

Perspectives – Before and After the Vote

- 4.1 Between 16 August and 1 September 1999, three members of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, Senator Vicki Bourne, Senator Marise Payne and the Hon Laurie Brereton MP accompanied the Hon Tim Fischer MP, government officials and representatives of Non Government Organisations to East Timor as monitors for the process of popular consultation set down for 30 August. They travelled extensively throughout the territory, including visits to Liquica, Baucau, Ermera, Aileu and Manatuto. That visit, extended over a number of days, allowed the delegation to observe the ballot but also to meet large numbers of East Timorese and to see East Timor intact, despite the intimidation and harassment.
- 4.2 Because of this significant, recent experience in East Timor, the Committee decided that Senators Bourne and Payne should accompany the Committee when it visited East Timor in December 1999. It was felt that they would be in a position to make a comparative assessment of the state of the territory after the post-ballot violence and destruction. The two Senators have made the following observations.

A Comparative Assessment

- 4.3 There were two obvious and significant differences between East Timor during the period of the ballot and at the time of the Committee's visit in December: the security situation had improved markedly but the territory had suffered extensive destruction. Given the short time that had elapsed between the two visits, the alteration in both these conditions was both remarkable and shocking.

Security

- 4.4 In the period surrounding the ballot on 30 August this year, the atmosphere in Dili and throughout most of East Timor was one of very high tension. Militia were obvious everywhere, many wearing uniforms and carrying weapons such as machetes, semi-automatic machine guns, and homemade pipe guns. Gunfire could be heard periodically, and there were constant threats by the militia that they would carry out more and more extreme acts of violence and revenge. Even though both the TNI (Indonesian Armed Forces) and Polri (Indonesian Police) were present in large numbers, they obviously had no interest in exercising any control over the militia as far as intimidation and threats were concerned. Most East Timorese and visitors went about their daily lives feeling both determined and anxious.
- 4.5 The situation now is very different. In Suai, where some of the worst violence was seen prior to the arrival of INTERFET, children run after INTERFET vehicles laughing, yelling and waving. In Dili, the atmosphere of high tension has dissipated, despite the ruin that surrounds the population.

Destruction

- 4.6 The most obvious physical difference is the terrible destruction of infrastructure. Buildings in both Dili and Suai have almost all lost their roof, and most have been gutted and looted or completely destroyed. The orgy of destruction by the TNI-backed militia after the declaration of the poll has left both Dili and Suai substantially uninhabitable. It was obvious there had been a single-minded determination to ensure that no-one who was left in Dili or was able to return there would be able to live in their homes.
- 4.7 The undaunted spirit of the East Timorese that took them to the polls amid threats and intimidation will be needed now to rebuild their lives. It would appear, from the spirit they displayed in the streets on our second visit, that they may well be successful.



Senator Vicki Bourne



Senator Marise Payne