

What really happened in the Timor deal?

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It is disturbing that more than a decade after East Timor secured its independence, with the assistance of Australian forces, our nations now are in dispute. Primarily, the quarrel is about the division of many billions of dollars of revenue that will flow from developing gasfields in the Timor Sea. Underneath, though, are serious concerns about Australia's conduct during treaty negotiations in 2004.

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For years, there has been deep suspicion on East Timor's part that Australian intelligence agencies bugged Timor ministers' offices as they negotiated the Treaty on Certain Maritime Arrangements in the Timor Sea. In May, East Timor declared the treaty invalid, saying Australia had not negotiated in good faith. Arbitration is about to begin in The Hague.

East Timor's case, however, has been disrupted to some extent after ASIO, acting on a warrant issued by Attorney-General George Brandis, raided the Canberra premises of Bernard Collaery, an Australian lawyer acting for the tiny nation. ASIO also raided the premises of a former Australian Secret Intelligence Service officer, who, Mr Collaery says, was prepared to blow the whistle on what happened in 2004.

Our concern for now is the timing of this raid. The Australian government and its intelligence agencies have been on notice about the arbitration for months. They have been aware for years of Timor's allegations about covert surveillance. Yet they left this raid until the last minute. While Senator Brandis contends the raid was not designed to interfere with the arbitration, the fact that it has taken place now invites such suspicions. While we respect the need to maintain certain confidences in the interest of national security, many questions remain unanswered. Security agencies must always exercise their sweeping powers responsibly.

Last month, East Timor Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao chastised "powerful countries [that] shamelessly violate the civil rights ... of other countries". He said: "Either we are in the presence of an extreme distrust, where everyone is a potential enemy, or we are witnessing the fraudulent use of technology to obtain economic advantage over others, which is even more immoral when those others are weak and small."

If Australia has exploited such imbalances in power for commercial gain, and done so through espionage, then we should be deeply ashamed.

In mathematics, we must all do better

Young Australians have fallen further behind some of their counterparts in other OECD countries in mathematics studies. The latest triennial Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), which analysed the performance of 15-year-old students in maths, science and reading in 65 countries, shows Australia has had one of the largest declines in maths - falling from 13th place in 2009 to 17th now.

The Australian Council for Educational Research, which surveyed PISA's results, found that although Australia exceeded the OECD average in maths, our overall maths-literacy results were a "major concern". This result - a world away from the admirable ambition of the former Gillard government to put Australian secondary students in the international top five by 2025 - shows that a third of females and a fifth of males from the 775 Australian schools surveyed believe that mathematics are not important for future study. It does not take Einstein to work out that this means the already serious decline in teachers with proper maths skills is likely to worsen. Indeed, 2010 figures show an alarming proportion of unqualified secondary maths teachers - 39 per cent in years 7 to 10 and 24 per cent in years 11 and 12.

Australia's dismal academic performance is a direct reflection of the inequities of our education system. The national gap between the performance of rich and poor students is, ACER says, the equivalent of about 2½ school years' difference. This, in itself, reinforces the importance of the Gonski reforms, which seek to tackle this damaging imbalance.

Maths, along with reading and writing, is a non-negotiable educational tenet. It is crucial to ensure maths remains high on the curriculum, and that there is a proper career path for those who choose to teach it. But it will require a significant

change of cultural mindset to ensure maths is not only properly taught, but properly learnt - in the classroom and at home. As Gonski panel member Bill Scales recently wrote on these pages, a child's academic performance, although mostly achieved from innate capabilities, also relies on other influences, especially family.

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/comment/the-age-editorial/what-really-happened-in-the-timor-deal-20131204-2yqxn.html>