



**THE HON RICHARD MARLES MP
SHADOW MINISTER FOR DEFENCE
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**E&OE TRANSCRIPT
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SUBJECTS: Bennelong; citizenship; China

HOST: I'm joined now by the Shadow Defence Minister, Richard Marles, who's been listening in. Welcome to the program.

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

HOST: Good. So, obviously very different spin on the Bennelong result from both sides of politics. I'm not really surprised by that. But what I really want to quiz you on is that in the last part of the campaign Labor really ramped up this argument in the last days that the Government was anti-Chinese. Was that the wrong thing to say in hindsight?

MARLES: Well I think the issue that we were raising was that the Government completely overreached in the way in which it was dealing with Sam Dastyari. You know, when we were hearing comments such as being a double agent, such as treason, there was a question that was asked in the last week of Parliament which essentially accused China of being an enemy, I mean all of that is overreach and it was done for political purposes in the context of Bennelong.

The point really, here, is that we're talking about - when we're dealing with China, the US, East Asia, our sphere of influence, all that's going on there - very difficult and sensitive topics and we need to be adults about it and actually it does need to be above politics and we need to be thoughtful and it got completely caught up in the politics of the moment and I think that was very concerning.

HOST: Well you got caught up a bit in the politics of the moment, too. In fact, Craig Laundry has accused Labor of playing the race card in the Bennelong byelection out of desperation and treating Australian Chinese voters as dopes. Did you treat them as dopes?

MARLES: Absolutely not, and I completely reject what Craig has said. I really like Craig but I don't think that is an appropriate thing to say in respect of what's gone on

here. I mean, anyone who looked at the way in which the Sam Dastyari issue was being prosecuted by the Government knew that it was highly driven by politics in the lead up to the Bennelong by elections. There's no question about that. It wasn't it wasn't Labor using labels such as double agent and treason. That was the Government that was doing that. It was complete overreach and it's reasonable that we point that out.

You know it's an area of policy that obviously, in part, I'm responsible for and think a lot about. I think it's really concerning that the government of the day is treating an issue like that in an essentially political way.

This is hard stuff to work out: where Australia should go and how we should be dealing with the geostrategic situation which is unfolding before us which is presenting really challenging issues that we haven't seen before, and we need to be able to deal with this in a way which is above politics. That's what I've tried to do in the way in which I've gone about my role. We need to see that from everyone in politics, and I think the Government totally overreached when it came to the way in which they dealt with the Sam Dastyari issue.

HOST: Did the Sam Dastyari issue hurt you in Bennelong?

MARLES: Look, the honest answer to that question is it's impossible to say. You don't want to have issues like that playing out in the final week of an election campaign - that's to state the obvious - but I think it's also important to say that I reckon when people go into vote hardly anyone votes on the political soap opera, if I can put it that way.

People are by and large interested in issues of policy which affect them: government service delivery; the situation with schools; how the health care system is working. I think they're the issues that people are thinking about when they go in to cast their vote. They're not thinking about Sam Dastyari or what's played out in the political soap opera in the last few days. So, as much heat and light as there was around it I'd be surprised if it had a big impact on the vote, but you know ultimately it's hard to answer that question and no-one can tell for sure.

HOST: Kristina Keneally obviously didn't win. Should she take Sam Dastyari's vacant Senate spot?

MARLES: Well, that's a matter for the NSW branch of the Labor Party-

HOST: -Sure, but would you like to see her in the Senate?

MARLES: Well the last thing I'm going to do is weigh in on a decision of the NSW branch of the Labor Party. That is completely a decision for them to make.

Kristina did a fantastic job in this election. It was great that she was willing to do it. It was a hard ask from the outset. She's an obvious political talent and what we saw in terms of the way she went about things in the last few weeks is that she retains all the political skills that she had when she was in the New South Wales State Parliament, but ultimately the future of that position, and indeed Kristina's political future, is a matter for those in NSW to determine and I'm going to leave it to them.

HOST: It looks now that some Labor MPs are set to go to the High Court because Christopher Pyne has indicated that the referrals will happen now that the Government has a majority back on the floor next year in February when the Parliament sits again, and of course Josh Frydenberg just backed that up here on this program, so clearly you're going to have all the citizenship issues next year, aren't you? I mean, the pressure is going to be on Labor.

MARLES: Well I think political referrals would be a sorry development in what has been a difficult issue, and to be fair not of the Government's making initially, but which the Government has handled appallingly from the moment that it roes its head. If they go down the path of on a partisan basis referring people to the High Court that will only add another sorry chapter to what has been a difficult issue. So I hope they don't do that, but if they ultimately move down that path, that, I think, would be a very sad turn of events.

What we actually need is, again, a consensus across the parties as to how to deal with this situation as it's been presented to the parliament and how we understand validity in terms of standing for parliament. Now there was a process that was negotiated between the Leader of the Opposition and the Prime Minister. That should have been gone through with full transparency and full declaration. That was not the case on the Government side.

We were proposing in the last week of Parliament to have a joint referral based on anyone who had an issue. The Government chose not to go down that path.

That's where things are at and I think it would be much better if we were proceeding on a basis of agreement and consensus because ultimately this is an issue which needs to be sorted out across the entire parliament.

HOST: I just want to return you to China and your hat as Shadow Defence Minister. Does Labor now have a different policy to the Government on our relationship with China and the kind of political interference that the Government clearly has raised concerns around in this legislation. Is there a different policy setting that Labor wants to propose here?

MARLES: I don't think so. I think our instinct here, Patricia, is as it should be, is to approach these things in a bipartisan way. That's not a blank cheque. That doesn't mean that there are aren't questions-

HOST: -But right now things sound different, don't they? It sounds like you're saying different things around China now. I mean, the Government is taking a very hard line on Chinese interference and it sounds to me that you're concerned that that's too hardline.

MARLES: I wouldn't read that into it. I mean, first of all it was Labor who's been leading the debate around the question of not having foreign donations and putting in place the foreign agents register. It's Labor who's been leading that.

I mean we've taken a very strong line on it on a range of issues in respect of China, for example in respect of the South China Sea. So, none of that changes, but the point that I'm making in relation to the way in which the Government handled the Sam Dastyari issue is that these issues of the geostrategic situation that Australia

faces and the foreign and security policy that we adopt to meet it need to be above politics, and far too often we see the Government rush to a political position in relation to these things, or perhaps exploit the political moment, in a way which puts on the back burner what is in the national interest in relation to these geostrategic issues.

I mean ultimately I think the Government needs to grow up, and I think we do need to treat this with a much greater degree of seriousness because these are really serious issues. Now, when we're doing that I actually think we do it in a bipartisan way. I think we are largely on the same page, and as I say there will be questions asked and scrutiny applied to any proposition put in the parliament as people would expect us to do, but our instinct is to get to a bipartisan position and by and large that's what has occurred, so I don't think there is a significant difference between the Government and the Opposition in respect of this.

What we want to have is a position which sees our national interest in terms of the way in which we react to the geostrategic situation we face, and in terms of our own democracy we want to make sure that it's free from interference from anyone beyond our shores and that it really represents a true Australian democracy. I think both parties are for that. We need to actually get to a place of proper regulation of it and we're keen to see that.

HOST: Richard Marles have a great Christmas. I'll speak to you in the New Year.

MARLES: I look forward to it, Patricia. You, too.