

Legislative Assembly 10 May 2006

District of Dili

MR GENTLEMAN (Brindabella) (12.02): I move:

That this Assembly:

(1) reaffirms its commitment to the City of Canberra Friendship Relationship with the District of Dili;

(2) recognises the central importance of educational exchange in achieving the Relationship's goals of friendship and mutual respect; and

(3) recognises and congratulates:

(a) the students and education professionals involved in forming Tuggeranong High Schools Consortium for their commitment to the Friendship Schools program and creative and inclusive program of educational exchange with the District of Dili; and

(b) the Canberra Institute of Technology for its ongoing commitment to the Friendship Relationship through its work and support of the Dili Institute of Technology.

I would like to begin by quoting from an article written by Jim Aubrey in May 1999:

Future Australians will look upon East Timor's endurance and courage, its devotion to the right to live freely in peace, and they will say 'this terrible invasion and war was an epic of Homeric proportions'.

The scale of the human tragedy in East Timor defies belief. On 28 November 1975, East Timor declared itself independent of colonial rule. For over a century the East Timorese were subjects of Portugal, when the small and remote island of Timor was divided amongst the Portuguese and the Dutch. Nine days after this declaration, it was

invaded and occupied by Indonesian forces before this could be internationally recognised. Since the Indonesian invasion of East Timor in 1975, 200,000 East Timorese have been killed by the Indonesian military or have fallen victim to starvation and disease. That is a third of this tiny nation's total population.

Indonesian rule in East Timor was marked by extreme violence and brutality, two of the worst examples of this being the Dili massacre and the Liquica church massacre. On 12 November 1991, East Timorese pro-independence protestors had gathered at the funeral procession of a student who had been shot dead by Indonesian troops. As the procession entered the cemetery, Indonesian troops opened fire. Of the people demonstrating in the cemetery, 271 were killed, 382 wounded and 250 disappeared.

On 6 April 1999, hundreds of East Timorese and Indonesian militia, soldiers and police attacked several thousand refugees sheltering in the Catholic church in Liquica, having slaughtered several civilians nearby the day before. The refugees had sought shelter in the churchyard from earlier militia attacks. According to an unpublished report commissioned by the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the attack left up to 60 people dead, although the precise death toll is still unknown. It was the Timor independence movement and its continued protest that forced the international community to act, and it is to our shame that our government at the time was not more vocal in its support of a free and independent East Timor.

On 30 August 1999, 98 per cent of East Timorese registered voters went to the polls, the result of which was unanimous support for the beginning of the transition towards independence. Following the announcement of the result, pro-integration militia and the Indonesian security forces launched a campaign of violence, looting and arson. In the rampages of September 1999 the Indonesian military destroyed 75 per cent of East Timor's infrastructure. They targeted the infrastructure of education, burning schools, looting the nurses institute and destroying the National University of East Timor.

It was, as Jim Aubrey states, the endurance and courage of the East Timorese people that enabled them to continue in their struggle for independence. No greater example

can be given than that of East Timor's university students. Despite having a university destroyed, students fanned across the country to work for the vote for independence. Many were killed in the violence that followed. Students went to regional areas to teach classes in burnt-out buildings, to keep the children learning and the schools open. They also organised classes for tertiary students when no other education facilities were operational.

When I think of Australian university students, I think of young men and women with radical thought, with the time to question the status quo and the drive to challenge directly. I believe that these are universal truths of students. However, what is markedly different is the status quo and how the challenge takes form. East Timorese students organised schools where there were no buildings. They organised voter registration where their fellow students were killed for doing the same. They would not be defeated, despite the violence inflicted on them.

On 20 May 2002, 27 years after invasion and several centuries of colonial rule, East Timor became a fully independent country. The determination and bravery of the East Timorese had prevailed. This new nation was only born because of the strength of character. The strength of mind of the East Timorese people was put to the test every day for over 30 years, but they were triumphant.

