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Proof Committee Hansard

PARLIAMENTARY JOINT COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS,
DEFENCE AND TRADE

Australia's relationship with Timor-Leste

(Public)

MONDAY, 24 JUNE 2013

CANBERRA

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PARLIAMENTARY JOINT COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS, DEFENCE AND TRADE

Monday, 24 June 2013

Members in attendance: Senators Moore and Ms Brodtmann, Mr Champion, Mr Ruddock, Ms Vamvakinou.

Terms of Reference for the Inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

Australia's relationship with Timor-Leste, with special emphasis on:

- bilateral relations at the parliamentary and government levels;
- aid, including support with governance issues;
- economic issues, including trade and investment;
- cultural, educational and scientific relations and exchanges;
- people to people links; and
- defence cooperation and those aspects of regional security that affect Timor-Leste.

The Committee will consider both the current situation and opportunities for the future.

WITNESSES

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BROWN, Mr Barry Vivian, Convener, Canberra Friends of Dili

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TEATHER, Professor David, Member, Canberra Friends of Dili

UTICK, Dr Stephen Eric, Member, Canberra Friends of Dili

Subcommittee met at 17:30.

CHAIR (Mr Champion): The subcommittee will now resume taking evidence as part of its inquiry into Australia's relationship with Timor-Leste. Before commencing the hearing, I remind any members of the media who may be observing that they need to report fairly and accurately on the proceedings of the committee, as required by the Senate order concerning the broadcasting of Senate and committee proceedings. On behalf of the committee, I would like to welcome representatives of the Canberra Friends of Dili.

Mr RUDDOCK: Why doesn't Timor deserve friends?

CHAIR: Now, now. Stop it. There will be plenty of time to be provocative, Mr Ruddock. Before proceeding to questions, do you wish to make a short opening statement to the committee?

Mr Brown: I am happy to do that. There are three things that we wanted to raise with particular emphasis at the beginning. The first one was the question of recognition for the role of the Timorese in the Second World War. You might know that in 2009 a petition was presented to the parliament with 24,000 signatures, seeking something that was not within the remit of the parliament to grant: it wanted East Timor made a member of the Order of Australia. However, the then Special Minister of State, the Hon. Joe Ludwig, wrote to the Mary MacKillop sisters—who had organised the petition—pointing out that it was not an appropriate form of recognition but offering to consider another, more appropriate, form of recognition as soon as possible. We have heard no more since 2009 on that issue, so the question that Susan Connelly—who organised the petition that was presented by David Bradbury—raised still remains: how can a country like Australia have a memorial to the role of horses in the First and Second World Wars and not to the 40,000 dead Timorese? I think it still remains a valid question.

CHAIR: No disrespect to the horses.

Mr Brown: No disrespect to the horses, but nevertheless. The other question was about the government of East Timor recently raising the question of the fairness of the Treaty on Certain Maritime Arrangements in the Timor Sea—the CMATS treaty—and seeking arbitration. The request for that was lodged in formal terms under international law and Australia now has less than seven days in which to respond. So we are just concerned that we be seen to be acting fairly towards a neighbour and giving them a chance to have their say—and be fair. There is not much more we can do about that.

The other matter that we thought should be emphasised was about the seasonal workers program. Part of what we were requesting and what was commonly requested by several other organisations was that the scheme be extended. That has now been done, actually, in the interim. It has been extended to include horticultural workers, which was the concern of the Timorese side. But we also wanted to see—as does the Timorese government and many of our Timorese friends—the scheme developed to include some form of occupational training so that the Timorese who come here and work in hotels, farms and wherever at the same time receive some sort of training so they can take back skills and develop some skills, rather than just send money home.

Mr RUDDOCK: I thought that seasonal workers worked in fruit picking.

Mr Brown: Yes, that is the horticultural side.

CHAIR: Advanced horticulture.

Mr Brown: But there could be some sort of training in the commercial development of mangoes, for instance, rather than just going out and picking them. In the hotel industry maybe there could be some English-language training.

Mr RUDDOCK: Seasonal working was really intended to be in those areas where you do not get people readily available and you bring them in because there is a seasonal demand. I do not know how you get that in the hospitality area, unless it is for a race meeting.

