

Hon Steve Bracks AC
INTERFET 15th Anniversary Commemorative Dinner

RACV Club Saturday 20th September 2014

I'd like to acknowledge:

- His Excellency Xanana Gusmao, the Prime Minister of Timor-Leste and Her Excellency Kirsty Sword Gusmao
- His Excellency Abel Guterres, the Timor-Leste Ambassador to Australia, and
- His Excellency Alfredo Pires, the Timor-Leste Minister for Petroleum & Mineral Resources.

I have been trying to convert the Prime Minister to Aussie rules, and more importantly to Geelong, but he remains obsessed by the round ball game, and the Portuguese team, Benfica.

He's on a winner there, as the club has the biggest fan base in the world.

Ladies and gentlemen, rather than go over issues that I suspect have been canvassed by people far more expert than me at this conference, I want to share some personal perspectives on the relationship between Timor-Leste and Australia, largely based on my role over the last seven years as a pro bono Special Adviser to the Prime Minister.

But first, some background. I'd like to take you back to 18 September 1999. Election day here in Victoria. At that time, I was the leader of the Australian Labor Party. We had been in Opposition for two long terms, and no credible pundit gave us any chance of winning the election.

My wife Terry and I walked to vote at our local primary school and as we neared the gates, in addition to usual pack of party faithful handing out how to vote cards, there were a couple of people handing out leaflets promoting a rally for East Timor that was happening in the city centre the next day. I recall saying to Terry, "we can go to that tomorrow, we'll have free time."

I didn't make it to the rally. The people of Victoria had swung to Labor and, there was a chance, if the cards all fell the right way, that I could be Premier, so I was back on the campaign treadmill. The hung election however didn't deter 40,000 other Victorians from marching through the streets of Melbourne that Sunday. Unlike earlier rallies that had called on the Australian Government to intervene to stop the escalating violence in East Timor following the historic vote for independence, this rally, by all accounts, was pervaded by a sense of relief, almost celebration. Because it had been announced during the week that Australia would lead an international peacekeeping force to East Timor, INTERFET, and troops would begin deploying the following day, Monday 20 September.

Under the leadership of the then Commander of INTERFET, and now Governor General of Australia, Sir Peter Cosgrove, INTERFET succeeded in bringing peace to Timor. INTERFET also helped begin the enormous job of rebuilding roads, bridges, schools, power and water systems – over 80 per cent of which were destroyed during the violence following the independence vote. There is no doubt in my mind, that the highpoint of the relationship between Australia and the Timorese people was the arrival of INTERFET forces in Dili that September.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have now had the privilege of serving Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao for seven years and in that time I have marvelled at the versatility and depth of his leadership skills.

Needless to say he was an outstanding resistance leader – he spent 17 years in the remote mountains of Timor-Leste, and for over a decade he led the guerrilla army against the might of a military dictatorship armed by western nations.

He had to make life and death decision on a daily basis. That is a burden of leadership that I never had to experience – I can only imagine the sense of personal responsibility and isolation that would have come with it.

He was an outstanding diplomatic strategist and leader running the international diplomatic campaign for independence from his prison cell in Indonesia for 7 years after his capture in 1992.

And since Timor-Leste became an independent nation in 2002, he has proved that he is also an outstanding political leader. It is in this last incarnation, that I have witnessed the Prime Minister in action.

To give you a sense of the extraordinary progress that has been made in Timor-Leste in the last seven years under the leadership of Prime Minister Gusmao, I want to talk briefly about the situation in Timor-Leste at time of my first visit as special adviser in September 2007.

At that time the Gusmao Government was only a month old and it faced massive challenges. I'm just mentioned here some snap shot memories from that time:

- there were around 150,000 people living in “internally displaced persons” or IDP camps in and around Dili.
- violent conflicts between sections of the army and the police in 2006 meant that Australian soldiers were back in the country, this time leading the International Stabilisation Force
- there was a group of armed rebel soldiers in the mountains
- another UN mission had been established – also in response to the violence of 2006 – and at times the only cars on the road were UN four wheel drives

- there were daily power failures in the capital, and no power in most regional areas
- every third building in Dili was an empty burnt out shell and there was still a massive need to rebuild the infrastructure destroyed in 1999
- the streets and waterfront were largely deserted at night
- there were no traffic lights, no pavements and potholes as big as cars in the main street
- there was a palpable sense of anxiety and reports of vehicles being stoned and other acts of violence.

So how have things changed in the last seven years?

In 2008 the armed rebels all surrendered peacefully. This made it safe for the people living in IDP camps to return to their homes. Dili is no longer a tent city. The UN said it would take 10 years – the Gusmao Government had everyone resettled in two.

