BY WILSON DA SILVA

The Politics of the Prize

HIS IS a tale of two Australian Nobel laureates of 1996. One was born in Brisbane and lives overseas. The other was born overseas and lives in Sydney.

One is feted by governments, honoured by academia and bestowed with the country's highest honour, the Companion of the Order of Australia. His criticisms of the country, made during a short visit before he boarded a jetliner for home, make the front pages of the nation's press.

The other, returning home after being honoured by presidents and prime ministers overseas, doesn't even rate a congratulatory letter from the Mayor of Sydney. His reasoned and conciliatory address to the National Press Club in Canberra, his first press event since his return and in which he defends his adopted land against criticism, fails to rate a mention in the country's national daily newspaper.

One is Professor Peter Doherty, co-winner of the 1996 Nobel Prize for Physiology or Medicine and a resident of Memphis, Tennessee. The other is José Ramos Horta, co-winner of the 1996 Nobel Prize for Peace and a resident of Warwick Farm, in Sydney's outer west.

BELOW: ROSS BIRD. RIGHT: JONAS EKSTROMER/REUTERS

One symbolises triumph for Australia in the eyes of the world. Sir Gustav Nossal, president of the Australian Academy of Science, said of Doherty's win, "all 18 million Australians should walk a millimetre or two taller". His is the kind of success that politicians want to be associated with: an Australian scientist who captures the world's highest accolade in a complex and pioneering field. Doherty is the "clever country" personified.

The other is a profound embarrassment for Australia. A reminder that after more than two decades of passionately, and at times single-handedly, defending a questionable cause in international forums, we find the world still regards it as unjust. Ramos Horta represents abject failure for Australia's political elites. His is the Nobel Prize they would rather ignore.

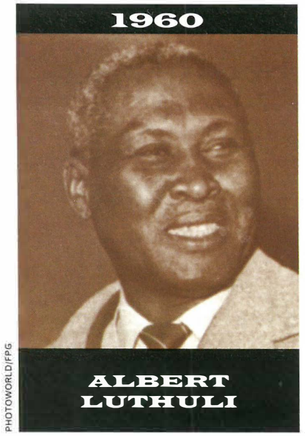
"The contrast is just dramatic," said Scott Burchill, a

The differing experiences of two recently honoured Nobel laureates show that the prizes, far from rising above the political fray, have now become a part of it

JOSE MANUEL RIBEIRO

PHIL CARRICK

Above left: Professor Peter Doherty receives his Nobel prize from King Carl Gustav. Right: José Ramos Horta stands on a map of the world in Lisbon.


1960

ALBERT LUTHULI

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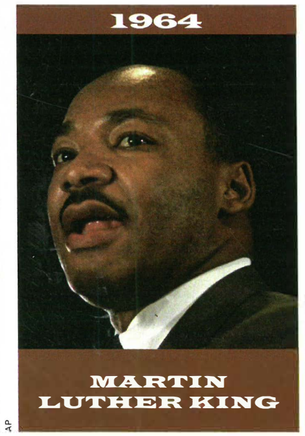
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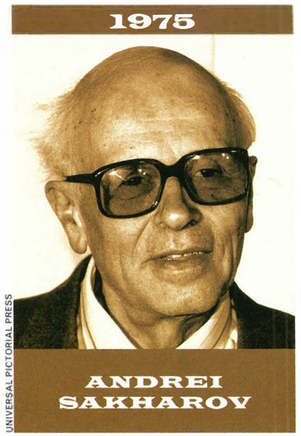
MARTIN LUTHER KING

AP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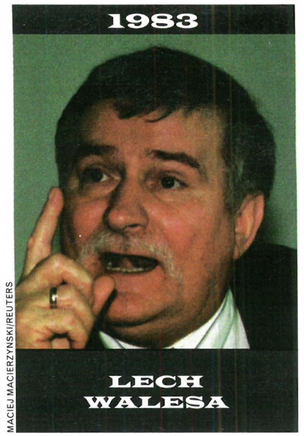
ANDREI SAKHAROV