CHAIR: Or peak seasons. They do have peak seasons in places. But we will let you finish.

Mr Brown: I think the real problem was Broome. Broome had a shortage of workers during the peak seasons. In many hotels, up to half their rooms were closed off during what should have been their peak period, because

they could get enough people in to work there. So the seasonal workers scheme applies there and they can now open more rooms.

Prof. Teather: Just as there is a recurring seasonal requirement—

Mr RUDDOCK: You can do it under 457s.

Prof. Teather: From the Timor side, I understand there are people who partake of the scheme more than once, so that you have the vacancies and some of these people come back for more than one year.

Mr RUDDOCK: Return business.

Prof. Teather: So it is an investment. If one were to provide a little more training—which is more than simply familiarisation with what they are immediately doing—this is a win-win situation.

Mr Brown: There is a significant lack in Timor of people with hospitality skills, commercial farming skills, trade skills, food production skills and animal husbandry skills—these sorts of areas. They could do with some experience and some professionalism in those areas, which they can develop.

Mr RUDDOCK: It seems to me—I do not mean to interrupt—that you would be looking at an alternative form of visa: a student visa which envisages some training and then some work experience flowing off that. The seasonal workers scheme is really for those people who come and do something that is fairly manual, such as fruit picking, for which you do not need any particular training. The idea was that they come in for a short term and then go back. If they were compliant, you would do it again. I think you are changing its character. But is what you are really saying is that there is a need in Timor for perhaps some scholarships for people who come in to do courses that are not necessarily university courses—around some of the TAFEs and so on—to prepare them in the horticulture and agricultural are? We have a horticultural college in what used to be my electorate, at Ryde—I should not claim it now. There will be places like that where you could do it. If what you are saying is that the Timorese government sees it like that, they would have raised in the discussions about how the aid program works—that is, if you are talking to them.

Mr Brown: They are actually talking about a subclass 402 visa, which is an occupational workplace trainee visa.

Mr RUDDOCK: I think that is more meaningful than doing it with the seasonal workers.

Mr Brown: But the thought was that maybe the two could be combined so that they could work and do some training at the same time. Therefore, there is less expense.

Mr RUDDOCK: But the occupational visa does envisage training, does it not? You get your training and then you do the work experience—usually they are—

Mr Brown: If the two concepts of work experience and training could be combined in that way then we would—

Mr RUDDOCK: I think we would have to check whether that is in fact possible now. I think it probably is.

CHAIR: I think we got some evidence about the hotel side, where I think at the moment most of them are just cleaning rooms, whereas it was envisaged that they might do a bit of the front desk work and that sort of thing.

Mr Brown: I suspect that English-language skills might have something to do with it.

CHAIR: Yes, that is right. I think that is right.

Mr RUDDOCK: I apologise if I have put you off. Please continue.

CHAIR: Anything else? We are at questions. You talk about a motion passed by the parliament—

Mr RUDDOCK: We could do that. You could do it and I can second it.

CHAIR: Yes, we could indeed. It would not be that hard!

Mr RUDDOCK: You would get yourself re-elected!

CHAIR: Yes, that is right! Thank you for that. I am not sure if that was a vote of confidence or not! On the *Hansard*, we will strike that.

Mr RUDDOCK: It is well meant and a little humorous.

CHAIR: Thank you. I am just wondering—there is a memorial up at Dare. It is up in the hills about Dili. But there is no memorial in Australia at all?

Mr Brown: Not that I am aware of.

Ms Dettman: I would say that it seems to be a recurring theme in many of the submissions.

CHAIR: Yes.

Ms Dettman: It is the so-called debt of honour. I think it has very much influenced our relationship with Timor. It is perhaps one of the main reasons why there has been so much support and activism for East Timor, rather than perhaps other islands of the Pacific. I think it is widely perceived within the community as a very important part of our relationship with the region and one that perhaps needs to be recognised in Australia. Many Australians are probably not aware that we do have the memorial in Dare.

