



## TRANSCRIPT

**THE HON RICHARD MARLES MP  
SHADOW MINISTER FOR IMMIGRATION AND BORDER  
PROTECTION  
MEMBER FOR CORIO**

**E&OE TRANSCRIPT  
RADIO INTERVIEW  
ABC, RADIO NATIONAL DRIVE  
FRIDAY, 22 MAY 2015**

***SUBJECT/S: Rohingya refugees***

**PATRICIA KARVELAS:** Richard Marles is the Shadow Minister for Immigration and Border Protection and he joins me now on RN Drive. Welcome to the program.

**RICHARD MARLES, SHADOW MINISTER FOR IMMIGRATION AND BORDER PROTECTION:** Good evening Patricia, how are you?

**KARVELAS:** I'm really well. Tony Abbott has refused to offer resettlement to Rohingya refugees on the grounds it would encourage people smuggling, he actually has a point doesn't he? Since refusing refugees settlement in Australia, the Government has dramatically reduced the boats arriving.

**MARLES:** Well I think we firstly need to distinguish between the question of resettlement and the immediate humanitarian crisis which has been evolving on the Andaman Sea, which sees people in their thousands on the Andaman Sea in a really desperate state and the need to rescue those people so as I have been through the region this week, the question is not so much about resettlement right now but how we get people off the sea and save their lives. And in that respect, what we need to be doing is supporting the Malaysian, the Indonesian Governments in what they're doing and I actually think the comments of the Prime Minister earlier in the week where he was seen to be talking about turning back boats as if it was a global philosophy and panacea to all the issues of people smuggling around the world were silly but they were also quite dangerous in this respect.

**KARVELAS:** Bill Shorten says there are other options to deal with this crisis but what are they, you can say there are other options but you've got to outline them, don't you?

**MARLES:** Well the first thing is dealing with the humanitarian issue, and we should be working with Malaysia and Indonesia and Thailand on that.

**KARVELAS:** But do you see a role for our nation, Australia, in bringing refugees here that may not be resettled here, but in the interim – I mean you say there is a crisis, why not bring them here?

**MARLES:** Well because no one is suggesting that, I mean Malaysia and Indonesia have already agreed to have those people in Malaysia and Indonesia for the next year. No one is requesting any kind of temporary settlement, so I think in that sense the debate in Australia has become a little confused. In terms of long-term resettlement, I mean that is a complex question, we already have a resettlement program out of Malaysia. As to whether we would take any of these, I think that is a discussion we ought to have with the UNHCR and look at what they are thinking of and we need to be consulting with the Rohingya community in Myanmar, they themselves have quite differing views about this question. But that is something to be dealt with in due course, right now we need to be helping the countries of the region in dealing with the immediate humanitarian crisis, there is a meeting in Bangkok next Friday and Australia is attending that but we need to be a very active player, we are a co-chair of the Bali Process and whilst the meeting next week is not a formal Bali Process meeting, it is essentially the same countries who are part of the Bali Process who will be there. This is a critical meeting in terms of dealing with the immediate crisis but also in beginning the discussion on a regional framework and how to handle displaced persons within South East Asia and Australia has a huge responsibility in that.

**KARVELAS:** On RN Drive my guest is Richard Marles, the opposition's spokesman for immigration. I have a message here I will put to you, why don't we let the Navy go and pick them up?

**MARLES:** The question right now is, we are talking about vessels which are off the coast of Malaysia and Indonesia. Malaysia and Indonesia have now agreed to begin the process of rescuing people. I think what people need to understand is there are literally thousands of people seeking asylum, economic migrants who are on this journey, it is a particularly dangerous journey which has been conducted by people smugglers who are utterly depraved in the way in which they have treated people, often people have been on this journey for months, in extreme states in some cases of malnutrition and indeed ultimate starvation and hence a lot of the images people have seen of people in a skeletal state of starvation and that's why they need to be brought ashore as quickly as possible, it's not a matter of taking a week to get an Australian boat up there, they need to be got onto shore immediately.

My criticism of the Prime Minister earlier this week was that it is difficult for the countries of the region, they needed to find the political space to make the decision which Malaysia and Indonesia ultimately did on Wednesday which was to agree to rescue people. Now prior to that all you heard was an Australian Prime Minister using his three word slogan as if it was some kind of global panacea and it actually denied the political space needed for the decision Malaysia and Indonesia were able to ultimately make despite him and that was incredibly irresponsible given what it essentially was doing was trying to make a cheap political point in Australia but doing

it very much at the expense of the way in which this matter was progressing where it counted.

**KARVELAS:** As you raised, Indonesia and Malaysia have agreed to provide humanitarian assistance and provide temporary shelter for up to a year. You say we should be offering to help though, I'm wondering if you can outline here and now how, I mean other than being involved in the process, going to the meetings, what should Australia actually materially be doing given those people are now going to be housed for a year, after that year is up, during that year what should be actually doing?

