

Australia's true relationship with Timor-Leste

Sophie Raynor, Eureka Street 9 September 2019

Scott Morrison posted a selfie on Facebook this week. A goofy, grinning snap, showing the prime minister leaning in together with Taur Matan Ruak, his Timorese counterpart. The pair were celebrating the 20th anniversary of Timor-Leste's vote for independence: an occasion for which Morrison made Australia's first prime ministerial visit to Timor-Leste in 12 years, and during which he publicly trumpeted a 'great friendship' between the neighbouring countries. If you'd been casually scrolling through Facebook or listening to news headlines, you'd have absolutely believed him.



Protesters hold up signs during Anti-Australia protests on December 6, 2013 in Dili, Timor-Leste. (Photo: Pamela Martin/Getty Images).

But in sunny Dili, it was a different story. Two days before Morrison's cheery selfies, a hundred Timorese students and activists had marched behind white banners, littered with signatures, proclaiming, 'Solidarity with Witness K and Bernard Collaery', referring to the former ASIS agent and his lawyer, who remain trapped in a drawn-out, obfuscated and unpopular prosecution for revealing information of Australia's spying on Timor-Leste in 2004 for oil wealth gain. Shirley Shackleton, the 87-year-old widow of murdered Balibo Five journalist Greg, sidestepped security guards at Morrison's airport arrival in an attempt to hand him a 4,000-signature-strong petition calling for the charges to be dropped. The Timorese activist group, *Movimentu Kontra Okupasaun Tasi Timor*, or the Movement Against the Occupation of the Timor Sea, MKOTT, were handing out white T-shirts adorned with Collaery's face; you saw them worn days later on the streets of Dili.

Just five months into government, Morrison's attorney-general Christian Porter greenlit the Witness K prosecution — a unique charge requiring his approval, and one which Timorese activists told me in Dili he could easily withdraw.

'It's not his fault,' explained Tomas Freitas, an organiser with MKOTT. '[The bugging] happened under the previous government. Christian Porter can withdraw these charges. And we're calling on him to drop the charges.'

Sympathy from tolerant activists, grinning ministerial selfies and neat soundbites about a great new chapter belie the cruel and harrowing history of Australia's turbulent relationship with Timor-Leste: one which stretches decades beyond the 20 years celebrated by the Australian government in its cheery '20 together' branding for Morrison's anniversary trip, and one which continues to disadvantage Timor-Leste to this day.

However, Australia's relationship of espionage in Timor-Leste starts long before Witness K.

In the late 1930s, a nervous Australian government held secret meetings to discuss Japanese activities in the region with then-Portuguese Timor governor, Alutarro Neves da Fontoura. In 1940, the governor — a quiet ally and sympathiser to the British, despite Portugal's neutrality during World War II — granted Qantas permission to make fortnightly stops in Dili on two of its routes, and conceded similar permission to the Japanese to trial flights between Dili and Palau. Australia openly used the flight authority to spy on the Japanese: in early 1941, Qantas managing director Hudson Fysh [told the airline's Dili-based agent](#) to 'make it [your] special duty to watch and report on Japanese activities'.

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The arrival of Australian troops to Timor to counter the Japanese in February 1942 technically constituted an invasion of a neutral territory — one which resulted in a Japanese victory and the deaths of between 40,000 and 60,000 Timorese bystanders. As Australian troops were evacuated out of the ravaged territory, they dropped leaflets reading, 'Your friends do not forget you'.

Timor-Leste, which had [not previously been of interest](#) to the Japanese, was thrust into the war by Australia's intrusion and remained under militant Japanese occupation until 1945. Former Timor-Leste president, prime minister and resistance leader Xanana Gusmão has accused Australia of 'sacrificing' Timorese lives during the war and has attributed TimorLeste's suffering to Australia's act of self-protection.