UNIVERSAL PICTORIAL PRESS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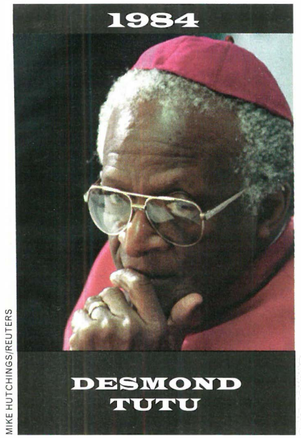
LECH WALESA

MACIEJ NACIERZYNSKI/REUTERS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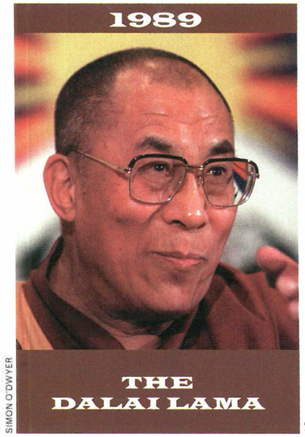
DESMOND TUTU

MIKE HUTCHINGS/REUTERS


1989

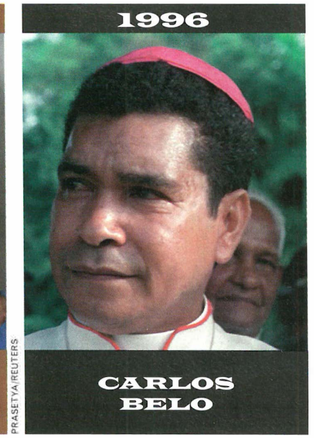
THE DALAI LAMA

SIMON O'DWYER

AP


1991

AUNG SAN SUU KYI


1996

CARLOS BELO

PRASETYA/REUTERS

lecturer in international relations at Melbourne's Deakin University and a former Foreign Affairs official. "If an item is disturbing to the policy elites, as the 1996 Nobel Peace Prize is, they just drive it off the agenda. They don't discuss it, they don't acknowledge it. It doesn't exist."

Ramos Horta, the 101st Nobel Peace laureate, has lived in Sydney since 1983. He is now taking out Australian citizenship, which will also make him Australia's first Nobel Peace laureate. Strangely, there has been none of the frenzy that usually accompanies international success for someone with such a strong connection to the country.

The reason can be summed up in two words: East Timor. When Australian diplomats hear it, their eyes roll heavenwards. Mere mention makes business people cautious, bureaucrats wary, politicians uncomfortable and journalists sigh with boredom.

And yet the tiny South-East Asian territory, invaded by Indonesia in 1975 and occupied ever since, is something of a *cause célèbre* elsewhere in the world. Even before the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to the Timorese-born Ramos Horta, along with East Timor's Roman Catholic Bishop Carlos Belo, both men were warmly received by dignitaries and heads of state.

Following the prize announcement in October last year, Ramos Horta was entertained by the kings and queens of Sweden and of Norway, by German chancellor Helmut Kohl and by South African President Nelson Mandela. His European press conferences were standing-room-only affairs. Upon arriving in Lisbon, he was carried on the shoulders of cheering Timorese exiles at the airport and stopped in the street by Portuguese housewives offering their congratulations. Swedish airline stewards pressed him for autographs, British students posed beside him for pictures.

In the country Ramos Horta calls home, the reception was somewhat different. The Prime Minister flew the expatriate Doherty to be guest of honour at a State reception in Melbourne and at another in Canberra's Parliament House. For Australia's other Nobel laureate, who paid his own fare to Canberra, John Howard could not spare the time for a cup of tea. A long-standing request to meet Foreign Minister Alexander Downer was postponed twice and finally granted: 30 minutes at Downer's electorate office in Adelaide.

José Ramos Horta is Australia's invisible Nobel laureate. Curiously, his invisibility seems restricted to Australian officials and opinion-makers. The public appears to be less diffident: on his return from Norway in December, Ramos Horta spoke to packed auditoriums in Sydney, Melbourne, Canberra and Perth. In church halls, community centres and university lecture theatres, he received standing ovations from students, academics and clerics. But there was no television coverage and you didn't read about it in the newspapers.

Since 1960, the Nobel Peace Prize has increasingly sought to intervene in political conflicts of the day.

THE 1996 Nobel Peace Prize was a hot political poker jabbed at a long-festering international wound. But it is not the only time the Norwegian Nobel Committee, which decides each year's winners, has stoked the world's political hot spots.

