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**E&OE TRANSCRIPT  
TELEVISION INTERVIEW  
SKY NEWS - SPEERS  
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***SUBJECT/S: Freedom of navigation; Vietnam, Michael McCormack's belated Pacific apology; Government's energy policy chaos.***

**DAVID SPEERS:** Richard Marles thanks very much for your time. Look, sending in the military is usually the last resort. Are you convinced that Donald Trump has given diplomacy with Iran every chance before opting to send in warships?

**ACTING LABOR LEADER RICHARD MARLES:** Well the mission that was announced yesterday by the Government and the mission that we provided our support for is about freedom of navigation in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, and it's very much tightly focused on that, and that's the basis upon which Labor has provided support to this. That's because freedom of navigation and the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea are completely central to Australia's national interest as an island trading nation. We have product which comes to Australia and goes from Australia through the Strait of Hormuz, but in a larger sense that as a piece of international architecture is essential to our national interest as any and so Australia actually has a long history of participating in freedom of navigation operations and we thought it was appropriate to support the Government's decision to be involved in this one.

**SPEERS:** Now I understand the argument in favour of keeping that Strait open, just the cause of why there is a problem there right now surely needs to be addressed doesn't it? I

mean it's pretty clear why this is happening, this is Iran that's hassling these commercial vessels right?

**MARLES:** Well whoever it is, safe shipping is a principle that Australia should support and is very central to Australia's national interest.

**SPEERS:** But you know who it is, is my point; you know who is doing this.

**MARLES:** But, well in terms of the wider issues within the region we made clear yesterday that Labor continues to support what is actually the Government's position of support of the Iran nuclear agreement. We think that that was an important measure in terms of providing stability in the region.

**SPEERS:** In other words you don't think Trump should have withdrawn from that nuclear deal?

**MARLES:** That's right and we feel as the Government has expressed, that the Iran nuclear agreement was an important measure that provided stability within the region and we continue to support that and Labor's support does not change on that.

**SPEERS:** And that's broken down now. Isn't the point that stability has broken down now, shouldn't there be a greater effort at diplomacy to patch things up before sending in warships and potentially putting our service personnel at risk.

**MARLES:** Diplomacy continues to play a role and I think it's really important that every measure is taken to de-escalate tension within the region and indeed within the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz. I actually think that having a situation where the shipping can transit the Strait of Hormuz in a safe and secure way will contribute to the de-escalation of tensions within the Strait of Hormuz and within the region, but that doesn't mean that, you know there shouldn't be the pursuit of diplomacy. We absolutely believe that every measure should be taken to try and de-escalate tensions within the region and as I said we continue to support the Iran Nuclear Agreement and see it as an important measure.

**SPEERS:** Look what's your understanding of the rules of engagement here. What would the Australian frigate do if a commercial frigate, a commercial ship or the frigate itself does come under some sort of attack from a Revolutionary Guard vessel?

**MARLES:** Well there are a range of roles that potentially the Australian vessel may play. Ultimately what this is about though is providing safe shipping for vessels which transit the Strait of Hormuz. I haven't seen the precise terms of engagement and they are important, but the principle here is the basis upon which we've made our support for the Government's position and it is a very important principle in terms of Australia's national interest.

**SPEERS:** Does Labor's support extend to an indefinite deployment here or is it limited to the six month deployment that the Prime Minister spoke of yesterday?

**MARLES:** I think it's important that you react to the circumstance that is provided to you and what has been put forward by the Government is a time limit mission, so that's what we have provided support to. Any other question would be something that we would have to consider in the future. But this is a time limited mission, a six month deployment of a frigate from January of next year, a one month provision of a P8 aircraft before the end of the year, and it is that, that we've provided support for.

**SPEERS:** Let me turn to the Prime Minister's visit to Vietnam. He'll be there the next couple of days talking trade and investment. That is as well as the strategic environment as you'd know tensions between Vietnam and China have been well dramatically increasing. Do you think Chinese survey ships should stay out of Vietnam's exclusive economic zone around the Spratly Islands there?

**MARLES:** Well, I think it's important that Australia not engage in the various territorial disputes which exist within the South China Sea. That is not a matter which engages Australia's national interest. But what does engage Australia's national interest is the same principle of freedom of navigation. As an island trading nation we are very dependent on shipping trade. Trade forms a large part of our economy and most of the trade that we engage in goes by shipping and in fact most of that goes through the South China Sea. So this is an area of the world in which freedom of navigation is very central to Australia's national interest and it's appropriate therefore that we stand for the principle of asserting the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, freedom of navigation in that body of water.

