

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

**E&OE TRANSCRIPT**

**TV INTERVIEW**

**SKY NEWS LIVE**

***RICHO***

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***SUBJECTS: ALP National Conference; defence industry; the Pacific***

**HOST:** I can now turn to Richard Marles, who's in our- I didn't know we had a Geelong studio until tonight but apparently he's in our Geelong studio. Is this correct, Richard?

**RICHARD MARLES, SHADOW MINISTER FOR DEFENCE:** It is the salubrious Sky studio in Geelong, as obviously there should be. It's the cultural center of the nation.

**HOST:** There are those of us who could disagree, but then again you are a Victorian so I can't expect too much.

Now, you've got the ALP National Conference kicking off in the next few days. I remember at the last one you were the man who had to get up and move the resolution to not change policy on stopping the boats. Who'll do it this time?

**MARLES:** Well, last time as we moved into National Conference we needed to

adopt a different position, which was to agree to be open to the idea of turning back boats, whereas prior to that we'd or held a position different to that. That's been our position since then and what we sought to do at the last Conference was to really go about the whole issue of those seeking asylum, the journey between Java and Christmas Island, looking at all of that through a values prism and having the courage to argue our position wherever that landed. Of course, there was nothing compassionate about seeing people drown at sea and we needed to be making sure that we took a position which meant that that terrible journey came to an end and ultimately that's what we did.

I'm confident that that's the position that will be maintained throughout this Conference and the sense that I'm getting from all those leading into this weekend is that the position that we established three years ago will remain the position of the ALP National Conference and will remain the position of Federal Labor going into the next election.

**HOST:** I know my own views changed when I saw that boat break up on the rocks of Christmas Island, as everyone saw, you saw people die in front of your eyes, and that just gave me a view of all of these boats and these boat people where I thought myself we've got to stop them because this is crazy, because you look at the boats and you can see that they're pretty fragile. They're not exactly, you know, the *QEII*, are they.

**MARLES:** No, and the other point is that it had something to do with us. These were people who were seeking to come to Australia. I had many conversations with people in the lead up to 2015, and there would be some who would say that it's not for us to make a judgment about what risks people take in order to come to Australia, but I just don't think that can be the moral position that we take. It has something to do with us that people in these boats, and of course it's people smugglers who are running this trade, so it's not as though there is an open sense of information that people get before they get on one of these boats about what their chances of survival are, and a situation where 1,200 people died on our border over that period of time, is a situation where

you have to wonder whether or not the position that we were taking was reducing the sum of global human misery or whether it was increasing it, and there was no doubt that it was increasing it, which is why, ultimately, from a moral perspective, actually, we took the view that this had to be brought to an end. Whilst that implied very difficult decisions that we needed to make, we needed to make them nevertheless.

Now, we did that in tandem with increasing our humanitarian intake, doing it in a way where we brought people who'd gone through a proper process to this country in a safe way, and I think that's a really generous and good thing to do which is also consistent with our values, but that journey needed to be brought to an end and it was important that we make that statement and we've been consistently making that statement ever since.

I know that in the last sitting fortnight there was a kind of shrill attempt on the part of the Prime Minister to open up this is an area of difference again, saying that Labor didn't have a commitment to this or indeed to offshore processing. That of course is absolute rubbish. We maintained a steadfast position that this is a journey which can never start again, we can't put people circulars back into business and that it's absolutely essential that we not have this loss of life on our border ever again.

**HOST:** But how do you convince people, given the record of the Labor Party under Rudd. The boats, you know, we can't deny it, about the number of boats that came across and the number of people that came across and the number who died. How do you say to people 'trust us, we'll bring them home from Nauru and we'll treat them for whatever medical problem they've got, and then when we've fixed them up we'll send them back to Nauru.' Is that credible?

**MARLES:** Well, in terms of people on Manus and Nauru, what fundamentally needs to happen is there need to be third-country resettlement options and this government has been patently hopeless in organising them. They've come up after five years with one option and that's the United States. All their eggs are in

that basket and that's not a solution which will resolve the situation of everyone on Manus and Nauru, so they need to do more.

In respect of people coming for medical treatment, I'd make the obvious point that this government itself has been bringing people to Australia to receive medical treatment, as they should when it has been doctor's advice that that is treatment which can only be provided here. Now that's our view as well, so in fact there's not really any difference between what the Government has been doing and the position that we adopt there.

