

The Other Swindled Partner

What were you doing in 2004 as the Australian Government's fleecing of the Timorese people began to take shape? [more]

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I remember 2004 well. It was another year of joy, purpose, and hard work. It was great to be associated with the Timorese people and with so many other Australians who were relieved that East Timor, as it had been known, was now free. The terrible years of oppression were over, as the Timorese had seized the opportunities which led to the UN Referendum of 1999 and the declaration of themselves as the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste in 2002.

However, the situation of the people remained dire, as the destruction wrought in 1999 and previous decades of violent occupation still caused hardship. Looking at photos from 2004 I can see bombed out schools, traumatised people, and the man who lived in a tree, unable to cope with his memories.

Many Australians working with the people in 2004 had heard about the Timorese assistance given to our soldiers in 1942, and wanted to repay the very large debt Australia owed. Australian soldiers in Timor would not have remained a viable fighting force except for the local people who fed and housed them and acted as guides and lookouts. The Timorese paid dearly after our men left: tens of thousands died from Japanese reprisals and Allied bombing.

Australians in 2004 also knew of our government's compliance with the Indonesian desire to subsume East Timor in 1975, and how it stood quietly by as the people were ravaged for 24 years.

These historical and moral realities moved many Australians to assist their Timorese friends in the newly independent nation. They raised money to send goods, and travelled at their own expense to Timor to engage in training and health support. They re-built schools, supplied furniture, conducted nutrition programs, and supported university students. Clubs, schools, churches and Timorese support groups redoubled their efforts, and generous individuals marshalled friends and family in the cause. Much of that support continues, with Australians across the nation still determined never to forget the debt we owe.

But what else was happening in 2004? Unbeknown to those who had taken the Timorese to heart, something very secretive was underway. An Australian government plot to defraud the Timorese was reaching the nadir of its deceit.

The resources of the rich Timor Sea had been the focus of Australian official interest for decades. Negotiations were now underway to decide on the sharing of the petrochemical resources in the Greater Sunrise area. Most people thought the process would be fair. We were all wrong.

In 2004, while Timorese government offices were being refurbished with Australian aid, listening devices were installed in the walls. The discussions of the Timorese negotiating team were recorded, giving Australia access to their plans, points of contention, and positions on the negotiations. The Australians then knew how far the Timorese would compromise, and whose opinions differed from the rest. The furtive signal was sent to facilities inside a floating hotel at a wharf not far away—a converted Russian hospital [ship](#) that was had been repurposed as accommodation and taken to Dili. From there the Australian Embassy in Dili ensured that the information was relayed to Canberra.

The result was a 50/50 split of the Greater Sunrise oil and gas field, despite it lying on Timor's side of half-way. Worth at the time around \$40 billion, the Australian end of the deal was designed to benefit Australian companies such as Woodside. And our government negotiators had clinched it by [spying](#) on their unsuspecting trading partner.

The Timorese people have received no war reparations from Australia despite the huge death toll they suffered as a result of their loyalty in World War II. They have claimed nothing from Australia despite our connivance with

the Indonesian invasion and occupation. They have not claimed reparations for the swindle of 2004. These matters remain for future consideration.

But we ordinary Australian citizens need to start thinking seriously about the confidence trick the government pulled on us. While we were working tooth, nail and purse, the government was concocting a plan to fleece the very people we were helping. And they carried it out—despicably—under the cover of an [AusAid humanitarian project](#).

Were there wry smiles in Canberra in 2004 at the dogged generosity of so many well-meaning “do-gooders” while plans to enrich Australian companies were cunningly woven and implemented behind our backs?

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