby Joyce and deputy federal opposition leader Julie Bishop - to accompany Rinehart to the Hyderabad wedding of the granddaughter of GVK chairman G. V. Krishna Reddy. This was shortly before Rinehart and GVK finalised the Galilee Basin deal. "She was there to make sure the business was concluded," says Gambaro, who came home impressed by Rinehart's determination and exhausted by her conversation. "I haven't met anyone else who can talk coal for nine hours." All the way to India? "Pretty much."

I email Mark Bickerton to ask if Rinehart can suggest friends for me to interview, and if I can check facts with her. No, he says, not unless she can have a draft of the story. What becomes clear is that Rinehart feels sorely underappreciated in Australia. "In Namibia, there is an Entrepreneurial Promotion Academy designed to encourage entre­preneurs who Mrs Rinehart met at CHOGM business," Bickerton writes, "and they want entrepreneurs in their country! Other countries have asked Mrs Rinehart to become a resident of their country as they also value entrepreneurs."

Bickerton points out that Rinehart was named "Masterclass CEO of the Year" at the 2011 Global Leadership Awards. I find out later that these awards are presented by a bi-monthly Malaysian magazine with a print run of just 15,000 copies. Undoubtedly an achievement, though.

Advertising and broadcasting supremo John Singleton has been a confidant of Rinehart for more than four decades and it seems to him that she has one overriding goal: "She sees it as her destiny to fulfil Lang's dream. And nothing will stop her from doing that."

During one of her estrangements from her son, John, Rinehart started grooming her oldest daughter, Bianca, to take the reins of the family firm. Now it appears that [**Ginia**](http://www.smh.com.au/wa-news/rinehart-eyes-dynasty-succession-20120110-1psht.html), 25, her youngest child, is the anointed one. She has reportedly been appointed by Rinehart to the boards of three family companies. What is this about?

"I'm not a psychologist, but I'm a close observer of the family," Singleton says. "It's because the business comes first. Being a parent is secondary. It's just, 'Where do they fit into the dynasty? Are they iron or are they coal or are they uranium?' If they don't fit into the company, there's no role for them."

Singleton was in his 20s and Rinehart in her early teens when they first met. It was Hancock who was really his friend back then, but over the years Singleton spent a lot of time watching father and daughter interact. "I was with them as much as anyone was," he says. And here is what he knows: to understand Rinehart, it is important to look at her relationship with Langley George Hancock.

**The so-called king of the Pilbara** was regarded by his admirers as an eccentric visionary who changed Australia by seeing its potential as one of the world's great mining nations. His critics saw him as a ruthless opportunist, interested only in enriching himself. In the 1930s, he established the infamous blue asbestos mine at Wittenoom, then suggested that those who died from asbestos-related cancer were somehow themselves to blame. He cheerfully did business with the brutal Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceausescu. Politically, he was so far to the right that at times even his close friend, Queens­land premier Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen, must have blushed. Racist? At one point, Hancock suggested forcing unemployed indigenous Aust­ralians - particularly "no-good half-castes" - to collect their welfare cheques from a central location: "And when they had gravitated there, I would dope the water up so that they were sterile and would breed themselves out in the future."

His daughter worshipped him. "I think my father is nearly perfect," Rinehart said at the age of 12 on a BBC documentary, Man of Iron. Her mother, Hope, who was Hancock's second wife, told a magazine that she had overheard Gina say she didn't intend to sit for her junior school certificate because "Mummy didn't, and look what happened to her. She married Daddy." Hope had breast cancer, and though she lived long enough to dandle two grandchildren on her knee, was often unwell. Hancock was the dominant figure in Rinehart's childhood. "They were just inseparable," Singleton says.

Even when she was a weekly boarder at St Hilda's Anglican School for Girls in Perth, Hancock often arrived in his white Jaguar to visit her in the afternoons. "He'd park in the driveway," remembers one of Rinehart's former dorm-mates, "and Gina would spend the hours after school and before dinner in the car, talking to her father." Hancock later suggested that both had resented the extent to which Rinehart's education kept them apart. "School was just a nasty interlude to put up with," he said. "Then she tried a year doing economics at Sydney University but she found out it was basically communist ..."