In 1989 it awarded the Peace Prize to a then obscure Tibetan cleric: Tenzin Gyatso, better known as the 14th Dalai Lama. The award infuriated China, which had invaded Tibet 50 years earlier and has ruled it ever since. The exiled Dalai Lama, still regarded by Tibetans as their leader, has eschewed violence and independence and advocated accommodation with China to prevent the erosion of Tibetan culture. The Nobel Prize granted him a stature and recognition that now allows the globe-trotting Buddhist cleric to fill stadiums from Melbourne to Miami.

More and more of late, the Norwegian Nobel Committee has waded into choppy political waters such as those of Tibet and Burma. And now, East Timor

Two years later, the committee honoured Aung San Suu Kyi, the Burmese democracy leader who was wont to walk serenely through lines of Burmese soldiers even as orders to fire were being shouted. The daughter of the country's independence hero won national elections that were later annulled by the military junta in power. Since becoming a laureate, she has been a thorn in the side of the Burmese regime: six years of house arrest have not broken her, her criticisms make the international press and sanctions against the regime not only hobble trade, the Burmese generals and their families can't even get visas to Europe or the US.

"There's been more controversial prizes and more prizes to individuals who have not completed their work, so to speak," admits Professor Geir Lundestad, director of the Norwegian Nobel Committee for six years. "The Dalai Lama for instance, presented obvious problems with China – this was not a very popular decision with the Norwegian government. In 1996, we heard very clearly what the Indonesian government thought and other governments also commented upon it."

But the Peace prizes haven't always been like this. Originally, the committee stuck slavishly to the wording in Nobel's will; the prizes were to be awarded to those "who shall have done the most or best work for fraternity between nations, for the abolition or reduction of standing armies and for the holding and promotion of peace congresses". They became "rewards" to statesmen who promoted peace, such as League of Nations founder, President Woodrow Wilson of the US (1919), and to peace activists, such as French missionary surgeon Albert Schweitzer (1952).

It was not until 1960 that a shift occurred: Albert Luthuli, leader of the African National Congress, won the prize. Here was a South African in the middle of a conflict that was basically about civil and political rights. Four years later it was American civil rights campaigner Martin Luther King who was honoured.

From this point on, the Norwegian Nobel Committee made a conscious effort not only to reward peacemakers, but also to anoint those playing a part in unresolved conflicts who nevertheless pursued their aims through peaceful means. It struck a new path that crossed into burning political issues of the day: political freedom in the Soviet Union (Andrei Sakharov, 1975), peace in Northern Ireland (Betty Williams and Mairead Corrigan, 1976) and international human rights (Amnesty International, 1977).

Even in rewarding the "champions of peace", as Alfred Nobel called them in his will, the five-member committee began to score political points. In 1995, as French President Jacques Chirac was weathering months of international outrage over his decision to resume nuclear testing at Mururoa Atoll, the committee awarded the prize to a long-time anti-nuclear campaigner: Joseph Rotblat and his Pugwash Conferences on peace and disarmament.

However, the reward for past efforts has a tendency to be quickly forgotten by the world, irrespective of the indirect point being made; one can scarcely recall that Mikhail Gorbachev was honoured in 1990 for helping to end the Cold War (while Reagan was pointedly ignored). Invariably, it is the anointing of those in the centre of a conflict that captures most attention. The bestowal of the prize on Poland's Lech Walesa (1983) and South Africa's Desmond Tutu (1984) were attempts by the committee not only to make a definitive political statement, but also to influence an outcome.

Every year, more than 100 nominations for the Peace Prize are received in Oslo by the February 1 deadline. At the committee's first meeting in late February, it selects from the nominations some 20 to 30 candidates for further study. These are handed to in-house researchers of the Norwegian Nobel Institute, or contracted to outside experts, if so required. Reports are produced for the committee, which digests them and then agrees on a short list of five or six candidates by its April meeting. The next five months are spent further researching the minutiae of the lives and achievements of the short-listed candidates, which the committee discusses over a number of meetings. By early October, it is ready to make a decision.

Nominations can only be made by current and former members of the Norwegian Nobel Committee; by sitting parliamentarians around the world; by university professors of political science, law, history and philosophy; by members of the International Court of Arbitration at The Hague; by the Commission of the Permanent International Peace Bureau and the Institut de Droit International; and by past Nobel Peace laureates. The identity of nominees is kept secret (unless those who nominate go public) and no minutes are taken of the committee's meetings. Once a decision is made, the candidatures expire unless fresh nominations are made the following year. However, it is not uncommon for those who propose candidates to be unofficially urged to renominate, especially when a candidate makes the short list but just misses out.

