

Khmer Rouge's evil led Peacock to quit
Mark Dodd
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Former foreign minister Andrew Peacock's resignation from the Fraser government in 1981 was triggered by the revelation that Australian sailors Ronald Dean and David Scott had been tortured to death by the Khmer Rouge.

Already angry he had been forced by Malcolm Fraser to recognise the Khmer Rouge regime, Mr Peacock's anger boiled over on a flight to New Delhi when he showed the prime minister a report of an investigation he had commissioned after the fall of Pol Pot in 1979.

En route to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, Mr Peacock said the report from Australian officials he had sent to Cambodia to investigate the deaths of Scott and Dean was the final straw, after years of growing tension over Mr Fraser's interference in his portfolio.

"I was so angry about that. Our primary duty was to our own bloody citizens and when these bastards treated them the way they did and we had the increasing evidence about the behaviour of Pol Pot -- all I wanted to do was withdraw the recognition that had been granted to them as the deepest form of protest," Mr Peacock said in Sydney yesterday.

"As far as I was concerned, international law was rather like beauty -- it was in the eye of the beholder.

"There were various conventions and there was nothing, but nothing, that prevented me from doing it. Of course we eventually did do it but only after a lot of haggling.

"Their treatment was so bestial, so bad."

Hansard records show the report indicated the pair had been "gruesomely tortured" before being executed.

Canberra's recognition of the Khmer Rouge regime, responsible for the deaths of 1.8 million Cambodians, remains a controversial chapter in Australia's foreign policy.

Hawke government minister Lionel Bowen accused Mr Fraser of kowtowing to Beijing, Pol Pot's chief sponsor, in order to ensure harmonious relations between China and Australia. But the two men's murder -- which led to the eventual withdrawal of

recognition of the Khmer Rouge as part of Cambodia's government in exile after the Vietnamese invasion -- may have left a permanent legacy.

Mr Peacock said as a result, Australian governments no longer recognised regimes or governments -- only nation states.

"I was totally ill at ease about the recognition and said so at the time," he said.

"All this led to a much more sensible form of recognition where we now recognise nation states and we don't recognise regimes.

"In those days we recognised regimes. It did not of itself connote any moral approval but the test was 'did they have control over the majority of their jurisdiction', but these days recognition is bestowed on a nation state so it (recognition) doesn't change all the time."