

East Timor is mad as hell, and it's our fault

John Martinkus | Apr 15, 2016 1:01PM |

The East Timorese may be poor, but they are not stupid. And we need to stop exploiting them, writes freelance journalist **John Martinkus**.



Jose Belo (left) and Commander David Alex (right) (Photo: John Martinkus)

In 1995, as I squatted for days in a hole in the jungle of East Timor with 12 men hiding from Indonesian troops patrolling nearby, the whispered conversations between the Falintil Guerrillas and myself turned to oil. We had plenty of time to talk, admittedly very quietly to not alert the Indonesians of our presence — they sometimes came so close we could hear their boots in the undergrowth. The issue of the Timor Gap treaty came up. They were having a bit of a go at the foreigner in their midst, whom they were then protecting with their lives so I could get a story. A story at the time I wasn't even sure I could sell.

Australia had signed the Timor Gap treaty with the Indonesians way back in December 1989, dividing up the resources that lay between East Timor and its nearest international neighbor, Australia, and those resources were mostly a giant oil reserve. Australia got a great deal, with the line dividing what oil would belong to Indonesia and what oil would belong to Australia significantly favouring Australia. Indonesia went along with it mainly to guarantee Australia's ongoing support for its occupation of East Timor, which it had maintained internationally since the 1975 invasion. Australia was the only country in the world to recognise Indonesian sovereignty, and the Timor Gap treaty that gave us the majority of the oil was our pay-off for ignoring the atrocities carried out on our doorstep by the Indonesian military against the East Timorese. The 12 guys sitting in that hole in the jungle, armed with a few captured M16s and old Portuguese weapons left over from the colonial army and a tarpaulin and some bushes the only protection against the hundreds of Indonesian troops searching for us, knew that. They knew Australia, on both sides of politics, had screwed East Timor.

We all know the story from there. The UN got involved after Suharto was ousted in 1998. The independence ballot was held, and the Timorese voted overwhelmingly in favour. The Indonesians burnt, looted, killed and displaced at least a third of the population. Outrage in Australia, but more importantly, pressure from then-US president Bill Clinton to clean up the mess he had helped create forced the hapless John Howard to send in a peacekeeping force led by Peter Cosgrove, now Australian Governor-General. We, Australians, were greeted as liberators and cheered in the streets still littered with the corpses of the victims of the Indonesian rampage in a city still burning with fires lit in revenge by the retreating occupiers. I was there, and suddenly, after years of working in that country, I felt proud to be an Australian.

Fast forward to 2016. Last month, 10,000 East Timorese protested against the unfair maritime boundary, which gives Australia the lion's share of the oil in the Timor Sea, outside the Australian

Embassy. Dili is a small town. Protesters blocked the road to the airport and all the regions to the west of the country for hours. They were peaceful. They know how to demonstrate; they have a lot of experience. They were protesting about the oil deal and Australia's refusal to revisit what we know has always been an unfair agreement.

This week, Labor foreign affairs spokeswoman Tanya Plibersek finally addressed years of Australian hypocrisy. Australia has always lectured other countries on human rights issues, on following international law, on being responsible global citizens. But, on Timor, we never practised what we preached. In a refreshing gust of common sense and decency the ALP finally changed its policy on Timor, the oil and the agreement.

As Plibersek put it in her statement:

“Timor-Leste suffered decades of war and starvation before gaining independence. Australia played a key role in securing that independence — a proud moment for our nation. But the maritime boundary dispute has strained relations with our newest neighbour. Australia's unwillingness to commit to maritime border negotiations with Timor-Leste has raised valid questions about our commitment to a rules-based international system and to being a good global citizen. This must change. Labor in government will immediately commence discussions on a voluntary, binding international resolution for a permanent maritime boundary between Australia and Timor-Leste. It is in the national interest of both countries that we do so. And importantly, by committing to freely participating in it, Labor's proposal is in the interests of the international system itself. We are seeking to end more than 40 years of uncertainty over a maritime border, and committing to international norms that we expect others to follow”.

Finally, a mainstream Australian politician has come out and said what has been painfully obvious for so long. Australia has bullied, lied, spied on and used our own military as leverage to secure an inequitable deal over the resources that lie between Australia and East Timor. First we did it by coalescing and turning a blind eye to the Indonesian invasion and subsequent atrocities, right up until 1999, and some would argue, after. Both Labor and Liberal governments did that for 24 years.

