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EAST TIMOR-AUSTRALIA MARITIME BORDER MAJOR ISSUE FOR SEVERAL BRISBANE PARISHES

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Divided territory: “The seabed boundary between the two neighbours represents only 1.8 per cent of Australia’s entire seabed border, but takes in the Greater Sunrise gas field worth an estimated \$40 billion dollars in government revenues.”

BRISBANE parishes are using the election campaign to press Federal politicians on one of the most divisive international issues on Australia’s doorstep – drawing a fair maritime boundary between Timor-Leste and Australia.

The seabed boundary between the two neighbours represents only 1.8 per cent of Australia’s entire seabed border, but takes in the Greater Sunrise gas field worth an estimated \$40 billion in government revenues.

Experts agree that if international law were applied the rich deposits would most likely fall within

Timor-Leste territory.

The Timor-Leste Companions of the Catholic Communities of Grovely, Samford and Mitchelton are a parish group focused on building friendship and solidarity, and recognising the issues of concern to the Timorese community, including a resolution of the sea boundary dispute.

The group has a faith partnership with a sister parish St John de Brito in the Timorese town of Liquica.

“Our main idea is to pin down our politicians on the maritime border issue,” group member Martin Powell said.

“We want a fair outcome, and frankly it’s time to draw the line.”

The Timor-Leste Companions recently asked local Federal Member for Dickson, Immigration Minister Peter Dutton, whether he was prepared to advocate within his party for a fair resolution within the next three years.

“In previous negotiations Australia and Timor-Leste were unable to reach agreement on permanent boundaries,” Mr Dutton said.

“To resolve this impasse, Australia and Timor-Leste concluded three treaties that provide for the co-operative development of the oil and gas resources of the Timor Sea.”

He said this type of provisional arrangement was actively encouraged by international law, and that Timor-Leste received 90 per cent of the petroleum revenue from the Joint Petroleum Development Area and had accrued a US\$16.2 billion Petroleum Fund.

Mr Dutton said Timor-Leste would receive 50 per cent of Greater Sunrise revenue even though about 80 per cent of Greater Sunrise was in an area where Australia had exclusive seabed jurisdiction.

“Reopening the Timor Sea treaties would undermine investment certainty and delay the flow of revenue to both countries,” he said.

However, Timorese leaders see the issue differently.

Former president and independence guerilla fighter Xanana Gusmao said securing a permanent seabed boundary was about sovereignty, not money.

“For our nation, it is a priority to achieve the final step in our struggle for independence: sovereignty over our seas as well as our lands,” he said.

“Our struggle for sovereignty over our lands took 24 years and we never gave up, even during the darkest of times.

“We are confident that we will prevail, because we have faith in the Australian people and their commitment to fairness and justice.”

Josephite Sister Susan Connelly, an expert on Timor Sea negotiations, said Australians should care about settling the border issue.

“We have the right to a complete maritime border – not a border with 1.8 per cent missing,” she said.

“And, for the people of Timor-Leste, it represents stability and ongoing security. Timor-Leste has a right to a complete border like any other country.

“It’s about simple legality. It’s a question of sovereignty.”

By Mark Bowling