

**THE HON RICHARD MARLES MP  
SHADOW MINISTER FOR DEFENCE**

**MEMBER FOR CORIO  
E&OE TRANSCRIPT  
ABC RADIO – AM  
FRIDAY, 9 NOVEMBER 2018**

***SUBJECTS: Pacific Aid and Defence Cooperation; Belt and Road Initiative***

**SABRA LANE:** Richard Marles, thanks for joining AM. You warned in May that the Government's policy of the Pacific was effectively leaving Chinese influence unchecked. What is your assessment of this new policy?

**RICHARD MARLES:** Well, I'm glad that the Government is making the Pacific a focus. It is definitely a step in the right direction. They followed us on the infrastructure bank and that's good.

**LANE:** In September Labor announced it would have a substantial policy regarding the Pacific on an investment bank. The Government has now revealed it has a \$2 billion infrastructure fund for the region. Is that \$2 billion appropriate? Will you approve that?

**MARLES:** As I say, it is good that they have followed us in this direction. I make the point that, when Bill Shorten announced this a few weeks ago, it was an important part, but only a part in a much wider strategy in respect of the Pacific and one which would see Australia changing its relationship with the Pacific in a transformational way. We need to see that from the Government as well. And I think one of the others points here is that central to Australia's relationship to the Pacific has to be climate change. This is an issue felt in a very existential way in countries like Kiribati, Tuvalu, Marshall Islands: coral atoll nations which are only one or two meters above sea level. And of course, the Government are hopeless when it comes to climate change. They don't have anything like a credible domestic policy, let alone a willingness to stand up and help support the Pacific in telling their story in respect of climate change. So this is a huge flaw in terms of where the Government is at.

**LANE:** All right. Just getting back to the money, though, both financial commitments: are they too late, given that many analysts are saying that many Pacific nations are indebted already and they can't afford to take on anymore?

**MARLES:** I think it is important that there be a facility whereby Australia can help in offering to the Pacific countries a choice when it comes to critical pieces of infrastructure. We're well placed to do this. But I do want to emphasise: it's far from the whole story and there needs to be a much bigger strategy in respect of building our relationship with the Pacific. And it is not going to be done on infrastructure alone and we're very clear in understanding that.

**LANE:** A big part of the announcement was that the boosting of defence and security ties, with a large emphasis on training. In your view, is that adequate?

**MARLES:** We certainly agree that there needs to be a much bigger relationship in respect of our militaries with those countries in the Pacific that have a military. So we are talking about Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Tonga. Training is definitely a key part of it and a lot of training is done already and there wouldn't be a member of the officer corps in Papua New Guinea, for example, who wouldn't have done some training in Australia. But again, there is room to do more here. And to be fair, this Government, along with previous Australian governments, have been participating in the Pacific patrol boat program which essentially provides the navies for Papua New Guinea, Fiji and Tonga. So already we are doing more. But I actually think there is a lot more that can be done in terms of military cooperation, but this is a step in the right direction: no question.

**LANE:** How comfortable are you with the Victorian Labor's decision to sign a MoU with China on its Belt and Road initiative and keep it secret?

**MARLES:** Well, I understand the Government is trying to make some opportunistic hay here in the lead-up to the Victorian election. We should remember –

**LANE:** Hang on for a tic. Federal Labor too is uncomfortable about the Belt and Road initiative and your state colleagues have gone and done this, so?

**MARLES:** Yeah, let me just make this point, though, Sabra. The Federal Government are making hay here, claiming in respect of the Victorian Government that it needs to make this agreement public, whilst it also has signed MoUs around infrastructure in third countries which potentially involves BRI projects; although we don't know that and we don't know it because the Federal Government itself hasn't made these agreements public. I think the point here is that state governments engage in trade and investment discussions and dialogue with countries around the world. That's pretty natural. They maintain trade representatives in other countries –

**LANE:** Sure, and to the question: how comfortable are you that the Victorian Labor Party has done this?

**MARLES:** Well, I don't know what is in the agreement and so it is difficult to give an answer to that. But let me say in respect of Belt Road – and this is

Federal Labor's position in relation to Belt Road, as it is my position, of course – that I think this needs to be engaged with on a case-by-case basis and with caution. There will be times where there are initiatives under Belt Road which are deserving of support but we do need to be very aware of the potential of Belt Road and what it means in terms of China's place in the world and what that means for us. And so it is important that we engage with this with our eyes open and we do that with caution.

**LANE:** Richard Marles, thanks for joining AM this morning.

**MARLES:** Thanks, Sabra.

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