

THE TITAN BEHIND TITANIC II

A FEW YEARS AGO THE NAME CLIVE PALMER WOULD HAVE DRAWN A BLANK LOOK FROM MOST AUSTRALIANS. AS **NIGEL BOWEN** DISCOVERS, NOW THE WHOLE WORLD IS TALKING ABOUT THE QUEENSLAND MINING MAGNATE WHO'S DEVOTING AN ESTIMATED HALF A BILLION DOLLARS TO BUILDING *TITANIC 2.0*.

There's something of the early 20th century tycoon about Clive Palmer that makes him the ideal individual to rebuild a ship that launched and, notoriously, almost immediately sank a century ago. In an age of circumspect business leaders unwilling or unable to depart from a PR-approved script, Palmer is an Antipodean throwback to the likes of Andrew Carnegie, Cornelius Vanderbilt or Henry Ford, the kind of redoubtable captains of industry who dreamed big dreams, launched world-changing enterprises and fearlessly called it like they saw it.

Like the ship he's in the process of reincarnating, it can be difficult disentangling historical fact from entertaining embellishment when it comes to Clive Palmer, not least because the man himself is given to the odd colourful claim. Earlier this year, for example, he told the ABC's Tony Jones he'd door-knocked four million homes on behalf of the National Party since 1969, before later taking to Twitter to downgrade the figure to 400,000 (which still works out as an impressive one home an hour, every hour, for the last 43 years).

Nonetheless, from the various accounts Palmer has given to the media over the years, his bio appears to go something like this: baby Clive is born in Melbourne in 1954, to Nancy and George Palmer. Palmer senior was a silent movie star of the 1920s who went on to set up the first commercial radio stations in Australia and act as media adviser to Prime Minister Joe Lyons, but despite this illustrious career his son recalls being brought up in "relatively poor" circumstances.

As a young child, Palmer suffered from life-threateningly bad asthma. At age seven or eight he had an attack so severe that his heart stopped beating and he blacked out. He regained consciousness on an operating table to find a doctor giving him a cardiac massage. As he told *Australian Story* earlier this year, "That was an interesting point in my life, because it made me realise we've got nothing to fear about life. We've only got death that awaits all of us, so the most important thing about life is to use the time you've got and not to be intimidated and worried about who you are... when you go through a near-death experience you tend to value life... and the opportunities you've got. I guess that refers to me even today [in] that I'm not frightened to say what I think."

Told his son would be dead within a year if he didn't

escape the polluted air of Melbourne's Williamstown, George Palmer moved his family up to Surfers Paradise, where his once sickly child thrived, at least athletically, becoming a champion runner and playing on the wing with Southport Tigers rugby league club.

While Palmer recalls being "very poor as a scholar" and found the school curriculum "very boring", he nonetheless managed to get into the University of Queensland during the tumultuous Whitlam era. According to the Palmer legend, he dropped out of law school and got a job in order to be able to afford to take a fellow student who'd caught his eye (and was soon to become his wife) out to dinner. After missing out on an interview for a real estate agent job because, at 21, he was considered too young for the position, he rang back, pretended to be 31, got the job and earned about \$300,000 in his first six months, making him the "top-selling person in Australia".

By 29, having launched his own business, GSS Property Sales, during the Gold Coast property boom of the late 1970s and early 1980s, he had made his first 40 million dollars and retired to travel the world with his wife. A couple of years later, bored senseless, he went back into business and began, among several other ventures, buying up iron ore deposits. Around this time he also befriended his boyhood hero, Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen, and became a major donor to and powerbroker within the National Party.

Despite his own conservatism, Palmer has never had any issue dealing with communists. In 1962 he spent half a year in China with his father and remembers sitting on Chairman Mao's knee. In the mid 1980s, he headed to the Soviet Union to flog iron ore to Mikhail Gorbachev and



THE IT CROWD
Palmer with his second wife Anna and former US president Bill Clinton in New York in 2011.



established a relationship with Russia's governing class that endures to this day. But it was a nation that, after a fashion, maintained the Marxist faith that was to propel Palmer from being simply seriously wealthy to eye-wateringly rich. In the 1980s, long before most recognised the possibilities thrown up by China's inevitable industrialisation, Palmer set about cultivating contacts in a country where establishing strong business relationships can take many years. When the China-fuelled mining boom took off, so did both Palmer's privately owned minerals company Mineralogy and his public profile.