Both of the 1996 winners of the Peace Prize had been nominated before. Belo is now known to have been proposed for at least the 1994 and 1995 prizes by a number of people, including Desmond Tutu and US Congressman Tony Hall. When in 1995 word got out that the Catholic cleric was a candidate, Timorese exiles in Australia and Portugal mounted a year-long campaign to convince the Norwegians of his worthiness. This actually backfired: the Norwegian Nobel Committee is known to abhor campaigns, and although Belo made the short list in 1995 – and according to scuttlebutt in Oslo was the favoured candidate until the last minute – the committee chose to send a strong anti-nuclear message to Paris instead.

In 1994 Belo had also been on the short list but was squeezed out by the first triumphs of the Middle East peace process on the lawns of the White House: the prize went to Yasser Arafat, Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres. The decision led to the resignation of committee member Kaare Kristiansen, ostensibly over the inclusion of the Palestinian leader. At the time, Kristiansen said publicly that Belo had been his favoured candidate. Interestingly, Ramos Horta – unbeknownst to him – had also been a candidate that year, nominated by three female Icelandic parliamentarians. According to one source, another reason for Kristiansen's fury was that the committee, which had been leaning towards the short-listed Ramos Horta and Belo up until the last meeting, had a sudden change of heart after some heavy lobbying by Norwegian and foreign leaders. The committee's Lundestad denies this, but declined to say if the Timorese had been candidates until the last meeting of 1994.

Since the first Nobel Prizes were awarded in 1901, they have propelled laureates seemingly beyond the reach of ordinary mortals. However questions, particularly about Peace laureates, occasionally do arise

The winning 1996 nomination – that of Belo and Ramos Horta together – came from the same source as 1994: the Icelandic parliamentarians. The Timorese were up against 117 candidates, of which 28 were organisations. Candidates that had been considered front-runners were then-assistant US Secretary of State Richard Holbrooke (for brokering the Bosnian peace accords); imprisoned Chinese dissident and human rights activist Wei Jingsheng; and Turkey's jailed Kurdish parliamentarian Leyla Zana.

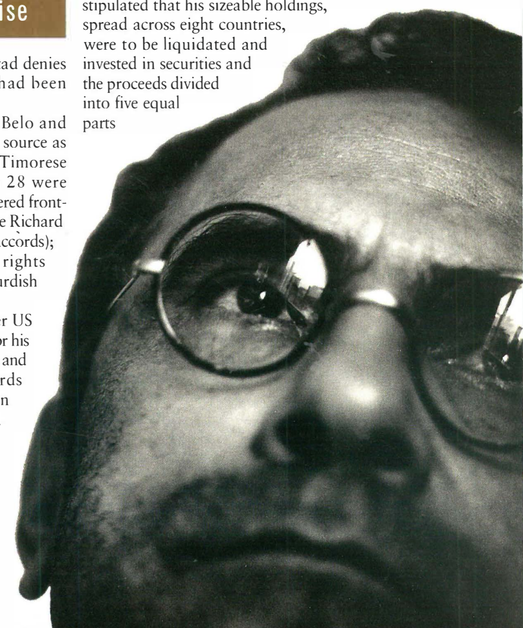
An old hand at being a candidate is former US President Jimmy Carter, nominated seven times for his mediating roles in Haiti, North Korea and Africa, and originally for the Camp David peace accords between Egypt and Israel in 1979. He was again wheeled out this year, which has seen a record 130 entries. Other known contenders in 1997 include Holbrooke, Wei Jingsheng and the Salvation Army.

Although the other prizes can have some political overtones, it is the Peace Prize that has the clout. As a bonus, the power conferred by the prize does not just amplify the cause it is highlighting, it enhances the influence of the prize itself. For the committee, it is a win-win combination. It should not be surprising that its tendency to dip its toe into political waters has intensified, perhaps fuelled by the successes of Tutu and Walesa: each was at the centre of a conflict that was eventually resolved. More and more of late, the committee has waded into choppy diplomatic waters, such as those of Tibet and Burma. And now, East Timor.