Rinehart told Robert Duffield, author of the Hancock biography Rogue Bull, that the university taught "the wrong things". Duffield noted that she parroted Hancock's political views, "mastering all his stock tracts, phrase by phrase". Singleton was aware of this, too: "I mean, a conversation with Gina was a conversation with Lang. They both had the same fanaticism ... If Lang paused, Gina could finish the sentence."

Their pet subjects included the desirability of Western Australian secession and the feasibility of using a nuclear bomb to create a harbour on the north-west coast. Businessman and former NSW Liberal MP Michael Yabsley says the young Rinehart could be pleasant company, though her refusal to listen to views that differed from her own had a tendency to kill dinner-party conversation. "You'd wait for it to be derailed because she didn't like something that someone said," Yabsley says. "It was always pretty tense."

Rinehart was Hancock's eager apprentice, travelling the globe with him as he trained her to take over the mining behemoth he predicted Hancock Prospecting would become. He called her his "right-hand man" and addressed her as "young fella". At the same time, he expected her to be a decorative addition to business meetings. "He used to pick at her about her dress and her style and her behaviour," remembers an old family friend. "He used to keep picking at her if she put on weight. He'd say, 'Where's my pretty girl?' " Much later, when father and daughter fell out over his marriage to Rose, Hancock taunted Rinehart about the kilos she had gained. In a vitriolic letter that surfaced during one of the court cases after his death, he said he wanted to remember her as the "neat, trim, capable and attractive young lady" she had been rather than "the slothful, vindictive and devious baby elephant that you have become".

Rinehart was only 18 when she married Greg Milton, a young Englishman who had worked in a Hancock-owned hardware store, in 1973. "I think Lang had higher hopes than Greg for Gina," says Gloria Schultz. Still, the groom was nothing if not malleable, even changing his surname to something closer to Hancock. (He picked Hayward, his grandmother's maiden name.) He later told Hancock biographer Debi Marshall he bitterly regretted that after the divorce he agreed to stay away from his children, John and Bianca, "to save them the confusion between their lifestyle and mine". Marshall says John was overcome with emotion when he learnt she had tracked down Milton, who had reverted to his original surname. She says John asked, "Can you put me in touch with Dad?"

Rinehart's next husband was an American tax attorney almost four decades her senior. Gina was 28 when the couple wed in Las Vegas in 1983. Frank Rinehart was 65. A search of US court records reveals that he had been convicted of tax fraud in 1977 - he received a one-year suspended jail sentence and was briefly barred from practising law. Nevertheless, Gina has described him as "the finest person I've ever known". Frank adopted John and Bianca, then he and Gina had their own children, Hope and Ginia. Until his death in 1990, he and the family divided their time between Australia and the US.

Frank has one surviving child from his previous marriage: Chris Rinehart, a flight instructor in Idaho. "Gina prefers the family not interact with the press," he emails. "I will respect her wishes and decline an interview."

**John Singleton has a theory about** Gina's marriage to Frank Rinehart, which took place the same year her mother died and her father, then 73, started an affair with Rose Lacson, a flamboyant 34-year-old from the Philippines who had been hired to look after his house. "I think it was just to get square," Singleton says. "If Lang's going to run off with a Filipina housekeeper, she's going to run off with an American geriatric ... He found a new daughter and she found a new dad." (The obvious flaw here is that Gina and Frank tied the knot three months before Rose took the job with Hancock.)

Rose was a seriously big spender who persuaded Hancock to outlay millions on the construction of a southern-plantation-style palace she called Prix d'Amour. She threw him parties, got him to dye his hair and, by most accounts, put a spring in his step. "I rather liked her," says long-time family friend Ron Manners. "I thought she was good for Lang." Rinehart loathed her, referring to her in a letter to Hancock as "a Filipina whore".

Father and daughter were reconciled before he died, but afterwards Rinehart went after his widow with all guns blazing, not only pursuing her for money and property but hiring private detectives to find evidence to support her belief that Rose had contributed to Hancock's death. Rinehart accused her stepmother of everything from swapping Hancock's medications to causing him lethal levels of stress, but an inquest held in 2001 as a result of her lobbying came to the same conclusion as previous inquiries: that the 82-year-old had died of natural causes.