Then when East Timor got independence we basically wrestled them into a deal that massively favoured Australian companies and the Australian government in terms of revenues. We stole the oil. It is well documented, the spying on negotiations, the pressure applied to Timorese politicians to sign a deal they knew was unjust. The relentless pursuit of journalists and whistleblowers involved in the negotiations by federal authorities. We bullied one of the poorest countries in the world into accepting an unfair deal. They took it because, at that time, they were broke, and we knew that and used that against them. It is no wonder 10,000 of them turned up to the Australian Embassy in Dili to protest against this. They may be poor, but they are not stupid. That is the lesson I learnt all those years ago back in the jungle. They may have had no shoes and had not eaten for a week and lived hiding in ditches from Indonesian troops (US and Australian supplied and trained at the time) trying to hunt them, but they could quote the agreements made internationally to deny them of their natural birthright with more accuracy than diplomats, journalists and academics. The right to the resources of their country is in their blood, and at last Plibersek has acknowledged that.

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Aphra

Posted Friday, 15 April 2016 at 3:56 pm | [Permalink](#)

Thanks for this article.

Australia's treatment of Timor Leste is one of the more shameful acts in our history.

No body much seems to care, however.

• 2



Dog's Breakfast

Posted Friday, 15 April 2016 at 6:06 pm | [Permalink](#)

I care Aphra, and apart from turning a blind eye to massacres for ages, it was a great moment when John Howard reluctantly wandered into the mess, at US urging, and actually did something right.

But then the zombie apocalypse in the form of Al Downer took away any chance of real sovereignty by stealing their reasonable claims about sovereignty over the Sunrise development, spying on them at the time.

What has happened to Labor, have they finally found their soul?

We can only hope.

• 3



Woopwoop

Posted Friday, 15 April 2016 at 7:51 pm | [Permalink](#)

Was it at US urging? As I remember, there was a massive public outcry in Australia, which forced a reluctant Howard to ask Clinton for help in the UN.

• 4



Woopwoop

Posted Friday, 15 April 2016 at 7:54 pm |

As here, from Noam Chomsky's website:

John Roosa, historian on Indonesia and official observer of the vote, described the situation starkly: "Given that the pogrom was so predictable, it was easily preventable... But in the weeks before the ballot, the Clinton Administration refused to discuss with Australia and other countries the formation (of an international force). Even after the violence erupted, the administration dithered for days" (2). Finally it was compelled by international (primarily Australian) and domestic pressure to make some timid gestures. Even these ambiguous messages sufficed to induce the Indonesian generals to reverse course and accept an international presence.

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AR

Posted Friday, 15 April 2016 at 8:32 pm |

Aphra@1 - "one of..." and we have quite a selection for comparison, our treatment of the Ellis/Gilbert Islands and other tiny entities in our region ranks with the French & other vicious colonials in sheer wicked exploitation.

As others have noted above, Howard, inexplicably and contrary to his baser instincts, did the right thing, no thanks to the US which, as in 1975 would have preferred the status quo.

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Norman Hanscombe

Posted Friday, 15 April 2016 at 11:27 pm |

Don't ANY of the Crikey Fellow Travellers know how to find the background details to this problem? I found even the more mediocre students I encountered could manage to do this far better than do Crikey's Devotees.

• 7



Jaybuoy

Posted Saturday, 16 April 2016 at 12:27 am |

The right to the resources of their country is in their spilt blood..

• 8



klewso

Posted Saturday, 16 April 2016 at 1:09 am |

Another "Howard legacy" - the bugging (paid for by we tax-payers) and bullying of another country, on behalf of an Australian company (paying some tax) - the dregs of which haunt this government.

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AR

Posted Saturday, 16 April 2016 at 9:13 am |

To paraphrase from Iraq I & II, "how come our oil is under their seabed?"

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Robert Johnson

Posted Saturday, 16 April 2016 at 9:24 am |

Howard had not planned to be seen as Timor's saviour, but had wedged himself when Habibie reacted to his 'Matignon Accord' urging (by which Howard thought he was assisting Indonesia to have a quasi act of self-determination that would fail — or, in Howard's reckoning, succeed — in putting an end to Timorese aspirations for independence). At least Howard seized the chance to do the right if unanticipated thing, even if he had little choice.

Dog's Breakfast@2 — Downer certainly, but recall that, on the day of it's independence celebrations in 2002, newly-installed PM Alkatiri was pressed by Howard into one formal duty only: taken into a room to sign his agreement to the Timor Sea treaty. An act of "you owe us, you need us, now sign here".

Good that Plibersek has steered through a position that has likely enjoyed majority support for years at ALP membership level.

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AR

Posted Saturday, 16 April 2016 at 9:30 am |

RobJ@8 - your 1st para. nails it.

The Rodent did the right thing but, as was his wont, for the wrong reason.

Unintended consequences is so often demonstrated that one might suspect karma exists.