WHEN THE Swedish industrialist Alfred Nobel died 100 years ago, his will established five international prizes that were to be presented "to those who, during the preceding year, shall have conferred the greatest benefit on mankind".

The creation of the prizes was a surprise to Nobel's relatives, who had expected him to leave them most of his estate, not just five per cent. The remainder of the wealth – 1.5 billion Swedish kronor, or almost $260 million in today's money – created the prizes. His will stipulated that his sizeable holdings, spread across eight countries, were to be liquidated and invested in securities and the proceeds divided into five equal parts

ROSS BIRD



BJOERN SIGURDSON

Winning the prize is not all about meeting kings and queens, it can also attract an assassin's bullet. Since the award, the number of threats against Ramos Horta have increased

The latest among a growing number of controversial Peace Prize laureates, José Ramos Horta (left) and Bishop Carlos Belo.

every year, with a portion set aside for administration. The prizes were to be awarded for outstanding achievements in only five categories: physics, chemistry, physiology or medicine, literature and peace.

The will, written in long-hand a year before his death and not without some legal problems, was controversial because Nobel did not consult the institutions into whose care he placed the sobering responsibility of choosing the winners: the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences (physics, chemistry), the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm (medicine) and the Swedish Academy (literature). Additionally, he assigned responsibility for choosing the Peace Prize to "a committee of five persons" elected by Norway's Storting, or parliament. He further stipulated that for all five prizes, "no consideration whatsoever shall be given to the nationality of the candidates". These last two clauses did not go down well with the Swedish establishment, particularly King Oskar II, then monarch of a united Sweden and Norway and an implacable opponent of Norwegian devolution.

No-one is certain why Nobel, a Swede, gave Norway control over the Peace Prize. His close aide and confidant, the young chemical engineer Ragnar Sohlman, suspected that Nobel might have been trying to quell growing agitation for secession in independent-minded Norway, conquered from Denmark in 1814. Others have suggested that Nobel might have been influenced by the autonomous Storting's more democratic and internationalist character; it enjoyed greater powers than any other legislature save those of Britain and the US.

Three years of lawsuits and negotiations followed. After some modifications to the original will, the heirs agreed not to contest it further. King Oskar accepted the compromises and promulgated the governing statutes on June 29, 1900. Five years later, in tense circumstances, Norway dissolved the union with Sweden and the Storting passed legislation to ensure the Peace Prize stayed its responsibility.

The science and literature prizes are decided by a complicated system that makes rigging a result difficult. The Karolinska Institute, a respected independent medical research centre established almost two centuries ago to train Swedish army surgeons, was responsible for awarding Doherty and his Swiss colleague, Rolf Zinkernagel, the 1996 prize for "medicine or physiology". Every three years, the institute's medical faculty elects 50 professors from inside and outside Karolinska to be members of the Nobel Assembly. From these, five are elected by the assembly to serve on the Nobel Committee for Physiology or Medicine, and another 10 co-opted for 10 months. The committee then mails nomination forms to a random (and annually rotating) sample of 2,000 professors around the world working in different fields of the medical sciences, inviting them to nominate worthy candidates. Members of the Karolinska committee and the assembly cannot nominate.

"All of this is to ensure that there is a constantly changing composition and to guarantee objectivity," said Professor Nils Ringertz, a geneticist and secretary of the Karolinska's Nobel committee for the 1996 prize.

Once the nominations are in, a short list is selected and members of the committee study candidates and research the nominated work. Over 10 months, an average 200 candidates are reduced to just a handful. A maximum of three candidates can be awarded any one of the Nobel Prizes and the statutes stipulate that recipients must be living at the time a decision is reached. The finalists, complete with voluminous documentation, are presented to members of Karolinska's Nobel Assembly, who later vote on the winners. Winners are immediately telephoned and minutes later the information is released to the press.

Despite the rigid selection system, scientists bombard the institute every year with glowing recommendations for aspiring colleagues. Some even mount campaigns designed to ensure a favoured researcher is moved to the top of the list. This can actually harm a candidate, says Ringertz.

"Campaigns are ineffective. Since we only consider nominations from those who have been invited, it doesn't matter who you are. If you send a letter, it gets filed there," he says, motioning to a wastepaper basket.

