

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

**E&OE TRANSCRIPT
RADIO INTERVIEW
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Subjects:

KATE O'TOOLE: Richard Marles joins us this afternoon, g'day.

RICHARD MARLES SHADOW MINISTER FOR DEFENCE: G'day Kate how are you?

O'TOOLE: I'm well thank you, now I'm interested you've been speaking to businesses in the Top End; is the Northern Territory Government doing enough to try to build local defence capacity and those sort of contracts, the business that flows from Defence?

MARLES: Well I think the Northern Territory Government is certainly keen. The question is ultimately whether or not the businesses in Darwin and the Territory are getting a fair crack at the defence industry work that comes from a really significant defence industry or defence presence here, particularly in Darwin and Katherine. I mean this is a big defence town, Darwin. And you know you've got very significant bases here. So there's a lot of Defence property but there's also a lot of equipment; patrol vessels for example that are based here; aircraft that are based here. So to what extent are local businesses being able to get a crack at the work involved in sustaining the property and sustaining the equipment? And I think the answer to that is, you know, there could be improvements there. I think there is opportunity for more to be done here and you know as I was speaking to the Northern Territory Government today one of the things that comes through really loud and clear is: whether or not Defence is actually making a commitment to Darwin and making a commitment to this as a base for a significant part of the Australian Defence Force. The reason for us being, the reason for the ADF being based here is pretty obvious you just need to look at the map. It's a very strategic part of the world. If we're committing to this place then you need to be committed to it and a defence industry as well.

O'TOOLE: So when you say there is more scope there, is that scope for that the

Department of Defence needs to take on and change the way that they open tenders for this sort of thing?

MARLES: Yeah. Look I think there are, I think there's got to be more imagination in the way in which the Department of Defence and the ADF engages particularly with Darwin. But actually this is a regional Australia story and the question here is about the size of the packages of work which are tendered for, I mean Defence is a very big beast. It's probably the largest thing that the Commonwealth Government does -

O'TOOLE: So if you're offering tenders for you know taking care of a particular implement nationally, then a local Darwin business is not going to be able to tender effectively for that.

MARLES: Precisely. And so that's exactly right. If you are doing contracts across the country for any particular service or any particular equipment

O'TOOLE: And is that what happens currently?

MARLES: Well there is a tendency to do that and at one level that's understandable in terms of administrative ease but it does come back to a question if we if we're doing that and in the process we're locking out communities like Darwin from participating, and it's not a complete lockout obviously, but if we're limiting the capacity or reducing the capacity of businesses in Darwin to participate, well then questions need to be asked and certainly questions from this community need to be asked. At I guess the point here is this: that the amount of money which is spent in Defence is so significant that it can leverage other policy outcomes and a commitment to Darwin and to this part of the world as a base for a lot of the ADF is a policy outcome in itself and I think the question has to be asked if this is what we're about as a defence force then are we doing it and it doesn't ultimately take that much wit and imagination to come up with different ways in which you structure contracts so that you do open the door for local businesses to participate.

O'TOOLE: So this is a broad idea. Do you have any specific ideas like for example the new patrol boats that had been built in Perth when they come up will they be serviced locally?

MARLES: Well and the question then is about - so the existing Armadale class patrol boats which are based here - the level to which they are able to be serviced locally. Now there is a degree of local maintenance which is done in relation to them. The future patrol vessels will be a larger boat and you know one imagines they will be based here as well. Will there be opportunities for that work to be done? I think, the question that I found interesting today was if you look at Inpex a very large entity you know one of the biggest projects in Australia in fact in the world at the moment. The comment was made today that Inpex have probably done a better job in relation to opening the door for local contractors and businesses to engage with them, than what we're seeing with Defence. Now that is measured in terms of billions of dollars, the investment in that piece of infrastructure, seems to me that if the Inpex can do it

and can do it in a way which is cost effective for them it oughtn't be beyond the wit of Defence to walk down that path as well.

O'TOOLE: Just looking at our defence relationship with the United States, Donald Trump did talk about a record military spend. But then in other areas reducing the budget and one of those areas is the marine rotation to the Northern Territory. There were plans to increase it to two and a half thousand now sticking to that twelve hundred mark. Does that concern you?

