

Howard's way : East Timor has made waves for Australia

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MEDIA AND HUMAN RIGHTS SEMINARHoward's way: East Timor has made waves for Australia

The despatch of British Gurkhas has undoubtedly helped quell the violence in East Timor. By all accounts, they are performing a difficult task in exemplary fashion. Their deployment as part of the Australian-led international intervention force has also redeemed, to a limited extent "the government's deeply flawed" Indonesia policy. But few could have imagined that the arrival in Dili of a mere 164 British soldiers might change the course of history. Yet there is a very real possibility that Australians, who decide on November 6 whether to retain the Queen as head of state or become a republic, will be crucially swayed by Britain's swift support for their troops. Polls were already predicting a close referendum result. Now the dangers inherent in the operation, Indonesia's enmity, and the ugly, racist criticism emanating from some Asian "allies" have given Australians a sharp reminder of who, when the chips are down, their true friends are.

The possible rout of republicanism is not the only unexpected ramification of the Timor emergency in Australia. Prime Minister John Howard, a conservative monarchist, told parliament last week that the crisis had reaffirmed some awkward "home truths". Australia was not an Asian nation, as some of his predecessors had contended, but a western nation in Asia, he said. Its policy "must be based on a clear sense of the national interest and on our values." This meant maintaining trade and other regional links, but not at the expense of basic principles, such as democracy and human rights. As the leading regional power, by default, in the Timor crisis, "we have got on with the job of being ourselves."

The "Howard Doctrine" represents perhaps the biggest shift in Australia's debate about its identity and role since the days of Gough Whitlam almost 30 years ago. In Mr Howard's views on the need to re-emphasise ties with the US and Europe, Asian leaders claim to detect a reviving colonialism. "We don't want to see any country appointing itself protector of this region," the Malaysian deputy prime minister said. In truth, Canberra does not seek such a role - but if a more confident Australia is now reassessing its compromises with "Asian values" Asian countries which prevaricated, ducked, and appeased throughout the Timor crisis have only themselves to blame. They waited for someone else to tackle their problem. Luckily for them, Australia. (and the Gurkhas) obliged.