

## The Australian who spent millions fighting for justice for Timor



Timor-Leste's Minister of State Agio Pereira with Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop at the UN. *Photo: AAP*



Mike Bruce

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In 2005, Australian businessman Ian Melrose spent \$3.5 million of his own money to support Timor-Leste's fight with Australia over lucrative oil and gas fields in the Timor Sea.

After this week's announcement of a treaty that will finally see the poor island nation secure 80 per cent of those oil and gas fields, you'd think he would be viewing his mission as accomplished.

Far from it. A sense of injustice still rankles with the 64-year-old entrepreneur who has made a crusade out of seeking justice and quality of life for Timor-Leste.

“Yes, this is a step forward, but Australia still has a long way to go to make good for its past thefts,” Mr Melrose told *The New Daily*.

On Wednesday, the developing country’s 16-year fight for its right to the oil and gas reserves in its waters – estimated to be worth \$56 billion – appeared to have ended with the signing of a treaty with Australia at the United Nations.

The agreement will see a new maritime border that runs halfway between the two countries, through the Greater Sunrise gas field, but with 80 per cent of the field falling into Timor-Leste’s economic zone.

Negotiations initially offered Timor-Leste less than 20 per cent of the fields, despite a much bigger portion of them being situated close to the new country.



The dispute over the Timor Sea oil has been running for more than 16 years. *Photo: Getty*

But Mr Melrose said the treaty only goes some way to righting past wrongs, and claimed Australia still owes Timor-Leste at least \$5 billion in royalties from what he argued was an illegal grab by Australia that included the Laminaria and Corallina oil fields in the Timor Sea.

“This new treaty is not addressing any of that past theft,” he said. “It still doesn’t return that stolen money and so they [the Timorese] are still being ripped off.”

The treaty signed at the UN stipulates “no compensation for past exploitation”.

## **The unlikely crusader**

Mr Melrose, the founder and director of a company selling prescription eyewear, said he has never been a member of a political party\* and had never so much as written a letter to his local MP until 2004 when he happened to read an article about Timor that left him incensed.



Ian Melrose built his fortune on the Melbourne-based Optical Superstore chain.

*Photo: Getty*

The article detailed the death of a 12-year-old East Timorese girl who choked to death on round-worms which could have been treated by tablets that cost less than \$1.

“[Around this time] this was the poorest country in Asia and it had gone through hell during the occupation [by Indonesia] ... Australia knew atrocities were happening and did nothing,” he said.

“I was horrified when I discovered the Howard government was taking billions of dollars worth of oil and gas royalties that, according to International Law, would belong to East Timor.

“How bad is it that we have to steal from such have-nots?”

That prompted Mr Melrose to put his own money towards television and newspaper ads and letterbox drops to highlight the injustice of the government’s grab for the Timor Sea resources, on which the developing nation was greatly dependent.

The campaign ultimately cost him \$3.5 million. On top of that, he is a regular and generous donor to health, education and micro-finance organisations in Timor-Leste, most notably a malnutrition clinic in the capital Dili.

While Mr Melrose saw the new treaty as a step in the right direction, he hoped when it comes to be ratified by the Australian government, it would prompt further questions about what Australia still owes Timor-Leste.

“The story is not finished and I am not satisfied ... I am sure when this treaty comes before JSCOT [Joint Standing Committee on Treaties], some politicians will be asking about Laminaria and Corallina. We had no right to that.

“I think the Australian public don’t know the full story. It’s still absolutely disgraceful.”

**\* Mr Melrose reportedly donated \$170,000 to the Nick Xenophon Team in 2016.**