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SUBJECTS: Australia's relationship with the Pacific

RICHARD MARLES, SHADOW MINISTER FOR DEFENCE: The more that are contributing to the Pacific the better. I mean, I think there has been a strong history of cooperation between Australia and New Zealand within the Pacific, and certainly when I was Parliamentary Secretary of Pacific Island Affairs during the Gillard Government worked very closely with Murray Mccully who was then Foreign Minister in the Key Government. Australia and New Zealand work hand in glove in our efforts in the Pacific. I think encouraging France to be more involved beyond their territories is important. The United States obviously has a role to play in the Pacific and I think we should be encouraging others.

One of the issues that we were trying to pursue then and continue to do so now is to engage China in a trilateral way in terms of the provision of development assistance, and I remember, really, New Zealand as the first cab off the rank there doing a project with China in the Cook Islands, and it was a really good example of how we can work creatively to get other countries assisting in the region.

HOST: Yes. Now you seem to be saying that there is almost an anxiety about pushing too much, as a, maybe, a former colonial power or as a sort of parental, paternal kind of influence in the region, but you think it's you know Australia shouldn't hesitate so much, you should do more.

MARLES: That's right. I think sometimes out of a well-motivated sense of not wanting to be an overbearing colonial power we might go about things with a light touch, but actually I think there is a huge desire within the Pacific to see Australia lead and to play its part. I actually think when you look at New Zealand there's a huge amount of thought which goes on in New Zealand around its role in the Pacific. It's very central to the identity of New Zealand and it's very well received by the countries of the Pacific. In some respects I think we can take a leaf out of your book and do the same.

It's not in the sense that we don't commit resources to the Pacific, because we do. We're the largest provider of aid into the Pacific. We have the largest diplomatic footprint in the Pacific. We have huge defence cooperation programs with those

countries that have a military within the Pacific. But I do think there is an enormous amount of room for us to engage more in strategic thought about how we see the Pacific, and to encourage discussion amongst Pacific island countries about how they see the future as well. There is a thoughtful role for Australia to play which I think it's important that we step up and make sure that we do play.

HOST: Hasn't Australia lost some of that strategic leverage, if you like, through I guess the fallout from the offshore refugee processing arrangements?

MARLES: Look, I think that it can be overstated. I mean in terms of Nauru all that's occurred there has been done in cooperation with the Nauruan government. I mean, if you're looking at it simply through the prism of Nauru there's actually a big impact on the economy in Nauru. PNG, it certainly is an issue which needs to be managed properly in the relationship with PNG. I'd be critical of our current government at the moment and the way in which it's handled its relationship with PNG in respect of Manus, but I don't think at the end of the day it has a determining impact on the role Australia can play within the Pacific, and indeed the kind of role that countries within the Pacific would like to see Australia play. I think it's really important that we step up and take that role that is expected of us.

One of the points I made today is that this is the one part of the world where we are expected to lead, and it's important that we demonstrate that leadership, important that we are willing to step up and play that part.

HOST: Yeah, with PNG, though, obviously governance is such an issue which seems to be an obstacle to development on quite a number of key areas, and it appears as if Australia's lost the ability to leverage better governance outcomes in PNG, and Australia is still the main partner, the most important relationship and that seems to me quite dysfunctional at the moment because of the Manus situation.

MARLES: Well, again, I don't think it's about Manus. I think there are a whole lot of challenges in respect of governance in PNG, but I think it's important to look at the glass half full as well. I mean, PNG has been a democratic country since the time of its independence. You know, that is a feather in its cap, but I think there is more that we can do in terms of working cooperatively with PNG going forward.

One of the issues that I argued today is about building our defence cooperation relationship with the PNG defence force. Now, it is very strong right now in the sense that many in the officer core of the PNG Defence Force have had their training in Australia, but I actually think there's a whole lot of ways in which we could further build upon that and have an even more enhanced defence cooperation relationship or defence relationship with PNG, providing opportunities for Papua New Guineans potentially within the Australian Defence Force and helping build capability for the PNG Defence Force itself. That, I think, is a really good example of how we can go about our business in a cooperative way which does help build governance structures within Papua New Guinea and I think it's very important that we continue to do that.

