



📷 Motorbikes line the streets of Dili near the National Eye Centre. National Eye Centre in Dili East Timor. Picture: NIKKI DAVIS-JONES

Business

Will greenies destroy East Timor's bid for economic freedom?

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AUSTRALIA and East Timor are two economically opposite countries.

One has been relatively free of internal trouble, while the other suffered a long, drawn-out occupation which has left a bitterness in the mouth of some. And depending on the prism through which you view Australia's history, you can argue occupation was an underlying feature of our history.

Both nations are blessed with at least one natural resource beyond their people, although

only Australia can be considered first world.

In East Timor's case, it is oil, located onshore and offshore.

In Australia's case, it is a list of natural resources spanning from unpalatable energy like uranium to the now unfashionable gas to good old-fashioned oil — “Texas T” as the hillbilly TV family the Clampetts would call it.

Last week a landmark deal was struck between the East Timorese Government and Timor Resources for the onshore exploration of 2000sq km. A substantial chunk of land for a country which is only 15,410sq km in total.

An onshore oil industry changes the entire dynamic for one of the world's newest nations. It gives it access to a potential revenue which can lift its people up by the bootstraps and deliver them a quality of life which right now is reliant on the goodwill of others. It allows them to become an independent nation which can design and deliver a future for their children. But will the environmental movement allow the East Timorese to economically develop their resource or will they be subject to the same type of “first-world thinking” as Energy Resources of Australia chairman Peter Mansell described to his shareholders and assembled media last week?

Mansell was forthright in his assessment of what is ahead for the longest operating uranium mine in Australia.

Ranger, 200km from Darwin, has been producing uranium oxide at Jabiru for 35 years. Its lease expires in 2021 and the hunt is currently on for a new chief executive officer with their first task possibly being setting a timeline for the mine's closure.

“My personal view is there is a future for uranium,” Mansell said. “It will be a huge loss (to Australia). I can't quantify it, but it is a great pity. We are a country which is not economically challenged and we can make these first-world decisions. Countries which



📷 Women carry heavy loads on their heads in the monsoon rains. National Eye Centre in Dili East Timor. Picture: NIKKI DAVIS-JONES

are economically challenged make more robust decisions — well thought-out decisions as opposed to ideological views.”

Australia is not economically challenged and therefore we do make these first-world decisions. In one sentence, Mansell has just summarised the battle those in East Timor can look forward to from the environmental movement here in Australia.

The environmental movement won't care about the economic opportunity and the improved standard of living the development of onshore oil might bring. The environmental movement is anti-fossil fuel at any cost and if gas is the new evil, then oil is Satan.

What you and I take for granted in Australia, others less than 500km to our north don't. It will be interesting to watch where human need sits when it comes to developing East Timor.