



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Main Committee

EAST TIMOR

SPEECH

Monday, 27 September 1999

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Date Monday, 27 September 1999
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Questioner
Speaker Abbott, Tony MP

Source House
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Mr ABBOTT (Warringah—Employment Services) (4.49 pm)—I am grateful to have this chance to comment on what is undoubtedly the biggest defence and foreign policy challenge that Australia has faced in a generation. Ben Chifley's 'light on the hill' was, he said, to work for the betterment of mankind, not just here but wherever we could lend a helping hand. It seems to me that Australia's intervention in East Timor stands in the great tradition of one of our greatest Prime Ministers.

In 1949, when the people of Indonesia were fighting to be free, the Australian government refused to support the Dutch colonial occupation and laid the basis of what should be a lasting friendship between Australia and the peoples of Indonesia. The tragedy of East Timor, which the Indonesian establishment, and particularly the Indonesian military establishment, seems never to have grasped, was that the Indonesians were every bit as much colonial overlords there as the Dutch had been in Indonesia itself.

From 1975, Australian policy towards the forcible integration of East Timor into Indonesia has been that of an awkward and embarrassed bystander. For understandable reasons, we did not want our moral qualms to affect good relations with our giant neighbour, but you cannot have business as usual when people are being slaughtered in the street. I think the vast majority of Australians—and, I suspect, the vast majority of Indonesians—are actually relieved that an ignominious chapter in history seems now to have closed.

If, as I hope, East Timor becomes a free, stable and democratic society, two people deserve considerable credit. The first is President B.J. Habibie, who realised that Indonesia's hold on people who did not want to belong was politically, economically and ultimately morally untenable, and thus permitted the United Nations ballot. The second is Prime Minister J.W. Howard, who could easily have dithered on the sidelines like so many of his predecessors, or, like the Pharisee, passed by on the other side of the road. Instead, he organised the multinational force which is now giving the people of East Timor the protection they are entitled to expect.

A few voices have suggested that Australia should have let the Indonesians sort things out in their own way, as if the slaughter of innocents has ever been a part of any culture's ordinary way of doing things. A few voices have even suggested that Australia is trying to impose Western values. As the previous speaker, the member for Wills, has said, this is dead wrong. Australia is standing up for universal human values, values which are every bit as much Indonesian values as they are Australian values. When President Habibie sanctioned the free vote he was standing up for the best values of the Indonesian people, and when John Howard organised a force to stop the slaughter he was standing up for the best values of the Australian as well as the Indonesian people—values which had been forgotten, it seems, by rogue elements inside the Indonesian military.

There have been times when Australia has committed more troops abroad. Obviously, the 300,000 who went abroad as part of the 1st and 2nd AIF had a much bigger role in conflict than the peacekeeping force. There have been times when Australia has made a bigger impact on world history—for instance, in March 1918 when the 1st AIF stopped the big German push, and in 1941 when the 2nd AIF virtually knocked Italy out of the war. But never before has Australia, in its own right, stood in this way for justice and freedom. We have never been a leader in any international expedition in this way. The UN resolution was our doing; the multinational army is our doing. None of this would have happened without us.

There are some voices raised now to say that, because of what is happening in East Timor, Australia is the odd man out of Asia. On the contrary, we have never had more friends than since we decided to take our stand for justice and freedom for a people denied both for far too long.

As well as Australia, Thailand, New Zealand, the United States, Italy, Canada, the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, France, Brazil and the United Kingdom are contributing to the force in East Timor. In addition, Fiji, Pakistan, Zimbabwe, Egypt, Mozambique, Spain, Ireland, Denmark, Japan and Portugal are assisting in other ways. The People's Republic of China is making a small but significant contribution. All this is happening because our government and our Prime Minister decided that we had dithered on the sidelines for too long. Our

government and our Prime Minister decided that Australia had to lead on behalf of the suffering people of East Timor. I doubt that Australia has ever stood taller in our region. Certainly, I have rarely felt more proud to be an Australian; proud to be an Australian and humbled at the exertions of our soldiers who are standing up for decent, civilised values on behalf of the Australian and Indonesian people.

I just want to close with a few observations about the way this debate has been conducted in Australia. I regret to say that on this issue the Leader of the Opposition, who is a decent man, has blown a tin trumpet. It is as if Neville Chamberlain of 1938 was pretending that he, too, would have been Winston Churchill in 1940. He seems to be saying that we should have kept good relations with Indonesia while at the same time we should have labelled them an international pariah before the ballot and its aftermath. He seems to be saying that we should have known that elements of the Indonesian army would go on the rampage and we should have insisted on armed peacekeepers before the ballot, even though he must know that this would have resulted in the ballot's immediate cancellation. It seems to me that on this issue at times Kim Beazley and General Wiranto seemed to have formed a unity ticket. The result of the Beazley line is that East Timor would have remained an Indonesian killing field and a blot on Australia's conscience for ever.