Strange as it seems now, up until half a decade ago Palmer was relatively unknown outside of Australian political and business circles. It was not until he got into a stoush, which rages to this day, with the federal government over the divvying up of natural resources profits that he started making the front page regularly. Along with fellow mining moguls Gina Rinehart and Andrew Forrest, Palmer was caricatured, particularly by Treasurer Wayne Swan, as the archetypal greedy

capitalist. Given Palmer's reported to be worth somewhere between \$5 to \$8 billion and owns lavish homes in Brisbane, the Gold Coast, Perth and Beijing, three private jets, two helicopters, two golf courses, a horse stud, a nickel smelter, a five-star resort, more luxury boats than he can keep track of (more on that shortly) and 160 billion tonnes of iron ore reserves in the Pilbarra Ranges, it wasn't difficult for senior Labor figures to paint Palmer as a self-interested plutocrat.

The truth is rather more complex. Palmer's life has not been without hardship. In 2006 his beloved wife of 22 years died of cancer, leaving him with two young children to raise. (He later remarried the widow of a close friend, who had also died from cancer, and had a third child). Like Forrest, he has a long-standing interest in tackling Indigenous disadvantage and is somewhere to the left of the Greens when it comes to welcoming asylum-seeking boatpeople. He's also a big supporter of the Salvation Army, an organisation he worked for while at university. Unlike many of his rich list colleagues, Palmer built his fortune from

MAIDEN VOYAGE
Titanic at dock before she met her destiny.

scratch and has given plenty of it away, to political parties, charities and employees. Given all this, Palmer's presumably telling the truth when he claims to be interested in money not for its own sake but for what it allows him to do. And one of the things it's now allowing him to do, as he tells *Ocean*, is rebuild what must be, after Noah's Ark, the most famous ship ever to set sail.

When asked about the genesis of *Titanic II*, Palmer tells *Ocean*, "The Chinese are in the top 70 per cent for building container vessels but in the bottom two per cent when it comes to providing passenger vessels, so they said to me, 'How do we break into the market?' and I said, 'Let's build the *Titanic*!' It will be great, it will show off the competitiveness of Chinese shipbuilders."

Palmer's suggestion must strike fear into the hearts of European shipbuilders, who've long accounted for 75 per cent of the luxury ship market while China, which presently lays claim to less than three per cent of it, has confined itself to constructing utilitarian container vessels. Palmer's shipping company, Blue Star Lines, has contracted Deltamarin, a Finnish-based ship design and marine engineering company, best known for *Oasis of the Seas*, *Celebrity Solstice* and *Celebrity Equinox*, to oversee the project with the state-owned, CSC Jinling Shipyard, founded in Nanjing in 1952, responsible for building the vessel.

Questions have been raised as to whether the Chinese have the experience and skill set to pull off recreating the *Titanic* but Markku Kanerva, Deltamarin's Director of Sales, has no doubt both his firm and CSC Jinling Shipyard are up to recreating the opulence that made the *Titanic* world-famous even before it met its tragic fate. Kanerva says, "Deltamarin has been involved in the development of several comparable cruise ships and cruise ferries, such as the development of the first Disney Cruise Line ships. We also participated in the development of *The World*, the world's first apartment cruise ship." As for doubts about the supposedly inexperienced Chinese, Kanerva notes, "Seventy to 80 per cent of a cruise ship is developed by turnkey subcontractors and suppliers, so it is more a question of logistics, project management and the supplier network than the shipyard work. And many of the European suppliers already have their material purchase or production in China."

