

What lies behind the Australian Labor Party's shift on East Timor?

10 February 1999

A speech last week by Laurie Brereton, the Australian Labor Party's foreign affairs spokesman, criticising previous Labor governments for backing the Indonesian annexation of East Timor prompted the following letter, and reply.

Dear editor,

What lies behind Brereton's speech condemning past ALP policy on East Timor? Given his history as former prime minister Keating's toady, and consequent long support for the butcher Suharto, can it be that this political invertebrate has suddenly developed a grain of principle and a genuine concern for the self-determination of the East Timorese?

Or rather, is this an indication of a major shift in the policy of Australian imperialism? They see Indonesia breaking up into a series of mini statelets--its Balkanisation, in fact. While Suharto maintained his repressive regime the Australian bourgeoisie enjoyed opportunities to make mammoth profits from the blood, sweat and tears of the Indonesian masses.

Surely Brereton's speech writer has been instructed to make it clear to big capital that the ALP, as ever, is aware of winds and shifts in bourgeois politics, and ready to do its bidding! They are ready to do their duty and adapt to whichever "independent" regime emerges in East Timor, even if it is an extreme right-wing one. Shades of the hues of bourgeois regimes have never been a bar to the adaptability of the ALP, as long as the interests of imperialism (especially the Australian variety) are served.

I'm sure a patient researcher would gain a clear illustration of this upon examining and comparing ALP policies concerning Chile, the Philippines, Bougainville and Burma, to name just a few. These could further be compared with the ALP's support of US imperialism in the devastation of Iraq, while both in and out of government.

Any illusions which the working class has that the ALP has concern for oppressed people anywhere should not be buoyed by the utterances of Brereton. In this regard, apart from the afore-mentioned clear signal to the ruling class, it is, in the words of Shakespeare, "Full of sound and fury, and signifying nothing".

RW

Dear RW,

We agree. An examination of Labor's policy on East Timor over the past three decades demonstrates the ALP's readiness to

support any regime, no matter how vicious, that will further the prospects of corporate Australia. Brereton, as a life-long member of the ALP's right wing and a former minister in the Keating government, is fully acquainted with, and complicit in, this record.

Labor's embrace of dictatorial rule in East Timor goes back at least to the final decade of the 400-year Portuguese occupation of the territory. Under the fascist regime of Salazar, who was succeeded by Caetano in 1970, Portugal was notorious for its colonial brutality, whether in Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau or East Timor. In the 1960s and 1970s, East Timor remained one of the most impoverished colonies in the world, with an average annual income of some \$30. By then, Australia was its largest single source of foreign investment, notably through the presence of BHP, which held a mining concession, and the Australian-owned Timor Oil.

In 1963 the federal conference of the ALP, in line with international denunciations of Portuguese colonialism, declared its support for the "liberation of Eastern Timor" but that policy was dropped by the 1966 conference, so that when the Whitlam Labor government came to office in 1972 it had no formal policy on East Timor. At the United Nations, of course, the incoming government voted for resolutions calling for "self-determination" for Portuguese colonies. This stance was exposed as a sham, however, when it was revealed in the *Australian Financial Review* that the government-owned Trans Australian Airlines, which provided the only regular air service, had been transporting Portuguese troops from Darwin to the East Timorese capital, Dili. Questioned about this, and the government's negotiations with Portugal over drilling rights in the potentially oil-rich Timor Gap, Labor's foreign minister Don Willesee claimed that the UN resolutions applied only to Portugal's African territories.

With the overthrow of the Caetano regime and preparations for a rapid Portuguese withdrawal from East Timor in 1974, the Whitlam government shifted its support to the Indonesian military junta headed by Suharto. In last week's speech, Brereton said Whitlam took a "dangerously ambiguous" path of telling Suharto that he rejected independence for East Timor but also opposed the use of force by Indonesia. In fact, there was nothing ambiguous about Whitlam's position. He was adamant that a takeover by the Indonesian regime offered the

most reliable means of securing stable conditions and protecting Australian commercial interests. "We for our part understand Indonesia's concern that the territory should not be allowed to become a source of instability on Indonesia's borders," Whitlam stated publicly.

