

The Pebble in our Shoe

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In this National Reconciliation Week we mark the anniversary of the 1967 referendum in which 90% of Australians voted to remove from the Australian Constitution the clauses that discriminated against aboriginal people. June 3 is Mabo Day, recalling the 1992 High Court judgement that recognised native title rights and overturned the myth of *terra nullius*, that the land was unoccupied before 1788. It is hard to imagine that our nation was founded on what to us today appears to be such an obvious untruth, yet an untruth that led to a series of injustices. Although it took two centuries, the fault has been exposed. It remains for our nation to acknowledge in a formal way our widely expressed desire for reconciliation. Acknowledging the truth of our history is the only practical way for a person and for a nation. How hollow it is, for example, to talk about 'border protection' when we have not yet resolved our right to be here in the first place!

Almost 30 years ago, when Portugal began to relinquish its colonies East Timor was an anomalous enclave squarely within the Indonesian archipelago. Indonesia, a nation barely 25 years old, was obsessive about its own stability. A cable from the Australian Ambassador in Jakarta, Richard Woolcott, in late 1975 said:

[Australia's] policies should be based on disengaging ourselves as far as possible from the Timor question; getting Australians presently there out of Timor; leave events to take their course and if and when Indonesia does intervene, act in a way which would be designed to minimize the public impact in Australia and show privately understanding to Indonesia of their problems ... I know I am recommending a pragmatic rather than a principled stand, but that is what national interest and foreign policy is all about.

This cable had more than a passing interest for me, since I was one of the Australians 'presently there' in Timor on my first proper humanitarian mission abroad. East Timorese people were my first teachers in the field of humanitarian aid. The cable became a symbol of one of the most unpopular, unprincipled and impractical foreign policy positions that our government has taken in recent decades. We know some of the terrible costs of that 'pragmatic' course. Only the totally unexpected decision of President Habibie to call for a plebiscite, rescued Australia from its mistaken pragmatism, giving the East Timorese their first opportunity ever, other than by militant or passive resistance, to make their own choice.

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On August 30, 1999 almost 80% of East Timorese voted for independence. One Timorese Jesuit in Rome, where I then lived, told me he rang his mother that evening. She had gone at dawn with all her neighbours to vote. "Even if they kill me," she said to her son, "I will not miss this one chance in my life to choose freedom."

In the days following, Indonesian military and pro-Indonesia militia destroyed most of what they had built during 24 years of occupation. As many as 2,000 people, among them two Jesuits, were killed. Under orders of the Security Council following decisive intervention from Australia, a UN peace keeping force landed in Dili, leading to the birth, one year ago, of the 21st century's newest nation, Timor Lorosae. Australian involvement in East Timor this time was described by Prime Minister John Howard as: '...the most positive and noble act by Australia in the area of international relations in the last 20 years.'[†]

After the massacre of over 200 East Timorese people at the Santa Cruz cemetery on November 12, 1991, the then Foreign Minister of Indonesia, Ali Alatas, described East Timor as: 'the pebble in our shoe'. The pebble, however only grew, and became a dragon that came up and bit Indonesia. Writing in the Jakarta Post last week concerning the Aceh offensive, Mr Alatas urged Indonesians to learn from the East Timor experience: 'We should learn from how we handled East Timor. We should learn from our past mistakes.'[‡] Referring to the Philippines, Cambodia and Sri Lanka, he urges instead the 'peaceful path of negotiations'.

Another area where Australians detect the dissonance between a principled and pragmatic approach is in the treatment of asylum seekers. This is surely a pebble in the current government's shoe. The 'children overboard' deceptions opened the eyes of some, and recent media exposure of the Woomera Detention Centre has finally given a more graphic insight into the truth of one of our countries darkest moments.

After years abroad with refugees, I returned to Australia to discover with shock our treatment of those who arrive in our country seeking safety. If it is true that Iraq is now liberated, and that Iraqi people are now able to speak freely, what will they be thinking when they call their relatives and friends overseas to share their joy, only to discover that those in Australia, even the children, are held captive in prisons or treated as non persons on temporary visas in the very country that went to Iraq as their liberators?

During the asylum policy debate I have often been told that this government asks to be spared the moral outrage. They claim that protecting the 'integrity of the system' is sufficient justification for what some of us see as inhumane actions. Yet time and again the ad hoc measures that have been adopted are being revealed as impractical, harmful to the individuals concerned, and contrary to the rule of law. I refer to the incarceration of innocent persons in island or desert detention, the prolonged imprisonment of children, or the granting of temporary visas without social rights to people found to be genuine refugees. Moreover Australia's unilateral approach to refugees with the aim of protecting our own security (is 'security' a code word for life style, itself a synonym for wealth and privilege?) undermines the collective principles and multilateral efforts of the international community to share the responsibility for refugee protection.

[†] Quoted in Richard Woolcott, *The Hot Seat*, HarperCollins, Sydney, 2003, p. 169

[‡] Ali Alatas, 'Indonesia should learn from its failure in East Timor', *The Jakarta Post*, May 17, 2003

Politics is the art of the possible. Any branch of politics should therefore be pragmatic. But pragmatism alone makes for poor governance. Principle and pragmatism need not exclude one another, indeed if a pragmatic choice is unprincipled, this will eventually come to light and it will be undone. Unprincipled choices return to haunt. As practitioners, we do what can possibly be done, to respond to needs with appropriate solutions. But this form of pragmatism will only stand up over time if it is also principled and respectful of human rights. Otherwise it risks becoming, like Alatas' East Timor, a 'pebble in our shoe'.