

“The Balibo deaths represented part of the broader tragedy that befell East Timor”

Director Robert Connolly speaks with WSWS

Richard Phillips
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Writer/director Robert Connolly spoke this month with the World Socialist Web Site about his latest movie on the execution of five television reporters by the Indonesian military in East Timor in 1975. (See: “Balibo: a war crime exposed”) Connolly’s previous films include The Bank (2001) and Three Dollars (2005). He was also joint producer of The Boys (1998), The Monkey’s Mask (2000) and Romulus, My Father (2007).

Richard Phillips: Why do you think there has been such a cover-up by consecutive Australian governments over the Balibo Five?

Robert Connolly: It’s staggering that the NSW coroner’s inquiry in 2007 couldn’t find one witness to testify that the Balibo Five were killed by crossfire, as the Australian government claimed, and yet they found a significant number of reputable witnesses with evidence to show that they were murdered. How deep was the cover-up when two previous major government inquiries were allowed to make claims that were entirely unsubstantiated? For me this comes down to the big question of principle and pragmatism in foreign policy.

[Former Australian ambassador] Richard Woolcott said in one of his cables from Jakarta in 1975 that the Australian government had to turn a blind eye to Indonesia’s invasion of East Timor. These aren’t his exact words but he basically wrote, “I know that what I’m recommending is not principled, it’s pragmatic, but isn’t that what foreign policy is all about.”

In other words essential principles that we have chosen to live by—the Geneva Conventions and other legal principles—were being repudiated. And *Balibo* stands as a document, as evidence, of the human cost of this approach.

In the case of the Balibo Five, we had both sides of politics in this country—Labor and Liberal—rejecting basic principles, endorsing the Indonesian military takeover of East Timor, and then attempting to cover-up what happened at Balibo.

RP: Isn’t this another example of the infamous great power phrase: “Our country has no permanent principles or friends, only permanent interests”?

RC: Yes, but I’m determined to stand in the face of this sort of approach. There have to be certain basic principles that determine how we live. And despite everything that our governments have done to cover it up, the Balibo story hasn’t gone away.

Here we had five young journalists—Australians, a New Zealander and a Briton—who were brutally murdered and their bodies were hastily burnt, put in a box and buried in Jakarta. This was a war crime and for me represented part of the broader tragedy that befell East Timor.

The official view of the Commission for Truth and Reconciliation in East Timor found that as many as 183,000 East Timorese died as a result of the conflict. This was in a country that only had a population of about 600,000 in 1975. This shows what happens when governments operate on the basis of selfish self interest.

I’ll never forget what one guy who was helping us with the shoot in East Timor said to me. His father had always explained that the Timorese had been betrayed by the Australian government but never betrayed by the Australian people.

RP: Nor did Canberra’s military intervention in 1999 have anything to do with humanitarian concerns. It was about oil and gas resources and regional influence, which was further highlighted by the destabilisation campaign it mounted against then East Timor prime minister Mari Alkatiri in 2008 because he demanded a better deal on oil and gas rights.

RC: Yes. I met a woman who was running a mental hospital for traumatised children. When Downer [Australian foreign minister (1996-2007)] was playing hard ball with Alkatiri over the oil and gas treaty, he cancelled funding to a whole heap of organisations—including hers. This was at a time when East Timor was on its knees. I have little time for Downer’s role in that period of history.

RP: It wasn’t just Downer though; the Labor Party opposition supported this policy.

RC: That’s right and we’ve all seen the 1989 footage of Gareth Evans [Australian foreign minister 1988-96] popping the bubbly in a Lear jet with Ali Alitas [Indonesian foreign minister (1988-99)] after signing the Timor Gap Treaty which assigned half East Timor’s offshore oil resources to Australia and the other half to Indonesia.

RP: Did you uncover any new evidence about the Balibo murders during production?

RC: No. All the issues are well documented in Jill Joliffe’s book [*Cover-Up: the inside story of the Balibo Five*]. What I did come to understand more deeply was the terrible psychological impact of

the tragedy on the journalists' families.

