

## **Achieving against the odds**

*Pat Walsh oration on the occasion of being awarded an Honorary Doctor of Letters  
University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, 6 September 2012*

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Chancellor Brazil, Vice-Chancellor Thomas, distinguished guests and graduands.

I am deeply touched and indebted to the University of Southern Queensland for this wonderful honour. May I particularly thank Vice-Chancellor Professor Jan Thomas personally, and her staff, for welcoming my wife Annie and I to Toowoomba so warmly and thoughtfully. We have been received like royalty! I am also delighted to share this memorable moment with those graduating today, including your families and lecturers. Congratulations to each of you on your achievements.

This Honorary Doctorate is not just for me. It is also to recognise many wonderful friends and colleagues in the human rights sector in Australia and abroad and to honour this sector's guiding star, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) which correctly and wisely states that respect for human rights is fundamental to world order, peace, security, development and ultimately being human. I have tried to build my working life around the UDHR. It is one of humanity's great achievements. It is the most translated document in the world and deserves to occupy pride of place on every fridge door and faculty noticeboard. The UDHR represents a rejection of the primitive dogmas that fuelled World War II, in both Europe and Asia, and consensus at the highest levels that all human beings regardless of their differences of colour, culture, politics, religion, or gender have the same rights, including the right to education. It is also revolutionary in that its opening Article is based on similar sentiments from the American and French Revolutions and in that it continues to inspire marginalised and oppressed groups and people in many societies, notably today in the Middle East. My work, particularly with the Australian Council for Overseas Aid (now ACFID), has been to partner some of these movements for change and justice in the Asia-Pacific region and to advocate on their behalf to the Australian and other governments so that they too may enjoy, to use the UN term, the entitlements that the UDHR says equally belong to them.

I suspended my studies at the University of Melbourne in the late 70s so I could concentrate on human rights advocacy for East Timor and later other societies in conflict in the Asia-Pacific region. I've been full time on those issues ever since with the result that I have never returned to my formal studies, something I regret and do not recommend to others, though I hasten to add I did not stop learning at that point. So it is a touch ironic that I have received this doctorate today but also a lovely affirmation of my decision and an admirable indicator of the social justice values and orientation of your university. May I also say that the AM I received this year came from Her Excellency Quentin Bryce, a Queenslander, the first woman to hold the office of Governor General, and a former human rights advocate in Australia and internationally. It also means a lot to me that earlier recipients of this doctorate include Bishop Edward Kelly, who was once my superior, and the poet Bruce Dawe. I also feel an easy affinity with Toowoomba because I come from regional Australia, the Western District in Victoria, a rich and beautiful part of Australia similar to the Darling Downs which I have lived away from for many years but which I am re-discovering as you will see from my website ([www.patwalsh.net](http://www.patwalsh.net)).

I am the lucky one, but anything I have done in the field of human rights has been wonderfully supported and enriched by my wife Annie, who is here today on her way to East Timor, and our three daughters as they grew up, all university graduates and wonderful individuals. I am very proud of each of them.

About this time of the year 13 years ago I found myself in a most surprising, indeed surreal, situation. It was early morning, like me the sun had not long risen, and I was sitting in John Howard's prime-ministerial jet flying North-West across Australia. To Labor supporters and Greens that might sound pretty scary, to Liberals more like a dream come true. And certainly if that scenario had been predicted 10 years previously, I would have asked my informant what he'd been drinking. The fact is it was not a nightmare but a dream come true and flying at 30,000 feet pretty much summed up how excited I felt. I was on a high that morning.

