

# Institute of Public Administration of Australia National Conference

## “Powerful Human Connections”

Address by Kirsty Sword Gusmao  
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In keeping with the conference theme of **powerful connections**, I declare at the outset that I have one very powerful connection. I am married to a President of a nation. It is the world's newest nation and the region's poorest nation, but I would have to say the world's proudest nation, because it is just that - a nation. I am proud to be part of it, part of its story, and proud to be representing the people of East Timor here today.

Connections between human beings are powerful in so many different ways. Most often we probably think of these connections in terms of authority, high office or financial power. Connections are also powerful when they are:

Perceptive  
Fresh  
Lasting  
Challenging  
Inclusive  
Collective  
Private  
Interdependent  
Vital  
Exceptional  
Enjoyable  
International

All these words proposed by this conference qualify or illustrate the sorts of connections we have and make use of in our public and private lives. All of these words which I read in the conference material evoked for me the numerous and varied connections that formed and shaped my experience of working for the freedom of East Timor. Some of these memories are powerful in themselves, some bitter-sweet and all relevant today.

I would add three more qualifiers for connections; family, mates and community, which I shall return to during my presentation, but not in any particular order or even so stratified, as my experience is that connections are overlapping.

It is this aspect of human relationships as powerfully strong connections, the mateship that helped contribute to the realisation of East Timor's independence, that I shall focus on today.

But I'm also going to tell you about my personal journey to East Timor and discuss issues surrounding the making of public policy and how it can change, focussing specifically on the area of Australian Foreign Policy toward East Timor, on my connections to communications, language, and education policy today and my personal commitment to policy relating to women in East Timor.

But first I must give thanks to the Conference organisers and say that I am looking forward to the enjoyable connections to be made tonight at the National Wine Centre during the conference dinner. I am sure the Chief Executive Bill Mackey will make it a most enjoyable evening for everyone.

Thank you to the Institute of Public Administration Australia, particularly Sue Vardon, National President, for affording me the opportunity to remain part of Australia's public discourse in which the Institute plays a key role. I am happy to now be invited in, whereas my first forays into public policy and public discourse were self-initiated.

Thank you to the Institute of Public Administration South Australia, particularly President Bill Cossey, for your support and for bringing the Conference together. I like your motto "Advancing the Public Sector". It is what I want to do as I have a high regard for the public sector and its ability to contribute to the common good. We are still building the Public Sector in East Timor along with a sense of civic duty. Thank you to Elizabeth Warhurst who has attended to my complicated travel arrangements. With a new and breast-fed baby in tow, it requires a great deal of effort to travel. Thank you to my personal team for all your efforts and your commitment to the people of East Timor.

I note a formidable list of sponsors from the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, State Premiers and Cabinet to private companies such as the Bell Human Resources Group, and Price Waterhouse Coopers Consulting, which is a strong indicator of the high esteem in which the IPAA is held. I note Phil Koperberg, Commissioner Rural Fire Service of NSW, who was going to be speaking and Brian Gilligan, Chief Executive NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, who will be speaking during the "vital connections" part of the program. I would like to thank them for the vital work they have done in East Timor.

There are, I am sure, many others here who have or will contribute to East Timor's nation building, and I would like you to come forward at some stage and let me know, or if that is not possible please let my colleague Sarah Niner know, because I am sure we would be surprised to find out just how many people are involved and across a wide range of areas. So you see we are already connected and most of us have yet to meet.

In preparing for my keynote address, I was struck by your lofty list of fellows and other keynote addresses delivered in previous IPAA National Conferences. As is my way, I thought what can my story possibly have to say to this erstwhile gathering, given that your organisation's objective is, "To advance the Study and Practice of Public Administration".

My personal journey is one that is rather unique and still unfolding, and given the interest shown following the screening of Australian Story about my involvement with East Timor (which is how I got invited here) I decided to accept your most welcome invitation to give this keynote address.

My life is wracked with challenges and triumphs, and I find my life very much centred on public affairs, therefore public service and public administration. So my connection to your objective and work, whilst not first evident to me, started to reveal itself as I contemplated which parts of my story to share with you today that were connected to public policy. It made me realise in a very deliberate way that I have been part of Australian public policy and discourse now since the late 80s, yet I have not previously characterised it this way. So this opportunity enabled me to reflect on this. Thank you IPAA. One of the nice things about public speaking is that it brings discipline to one's thoughts, actions, works, and allows one to crystallise ideas. It is both a burden and a pleasure; a burden to find the time to do it, and pleasure in that it facilitates intellectual thought.