However, the challenge for the East Timorese did not stop and has not stopped with independence. This country in its infancy is charged with the task of rebuilding a community devastated by decades of war. This rebuild has not been without its own tensions. This is a recovering war zone, a fact that cannot be overlooked when considering the East Timorese transition from colony to forced annexure to independent nation. Just the other day, one police officer was killed when a mob attacked a government office in a town south-west of Dili. One hundred of the 1,000 antigovernment protestors have been arrested. There is still a long way to go until the scars of war are faded, but this does not mean that you give up.

Central to the rebuilding of East Timor is education. It was Benjamin Disraeli who said, "Upon the education of people in this country, the fate of this country depends." This is a sentiment not lost on the Stanhope government. On 7 June 2004, the Chief Minister signed the Canberra-Dili friendship agreement with the Dili district ambassador, Mr Ruben de Carvalho. The agreement has a focus on encouraging mutual respect and cooperation through initiatives promoting educational, cultural, economic, humanitarian and sporting links. The Canberra Friends of Dili, a local organisation, the ACT Department of Education and Training and the Australian Education Union are working together to support the education system in Dili in the best and most appropriate way.

The friendship schools program was launched at Calwell high school in July 2005 to celebrate Calwell's linkage with 30 de Agosta high school in Dili. An ACT Department of Education and Training representative spent a day with Siobhan Hobbs, Australia's youth ambassador to Dili, in February 2006, visiting Calwell high and Lyneham primary schools before meeting with the central office staff.

The Tuggeranong high school consortium—Calwell, Caroline Chisholm, Kambah, Lanyon and Wanniasa high schools—met with a representative of the ACT Department of Education and Training, Tim McNevin of the Australian Education Union and me on 23 February this year to discuss the Dili friendship schools program. Immediate strategies organised at the February 2006 meeting of the consortium included discussing opportunities for English language instructions with the ESL network, carrying out an audit of curriculum text books in cluster schools and considering opportunities to involve Tuggeranong community groups.

Short-term strategies from the meeting include: schools to collect a significant quantity of exercise books, pens, pencils, and some textbooks to be sent in July this year; to publicise information through each school's student representative council, SRC, and slide shows at whole-of-school assemblies; and, thirdly, to develop the sport-in-schools program to involve Dili schools and to send sports equipment.

On Friday last week Tuggeranong student representative councillors met to discuss how students can promote the friendship agreement through their peers and peer support structures. I was very fortunate to address this group about the friendship agreement and the importance of leadership in making the aims of this agreement a reality within their schools. These students addressed how they may use their leadership skills to encourage friends and relatives to get involved, extending the friendship schools to the Canberra community.

It is this aim—making the friendship agreement a Canberra community action—that drives the Canberra Friends of Dili. The students were given real insight by CFD coordinator Bruce Sinclair about the financial support needed by Dili families. This gave a great platform for the myriad ideas of concrete and immediate support these students could provide for Dili schools and students, most focusing on fundraising activities. These activities form the basis of real action plans and I am very confident that, given the support these students receive from their teachers and principals, we can rest assured that some vigorous fundraising will be taking place in the near future.

Also coming out of Friday's meeting were plans to coordinate a visit to Dili by consortium principals later in the year. This will allow a face-to-face exchange of ideas that can only strengthen the friendship schools program. The consortium is a true amalgam of groups and individuals who have at their core a genuine concern for the people of East Timor and a desire to see this new nation succeed.

One such group is the Australian Education Union. The AEU has been an integral part of educational assistance for Dili. The consortium is just one of the many programs that the AEU has been involved in over the years, and a special mention must go to Tim McNevin from the union for his long-time support of the East Timorese people, from their struggle for independence to their rebuilding. The AEU has made a commitment to support Dili teachers in visiting Canberra in the future. Congratulations to Tim and the AEU for their continuing contribution to this cause. It warms my heart to hear again and again how the union movement continues to support those less fortunate—not just in our society but across the oceans—in the workplace and in the community.

I am very proud to support this important initiative. I strongly believe that this program deserves our unanimous congratulations. Education assistance is a two-way street in this program. Indeed, Australians and Tuggeranong students will look upon East Timor's endurance and courage and its devotion to the right to live freely in peace. Similarly, support and congratulations are deserved by the Canberra Institute of Technology for its work with the Dili Institute of Technology.