Australia's priority was clear: self-protection at all costs, no matter the sacrifice required of Timor-Leste. And it's a theme that continues today. Whether using the island as a base for open espionage, inciting the Japanese invasion and flying to freedom leaving the Timorese behind, or shamelessly prosecuting the men who told the truth about oil spying for commercial gain from a fragile new nation in the early weeks of independence — Australia's neighbourly relationship with Timor-Leste remains one of taking anything it can, not of sharing like friends.

Australia's seemingly unquenchable oil thirst similarly shows a different side to the grinning face Morrison put on at his Dili events.

The seeds of that Witness K prosecution were buried decades earlier, when oil was first discovered in the Timor Sea in the 1960s. Woodside hit the jackpot in 1974 when it discovered the Greater Sunrise oil and gas fields, about 450 kilometres north-west of Darwin — confirming the region's riches, and first arousing Australia's curiosity about the ownership of the multi-billion-dollar resources buried beneath the seabed — and then a desire to get all they could.

In Dili on Friday, Morrison stood squinting in the hot sun outside Timor-Leste's government palace — the very building his predecessors authorised the bugging of, in order to learn more about Timor-Leste's negotiating position and strategy — to announce the formal ratification of a permanent maritime boundary treaty between Australia and Timor-Leste in the Timor Sea.

The treaty is the result of a previously untested mandatory conciliation process brought to the Hague by Timor-Leste after Witness K's spying revelation, and permanently closes the Timor Gap. A small hole in a 1972 boundary treaty between Australia and Indonesia that agreed a boundary following Australia's generous continental shelf.

This treaty left a crucial gap right near Greater Sunrise, because Timor-Leste's then-colonial power Portugal — a proponent of a median line boundary, not the seabed line that would have delivered Greater Sunrise to Australia — wasn't invited to negotiate.

The gap, Australia's then-ambassador to Indonesia, Richard Woolcott, [said in August 1975](#), 'Could be much more readily negotiated with Indonesia... than with Portugal or an independent Portuguese Timor'.

Four months later, Indonesia invaded Timor-Leste, commencing a brutal and bloody 24-year-long occupation that declassified Australian diplomatic cables prove Australia knew about in advance, but did nothing to stop. Between 100,000 and 300,000 Timorese people died during the occupation — which was [tacitly endorsed](#) by Australia's diplomatic silence — and the country suffers the effects of brutality and over-exploitation today.

Indonesia did indeed prove easier to negotiate with, and Australia gleefully arranged a series of resource-use agreements for the disputed area — unlocking the wealth of the Timor Sea. But no money flowed to Timor-Leste.

'We are committed to your sovereignty and prosperity, and today open a new chapter in our great partnership,' Morrison said on Friday at his government palace press conference — addressing all of Timor-Leste, and a host of flown-in Australian journalists.

'One founded on trust. On shared respect. On shared values. One strengthened by talking together, walking together, working to solve problems together.'

The polished lines mark a clear departure from the actions of previous Australian governments — and an inconsistency with the Morrison government's own work. It remains responsible for Australia's continued inaction, manipulation and deceit with regard to Timor-Leste.

Australian parliament took 16 months from the boundary treaty's ratification to sign, receiving [approximately \\$6 million per month](#) from a 10 per cent share in an oil field now found by the treaty to belong to Timor-Leste. The government has said it won't repay the money.

Morrison sidestepped the Witness K question, saying it was a domestic matter before the courts. Shackleton, the petitioner, told the AAP in Dili: 'What is it that the Australian government is so afraid of? If Collaery goes to jail we will lose our freedom, we will lose our democracy.'

While the deployment of the Australian-led peacekeeping force to Timor-Leste in 1999 secured the country from militia violence and helped start a process of rebuilding, Australia capitalised on Indonesia's invasion and prioritised oil greed over Timor-Leste's sovereignty. For all Morrison's claims of a 'great friendship' and his government's celebration of '20 years together', the truth is that Australia's history with Timor-Leste is far longer and more fraught than he'd have you believe. It's an unjust, manipulative and exploitative relationship characterised by Australia's greed and short-sightedness. And it's a truth Australia must wake up to, lest it suffocate in its own stories.



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