In 1991 I visited East Timor for the second time, working as a researcher and interpreter on a documentary film called Cold Blood: The Massacre of East Timor. I was brutally and directly introduced to life under occupation, which is what it was for the majority of East Timorese. This reality challenged me, as someone who had a profound love and respect for the Indonesian people, their rich and diverse culture and their language, which I majored in at University and am still today fluent in. In fact I was four years old when I learned my first words of Indonesian. My father was a mature age student of the language at Monash University and he would return home in the evenings to teach my brother and me some basic phrases: "Apa Kabar?", "baik, baik saja".

I then went on to choose Indonesian as a language elective at high school in Bendigo, another decision made available through public policy. There is a sense to which my life choices have prepared me for the job I now have today, that of First Lady of the Democratic Republic of East Timor.

Melbourne University was where I became fluent in Indonesian and Italian. Italian's latin root made it relatively simple for me to acquire Portuguese later. My study of Indonesian language, history and literature deepened my knowledge of the culture and society and fostered long-lasting friendships that have been unaltered by the profound events of my involvement in East Timor. The problem that beset East Timor was military abuse of power, and this has equally beset the people of Indonesia who struggle to escape its yoke. General Soeharto's downfall in 1998 allowed democratic forces to take root.

It was at Uni that I also got involved in the East Timorese people's struggle by firstly translating reports from the "clandestine" movement, reports that detailed the appalling human rights situation in the country. I could no longer be a silent witness after acquiring this knowledge first-hand; my conscience dictated that I had to do more to help bring the people's suffering to light. In early 1992 I decided to move to Indonesia to work to deepen my understanding of Indonesians and Indonesia, but equally I was committed to working more intensively for the East Timorese. By now I could not separate these two powerful connections that have come to shape my life and that will continue to do so now all my days.

I became ensconced in Jakarta; working as an Independent English Language Consultant and Trainer and Liaison Officer with the Overseas Service Bureau. I then came back to Melbourne as Program Officer for Indonesia/Malaysia/Thailand, still with Australian Volunteers Abroad, a program which is as much about making our own Australian

society a more tolerant, outward looking one as it is about providing technical assistance to developing countries. It is about promoting friendships and civil society links that can flourish across cultures. It was for me a most satisfying job. I was able to work and come to understand better our region, something which, in the wake of the Bali bombings, is important for people to do now. Good civil society links with our neighbours are so important. We can't just leave them up to the politicians!

1991 was the catalyst year in the history of East Timor. The Santa Cruz massacre was powerful as it was seen with our own eyes. We couldn't deny it. It awakened us. There was from that event no turning back. That was the year I got more heavily involved. It was the turning point for Australian public policy and for the strengthening of international public policy. 1991 to 1999 were for me amazing years, and the connections from that time are powerful and cover all the qualifiers I mentioned earlier, plus some.

During these years we made, developed and strengthened these powerful connections. Some of the people who played a part were powerful in their own right as public or semi-public figures. Some were powerful because of their passion, some because of their public or corporate positions, some through their understanding and their desire to help even when they had their hands tied. All were drawn together through the suffering of the people of East Timor.

I have now dined with Presidents and Prime Ministers, the UN Secretary General, the Heads of the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, Nobel Peace Prize Laureates (not so hard when I have two in my backyard) but I am yet no wiser when it comes to answering questions about public policy.

Public Policy raises for me more questions than I could ever possibly answer, and I wouldn't even begin to try. Others more skilled in this area will do that. How does public policy come about? Who makes it? A few or many? Where is their authority? Political Party platforms? Does public policy reflect public opinion? Does public policy always reflect public sentiment? What is national interest? Who determines national interest? Do national interest and public sentiment coalesce? What if they don't, can they be reconciled?

Following is a list of questions thrown up by the conference and I have answered them in simple form, as the answers really are simple. Truth and respect for human dignity always finds a way to triumph, despite the best intentions of sometimes misguided public policy makers.

Did public policy change?

If so how?

What drove it?

What shaped it?

Did the world change?

I'm now going to address Australia's foreign policy on East Timor. Regarding East Timor's independence I have this to say. That East Timor had the right to be independent was not in question; as a matter of international law this was the case; as a matter of international public policy this was the case, it just took a few years, twenty-seven in fact,

to have this legal right respected. And what a joy it was, that night in May this year when I stood together on stage with the UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, Indonesian President, Megawati Sukarnoputri, President Bill Clinton and Prime Minister John Howard and many other notable leaders, watching the UN flag lowered and the Timorese one raised officially for the first time. We could never have dreamed of this back in the late 80s when I first got involved. Faith in human values underscores all else. When governments and policy makers don't come through, the people somehow find a way. The connection to communities of people cannot be overestimated in all that we do, particularly in these difficult times when feelings of fear and physical insecurity cause us to distrust our neighbours. Connections between Aussies, Indonesians and Timorese are surely amongst the most important of all in this regard.

