

'National security' and the protection of mining interests

Mark Westcott Green Left Weekly May 24, 2019

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Island of the Coast of Asia: Instruments of Statecraft in Australian Foreign Policy

(<http://www.publishing.monash.edu/books/ioca-9781925523799.html>)

By Clinton Fernandes

Monash University Publishing, 2018

304pp, \$29.95

Clinton Fernandes is a professor of international and political studies at the University of New South Wales in Canberra, part of the Australian Defence Force Academy. "I've never been convicted of anything that stood up on appeal," Fernandes said at his book launch in North Sydney on April 13.

About 200 people packed out the launch, many with a special interest in East Timor, of which Fernandes is a renowned expert.

Fernandes was speaking in solidarity with lawyer Bernard Collaery, who had just described his own precarious legal situation in the matter of defending Witness K. Infamously, Witness K blew the whistle on the bugging of the East Timorese Cabinet rooms in 2004, during oil negotiations with Australia.

In Collaery's case, the Kafka-esque secrecy surrounding the actual charges against himself and Witness K is claimed to be for "national security".

Neither speaker relished the prospect of jail or other legal consequences, but they both displayed a determination to keep speaking up.

The central thesis of Fernandes' book is that the anodyne phrase "national security" is used for much more than the physical safety of the nation and its citizens. From the beginning of colonial settlement to the present, that phrase has encompassed protection of the commercial interests of the few large private concerns that dominate Australia's economy.

In negotiating an oil treaty with East Timor, Australia's scientific, diplomatic, legal, economic and political resources were focused on benefiting large companies like Woodside Oil. Cloak and dagger special ops were deployed. Unsurprisingly, some of the negotiators later benefitted with jobs and consultancies with Woodside.

He points out one further disturbing aspect of this tale: the extent to which diplomatic and security resources were diverted away from monitoring international and national terrorist activities in favour of securing commercial advantage for large corporations.

For those interested in East Timor's treaty with Australia, Fernandes recommended reading chapter seven first. This chapter details how the many arms of the Australian government were applied to the East Timor oil negotiations.

Chapter one describes the book's central thesis. Subsequent chapters trace the influence of British imperialism on the early colony of Australia, and then apply the book's central thesis to a retelling of the history of ANZUS (The Australia, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty) and historical international conflict hotspots in Suez, Malaya, Vietnam, Indonesia and East Timor.

The next three chapters focus on the economic and financial instruments of power, starting with "The Challenge of the New International Economic Order". Fernandes traces the significance of Australia's role in the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank during the economic crises of 1970s.

The book goes on to tell how the Bob Hawke–Paul Keating government embraced economic deregulation, favouring the major capital interests over the citizenry.

This is followed by an analysis of how Australia used foreign aid from 1997, principally to support big business, despite the proffered humanitarian rationale. The IMF and the World Bank feature as tools used to achieve this.

The government underwriting of Australian banks in response to the 2008 Global Financial Crisis is cited as a further example of the government's favouring of large financial interests.

The last chapter, "Current Policy Priorities" draws out what to expect, based on the entrenched power interests. The rise of China's power in the world is presented as one of the looming issues.

Both speakers expressed the hope that the trial of Witness K and Collaery will be presented in public. In such a case, it is most likely that the charges would be withdrawn out of the embarrassment this would cause the current and previous governments.