The Labor leaders initially supported Portuguese efforts to arrange a swift, forced transfer to Indonesian control. When the intense opposition of most East Timorese people made that unlikely, Whitlam paid lip service to discouraging a blatant military takeover by Indonesia. But in two summit meetings, at Jogjakarta in September 1974 and Cairns in April 1975, he gave Suharto the clearest possible indications that Canberra would not oppose the use of force. In fact, it was Whitlam's meeting with Suharto in Jogjakarta that set in motion Suharto's plans to send in undercover Indonesian troops and foment an apparent civil war as the pretext for an invasion. Whitlam reportedly told Suharto that "an independent East Timor would be an unviable state and a potential threat to the area". In the words of one well-known Australian journalist, Peter Hastings, Whitlam "uninvited, practically gave East Timor to Indonesia". By early 1975, Indonesia's Radio Kupang, based in West Timor, was making frequent use of Whitlam's statement to broadcast pro-Indonesian propaganda into East Timor--with the full knowledge of the Australian authorities.

The mercenary motives of the Labor government were identified in a cable sent to Canberra by its ambassador in Jakarta, Richard Woolcott. A treaty to divide up the Timor Gap "might be more readily negotiated with Indonesia than with Portugal or an independent Portuguese Timor," he wrote.

Documents leaked last year proved that Woolcott and the Whitlam government were told in advance of the first stage in the Indonesian invasion, at Balibo in October 1975, where five Australian-based television newsmen were killed. Even after Whitlam was removed from office in November 1975 he continued to encourage the Indonesian takeover. On December 4, 1975, just three days before the full-scale troop influx, naval bombardment and aerial bombing, Whitlam stated on national television that if he were still in office, his government would do "absolutely nothing" in the event of an Indonesian invasion. "Nobody would go to war over it... Now that's a blunt truthful answer and no political leader would give you another answer. It's the same answer Menzies [previous conservative prime minister] gave when some newspapers said we ought to go to war over West Irian."

It was indeed a bipartisan policy. The Fraser Liberal-National Party government became the first in the world to extend *de jure* recognition to Indonesian rule over East Timor in 1977. The Hawke Labor government cemented that recognition in 1989 when it signed the Timor Gap Treaty in a champagne ceremony to divide the spoils of the undersea oil and natural gas fields, now worth \$19 billion.

The Labor government went even further by assisting the Suharto junta to coverup the massacre of more than 200 people

in and around the Dili cemetery in December 1991. This support, necessary to prevent any challenge to the Timor Gap arrangements, also extended beyond East Timor. During the 1990s, the Labor leaders, Brereton included, established the most intimate economic, political and military ties with the Suharto dictatorship in order to secure the interests of Australian companies. BHP, Rio Tinto, CC Amatil, Transfield, Pacific Dunlop, ICI, Boral and others invested more than \$10 billion in Indonesia in these years, often in joint ventures with the Suharto family and its associates.

The Labor leadership's partnership with the Suharto regime culminated in December 1995 when it signed a security treaty to provide Jakarta with military assistance in the event of "adverse challenges". Speaking after the ceremony, prime minister Keating hailed Suharto's bloody 1965-66 coup, in which up to one million Indonesian workers and peasants were killed, as "the event of most positive strategic significance to Australia in the post-war years".

Now, as you suggest, Brereton and his colleagues have sniffed the shifting winds. The disintegration of the Indonesian economy, the fall of Suharto, and moves by the United States, Portugal and others to profit from these convulsions, require an adjustment. Under Habibie, the military is still clinging to its occupation of East Timor and also arming para-military forces to prosecute its interests, as it did in 1974-75. But it is simultaneously threatening to pull out of East Timor within months. For their part, the East Timorese leaders, headed by Xanana Gusmao and Jose Ramos Horta, are looking for deals with Australian-based and other transnational oil companies and their governments, promising them that an administration run by the National Council of Timorese Resistance will guarantee a "more secure and predictable environment" than the Indonesian military. That is why, all of a sudden, Brereton is reviving talk of "self-determination".

In all their twists and turns, the ALP leaders have never been motivated by the needs and aspirations of the ordinary Timorese workers and villagers, including their basic right to live free of national oppression and economic exploitation. Brereton's remarks demonstrate that nothing has changed. And as you say, an examination of Labor's foreign policy as a whole would show that the same is true on every front.

Regards,

Mike Head

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