What made headlines were courtroom revelations that Rinehart had paid potential witnesses (more than $200,000 in one instance). Coroner Alastair Hope spoke of gross irregularities in Rinehart's private investigation, and of the "potential corrupting effect on the evidence of witnesses", but did not recommend action. Jim McGinty, then attorney-general in the Labor state government, described the payments as "one of the most unsavoury and improper episodes ever seen in a Western Australian court".

Coroner Hope had heard evidence from a Hancock Prospecting director that Rine­hart paid one person, Hilda Kickett, to stay away from the inquest. The daughter of an Aboriginal woman who worked on Han­cock's family property, Mulga Downs, Kickett has long claimed that Hancock was her father.

Thanks partly to Rinehart's tireless efforts to promote his achievements, Han­cock is regarded as something of a folk hero in Western Australia. As McGinty, now retired from politics, says, "In the west, there's an affection towards people who go out there and give it a go." Tim Treadgold makes the point that Rinehart too has given it a go: "She can be incredibly proud of her achievement in taking her inheritance and building substantially on it."

Yet in Perth, Rinehart seems to be a far less popular figure than her father. Michael Wright, the son of Hancock's late business partner, says of Lang, "He was a wonderful fella. Slightly mad, but I loved him dearly." Of Rinehart, who has been fighting him for years over aspects of the division of the partnership's spoils, he has nothing good to say. Her charitable gestures range from contributions to a cancer centre at St John of God Hospital in Subiaco to prizes for the best Christmas lights in Queensland coal towns. But some contend she is much less generous than others who have made billions digging minerals out of the West Australian desert. "She's unknown in philanthropic circles," McGinty says. (Hancock wanted a cardiac institute established in the family's name but his finances were in disarray when he died and Rinehart successfully petitioned for his estate to be made bankrupt, which meant there was no money for the institute, nor anything for the handful of loyal friends and employees he had named as beneficiaries.)

**Rinehart is "one of the most fascinating Australians** of our time", says Fairfax journalist Adele Ferguson, whose book about her is due out in July. But from a distance, her life can look oddly unenviable. Newspapers reported in 1997 that Rinehart had reached a confidential out-of-court settlement with her former live-in security guard, Bob Thompson, who had filed a sexual harassment complaint against her. In a long article in Woman's Day, Thompson said Rinehart became infatuated with him and wanted to marry him, despite his being engaged to someone else. "I told her over and over I wasn't interested," he said, but "she wouldn't take no for an answer". Thompson made plain that in some ways he felt sorry for Rinehart: "She's just incredibly lonely and isolated."

Singleton tells me Rinehart has no interests besides mining. "There is no social life," he says. "It's just work."

Rinehart and Singleton have something in common: both are big fans - and employers - of Andrew Bolt. Soon after Rinehart bought into Ten and got a seat on the board, the television network gave the right-wing newspaper columnist his own Sunday morning program. Bolt's voice is also heard on 2GB, the Sydney radio station that is majority-owned by Singleton and home to two of the country's most strident talk-back hosts, Alan Jones and Ray Hadley. Says Singleton, who shares Rinehart's views on mining and taxes: "We have been able to overtly and covertly attack governments ... Because we have people employed by us like Andrew Bolt and Alan Jones and Ray Hadley who agree with her thinking about the development of our resources, we act in concert in that way."

Rinehart and her lobby group, Australians for Northern Development and Economic Vision, have been campaigning for mining companies to be allowed to import cheap labour from overseas. In Jim McGinty's opinion, decent wages are one way the benefits of the mining boom can flow through the Australian community. "But Gina wants to cut even that off," he says incredulously. "I wonder, how many billions do you need, really, to be happy?"

Gloria Schultz has no doubt that her friend's motives are pure: "She really believes that mining and the money it brings are important to Australia. She's very patriotic." Asked if she thinks Rinehart is happy, Schultz hesitates. "Most of the time," she says. But a lot has been sacrificed in the name of the father. "It hasn't been an easy ride for Gina Rinehart."