

Editorial

Guilty of bravery

It is an absurd situation. Witness K has pleaded guilty for his role in exposing wrongdoing by the government. He is being sentenced over a crime Australia committed.

In a little room in Canberra, behind black panels to conceal his identity, he spoke his first words in open court: “Guilty, your honour.”

A former spy, he was charged with conspiring to reveal information about an operation in which Australia bugged political offices in Timor-Leste to help rig negotiations over the country’s oil and gas fields.

It was a craven exercise, wholly motivated by profit. Australia succeeded in exploiting an impoverished neighbour and delivered an enormous windfall for a private company. This was standover capitalism.

“Corporate greed was a big part of it,” Timor-Leste’s chief negotiator told *The Guardian* in 2019, “because the Howard and Downer government, they were skills for the corporations. That was what was really important to them.”

The case against Witness K and his lawyer, Bernard Collaery, has dragged on for years. Almost all of it is secret. The government has prevented K from publishing a book, threatening him with jail. They have taken his passport to prevent him testifying at The Hague.

According to his barrister, he suffers “alienation, anxiety and post-traumatic stress”. For his decency he has been gravely punished.

José Ramos-Horta, the former president of Timor-Leste, says this is “a story of chicanery, of innocence and trust betrayed”. He calls Witness K and Collaery “brave Australians, individuals with a conscience and courage, representing the very best of Australians as I know them – instinctively sympathetic to the underdog, the weak and vulnerable”. He says: “These men haven’t done any harm to their country. They honoured Australia.”

All of this is true. Australia acted unconscionably in Timor. The redrawn maritime boundary between the two countries is proof of this. The pursuit of the two men who exposed our malfeasance is a further crime.

Outside the Canberra courts, a group of protesters sometimes gathers in support of Collaery and Witness K. Sometimes they tape shut their mouths. One of their signs reads: “Charge the real criminals.”

The sign doesn’t say who these criminals are. It doesn’t need to. For anyone who has followed this appalling saga, the answer is obvious.

This article was first published in the print edition of The Saturday Paper on Jun 19, 2021 as "Guilty of bravery".