

**THE HON RICHARD MARLES MP
SHADOW MINISTER FOR DEFENCE
MEMBER FOR CORIO**

**E&OE TRANSCRIPT
TV INTERVIEW
ABC 24
AFTERNOON BRIEFING
TUESDAY, 5 MARCH 2019**

SUBJECTS: Liberals appointing Liberals to diplomatic posts; free trade agreements; coal; China; Five Liberal defence ministers in six years

HOST: Richard Marles joins me now. Richard Marles, welcome.

RICHARD MARLES, SHADOW MINISTER FOR DEFENCE: Good afternoon, Patricia. How are you?

HOST: Good. The Prime Minister says Labor is drunk on power, drawing up hit lists of diplomats you want to recall. Do you have a diplomatic hit list to remove Liberals from key posts?

MARLES: No, but I think it's completely reasonable that in circumstances where the Liberal Party has been pretty focused on themselves and pretty focused on their friends that we have a good look at those posts. You've got Joe Hockey, David Bushby, now Sarah Forsythe, David Johnson, the list goes on.

We understand that politicians can play an important role in diplomacy. It's why when we were last in power we appointed Brendan Nelson to be an ambassador for Australia. We appointed Kim Beazley as well. This needs to be done on its merits, and what we've got at the moment is a government that first of all is interested in itself, then interested in its mates, and the Australian people comes a distant third.

HOST: Isn't it about whether the people are doing a good job for Australia? You've just given me a list. You say you don't have a hit list, but you could name quite a few people there. Does that mean they're all on notice? What are you going to be looking for?

MARLES: Well, all I've done is named former Liberal politicians or friends, notable friends thereof. Of course it's about whether they can do the job and what kind of job they're doing, and that's the only point that's been made. We'll have a look at that and that's an appropriate examination to undertake.

I've also just made the point, Patricia, that we appointed a former Liberal leader to be an ambassador for Australia in Brendan Nelson. He did a wonderful job, so we

acknowledge that that can be done, but whereas there was some balance in the way in which we went about this when we were last in government, this is all one way under this mob. They are about themselves, they are about their mates; and the Australian people come a very distant third.

HOST: OK, but the PM says it looks like you're drunk on power. Doesn't it look like a bit of hubris that you assume you're gonna win the election, that you can recall diplomats and essentially really redraw up our entire international map of where we put people?

MARLES: All of this is conditional on us winning an election, which is what we are focused on, but if you want to talk about being drunk on power, how drunk on power do you need to be in order to walk down the path of giving all of these posts to yourself which is effectively what this government has been doing since it's been in place.

If we win we will have a look, as you would expect us to do, at those positions that we've just described, but you know, there is a long way to go. There's no hubris here, but people ask us what would we be in power, and they're the questions that we're answering.

HOST: Labor has been vowing to renegotiate the Indonesia free trade agreement. Now, you've said you're all concerned about this investor-state dispute settlement clause. Why is that?

MARLES: Well, we've had concerns about investor-state dispute settlement clauses and that's well known. That remains a matter that is set out in Labor's platform and we've made it clear that we are opposed to those. It's important that countries have sovereignty when they're entering into free trade agreements and that's been our in-principle objection to those clauses.

Look, the announcement of the signing of a free trade agreement with Indonesia, it's a positive step forward. This was something that was initiated under a former Labor government. It's been under way under successive governments. We obviously want to have a look at the detail of it and make sure that it works in the interests of the Australian economy and the interests of Australian jobs. That's an exercise that would be undertaken in the normal course by the Treaties Committee, and that's the way we would pursue it, but you know as a matter of principle this is a step in the right direction.

HOST: The Free Trade Agreement is making the union movement nervous. The ACTU is expecting you to renegotiate the deal. What will you do about their demands?

MARLES: Well, we've made our position very clear in relation to investor-state dispute settlement clauses. That-

HOST: -I asked you a question about renegotiating the deal.

MARLES: Well, we need to know what the deal is, and right now we need to get the details of that, so it's a bit difficult to go into that question in detail other than to say we've laid down a set of principles about how we will engage in free trade agreements: making sure that they meet a national interest test in terms of our economy, but importantly in terms of Australian jobs, that it contributes to the jobs

that we have in this country, and that would be an exercise undertaken by the Joint Treaties Committee of the parliament and we would expect that to play out. Now, that's all that one can say at the moment given what's being placed on the public record.

