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SUBJECTS: Coronavirus.

ANNELISE NIELSEN, HOST: Richard, thank you for your time. We're running out of superlatives, but extraordinary times that we're faced with. What do you make of the Government's response so far? We saw a dramatic escalation last night in the restrictions on what are being called non-essential gatherings.

RICHARD MARLES, DEPUTY LEADER OF THE AUSTRALIAN LABOR PARTY: These certainly are extraordinary times, Annelise. I thought September 11 would be the biggest thing I would live through, I think now is in that league. And extraordinary times require extraordinary measures. I think what we really need to see from the Government is honesty with the Australian people about what we're facing- and a clear set of communications about what their strategy is in dealing with it. I'd be the first person to say this is an incredibly complex matter for the Government, and we're fundamentally here to support the Government in this moment. But it is really important that there is a clear communication with the Australian people about the significance of this and we need to actually hear; what's the end game? What is the strategy that the government is trying to put in place, to deal with a matter which is a mathematical exponential problem? We're seeing cases double every three days and so that means that if nothing changes 1,000 cases today, is more than 30,000 cases in just over two weeks. That's the problem that we're dealing with and there needs to be a really clear strategy which right now I'm struggling to discern.

NIELSEN: A lot of people are extremely frustrated that people were allowed to walk off cruise ships with no kind of intervention whatsoever; that Bondi beach was packed. Does the responsibility with that lie with the State Government in New South Wales or the Federal Government?

MARLES: Well actually I think at the end of the day this is about national leadership. And it's about the tone, the explanation and the clear strategy which must be set by the national government. That has to be where the buck ultimately stops. And the border is one of the key assets that we have in relation to dealing with this; it puts us actually in a very strong position compared to other countries. But when you look at the cruise ship, you know, it's beggars belief what has played out there and it makes you realise the steps that could have been taken in relation to the border could have been taken some time ago. There needs to be clear messaging around social distancing. I mean, a week ago within the one day we couldn't work out whether it was appropriate to shake hands or not. I mean we've seen this extraordinary debate go on in the last 24 hours about schools, and; do you send your kids to school or don't you. I think the whole country is confused about that. And in the face of that, Bondi Beach doesn't surprise me. There needs to be a clear articulation from the Federal Government about what's the game plan. What is the end game here? What are they seeking to do? And level with the Australian people about the seriousness of what we're facing.

NIELSEN: The Government, the Federal Government that is, does have this incredibly tough task of trying to manage the health risk with also not shutting down the economy overnight and causing more damage than is needed. Do you think that they have had the right speed of enforcing these bans? Because if they came in overnight with a total ban like we've seen in some European countries like France it could just absolutely destroy the economy.

MARLES: I absolutely agree it's an incredibly tough task. So let me say that. It's actually the role of all of us to be as constructive as we can in talking about this and in supporting the Federal Government in this moment; that's the first point to make. In terms of social distancing, and in terms of any of those measures; stopping sporting events with big crowds and the like, I think it's a simple proposition, whatever we think we might be doing in two weeks' time in three weeks' time we should be doing right now. Every transmission that occurs makes this problem that much harder to solve. When you've got an exponential problem, it grows rapidly. And so, if you can deal with it right now you're dealing with a

much smaller matter than if you're dealing with it in a few weeks' time. So urgency is the key here. And it's why there needs to actually be an articulation of what the strategy is. We've seen a kind of an iterative process in terms of various bans being put in place, we hear words such as a 'proportionate response', I struggle to see how that makes sense in this context. We're not, proportionate response is the kind of the language of dealing with a human adversary, but we're not, we're dealing with a virus which is spreading exponentially. Actually what you need to be doing is significant measures; quickly and. I think what we'll find is that the countries- when this is all said and done- that acted hardest and fastest will be the countries which get through this in best shape both in terms of health but economically as well. And that's really the final point. If you want to solve an economic shock which is caused by a virus, you've got to deal with the virus. That's to state the obvious. And so the stimulus is a really important set of measures. You know, we think that there are a number of issues with it; there is a whole lot of payments there which have not been made urgently enough and in a sense the same principle applies there. If people are going to be getting payments a month, two months, three months down the track, why aren't they getting those payments right now in terms of getting them through this process? But ultimately what we're dealing with are the symptoms of what has been a health crisis. And it is dealing with the health issue quickly and appropriately and no one is suggesting this is going to be done in two weeks; it's obviously going to take a lot longer than that. But we have seen elsewhere in the world, where measures have been taken, significant measures up front and early, that has been the best way to reduce the spread of the virus and I think that actually empowers those Governments in economic terms as well.

NIELSEN: Shouldn't the State Governments though be taking a bit more responsibility? I mean we have the New South Wales Premier Gladys Berejiklian standing up and talking about locking down schools, when most parents would have been doing the school run. Surely the onus for good messaging falls on the States, just as much as the Federal Government when they made a clear directive about exactly what was going to happen with schools.

MARLES: I think good messaging applies to all leaders. Gladys Berejiklian is responsible for her State- as Daniel Andrews is for his. And they're the leaders in those States and for sure they're responsible for messaging and giving a clear strategy to their States about how to deal with this. But ultimately we are one nation and we need to have a national strategy and we need to have national leadership. And I think actually what we're seeing in relation to the schools issue is Victoria and New South Wales now out there doing leadership for the country. It would be much better if we were getting that leadership at a

national level, with a clear strategy which took the Australian people into the confidence of the Australian Government, about exactly what we are facing, and what the strategy is and what the end game is. Whereas at the moment, it is this piecemeal process which is very hard to understand and in the context of that I can see why states are now acting on their own volition in relation to measures such as schools.

NIELSEN: And just finally- we are almost out of time- but quickly the herd immunity line has been pushed by a number of countries in response to this, that would be quite dangerous in the context of COVID-19 to be relying on that though wouldn't it?

MARLES: Well if that phrase implies a significant proportion of our population getting this disease- and I think that's what it does- then we're talking about a significant loss of life. We're talking about a significant loss of life. I mean the maths is not that hard; half of the Australian population is 12.5 million people, one per cent of that is 125,000 people. That is a huge number and even 20 per cent of the population and one per cent of that; we're still talking about massive numbers. So really the point here is that, we need to be doing everything we can to stop the spread of this disease so that it doesn't significantly take hold within our community. That has to be the strategy because otherwise we are going to see an enormous loss of life-

NIELSEN: Absolutely.

MARLES: And that's why I think it's really important on all of those matters that we do hear a clear strategy from the Federal Government with an end game in mind.

NIELSEN: Richard Marles, thank you for your time.

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Authorised by Paul Erickson, ALP, Canberra.