There is now a power grid and optical cable around the whole nation – that is opening up access to refrigeration, electric stoves, light for reading and learning after dark, and the digital age.

It now takes 20-30 minutes to get anywhere in Dili and traffic congestion is a major problem – but also a sign of progress. The streets of Dili are alive at night and all along the waterfront families gather to eat at beachfront food stalls.

There is a building boom in Dili. There is an air-conditioned shopping mall, two cinemas, and many new café and bars, including a personal favourite, the wonderful beachfront Diza restaurant!

In 2012, following successful and peaceful elections that saw Prime Minister Gusmao's Government reelected, both the UN Mission and the International Stabilisation Force packed up and left.

Timor-Leste is now a truly independent sovereign nation.

The Petroleum Fund, which was \$1.8 billion when the Prime Minister took office, is now nearly \$17 billion dollars. It was conservatively invested and is recognised as one of the best performing sovereign wealth funds in the world.

Timor-Leste was the first country in Asia, and third in the world, to be compliant with the Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative so that every dollar that comes in from petroleum revenue is publicly disclosed and matched with the records of resource companies. Since 2007 the economy has been growing at double digit numbers.

Australia has played a positive role in this transformation.

Australia is the biggest bilateral donor and helps fund key advisers and supports projects in the Ministry of Finance, the Civil Service Commission and across other areas of Government.

However, I think everyone in this room would be aware of the fact that Australia's relationship with the Timorese people has not always been positive.

For example, during World War II, along with Dutch and British troops, Australian troops invaded neutral Portuguese Timor drawing the Japanese to the island with devastating consequences for the Timorese. Around fifty thousand died during the Japanese occupation.

And in 1975 Australia effectively gave the green light for the Indonesian invasion. We don't have time to unpick that issue tonight, suffice to say there is enough information on the public record to conclude that it was another huge betrayal of the Timorese people by Australian Governments of both major political persuasions.

And of course, there is the current dispute over maritime boundaries in the Timor Sea. This is not the forum in which to say too much about this issue however I just want to make one point. Australia should re submit to the maritime jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice.

Much of the trust and goodwill built up by INTERFET in 1999 was eroded in 2002, when just two months before Timor-Leste became an independent nation, Australia withdrew from the maritime jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice.

You don't need to be a cynic to suspect this decision was made to bar the new nation challenging Australia's sovereignty grab for resources in the Timor Sea. This decision potentially robbed Timor-Leste, one of the poorest countries in the world, of billions of dollars of oil and gas revenue.

Australia lectures the Chinese about adhering to international maritime law in the South China Sea, and we take the Japanese to the ICJ over whaling, but we will not let Timor-Leste invite the ICJ to act as an independent umpire in relation to a permanent maritime boundary between our nations.

I understand there has been some movement on the maritime boundary issue and discussions are underway between our two governments. I sincerely hope that our Government finally recognises that it is in the interests of both nations, and the resource companies, to have a permanent maritime boundary based on the median line.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It's now 15 years since that historic day in September when INTERFET forces landed on the shores of Timor. It was a critical turning point in the relationship between Australia

and the Timorese people, and it is something that all Australians can be proud of. Since then a new nation has been born and is forging a new future.

No-one would have predicted that in 2014 Timor-Leste would host a three day visit by the Indonesia President that would be a national celebration accompanied by gala events and fireworks.

That is another remarkable achievement of the Prime Minister. He has lead the reconciliation process and the Governments of Indonesia and Timor-Leste are working together on many fronts.

I sincerely hope that that close working relationship, based on mutual respect, can be replicated with Australia.

There are strong bonds of friendship between many Australian and Timorese families, there are friendship schools, there are hundreds of Australian doctors who regularly volunteer their services, there are thousands of Rotary Clubs and other community groups, holding fund raisers to help build schools, or to support organisations like the Aloia Foundation, established by the Prime Minister's wife Kirsty.

We now need Australian companies and entrepreneurs to invest in Timor-Leste so we can embed strong economic ties, and help create jobs for the 50 per cent of the population that is under 18.

Ladies and gentlemen, I have made over thirty visits to Timor-Leste in the last seven years. Each time I go back it seems like haven't been away, except that each time I go back there are dramatic signs of progress.

In addition to physical signs – paved roads, building works, traffic jams, packed cafes, Hotel Timor going smoke free! – the most dramatic change I have witnessed in that time, is written on people's faces.

Despite all the trauma of the past, and the challenges of the future, there is a vibrant sense of optimism in the air in Timor-Leste.

And there are smiles on people's faces.

That, I believe, is the Prime Minister's greatest achievement.

Thank you.