HOST: You recently said the collapse of the global market for thermal coal was good at one level. Do you still stand by that?

MARLES: I don't think I expressed myself particularly well in that interview. Obviously the take up of renewables is a good thing, but I'd also want to make it clear that the role of coal within our own economy, in terms of powering our own energy needs but also in the context of exports, is going to be a part of what we do for a long time. Those coal jobs are very important for the people who have them, of course, but they're very important for the Australian economy as well.

HOST: The National People's Congress is under way in China. The GDP growth target is 6 per cent, but defence spending will rise 7.5 percent. What should we read into that?

MARLES: Well, we need to obviously observe this closely in terms of where China is going. I've long said that the growth of China is fundamentally a good thing for Australia and we've been a beneficiary of that, but you know there have been some steps that the Chinese Government have taken, particularly in the South China Sea, for example, which have caused us anxiety, and what is important here is that we watch closely but that we are very clear-eyed in expressing our own national interest. We've got to continue to do that and make sure that we do that in a frank way in relation to the way we deal with China, and that needs to be done with respect.

It's important that we don't walk down a path of putting a black hat on China. The world's nowhere near that simple. China is not the Soviet Union and the rise of China, as I said, has been something of enormous benefit to Australia. It's a complex relationship and we need to afford it that respect.

HOST: China doesn't provide a breakdown of the defence budget. Does that lack of transparency concern you?

MARLES: Well, it is ultimately what it is, Patricia. I mean-

HOST: -Does it concern you?

MARLES: Well, we've ultimately been all observing the Chinese for a long time in terms of how they go about their budgets, also in terms of how they go about defence, so I'm not sure it serves to answer that question. Really, at the end of the day what matters is how we relate to China and it is very important that we do that in a respectful way but we do it in a way with a very clear-eyed perspective to our own national interests and that we have the courage to express that. I've long been on the record urging that and it's important that we continue to do that.

HOST: You're the Opposition defence spokesman. The PM has now appointed Linda Reynolds to take over, if they win the election, of course. She is already a defense portfolio, but she will be the Defence Minister. Do you accept she's a good choice, given she has experience, first-hand, in defence?

MARLES: I certainly recognize Senator Reynolds' experience in defence, but the

point that needs to be made here, Patricia, is that the Government now goes to this election with the proposition of having five defence ministers within six years. Now, that is an absolute joke and you cannot lay claim to any national security credentials so long as you are offering that proposition to the Australian people.

This is the key national security role in the government, and what this government has been doing is playing politics in terms of who gets the job. It has essentially been much more of an adornment to somebody's CV than it has actually been a policy interest of a person in pursuit of what's in the best in the interests of Australia and the Australian people.

There's been politics behind who's done the job and there's been politics in the decisions that people have made when they've done the job.

HOST: -All right, so what does that mean? What's Labor's answer to that? Do you have a guarantee from Bill Shorten that you'll be the Defence Minister for the whole term if Labor is elected and then the next term if Labor is re-elected? Is that the answer, that you want stability in that portfolio?

MARLES: We absolutely need stability in this portfolio, and I think let's have a look at form here. We've had a proposition now from the Government of five defence ministers within six years. You've had the defence portfolio effectively?-

HOST: -So what will you do? My question was what will you do? I don't want to hear what they did. I want to hear what you're going do.

MARLES: Well, the answer here is ultimately about form, Patricia. In the last three years when I've been the defence spokesperson I've been up against three defence industry ministers now and two defence ministers. The role was split for political purposes.

Ultimately it is a matter for Bill Shorten, of course, as the appointment of the cabinet were Scott Morrison to win, be the issue for him, but I hope to be doing this job. I anticipate doing this job. I expect to. That's the most I can possibly say, but to point to the normal privileges of an incoming prime minister in the face of the form that this mob have actually shown in turning this job over so frequently in the last six years does not come up with an appropriate or an equivalent response.

It has been a joke, the way they've treated this portfolio, and as a result they can have absolutely no claim to any national security credentials at all.

HOST: Richard Marles, thanks for joining me.

MARLES: Thanks, Patricia.

-ends-

Authorised by Noah Carroll, ALP, Canberra.