



Submission No 19

Inquiry into Australia's Relationship with Timor-Leste

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Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade
Foreign Affairs Sub-Committee

Submission to:

**The Joint Standing Committee on Foreign
Affairs, Defence and Trade**

Regarding:

**The Inquiry into Australia's Relationship with
Timor-Leste**

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Indonesian**

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This submission is directed at Item 4 of the Inquiry's Terms of Reference

During the 24-year occupation of East Timor by Indonesia, which received *de facto* or *de jure* recognition in Canberra, it was customary for commentators to depict the very concept of a separate East Timor as perverse and absurd. East Timor was an artificial creation, and were it not for Portuguese colonialism, it was argued, it would not exist at all. Gough Whitlam described East Timor as having been 'kept in a cocoon' under Portuguese rule, thereby obscuring its people's sense of kinship with their Indonesian neighbours, and once close cross-border cooperation were in place, they would see the folly of their ways, and realise that they were Indonesians all along.

Since the end of Indonesian rule and the transition towards independence, there has been obsessive hostility and contempt by Australian commentators, be they academics, journalists or politicians, towards the decision of the country's leaders to reintroduce Portuguese as an official language, and to strengthen relations with Portuguese-speaking countries, not only Portugal, but also Brazil. Although this decision has been highly problematic, prompting resentment among the Indonesian-educated generation of East Timorese, there has been a tendency by these commentators, however well-meaning, to take sides in disagreements between different generations.

What many observers have failed to grasp is that the use of Portuguese in East Timor does not mean abandoning Indonesian, nor does it preclude people from learning English as well; the East Timorese are polyglots by nature as well as by need, speaking a local language as well as Tetum, the national and co-official language. Fortunately, there has been more goodwill towards Tetum among Australians and other foreigners than there once was, with many now learning it rather than simply using Indonesian, although there are still areas where Indonesian is more widely understood. By contrast, many Portuguese expatriates make no effort to learn Tetum, despite the large amount of vocabulary derived from Portuguese.

Owing to the Latin roots of Portuguese, much of this is easily understood by English speakers, as equivalent terms in English are usually from the same Latin words. The flood of English loanwords into Indonesian has been described as 'Indo-Saxonisation', but it might be more appropriate to talk of 'Indo-Latinisation', given that the vast majority of these words are not of Germanic origin. (Nor indeed are many Dutch loanwords used in Indonesian.)

An unfortunate side-effect of this negative and dismissive attitude towards the Portuguese language in Australia is that it is looked upon solely in terms of its usefulness in East Timor, rather than generally. Spanish, for example, is not widely used in the Philippines, Spanish-speaking countries like Spain and Latin America are also far away from Australia, and there are relatively few Australians from Spanish-speaking backgrounds, but many Australian universities teach Spanish. By contrast, very few, such as Monash, teach Portuguese, despite it being the language of the largest country in Latin America, Brazil. To ignore Brazilian Portuguese while advocating greater cooperation with Latin America is as short-sighted as ignoring Indonesian while advocating greater cooperation with the Asia Pacific region. The latter, incidentally, is already the case in New Zealand, where Indonesian is no longer taught in universities.

Of course, as countries which actually speak Portuguese, it will be Portugal and Brazil who will be primarily involved with the promotion of that language, even if they have not been as sensitive or as competent in doing so as they could have been. For example, it was only last year that an Indonesian-Portuguese dictionary, compiled by the Australian linguist Geoffrey Hull, was finally published in Portugal. Despite its economic and geopolitical

potential compared to Portugal, Brazil has done little in the way of cultural diplomacy, and while geographical distance is not the stumbling block it might have been before satellite TV and the internet, trade links between the Portuguese-speaking world and the Asia Pacific region are still limited. All this makes promoting the Portuguese language in East Timor even more difficult, even without the poisonous vapourings of the Australian commentariat.

However, Australian institutions have been less hostile towards the Portuguese language in Australia itself than they have been towards it in East Timor. While immigration from Portugal and Brazil to Australia has not been on a large scale, compared to that from Italy or Greece, it is still large enough to sustain a weekly newspaper in Portuguese, along with community radio stations and pay-TV channels. When I first visited Australia in 1991, I was pleasantly surprised to find such a newspaper on sale in Darwin. SBS Radio also broadcasts in Portuguese, and while these programs are available on the internet, it is regrettable that they are not rebroadcast on Radio Australia in East Timor, or on another station. Although attempts to merge SBS into the ABC have faced opposition, it is a waste not to use the former's resources and programming in promoting news about Australia to speakers of other languages overseas, as well as in Australia.

Similarly, radio news from RTTL in both Tetum and Portuguese could be carried in Australia on the new SBS Radio 3 service. Regrettably, SBS Radio does not currently broadcast in Tetum, despite the large number of East Timorese in Australia, even though it broadcasts in Dinka, a language spoken in South Sudan. It is also regrettable that the SBS World News Channel, which would have been ideal for RTTL's television news, was closed in 2009.

In addition, SBS Television's long-standing practice of television programs in other languages with subtitles in English is something that would be beneficial to East Timor, with programs in Portuguese being subtitled in Tetum and *vice versa*. Ironically, despite the country being crudely stereotyped by Australian commentators as being 'chauvinistic' over its language, in Portugal, foreign television programs and films are almost invariably subtitled, rather than dubbed. On news programs in Portugal and other European countries, footage of people speaking in other languages is subtitled, rather than drowned out with a voiceover.

Therefore, it is not a case of Australian organisations doing for the Portuguese or Tetum languages in East Timor what they would not do for either of them in Australia itself, but rather, extending services which are already provided in Australia in those languages to East Timor. Similarly, the teaching of Portuguese in Australian universities should not be for the sole benefit of East Timorese studying there, but should be for the wider benefit of Australians seeking to do business in Brazil, as well as Angola and Mozambique, both Portuguese-speaking countries in Africa of growing economic importance. While it has been fashionable for people in Australia to dismiss Portuguese countries as too poor and far away to be of importance, many Australian airlines operate Embraer aircraft from Brazil, including Airnorth, which flies between Darwin and Dili.

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