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Main Committee

EAST TIMOR

SPEECH

Wednesday, 22 September 1999

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Speaker	Andrews, Kevin, MP	Question No.	

Mr ANDREWS (Menzies) (11.36 am)—I rise today to support the motion before the chamber and particularly the United Nations Security Council resolution. In the world of Orwell's *1984*, 'history was bunk'. The Orwellian state's public servants worked diligently at censoring and rewriting old newspapers, so that history would always apparently conform with whatever version of the truth the leadership wished to assign to it in line with changing international relationships. I have been reminded of Orwell's *1984* as I have listened to some intone piously about what the Howard government should have done on East Timor.

It is certainly agreeable to find that an issue which one has done one's small bit to champion over the years, namely the independence of East Timor, has become fashionable. But I am here to remind the House that this was not always so. There are only a couple of faces that I can remember from the other side speaking out for East Timor and they were the member for Melbourne, Lindsay Tanner, and the member for Reid, Laurie Ferguson. Regrettably, there were few on this side either.

While I commend the member for Kingsford-Smith, Laurie Brereton, for breaking with official Labor Party policy on East Timor earlier this year—it is certainly better late than never—it must also be remembered that it involved a massive U-turn after 24 years of appeasement by the Labor Party, all the more marked because it had the power in government, both in 1975 when this problem arose and, more recently, to really make a difference, but it did not. The member for Kingsford-Smith made this remark yesterday:

One is always tempted by what might have been.

He went on:

Had we fulfilled our responsibilities, we could have prevented Timor's triumph from turning into tragedy.

Well, I am not going to resist this temptation. I will tell you what might have been. Had Paul Keating remained at the head of government, there would have been no pushing for any ballot for independence in East Timor for starters. Paul Keating, like all Australian leaders from Whitlam on, liked to think that we had a 'special relationship' with Indonesia. Every time we made the mildest of objections to some dreadful infringement of human rights, we were quickly smacked on the wrist and we were made to go on our way with our tails between our legs. Had one been describing the relationship between two people, one would have described it as deeply dysfunctional and certainly masochistic on our side.

As there would have been no ballot, we probably would not have seen such a bloody maelstrom, but certainly the killings of East Timorese supporters of independence and anyone else who got in the way would have continued, though not on such a grand scale. We would have been left with the steady drip drip of routine violence and bloodshed in East Timor, and the Labor government would have continued to tell us that Indonesia would deal with its own internal security problems.

Let me take the chamber on a brief trip down memory lane to the first speech I gave on East Timor in this place in March 1992. That day I reminded the House of the Whitlam government's response to the invasion of East Timor in 1975; it endorsed it. The Liberal shadow foreign minister at the time, Andrew Peacock, at least protested the inactivity of the Whitlam government. The Whitlam government, as I said then, gave the green light to the invasion and sealed the fate of the East Timorese people.

Moving along in our time machine, let us revisit the Hawke Labor government's response to the 1991 churchyard massacre of over 100 people, including a New Zealand student studying in Australia. The then foreign minister, Gareth Evans, told us that the response of Indonesia was 'credible'. He was quick to make sure that the crosses blessed by a Catholic priest set up outside the Indonesian Embassy in Canberra to represent the slain in East Timor were removed posthaste to appease Indonesian sensibilities.

What struck me in that debate in March 1992 was how apparently decent human beings on both sides of the House, in the matter of a small foreign territory, far too close for comfort, consumed like a rabbit by a very large boa constrictor next door, could be quite impervious to decency or humanitarian concern and be totally focused on the economic advantages of our relationship with Indonesia and our gains from the Timor Gap Treaty. In international relations, morality tends to become what we can afford or think we can afford. I said then that pragmatism is really only a euphemism for allowing practical exigencies to excuse anything at all.

Against this sorry background the Howard government's achievement on East Timor would not have been believable 12 months ago. It constitutes a revolution in Australia's foreign policy. Not only did the Habibie government consent to a ballot for East Timor, for which it should be given great credit, the Indonesians subsequently invited the UN to send in a peacekeeping force. None of this would have come about but for the enormous work done by the Prime Minister and the foreign minister in convincing the international community that it was the right thing to do to protect the people of East Timor and to support Indonesia in re-establishing order.

While the calls for immediate action by the Australian public have flooded into all our offices and people have been critical of the time it has taken, it should be remembered that it took only two weeks between the ballot result and the sending in of the peacekeepers, a world record for United Nations missions.

The various 'might have beens' urged by the opposition belong to cloud-cuckoo-land. They are now manufacturing a new, seamless pseudo history where it would have been perfectly possible for the Indonesians to have been convinced both of the need for a ballot and for peacekeepers. The Prime Minister tells us that in his discussions with President Habibie, this was not possible, although it was suggested time and again to Indonesia. More importantly, China and Russia would have vetoed a peacekeeping force before the ballot. It took a vote of 78 per cent in favour of independence and, unfortunately and tragically, the mass slaughter and forced exodus of the East Timorese population that followed, to convince the international community that anything needed to be done. The opposition in this glib rewriting of history's possibilities tells us we could have kept good relations with Indonesia and secured the peacekeeping force for East Timor. This, I believe is just wishful thinking. It was obvious that Indonesia was going to be shocked and affronted by our sudden acquisition of moral sense after 24 years of craven appeasement at any cost.

The Prime Minister has been enabled to stand up for the people of East Timor and take a firm moral stance because he had the Australian people behind him. No member of this place could not have been moved by the enormous passion of ordinary, unallied Australians who protested their desire for the Howard government to go to the aid of little East Timor. I believe that this is the result of a sense of history. We have done this because we remember that during the last war 40,000 East Timorese people died, many of them helping Australian soldiers to survive in Japanese occupied territory. What we have seen in the Howard government's push for a ballot in East Timor and now our leadership of an international peace enforcing force, signifies a reversal of policy held for almost a quarter of a century by both parties in government. The holocaust of slaughter of men, women and little children who did nothing more than vote for independence has shown us that, as I said in my March 1992 speech, the price of appeasement is too high. That policy is now in the dustbin of history.

I believe that history will look kindly on the Prime Minister and give him the credit that is his due. I hope that we will be able to find some new and more genuine level of friendship with Indonesia and watch our neighbour grow in international prestige and esteem as its yet fragile democracy takes root. I sincerely hope that good may come from the terrible sacrifice made by the people of East Timor so that they may live free from fear in a prosperous new nation. We must not forget the hundreds of thousands of East Timorese people who find themselves stranded in West Timor in refugee camps or elsewhere and urge that they be permitted to return to East Timor.

If there is any glory to be had in this tale of suffering and endurance, it belongs to the brave people of East Timor. I would like to honour them today. In particular, I would like to mention an East Timorese leader, Mau Hodu, who came to Parliament House here in Canberra several months ago and addressed a meeting of Parliamentarians for East Timor and other people involved in this cause, a visit already mentioned in this discussion by the member for Calare. In the most recent information to hand, I have learned that Mau Hodu was taken into custody on 7th or 8th of September and transported to Kupang. He has not been heard of since then and there are fears that he is, in fact, dead. Mau Hodu represented both the gentleness and the strength of the East Timorese people and I would like to remember him here today. For those like him who have given their all for their country, I will end by saying, 'Viva East Timor.'