

# Australian Labor Party turns full circle on East Timor

Mike Head  
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After years of fervent support for the Indonesian military dictatorship's invasion and occupation of East Timor, the Australian Labor Party announced an apparent about-face this week. Labor's foreign affairs spokesman, Laurie Brereton, indicated support for East Timorese secession.

Brereton said a Labor government would appoint a special envoy on East Timor and adopt a 'forthright position' on self-determination. East Timor, the eastern half of a small island just north of Australia, was viable as a 'stand-alone proposition,' he declared.

The Labor leaders have a bloody record on East Timor, where at least 200,000 people have died under Indonesian rule. In 1974 and 1975 Labor Prime Minister Gough Whitlam held two meetings with General Suharto, guaranteeing Australian support for the military takeover of the former Portuguese colony in December 1975.

In 1989, the Hawke Labor government became the only regime in the world to formally recognise the Indonesian annexation--in return for a treaty with Indonesia to carve up the immense oil and natural gas reserves that lie beneath the sea in the Timor Gap between the two countries. In 1995, the Keating Labor government signed a defence treaty with Jakarta, committing the Australian military to intervene on Suharto's behalf in the event of instability.

Yet this week Brereton sought to distance Labor from its past, even criticising Whitlam, these days a Labor icon. Brereton referred to a recent letter Whitlam wrote to a newspaper blatantly defending his record on the Indonesian invasion and declaring there was nothing to apologise for. Brereton said: 'Regardless of that, the continuing events in East Timor have come at a very considerable moral price for Australia.'

As the old saying goes, when capitalist politicians

start speaking of morality it is time to watch one's wallet. In this case, the Labor leadership's only real concern is the \$19 billion worth of oil and natural gas that has begun to come on stream in the Timor Gap.

For 23 years, the Labor leaders embraced the Suharto junta's suppression of the East Timorese people as the best means for large Australian mining companies such as BHP to get their hands on the underwater wealth. Now they are now hurriedly shifting ground as the Indonesian economy deteriorates, undermining the regime presently headed by Suharto's protégé, Habibie.

With Indonesia lurching into a social catastrophe and towards possible disintegration, an unholy scramble is underway to secure a stake in East Timor's riches, with Australian big business jockeying for position with Portuguese, American and other multinationals to secure deals with the East Timorese leadership.

Brereton's announcement followed a meeting between a BHP executive and jailed Timorese leader Xanana Gusmao. During that meeting, Gusmao reiterated a July 22 statement issued by the National Council of Timorese Resistance (CNRT) that an East Timorese government would provide the oil companies with a 'more secure and predictable environment' than the Indonesian administration.

To put it plainly, the CNRT leaders declared that an East Timorese statelet under their control will protect oil profits. The CNRT, headed by Gusmao and Nobel Peace Prize winner José Ramos Horta, is primarily a bloc between East Timor's three main parties, Fretilin, UDT and Apodeti.

To a considerable extent, Brereton is only making slightly more explicit the position of the current Australian Liberal Party government and its Foreign Affairs Minister, Alexander Downer, who recently called for Gusmao's release from prison as a

precondition for talks on Timorese independence.

Brereton sought to dress up Labor's shift as a new-found concern for human rights in East Timor and elsewhere in the Asian region. But behind the seeming reversal of policy stands one constant: defence of the mercenary interests of corporate Australia, at the expense of the Indonesian and East Timorese masses.

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