

## Our duty to West Papua

By Hugh White  
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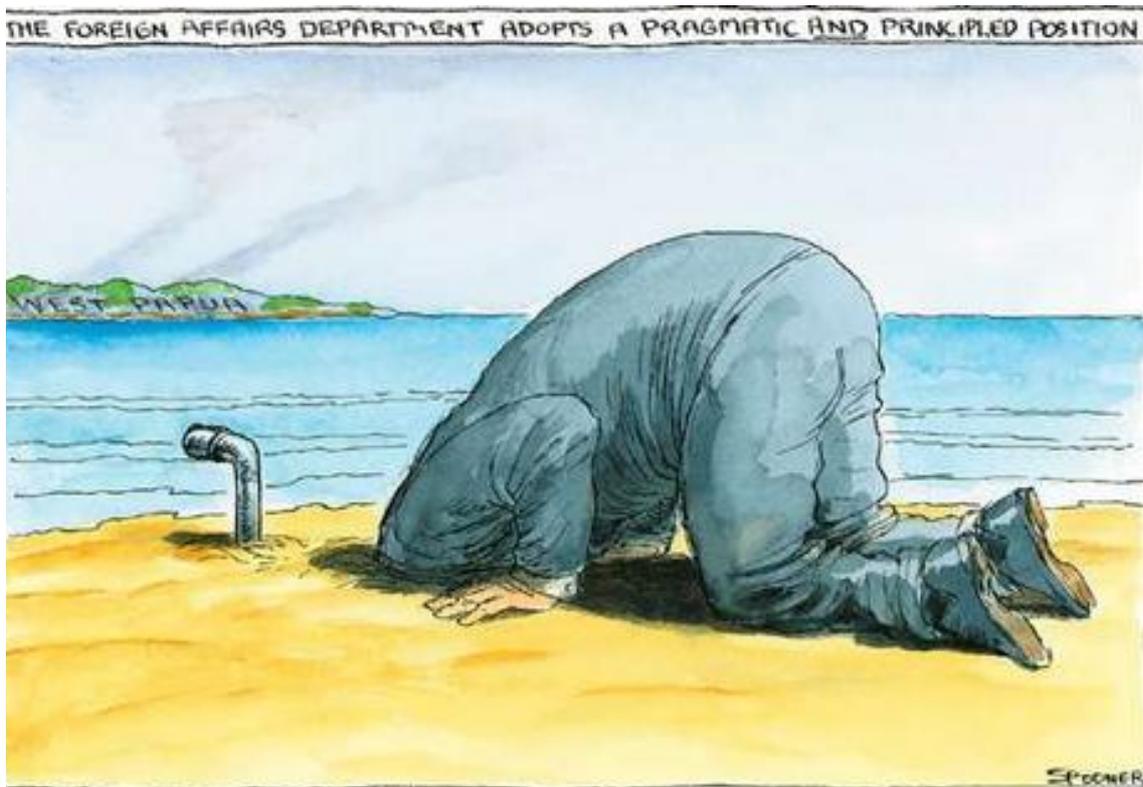


Illustration: John Spooner

AUSTRALIA'S debate over West Papua in the past fortnight has fallen into the ruts worn in our national consciousness by East Timor. We hear of principles on one side and pragmatism on the other. But that is a false dichotomy as we all should have learned from East Timor. Unless we can rethink the issue in new and clearer terms, we will have little hope of avoiding another tragedy.

Both sides have reoccupied their old positions unthinkingly. On one side there are the supporters of moral principle, who are back arguing again that Australia's values should place us squarely on the side of independence. On the other are the advocates of pragmatism, who are telling us again that our interests in good relations with Indonesia require us to acquiesce in what they seem to accept is the serious oppression of some of our nearest neighbours.

Strangely enough, the Government itself seems to accept this way of seeing the issue, and to have abandoned the language of principle to their opponents. For the past fortnight, Canberra has talked about Australia's policy on West Papua in purely pragmatic terms. Its first priority has been to uphold its reputation for being tough on illegal immigration. Its second priority has been to keep relations with Indonesia in order. The welfare of the people of West Papua seems to enter the Government's equation as a distant third, if at all.

But Howard must know that a policy that elevates pragmatism over principles cannot be sustained. After a while, pragmatism starts to look like appeasement. That was one of the lessons of East Timor. As Howard said seven years ago, on the day after Australian forces landed in East Timor in 1999, "national interests cannot be pursued without regard to the values of the Australian community".

Jakarta understands this lesson from East Timor better than Canberra. It realises that events in West Papua could easily put irresistible public pressure on Howard to live up to his principles, abandon pragmatism and support Papuan independence. But that too would be an unsustainable position, for a simple but important reason. Australian support for independence cannot deliver freedom to West Papua, but it would make it much harder for the Papuans to find a better life within Indonesia.

Those who argue that Australia can force the pace on Papuan independence are drawing a wrong lesson from East Timor, based on an inflated view of Australia's role in 1999. East Timor's independence was an Indonesian decision. Australia's role was in the end more marginal than most Australians (and many Indonesians) like to admit.

There is no reason to expect that Indonesia can be persuaded to let West Papua go, and there is little Australia can do to force the issue. On the other hand, Australia can have great influence on the way Indonesia deals with West Papua. This influence is mostly negative. Australian support for Papuan independence would poison the political waters in Jakarta, scupper hopes for special autonomy, and probably provoke a more brutal conflict there that we would be powerless to abate.

These risks need to be carefully considered by Australian supporters of independence. Those who believe they have principles on their side still have an obligation to consider the likely consequences of their proposals. There is no high moral justification for ill-informed decisions and ineffectual gestures that end up doing more harm than good.

So where do we go on West Papua? There must be better options for Australia than a stale choice between the Government's unsustainably amoral pragmatism, and the high-principled but feckless adventurism of the independence lobby.

To find better options we need to reframe the debate. We should start by affirming that our foreign policy must uphold our principles. That means we need to put the welfare of the people of West Papua firmly in the centre of the policy frame. We need to ask what, pragmatically, in all the circumstances, is the best achievable outcome for them.

The answer is most surely the effective implementation of the special autonomy package that has been on the table in Jakarta since 2001. We then need to ask what Australia can do to promote special autonomy. Most likely the best thing Australia can do is to neutralise the false arguments of autonomy's opponents in Jakarta.

We need to make clear that Australia does not and will not support independence for West Papua. To do that, the Government has to start arguing forcefully and effectively in favour of special autonomy against those here in Australia who advocate an independence posture. And it needs to argue on the basis of principle, not pragmatism.

Finally, we need to remind ourselves that Australians have legitimate and morally important interests in this situation too. It's not mere pragmatism for the Government to want to preserve a good bilateral relationship with Indonesia. The consequences for Australia of a hostile relationship with Indonesia would be serious, and could affect the welfare of individual Australians deeply.

There is nothing immoral in weighing these factors in the policy balance alongside the welfare of the Papuans. As it happens, our interests and theirs converge on special autonomy.

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