Discussions have taken place with the AEU for CIT students to become involved in the Australian youth ambassadors for development project occurring in schools in Timor-Leste. CIT was approached to encourage students to become youth ambassadors, particularly in the area of sport and physical education. In relation to the Dili Institute of Technology, DIT, there are significant governance issues impacting on this arrangement, including that DIT is not recognised as a public institution. The CIT in Canberra has encouraged DIT to progress the recognition of the tech as a public institution, to enable public funding.

In correspondence in December 2005, the Director of CIT, Dr Peter Veenker, whom I talked about yesterday afternoon, strongly urged the Director of the Dili Institute of Technology, Dr Joao Freitas, to apply for recognition of the institute as a public organisation from the East Timor government. It was pointed out that this would significantly enhance the ability of CIT to provide support, and will also render DIT eligible for additional sources of Australian and international aid. At the same time,

Dr Freitas was also encouraged to take steps to develop the transparency and rigour of the DIT's governance arrangements.

In 2004-05 CIT assisted DIT with staff exchanges and with the contribution of equipment to support the development of automotive courses at the facility and resources for the library. These two initiatives, the Tuggeranong consortium and the CIT support of DIT, are founded on the belief that education is vital to a society. These progressive programs deserve our support now and into the future. I urge you all to support this motion.

MR STANHOPE (Ginninderra—Chief Minister, Treasurer, Minister for Business and Economic Development, Minister for Indigenous Affairs and Minister for the Arts)

(12.16): I am certainly more than happy to support Mr Gentleman's motion on this matter and I acknowledge the significant interest and involvement that Mr Gentleman has had in our relationship with Dili and with the Canberra Friends of Dili.

It is almost two years since the Canberra-Dili friendship agreement with the Dili district administrator, Mr Ruben de Carvalho, was signed by me and Mr Carvalho in Dili, which was on 7 June 2004. With me on that historic day were the president of the Canberra Friends of Dili and the chief executive officer of the Canberra Institute of Technology. But there were certainly many more than just we three there in spirit. In that regard, I think most particularly of the Canberra Friends of Dili, many of whom had worked hard to support the realisation of a recognition of the special relationship between Canberra, and indeed Australia, and Dili.

It is as a result of the impetus provided initially by the Canberra Friends of Dili that Canberra now has a formal friendship agreement with Dili. The Canberra-Dili friendship agreement is recognition of a long-established fact: our people have been friends for more than half a century. Australians still recall with genuine gratitude the sacrifices of those East Timorese who protected Australian servicemen in World War II, some at great personal sacrifice. The courage of the East Timorese inspired Australians then and continues to inspire us today as a new nation is built.

The goals of our friendship relationship are mainly humanitarian, although we have also forged educational, cultural, economic and sporting links. The ACT government already supports community-to-community educational activities. Now it is seeking ways that it might help in the areas of communications and personal safety. During a visit to Canberra in March this year for the United Nations Fund for Women, the first lady of Timor-Leste, Ms Kirsty Sword Gusmao, told an International Women's Day luncheon of the lack of personal safety experienced by more than half of all Dili's women and the welcome prospect of a domestic violence bill. She spoke of the proportion of East

Timorese who experience malnutrition, the high rates of illiteracy and child mortality and the huge numbers of East Timorese who subsist on less than US50c a day.

We wonder at the capacity of a fledgling nation to maintain public peace under such conditions. Ms Sword Gusmao spoke from the heart of how highly Timor-Leste values public peace. We can all imagine how painful and disturbing it must have been to see the recent eruption into violence and unrest once again in Dili. It is certainly something that I, in observing it from this distance via by TV and on the news, am most distressed about.

While the struggle for independence has been won, it is clear that the job of building a sustainable future still lies ahead, as does the job of erecting the economic and social structures that will let the East Timorese implement their dreams. The ACT community, through the Canberra-Dili friendship agreement, will do what we can to walk with and support our Timorese friends on that journey. Beyond the confines of the friendship agreement, the ACT government has helped the East Timorese establish a Timor-Leste Embassy here in Canberra, which we did in 2003, and we will continue to provide interim accommodation to Timor-Leste until the new embassy is constructed, which at this stage it is hoped will be achieved by 2008.

