



Municipal Association of Victoria Annual Conference

Conference Dinner Address – 31 October, 2002

My thanks to the MAV for giving me the opportunity to return to my home-town of Melbourne and to be with you on this occasion.

What I have to share with you this evening is very much a personal reflection on East Timor's journey to independence and beyond. During the most difficult years of that journey, at the time of the Indonesian invasion in 1975 and immediately following it, I was a young girl growing up in a carefree Australia. War was not part of my vocabulary and that there were children in the world less privileged than myself only became clear to me when my parents entertained the possibility of adopting a Vietnamese orphan in 1974.

At the tender age of 4, I learned my first words of Indonesian. My father was a mature-age student of the language at Monash University, and in the evenings he would return home to teach my brother and me some basic greetings. "Apa kabar?", "baik baik saja". When many years later, at Golden Square High School in Bendigo, Indonesian was offered as an elective, I chose the language on the strength of this childhood connection. I was too young to

appreciate that there was also geographical logic to the choice, the other options being French and German. Despite being a fairly typically insular Australian country town, Bendigo had developed something of a reputation as a center for Indonesian language studies, and lessons were frequently supplemented with cooking classes, visits to our classroom by Gamelan orchestras and traditional dance troupes. My fascination for the country and its culture had its roots here, in country Victoria. Many years later, I graduated from Melbourne University with a major in Indonesian and Italian. I could not have imagined then how significant those choices were in leading me to where I am today, nor how very well they have prepared me to participate in the rebuilding of the country I now call home.

It was East Timor that turned an academic interest in Indonesia into a brand of political activism. At the request of East Timorese dissidents I encountered at the University of Melbourne, I began translating reports from the clandestine movement and helped to make public the tales of appalling human rights abuses which these documents told. My conscience was pricked. As Australians and as neighbours, it

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seemed to me that we had a duty to speak out in defence of a martyred people. My love for Indonesia was neither diminished nor compromised by my growing awareness of conditions inside East Timor.

My first few visits to Indonesia in the mid 1980's taught me that the enemy of East Timor – oppression and military abuse of power – was also the scourge of Indonesian society. When I decided to live and work in Indonesia in 1992, my aim was not only to work more intensively for East Timor, but also to deepen my understanding of Indonesia and Indonesians. The three and a half years I spent in Jakarta changed my life, not only because during that time I met the man who is now my husband, but also because over that period I established deep and abiding friendships with ordinary Indonesians who welcomed me into their homes and their lives. And the experience of engaging with the concerns of those people I met every day – civil servants, bus drivers, NGO workers and bank tellers – and of immersing myself in their culture caused me to reflect on my own roots, on what it was to be an Australian. I began to examine some of the values and beliefs which underpinned my worldview and my attitudes to what I saw around me. It was this process as much as the causes I adopted whilst in Indonesia which was life-changing. Nevertheless, it turned me into neither a spy nor a heroine of East Timor's resistance movement!

Allow me to jump ahead to 1999, that year of reckoning for East Timor and the East Timorese. Suharto's downfall a year earlier had brought new hopes for a political solution to the East Timor question just as it had also resulted in changed circumstances for Xanana personally. Recognising finally that he was the key to any settlement of the problem, the Indonesian government eased some of the restrictions on Xanana who was serving the seventh year of a 20-year prison term in Cipinang maximum-security prison. He was allowed to meet with

representatives of foreign governments and the UN and to give his opinion on the autonomy plan being devised for East Timor by the Indonesian government. In early February 1999, he was released into house arrest and soon after I resigned from my job in Melbourne to assist with establishing and staffing a small support office in Jakarta aimed at enhancing Xanana's ability to broker a peaceful and lasting solution to the East Timor problem. The months that followed were gruelling and painful. As the day of the popular consultation approached and as its modalities were finalized in numerous meetings between Xanana, representatives of the Indonesian government and the UN, the militia violence inside East Timor was escalated and my colleagues and I spent long nights translating the stream of reports of killings and abuses which reached us in Jakarta. We provided regular briefings to foreign diplomats on the contents of these reports in an effort to counter the propaganda that the violence was the result of deep divisions and conflict between the East Timorese.

In spite of the months of intimidation and violence which preceded the Popular Consultation of 30 August 1999, the East Timorese people refused to forfeit the opportunity they had paid so dearly for. An overwhelming majority of the population opted for separation from Indonesia. Our celebrations that night in Xanana's prison house in Salemba were tinged with sadness and a sense of foreboding. Whilst none of us, not even Xanana, could have anticipated the extent of the violence and destruction about to be unleashed on the East Timorese people, we knew that there would be a price to pay for their choice and that peace would only be attained when the Indonesian military was replaced by an international peace-keeping force.

