

Behind Gough Whitlam's outburst

Leaked documents reveal Australian Labor leader's East Timor role

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The official Australian policy of supporting the Indonesian military occupation of East Timor is continuing to unravel. Last week, former Labor Party prime minister Gough Whitlam denounced Labor's current foreign affairs spokesman Laurie Brereton as "shallow, shonky and shabby" for suggesting that Whitlam's government failed to discourage the December 1975 Indonesian invasion.

Brereton had recently accused Whitlam of being "dangerously ambiguous" in his dealings with Indonesian president General Suharto in the lead-up to the invasion. Whitlam thundered that he would not be "blackguarded" by a man like Brereton, describing him as the most "ill-educated" foreign affairs representative in Australian history. Whitlam's outburst indicated that Brereton had touched a raw nerve.

The attack was all the more striking because since his dismissal by the Governor General in November 1975, Whitlam has become somewhat of an icon, generally depicted by the political and media establishment as a larger-than-life figure of intellectual vision, rare erudition and humanitarian liberalism. This image was a little tattered after his response to Brereton.

The leaders of the current Liberal-National Party government, Prime Minister Howard and his foreign minister, Alexander Downer, immediately sprang to Whitlam's defence. Downer joined Whitlam's condemnation of Brereton and endorsed the Whitlam government's record, saying it had been "understandably concerned with the prospect of a left-wing government in East Timor". Former Labor Party foreign ministers, Bill Hayden and Gareth Evans, also criticised Brereton for raising doubts about the role of previous Labor governments.

By the end of the week, strident backing for Whitlam had come forward from the *Australian* --the same Rupert Murdoch-owned newspaper that orchestrated the media campaign for Whitlam's dismissal in 1975. One of its headline stories reported that it had obtained a top-secret letter which Whitlam had written to Suharto in February 1975, showing that Whitlam opposed the use of force in East Timor.

Greg Sheridan, the *Australian's* foreign editor, wrote the front-page story and an accompanying opinion page column in which he declared: "The historical debate is now settled. It is absolutely clear. Gough Whitlam is innocent... Only those blinded by ideology or determined not to let the facts interfere with their anti-Whitlam prejudices on this issue can any longer have any doubt on these two points."

Just 24 hours later, however, another set of leaked secret documents emerged, this time published by the rival *Sydney Morning Herald*. These documents, the official record of two meetings that Whitlam held with Suharto in September 1974 and April 1975, show Whitlam championing Indonesia's incorporation of the former Portuguese colony. According to the *Herald's* foreign editor, Hamish McDonald, the documents "will torpedo attempts by Whitlam loyalists this week to save his record on East

Timor through the selective leak of one letter to Mr Suharto".

This extraordinary war of leaked cabinet documents indicates bitter wrangling in ruling circles, among the media owners and within the Labor Party. Their differences centre on how to readjust the bipartisan policy of supporting the military dictatorship in Indonesia and its annexation of East Timor without opening up for public view the historical crimes committed under that policy.

Now that the Indonesian regime, faced with economic disintegration, has threatened to suddenly withdraw from East Timor if its limited autonomy proposals are not accepted, the needs of Australian capitalism have shifted. Alongside Portugal, other European Union powers and the United States, Australia is staking a claim to play a leading role in East Timor, with a keen eye on the territory's resources--particularly its oil and natural gas reserves and high-quality coffee plantations.

To the extent that historical records of the past policy have been kept, however, the facts are proving troublesome.

Diplomatic documents, whether letters to neighbouring heads of state or official records of summit meetings, offer only a sanitised, selective and coded version of the actual discussions that take place. Nevertheless, the documents, including Whitlam's 1975 letter, are damning, particularly in light of the historical record.

They show that Whitlam encouraged the Indonesian invasion, knew in advance of the military preparations for it, and assured Suharto of his support when the invasion took place, even if the Labor government would have to make token noises of dismay in order to placate "the domestic audience".