For any community in any country, access to education is one of the prerequisites of a bright future, not just for individuals but for whole societies. The Canberra Friends of Dili, the ACT Department of Education and Training and the AEU are working together to support the education system in Dili—and where better to start than in schools. In November 2004 an officer of the Department of Education and Training took leave without pay to research the possibility of establishing a sports in schools program in Dili, on behalf of the Canberra Friends of Dili. AusAID has now approved the next intake of Australian youth ambassadors for development volunteers to run that program.

More recently, in July 2005, the friendship schools program was launched at Calwell high school, linking the school with 30 de Agosto high school in Dili, named for the 30 August 1999 vote for independence. In Tuggeranong, a high school consortium made

up of Calwell, Caroline Chisholm, Kambah, Lanyon and Wanniasa high schools is making great progress. In February this year, the consortium met with a departmental representative and with my colleague Mr Gentleman to discuss the Dili friendship schools program and to work at enhancing and expanding it.

Immediate strategies agreed to at that meeting, as Mr Gentleman has indicated, included discussing opportunities for English language instruction with the ESL network, carrying out an audit of curriculum text books in cluster schools, considering opportunities to involve Tuggeranong community groups and organising a day-long workshop of the combined student representatives of Tuggeranong high schools. That workshop was held last Friday, involving 100 students, five teachers and the principals of the five participating schools. Indeed, Mr Gentleman and the East Timorese Ambassador, Mr Hernani Coelho, and the second secretary, Mr Gaspar, also participated in that workshop. I commend, once again, Mr Gentleman for his continued deep involvement in all aspects of our Dili relationship.

I am sure that the eyes of many of those present were opened by the stories related by the Canberra Friends of Dili representatives, who spoke of the traumas that still haunted many students in East Timor and of the difficult conditions under which many of them continued their schooling, with few of the basic resources taken for granted by students and teachers here in Australia. Mr Coelho spoke about family life in East Timor, the high percentage of young people in the population, the high number of East Timorese without any education and the determination of most young Timorese to enjoy the kind of education that will help East Timor take its rightful place in the international community.

From my own personal experience and the visit that I undertook to Dili in 2004 for the purpose of signing the Canberra-Dili friendship agreement, I can certainly attest to that. I understand from briefings that I received at the time that upwards of 30 per cent of all children in East Timor have no formal schooling, do not attend school, that unemployment is incredibly high and that many children who live within rural communities do not have a school to access.

The advice and the information provided by Ms Kirsty Sword Gusmao in her speech here went to issues around average levels of income and employment. Employment is very scarce. There are incredibly high levels of unemployment, high levels of illiteracy, high levels of no schooling at all and, as indicated previously, high levels of issues such as personal violence and abuse.

I visited a school in Dili during my time there. It is very sobering for those of us in a privileged city in a privileged nation, such as Canberra within Australia, to attend the school of a neighbour where there were no windows, where there is an urban poor, where the students were still using boards rather than books for lessons. and where there is essentially absolutely no infrastructure other than the four bare walls and a tin roof. Benches and stools are the entire infrastructure within a school setting for some schools in Dili.

It is important that we continue to work with Dili in a friendship relationship to show and extend that hand that can perhaps lead to the development of some advances for the people of Dili. The workshop that Mr Gentleman was very much a part of was very significant in preparing action plans and taking the ideas and strategies discussed at such meetings by those schools to the next stage. That will involve, as I understand it, a study tour of East Timor, which is planned for September 2006, and I am sure real results will be born out of the friendship relationship.

But education does not of course start and end with school. Our own CIT has recognised that education and training are critical to the sustainable development of Timor-Leste and has provided ongoing support to the Dili Institute of Technology. Ventures that have been undertaken to date include a staff exchange for two teachers from the Dili Institute of Technology to gain training and development in automotive skills; provision of resources and equipment to enable the institute to deliver automotive training, including books for the library; an offer of support from engineering design at CIT to assist with campus redevelopment of the Dili institute, in conjunction with an initiative of Canberra Friends of Dili; provision of advice and encouragement as the Dili institute seeks to improve its governance arrangements; and encouragement to the Dili

institute to apply for recognition as a public organisation from the East Timor government.