Mr RUDDOCK: There are competing demands for memorials and so on. This is about a resolution, and I think a resolution could be very easily proposed by one of us as a private member's matter. It would be dealt with by the house, it would be debated, and on an appropriate day it would be voted on and carried unanimously. It would happen without any particular difficulty, I think.

CHAIR: Perhaps we have given ourselves some work!

Mr RUDDOCK: I will ask John to draft an appropriate resolution and to check it with you! If you want somebody who will be in the next parliament to speak to it—

CHAIR: We will get Maria and Mr Ruddock to do it, just to be safe!

Ms VAMVAKINO: Philip, I suggest we do it by two o'clock tomorrow—

Mr RUDDOCK: Absolutely!

Ms VAMVAKINO: to lie in wait for the new parliament!

Mr RUDDOCK: You may need a little bit more cooperation from the Leader of the House for that!

CHAIR: Just in terms of memorials and those sorts of things, I think there was a movie made years ago, *Attack Force Z*, with Mel Gibson in it. But I do not know if it featured Timor terribly much, but that is where they got—

Mr RUDDOCK: They may be competing with those that want a Boer War memorial.

CHAIR: Yes, indeed. Would you see that as a positive thing, if we were to have one in Australia?

Ms Dettman: I do not think we are asking for a memorial, just the resolution.

CHAIR: Just a resolution?

Ms Dettman: Yes.

Mr Brown: I think the important thing then is what you do with it once it is done. There needs to be some sort of formal presentation, maybe to the Timorese parliament.

Mr RUDDOCK: I am going to meet the President in a week or so, so I will give it to him!

Mr Brown: Yes, he is going to be here.

CHAIR: We heard some other evidence about the limited nature of the seasonal worker program—that it is actually quite a small number of people. I think it is less than 100, from memory. Do you have any thoughts about how we might expand that?

Mr Brown: Initially, it was only in hospitality. The Timorese were concerned to get it expanded to include horticulture. I believe that has now been agreed to. I am not 100 per cent certain on that, but I was told that it has been extended to include horticulture. I would say that they are the only two areas in which it is possible to find Timorese people that would be able to do the work.

Mr RUDDOCK: There are people in the horticulture area who want it—maybe get into the Ord or something; I do not know. I think the two issues that would be relevant are that there is a demand, which is finite; and that it is a compliant population. If those who come provide evidence that they are coming and then going, I would not have thought that there would be any problems.

CHAIR: There was some evidence given that, rather than having a special program, we would be better off just extending the same rights to the Timorese that we give to backpackers, for instance, which is far easier, which is if they work—

Mr RUDDOCK: You mean a working holiday visa?

CHAIR: In effect, yes. That was one suggestion that was made to us, but I do not know if you have an opinion about it.

Mr Brown: I think there was an extension of sorts to include Indonesians in the working holiday visa program, but it was very restricted as to which Indonesians it applied to. I think that is the sort of—

Mr RUDDOCK: At the end of the day, all of these visa classes are developed on the basis of compliance. When you are dealing with developing countries, where there is a possibility that people will overstay and so on,

you look at it more closely. For instance, I think the work-holiday arrangements with Iran would only take people who had certain levels of education in the expectation that they would use their skills in a substantial way, whereas the ones for Europe, Hong Kong, Japan and so on essentially work on the basis that young people between a certain age like to go, they can afford it and they are going to go home because their linkages are substantial.

CHAIR: Any more questions?

Mr RUDDOCK: Were you saying that Dili has a sister-city arrangement with Canberra?

Mr Brown: No, we are a friendship city. The Chief Minister of the ACT and the Dili district administrator signed a friendship city agreement. It was last renewed in 2004. That was the second time—they signed one earlier, too.

Mr RUDDOCK: It sounds very positive. Does Canberra have a lot of friendship treaties?

Mr Brown: There is only one—Dili—and it has two sister cities.

Mr RUDDOCK: So that is a friendship, and the others are sister city arrangements?

Mr Brown: The sister city is a far more formal arrangement with legal and ongoing obligations, whereas the friendship city just means we are mates and we will look after each other. It is a much more casual arrangement than the sister city.

Mr RUDDOCK: Does it lead to some linkages between the people of Canberra and the people of Timor?

