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

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RADIO INTERVIEW
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SUBJECT/S: *Christmas Island; asylum seekers.*

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN: We asked the Immigration Minister Peter Dutton for an interview this morning - unfortunately he was unavailable. But I was joined in the studio by the shadow immigration minister Richard Marles a short time ago.

He says he's been kept in the dark about what's going on at the Christmas Island detention centre.

RICHARD MARLES, SHADOW MINISTER FOR IMMIGRATION AND BORDER PROTECTION: It's not good enough, because we ought to be hearing from the Minister directly. We should be hearing from him frankly repeatedly about how this is progressing, and whether or not in particular the safety of everyone concerned can be assured, both the detainees and those working within the facility.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN: Should the Government negotiate in this case?

RICHARD MARLES: It's impossible for me to answer that question given the little information that we have out there. And as your report indicated, we're increasingly relying on second-hand accounts. We need the Government out on the front foot today explaining, and the minister, explaining to the Australian people exactly what has occurred here. Are the safety of those involved, can it be assured? Is there an explanation of how that can be better done? And we need to know what's going on.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN: One of the problems it seems to be at the moment is that you've got a mix of hardened criminals and former prisoners in the same detention centre as asylum seekers and people awaiting deportation. Now, is that right? Should that change?

RICHARD MARLES: I think that's a very good question. And I mean obviously this is a very large facility and there'll be different areas within the facility. But I think the Australian people do need to have a sense of confidence about that very legitimate question: are those people in the same areas? Is there, are people being mixed as that report just indicated? And it's very obvious we're talking about different clientele and they need to be managed in different ways. And the answer to that question very much goes to the safety of everyone concerned, which is why I think it's important that we actually hear from the Minister about what's going on here, that we have some transparency in relation to this.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN: Because there's some, as I understand it, some 80 New Zealanders there. Some of them are presumably pretty tough criminals - bikies and the like - who are basically awaiting deportation to New Zealand.

That would be pretty uncomfortable if you're an asylum seeker.

RICHARD MARLES: And obviously a very different set of circumstances to asylum seekers. There are people in the facility as I understand it who have gone through the Australian prison system, who have now failed the character test.

And as I understand it, their visas are now being cancelled, and as you say are now awaiting deportation. Now that's a very different set of people and circumstances to asylum seekers who of course have committed no crime and who have done nothing wrong.

And we need to have a sense of understanding about who's in that facility and in what circumstances. Too often, what we're seeing here, Michael, is a Government which is happy to go out and talk about the good news, but when there are difficult issues which need to be addressed, they go into hiding.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN: Those asylum seekers, who you say have done nothing wrong, now many of them have been there for many years, including, well, under policies from your government, the previous government.

We've had the death of an Iranian refugee in the last week or so. Increasingly there are some very, very desperate people in those camps now, aren't there?

RICHARD MARLES: There's no doubt that there are people who have taken steps to seek refuge in this country, and obviously to put themselves on a boat between Java and Christmas Island. There's a level of desperation from the start - there's never been a question about that.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN: Isn't it time to rethink how we deal with them?

RICHARD MARLES: Well this is a very complicated question, and a lot of thought's gone into it. And one of the problems here which we just cannot put to one side is that we saw a human tragedy play out between Java and Christmas Island where 1200 people that we know of lost their lives. Now that is obviously an extremely relevant fact in terms of whatever policy settings you put in place to try and deal with this situation. We hope, touch wood, that the situation that we now have in place has

bought an end to that loss of life. Now that doesn't mean that the Government is resolved of any obligation in relation to those people within our detention centre network, and particularly those people who are in offshore detention. And we're not talking about Christmas Island now, but those on Nauru and Manus. And one of the real issues here for which the Government needs to answer is what are its plans to resolve the fate of those 2,000 people?

What are the plans in relation to resettlement? Because frankly the Government has completely dropped the ball on that.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN: Well what would you do?

RICHARD MARLES: Oh well, firstly we would be managing our relationship with Papua New Guinea much better than the way in which this Government has done it. I mean, we had a minister who after the election of the Turnbull-Abbott Government took months before he went up and had a meaningful conversation with the Papua New Guinean government about the question of resettlement.

And it's only now that we see a resettlement policy going through the PNG system, and we hope that there will be resettlements in the near future. But this is an agreement that we signed with PNG more than two years ago.

Can I just say, we'd be working on meaningful third country options - it's not a meaningful third country option to work with a country like Cambodia where you're spending \$55 million to resettle three people. That's where this Government has got it wrong.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN: Just quickly, what do you think of when you hear the UN's leading human rights body criticise Australia's bipartisan stance on refugees and asylum seekers?

You've got countries like the UK, Germany, Sweden, calling Australia out on the detention centres, on the detention of children and offshore processing, which as they say Australia is the only country to do both. It's a pretty strong criticism, isn't it?

RICHARD MARLES: Well, I don't think it should be any surprise that there is that criticism, given the way in which this Government has handled our offshore processing...

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN: But it's about policies that go back before this Government.

RICHARD MARLES: Sure, but the real issue here is this: Offshore processing should be about processing. It should be about resolving the fate of these people. It should not be a question of indefinite detention.

The fact that we've got near 2,000 people on Manus and Nauru, that they've been there now for some years and there is no answer as to what their long-term future is going to be, that is obviously a significant point and worthy of criticism.

The fact that you kept people, the Government has kept people living in tents on Nauru from the time, which was really a decision not to complete the construction of a facility on Nauru, that's an absolute disgrace and worthy of criticism.

And, you know, we've got a former prime minister who doesn't mind going over to Britain and lecturing the rest of the world about how it should be done. It shouldn't be a surprise to the Turnbull Government that they're getting a bit of a lecture back.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN: Opposition immigration spokesman Richard Marles there.

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