I think more generally, Graham, in the context of how do we convince people, it is about making an argument from a set of values that people understand and expect from Labor, and really what we did last time, which I hope was different, and certainly how we're going forward, is to make clear our position in the context of a set of values which people can understand and believe and associate with Labor. From my point of view, ending that journey, putting people smugglers out of business, was the right and compassionate thing to do, and as you said, after that terrible incident on Christmas Island back in 2010 my views changed on that day as well. Who could possibly feel that this was an acceptable situation to go on, to continue on, from a compassionate point of view? I think you can make the argument and I think we have.

**HOST:** I agree with the set of values stuff, because I think that the set of values that you've set out is fine. The difficulty that we face now, though, is that when we were again putting on people on Nauru, the situation in Syria was just beginning to get bad. Now, across the whole of North Africa you've had a massive number of people who've just walked to the boats and crossed the Mediterranean and landed, and whether it's Greece or Italy or wherever they're all being overrun, so you've got countries like Armenia putting up fences and Hungary taking a very hard line. There's just nowhere to put the people on Nauru anymore because the situation around the world with refugees has just got a thousand times worse over the course of the last few years.

**MARLES:** I actually think in the context of an expanding humanitarian program, which has been our policy since 2015, it does create room for us to negotiate with other third countries about ways in which the situation for people on Nauru and Manus can be resolved. In essence that's what actually this government did when it negotiated, in effect, a swap with the United States in respect of people coming out of Costa Rica. In circumstances where we have a growing humanitarian intake there is an ability to do that, so I actually think that the opportunities are there.

But everything that you've just also described highlights that we're not in a position to resolve all the world's ills. We can't. But it's really essential in this context that, firstly, whatever generosity we have to give we do so in a way which reduces the sum of global human misery, and the way in which you do that is to make sure that you empower governments and you disempower people smuggling. It is it is a feature of being a displaced person in the world today that you are vulnerable and you are in the grips of people smugglers and we need to do everything we can to reduce the impact of those people on that business. That's actually what making sure the border was closed between Java and Christmas Island ultimately did.

**HOST:** I understand what you're trying to do. I'm just I'm just grappling with how how big the task is - but we shall move on. I can't talk about that all night because you are Shadow Minister for Defence. What do we think of the submarine program? I've heard people being very critical of it. I've heard Christopher Pyne saying there's absolutely no problem. What's Labor's stance?

**MARLES:** Well, I hope Christopher Pyne is right, obviously. This is a really important capability that we are seeking to acquire. It's the most expensive thing Australia has ever bought in any context. It's a fifty thousand million dollar spend. Submarines are very defining in terms of what capability your defence force has, so it's why they are costly and why it's ultimately worth spending money on them.

It is to state the obvious that the headline agreement between Naval, which is the company which is building the submarines, and the Australian Government has been delayed. That concerns me. The strategic partnership agreement, we still haven't seen that signed yet. From the original timeline that's more than a year overdue now. I'm worried about that. That is why you're getting questions being asked.

Now, I hope Christopher's right that there's nothing to see here and it's all fine, but I think there are questions which need to be answered about why this particular agreement, which is really the guiding document, is a year overdue.

I think the other point that needs to be made in the context of that is that back in 2016 when the Government down-selected the tender for this project down to one at the time of design was ultimately a mistake of epic proportions. I mean when you are spending fifty thousand million dollars in the building of a submarine, the idea that you wouldn't contest two hundred million dollars of the design is patently ridiculous, and yet that's what the Government did and it did it for political reasons because it wanted to be able to assert, given what David Johnson and others had said about the defense industry capability in Australia around building submarines, and what the government was trying to do that then in terms of having other countries build our submarines, they wanted to convince people in South Australia that they were actually going to be built and built here in Australia, so they down-selected to one and announced the preferred tenderer way too early.

Now, in saying that, Naval Group's an excellent company. They make fantastic submarines. They can be a great partner, but it put Australia at an enormous disadvantage in the negotiating process and that will cost our country a lot of money over a very long period of time and I fear that that is what we are dealing with now in terms of the delay of this agreement.

**HOST:** Of course it was David Johnston who said that he wasn't sure we could build a canoe in South Australia. That was the line. Do you think we can build a canoe?

**MARLES:** I absolutely do, and I think Australia has fantastic defence industry capability. It was a remarkable statement for Australia's Defence Minister to make at that time and he paid for that statement in the ultimate way, but it said something about the hostility, really, that the Government had towards Australian defence industry at that point in time.

Now, I accept that things changed under Christopher Pyne and that this government has sought to build more things in Australia and put an emphasis on that and that's great. I fear, again, that the Liberals are kind of policy tourists in this space. It is much more Labor's DNA to be building defence materiel here in Australia, but I go back to that point: down-selecting the submarine tender to one back in 2016 and not contesting the design is a mistake of epic proportions and it has placed our country at an enormous disadvantage in these negotiations.

