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SUBJECTS: Telecommunications infrastructure security; China in the Pacific; social credit; reset in the Australia-China relationship; quotas

HOST: Richard Marles, thanks for your time. Now, we had this Huawei decision of course taken, well in the last few moments, you might say, of the Turnbull Government. Have you had a briefing yet? Are you across this and supportive of it?

RICHARD MARLES, SHADOW MINISTER FOR DEFENCE: We have had a briefing and yes we are supportive of it. These are difficult decisions but they're ones that as a nation we have a right to take in our own national security interests, and in terms of really any country we need to be making sure that our telecommunications backbone is as secure as it can possibly be from any form of foreign interference.

HOST: Does it give concern in terms of what's already out there in the network? A lot of experts say that a lot of Chinese hardware is already intrinsically involved throughout Australia. Do we need a review of exactly how safe our networks are?

MARLES: I think a lot of work has been put into this and I suppose the first point to make is that with 5G we'll see much more interaction between peoples and systems and items which gives greater access to those who would seek to penetrate the system, but I think a lot of work has been put in by our agencies to make sure that our telecommunications backbone is as secure as it can be and I'm confident that it is that.

HOST: On China as well, they've obviously showered a lot of smaller nations with aid, in some cases loans as well, including Vanuatu, Tonga, the Solomon Islands as well. Is there a concern do you think about a debt trap here? Is this going to be one of the big issues in our region in the coming years?

MARLES: We've advocated for a long time about the way in which development assistance should be performed so that countries don't fall into a debt trap. I would make the observation that China is going to do what it's going to do and it's not a surprise to me. Equally countries in the Pacific are going to take help from whoever provides it, and while I understand the terms on which that help's provided at the end of the day it is help and it's understood as such by the countries of the Pacific. They are going to engage in that form of development assistance and we don't have a right to ask the countries of the Pacific to have an exclusive relationship with us.

I actually do think that the issue here is not so much about China's actions or indeed the Pacific's actions in respect of China. It's about our actions in respect of the Pacific. We need to transform our relationship with the Pacific. We need to vastly lift its importance in terms of our world view, and I have a deep belief that we are the natural partner of choice for the countries of the Pacific and that's the way those countries see it, but we don't get that by right. We actually have to earn that and we have to earn that by demonstrating to the countries of the Pacific that we actually care about them and their futures.

HOST: I suppose, briefly, as well, earn that because we're never going to compete with China's deep pockets?

MARLES: I don't think that that's how this should play out. I think we have a deep relationship with these countries, but we actually need to demonstrate to them that we care, that it's not just a matter of being present, it's a matter of being present with intent and that we have a desire to see this population, the 10 million people of the Pacific, prosper.

I mean right now, as business as usual, we'll see that cohort of 10 million people within the next 10 years be the least-developed people in the world. Now, I actually think that has something to do with Australia and I think we need to be working with those countries to secure their prosperity going forward, to work on their development and to demonstrate to them that their future actually matters to us in terms of our strategic and foreign policy. That's how we that's how we become the natural partner of choice and that's how we improve our strategic situation within the Pacific.

HOST: A lot of talk about China's social credit system being rolled out increasingly across the country. This is something in which citizens have this social credit score. It can either help them get things such as bank loans, you know, cheaper home loans or better job, a better seat on a plane, or hinder them as well, and it could obviously come down to whatever the Chinese government decide someone's social score could be. They might criticise the government, for example, about the smog and hey presto they're disadvantaged. What does this say about China and how it might act as a superpower?

MARLES: Well I think we need to see how this system plays out and how it evolves. I'd make the observation that I can't imagine a system of this kind

operating in Australia. I think it does highlight the very different political systems in which we live.

HOST: Does it highlight as well this thinking that capitalism would, sort of, infect if you like, the Communist Party, that it's not really done that at all, that they want this ultimate control?

MARLES: Well again I think it's a bit too early to say that. I think we need to see how this system actually evolves as it is rolled out in China and as they pursue this. But I just come back to the point I can't imagine this ever occurring in Australia and I don't think it does highlight the very different systems in which we live.

HOST: We've had the first meeting between Marise Payne, the new Foreign Minister, and Wang Yi her Chinese counterpart. Now, interesting to note from reports here that she has taken a more conciliatory tone with China. They're welcoming a fresh start with the Morrison Government. Is this good news?

MARLES: Well it is good news to get a reset because I think it's fair to say that there were actions under the Turnbull Government which bordered on the gratuitous, which did have an impact on our relationship with China. I'm referring to the kind of comments that were made during the Bennelong by-election.

Our relationship with China is a very complex one. It's a challenging one. It's one which has a lot of benefits for both China and Australia and so it's one that we have a huge stake in getting right, but because of precisely because of its complexity it's really important that there's no room for gratuitous behavior.

We have to engage with China with total dignity, and I don't think we saw that during the Bennelong by election. Certainly, if I was a Chinese official I would have been quite unhappy with the way in which the Government was speaking about them at that point in time. I mean, really, a very parochial, domestic, political interest was being put ahead and put at the expense of Australia's national interest, so there is a reset which is required here and hopefully the Foreign Minister will achieve that.

HOST: At the same time when we hear about the Chinese being upset about the 5G decision, which you've had a briefing on now, we can't exactly be backing down in any way on that.

MARLES: Of course not, and that's why this is a complex relationship and it's a relationship, actually, where we do need to have the ability to walk and chew gum at the same time. It's a relationship where we would seek to build our political relationship and our economic relationship, of course, but at the same time there are national security anxieties which we need to be very clear-eyed about and have a complete right to assert our national interests and to communicate that to China. But the key, then, in terms of doing all of that is that we need to be acting with dignity and respect in the way in which we

communicate and deal with China. There's no way we're going to be able to do both of those things if at the same time there are moments where the Government lapsed into gratuitous-type behavior as it did during the Bennelong by election.

So, you know, this has to be done with the utmost care. There is an enormous amount at stake and it has to be done with respect and dignity but with a clear-eyed view to Australia's national interests beyond just under

HOST: Just onto some domestic issues, some Labor MPs, behind the scenes, have been reminding Bill Shorten of a pledge he made way back in that leadership contest against Anthony Albanese to consider quotas, not just for women, which the Labor Party already has, but for example for LGBTI as well, people within the Labor Party. What do you think of that idea?

MARLES: Well, look that's not something which is on our agenda. I think for the LGBTI community what they really wanted to see was marriage equality and we led the way in respect of that and we saw a historic moment in terms of our nation's history with marriage equality becoming the law of the land. The Labor Party can stand proud in respect of that.

In terms of our diversity within the parliament, we are a highly diverse political party with a number of gay and lesbian members of parliament, as well as Indigenous members of parliament, men and women, members of parliament from different ethnic backgrounds and different life experiences.

This stands in stark contrast to the Coalition, who are struggling to get, I think, a quarter of their number being women. I mean, it is astounding, the inability of the Government to walk down a path of diversity which sees theirs as a party which looks like the Australian public.

That's what we're doing and we'll continue to do that.

HOST: Richard Marles, thanks for your time this morning.

MARLES: Thanks.

Authorised by Noah Carroll, ALP, Canberra.