On 7 September 1999, Xanana was released from house arrest. However, real freedom was still some weeks away as security concerns

meant that it was necessary for him to be provided a safe haven within the British Embassy compound in central Jakarta. My colleagues and I were also obliged to abandon our office and to set up a temporary base in the Mandarin Hotel. A series of violent demonstrations against foreign targets were staged in Jakarta as international pressure on Indonesia to allow the intervention of a multi-national force was stepped up. We continued to support Xanana in his contacts with the UN Security Council, UN humanitarian agencies and foreign governments as the news of killing sprees and the organized destruction of public and private property reached us. I will never forget the feeling of hopeless impotence I felt at, one afternoon, receiving a phone call from a senior member of the CNRT who implored me tearfully to do something to help as he fled into the hills above Dili. Below him, his home and the city were on fire.

In late September, a day before the Interfet forces entered Dili, Xanana, my colleagues and I departed Jakarta for Darwin. By taking up residence in the British Embassy, Xanana felt that he had exchanged one form of incarceration for another and there was little to be achieved by remaining in Indonesia when the ongoing threat to his security meant that Xanana was seriously limited in his movements and contacts with East Timor. After seven years of exile from his “patria”, he was understandably anxious to get home.

With the assistance of Australian soldiers under the command of Major General Peter Cosgrove, that homecoming did take place on the evening of 21 October 1999. It was an extraordinary event for Xanana personally, and also for the people of East Timor, representing as it did the culmination of 24 years of long and bitter struggle.

For me personally, the fact that Australia had taken the lead in heading the international force which brought peace to East Timor was

tremendously satisfying. Finally, defence of the lives and rights of innocent East Timorese was government policy, not just the demand of activists and concerned members of the public. Finally, the geopolitical tide had turned and to be a friend of East Timor was no longer to be a hopeless idealist, but a mere defender of freedom and democracy.

There have been so many momentous, historical, decisive moments over the period spanning October 1999 and the present that to relate them all would take an entire evening. Perhaps one of the most significant for me personally was my participation in August 2001 in the elections for East Timor’s Constituent Assembly. An impressive 91% of the population turned out on the day to cast their votes. Also significant, of course, has been my marriage to Xanana in July 2000 and the birth of our two sons, Alexandre and Kay Olok. I gave birth to both of my children in the Dili National Hospital, in spite of the misgivings of many friends who thought that I was mad not to avail myself of the superior medical facilities available in Australia. For me it was important that they be born on East Timorese soil, in the country of which they were the newest citizens. So what is my life today? I have gone from being a language student and activist to the First Lady of the poorest country in Asia and a wife and mother in a country very different from the one I grew up in. Nothing could prepare one for such a dramatic shift in one’s lifestyle and responsibilities.

Nowadays, I am sought out to be patron of this and a member of the board of that. I guess it is the lot of First Ladies worldwide! The endless meetings aside, it is interesting and worthwhile to be associated with and to contribute to a broad range of initiatives of civil society which has, of course, a vital role to play in national reconstruction and development.

The Government of East Timor does not as yet provide official recognition or sponsorship of

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the role of the First Lady. The state budget approved in May this year made no provision for the work or official functions of the spouse of the President. Sadly, this situation speaks volumes about the status of women in East Timorese society. Tremendous expectations exist of women and their ability to contribute to the social and economic life of their families and communities and yet they are accorded little acknowledgment and granted very little power in public and political life. Unequal gender relations within the family are perpetuated by traditional patriarchal values and customs which also contribute significantly to the high incidence of domestic violence. Fear, lack of confidence in the justice system, a lack of knowledge of victims rights and limited support services all contribute to the fact that a large number of cases of domestic violence tend to go unreported. Having said this, violence within the home is the single most reported crime in East Timor today, representing roughly 50% of all offences being brought to the attention of the Civilian Police. I set up the Alola Foundation in March 2001 in an attempt to draw attention locally and internationally to the problem of gender based violence in East Timor. Amongst other things, the Foundation seeks to boost the capacity of the large number of women's organisations across the country to access the funds and resources they require to respond to the immediate needs of women in the community.

I have spent the past two months seeking funding to establish a basic office structure which would permit me to meet at least some of the expectations which the people, particularly the women of East Timor, have of my ability to address their problems, including that of domestic violence.

As a mother of two small children, I have made tackling the high maternal and child mortality rate another priority of my activities. I have recently participated in the launch of a number

of government-sponsored campaigns aimed at promoting breastfeeding and immunization across the country. As a means of supporting government efforts to improve the health of mothers and infants, I am establishing a National Breastfeeding Association which will be launched in late November. The lives of a large number of newborn babies could be saved each year in East Timor if exclusive breastfeeding was practiced, since many die of malnutrition and gastrointestinal infections caused by the preparation of breastmilk substitutes in unsanitary conditions.

