DOORSTOP INTERVIEW WITH THE MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS ALEXANDER DOWNER IN EAST PERTH AT 1.45PM ON 17APRIL 2002.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS MINISTER ALEXANDER DOWNER ANSWERS QUESTIONS REGARDING XANANA GUSMAO WINNING THE ELECTION FOR THE PRESIDENCY OF THE NEW INDEPENDENT STATE OF EAST TIMOR & RELATED ISSUES.

DOWNER:
I've been informed by our embassy in Dili in East Timor that Xanana Gusmao has formally won the election for the presidency of the new independent state of East Timor. We warmly welcome Xanana Gusmao’s election as the president. This is an overwhelming victory. He’s won eighty-six per cent of the vote. There was an eighty-three per cent turnout, so there’s a very substantial turnout; a massive majority for Xanana Gusmao. And I think he will make a truly fine president of East Timor.

He’ll be very much of a unifying figure. Over the last year or so when Xanana has hesitated as to whether he should run as the president or not, I've encouraged him to run because it’s always been my view that Xanana Gusmao as the president would be a very important unifying force for the new country.

Inevitably in East Timor they have their politics like in any democratic country. But as a new country it’s particularly important that their president should be somebody who really brings the country together and unifies it. And there’s definitely no better person to do that than Xanana Gusmao.

I first met him back in 1999 in early 1999, in a prison in Jakarta. From the moment I met Xanana Gusmao I was very impressed with him. I thought he was, whilst a great campaigner for an independent East Timor, a man who had those qualities that a leader of a new nation needs to have; a quality of reconciliation and quality of healing, quality of forgiveness. And it’s those qualities which will help to ensure that he does bring the country together during its early stages as an independent nation.

So, we in Australia are delighted that Xanana Gusmao has won the election. He’ll be a great president of East Timor. We very much hope he’ll be able to come and visit Australia soon after independence, which is on 20 May. We’d like to feel that he’ll visit both Indonesia and Australia in the early months of his presidency.

REPORTER:
What does this mean for Australia’s relationship with East Timor?

DOWNER:
I think it’s good for Australia’s relationship with East Timor. We have a good and close relationship with Xanana Gusmao. I was saying I’ve known him myself for some time now. I visited him when he was a prisoner of the Indonesians at a prison in Jakarta. And so, ever since then, I’ve developed a very strong relationship with him. Whenever I’ve gone to East Timor I’ve spent time with him. He has a son called Alexander and an Australian wife. What more could you ask for?

REPORTER:
So, in terms of the Timor Gap, what level of certainty do you have about the treaty after this particular result?

DOWNER:
Well, I don’t think the presidency … the presidential election has any particular bearing on that. But we’re optimistic we’ll be able to conclude the negotiations both with Phillips who are the main exploration and production company in the Timor Sea, and, importantly, with the East Timorese before 20 May, which is Independence Day. Once we’ve concluded those negotiations we hope to be able to sign a formal treaty at the time of independence. But of course ratification will take a little time because of the ratification procedures we have to go through.

REPORTER:
Do you expect our troops will be coming home after that?

DOWNER:
No, I don't think the troops will be coming home in the immediate future. We’ll be keeping our troops and the United Nations Peacekeeping Force will be remaining in East Timor for a little while yet. But it has to be said the security situation there is now very good. The Australians as well as other nationalities have been helping to develop an East Timorese security force as well as East Timorese police. And it won't be all that long before they’ll be able to handle their own security themselves. But a withdrawal of the Australian troops in the United Nations peacekeeping operation more generally is not imminent.

REPORTER:
How vital are the first few months of this new presidency, do you think?

DOWNER:
I think they are vital. I think it’s important East Timor gets off to a strong and a united start. I’m pretty confident they will get off to a united start. I mean, it’s particularly significant that in a presidential election there is not only a very substantial turnout. Not quite as high as for the parliamentary elections, but still about eighty-three per cent turnout. And that the winning candidate gets eighty-six per cent of the vote. I mean, to get eighty-six per cent of the vote in an election is a gigantic win. Something that we never see in this country, at least in national and state-wide elections.

And I think that makes a very important point; and that is that the country is uniting behind Xanana Gusmao. He is a conciliatory person. He is a person that has that great quality of forgiveness that you’ve seen in one or two other leaders of new nations. We saw it with Nelson Mandela when he became the first president of a united South Africa. And, I mean, you can’t make too many comparisons here but Xanana Gusmao nevertheless is a person who has a lot of that quality of forgiveness and reconciliation. So I’m optimistic they’ll get off to a good start.

REPORTER:
In terms of a comparison, though, I mean, it is an extraordinary rise for this man too, to become president, isn’t it?

DOWNER:
Oh yes, I mean, he is the sort of guerilla fighter and poet; that’s an odd combination but not an unprecedented one, but it’s certainly an unusual combination. He’s somebody who has always believed very passionately that East Timor should be an independent country and he’s gone out and he’s fought for that. The overwhelming view of the people of East Timor, the massive majority of the people of East Timor, have wanted an independent country and with Australia’s assistance that’s become possible for them. I don’t think in the end it was ever sustainable for East Timor to remain part of Indonesia. They just did become unsustainable after 1991. So you know, we wish them well. We’ll do what we can for them.

REPORTER:
Back on Timor Gap I understand that East Timor’s not actually obliged to, despite the agreement, to convert it into a treaty if they believe that there have been changes made to the agreement in the interim. And that’s what they’re protesting about. Do you think this will hold up the signing of the treaty?