RP: *Balibo* is a welcome return to political/historical movies by Australian filmmakers. Why have there been so few local movies along these lines in the past few years?

RC: For about a decade or more the television mini-series became the documenters of Australian history. This was big event television and it kind of weaned feature filmmakers off our history. It was a pity because movies like *Breaker Morant*, *Gallipoli* and *The Year of Living Dangerously* made in the early 1980s were movies about our history. I hope that *Balibo* is in this lineage.

RP: The late 1980s and early 90s were a difficult period for filmmakers everywhere who wanted to deal with historical and political subjects.

RC: That's right there was a real absence. But in recent years there's been a change. Michael Winterbottom has made some interesting films and you would have to say that Philip Noyce's *The Quiet American* was good—a great return to form.

RP: But Miramax Films, his producers, refused to release it for quite a while because the Bush administration was involved in the invasion of Iraq and they didn't want to come into conflict with Washington.

RC: Yes, but I must say that I felt no censorship in making *Balibo*—either here where it touches on some sensitive issues—or in East Timor. The Indonesian government told us that they hoped it would present the Indonesian point of view.

I told everyone that I was not interested in either the Indonesian or the Australian governments' points of view—I was interested in the truth—and I wasn't censored for that. The big question is: Why did it take 34 years before *Balibo* was made?

In 2001 my first feature, *The Bank*, was to have a screening at parliament house in Canberra—every Australian movie receiving government money is offered the chance to screen at the parliament. It was all booked in and then they cancelled it because there was pressure from a senior figure in the banks ... This illustrates the sort of pressures applied to discourage filmmakers from tackling certain subjects. Labor took it up, of course, because that's the tit-for-tat nature of Australian politics. They wanted to score some points.

RP: Has *Balibo* changed your stylistic approach as a filmmaker?

RC: Yes, I have a whole new philosophy about it. Our catch-cry during production was to "explore the drama with the camera". This meant going to the places with the cast and crew where the real event occurred. Then, rather than setting up every single aspect, it meant stepping back, calling action and then using the cameras to explore the drama as it unfolded. It was an eye-opening way of working for me and allowed the human dimension to come to the fore. I think that's why many people find the film very moving.

RP: I felt that there could have been more information about and character development of the journalists.

RC: I can appreciate that, but maybe you have to sacrifice a little bit of that to make the film in this way. That's also why I encourage people to read the full story in *Cover-Up*, look at our web site, and investigate further. Earlier drafts of the script had more background on the journalists, their families and their girlfriends, but I decided not to use it in order to give the movie

more of an East Timorese point of view.

It's a question of balance, of course, but I think that it works in the bigger scheme of things and the meaty, chunky bits of the film deliver.

RP: Had you planned to use more about the Whitlam government?

RC: I think what's there is strong enough. *Balibo* could be a lecture and I obviously didn't want that. But I also didn't want to go soft on Whitlam. There is the scene where Ramos-Horta looks at the picture of Whitlam and Suharto and says "Two pieces of s... in matching shirts". There's also Whitlam's voice—a sound-grab from the ABC where he denies any interest in East Timor—and the jungle scene where Horta says the British, Americans and Australians are selling Indonesia weapons.

I hope these references are enough to ripple into the film and create a sufficient sense of the complicit role of the West. It's always a difficult balance. There were some versions which had more in and some with less. The test screenings with more of this material tended to turn audiences off. When I pulled these sections back people came out feeling a lot angrier about what the movie portrays, particularly those born after 1975 or very young at that time.

RP: The journalists' families have called for war crime charges to be brought against those responsible for the murders. Jose Ramos-Horta has rejected that. What's your position?

RC: I sat in on the NSW coroner's inquiry [in 2007] and it was very thorough. They interviewed lots of people, made a finding and have presented it to the attorney-general who has sent it to the Australian Federal Police. That system is in motion and it shouldn't be politicised. But it must be followed through. A war crime is a war crime.

RP: How has *Balibo* influenced your next project?

RC: Because the movie has been so all-consuming it means that at this point I don't actually have another project.



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