Good candidates surface repeatedly as the value of their original work is increasingly recognised. Others are infatuations of the year. In science, it is not immediately obvious which discoveries are significant: Doherty and Zinkernagel did their original work on immunology at the John Curtin School of Medical Research at the Australian National University between 1973 and 1975. It was not until the late 1980s that its potential was realised as researchers used the duo's discoveries to solve complex problems in transplantation, grafts and virus infections.

Ringertz declined to say if Doherty and Zinkernagel had been candidates for the $1.42 million prize previously. Committee and assembly members are, theoretically, sworn to secrecy. But Doherty later told *The Australian Financial Review Magazine* that whispers had reached him some years before. "You hear these things. You don't take too much notice."

The other academies have similar systems, none of them prescribed in Nobel's will. The measures had to be designed by the institutions and, after much disagreement, promulgated into law by King Oskar. It was at this time that the Nobel Foundation, the trustee of Nobel's will and manager of his fortune, was created.

Today the foundation has investments worth almost $400 million and an annual income of $31 million. The fortune would have been greater had not Nobel originally stipulated that his wealth be "invested in safe securities". This proved a questionable strategy and the annual prize amounts soon began to shrink. In 1946 the Swedish government granted the long-sought tax exempt status, and in 1953 the governing statutes were loosened to allow investments in shares. Today the foundation has 58 per cent of the bequest in shares, 27 per cent in interest-bearing instruments and the rest in real estate. In 1996, the foundation paid out $6.7 million in prize money and $7.6 million to the prize-giving bodies, and reserved $2.8 million for operating costs. The rest was ploughed back into the prize pool.

Since the first prizes were awarded in 1901, they have gained a reputation that has propelled laureates seemingly beyond the reach of ordinary mortals. But question marks occasionally arise, and in the case of the Peace Prize, campaigns are mounted to discredit winners. Rigoberta Menchú, a Mayan Indian from Guatemala, won the Peace Prize in 1992 for fighting for indigenous rights issues. She was accused of taking part in violent guerrilla activity, a charge which the Nobel Committee dismissed.

Questions were raised about Ramos Horta too. Within two days of the Nobel committee's announcement, Indonesian officials accused him of approving "a series of murders, torture and arrests" and of being involved in two massacres of his own people in East Timor while a member of Fretilin (Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor), the left-wing political party that briefly ruled the former Portuguese colony before the Indonesian invasion. Ramos Horta denies this, saying that between May and September 1975, the time of the massacres – resulting from sharp differences between Fretilin and the conservative UDT (Timorese Democratic Union) that eventually led to a civil war in August 1975 – he was actually in Australia. The last time he was so accused, in a magazine article, he filed for defamation and says he was awarded $200,000 in damages.

Winning the Peace Prize is not all about meeting kings and queens; it can also attract an assassin's bullet, as Yitzhak Rabin and Martin Luther King discovered. Since the Nobel announcement, the once sporadic death threats against Ramos Horta have increased. The underground resistance in East Timor recently told him that a Timorese collaborator, a convicted criminal, had been hired by the Indonesian military to assassinate him abroad.

The Timorese are not the only ones to worry: when Ramos Horta asked the Norwegian Nobel Committee if he could stay at a friend's home in Oslo rather than at the opulent Grand Hôtel (he didn't feel right, he said, considering many of his colleagues are in Indonesian prisons), they declined on the grounds of safety, saying they were responsible for his life while he was on Norwegian soil. Security was certainly tight in Oslo: journalists attending the press conferences had to pass a cordon of armed police and metal detectors and have their bags searched by sniffer dogs. Norwegian journalists said the security was on a par with that given to past winners Arafat and Rabin.

JUDITH PEAD, Her Excellency the Australian Ambassador to Sweden, had a most delightful task. Resplendent in a gown of black silk, she was clearly enjoying the spectacle in the Prince's Gallery of the imposing Stadshuset: the glass cabinets displaying the 1996 Nobel Prizes for the assorted galaxy of the world's best and brightest as well as Sweden's political and industrial elite. Men in white-tie drifted across the marble, haute couture swished by in the half-light and Möet & Chandon Brut Impérial sparkled in gently-held flutes. Pead was smiling pleasantly at the passing show, then suddenly turned icy.

"Ah!" she exclaimed, her eyes darting at me askance, then narrowing. "So that's why you came all the way here. *Timor*."