I hope that our friendship with East Timor grows deeper in the coming months and years. I personally wish to see the scope of our involvement widen to encompass, as I mentioned before, initiatives in the areas of personal security and communications. At the moment, the ACT government, through the Chief Minister's Department, is negotiating with the Dili district administration on a project for each of those areas. We have been long working with the Dili district administration on a communications project, which has been hampered by the lack of access to appropriate or secure technology and a communications band.

In addition, we are working with the Dili district administration, with the United Nations on Dili, to seek to provide some communication strategy by the Dili district

administration with islands offshore, to which there is simply no communication. There are no radios or telephone access between different towns and townships within the Dili district administration. Ms Kirsty Sword Gusmao advised me when she visited here just a month or so ago that in the very week of her departure a young mother had died in labour as a result of not being able to communicate from an island no more than a kilometre offshore with the district Dili administrator to ensure that she received the assistance that might have saved her life.

Similarly, as I mentioned before, there is, regrettably, a very, very high incidence of violence against women within Timor-Leste. This is something that is recognised and acknowledged by the Timor-Leste government. We, through a scoping study undertaken by the Chief Executive of the Canberra Domestic Violence Crisis Service, Ms Dennise Simpson, are looking at working in collaboration and partnership with community service organisations and the Dili district administration in Dili in the provision of training on issues around violence within domestic relationships, and I look forward to being able to progress that program some time in the very near future.

I commend Mr Gentleman for this motion and I most certainly acknowledge and commend Mr Gentleman for his very deep personal support for our friendship with Dili.

Debate interrupted in accordance with standing order 74 and the resumption of the debate made an order of the day for a later hour.

District of Dili

Debate resumed.

MR PRATT (Brindabella) (3.36): The opposition rises to support this particular motion. It is almost like a motherhood statement. There is little to be said and there is little to be thought as to why you would not support this. This is an issue which goes to the heart of the country's interests and the community's interests as well. The opposition certainly supports the city of Canberra friendship relationship with the district of Dili. We have been to a number of their fundraising activities. It is quite a useful organisation. An extension of the friendship and support by Australia to Timor is an extension of Australian's national interest and its concerns about Timor and Timor's future.

Against the background of that relationship, education programs are important. Tuggeranong College, the CIT and high schools have roles and involvements in exchanges that occur as part of that relationship. We also acknowledge that they are important and we certainly warmly welcome those. City relationships utilising our local institutions can be very effective in the overall scheme of country-to-country relationships. Sometimes they may even have a bit of a spin-off in that what is good for the relationship may also provide some growth in some of our own community capabilities.

I was pleased to hear Mr Gentleman acknowledge, though, in his speech, the fact that this country quite terribly let Timor down in recent history. We know that three successive governments really did not take notice of the fact that Timor suffered badly

once Timor had been taken in under Indonesia's wing, and rather forcefully so. Mr Gentleman talked about a figure of 200,000 Timorese who had perhaps been killed under the regime. That is the figure that I generally know of. Of that 200,000, 60,000, from my research, were killed almost in the first year of annexation of Timor. Why Prime Minister Whitlam at the time made those decisions, which were then reinforced by three successive prime ministers, is something that we do not know.

It is to this country's eternal shame that perhaps a real-politic approach to dealing with our neighbours, a concern that we did not want to unsteady our relationship with a very large and near neighbour, in this case certainly meant that great injustices and killings went undeterred. This has been the issue around the world. Just as Western governments have failed to intervene in other trouble spots, perhaps this was Australia's example of that. The blind-sidedness to bend to the whims of the Suharto government then continued through two more governments. The 1999 intervention by Howard broke the nexus of that.

