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Happy Birthday Timor! Our Gift To You Is To Steal Your Oil, And Your Future

By [Ella Fabry](#) on November 27, 2016

As one of our closest – and poorest – neighbours marks 14 years of independence, Australia is still stealing their natural resources. Ella Fabry explains.

Tomorrow, November 28, one of the world's newest nations, Timor Leste, will celebrate the anniversary of its declaration of independence from foreign rule. It's unfortunate that against that backdrop of pride and celebration, Timor continues to fight for self-determination and economic security against a much wealthier neighbour.

It should come as no surprise that this neighbour is Australia, and that Australia has been trashing international law for 14 years, at the expense of a much poorer nation. In recent history, Timor has been occupied by two foreign powers – Portugal and Indonesia – before finally being declared independent in 2002. A few weeks before independence, Australia withdrew its recognition of the maritime boundary jurisdiction at the International Court of Arbitration.

This is a wordy way of saying that Australia realised the rules might prevent them from accessing resources in the Timor Sea, so they decided to claim that they didn't recognise the rules any more. The resulting negotiations – free from any sort of independent arbitration – have created a situation where Timor does not have a permanent maritime boundary, Australia is missing 1.8 per cent of its boundary, and large chunks of resources that lie entirely on Timor's side of the ocean are being harvested by a country that should, in any event, be severely limiting its use of fossil fuels.

Instead, Australia is focussed on taking East Timor's oil.

There is a significant amount of money at stake in this dispute. The last treaty signed by Australia and Timor (which is currently being examined by the Permanent Court of Arbitration) stipulated a 50/50 split of any revenue from the Greater Sunrise Field. This field is as yet completely undeveloped, and it's projected to be worth around \$40 billion (USD) over 20 years.

To put that into some kind of perspective, Timor's Gross Domestic Product in 2015 was just over \$1.4 billion. Australia's was \$1.34 trillion.

For Australia, the difference between accessing the Greater Sunrise field or not is significantly less than 1 per cent of its annual revenue. For Timor, the difference is the potential to almost double revenue, to be able to significantly increase spending in health and education programs and significantly reduce still high infant mortality rates over the next 20 years. But more than these visible results, it provides Timor with the economic security that is needed to invest and create other revenue streams in the future.

On top of this, the relationship between Australia and Timor has long been a policy area where public opinion and government policy are at loggerheads. In 1999, a diverse range of Australians campaigned to send Australian Peacekeepers to Timor to assist with the transition to independence. Many Australians disagreed with the boundary negotiations in 2002, and in 2005 when Australia was back at the negotiating table, thousands of Australians chipped in to put ads on television about the issue.

Even now, with very little coverage in the mainstream media or by any political party, Australians remain aware and supportive of Timor. Anecdotally, since I started working on this issue I've discussed it with friends and family of highly variant levels of political engagement. All of them had at least a basic understanding of what the issue was as soon as I mentioned "the Timor Sea" and "oil". This experience is backed by recent polling suggesting that the majority of Australians understand the issue enough to want it to be resolved in conjunction with international law.

Rarely do we see international issues where political opinion and political action are so polarised.

Most of all, this is an issue of fairness. Look at the map of the oil and gas fields and draw a line halfway between Australia and Timor. The resources are on their side.

Prior to Timor's independence, Australia signed resource sharing agreements in the Timor Sea with Indonesia. Footage can still be found of Australia's then Foreign Minister Gareth Evans sharing a champagne with his Indonesian counterpart as they divided up the spoils of occupation.

For decades the Australian Government has watched passively as Timor resisted colonisation, invasion, occupation and state terrorism. Tomorrow, the Timorese will proudly celebrate their resilience in the face of innumerable atrocities.

People across Australia will no doubt celebrate with them, while our Government continues to steal their resources and jeopardise their future.



Street art in Melbourne, protesting Australia's theft of Timor's oil. (IMAGE: Melbourne Streets Avant-garde, Flickr)



Ella Fabry

Ella is a Melbourne based activist studying at the University of Melbourne. She is the current Campaign Coordinator of the Timor Sea Justice Campaign.

