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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

EAST TIMOR

SPEECH

Tuesday, 21 September 1999

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Questioner
Speaker Brereton, Laurie, MP

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Mr BRERETON (Kingsford-Smith) (4.21 pm)—What awfully chosen words for the Minister for Foreign Affairs to finish his speech with today: to his dying day, much as he regrets the deaths in East Timor, he will be proud of what he has achieved. I could not think of a more inappropriate thing to say.

Three days before the East Timor vote for independence, the Australian parliamentary observer delegation visited the town of Liquica. We were taken to the churchyard and the priest's residence where, it is now admitted, at least 58, perhaps many more, East Timorese men, women and children were cut to pieces in a bloody slaughter by the pro-integrationist militias on the afternoon of Tuesday, 6 April this year. The victims were corralled in the residence. They were forced down the central passageway and butchered with machetes as they spilled from the doorway. What occurred was the equivalent of another Dili massacre, but without the cameras.

This horrific crime was committed under the watchful eyes of the Indonesian military and the police mobile brigade. The police were not inactive: they fired the teargas that drove the victims out of the building and to their deaths. But on the day we visited Liquica all was quiet. There was no trace of the massacre. All the walls had long been whitewashed. The bullet holes were plastered up; the dead long ago trucked away to an unknown mass grave. The fact of what happened at Liquica that April Tuesday is known to us only because witnesses survived, like the priest, Father Rafael. The Australian government knows, too, because not long after the massacre our embassy in Jakarta sent two officers to investigate and to report on these terrible events. Their report left no doubt about the complicity of the Indonesian military and police.

On 15 April this year, nine days after that massacre, I visited Jakarta and saw Ali Alatas and Xanana Gusmao. At Xanana's urging, I called for Alexander Downer to release the embassy report on the killings—subject, I should add, to the deletion of the identity of confidential informants. Had the foreign minister done so, the Indonesian military's orchestration of the militia's campaign of violence would have been thrown into stark relief. But the foreign minister refused to release the report: he said it would be irresponsible to do so. Today that report remains secret, tucked away in DFAT's vaults to moulder like so many other reports of East Timor atrocities, until the files are eventually opened in 30 years' time.

That is the story of Liquica—the massacre neatly whitewashed, the facts quietly filed away. All this was last April, just five months ago. Today the Australian government defends its East Timor diplomacy, saying that no-one could have predicted the awful events following the ballot. But in truth it had an avalanche of warnings. Every East Timorese leader—Bishop Belo, Xanana Gusmao, Ramos Horta—pleaded for Australia and pleaded for the international community to put security first. They implored us to insist on a transitional process underpinned by three things: reconciliation, disarmament and a UN peacekeeping force.

Fourteen days after the Liquica massacre, Father Francisco Barreto sat in my office in Sydney. He came in his capacity as Director of Caritas in East Timor. He also called on the foreign minister in his plea for Australia to do what was required to guarantee security. He sat there and he told me of his dreadful foreboding of what was likely to happen to his people if they were left to the mercy of the militia and their military controllers. I saw him again in East Timor the day after the ballot and the day before the parliamentary delegation returned to Australia. He repeated his fears. Tragically, his foreboding proved all too correct. He was one of the first of the Catholic priests to be assassinated by the militia following the announcement of the ballot results.

But even before Liquica, Australia knew what was likely to happen. As this House is acquainted, on 4 March, Australia's Defence Intelligence Organisation gave the government an assessment that pulled no punches. At the time when Foreign Minister Downer was still talking about rogue elements which might or might not be helping the militias, DIO said:

The military in East Timor are clearly protecting, and in some instances operating with the militias . . .

It said:

No vigorous action to reign in the military have been noted implying that General Wiranto is at least turning a blind eye . . . Unless Jakarta takes firm action—

DIO said—

the military will continue to support intimidation and violence or at least won't prevent it.

DIO concluded by saying:

Further violence is certain and Dili will be a focus.

But of course this was something the Australian government just did not want to hear. After all, Australia was already campaigning to help Jakarta resist any move by the international community for peacekeepers.

I made the first of Labor's many calls for peacekeepers in February of this year—and we have made literally hundreds. So let us not have any of this rubbish from the government that there has been any confusion on this side of the House. This went to our shadow ministry, this went to our caucus and this has been the subject of—I repeat—hundreds of calls upon this government to do the right thing.

