

Australia: Former PM Whitlam testifies on 1975 murder of “Balibo Five” journalists

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2 June 2007

After more than three decades of official cover ups and whitewashes of the Indonesian military’s 1975 murder of five journalists in East Timor, a New South Wales coronial inquest has heard evidence from one of the key participants in the events surrounding the deaths, former Australian Prime Minister Gough Whitlam.

The former prime minister’s appearance before the court on May 8 marked the first time he has issued sworn testimony on the circumstances of the “Balibo Five” deaths. While Whitlam denied any foreknowledge or culpability, the coronial inquest—despite its highly limited scope—has collated damning evidence of his government’s cover-up of its complicity in the murders of the five journalists and in the subsequent Indonesian invasion of East Timor.

The “Balibo Five”, as the dead journalists have become known, were Brian Peters, a 29-year-old Channel 9 cameraman, Channel 9 reporter, Malcolm Rennie, 28, and three Channel 7 workers—reporter Greg Shackleton, 27, camera operator Gary Cunningham, 26, and sound recordist Tony Stewart, 21. The men were executed by Indonesian troops in the East Timorese border town of Balibo on October 16, 1975. The Indonesian military targeted the journalists to prevent any coverage of their provocative and illegal border raids aimed at destabilising the former Portuguese colony and fomenting civil war. With Canberra and Washington’s backing, the Indonesian military junta invaded East Timor in December 1975.

Two years ago, the New South Wales coroner accepted a legal argument advanced by the families of the five journalists that Brian Peters had been a resident of the state in 1975 and his death therefore fell under the court’s jurisdiction. Hearings began last February, with evidence provided by East Timorese witnesses, journalists, officials, and other participants in the events surrounding the deaths.

The families of the Balibo Five—who for decades have fought to reveal the truth about what took place in the period preceding the December Indonesian invasion—had hoped that the inquest, particularly Whitlam’s testimony, would provide an opportunity to challenge the official cover up.

Five separate closed-door investigations, orchestrated as whitewashes by successive Labor and Liberal governments, had previously concluded that the newsmen died inadvertently in crossfire between Indonesian troops and Fretilin independence fighters.

While the evidence tendered at the coroner’s inquest makes another whitewash along similar lines impossible, the latest investigation has nevertheless been carefully restricted in order to prevent a full exposure of the truth. Only the immediate circumstances of Brian Peters’ death are being investigated by the coroner, and the Whitlam Labor government’s support for the Indonesian invasion and its cover up of its knowledge of the Balibo murders has been deemed beyond the court’s remit.

The court effectively issued Whitlam with a free pass before he took the stand. “Deputy NSW coroner Dorelle Pinch warned lawyers that they would not be able to grill Mr Whitlam about a possible government cover-up,” the *Age* reported on May 8. “She also will ban questions on whether Mr Whitlam’s government had any obligation to warn or rescue Mr Peters and his colleagues Greg Shackleton, Gary Cunningham, Malcolm Rennie and Tony Stewart.”

Pinch said she did not expect the former prime minister to add anything to his previously submitted written statement. “Nevertheless, I don’t want it perceived that we haven’t canvassed with him to the fullest extent those matters to which he might be able to give evidence,” she added. In other words, Whitlam’s testimony was about maintaining the inquest’s credibility rather than establishing the truth.

When he finally appeared in court, Whitlam’s main concern was to deny any responsibility for the Balibo Five deaths and to condemn the journalists for their own fate. He blamed Greg Shackleton in particular, saying he had previously warned the journalist of the dangers in travelling to East Timor. Whitlam added that he would have expected Shackleton to pass this warning on to his colleagues. “I mean, it would have been irresponsible if he didn’t,” the former prime minister declared. “He would be culpable.”

Whitlam denied giving the green-light for Indonesia’s

invasion of East Timor, insisting that while his government supported the territory's integration into Indonesia, it did so only on the basis of the Timorese people's "self determination". He failed to mention that in both Australia and Indonesia, references to self determination were understood as nothing more than obligatory and cynical diplomatic niceties. The Australian prime minister twice met with Indonesian General Suharto before the invasion, leaving no doubt of his support.

Much of Whitlam's testimony involved his claim that he only learned of the deaths in Balibo after being briefed by foreign affairs and defence officials on October 21, 1975. The five men had been murdered five days before, on October 16. Australian intelligence intercepted an Indonesian radio signal within hours of the killings, and senior officials and ministers in the defence and foreign affairs departments were immediately informed. According to the former prime minister, however, no-one in his office knew anything until October 21.

Whitlam's testimony was immediately contradicted by subsequent witnesses. The next day Gordon Jockel, head of the Joint Intelligence Organisation (JIO) in 1975, gave evidence. He told the court that on October 16 he had been briefed by a senior officer with the Defence Signals Directorate who, because of the intercept's significance, personally delivered the news. Jockel said that the same officer had also delivered the news to the prime minister's office.

"My assumption from the start was that they had been deliberately killed," Jockel said. When asked why, he replied, "The nature of the circumstances, why would they all be killed?" The same assumption was made by all his staff in the JIO.

Testifying on May 17, Alan Renouf, former head of the Department of Foreign Affairs under the Whitlam government, added: "I had the view then as I have it now that they had been deliberately killed." He said that it was in the nature of military dictatorships carrying out illegal invasions not to protect unarmed civilians. "They are inclined to take the obvious way out and shoot them," he told the coroner. "I thought the killing of the journalists was revolting, quite unnecessary and cold-blooded, and a really merciless, wanton, infamous act." This position, he said, had been shared in Canberra "by nearly everybody in a position to know".

Renouf also exposed Whitlam's claim that the latter opposed East Timorese integration into Indonesia unless this was based on "self determination". Before meeting General Suharto in May 1975, the former prime minister had moved to drop all references to "self determination", but Renouf re-inserted the phrase back into Australian policy documents.

"[Whitlam] was very annoyed that I changed his policy, but that's the way it was," Renouf told the court.

The evidence tendered at the coronial inquest so far provides a damning indictment of Whitlam's record in relation to the Balibo deaths. Neither in 1975 nor at any time since have the interests of ordinary East Timorese played any role in the determination of Canberra's foreign policy objectives. The entire Australian political establishment, relishing the possibility of closer ties with Jakarta as well as lucrative oil contracts in the Timor Sea, backed the invasion and turned a blind eye to the subsequent slaughter in East Timor. Between 1975 and 1999, an estimated 200,000 people died under the occupation.

Despite Whitlam's best efforts, the truth could not be suppressed indefinitely. The former prime minister will now forever be associated with the atrocities carried out by the Indonesian junta, with Australian and US backing.

Whitlam's appearance before the coroner's court is likely to mark the final chapter in his somewhat desperate campaign to deny culpability. It has been, in its own way, a fitting end. Now 90-years-old, the former prime minister spent most of his time in the coroner's court reading from a pre-prepared statement. When asked about matters other than those directly relating to the statement, he appeared to have difficulty in following questions and recalling basic facts. Only when it came to blaming the journalists for their own deaths did Whitlam become lucid and even aggressive.

Shirley Shackleton, the murdered newsman's widow, later condemned the former Labor leader. "I just think he is despicable," she said. "He is totally despicable. Dead men can't tell stories so it's left to their poor old wives to do it for them."



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