In short, my life at present is big on responsibility and hard work and light on glamour! A typical day in my life consists of juggling my responsibilities to my children with the fielding of requests for meetings with journalists and other visitors to East Timor, attending to requests for humanitarian and material assistance from widows, students, schools and women's groups. I have become quite adept at balancing a baby feeding at the breast in one arm and taking calls on my mobile with the other! There is so much still to be done to restore the most basic services to the East Timorese, to rebuild essential infrastructure. Every area is a priority, the renewal of one sector depending on the recovery of another. The needs of the people are overwhelming and Xanana and I grapple with them at a very personal level each day, as well as in our capacity as public figures. We have little time to enjoy one another's company or that of our children. Nevertheless, I believe that having young kids in our circumstances helps to keep us grounded and focused on the future. I am convinced that it is good for Xanana's sense of reality and perspective that, at the end of a day of dealing with affairs of state, he is obliged by our two year old son to spend time in front of the Wiggles and Sesame Street!

When Andrew Bolt wrote in the Herald Sun earlier this year of my fairytale leap into the

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Presidential Palace, he revealed his ignorance of East Timor's reality. Dili has no presidential palace. The building which serves as my husband's office is a gutted shell. Since the government of East Timor has no funds to rehabilitate the building, my husband has had to resort to soliciting donations from amongst the local business community to complete the job. Mr Bolt also wrote that he saw no public benefit in the revelation of details of my involvement in East Timor's struggle in the ABC's Australian Story documentary. He referred to my so-called boasting as "dumb and dangerous".

Again, the reality is somewhat different. As a result of the Australian Story documentary, I have received numerous letters of support and encouragement from ordinary Australians wanting to know what they can do to contribute to East Timor's reconstruction effort. Many of these contacts with my fellow Australians have resulted in donations of material aid, cash and technical assistance, and have reinforced my pride in being Australian. Retired men and women, school children and youth groups continue to be in touch with me to get my ideas on how they can be of practical use to a people whose courage and will to win against tremendous odds they admire. Here the role of local government in rebuilding East Timor deserves a mention.

Numerous city councils across Australia, but principally in the state of Victoria, have established a friendship city relationship with a particular town or district in East Timor. These linkages have not only generated much needed material and technical assistance for some of the more remote and under-resourced areas of the country, but have also contributed very meaningfully to the Australian community's understanding of conditions inside East Timor. As East Timor now debates the question of decentralization and models of local government (aimed at increasing community participation in planning and decision making), new

opportunities emerge for cooperation and the provision of ideas and input from the Australian end.

Finally, I would like to speak a little about where East Timor stands today as it enters its 6th month as an independent nation. The expectations of the people are high. The patience and resilience they developed through the years of resistance to Indonesian rule continue to be put to the test as the nation's leaders grapple with the huge and complex task of rebuilding. It is a process to which many countries, individuals and organizations wish to contribute and dealing with these diverse players and their different, sometimes conflicting visions represents a challenge in itself. Capacity building is the catch-cry of the day and is indeed a priority issue. Under Indonesian rule, the East Timorese were effectively excluded from senior management positions in both the public and private spheres. Civil servants were not encouraged to be creative, to take initiatives, nor was any sense of civic duty engendered. Non-government organization was a dirty word and only a handful of local, tightly controlled NGOs existed. Today civil society is being challenged to contribute actively to the building of East Timor's democracy and so the learning curves are sharp.

In his public address to the nation marking 100 days of independence, Xanana spoke of the need of the East Timorese to acquire a new sense of nationalism. The patriotism which guided the people in their struggle against foreign domination is no longer relevant. Today nationalism demands of East Timor's leaders, civil servants and members of the public alike a commitment to working selflessly to defeat a new enemy; that of poverty and ignorance. For the first time in history, responsibility for winning this battle is in the hands of the East Timorese. Many important advances have been made, and in spite of concerns that some of the old practices of corruption and collusion

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continue to plague society, the East Timorese are genuinely committed to strengthening democracy and to ensuring that the tears and blood of the past were not shed in vain.

In addition to considerable human potential, East Timor enjoys another important asset which will serve it well in the years ahead. East Timor has friends, some old, some new, but all full of respect for and goodwill towards the East Timorese people and all representing a source of wealth, of experience and resources. I hope that by sharing this personal account of my own relationship with East Timor I will have added in a modest way to the sum of this wealth.

Thank you.