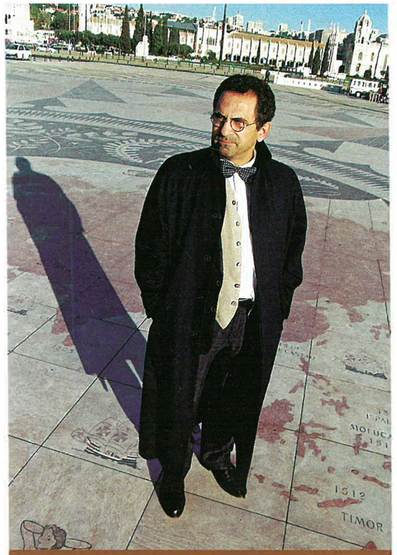
Earlier, Her Excellency had dined with King Carl Gustav and Queen Silvia at the main table of the Stadshuset's cavernous Blue Hall, an honour accorded only to the winning Nobel laureates and their partners, descendants of the Nobel family and the ambassadors of nations whose citizens have been honoured with a prize. Australia had not had a seat at the main table since 1973, when Patrick White received the literature prize. It is an honour seldom afforded an Australian diplomat. This time it was thanks, of course, to Peter Doherty.

The Nobel banquet is an affair like no other. Two hundred and eighteen paired waiters in white jackets move in unison, holding silver platters aloft, slowly marching down the baroque stone steps with each course. The stairway is lit by torches held by men in silk Arabian costumes; the waiters, male and female, come to a halt as one at each of the 66 long tables, where 1,300 guests are seated. As one, they begin serving the guests. Between courses there are speeches and soprano arias. The main table cuts the long hall in two like a cotton-sheeted runway; 88 finely-dressed men and women chat with the royal family and the laureates. The event even has its own gilt-edged china, along with gold cutlery, brought out only once a year.

The invitation-only event always takes place on December 10, the day a century ago when Alfred Nobel died and the day when the awards are officially presented. In Sweden it is held at the Stockholm Concert House before 1,800 guests. King Carl Gustav presses each laureate with a handshake and the medal, an ornate diploma and a cheque. In Norway the event is held earlier but on the same day, in the Rådushallen, or Main Hall, of the Oslo City Hall, against a backdrop of white marble and the vivid oil-on-wood paintings of Henrik Sørensen. While King Harald and Queen Sonja observe, the chairman of the Norwegian Nobel Committee presents the Peace Prizes – this year, to the two Timorese. Before the assembled 1,000 guests, Ramos Horta had dropped his medallion and the chairman had quickly bent to pick it up. I had just described the scene to the Ambassador.

There was a trace of irritation in her reply, a slight pulling away in the body language. This might have been due to the fact that Her Excellency's previous overseas posting, before being appointed ambassador, was Jakarta – making her, perhaps, particularly sensitive to the subject of the 1996 Nobel Peace Prize.

Or perhaps it is as some commentators suggest: Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs, in common with much of the country's policy elites, has long been acutely sensitised to the issue of East Timor. As a representative of her country abroad, Pead mirrors the thinking of Foreign Affairs. When hundreds of Timorese civilians were gunned down by Indonesian troops in a massacre that made world headlines in 1991, Australian diplomats in Jakarta pressed witnesses not for details about the bloodbath, but for evidence of Timorese provocation. Pead was among them. When the ABC's overseas satellite service, Australia Television, was established in 1993, officials from the Department of Foreign Affairs visited the journalists in Darwin and advised them not to cover the issue of East Timor. Pead led the delegation. In the 1990s, relations between the Australian embassy in Jakarta and the Red Cross, the only international agency operating in Dili, broke down over the issue of East Timor. Pead was the embassy's liaison.



JOSE MANUEL RIBEIRO

His long journey to Oslo really began 21 years ago on another aeroplane, climbing above the mountains of his homeland. Ramos Horta has not been back since. He is an unwilling exile

Such difficulty with the issue of East Timor might explain why Australia, so well represented in Stockholm, made no great effort to be in Oslo. Canberra says it was not invited. The Norwegians say they automatically invite the ambassador of any country that expresses an interest.

