

**THE HON RICHARD MARLES MP
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**E&OE TRANSCRIPT
TELEVISION INTERVIEW
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SUBJECTS: *18C, visit by Premier Li Keqiang, Australia-China relationship.*

KIERAN GILBERT: With me now, the Shadow Defence Minister, Richard Marles. Mr. Marles, thanks for your time.

The Government pursuing this line that their changes to the wording on 18C will toughen the requirements under the law but also make it more, I guess, a better law in the sense that it is saying what it means.

RICHARD MARLES, SHADOW MINISTER FOR DEFENCE: Well, that's their argument but it doesn't add up. At the end of the day there is no question that they are weakening the words in the legislation, which begs the question as to what it is that they think should be allowed to be said now which couldn't be said previously. I mean, that's ultimately the logic of where they've gone here.

You know this says much more about what's going on inside the Liberal Party. Malcolm Turnbull is clearly a hostage to the right of his party. He's not going about this with much confidence, being introduced into the Senate. He's obviously concerned that people are going to cross the floor in the House.

This says everything about how he does not have control of his own party.

GILBERT: But it's not going to get through the Senate anyway, so you could kick up a stink but Nick Xenophon is not going to back it anyway.

MARLES: Which begs the question as to why he's putting it in the Senate, and I think that's because he wants to avoid it going to the House of Representatives. I mean this is hardly a guy who's proud of his work.

Look, the point, ultimately, here, Kieran, is this:, we as a country have one of the highest proportions of our population born outside of our borders. I think we're in the top three countries in the world on that stat. We're more invested in the question of a successful multicultural society than almost any other country on earth, so it's incredibly important that everyone, no matter their background, their ethnicity, their

culture, feel a sense of comfort of being in this country. That's why these laws are so important and why those groups are so unhappy about what's going on now.

GILBERT: The Chinese Premier, Li Keqiang, arrives in Australia later today for an official visit to this nation. Is there room for Australia and Beijing to have closer ties? I mean in a defence relationship as well, potentially, given, particularly how unpredictable the White House is right now.

MARLES: Well put aside America for a moment. We obviously have, as you know, the alliance with the US is our principal defence relationship, our principal alliance, but we have a strong relationship with China and it's a relationship which we do need to encourage and we do want to see grow.

When Labor was formerly in power we had a number of defence exercises with China. There are defence exercises which continue with China to this day. I think it would be a good thing to continue that program and to strengthen it.

We talk a lot about the economic relationship with China. It is obviously critical, and very much in both countries interests, but we should be trying to have a deepening political relationship and that includes the defence side of it.

GILBERT: Does that go to the fact that, not so much, everyone balks at using the term 'mediator' or 'a middleman' in between the two superpowers of China or the United States, but at least a nation that has productive ties with both, that can't hurt, can it, in terms of trying to ensure smooth ties between Washington and Beijing as well?

MARLES: Well, I don't think we should overstate our position in terms of being able to be a mediator between those two countries. They have a very deep relationship themselves.

From Australia's national interest point of view, you know, we need to take each of these relationships on their own terms. There's no question that China is a huge player in the world, in our region, and in Australia's future. It is absolutely in our national interest to be building the very best relationship with China that we possibly can.

We have got our issues with China and you've heard me be critical of China in relation to the South China Sea. Those don't change, and it's important we have the courage to raise those issues when we speak with China.

That aside, we do need to be building the relationship with China. It has been a very positive path that we've had in our bilateral relationship over the last few decades. The economic relationship is obviously key and this is a hugely significant visit.

GILBERT: Now, in terms of Julie Bishop's comments in Singapore recently, she got some flak from Beijing for the remarks basically suggesting that because it's not a democracy it's not in a position to assume the sort of leadership across the region that we've seen it from the United States in recent decades.

MARLES: Well, our values as a country are important, and it's important that we assert those, and democracy is clearly one of our values, as is human rights. You know, we raise those issues with countries around the world, as indeed countries raise them with us.

I think it's important to see where China's come from. I mean, they have come a long way over the last few decades. China is responsible for the single biggest alleviation out of poverty that we have seen in humanity's history.

GILBERT: And bigger than a comparable sized democracy in India.

MARLES: And you know, they need to be given credit for that. That is a Herculean achievement. So, of course we do, and it's important that we espouse our values, and it's important we have the confidence to do that with all countries, including China.

We've also got to remember where China has come from, the journey that they're on, and at the end of the day we have a huge interest in our relationship with China and we need to be fostering it and building it.

GILBERT: Shadow Defence Minister Richard Marles, we appreciate your time as always.

MARLES: Thank you.