HOST: PNG's Defence Forces in desperate need of a strong partnership to bolster it, and I suppose the other options for PNG would be Indonesia. and they do have some links obviously.

MARLES: And again a point I made today, I think the Pacific have choices and we can't take for granted that we will be the partner of choice forever, that the country that cares the most will be the country that has the biggest influence within the Pacific, and it really does mean that the Pacific needs to be elevated to being a really mainstream part of Australia's world view.

Again, I come back to what I said earlier, I think you can see that in New Zealand. I mean it's really evident when you speak to Kiwis about how they see the world that their identity as being part of the Pacific and the importance of the Pacific in their world view is manifest. We really can learn from that and we need to learn from that and it's important that we see it in the same way and that our relationship with the Pacific, what we do in the Pacific, is as important as our relationship with the United States, it's as important as our relationship with China, and that in the process we demonstrate that we care. I think that's the pathway to making sure that we remain the partner of choice for the Pacific going forward - but it's not by right, we actually have to earn it.

HOST: As one of those ways to demonstrate it sort of, as Jonathan Pryke, I think, in the Lowy Institute and one of their papers put it as opening up the greater access to Australia's Labour market for Pacific Islanders, that would be a way to help more.

MARLES: I think that that is an important area of thought that we need to engage in, bearing in mind that of course the seasonal workers program, which again is policy that we learned from you, has had an important benefit for people in the Pacific, as it has I might say for people in the agricultural sector within Australia. One of the lessons I learned when I visited New Zealand I went to Hawke's Bay to see how your scheme works, is that this is very much a mutual endeavour that apple growers there get a huge benefit out of people from the Pacific working on their in their orchards and engaging in their harvest, which has totally transformed the way they work, but the benefit for those coming from Tonga and other parts of the Pacific is huge. So, I think this is an area that needs to be looked at. We've taken the first steps in that area. It obviously needs to be thought through and worked out in detail, but that is a critical part, I think, of how we can build the relationship.

HOST: You mentioned just before that the Pacific Islands countries have options for partners. How well does Australia view itself as being different from China, in terms of the aid they've given so far compared to China's in the region?

MARLES: Well it is right that our aid still is far and away the most significant in terms of size that is in the Pacific right now, but I think we ultimately need to differentiate ourselves by making sure that we of the region, that we see the region's future development as completely connected to our own security and our own national interests - which it absolutely is - so this is not in a sense external help provided. There is this is a country who is next door who is part of the region wanting to play its part, and I think the appetite within the Pacific for that, for Australia to play a part in that way, is really significant.

There is absolutely an opportunity for us to do that, but it's not something we can take for granted. The holding pattern of policy where you know we have significant resources, we're not thinking about the future in strategic terms, I don't think he's going to be good enough to see us through this century and so it's really important that we are thinking about this in a far deeper way in terms of making sure that the relationship continues to evolve and that we continue to play our part in the region.

HOST: Yeah. I mean I hear you saying, that Australia could think of itself more, it could operate more as such that it's part of the region because geographically it is part of the Pacific, but does the public feel that way as such?

MARLES: I think that's a really good question. At times, and certainly at times in our past, that's been the case.

We've got deep history in the region. For example, the largest Australian war cemetery in the world is the Bomana War Cemetery, which is just outside of Port Moresby. Almost 4000 Australian Defence Force personnel were buried there. In many respects it's sacred ground, and the Kokoda track is continuing to be a place where there's almost a pilgrimage being made by a new generation of Australians wanting to connect to our history. I think they're really good examples of where the Pacific is, at an emotional sense attached to our core.

But we can do more, and I think the media has a role to play here, I think those of us who are passionate about this have a role to play in terms of making this case. When you go to Auckland, when you go to New Zealand, and you see the way in which New Zealand feel deeply rooted within the Pacific, we do actually have a way to go, and it's important that we do that because this is the part of the world which we in which we belong and which we are a part of. This is the part of the world where both those within it expect to see us leaving and those without it expect to see us leading, and we need to live up to those expectations, and that is in part about resources, which we provide, but it's in part about thought strategic energy and that's what we need to now provide.

HOST: Yeah, and how much political will do you think there is in Canberra to do what you're suggesting, to make the Pacific a core concern at the heart of Australian foreign policy and so forth, because I note that Turnbull did call for a quote 'step change' in Australia's engagement with the Pacific not long ago. I don't know if anything's been done on that.