According to one of the classified documents, an "edited record" of the meeting between Whitlam and Suharto at the State Guest House in Yogyakarta on September 6, 1974, Whitlam "said two things were basic to his own thinking on Portuguese Timor". They were: "First, he believed that Portuguese Timor should become part of Indonesia. Second, this should happen in accordance with the properly expressed wishes of the people of Portuguese Timor."

The latter proviso was added to avoid public condemnation in Australia. The official record states: "The Prime Minister noted that, for the domestic audience in Australia, incorporation into Indonesia should appear to be a natural process arising from the wishes of the people." In short, Whitlam and Suharto agreed on annexation; the only issue was to make it appear that this was the wish of the Timorese themselves.

Whitlam's letter, dated 28 February 1975 and hand-delivered to Suharto by the then Australian ambassador Richard Woolcott, referred back to this meeting. By this time the Portuguese colonial authorities were preparing to withdraw in the wake of the fall of the Caetano dictatorship in Lisbon in April 1974.

Reports had appeared in the Australian media that military exercises and

manoeuvres were underway in Indonesia, pointing to plans for an amphibious and airborne assault on the East Timorese capital of Dili, to be followed by a large-scale troop deployment from West Timor. As the *Australian's* Sheridan admits, there is no doubt that Whitlam knew from intelligence sources far more than the media was reporting.

Whitlam wrote to Suharto: "In September, you explained to me your concern about the future of Portuguese Timor and Indonesia's important national interest in the security and stability of that territory and in its close association with your country. I fully understood your concern and interest. You expressed the belief that Portuguese Timor, poor and weak as it is, could become a source of instability and an attraction for other powers and political interests unfavourable to Indonesia."

Whitlam confirmed that the two leaders had agreed that "the solution" was for Indonesia to take over East Timor. He then explained that the issue had become "sensitive" in Australia because of the media reports, and expressed his gratitude for Suharto's public stance of denying any military plans.

"The public debate does, however, serve to indicate the delicacy of the question, the widespread support here for an internationally acceptable act of self-determination in Portuguese Timor, and the great sensitivity of Australian Parliamentary and public opinion to any suggestion of a possible resort to unilateral action," Whitlam wrote. "I should like to impress this sensitivity upon you. I am sure you will understand that no Australian government could allow it to be thought, whether beforehand or afterwards, that it supported such action."

This was simply a message to Suharto not to misinterpret any public denials by Whitlam's government that it supported an Indonesian annexation. Suharto would understand that any reference to self-determination would be for public consumption only.

To underscore his desire to remain on intimate terms with Suharto's dictatorship, Whitlam immediately added: "A primary concern of any Australian government, and certainly of my own, is the preservation and promotion of the close and mutually advantageous relationship between our two countries."

This latter assurance was underlined when Whitlam and Suharto met in Townsville for a second summit on April 4, 1975. In the language of the official "summary" of the discussion, Whitlam again spoke of "various domestic pressures" on his government but told Suharto that "our actions in regard to Portuguese Timor would always be guided by the principle that good relations with Indonesia were of paramount importance to Australia". Only six months later, the Indonesian invasion began with the occupation of the town of Balibo in October 1975.

Apart from these documents, the Labor Party's record both before and after the Indonesian invasion is irrefutable.

Following Whitlam's September 1974 meeting with Suharto, it was accurately reported in the Australian media that Whitlam had told Suharto that "an independent East Timor would be an unviable state and a potential threat to the area". One respected journalist, Peter Hastings, commented: "Uninvited, he practically gave East Timor to Indonesia." By early 1975, Australian journalists working in East Timor reported that Indonesia's Radio Kupang was making propaganda use of Whitlam's statement.

Whitlam's position was so obvious that the opposition foreign affairs spokesman, Liberal Party figure Andrew Peacock, raised it in parliament in October 1974, accusing the government of "pre-judging the free expression of the Timorese". (The Liberals also talked of "self-determination" but their preference was for Portugal to remain in control, at least for a further decade.)