MARLES: It does concern me. When we go back to 2011 and when the original agreement was reached between the then Gillard Government and the Obama Administration it was for two and a half thousand Marines ultimately to be rotated through Darwin. This year we're looking at 1,250 and I might say that two and a half thousand was intended to be in place last year. So it was going to grow but it was going to be in place last year. Well last year 1,250. And that's the intention this year as well. The agreement around the cost sharing of the facilities here between Australia and America took far too long to be completed by the government. I worry that that has been, has not encouraged the faster build-up of the Marines coming here. The question now has to be asked what is the long term prospect here? Does the government actually imagine that we ever will see two and a half thousand Marines coming here during their rotation? If they do imagine and that if that's still on the cards, what is now the new timeframe. But there's a whole lot of unanswered questions there. There are two dimensions to this. From a national strategic point of view I think it's in our nation's interest to have as many or as greater involvement in the US here in Australia as possible - that from a national strategic point of view, from obviously a Darwin point of view the contribution that those people make to the local economy is very significant as well so I can imagine that there'd be real questions being asked locally about where we are going to see that?

O'TOOLE: On ABC Radio Darwin, Kate O'Toole speaking with the Federal Opposition spokesperson for Defence, Richard Marles is in the studio at the moment and of course one of the main topics of discussion over the last 24 hours has been PFOS chemicals, the fire fighting foam chemicals, thanks to a reduction in the tolerable levels of these chemicals that we find in water and find in particular in groundwater in some areas in Katherine because of that seven and a half old drop of the acceptable level there are now some places where the groundwater is at three to five times the allowable limit in Katherine. Is defence moving fast enough in trying to deal with this issue?

MARLES: Well I think this is an issue where the Minister can't hide from this issue and it's not an issue to be hid from. It's an issue which the Minister actually needs to grab hold of and manage. I mean it's an issue which obviously has arisen over a long period of time but it's happening now on her watch and it's a very...it's an issue causing a lot of anxiety out there and I think people would expect to see a greater degree of management of this now.

O'TOOLE: Just as an example people in Katherine say that they were expecting the

testing to start again early this year and it's only starting now and we are in April. For example, Robertson Barracks testing due to begin mid-year, why the delay in this testing?

MARLES: Exactly right. So what we need to be seeing is bore water testing. I think so far all we've seen is testing of groundwater, surface water I mean, but we need bore water testing. I think we also need to see the voluntary blood test arrangements which exist in Newcastle for example around the Williamstown base there available to people in the Northern Territory as well so that you can get a blood sample of yourself tested to find out the levels.

O'TOOLE: So is that not available for people in the Northern Territory yet?

MARLES: My understanding is it's not yet, and I think rolling that out here would be important as would be you know counselling around what is happening here. The community need to have more information about the extent of this contaminant in the system and the extent of their exposure to it. Now the news that we've had in the last 24 hours is good news at one level because what we now have is a national standard which has been established by the Food Standards of Australia and New Zealand. Against which we can base what is a safe and acceptable level of exposure to PFAS and what is not now that we have that standard in place it's really important that we get the work done to work out exactly the prevalence of this chemical in the system. When I got off the aeroplane today the first thing I did with Luke Gosling was have a look at the Rapid Creek area that's obviously in and around the airport and RAAF Base Darwin, getting a sense of the extent to which there is a contaminant in that creek is obviously really important from the point of view of the local community. That testing needs to be done and it needs to be done as soon as possible, and it's why I say this is not an issue that the Minister should be hiding from. It's an issue which needs to be grabbed hold of. People need to know what's going on. There needs to be a sense of where defence is going in terms of the management of this and people need to know, there are a lot of anxious people out there and understandably so.

O'TOOLE: But hasn't Defence been slow for years on talking about this is an issue it's been known to be a potential problem for, years right?

MARLES: Look I think if you look at the management of this over the last few years there is cause for concern. But right now you know we have a standard now in place that is a really significant moment in this story. Up until now we've not been able to benchmark what is an appropriate or not level of this contaminant in the system. Now we have actually a benchmark in place.

O'TOOLE: And we also have people in Katherine who've been drinking bore water which they know because some of it has been tested that it is above those levels. And they may have been drinking that bore water for decades.

MARLES: So if you're somebody there you are going to want to have, you're going to be pretty anxious and you're going to want the bore water around Katherine

properly tested. And I don't think the full testing of that has not yet occurred. I think as you rightly say there are there are some in the community who are being provided bottled water now but we actually need to know exactly where this contaminant is and individuals need to be able to work out what their personal exposure has been to this and that's important as well.

O'TOOLE: Thank you so much for speaking with us today.

MARLES: Thanks Kate.