Whilst we are talking about Timor, I exhort the federal government to very carefully maintain an eye on current events, as they unfold. I hope they will; I am sure they will. By the way, I hope that our students who are involved in these exchange programs fully understand and are being educated on the full facts of what has happened with the whole Timor question since 1974. One hopes that the government, if it is sponsoring our educational institutions to be involved in those exchange activities, is also ensuring that ACT children and ACT students involved in these programs are fully educated and understand the entire balanced history of what happened with Timor once the Portuguese had decided to pack up and go home under the previous regime's arrangements.

The opposition congratulates the Canberra Friends of Dili; we congratulate our schools and the CIT, which are involved in the city-to-city relationship issue. We also go on and congratulate Australian NGOs who are involved at the national level for their role in assisting Timor-Leste to come out of its dark past and develop as a new nation. Again, as I started out, the opposition supports this motion.

DR FOSKEY (Molonglo) (3.41): It is hardly surprising to hear that the Greens support Mr Gentleman's motion. In fact, we applaud Mr Gentleman and the Stanhope government for their ongoing commitment to the friendship relationship with Dili. It is very important to remind the Assembly that that commitment was made due to community action and concern in the Canberra community about what was happening in Indonesia. People living in Canberra have been active ever since the shameful behaviour of our government—the Whitlam government, the government that we otherwise like to revere, perhaps wrongly in this case—after the terrible bloodshed that went with the Indonesian takeover of East Timor in 1975.

It is not only Dili which needs our support. Given that East Timor is primarily a rural population and given that it is a small jurisdiction, probably not too much larger than the ACT, I urge the government to do all it can to help people wherever they live in East Timor. It is also worth mentioning at the same time that, although we have our memory and our shame about the way that our governments regarded East Timor, we are very much in danger of doing the same thing with the people of West Papua at the moment.

It is understood, I believe, that education is a primary way by which people are able to lift themselves out of underdevelopment and the kinds of human rights abuses that still, I believe, occur in East Timor today. It is not possible for a country that has never before had the opportunity to learn even how to work in local government to suddenly become an independent and very successful government in two or three years. At the moment, I believe that we should be keeping a very close eye on East Timor and listening to the pleas from that government when it asks for support and asks for the UN forces to stay there at least until after the next election.

We must realise, too, that a lot of the legacies that we are concerned about and that the Chief Minister mentioned today are a result of the brutal occupation by the Indonesian military, which uses starvation as a weapon to exterminate the East Timorese. There is documentation of forced sterilisations, forced abortions, while at the same time East Timorese women were being raped and sexually assaulted during the occupation. As elsewhere, rape was being used by the Indonesian military as a weapon of war. When

this is the lesson that people have learned, it is no wonder that violence against women continues to be a major concern in East Timor.

For that reason, I believe that one of the ways that we can assist women and assist the East Timorese people, whose birth rate is currently the highest in the world—a country populating itself into existence, we might say—is to work with the women and work on sexual and reproductive health measures and, perhaps in some gentle way, work against the very strong influence of the Catholic Church there, which has been a force for good. If it does not assist women in looking after their reproductive health, then this is something that should be recognised.

When we talk about education, we too often talk about formal education. We talk about schools and tertiary institutions. These are very, very important. As in South Africa, we are talking about a whole generation of people who missed out on formal education. The Chief Minister mentioned the high rates of illiteracy in East Timor. These tertiary institutions and formal schools are not going to tackle that; nor can East Timor afford to have what we take for granted—the broadband facilities. Most people do not even have computer access. What good is it to people who cannot read and write? Nor is there a TV service that is worthy of the name; nor is radio available to most people. Consequently, to talk about education is really just a speck out of the needs for East Timor.

Consequently, we have to look at innovative ways that are being used in other parts of the region to involve people in education. Education is not just about book learning, getting a degree, learning to read and write even; it is about health issues; it is about nutrition; it is about sexual relationships, sexual behaviour; and it is about teaching people that violence against women, even though it is endemic, is not appropriate—nor is violence against anybody else.

We have some examples in the Pacific. We have the theatre group called One Small Bag that operates out of Vanuatu and now has a much broader role in places like the Solomon Islands. That is based on theatre. It started off with expatriates but it also

involves some local people. It develops plays and scenarios based on the issues that are relevant to those people.