MARLES: I think now is the time when this can happen, and it's variable, is really the honest answer. There are there are some who see the importance of it, others may not. But I think it's really important now that those of us who see how significant the Pacific is give expression to that and I do feel that we can generate a political will where there is a change in the way in which we go about our national security policy, our foreign policy, so that the Pacific does take a more centre stage place in our world view and I think it's critical that we do that.

HOST: Yeah. Do you think Australia can do something or can do more to address the kind of festering unresolved situation in West Papua while still maintaining its interests in terms of Indonesia?

MARLES: Ultimately, you know PNG itself is seeking to grow its relationship with Indonesia. We are invested in both those countries. I think PNG having a bigger focus in terms of its world view on the ASEAN countries is a really positive step and we should support that. We are supporters of Indonesia in the context of its current configuration and have always been that and I think we need to be sensible about this going forward. I know it's clearly important that human rights are respected and continue to be improved in West Papua, but I think it's also important that we continue to acknowledge Indonesia in the context of its current sovereign borders.

HOST: I should ask, what do you think should happen with the refugees on Manus Island? Do you have to wait for the US deal, which could take a long time, or should there be other options?

MARLES: Well this government, our government, has been very slow in finding options for those on Manus. Had we remained in power in 2013 that's what we would have been doing. To leave people in circumstances of limbo and uncertainty is what really caused the damage here and it wouldn't have been beyond the wit of this government if it had placed some energy in relation to the question of resettlement to find other options. What it's done with the United States is important and good and it's good that that is going to be honoured and it does take some time for that to play out, but it's not enough on its own. They do need to be other options pursued by the Government.

An important element of all this is having an increasing humanitarian intake, which actually the Government has but Labor has committed to a much more significant increase in our humanitarian intake if we were elected. I think with that in tow it does create opportunities where different options can pursue other countries around the world and that's what needs to be done, but certainly the future of those on Manus need to be resolved. Circumstances where they continue to be in a position of limbo and uncertainty is not acceptable.

HOST: It's cost a hell of a lot of money to the Australian taxpayer. Huge amount. I mean surely they could have just been processed on the mainland in a humane and efficient way?

MARLES: Look, the difficulty about people coming to Australia is simply this: we had a flow of people coming from Java to Christmas Island which at the time was the most dangerous journey in pursuit of refuge anywhere in the world, where people were dying at a rate of three a day. That had something to do with Australia and needed to be stopped. There is no way from any humanitarian or compassionate point of view you could argue that anything other than bringing that to an end had to occur.

Offshore processing was a critical part of that, as indeed has been the policy of turn backs, which the Government has proceeded with. That doesn't then mean that Australia doesn't have an obligation to those people who are in the facilities at both

Manus and Nauru. It was incumbent upon the Australian Government to find a resolution for them.

Our criticism is not the existence of offshore processing. It was an absolutely foundational part of bringing to an end a journey which was killing people at a frightening rate. But what we now need to see is a government which is active in finding resolution for these people.

It took them far too long to negotiate the arrangement with the United States. All their eggs have only been in that basket, and they need to have other options out there and if they were pursuing those then I actually think this could have been resolved some time ago.

Certainly if we were in power that's what we would be seeking to do, but it's important that in resolving the issue for those on Manus and Nauru you don't create other issues for people by restarting a trade which will inevitably involve people dying from it. It is really important that we see the whole the whole story here.

HOST: So that would exclude the New Zealand offer, for instance?

MARLES: Oh, well, the New Zealand offer's on the table and that's an important offer as well, and that was an important element that was negotiated by the then Gillard government of which we were a part, and we've made it clear that we think that's an offer that should be pursued by the Australian Government now as well, but I think other offers also need to be pursued or other options need to be pursued, and I don't think it is beyond the wit of this government to do that with the appropriate energy and also in the context of a growing humanitarian intake, which in fact they have, albeit that if Labor in power we would have a much bigger program. With a growing program you could and can do this. It just it needs to be done, though.

What is not an option is just to allow people to sit in a state of limbo and uncertainty on Manus and Nauru and that's what ultimately needs to be resolved and it's in dealing with that the Government have been seemingly hopeless.