The Conference brochure tells you that I am going to provide you with my views on foreign policy and relationships that contributed to or hindered the quest for East Timor's independence. As Australians engaged in public life the answer to this question is self-evident, as we have all lived with Australian foreign policy, a multi-partisan one, since East Timor was invaded and occupied by the Indonesian Army in 1975. The policy itself and its rationale, best articulated by foreign affairs supremos such as Richard Woolcott and Gareth Evans, are no secret and a matter of public record. The sentiment of the Australian people toward the people of East Timor, always different to that of the official policy, is no secret and a matter of public record.

My feelings on this are also a matter of public record; East Timor was a case of our successive Governments being out of step with public sentiment and also the international community at both the legal and the political level. The question this then raises is how can public policy be formed and adhered to when it is out of step with the public view? That is the question for policy makers, which I am not. The further question this raises is: "Why did it take so long to have East Timor's independence respected after it was invaded and occupied in 1975?"

I saw public policy changing. People demanded it and the Politicians had to finally respond. People drove it, just as they did in South Africa and the Phillipines and other places around the world. It was shaped by the truth of the suffering of East Timorese, reported in the media consistently by brave and committed journalists who kept the focus on East Timor. This meant that public policy had to change. Thank you to the media - another powerful connection and one that we should treasure. It is the values of freedom of speech that we must treasure. As Australians we should pride ourselves on defending this right above all, as we do; not so much within a human rights framework, but within our own cultural framework. It is one of openness, forthrightness, direct speech - qualities which are sometimes rather arresting for our regional neighbours whose speech is more subtle. We say what we think.

When I arrived in East Timor in 1991 I saw a nation of people suffering. I saw a nation of people betrayed. I saw a nation of people in need. I did what any human being does in such a situation. I reached out and helped. This was so evident in September of 1999 when many of you took to the streets here. I was in Jakarta at this time and I can't quite describe what it felt like to have my nation behind my now adopted home, sharing the responsibility with me. I felt supported to have everyone finally with us. It was a blessed relief to us up there when we were so tired and distraught.

This support was moulded into public policy and dramatically so. The Prime Minister responded, with the absolute support of the Opposition Leader, and in Aussie terms they did the right thing.

Some at times want me to revisit the policy issues over successive Australian government policy on East Timor, but I'll leave that to others. I have no need to labour on it. When it was demanded of us, our mateship spirit came to the fore and we connected with the East Timorese so that their struggle was not in vain and so that they were supported.

Even though we did the right thing, the argument is still sometimes put that in doing the right thing morally, we acted against our national interest. Much of the recent analysis of Australia's relationship with Indonesia attributes its fragility to Australia's intervention in East Timor in 1999. This is perhaps a little simplistic. After all, to a large extent, strong state to state relations are made of the same stuff of sturdy human relationships; understanding, honesty, mutual respect and tolerance.

It would be foolish to deny that I disagreed with successive Australian Foreign Policy and I, along with many Australians in the solidarity movement, worked hard to change it. So by the time Sept 1999 blazed into our lives, we had done a lot of groundwork in shaping policy at many levels. International, regionally, bi-laterally and multi-laterally. I am proud to have played a small part in this

One of my most powerful connections during the years of struggle was the internet and electronic communications, and it is still one of my most powerful today. I was online and running from 1993. This seems only a little while ago, but it was still early days for the general public to be connected, and there were very few women at this time who were online.

Encrypted email allowed me to tell the world what was happening to East Timor without compromising my safety or that of the East Timorese who were the source of my information. The internet has and is still changing the world. So if there is a lesson to be learned about making and shaping public policy, the means of mass communication via new technologies must be factored in. All citizens should have access to these powerful communication tools. It has kept me in touch and connected from East Timor and I rely on it for so much information; for many activists and community workers it is a lifeline.

It was simple human language however, that directly connected my husband and me. If not for our knowledge of common languages, in this case Portuguese and Indonesian, we would not have been able to communicate as intensely or intimately as we did, or at all. We also speak Tetum, the local East Timorese language, which is still a rich and developing language. My children will acquire Tetum, Portuguese East Timor's official language, English my first language and some Indonesian. My 2 year old, Alex, can say GIVE in three languages and thinks nothing of it.

The reason I am labouring on language is that it is clearly a matter of public interest and, given that we are part of a multi-lingual region, it is of primary importance. Australia, as one of the world's most multi-racial, -ethnic, -religious and -cultural nations, should have our public policy reflect this with the teaching of languages. So many people I have known and mix with beyond our borders are conversant in at least two languages, even those who are unfortunately illiterate. Language is a means to understanding, acceptance,

friendship, trade and much, much more. Culture is rooted in language and language reflects and is built on culture.