One of our own community, Robin Davidson, whom some people might know as someone who is involved in community theatre, spent some time in East Timor at the end of last year. He was working there with NGOs on using theatre as a way of—we might call it education but that is too formal a word—helping people learn their human rights, health needs and other things that we might recognise they need but perhaps they do not ask for. His comment in a presentation that he gave to a group of people at CMAG last year was that the main thing that characterises the young people of East Timor is boredom; there is nothing to do. They have come from a culture of violence and oppression. When that oppression is removed, people hoped things would get better very soon. They have not, as they do not. I might say that the oil deal that Australia has just wrought with East Timor is not in favour of the East Timorese people.

What happens, then, is that NGOs are using theatre as a way of educating and raising awareness in East Timor. Once the word gets around—and it is word of mouth, since most people are illiterate—many, many people gather, whole villages gather, on hillsides to watch and be involved in theatre which is based on their issues and their needs. I commend this as a way that the Canberra community can work to improve the awareness and the education of people, and not just rely on the formal relationships between schools. As I mentioned, that only touches a tiny proportion of the community.

I reiterate a call I made last year for the ACT minister for tourism to visit East Timor, to investigate and promote relationships with Dili. There may be ways that we can facilitate visits between our two cities and actively seek to identify and foster appropriate business, educational, social, agricultural and health links. Of course we must thank the Canberra Friends of Dili, which was set up in about 2001 and which is very active. In fact, Kerrie Tucker worked with them to encourage the government to set up the friendship city relationship.

In closing, I suggest that perhaps some of the empty desks in ACT schools can be sent to East Timor. My tongue was in my cheek as I said that.

MR STEFANIAK (Ginninderra) (3.51): I start with Dr Foskey's last point. I certainly commend that to the government, if they are not doing it. I remember, as education minister, having the pleasure of sending, courtesy of a lot of our local schools, equipment to East Timor. I am not quite sure whether they were empty desks; they might have been, Dr Foskey. They needed everything.

It is a timely motion. It is timely because East Timor is a recent independent country whose relationship with Australia goes back many years. Those of us with an interest in history, and military history especially, will remember the fantastic support, at great risk to themselves—about 100,000 East Timorese died during the Japanese occupation—they gave to the independent commando company of Australians who were there fighting magnificently from 1942 to 1943 or even 1944, before the last managed to withdraw.

We owe a great debt to the East Timorese. It was tragic—and I remember it quite well—in 1975, to see the then Whitlam government wash their hands of it. There was a three or four-month hiatus after Portugal just walked out on its former colony. It had done nothing to prepare them for independence. It was probably one of the worst colonial powers you have seen.

I remember Indonesia at the time maintaining that they wanted stability. It was quite tragic. Perhaps all that needed to be done was for the Whitlam government to posit a battalion of troops in Dili. That might have helped sort the situation out. We might never have had the Indonesian invasion. There was a lot of prevaricating and washing of hands by successive Australian governments, from Whitlam onwards, on the situation in East Timor.

To its eternal credit, the Howard government reversed that situation back in 1999. Within two weeks of the dramas that erupted over the courageous decision by the then Indonesian President to have self-determination, Australia was committed to assisting in

East Timor. There was a magnificent effort by the Australian Defence Force, led by the then General Peter Cosgrove.

Before that, in supervising the ballot, there was probably an even more magnificent effort by members of the Australian Federal Police. When I was police minister in 2000, I had the honour of presenting some awards to those who went in and supervised the ballot back in 1999. They were threatened; they were stoned; they were threatened with death; yet they protected and probably saved the lives of thousands of East Timorese.

There are a number of heroes still serving in the Australian Federal Police in the ACT who single-handedly stared down mobs. They were unarmed; they used force of character and incredible guts to stare down some of these wild, anti-independent mobs, thus saving probably countless thousands of East Timorese. As a result of the intervention by the Australian Defence Force, a nation slowly is being formed there.

It is not without its problems. It is a poor nation. I was saddened to see reports in the last couple of weeks of dramas there based not so much on ethnic lines but on lines of people who live in the east and people who live in the west. Those are the things that you really want to do all you can to avoid if you are setting up a new nation state.