But we now know that when we first made that call in February this year, the Assistant Secretary of State for the United States, the Clinton administration's point man in Asia, was also advocating peacekeepers. That same month he told DFAT secretary Ashton Calvert that it was essential to build a coalition to push for peacekeepers for, as he said, without peacekeepers East Timor would collapse into violence. We know that Calvert, speaking on behalf of the Australian government, scotched Roth's initiative, saying that Australia—without doubt the key player—would not support such an approach. Calvert declared, and I quote from the cabled report:

One of the central themes to achieving a resolution was to convince the Timorese that they had to sort themselves out, and to dispel the idea that the UN was going to solve all their problems while they indulged in vendetta and bloodletting.

Have you ever heard a more inappropriate view to be expressing in such a one-sided contest with one group of people being chopped to pieces by the militias?

At every opportunity, Foreign Minister Downer rubbished the idea of pressing Jakarta to accept peacekeepers, though at times his argument got pretty tortuous. On 14 March this year he said this:

We hope that there won't be a need for a peacekeeping force because if you need a peacekeeping force, you need a peace to keep and peace first has to be negotiated and we hope that when the peace is negotiated it will be a peaceful peace that won't require a peacekeeping force.

Instead of pressing Jakarta to accept peacekeepers, pressing them to accept an international security presence, the Australian government put all its faith in President Habibie and the fact that General Wiranto stood alongside him at the Bali summit. That was our assessment at the end of the day.

This is very clear from the Prime Minister's own words. On his return from Bali, at the press conference that he held outside his office the Prime Minister said:

. . . I have no reason to doubt the sincerity of the commitments that were made yesterday by both the President and also the other ministers who were present.

He said:

There is no doubt that there has been a quantum shift so far as the assertion of control both in relation to the military by the Government and also the central control of the military in relation to its activities in East Timor. . . . I am certainly satisfied from what's happened publicly, from the presence yesterday of General Wiranto, his participation in the discussions and the general attitude taken by Dr Habibie . . . there is a realisation that things had to change, that things have begun to change.

A journalist inquired of him:

Prime Minister, how can you maintain the confidence given that even with General Wiranto's presence at a peace ceremony in the territory itself still the atrocities continue and there hasn't been a disarming of the militia?

The Prime Minister replied:

. . . the confidence I expressed was a confidence that things were infinitely better than they were a week or two weeks ago.

That very same day the Minister for Foreign Affairs sang from the same Panglossian hymn sheet when he said:

There isn't any doubt that the Indonesians through the process are committed to the laying down of arms, endeavouring to achieve disarmament, using the Peace and Stability Commission which they established on 21 April to assist with that process but also to do so in consultation with the United Nations. I can say that much, and obviously we are delighted to get that commitment from the Indonesians.

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I think people will feel more confident with the police playing a much more substantial role on the ground rather than the armed forces.

These were, of course, the very same police who helped oversee the massacre at Liquica. I think it is fair to say that, with these declarations made just three weeks after that Liquica horror, the die was cast. With them, the Australian government embraced the plan to see the ballot through, come what may, and without any real protection for the East Timorese people themselves. Behind the scenes, Australian intelligence assessments were quietly revised to remove any conflict with the government's acceptance of Jakarta's assurances.

There can be no doubt that the people of East Timor have been grievously betrayed by both the United Nations and Australia. Despite all the mounting evidence, we pressed on without any real attempt to guarantee security. Despite all the repeated promises, there was no process of disarmament. Militia gangs made a show of handing in a few weapons. But the UN promptly and kindly returned them to the militia headquarters for safekeeping and for occasional inspection. In place of real disarmament, we funded a massive public education program to convince the East Timorese that they could cast their vote and do so free of violence, free of intimidation and free of retribution.

I have here examples of the leaflets that were distributed on the streets of Dili and across the countryside of East Timor and posted on the sides of building after building when we were there. They were put there to persuade the East Timorese to come forward to register to vote and to convince them that they would not be betrayed in the days and weeks following the ballot. This one reads:

No matter what the outcome on August 30th, UNAMET will NOT leave after the consultation

UNAMET is here to . . .

Conduct the popular consultation

Transport the ballot papers

Count all the votes together

Remain in East Timor after the vote

That is what the UN pledged to do. Another one, translated, says:

UNAMET will stay after the vote. You can be confident.

Another one, perhaps the cruellest of all, has the dove of peace and the slogan:

Peace is the prize.

