

Oil under Troubled Water

A response by David Odling-Smee

I am flabbergasted by the erudition of Bernard Collaery who successfully explains complex matters in the realms of history, diplomacy, defence, law (including international law), and technical oil dealings. A dazzling example of one man's intellect.

I am surprised to learn that the immorality and greed which the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (and its predecessors under other names) has displayed, started as early as the 1960s. This means that it has been ongoing for over 50 years.

It was good to be reminded of the days when Australia demonstrated moral leadership, in the 1940s and up to 1949. Australia's work for the Atlantic Charter and in supporting independence for Indonesia, were high points. (Foreign Minister Doc Evatt was the architect).

It was also good to hear of the occasional Australian political voices - David Fairbairn, Lance Barnard, Don Willesee – protesting the onward march of the immoral and counter-productive Australian foreign policy.

I was interested in the extent of the failures of the UN to protect the Timorese, and their inability or refusal to counter Australian pressure.

The immorality and greed which constitutes the culture of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) stands alone. The Department of Defence seems entirely different. Is this because in foreign affairs there is no need to explain one's actions to Australian opposition groups? A Foreign Affairs minister can be a bully and a dictator towards other nations, especially if the other nations are weak. Is Australia a bully in the Asia-Pacific playground?

The culture of DFAT has, as mentioned, been long-lasting, but also powerful. It has managed to convert all incoming ministers and prime ministers of both Liberal and Labor parties, and thus produced a seamless and ongoing pattern of deceit with hardly a hint of opposition from anyone in the higher levels of government and administration. (Only the Australian people complain).

Australia's DFAT has notably made an enemy of its neighbour Timor-Leste, and also negatively interfered in Timorese politics. In addition, it has kept the Australian Parliament in the dark and deprived the Australian people of their lawful petroleum gains. (Timorese meanwhile look well on the Australian Defence Force and the Department of Defence).

Although this selfish and cruel activity has been going on for 50+ years, its high point came in recent years, under Foreign Minister Alexander Downer. He has excelled in Timor-bashing. Downer has been the chief torturer. Since the 1990s there have been many meetings concerning oil between Australia and Timor-Leste, at least 40 or 50 meetings; during that time and at those meetings, Australia has been relentless in deceiving Timor and depriving it of money and oil which the Timor government needs for its impoverished people. Never has there been an Australian voice which says "This is immoral", or "We have gone too far" or "Poor Timor". Not a glimmer of compassion. At times, on international TV news, we see a policeman vigorously and viciously beating a man on the ground, with no let up, on and on, unremittingly. Australia has been that policeman. The beating is still continuing today.

At the beginning of the book we learn how Australia realised the importance of having friendly neighbours to the north in that arc of countries – Timor, New Guinea, Solomons, Vanuatu. Doc Evatt (Australian FM) even tried to get hold of Timor (in 1943), from Portugal. Australia has long wanted

security to its north, so has staunchly supported and wooed PNG and Indonesia for years. But in the case of Timor, Australia's greed for oil forced it to shoot itself in the foot. DFAT has made enemies of a country (Timor) and its key leader (Xanana Gusmão) whose support it needed for strategic purposes, the more so as China's power increases.

The book finishes with Collaery demanding a new Australian foreign policy strategy. How this can be achieved I do not know. But the Australian people must demand it – like they are demanding acknowledgement of Aboriginals. Collaery says in conclusion: “A new foreign policy strategy in the Asia Pacific region is required based on re-establishing Australia's moral standing. As with the legacy of white dealings with the first Australians, it must start with an exemplary process of recognition of past wrongs affecting East Timor, including restitution. Serving relics from the troubled Timor waters of a disgraceful era should be removed from the Australian Public Service and government funded NGOs and think-tanks. Former diplomats and intelligence personnel of integrity might be rehired to restore vision and purpose. A new foreign service must be developed with proper values instilled and competent foreign policy oversight mechanisms implemented”.

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