In my role as the President's wife I am pursuing a few policies dear to my heart, which thankfully accord with national policy. Education is our first priority and this means among other things, literacy. I desire a fully literate and multi-lingual nation, as without that we are condemned to poverty. The Timorese deserve better and in fact it was they themselves that determined that education was to be the development priority. It was gauged through an intensive National Development Commission project, the Commission Chaired by my husband and managed by Emilia Pires who was trained and worked for many years in the Victorian Public Service.

The need to have a literate nation is so universally agreed and promoted as one of society's most desirable goals that it is unquestioned. The challenging question is the mechanism to achieve it. Many nations are able to recognise and formulate good public policy but when you start with a deficit on all counts as we have in East Timor it is an awesome task.

When you work in the development world as I have, you learn many sayings such as, "When you educate a man you educate a man but when you educate a woman you educate a family – a village – a city." Now about the man, perhaps it's not entirely true, but about the woman it is true – certain facts also give weight to this. The World Health Organisation (WHO) has figures that show a positive correlation between women's standard of education and their children's health. The higher the education standard, the better the health. Now, the correlation may have variants – I accept that, but the correlation is certainly positive.

You see I am a teacher and whilst not a linguist I am certainly a lover of and adept in language. When I was pondering over my address it was inescapable for me to get too far away from language and literacy; therefore education, as it is the means. They have also shaped my life and taken me to places and given me opportunities I had never even contemplated from my wonderfully safe and rich background in Melbourne and Central Victoria.

My family background, though, was one of service and giving a helping hand so when I was directly confronted with the plight of the lives of the East Timorese people, the influences that had so far shaped my life made it such that I could not turn away or turn the other cheek so to speak. For this I thank my Mum and Dad. My mum is still a primary person in my story, sharing so much with me, even learning Tetum.

Because you have generously given me the opportunity I am going to use it well to promote something that I am committed to, that is reducing and preventing violence in women's lives and simply improving women's lives in all areas.

In terms of public policy and powerful connections I made one decision in 2001 and that was to establish the Alola Foundation, an organisation that attempts to draw attention locally and internationally to the problem of gender based violence in East Timor. The impetus for setting it up came when I learned the story of a young girl, Juliana dos Santos of Suai, who was brutally kidnapped by a militia leader, Igidio Manek, in September 1999. She was taken as a war prize by her captor across the border into West Timor

where she remains today. Her fate was undoubtedly shared by an untold number of East Timorese women who, for reasons of shame or fear, have chosen to remain silent and who are therefore nameless.

Out of the experience of campaigning to have Juliana reunited with her parents in Suai grew an interest in the issue of gender based violence in the East Timorese context.

Domestic violence is a big public problem in East Timor, representing over fifty per cent of all crimes being reported to the Civilian Police. East Timor is not alone as it is a huge problem in many countries where it continues to be relegated to the private sphere. Public policy has to be shaped that challenges that. Working against the reporting of all cases of domestic violence is fear, lack of confidence in the justice system, a lack of knowledge of victim's rights and limited support services. The formation of ALOLA, its genesis and its existence, is making a statement and we in East Timor can't ignore the fact that domestic violence is a blight on our society.

I hope that we tackle it in ways other nations have begun to do over the past few decades. We have a bit of catch up to do, but I have faith that we will tackle this. For so long we were consumed by the struggle to realise our independence, that we were not able to give the women the attention that they needed. Now I say in this New Millenium it is their turn. We too must accept the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Convention of the Rights of the Child. We too must be able to implement the Beijing Platform of Action for Women. These are universally agreed public policy matters that are aimed at improving women's lives.

The ALOLA Foundation also 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. It has a powerful connection through its Patron the Honourable Mrs Mary Robinson, the immediate past United Nations Commissioner for Human Rights and past President of Ireland.

The Government of East Timor does not as yet provide official recognition or sponsorship of 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. 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 mum I am connected to all mothers in East Timor and to all women who generally play a part in nurturing families, whether they have children or not. It is the connection to them that keeps me grounded and focused on what I need to do to develop my community and to improve women's lives. My public policy focus is and will continue to be around women. If the women of East Timor are healthy, enjoy a reasonable standard of living and have a voice in matters affecting their lives, then future prospects for the nation are bright.

I have made some more powerful connections by joining with you to participate in your national conference and I know from experience that some of these will grow and develop into partnerships, others into friendships. You are all welcome to visit my new

homeland, East Timor, and to be seduced by the beauty of the place and the charm of its people. But I warn you it may “connect” you in a way that could change your life.

Connections are more than just people you meet – they are people you can call on – people who will help. In today’s world where trade and security are the basis of bilateral, multilateral and international relations, these personal connections become even more important. They are the connections between people who open their hearts, who share the struggle for fairness and social justice. These are powerful connections indeed and I salute them.

Thank you for coming along and listening.

Kirsty Sword Gusmao

14th November 2002

ADELAIDE