8 Comments



Roy Hives

I guess the government gets a slice, but who 'owns' the oil. Which corporate giant did we do this for? Maybe I can get my fuel elsewhere.

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Em Arghh

Great article. Thanks Ella.

[Like](#) · [Reply](#) · Nov 26, 2016 11:20pm



Matthew Ryan Buckley · University of South Australia

I have long wondered by successive Australian politicians who armed the Suharto regime, had Australia train Indonesian troops, and organised the theft of East Timor's oil have not been charged with complicity in genocide, with crimes against peace, and with theft.

In Christopher Hitchens' book "The Trial Of Henry Kissinger", Hitchens laid out the case for the former American Secretary of State/National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger to stand trial for war crimes. One of the reasons Hitchens gives in the book is Henry Kissinger's encouragement of the Indonesian invasion of East Timor.

If Henry Kissinger should stand trial for his encouragement for, and aiding of, the Indonesian invasion of East Timor, then so should quite a number of Australian politicians from the Whitlam era to the Howard era.

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Susan Connelly · Sydney, Australia

Good one! Thanks Ella.

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Susan Connelly · Sydney, Australia

Of course it's the first declaration of Independence in 1975 being remembered tomorrow. I was wondering if anyone in DFAT sees the irony in the current condemnations of Fidel Castro alongside the relative records of Australia and Cuba in assisting the new nation of Timor-Leste. Cuba's promise to Timor on the occasion of the second declaration of the Timorese Republic in 2002 was the gift of 1000 Cuban-trained Timorese doctors, and they have delivered about 800 as far as I know. Australia has a small scholarship programme that would take decades to match that practical support. Certainly, Australia has given 1 billion dollars worth of aid since 1999 (includes salaries and fees for Australians, but still, sizeable). However, during the same period of time, we have received tax revenue worth 2 billion dollars from a now exhausted oil and gas area, Laminaria-Corallina, which lies totally in a disputed area of the Timor Sea. So there you go, we're a billion dollars ahead.

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Susan Connelly · Sydney, Australia

So many Timorese anniversaries in November!

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Ian MacDougall · University of Sydney

An excellent article from Ella Fabry.

It is worth remembering in this regard that Jose Ramos Horta said at the time of Timorese independence that the people of East Timor would always remember John Howard for his contribution. "Keating, Evans and the others who betrayed us, we will forget. But John Howard will be remembered."

If Keating had not been beaten by Howard in the previous Australian election, it would have been a different story. All the way through, Keating had been brown-nosing his good friend the Indonesian dictator Suharto for all he was worth, and condemned the independence of East Timor as a terrible mistake, insisting that it should remain part of the Javanese Empire (sorry Paul, 'Indonesia'.)

I can't help remembering this when I read bilge praising Keating as a 'great statesman' in the left-of-centre press.

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Ian MacDougall · University of Sydney

Jose Ramos-Horta.

[Like](#) · [Reply](#) · Nov 27, 2016 3:48pm



Mario Ricardo

Ian MacDougall you sir are entitled to you interpretation of the past accurances and what the past and the present PM of the time did or did not do.

One thing for sure our late Gough Witlam was the first PM to sell out Timor Leste to the Indonesians together with the USA the late President Gerald Ford and the Grim Reaper Henry Kissinger, these two gave Suharto the go ahead to invade Timor Leste. The rest of the Australian PM's had to follow the path and accept the government policy and commercial interests together with the USA on it's side doing the same thing and the West Papua is a perfect ... [See More](#)

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Ian MacDougall · University of Sydney

Mario Ricardo: I would not defend Whitlam. Despite his legal training, he was easily gulled.

He had a conversation with Suharto pre the Indonesian invasion, in which he expressed the view that 1. he would like to see East Timor become part of Indonesia but 2. Indonesian incorporation would have to be endorsed by a popular vote throughout East Timor.

Well, Suharto was only interested in point 1, though after the bloody Indonesian invasion they did hold a sham referendum, which (surprise surprise) gave them a rigged endorsement. At the later UN -supervised plebiscite in 1999 the courageous Eas... [See More](#)

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Marchella Perez · Manager at Ladang TUhan