



## Grievance Debate

### Friends in Far Places – Visits to Mongolia and Timor Leste

#### Main Committee

14 September 2009

Sharon Grierson MP

**Ms Grierson:** (Newcastle) (9:08pm) —I wish to take advantage of this debate to share with the House some observations and knowledge arising from the recent opportunity I had to visit Mongolia and Timor Leste. These experiences, when reflected upon, have significance when related to what we do here in this parliament, the legislation we enact and the policies we deliver. In June 2009 an invitation was extended from His Excellency Mr Enkhbold, the Vice-Chairman of Mongolia's State Great Khural, the Mongolian parliament, and Chair of the Mongolia-Australia Friendship Group—or the 'Mozzies' as they affectionately call it—offering on behalf of the Mongolian parliament to host a delegation from our parliament. The delegation included Kirsten Livermore, the member for Capricornia, who led our delegation. She is particularly deserving of great praise for her diplomacy, her skill and her level of engagement with Mongolia. The delegation also included the Hon. Peter Lindsay, the member for Herbert, and Dr Mal Washer, the member for Moore, as well as Mrs Washer.

The visit was particularly extended to people interested in mining communities such as the Hunter Region. We were assisted by public servants, Ms Bayasa and Mr Batbold, who were excellent advocates for their country. The delegation's program was divided into formal meetings with members of the executive and the parliament, visits to two national parks showcasing the natural environment of Mongolia and meetings with Australians who are representatives of Australian companies operating in Mongolia. We also had the great opportunity to visit Oyu Tolgoi, an Ivanhoe-Rio copper mine in the Gobi Desert, as well as spending an afternoon with children from Didi Kalika's Lotus Children's Centre. Didi is originally from Albury, and her work in setting up that orphanage and the work of the carers whom she employs are outstanding.

Whilst visiting these mines in the Gobi Desert, it was a great pleasure for me both to find that the geologist was from Newcastle, and to hear him talk about their discovery of 40 dinosaur eggs in the final drilling that disclosed all the copper and gold that is present there. To meet a young Novocastrian who was studying for a PhD, looking at the impact of mining on the Mongolian people with particular

reference to gender relationships, was a true delight. I was not surprised but was certainly pleased to see that Novocastrians play a role there.

We were there because Mongolia extends to us the desire for a 'third neighbour'. Landlocked between Kyrgyzstan, China and Russia, it is certainly in need of a third neighbour and it looks to us. It has a strong desire for Australia to establish an embassy in Mongolia. We discussed particularly the significance to Mongolians of the AusAID scholarship program and other areas of cooperation, particularly mining, between our countries.

In many ways Mongolia is reminiscent of Australia, pre the economic boom. Mongolians struggle with the challenge of negotiating beneficial international investment agreements—ones that will benefit their communities and their country and that will still be attractive for international investment. We are pleased to report that an investment agreement with Rio was signed shortly after our visit, and I can only praise Mongolia's Prime Minister, His Excellency Mr S Bayar; the Minister for Mineral Resources and Energy, Mr D Zorigt; and Foreign Affairs Minister S Batbold for their very frank discussions with us. Certainly I understand that they look to Australia for our technical expertise as well. Although very grateful for the scholarship program, which many Mongolians have benefited from, they would like to see it widened so that they can look to develop the technical skills necessary to deal with mining regulations and safety issues. They also ask us to remove any barriers to studying in Australia and to bringing family. There are some real barriers, and we need to look at ways to promote real engagement and the people-to-people exchange that can be offered if families come with what are often older participants in these programs. Overall the trip was an outstanding success. I congratulate the member for Capricornia on her report, which I know has been given to our relevant ministers.

I also recently had the opportunity to visit East Timor, or Timor-Leste, on the occasion of its 10th anniversary of democracy. I was there in my role of Chair of the Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit to deliver a paper to the East Timorese parliament regarding the Financial Management and Accountability Act. I acknowledge the support of the JCPAA secretariat, in particular the work of Russell Chafer, in assisting me with developing that paper.

The conference that I attended was dealing with Timor-Leste's first legislation regarding accountability and financial management. I can only say that I was so impressed, particularly with the members of parliament that I met. They had many questions, and it was clear that they set the highest goals and ideals for their people. I would like to particularly thank Suzanne McCourt and Brian Diamond, DFAT staff from the Australian embassy there, and Mr Peter Heyward, the Australian ambassador, who extended great hospitality to me during my visit. Fe Gaffud, the senior budget expert and trainer from the UNDP Parliament Project, was responsible for the conference. I thank her for her excellent organisation.

I can only say that, when visiting countries like this, you gain a deeper understanding of how important it is that Australia is thoroughly supportive of these countries. In East Timor the life expectancy is 60. In Mongolia it is between 60 and 65. Conditions are harsh and poverty is real. Certainly the work done today by young

people to gain our support for the Millennium Development Goals is a salient reminder of our obligations.

While I was in Mongolia, 24 people died in 10 days as a result of a flood through their capital Ulaanbaatar. That was just from higher rainfall in that area. Gers were washed away and people drowned. While I was in Timor Leste, in Dili, an earthquake occurred. As I come from Newcastle, it made me rather edgy. East Timorese tell me they are now more frequent. Climate change is very real in countries such as these. In Mongolia desertification is extensive and growing. They do not have climate scepticism. That is an indulgence for developed nations like ours. They know from their everyday lives the impact that climate change has. I can only say to those who may think it is not our role to show regional and international leadership on climate change: please reflect on the plight of our neighbours in our region because they are certainly already experiencing the impacts of climate change. Coincidentally, I also recently visited East Timor on a separate occasion to look at Operation Astute, the Australian Defence Force's continuing contribution to the maintenance of peace and stability in East Timor. The training they were giving was welcomed and certainly, as always, their professionalism was outstanding.

I would also like to take the opportunity to thank the participants in the Micah Challenge who came to see me today in my office. Newcastle remains strongly representative of the community that desires to see global poverty eradicated. I support their work.

Also tonight I had the pleasure to spend time with two international students from our university, Alexa Halford and Vicky Chew. I have learnt so much already today in my discussions with international students, having dinner with them tonight and visiting them in their workshops. I know that the federal government will respond appropriately to the issue of international student welfare and learning because the input and the output have been exceptional. I look forward to their communique being presented to the Deputy Prime Minister tomorrow and congratulate them on the work they are doing. I wish Mr Bruce Baird, a former member of this parliament, success in his review of the role and activities of international colleges and private institutions for international students, because the issues raised today were quite alarming. There is certainly a great deal of work to do.