Throughout 1975, right up until the time it was dismissed, the Labor government did everything possible to facilitate the looming invasion. Led personally by Whitlam, the government:

- rejected backbench calls for the reopening of the Australian consulate

in Dili

- told parliament that Australia had no responsibility for what would occur in East Timor
- blocked aid shipments to the government formed by the separatist movement Fretilin
- helped prevent Fretilin's appeals for international recognition being heard at the United Nations
- when Australian-based journalists were killed at Balibo, falsely denied knowing the circumstances of their deaths at the hands of the military
- continued full-scale aid to Indonesia, including military aid.

In 1976, someone who knew the Labor government from the inside--Gregory Clark, a former Australian diplomat and consultant to the Prime Minister's Department under Whitlam--alleged that Whitlam had prior access to the details of the Indonesian invasion plans. Clark wrote that the plans for "Operasi Komodo," which were drawn up in the month following Whitlam's Yogyakarta visit, were studied and approved by Whitlam's government.

After the invasion, Whitlam publicly praised Indonesia's record in East Timor, describing it as "beneficial" and denying reports of atrocities and famine. In a statement on ABC radio (replayed last week on the PM program) he declared: "I am convinced that what the Indonesian government is doing is visibly beneficial for the East Timorese people and will achieve a long-term improvement in conditions." He even visited East Timor and went to the UN to support the Australian policy of recognising Indonesian sovereignty.

In his bombastic defence of Whitlam, Greg Sheridan contradicts himself. After arguing that Whitlam attempted to dissuade Suharto from invading, he asserts that, in any case, if Whitlam had opposed the invasion, it would have made no difference.

"US president Gerald Ford and his secretary of state, Henry Kissinger, had been in Jakarta the day before the invasion began," Sheridan writes. "At the height of the Cold War, if the US was not going to take any serious action, then the most strenuous protests by Australia would achieve nothing."

Perhaps inadvertently, Sheridan has pinpointed the fact that Washington fully backed the Indonesian invasion. Ford and Kissinger visited Jakarta as part of a regional tour in the wake of the final defeat of the US and its South Vietnamese puppet government in May 1975. After the debacle in Vietnam, followed by the loss of Laos and Cambodia, the US was not about to tolerate any threat to the stability of Indonesia, where it had helped instal the Suharto junta in a bloody coup just 10 years earlier. The emergence of a Fretilin regime claiming to be left wing in East Timor could not be countenanced.

Moreover these developments, including the abrupt Portuguese pullout of its Timor enclave, were bound up with global turmoil that had continued since the May-June 1968 general strike in France. The collapse of the fascist dictatorship in Portugal was followed by the disintegration of Franco's regime in Spain. In 1974 a miners' strike in Britain had caused the downfall of the Heath government. In the US itself, Nixon had been forced to resign in the same year. In Australia, the Labor government had failed to contain a movement for higher wages and better conditions.

Whitlam and the Labor leaders were aware that the American military and intelligence agencies, including the CIA, had orchestrated General Pinochet's 1973 coup in Chile in order to put down a threatening upsurge of the Chilean working class. One of the CIA's senior officers, Marshall Green, a direct participant in Suharto's coup, arrived in Australia as the US ambassador in 1974. Facing systematic media and political destabilisation, the Labor government was not going to challenge US policy in Timor. In any case, as Whitlam's references to "instability" in his letter to Suharto attest, the Labor government was committed to protecting the strategic and commercial interests of big business, including Australian companies, in Indonesia and throughout the Southeast Asian

region.

Today, the various capitalist powers, including Portugal, the US and Australia, are drawing up contingency plans for intervention in East Timor with the assistance of the former Fretilin leadership of Xanana Gusmao and Jose Ramos Horta. They will all pay lip service to "self-determination," just as Whitlam did in 1975. History demonstrates that if matters are left in these hands, the interests of the Timorese masses, and those of the masses throughout the Indonesian archipelago, will continue to be sacrificed to the economic and security requirements of the major powers.



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