

POLITICS

Perrett breaks Labor's long silence on K, Collaery

A federal Labor MP has finally spoken out about the government's malicious campaign of intimidation against Witness K and Bernard Collaery.

BERNARD KEANE DEC 05, 2019



LABOR MP GRAHAM PERRETT (IMAGE: AAP/DANIEL MUNOZ)

Queensland MP Graham Perrett has finally broken federal Labor's stolid silence on the government's persecution and harassment of Witness K and Bernard Collaery, labelling the Howard government's bugging of the Timor-Leste cabinet room a "dog act" and lauding K and Collaery for revealing it

Perrett rose in the House of Reps [adjournment debate](#) on Wednesday night to condemn the Howard government's spying, its diversion of precious counter-terrorism resources to do it, the restraints on parliament's intelligence committee to investigate it, and the current government's attempt to keep K and Collaery quiet.

"We would never have known about this dog act if not for the valiant ASIS officer now known as Witness K," Perrett said. "Witness K tried to do the right thing. Witness K obtained permission to talk to an approved lawyer. Witness K and that lawyer, Bernard Collaery, are now both on trial. These are trials the Morrison government wants to hold in secret. What message does this trumped-up harassment send to whistleblowers? Shut up or else."

I asked the Attorney-General, 'What possible purpose is there in pursuing these prosecutions if not to send a message to future whistleblowers?' Sometimes standing up and speaking out is just the right thing to do, but this coalition government doesn't like it."

Perrett is only the second Labor MP anywhere, after [NSW MP Paul Lynch](#), to depart from Labor's policy of refusing to say anything about either the prosecution of K and Collaery or Attorney-General Christian Porter's interference in the case.

Kudos to him: at least someone in the major parties has finally found their voice on the greatest Australian political scandal in decades.

SPEECH

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Page 75
Speaker Perrett, Graham, MP

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Mr PERRETT (Moreton) (19:39): I want to speak tonight about mates, about standing up and speaking out and about doing the right thing. I want to talk about East Timor and the merciless pursuit of two men. Before I do that, under the protection of parliamentary privilege, I'll start at the beginning of a dark chapter in Australia's history. Gough Whitlam is a legend. He's left a tremendous legacy. But on one occasion, regarding East Timor, I don't think Gough made the right call. Straight after East Timor declared independence from Portugal in 1975, it was invaded by Indonesia. East Timor was also our neighbour and friend, especially from World War II, but we turned our backs and supported Indonesia's annexation of East Timor. Five Australian based journalists were murdered at Balibo, East Timor, on 16 October 1975, killed during an Indonesian led attack just before the invasion. By standing by, the Australian government sanctioned Indonesia's legal right to East Timor and the two-decade-long occupation that followed. The Timor Sea is worth billions of dollars to Australia because of its oil and gas. The truth is we sold out our friend for cold, hard cash.

In 1999, the Timorese again voted for independence. Sadly, a campaign of terror followed. Australia evacuated foreigners in East Timor, but that was the extent of our initial intervention. A group of foreign journalists refused to leave, despite their colleagues being murdered under similar circumstances to 1975, but they wouldn't abandon the brave East Timorese. Those courageous journalists made sure that Australians and the rest of the world knew what was going on in East Timor, and it was genocide. It's reported that nearly 31 per cent of the Timor-Leste population perished. Australians wondered why our government was doing nothing. Eventually, the United States acted, telling Indonesia to leave East Timor. It was an Australian led peacekeeping team that liberated East Timor in September 1999. They were hailed as heroes. But we weren't the trusted friends or good neighbours we should have been in the aftermath.

After Timor's independence, negotiations continued to secure Australia's share in Timor-Leste's oil and gas. So began an episode that none of us would have known about were it not for one ASIS officer whose good conscience would not permit him to stay quiet. In 2004, when John Howard was Prime Minister and Alexander Downer was the foreign minister, ASIS bugged government offices of the newly independent Timor-Leste to gain an advantage in the negotiations regarding Australia's share of the oil and gas reserves. It was a dog act to a friend, a friend struggling to recover from decades of oppression, a poor country where people were dying from tuberculosis at a rate 122 times higher than in Australia and whose infant mortality rate was 20 times greater than Australia's.

At the time of this dog act in 2004, Prime Minister Howard was actually fighting a war on terror in the region. In October 2002, terrorists bombed a nightclub in Bali, killing 202 people, including, tragically, 88 Australians. In September 2004, terrorists bombed the Australian Embassy in Jakarta, killing eight innocent people. Yet precious intelligence resources were expended to bug our friend during crucial negotiations for commercial gain—one of the richest countries in the world doing over one ranked 169th. And, to make matters worse, the bugging was done under the cover of an aid project, putting our Australian aid workers all around the world in peril. Who benefited most from this dog act? Australia ended up with a disproportionate share of the resources in the area known as Greater Sunrise, but resources companies like Woodside benefited commercially from the rigged deal.

We would never have known about this dog act if not for the valiant ASIS officer now known as Witness K. The Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security—a bipartisan committee with a majority of government members—is specifically not allowed to review particular operations that have been, are being or are proposed to be undertaken by agencies, including ASIS, whereas, in the United States, intelligence and judiciary committees are regularly briefed about intelligence collection programs. But, in Australia, the intelligence and security committee could not have been briefed on the bugging, rendering it secret, known only to those in the coalition executive who made the decision and those involved in the actual operation. But for Witness K, we would have never know about this dog act. Witness K tried to do the right thing. Witness K obtained permission to talk to an approved lawyer. Witness K and that lawyer, Bernard Collaery, are now both on trial. These are trials the Morrison government wants to hold in secret. What message does this trumped-up harassment send to whistleblowers? Shut up or else. I asked the Attorney-General, 'What possible purpose is there in pursuing these prosecutions if not to send a message to future whistleblowers?' Sometimes standing up and speaking out is just the right thing to do, but this coalition government doesn't like it. (*Time expired*)