Why Foreign Affairs has for so long had such a blind spot when it comes to the issue is not clear. Critics charge that Canberra was anxious to see development of the rich Timor Gap oilfield between Australia and East Timor, development that had been stalled under the Portuguese administration but would have been (and was) eagerly sought under Indonesian rule. Others suggest that Canberra's closeness to Jakarta, almost unique in international diplomacy for a mature liberal democracy and a military-led Third World nation, necessitates that it look the other way when it comes to such unpleasantnesses as East Timor. It is, after all, a tiny territory hardly noticed by the rest of the world. At least until now.

Often in international affairs, issues can be very complex. East Timor is not one of them. Indonesia invaded a European colony that was being prepared for independence. Six months later, it unilaterally declared the territory its 27th province, in defiance of two resolutions of the UN Security Council calling for a withdrawal. There have since been another eight resolutions in the UN General Assembly, variously calling for an immediate pull-out or that Indonesia respect the right of the Timorese to independence.

Australia is virtually alone in its 21-year defence of the Indonesian occupation and acquisition of East Timor. To this day, the UN does not legally recognise Indonesia's annexation. Australia does. Many countries accept that, for all intents and purposes, Indonesia controls the territory. It is an acceptance that is, however, unspoken: it is termed *de facto* recognition; it does not bind a country to deciding issues of ultimate sovereignty and it has no standing in international law.

Australia is unusual in that it has, almost alone in the world, granted *de jure* recognition (in 1979) to the Indonesian annexation: legally binding acceptance of sovereignty. And it has gone even further, saying publicly that the "incorporation" (as Foreign Affairs prefers to call it) is irreversible. To grant such legal recognition to the coercive acquisition of territory by force is highly unusual in international circles. This is because, under international law, such conquests are illegal. And the Indonesian occupation of East Timor is, incontestably, illegal.

In Portugal, the Timorese cause is warmly welcomed and Lisbon is a constant diplomatic agitator for the single goal of Ramos Horta and his colleagues: a UN-supervised vote on independence. Australia's stance on the issue would surely not have helped its high-profile bid to win a seat on the UN Security Council last year. The bid was finally lost – to Portugal. Considering that Australian foreign policy is so out of step with the rest of the world on the issue, the 1996 Nobel Peace Prize must indeed cause some heartburn in Canberra. And with the profile that the Peace Prize brings, the issue is unlikely to go away. If the East Timor issue refuses to die after 21 years of relative obscurity, surely a Nobel Peace Prize is only going to make the road for Indonesian and Australian foreign policy a lot more bumpy.

THE SCENE is a riverside plaza in Lisbon. Across the flowing Tejo, a weak sun rises through the winter fog, catching the lone figure in the overcoat and signature bow-tie. The tiled surface of the square depicts the sweep of Portuguese colonial history, from an age when Lisbon ruled the seas; at his feet, a map of East Timor, claimed in 1512. His long shadow stretches towards the north-west, to the cold Nordic, to Oslo, his destination today.

José Ramos Horta poses for photographs. He is uncomfortable, uneasy, his eyes darting to and fro, his body tense. "Must be nerves over the prize," I suggest. "No," the photographer shakes his head. "I've never seen him like this. It's got to be the death threats."

It is December 7, 1996. In a few hours, Ramos Horta – for two decades the international face of the Timorese struggle for independence – boards a plane for Norway to collect the prize. Just four years earlier, he had proposed a peace plan that offered to halt the guerrilla war and suspend the issue of East Timor's sovereignty for up to 12 years in return for greater autonomy, a scaling back of the large Indonesian military presence and an eventual vote on its future. It is this plan, praised as conciliatory in diplomatic circles but criticised as too concessionary by many Timorese, that won him the peace accolade.

In a sense, his journey to Oslo really began 21 years ago on another aeroplane, climbing above the mountains of his homeland and headed for the UN where, as foreign minister of an eight-day-old independent East Timor, he sought international recognition for his fledgling country. But by the time his plane landed in wintry New York, East Timor was independent no more.

Ironically, today is also the 21st anniversary of the Indonesian invasion of East Timor. Ramos Horta has not been back since. He is an unwilling exile. So long as his country is occupied by Indonesia, he cannot return.

Looking at the lonely figure in the cold dawn light, it is obvious that his final destination cannot be found on any boarding pass, will not be announced over any airport loudspeaker nor flashed up on any destination board. Not today at least. ■