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SHADOW MINISTER FOR DEFENCE  
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**E&OE TRANSCRIPT  
RADIO INTERVIEW  
ABC RADIO NEWCASTLE  
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***SUBJECT: Contamination at Williamtown***

**HOST:** Well, Richard Marles is the Shadow Minister for Defence. He met with residents a year ago, but more recently about four weeks ago he took a trip back to Williamtown – not to meet with residents, but to talk with people there. He joins me on the line now. Thank you very much for your time this morning, Mr Marles.

**RICHARD MARLES, SHADOW MINISTER FOR DEFENCE:** Hi Garth. How are you?

**HOST:** Good, thank you. You came out with a rather quiet trip to Williamtown. What did you find?

**MARLES:** Well, I suppose the first thing is that the very first trip I did as the Shadow Defence Minister a year ago was to Williamtown, to Newcastle, not to go to the base but to meet with the residents who are affected, who have property in the red zone. What was clear to me at that point was that there was a lot of anxiety, naturally, about what were the health impacts associated with these chemicals being in the environment, but quite apart from that the day that the New South Wales EPA declared the red zone to exist was the day that the property prices, for example, of all these people, was dramatically affected.

You've got a community there which is clearly hurting, and who have been affected by what's occurred, and naturally they want answers and they want an outcome and they want a solution, and that's what we've been pressing the Government to do. The visit that I did to the base a few weeks ago made it clear to me, firstly, there are particular circumstances in and around this airport and where the airport's placed in terms of being a natural floodplain and the like. I think the Defence Force itself, those on the base, are clearly alive to this and are doing their best to work with the community, but really this issue lies with government.

You mentioned that James McGrath is responsible for this taskforce. He's talked about the fact that the Government has a solution, or will have a solution, for the residents in Newcastle, and for that matter around the country. We need to see what

that is. We actually need the Government talking to the community and explaining what it is they are now going to do.

**HOST:** In Opposition, though, do you feel that you go out there, you hear the plight, it's a pretty simple issue. We know exactly how much people are suffering and why. Has there been enough done from Opposition to push for answers from the Defence Department and from the Defence Minister?

**MARLES:** Well, we set up the Senate inquiry from Opposition which has given voice to this issue. We are constantly urging the Government to act. We are making ourselves available to make sure we can speak to people in the community about what is occurring, and I should say it's not just in Newcastle. This is occurring around the base in Oakey in Queensland. I was in Katherine recently, there's issues around the Tindal airbase there. In East Sale in Victoria there's now questions there around whether or not you can engage in duck hunting in and around the vicinity of the base.

What we've been calling for and what we need to see is a national approach in relation to this, and we actually have to see some leadership from government about how they are going to deal with this question-

**HOST:** -So if you were the Defence Minister, see, one of the issues the glacial pace at which this is travelling. That's the frustration. If you were the Minister for Defence and in power, what would you have done differently, do you think?

**MARLES:** The glacial pace is exactly the right phrase to use. There needs to be action on this. We need to have a national approach. The science needs to be done so that people can have a sense of exactly what is the impact here, and there needs to be a solution for those affected.

I should say Meryl Swanson, who is the local member, doing a fantastic job. She was elected at the last election. The thing that Meryl has been making clear to me is exactly how much people are hurting. She was very keen that I come and visit the community immediately, which is what I did, and the constant feedback from her is this sense of frustration-

**HOST:** -We all get that. We just want some action, and that is the frustration. Question for you: does this need a bipartisan support, or do we need to get political, or do you need to get more political?

**MARLES:** There are times for bipartisanship, to be sure, but I'd have to say this is one where we actually need to see some action from government. I don't think it serves the community well for an Opposition not to be holding the Government to account, and that's why we've been doing everything we can.

To be frank, this is a moment where it's important that people get loud, and that's certainly what Meryl has been doing as the local member and what we've been seeking to do as an Opposition in terms of applying pressure on the Government to act.

**HOST:** The residents have been a little bit reluctant to be campaigning and protesting and standing outside Marise Payne's office. Do you think they need to get a bit louder?

**MARLES:** To be fair to the residents I actually think their voice has been heard. The very moment I met with the residents, as I say, within the very first few weeks of being in the job that I'm now in, it was very clear to me what their view was. The Government can be under no illusion as to the pain this is being experienced by residents within Newcastle and in and around-

**HOST:** -Yeah, and a contaminated water supply, there's nothing much more obvious and painful for people's lives than that, let's face it.

**MARLES:** But also, that for sure, but also the impact on property prices, and this is the issue that was really clear to me. People who are living there, raising kids there, people who are running businesses there, there were fishers who were out of business for a couple of seasons. Thankfully I think they're now back at work, but people losing money – this was being felt deeply, and Meryl has made that point loud and clear. She has been incredibly active in the parliament around this issue, and as an Opposition we've sought to do the same.

What we now need to see here is actually some action from the Government, and it's not good enough to set up a taskforce but not let people know what it's doing. It's not good enough to be talking about the fact that we'll have solution here, but then going silent for months upon months about what that solution actually is. Ultimately, there does need to be a national approach to this, and that requires leadership from the Federal Government and that's leadership that we've not seen.

**HOST:** Richard Marles, we appreciate your time this morning. Thanks for talking to us.

**MARLES:** Pleasure, Garth.

**ENDS**