DOWNER:
Well, it’s possible, but I think we ought to try to get the negotiations concluded by 20 May. Inevitably, there are some differences with the details
of the negotiations, and the difference here ultimately revolves around the issue of unitisation of the Sunrise-Troubadour field with the Bayu-Undan field. Look, it’s a technical point but it’s an important point and we hope that can get those issues - that issue and other more minor issues - resolved with East Timor between now and 20 May.

But you know, they are technical differences and we’re certainly not getting into the negotiation in public and making a sort of whole series of public comments about it.

REPORTER: Those particular details, they do relate to maritime borders, don’t they, and the introduction of (indistinct)?

DOWNER: No, unitisation is not really … not really. I mean, unitisation is about bringing together those two oil and gas fields for the purposes in particular of bringing a pipeline down to Darwin and some of the legal issues about that are covered in the document that we negotiated and signed with East Timor back last year. So, we negotiated through 2002 and 2001.

So in any case, we just need to resolve these issues and we’ll work to do that with good will and it will be good will on both sides.

REPORTER: May I just ask a couple of questions on an unrelated subject?

Just with regards to Malaysia and there’s six people who’ve been detained for a plot to kill their Prime Minister, under the Malaysian Internal Security Act; how concerned are you that they’re being detained without the (indistinct) of a trial?

DOWNER: Well, this is an old question about the Internal Act Security in Malaysia, which was introduced by the British when they used to rule Malaysia, or Malaya as it was called in those days. I think it’s a matter of concern that there has genuinely been a plot to kill the Prime Minister of Malaysia. But this is something that the Malaysians will have to work through.

REPORTER: Does it concern you, though, that the former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim has also joined a hunger strike in support of these people?
DOWNER:
I'm not aware of that, actually, but I am aware of Anwar Ibrahim being in prison and, of course, we've had a lot to say about that. He has an appeal which is still pending. I think they've had the hearing of his appeal but the decision hasn’t yet been handed down. It’s expected to be in the next few weeks, so we’ll see what happens there.

But I mean, he has lodged appeals and the like. And one can make whatever comments one wants about the judicial process and the Malaysian Bar Council and others have had a lot to say about that. But in any case his case is subject to appeal.

REPORTER:
And I understand you also have a diplomatic delegation heading to Karratha … to the region.

DOWNER:
Oh yes.

REPORTER:
Can you explain to me what that's about; what’s going to be happening?

DOWNER:
Yes. Well, I have brought over to Perth 37 heads of mission - ambassadors and high commissioners - from Canberra because I think it’s very important that the diplomats get out and see what Australia is all about, not, of course, to criticise Canberra and to make any cheap and well-known comments about Canberra (laughs), because people are always saying that. But it’s not really the point. It is important that they understand that Western Australia’s an integral part of Australia and that they have a real sense of what Western Australia is about, what the people are like, what the issues are, what the … how the economy works.

Part of their visit here to Western Australia has been a briefing here in Perth and they met with the Premier and the Deputy Premier today, and the leader of the Opposition. I’ve taken them down to Margaret River, and Cape Naturaliste and all those sorts of tourist places. And tomorrow some of them are going to go to Karratha and they’re going to be shown how the LNG industry is developing in Western Australia, or off the coast of Western Australia, they’re going to look at other aspects of the resources sector, so that they have a very clear understanding of the strength of the resources sector in Western Australia.
And of course, Western Australia has only ten per cent of the population of Australia, but twenty-five per cent of the exports. So I mean, it has particular relevance to diplomats and it’s important they understand how this state works.

REPORTER:
Speaking of foreign missions, when Powell was sent to the Middle East with great fanfare, saying that, you know, he was going to do great ...

REPORTER:
… going to do great things …

DOWNER:
Oh no, he never over-claims, believe me.

[Laughter]
He was too clever for that (laughs).

REPORTER:
(Indistinct) Australia, I mean, what have he achieved so far?

DOWNER:
Well, I think what he’s achieved will gradually be revealed. I don’t think there are going to be any breathtaking and staggering announcements made immediately because the diplomacy of all of this is extremely sensitive. I think he has made some progress there and I think as time goes on we’ll hear more about the progress he’s made.

Look, at the end of the day neither of the parties of the conflict there have any choice but to sit down and negotiate a peace agreement. They can’t conduct war forever and war is going ultimately to be counterproductive and we hope not only that it will be possible for the Palestinian authority and the Israelis to conclude a ceasefire before too long but also that it might be possible to sit down at a diplomatic conference and begin proper negotiations about a long-term peace settlement. Because in the end you’re going to end up with two states, you’re going to end up with Israel and you’re going to end up with the Palestinian state.

There’ll be a great argument about precisely where the borders should be but conducting suicide bombing attacks on the Israelis and retaliation by the Israelis is not going to achieve stable statehood, not just for Israel but also for the Palestinians.
REPORTER:
At this point in time though it is very difficult to tell where any changes, I mean any steps have been made. Are they making any claims that this has happened with promises to reveal them later or …?

DOWNER:
Yeah, there are some signs, … no, no a bit more than that. There are some signs of progress, but, look, they are very tentative at this stage and I hope that in the next few days there’ll be some better signs than at least we’ve seen publicly. But privately I think there’s definitely signs of progress; but let’s say progress is not a breakthrough, there’s not a sign of a breakthrough but just signs of some progress.

END OF SEGMENT