Mr Brown: It has in the past, it is sort of in the doldrums at the moment. There is an opportunity coming up in September, when we are hoping that the ACT government and the East Timorese government will renew the friendship city agreement at Floriade.

Mr RUDDOCK: I remember the bike ride around Timor—

Mr Brown: That is on every year.

Mr RUDDOCK: If Canberra had some sort relationship with Dili where people saw some virtue in going there for some particular event, it might be interesting—

CHAIR: It is a pretty brutal bike ride, though, around Dili.

Mr RUDDOCK: I was not encouraging people to get on a bike—

CHAIR: No, you all have to do it, honestly.

Mr Brown: This is a matter of public awareness and communication and understanding about Timor-Leste. As part of the Centenary of Canberra, Canberra Friends of Dili launched the first significant travel diary of Timor-Leste which looks at the historical/ cultural/population/natural history aspects, which are wonderful. We have released that and the ACT government bought 100 copies of that diary for the schools and colleges of the ACT. It is written for all Australians, not just Canberrans, but with a publication like that we are hoping to bring an awareness of the story of Timor-Leste, an experience of the land and the people of Timor-Leste, to young people, particularly young Australians. That is it there. It is the first time we have had a significant travel diary on Timor-Leste published. It is the account of our journeys through Dili and ten of the thirteen districts of Timor-Leste which we conducted in July 2010. It contains 65 colour plates and stories and everything from anthropology to religion and history which have not been accounted for before.

CHAIR: If you do not mind, we will take that document as an exhibit

Mr Brown: If you wish to do so

CHAIR: Have you got a spare copy?

Mr Brown: We can present this to the committee; I think it is important. It is an account of the positive interactions not only between Canberrans but between Australians and Australian community associations and the ordinary Timorese people. This is an important account—it shows the way Australians and the Timorese are working together in various projects across the nation and that is a positive thing. We have taken the point of view of showing how important these links have been on the ground, to the ordinary people. It takes you on an expedition. It is written as an expedition and you land in Dili airport, and then you experience the various things, from sanitation right through to language and so forth. Then you start the trek right through the country.

This kind of thing is important because it is a realistic experience. It is an experiential thing. Importantly, we emphasise the land of children. This is a land of children, and the experience of the children is wonderful, but also there are the community groups and projects that we have had over the years. In that essence, it is important for Australians to be aware of our connections and these wonderful depictions of the land of children, which I call it,

which is what it is. So it is very engaging but it also deals with issues like geography, natural history, religion, population, arts-crafts, horticulture, nutritional aspects—it is right through there as you go through the diary. At the end of it you will have a snapshot panorama of Timor-Leste.

CHAIR: If it is the wish of the committee that the following document be incorporated into the committee's records as an exhibit into the inquiry into Australia's relationship with Timor-Leste, *Ten Canberrans and the Sleeping Crocodile*, it is so resolved.

Mr RUDDOCK: Mr Brown, how many members does your organisation have?

Mr Brown: Technically we have about 50 members, but we have about 200 people who are regular mailing-list people who come along to functions and things.

Mr RUDDOCK: I granted a lot of visas to East Timorese at one stage. Do you have a people-to-people relationship with East Timorese in Australia?

Mr Brown: Yes, with the Timorese in Canberra. There are very few resident Timorese in Canberra—only two or three families. Mostly it is with students at the university and ADFA. We see part of our role as helping them settle in and sort out problems.

Mr RUDDOCK: I was just thinking, in terms of a lot of the communities, that the development that goes to trade and so on occurs around some of the people-to-people linkages that come from people who are here and the families they have back home and so on, but if the numbers are so small it is perhaps not relevant.

Mr Brown: There are about 20,000 Timorese residents in Australia. Some of them are Australians. But most of those live in Sydney and Melbourne—probably about 14,000 of the 20,000—with a few more in Darwin and Perth. I think most of them find Canberra too cold.

Ms BRODTMANN: My apologies for coming in late. Welcome and thanks very much for your submission. Just going back to a comment you made earlier, was it the friendship group that is in the doldrums? You said that one of the bilateral relationships or friendship associations was in the doldrums.

