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Timor a block to better Asian ties

Q What should be our position on the Indonesian occupation of East Timor?

A Our party policy is clear. It lays down a number of obligations, including no military aid to Indonesia while the criteria we have laid down aren't met.

I find no problems with that. In fact I would seek to have a Labor government increase its aid to Indonesia generally within the context of our aid obligations and our declared objective of providing a greater level of aid — dependent on our balance of payments improving.

Once that improved I would want to see us provide more aid in our region and give a more substantial focus in that region instead of spreading it as widely as we do and, consequently, so thinly that it's not being really effective.

I acknowledge that our policy in relation to East Timor will create some problems for us in our diplomatic relationships with Indonesia. For anyone to say otherwise is to talk sheer nonsense and I'm not in the business of humbug.

I believe politicians should be as candid as they can in affairs affecting the public.

Nonetheless, allowing for the explicitness of our policy, I would be keen to enter into fairly early consultations with the Indonesians about the problems about our policies that lead to this policy; to acknowledge the cultural and historical differences between the two countries and the way

they approach things and ask them to acknowledge the same sort of thing. I think that is sometimes lost sight of on both sides.

We are a liberal democracy with Western traditions. They have very fine Asian traditions. Somehow we have to bridge that, and I would see this as a first and very important undertaking — to try to start building that bridge of understanding.

But it takes two people to shake hands. And if we are going to make any progress, the Indonesians have got to recognise it is not just a one-sided thing.

Furthermore, it is often said Indonesia is more important to Australia than we are to them: I don't accept that. I think that leads to a servility and not a firm enough assertion of our national interest.

That doesn't mean Australia has got to drop its point of view totally, immediately, or very quickly. Foreign policy differences are something you work at ironing out.