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Australian papers trace post-KR policy **Brooke Lewis** **January 3, 2011**

A newly declassified document has shed light on Australia’s decision to maintain support for the toppled Khmer Rouge regime in the face of the Australian public’s widespread “revulsion” at the atrocities committed under Pol Pot.

The document, dated July 15, 1980, and submitted to the Australian Cabinet by then-Foreign Minister Andrew Peacock, recommended that Australia vote to support the Khmer Rouge at an upcoming meeting of the United Nations General Assembly.

Peacock went on, however, to argue that the government “agree in principle” to withdraw Australian support for Democratic Kampuchea at an unspecified future date, citing the Australian public’s condemnation of the regime.

“I do not believe that the strong expression of Australian public feeling on this issue can, or should be, ignored in policy considerations,” he wrote.

At the time, the Khmer Rouge – overthrown by a Vietnamese invasion in January 1979 – had retreated to jungle redoubts along the Thai border, but still commanded the support of China, the ASEAN bloc and many Western countries.

In September 1979, the UNGA had voted to accept the credentials of Democratic Kampuchea with 71 in favour, 34 against and 35 abstentions.

China, the United States and the United Kingdom were among the other countries that backed the Khmer Rouge’s occupancy of Cambodia’s seat at the UN, which it held until 1991.

Opposing the Khmer Rouge, and in control of the majority of the country, was the

Vietnam-backed People's Republic of Kampuchea, led by Heng Samrin, which enjoyed support from the Soviet bloc.

In the paper, Peacock argued that continued support of the Khmer Rouge was important to maintaining good relations with ASEAN, which had campaigned for a withdrawal of Vietnamese forces from Cambodia and the formation of a government free from outside coercion.

“This campaign consists essentially of maintaining international support for DK's credentials in international forums, thus denying the legitimacy of the Heng Samrin, Vietnam-backed regime in Phnom Penh,” the document reads.

Peacock argued that the ASEAN campaign would ultimately aid the return of a stable government in Phnom Penh.

In line with Peacock's recommendations, the cabinet decided on September 23, 1980, to recognise the Khmer Rouge's credentials at an upcoming meeting of the UNGA, but then withdrew its recognition in February 1981.

During a speech marking the release of the 1980 cabinet papers, Paul Kelly, editor-at-large at The Australian, said the move was made under pressure from Peacock, who had threatened to resign if the government refused to withdraw its recognition.

Kelly said Primary Industry Minister Peter Nixon negotiated a deal with Peacock whereby Australia would vote in favour of Democratic Kampuchea's credentials in the UN but later announce its planned withdrawal of recognition, according to a transcript of the speech published online.

In an interview with The Australian, Peacock said personal experiences during two visits to Cambodia had made the issue important to him.

“I suppose Cambodia had a little place within me,” Peacock said. “I was probably more upset professionally than I should have been.”

Son Soubert, a political observer based in Phnom Penh, said yesterday that Australia and other Western countries had faced the “dilemma” of choosing to back the Khmer Rouge

over the “Vietnamese invasion” as a result of their earlier inaction.

“They had no choice. They had a choice in 1976, but then everyone closed their eyes because it was embarrassing,” he said.

He said, however, that there were still other options available to UN member states.

“They could have made some motion recommending that the UN Secretary General go to Cambodia to inspect what was happening,” he said.