Mr Brown: The Canberra city relationship. It is not so much in the doldrums; it is just that there has been a new Chief Minister here in the ACT and a new Dili district administrator at the other end, so it just needs a little bit of a—

Mr RUDDOCK: Gee them up a bit!

Ms BRODTMANN: Gee them up, okay.

Mr Brown: Yes. The plan is that they will be together in September at Floriade, when there will be a presentation to the Canberra city by the East Timorese government for its 100th anniversary.

Ms BRODTMANN: Okay, and hopefully that will move things along.

Mr Brown: Yes, that is the plan.

Ms BRODTMANN: Which schools here in Canberra have a Dili relationship?

Mr Brown: Radford College has an annual trip for their students to go to Timor-Leste.

Ms BRODTMANN: Apologies if you have gone over this before.

Dr Utick: No, we have not. The initiative of the *10 Canberrans* is important because, as I understand, the Centenary of Canberra will be putting copies of that travel diary into every college and school in the ACT. It is very important because they learn about the land of children, which young people can relate to. On that basic community-school level, I think that is an important start initiative to help young people to become aware of this in Canberra, that this is their friendship city and it is the gateway to this wonderful country.

Ms BRODTMANN: So there is a relationship with Radford, but no others?

Mr Brown: There have been attempts to get friendship relationships between schools here and Dili. The main difficulty is that there is no internet service that can cope with reasonable contacts at schools in Timor-Leste. That is in the process of change up there. There are significant improvements coming to the internet there. Modern kids do not want to be in a relationship when they cannot actually see or talk to the people up the other end on Skype or something like that or exchange emails—it just does not work trying to develop a relationship these days. It is a problem. Hopefully it will be addressed with the improvement of the internet that we can get. But Canberra has introduced a curriculum subject at primary school level that I think is called My Village, Your Village or Your Village, My Village, something like that, which takes a Timorese village and the kids learn what they would do if they were living in that village at their age.

Ms BRODTMANN: It probably would be worthwhile for the Canberra kids, in order to gain an understanding of the challenges that the children in Dili have experienced, to use traditional methods of communication.

Senator MOORE: Writing.

Ms BRODTMANN: Writing and photos and scrapbooks.

Mr Brown: The problem is there is no mail service of East Timor either.

Ms BRODTMANN: Oh.

Mr Brown: That is postal.

CHAIR: So perhaps they use carrier pigeons or something.

Mr Brown: Smoke signals?

Ms BRODTMANN: I was not aware of that.

Mr RUDDOCK: They are probably all emailing.

Senator MOORE: You can send things on the Catholic education network, so they do it.

Mr Brown: I think—

Senator MOORE: I do not know about the state system or the public system.

Mr Brown: Catholic schools, yes.

Senator MOORE: But the Catholic school network had their own way of getting letters and things, and the kids do this in some states.

Mr Brown: Not through the state system.

Senator MOORE: Not through the state system.

Ms BRODTMANN: So how could you communicate through the state system?

Mr Brown: You send messages with friends.

Ms BRODTMANN: Okay.

Senator MOORE: Expensive.

Mr Brown: You try to find someone that is going, or you ring them up.

Mr RUDDOCK: Thank you very much.

Mr Brown: Thank you.

Mr RUDDOCK: Very good. Nice to see you all.

CHAIR: I think Mr Ruddock has done my job for me!

Mr RUDDOCK: You will work on that motion, won't you? Seriously? I am being deadly serious—a form of motion. If you want to help the clerk with some words that you think might be an appropriate motion to acknowledge, I will ensure that it is appropriately lodged with Maria—unless you, Nick, want to do it?

CHAIR: I am happy to do it either way, but I think you and Maria would make a magnificent couple.

Mr RUDDOCK: We would be very happy to do it.

CHAIR: Thanks for your attendance here today. If there are any matters on which you need additional information, the secretary will write to you, no doubt with an appropriate wording for a motion. I am sure we can actually do that but, if there is anything you wish to be included, that would help. The secretary will send you a copy of the transcript of your evidence, to which any necessary corrections to errors of transcription can be made. Other than that, thank you very much.

Subcommittee adjourned at 17:56