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TELEVISION INTERVIEW
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SUBJECT: Coronavirus

KIERAN GILBERT, HOST: I am joined now by the Deputy Labor Leader and the Shadow Defence Minister, Richard Marles. Mr Marles thanks very much for your time. Another climb in the numbers over the last day or so. What do you make of the response that we're seeing both at the federal and state level to the coronavirus outbreak?

RICHARD MARLES, DEPUTY LABOR LEADER: Well, we have seen a climb as you said, Kieran and people should brace themselves for those numbers becoming larger and larger. I think the principle here is that whatever we are looking at doing in terms of reducing social contact, and clearly that is got to be central to the response, the sooner those measures are taken and in a sense the harder they are taken the better the outcome. I think when this is all said and done, it would be those countries which acted quickest and most significantly which will get through this in the best shape. And that's got to be the principle in terms of how we approach this because you know, why would you let any given transmission occur if you can stop it. And every extra transmission that does occur makes the ultimate problem that much harder to solve. So that has to be the principle upon which we proceed and I'd be urging governments to think about this matter in those terms.

GILBERT: The National Cabinet is meeting tonight and as we've reported this afternoon and Andrew Clennell reports, more detail today, it looks certain that the National Cabinet of the state and federal leaders will be looking to reduce and toughen those social gathering restrictions- indoor gatherings to less than 100 at the- well that is at the maximum, some states might even go further than that. Do you welcome that initiative?

MARLES: I think if that's where it goes, I would be welcoming that. I mean these are important steps to take. I come back to the point that if this was being considered for example last Friday, why is it taking this amount of time to be implemented? And we got, we had the really the farcical situation that played out last Friday where a measure was taken in relation to outdoor gatherings of more than 500 and that was to take place from

Monday, and in the very same press conference the Prime Minister announces that he's going to go to the footy on Saturday night in a gathering of thousands of people. I mean none of that makes sense. And the point here is that whatever measures you take, the sooner they are implemented the better. The proportionate response in a sense isn't the helpful construct here because what you need to be doing is acting in a way which stops transmission. Our ultimate goal, Kieran and has to be trying to make sure that this virus does not significantly take hold within our community because if-

GILBERT: And we have seen this recently, haven't we. No crowds at major sporting events. Huge disruptions in terms of 500 plus gatherings band and now we're hearing indoor gatherings of less than 100 allowed but not more than 100. These are big steps already, aren't they? How far do we have to go? Or do you think we should shut down now?

MARLES: Well I think they are very big steps and they're important steps to be taking. I think all of these issues need to be on the table, and I think speed is at the centre of this. That is to state the obvious. The earlier that measures are taken, the bigger and the better the outcome will be. And that has to be the principle on which these discussions take place. Now, I'm not sitting in the room and I don't have all the advice at hand, so it's difficult to get into the specifics of what I think should or shouldn't happen. But the principle on which these discussions should take place, and the way in which people should be guided in the decisions that they make has to be; the quicker measures are put in place the better. And that that has to be the way in which we go about it and it stands to reason that as long as what you are seeking to do is to stop the transmission of the virus- and that has to be the basis upon which we go about dealing with this- well then the earlier in the process the transmissions are stopped, the easier the problem is to solve. And the more that you will later let it continue- and we started this interview with the fact that the numbers are climbing and climbing rapidly- well then the bigger the problem is that you ultimately have to solve at the end of the day.

GILBERT: The other question though, is a big one that a lot of people are considering right now is the schools issue. The Prime Minister and other leaders around the nation are adamant that the advice to them is at this point that's not the course of action. The schools in fact, overseas the evidence suggests there hasn't been a great transmission within schools because young people are found to have, if they get, it's from older people wherever they are. What's your take on that discussion? Obviously strong arguments on both sides of that.

MARLES: Well in countries where there has been the most successful grappling of this problem, this is an issue which has been considered and in some measures implemented and to be fair it has been different around the world. I think a few things are really important to say here; this is something which is being actively considered across the board, a number of private schools have already made the decision to close their doors. One of the points that people consistently make in relation to the difficulty of closing schools is what that would do in relation to those people who work in essential occupations, particularly in the area of health who have kids in schools. That's a completely legitimate concern. It's important though, that what we then try to do is think through that concern; are there ways in which we can solve that problem? Chris Bowen called for this on the weekend, we've been talking about this a lot. That is an issue where there needs to be planning now. What

steps could be taken in relation to those who are working in essential occupations, in health but not just health- policing as an example, emergency services? What planning can be done for them in the event that we are facing school closures going forward? And clearly this is a matter which is being actively considered now. Again, that is the kind of planning which needs to be done right now. I mean, speed is obviously of the essence and this is a major, major health crisis and there is an urgency about this. And that kind of planning must be done. They can't be scrambling around that question down the track.

GILBERT: Are you encouraged by some of the developments we've seen from researchers? I know Professor David Paterson from the University of Queensland and their research centre, finding some breakthroughs in terms of dealing and responding to coronavirus via an HIV and malaria drug, two drugs that are already in place and having quite an impact in terms of curing coronavirus in the cases they've looked at. They want the test rolled out. Do you know much about that and should we be encouraged by those developments?

MARLES: Look I don't know the details but I'm certainly encouraged by the reports. And again it highlights how good Australia is in the sphere of medical research. I mean, that is an area of expertise in this country and we should all feel proud of that. And obviously whatever can be done to hasten that effort needs to be done. I think though it's also important to say, that in the here and now the most significant steps that we can do is to reduce the ability for this disease to be transmitted, and that goes to the question of social distancing. And it's in that respect that we have power and agency in government right now. We hope the treatments and vaccines come online sooner rather than later, but right now the actions that we can take and go to that sphere. And so we need to be moving post-haste in relation to that and we come back to the original principle; the sooner that you take a step the better the ability for that step to have a big impact.

GILBERT: And are you- finally before I let you go, are you worried, what's your thinking when it comes to this issue of social cohesion? We've seen some quite disturbing scenes in supermarkets and so on. Obviously everyone's got a camera these days, so if something happens we know about it. I would suggest they're isolated scenes, some of the violence and so on. But any situation like that is a worry, isn't it?

MARLES: It's obviously a worry. I totally understand the anxiety that people feel out there in the community and in a sense the run on toilet paper was- you know- spoke to that. But this comes back to another really important issue Kieran, what we ultimately need is leadership from our government. We need a plan. It can't be about that leadership coming from the community, although there's been incredible leadership from the community. Woolworths is a really good example of this in relation to providing for designated times for people who are vulnerable- pensioners, those with a disability- to actually be able to make the provisions they need to buy shopping exclusively in those times; that's a really good act of community leadership. But why isn't the Government bringing together all the retailers to try and make that situation across the board? The ultimate leadership that we need and what people crying out for is from our national government. They're the ones that need to do that. And, in doing that coming up with a plan they then need to communicate it with a very consistent and clear message. On Sunday, we had the farcical situation where it was okay to shake hands on Sunday morning but it wasn't okay to shake hands on Sunday afternoon. We had the Prime

Minister saying you were going to ban mass gatherings on Monday, but he was going to go to the footy on Saturday night. I mean, these send really mixed messages and I think only add to the anxiety which is out there within the community. We need a plan. It needs to be articulated consistently from a single source and in a very calm way. And that must come from our National Government, from Scott Morrison and his Government right now. And, we want to do everything we can to support the Government in being able to implement that plan. But it must be there.

GILBERT: Richard Marles, as always, appreciate your time. Thanks.

MARLES: Thanks Kieran.

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Authorised by Paul Erickson, ALP, Canberra.