**HOST:** And what about the planes, the F-35s. There's a lot of money going into them, too, not \$50 billion, I think I read \$17 billion, but that's still not chickenfeed, is it?

**MARLES:** No, it's been a procurement over a long period of time. It dates back to the Howard Government, and again that says something about the nature of defence procurements. They're made over decades, and in terms of the submarines, which is why the design should have been contested. The last of the future submarines will come out of the water in 2082. These are huge projects which go over a long period of time.

F-35s are fifth-generation planes. They are really important for our capability. It is hard to describe what they do until you see a simulation. Really, this is a command ship or a command plane in the form of a fighter plane, and its ability through the IT which is onboard this aircraft, to not only engage itself but to command the battle space around it. It will often be making decisions about other platforms - ships and other planes in the air - in the area firing off shots

whilst it is there. It greatly enhances our capability and it's really important in a modern world that we have a fifth-generation plane and the F-35s will become the bedrock of our air fighting force. In that sense I think they are really important.

As with any new capability they've been the subject of some criticism over the years, but we certainly think they are an important spend and are going to be a very important part of our air force going forward.

**HOST:** Getting towards the end now, what about China and the Pacific? Are they really doing anything that is causing Australia a real concern?

**MARLES:** I think China is behaving completely predictably in the Pacific and I think the Pacific is behaving completely predictably in respect of China.

I think the missing piece here has been our relationship with the Pacific over a long period of time. This is the part of the world where the rest of the world expects us to play a role, to lead, to have a plan, and to wield our influence, and in that sense the Pacific Island countries themselves look to Australia for assistance and for attention. For a long period of time we've not provided that and it has always baffled me that the Pacific hasn't played much bigger in our world view. It is completely central to the way Australia engages with the world, and in that sense we have to be present, but present with intent and we've got to be thinking about, not so much whether or not China is in the Pacific, but why is the Pacific the part of the world which has performed worst against the Millennium Development Goals from the period 2000 through 2015. That means they're the slowest-developing region in the world. On current trends, by the end of the 2020s this will be the least-developed part of the world, places where social indicators like life expectancy, maternal mortality rates, disease and education, they will all be going worse in the Pacific than anywhere else unless we do something about it.

Now, my view is that it's got something to do with us and that actually needs to

be the beacon for us to act, to build our relationships with the countries in the Pacific, and to seek to do everything we can to see the people of the Pacific prosper in a much bigger way than they have.

That's what we ought to be focused on, rather than seeing the Pacific through the lens of denying it to others.

**HOST:** What about the problem of climate change in the Pacific? I know that a lot of these Pacific leaders are of course terrified that they're going to be swimming to go to the shops shortly, and yet our government doesn't seem to take that view too seriously. Is there global warming effects that you can point to right now in the Pacific?

**MARLES:** Definitely. In terms of engagement with the Pacific, the entry ticket is actually to have a view about climate change and to seek to act to do everything we can to reduce the effects of climate change, and that in turn begins with having a credible domestic policy.

In answer to your question I had the great honor back in 2012 to take the then-Secretary General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon, to Kiribati, which is a coral atoll nation, which is only about two meters above sea level at its highest point. We walked into a person's kitchen - this is real - we walked into a person's kitchen at high tide where we were seeing the water lap up into the the footsteps of their house. You could see the impact that that had on the face of Ban Ki-moon, who was amazed at that.

If you look at the the ground water supply in south Tarawa, which is the main population center in Kiribati, about half of that groundwater supply now has been effectively contaminated, and that's about water salinity. That's the drinking water, so the first point at which climate change has an impact on these countries is through water security, drinking water security.

It's absolutely having an impact, and for a country which has had its culture

based on the sea, where its sustenance has come from the sea, to now be looking at the sea as its principal form of threat, I cannot describe to you how psychologically difficult, ultimately catastrophic, that is for those countries. They are living this in a way that we cannot imagine and I've seen that firsthand on many occasions.

It's just not good enough to be presenting to the Pacific Island Forum and other entities of the Pacific saying we're really not that interested in climate change and essentially giving off a view that we don't think it's a serious matter. It's a deeply serious matter for these countries and we need to act.

**HOST:** Indeed we do. Thank you very much for your time, Richard, as always. I hope you have a great break because I think over the course of the next six months you're going to be a pretty busy fella, and I suspect at the end of that six months you'll be minister and I can't wait to congratulate you when that happens. So, good luck mate. I hope it goes well and thank you for your time.

**MARLES:** You have a great Christmas, too.

**HOST:** Good on you, mate. Richard Marles in our salubrious studio, I'm now told, in Geelong.

[ENDS]

Authorised by Noah Carroll, ALP, Canberra.