But it is good to see a reaffirming of this friendship relationship. It is good to see the efforts made by ACT governments from 1999 onwards. It is good to see the efforts made by former members of the Assembly, including our old friend Bernard Colleary in the first Assembly who was a close personal friend of Xanana Gusmao and who certainly has been a champion of East Timor since then.

Perhaps through him, a few other people, such as Bernard's secretary, Silva Cengic, and her husband, Ivan, a very good soccer player, joined. He played with the then Croatia Deakin Soccer Club, but he got suspended a lot. Ivan was more akin to a rugby player. I was delighted when he played veterans once and got three goals in his first game. Ivan went over there and coached their first national soccer team. I also remember him coming back with these kids for the Kanga Cup in 2000 or 2001. Half of the team were orphans. They were an under-14 team and competed in our Kanga Cup.

Our former colleague from the last Assembly Helen Cross also had a very great interest in East Timor. Some other members of our community who are deserving of note are Wendy and Robert Altamore, whom a lot of us would know through Print Handicapped Radio. Rob Altamore is an inspiration for blind people throughout the ACT and everywhere. Wendy is a fantastic, tireless worker for very many community causes. Members will often, no doubt, get letters from the Altamores, from Wendy in particular, to come to functions to support East Timor.

The friendship relationship we have with East Timor is important. When Australia went in there, it was one of our better moments in the last 20 years or so. It was going to be a long-haul type of situation, and we should be in the long haul, too, in assisting the people of East Timor with the city of Canberra friendship relationship. There is a bit of shame about what happened in 1975. Obviously that is behind us now. Certainly the events of 1999 have expunged that. We have certainly played a major role, as Australians but also to an extent as Canberrans, especially through the AFP, in the setting up of East Timor. It is something we should continue to do. We certainly should reaffirm our commitment to the city of Canberra friendship relationship with Dili.

MR GENTLEMAN (Brindabella) (3.57), in reply: I thank all members for their contribution to this motion. There is a Chinese proverb about education. It says, "Tell me and I forget. Show me and I remember. Involve me and I understand." It is clear that, through its activities, the Tuggeranong consortium is about involving students, teachers and principals so that they may understand.

At their meeting last week, the consortium heard from the Timor-Leste ambassador to Australia, Dr Hernani Filomena Coelho da Silva, about the realities of school life for the majority of East Timorese. He explained to the consortium how facilities that we take for granted in Australia are a rare commodity for most households over there. He said, for example, that teachers in Dili do not even have a cupboard to store their materials, let alone lighting for evening courses.

It is true that the material confronting the consortium was heavy and challenging to hear, especially for those children involved. It takes a lot of courage to acknowledge privilege and to make a commitment to use that privilege to the benefit of others. But the day was not without some insight into the rich culture of Timor-Leste. Ambassador Coelho da Silva explained to the group the authentic East Timorese wine made from the root of the palm tree, Tua Metan, although I hope the students are not able to pick up on this comparison with the Australian cab sav for at least a couple of years.

The enthusiasm of the students and their teachers is something we should all draw inspiration from. Despite the enormity of the task, this consortium has taken the responsibility of establishing real support for Timor-Leste schools with gusto. The same has to be said for the efforts of the men and women directly involved at CIT with their continued support of the Dili institute of technology. Their assistance, from providing materials to actively pursuing student involvement in the Australian youth ambassadors for development project, demonstrates that all tiers of education in the ACT have a sense of social justice and conscience. Any discussion about Timor-Leste needs to acknowledge the failings of previous federal governments to support the East Timorese in their struggle for independence, as I have mentioned. Unfortunately, this federal government has seen fit to impose its own form of colonialism, with ongoing disputes with Timor-Leste about the control of oil.

It is fantastic to see that institutions in the ACT and in particular the students from my electorate of Brindabella are leading the way in developing real and sustainable links with Timor-Leste. I hope our federal counterparts can see the lessons in learning and supporting, rather than imposition and control. I urge you all to support this motion.

Motion agreed to.