That is what we said was at stake. That is what we put to the East Timorese people. Australia contributed \$10 million towards the conduct of this ballot and the publication of literature such as this. Oh, yes—and weren't we successful beyond our wildest expectations? Nearly 450,000 people registered to vote, 98.6 per cent turned out on the day and, despite all the threats, all the violence and all the intimidation, 78.5 per cent voted for their freedom. This was truly the triumph of an oppressed people's courage.

But within hours of that ballot the militia were back on the streets and the killing began. Instead of celebrating freedom, the East Timorese have been cut down and their country has been laid to waste—the horror of Liquica, that harbinger of doom, repeated on a vastly greater scale. All the grim warnings—warnings so often dismissed—have proved terrifyingly correct.

I wish to conclude with a couple of points. The first relates to our debt to the East Timorese. I listened with interest to the remarks of the Deputy Prime Minister about the exploits of the Australians in 1942. He spoke for a long while about the Australians and for a much shorter time, I regret, about the East Timorese who were involved in that endeavour. While we were there as part of the delegation together with our Senate colleagues, I went with Tim Fischer and looked at the plaque erected by the Australian commandoes in the hills behind Dili which pays a grateful tribute to the brave East Timorese who gave their lives in support of our troops in 1942. The East Timorese paid a terrible price. When our troops departed, we left many of our East Timorese friends on the beach. We left them to an awful fate at the hands of the Japanese.

The RAAF dropped leaflets saying, 'We thank you. We will always remember you.' But, in truth, we did not. Today's debate deals with a people we owe, a people we owe deeply, a people we betrayed in 1942 and betrayed a second time in 1975 when we failed to speak up, and betrayed a third time in 1978 when we extended de jure recognition of Indonesian sovereignty over East Timor—and a people we betrayed again in 1999 when we helped drive a fatally flawed process which has left their country in absolute ruins.

We as a nation have a responsibility to give the East Timorese our most generous support. Sending our troops, as we have, to lead this peacekeeping mission is the first vital step. We must also be prepared to provide them with humanitarian support on a massive scale, and indeed to commence the enormous task of reconstruction. I welcome today's announcement of \$4 million from Minister Downer, but that is only the very beginning of what is going to need to be a tremendous commitment. It is vitally important that Australia play a key role in all of these areas, and particularly in institution-building for a free East Timor, that new independent nation that is being formed on Australia's very doorstep.

I say at this very beginning that we should be ending our de jure recognition of Indonesian sovereignty. This may seem like a formality but it is not. We should not wait for the Indonesian MPR to implement the ballot results. Indonesia's claim of sovereignty has no legitimacy whatsoever. Australia should do the right thing and end de jure recognition, and we should do so now. We must also be prepared to recognise a provisional East Timorese government, headed, one anticipates, by Xanana Gusmao, as soon as it is formed.

At the same time it is tremendously important that Australia make a clear distinction between the Indonesian people and the Indonesian military and their militias who have been responsible for this horrific violence. The criminals who directed the appalling events in East Timor must be held fully accountable for their actions, but all Australians have a responsibility to ensure that this condemnation does not extend to the Indonesian people, whose own democratic aspirations are now in some jeopardy. The tragedy in East Timor will indeed be the much greater if the present crisis sets back Indonesia's emergent democracy. Australia must do the right thing by East Timor, but we must also support Indonesia's democracy. There is a responsibility for everyone in public office to ensure that anti-Indonesian outbursts have no place in our nation's response to the East Timorese crisis. We must do everything and make every effort to avoid any spiral of nationalistic rhetoric that can only damage democratic hopes and produce an enduring estrangement between our two countries.

One is always tempted to imagine what might have been. Yesterday the Minister for Foreign Affairs boasted that peacekeepers have been dispatched to East Timor in world record time. But imagine what things might have been like if Australia and the world community had done the work and been ready before the holocaust commenced. Imagine what might have been if Australia had properly heeded the dreadful warnings of Liquica. Imagine what might have been if the peacekeepers we sent in so proudly yesterday had departed either before or immediately after the ballot was declared 18 long days ago. Had we fulfilled our responsibilities, we could have helped prevent East Timor's triumph from being turned to tragedy. We could have helped prevent the assassination of so many East Timorese leaders. We could have helped prevent the torching of the towns and the villages. In reality, we could have saved so many lives and prevented so much horror. We will never know what might have been, but surely the East Timorese deserve so much better. It is our shame, and it is East Timor's tragedy, that we did not do so.