It's no simple task building a ship to century-old designs but Palmer is determined that modern-day passengers should undertake a journey that mirrors that of the original *Titanic*'s passengers as closely as possible. When it was built, the *Titanic* was the largest liner in the world,

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weighing 40,000 tonnes and being just under 270 metres long and 53 metres high. According to the Preliminary General Arrangement Plan Palmer released on July 17, *Titanic II* will be as long as its forebear, but 25,000 tonnes heavier and 4.2 metres wider (its draft will also be smaller by three metres). Palmer, who employed the services of a historical research team during the design process, says all the major changes for *Titanic II* – welding rather than riveting; a bulbous bow for greater fuel efficiency; an enlarged rudder and bow thrusters for increased manoeuvrability; and four-stroke medium-speed diesel generating sets manufactured by Wärtsilä (two 4,400 kilowatt 12-cylinder 12V46F and two 9,600 kilowatt 8L46F engines) instead of steam engines and coal-fired boilers – will be under the waterline. Two of the four funnels on the modern edition will be purely for show and house public viewing decks.

Above the waterline, Palmer promises, *Titanic II* will be a near identical replica, with just a few concessions made to modern safety regulations and the comfort of 21st century passengers and crew. Like the original, *Titanic II* will have nine decks, complete with first, second and third class, officer and crew accommodation. Reassuringly, a new safety deck with plenty of lifeboats has

TITANIC'S HEART WILL GO ON
Right: *Titanic*'s grand staircase.
Below: Anna and Clive Palmer with their daughter.



been inserted between D and C decks. G deck has been redesigned to feature crew accommodation, laundry, stores and machinery and there's also escape stairs, service elevators, air conditioning and fire zones that weren't on the 1912 version, but they've been made as unobtrusive as possible. Just like the first *Titanic*, there will be onboard gymnasiums, swimming pools, libraries, fine-dining restaurants and luxury (at least for some) cabins. Conditions in first, second and third class will all

the men and women who served in the entertainment groups on the *Titanic*."

When asked about his own armada of recreational craft, Palmer is vague in the way only those with lots of money but very little time to indulge their hobbies can be. He first admits to having "a couple of boats" before later volunteering he has "a Horizon 100-footer, a 70-foot yacht and about 10 other smaller boats that are all different sizes." Like his father, Clive Palmer enjoys travelling on cruise



reproduce what was provided back in the more socially stratified Edwardian era.

Palmer's determination to keep the *Titanic* experience as historically authentic as possible seems to stem from his love of James Cameron's mega-grossing 1996 movie. Indeed, he tells *Ocean* that his interest in the story of the *Titanic* was piqued, "Ever since I saw the movie I've been having a good think about it. When I read up on it I was fascinated by the opulence of the first-class section and the courage [passengers and crew demonstrated]."

"One hundred years have gone by and the work they did 100 years ago is the work we're reproducing and celebrating. The vessel is going to be the same, have the same design work and interior, to give everybody a chance to realise what it was like back in 1912. Passengers will be able to book a ticket for six days across the Atlantic and have two days each in first, second and third class or they can just book for one class. Third class will be exactly like it was: you'll be sharing a bathroom, having Irish stew, dancing around the drum."

If that's the case, surely Palmer has hired Celine Dion to belt out *My Heart Will Go On* on the maiden voyage? "Certainly, everyone's heart will go on with *Titanic II*. We've been giving some thought to having a string quartet as a tribute to

ships (he was on the *QEII* surrounded by geriatrics doing an aerobics class when he decided he really needed to come out of retirement and get back to work) though he only gets out on one of his own boats "four or five times a year" and has never chartered a vessel. When asked about reports he bought his daughter a \$5.3 million, 30-metre yacht in 2009 for her 15th birthday he scoffs that the story was "a bit of a beat-up, you know what the media are like" and that he'd actually purchased it for himself. Has he learnt anything out on the water that's been useful in business, I enquire? "Steady as she goes!" he laughs.

I sense my allotment of Clive Palmer's exceedingly valuable time is drawing to a close so I pose the logical last questions.

Does he think he's tempting fate by rebuilding the *Titanic*, a ship that claimed the lives of 1,514 passengers and crew?

"No, because there have been plenty of ships that have sunk that have had other ships built [to the same design] after them."

So you'll be one of the 1680 passengers on the maiden voyage, travelling from London to New York in 2016?

"I hope so."

And then, with an abrupt, "All the best, mate, see ya," Clive Palmer hangs up. He's a very busy man, with a very big boat to get built. ○