Our destination was East Timor, one and a half hours north-west of Darwin. My fellow-passengers, enjoying the comfort of the lounge suite that substitutes for cramped Jet Star style chairs in a VIP jet, were Tim Fischer, then Deputy Prime Minister, Laurie Brereton, Shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs, two women Senators, an NGO colleague and two minders from the Department of Foreign Affairs. We were Australia's official delegation sent to observe East Timor's ballot on its political future, held 30 August 1999 to choose between independence or remaining part of Indonesia. The previous day we'd been briefed in Canberra by Australian intelligence about the spectrum of challenges ahead - from the dangers of slipping over in a Dili bathroom through to the importance of staying close to our security detail to ensure we were not shot by angry local militia. As it turned out the referendum was a triumph and an unforgettable experience to be part of. It was free, fair and most importantly decisive. Using a 6 inch nail to punch a hole in their ballot paper, each one a nail in the coffin of Indonesia's military occupation, 78% of East Timorese bravely voted for independence, a decision the Indonesian military and their vicious proxy militias made them pay for dearly. Following the ballot our delegation flew back to Australia. Today East Timor is an oil-rich, self-governing democracy which, some formidable challenges aside, has recently successfully and peacefully completed three rounds of national elections and will see the UN and Australian troops leave later this year.

My reason for sharing this experience is not to big note myself but to highlight the contribution of the Australian community, represented by my NGO colleague and myself on the official flight, to that extraordinary moment in August 1999. Australian civil society, working with community organizations in other societies including Indonesia, played an important role in keeping the East Timor issue alive when our and other Governments wanted it dead, buried and cremated (to use a quote from another context). Often divided over strategy and struggling to make itself heard, civil society was the voice of conscience and principle wherever it could find space - the streets, media, NGOs, universities, parliaments, churches, UN forums, newsletters, and eventually in the 90s that wonderful gift to global solidarity, the internet. Many of us in the Australian community had been at loggerheads over East Timor policy with successive Australian Governments for the previous two decades. Canberra maintained, not without some cogency, that anyone who was numerate could see Indonesia's occupation of tiny, isolated, impoverished and out-gunned East Timor was irreversible. We were disgusted by their crude Kissingerian pragmatism and disregard for the internationally recognised human rights of the East Timorese; they thought we were at best naïve idealists and at worst lefty pinkos, racist anti-Indonesians, and professional trouble-makers. I was therefore just as amazed as no doubt were the Parliamentarians that we should be heading together to East Timor to witness the end of 24 years of Indonesian military rule and that the government was recognising the contribution of civil society through our presence.

The East Timor story is, I submit, an inspirational example par excellence of what can be achieved by ordinary people against almost overwhelming odds.

Are there any lessons learned from this experience that I can leave with you?

Of course there are many and I don't want to give the impression that civil society - in Australia or anywhere else - was solely responsible for the positive outcome in East Timor. There were

many factors at work, not least the sacrifices, spirit and genius of the East Timorese, supplemented by the end of the Cold War, the rare courage shown by many Indonesian activists, and what the CAVR truth commission report calls 'moral luck' associated with the East Asian economic crisis and the fall of President Suharto in Jakarta in 1998.

A fundamental lesson, however, is that people must care. If why bother (to draw on a comment made about the tennis player Bernard Tomic in *The Chronicle* yesterday) is the response to big moral issues then civil society is disempowered and the big decisions will be left to the other two sectors, government and business. We know what that would have meant for East Timor and what it could mean for contemporary issues confronting us all.

A second lesson is that space for civil society and the human rights that underpin the *raison d'être* of civil society (the rights to freedom of opinion, expression, association and assembly) must be jealously guarded.

A third lesson is the fundamental importance of coordination and collaboration across the community, in preference to doing it solo or competitively. A fourth lesson is that democratic governments, and corporations, sometimes listen and change their mind. In other words all that hard work sometimes pays off.

My final point relates to academia.

With only a handful of luminous exceptions, academia conspicuously failed East Timor during its darkest hours. Thankfully this is no longer the case and many Australian universities are very engaged with East Timor today. I am particularly keen to see this engagement extended to include the study by law faculties and other relevant disciplines of the East Timor truth commission's monumental report entitled *Chega!*. My final lesson learned, therefore, is that, in addition to your off-campus contributions as citizens, academics and graduates like yourselves can value add substantially to the work and credibility of civil society through your independent research, critical analysis, publishing and teaching. My strong sense is that the University of Southern Queensland is doing this brilliantly in a number of critical areas including through its unique distance education system. I am very proud and thrilled to join your ranks today. May God continue to bless you all. Thank you.