**MARLES:** Well I think there are a range of, this is a complicated issue so there is obviously issues at the source, in terms of Rakhine state in Myanmar, in Burma and it may well be that there are measures which can be taken there and potentially there is support that we can provide in relation to that. There are all sorts of measures that we can provide support to within the region around dealing with the question of the people smugglers themselves but also obviously the conditions that the asylum seekers are in. And as to the question of resettlement that is ultimately something that needs to be thought out very carefully, it shouldn't be rushed in to and we would be wanting to talk very closely to the UNHCR about that. I met earlier in the week with members of the Rohingya community in Burma and there is some ambivalence about the notion of resettlement, partly because they don't want to see a situation where more people leave their country, they want to hang on to their community and I think one can understand that, so I think this is not an easy question to answer and it shouldn't be rushed into.

**KARVELAS:** It seems to be another indication that bilateral relations with Indonesia aren't improving, they took a serious hit after the Bali 9 executions, should we be concerned or are you concerned that one of our key partners in tackling people smuggling is responding like this?

**MARLES:** We need to in the long term have a close relationship with Indonesia when it comes to people smuggling, that is patently obvious. If you look at the journey that has been of concern to us over the recent years between Java and Christmas Island, if we are to have a durable solution to that, not measured in terms of years but in terms of decades, we obviously have to be working hand in glove with Indonesia in relation to that so, right now you are right there hasn't been for more than a year now co-operation between Australia and Indonesia when it comes to that particular journey against the backdrop of when Labor was in power there was organic co-operation every minute of every day, so it is very important and of course Indonesia and Australia are the co-chairs of the Bali Process which is the major regional architecture to deal with people smuggling in South East Asia, we have to work closely together in respect of that but I'd make the point that Indonesia and Malaysia made the decision they needed to make this week, it would have been appalling if we had seen the situation where people were left at sea in an emaciated state and allowed to die in their thousands. That would have been an absolutely appalling situation. It is great that they were able to make the decision that they did and again in that context of the contribution from our Prime Minister earlier in the week was just an absolute disgrace.

**KARVELAS:** Richard Marles in Government would Labor continue the turn backs policy introduced by the Abbott Government because Bill Shorten has not been very clear on this issue, what is the answer on that?

**MARLES:** The answer to that is we retain concerns around turn backs and it really goes to the question that we have just been discussing and that is the impact that it has on our relationship with Indonesia, as I say it is not just about resolving this issue last year and this, it is about making sure...

**KARVELAS:** So are your concerns so strong you wouldn't turn back boats or are you leaving that open?

**MARLES:** The point I am making in relation to turn backs and why we retain a concern about this is the Government has simply not answered the question about how this works in the context of having a co-operative relationship with Indonesia in respect of people smuggling over the long term, they've not answered that question and it is also difficult to know exactly what is happening with turn backs when the whole of Operation Sovereign Borders is undertaken in a shroud of secrecy.

**KARVELAS:** But do you concede there has been a radical reduction in boats arriving to Australia? Given that is one of the levers that they are using, I mean it is clearly the case.

**MARLES:** It's not a matter of conceding it, we would absolutely say that but let's also be clear that despite the spin of this Government, the key decision that has been taken by any Australian Government which has seen a reduction in the flow of asylum seeker vessels was Labor establishing the Regional Resettlement Arrangement with Papua New Guinea and Nauru. In the aftermath of that, in mid-July of 2013 we saw the flow of asylum seeker vessels drop by 90 per cent, that more than anything else is what has actually seen an end to the flow of asylum seeker vessels and of course we aren't going to do anything which would...

**KARVELAS:** So you aren't going to rule out the possibility that you might turn back boats in Government?

**MARLES:** Let me be absolutely clear, we retain a concern in relation to turn backs, I'm not about to walk down a path of answering hypotheticals on that.

**KARVELAS:** But you're not ruling it out either Richard Marles, it is quite clear to me that you are not ruling it out the possibility that you will turn back boats.

**MARLES:** I've made it clear we have got concerns about the turn back policy but we are not about to see a re-opening of the journey between Java and Christmas Island

**KARVELAS:** So you are leaving the option open? Can you just make it clear for me? It's not clear, are you leaving the option open?

**MARLES:** I'm not about to walk down a, I've explained the concerns we have in relation to the policy of turn backs, I've explained it very clearly in relation to the relationship with Indonesia. We are not about to see a reopening of that journey, that

journey saw people die in their hundreds, ultimately in their thousands and it is absolutely imperative from a position of basic human compassion that we do not see that journey start again and we're very committed to that which is why we put in place the Regional Resettlement Arrangement, which as I said more than any other decision that an Australian Government has made, has been the critical decision in seeing an end to the flow of boats.

**KARVELAS:** Richard Marles thank you for your time and joining me on RN Drive.

***ENDS***