**SPEERS:** But there has been an international court ruling that this is not Chinese territory and yet we see reports of these Chinese survey vessels hassling Vietnamese oil and gas ships in that exclusive economic zone. So shouldn't we be clear that they need to stay out

of there?

**MARLES:** Well, we understand that freedom of navigation is an issue which the Vietnamese Government has raised and that as an issue is a matter where we have a shared concern and where very much is central to our national interests. I think that is the principle by which we ought to be making decisions about how we engage in matters such as this. How does it relate to Australia's interests and how doesn't it? Now there are various territorial disputes within the South China Sea which are not about us and we shouldn't be participating in them, but when it comes to freedom of navigation that is central to what we are about and that's appropriate and I think it would be understood by the international community that we have a role to play there and that we assert the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

**SPEERS:** What does that mean; I mean we're clearly sending a frigate over to protect freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz but closer to home, what should we be doing to ensure that those Vietnamese gas and oil ships can do what they need to do?

**MARLES:** It's a fair question, but ultimately it has to be a question of the Government. The precise operational questions and decisions of that kind are impossible to provide a judgment upon sitting in Opposition where you just don't have visibility of what are the operational constraints that face the Australian Navy and the Australian Defence Force. But what you can say from Opposition is what the principles are that are in play here, and we've said it for a long time that as a matter of principle, Australia should be part of asserting freedom of navigation and the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea in the South China Sea. And I think that's an important principle to state. Now, exactly how that principle is enacted in operational terms, really only the Government can say. And the other point I'd make here David, is at one level freedom of navigation ought to be a very routine matter. It's not something that should be made a song and dance of. And so again, exactly where Australian ships have engaged in freedom of navigation operations is something that the Government needs to be asked, and they're the ones in a position to respond.

**SPEERS:** Let me turn to a couple of domestic matters. You called out the Deputy Prime Minister Michael McCormack the other day, demanding an apology from him after his comments about Pacific Islanders. *'They'll be okay with climate change in part because they can come here and pick our fruit.'* He has issued, well I guess a qualified apology. He says 'look if any insult was taken I sincerely apologise'. Do you accept that and do you welcome that?

**MARLES:** Well let me firstly say, insult was taken. I've been contacted since his comments from people in the Pacific and I can assure Michael McCormack and the Australian people: insult was taken. It's good an apology has been made. It's a week down the track. But there's a common denominator here, David. Whether you looking at Michael McCormack's comments, whether you look at Peter Dutton cracking a joke with Scott Morrison about the effects of climate change on people in the Pacific, when you look at Melissa Price and her comments to the former President of Kiribati, AnoteTong, all of this indicates that this is a Government which deep down just do not get it. There is a deep ignorance about the circumstances which are facing the people of the Pacific. And there is an enormous disrespect shown by all of those comments, about their fate and about their future. And that's what's being heard in the Pacific.

It's great to be talking about a Pacific step up on the one hand, but if you don't actually have a belief in it, if you're not acting from the right motivations, well then it is impossible to actually make that happen. And this is really central, David, to Australia's national interest. Australian leadership starts in the Pacific, and developing the leadership side of our international personality is completely central to our ability to shape what are as challenging a set of strategic circumstances that Australia has faced since the Second World War.

At every level, this Government is absolutely missing the point. And when you look at all of these comments, what you ultimately see is a group of Government Ministers, David, which at the end of the day are just muppets.

**SPEERS:** Look, finally talking of climate policy, here in Australia of course it's contributing to a bit of an investment drought in the energy market. Today the Energy Market Operator has again warned more blackouts are on the way this summer. The situation is deteriorating it would seem, it's worried about decreasing reliability of coal and gas generators in particular. What should be done about this, does Labor actually have an energy policy right now?

**MARLES:** Well David, so what happened in May, sadly, was we lost an election. We'll have a whole set of policies going into the next election - that's a few years away - this is a report though which is talking about what will happen over the course of this summer. So the issue is what is the Government doing here? What this highlights is that there is no policy that the Government is able to; be able to bring to bear in this space - after six years there is no policy certainty. It's for that reason that there is no investment in our electricity grid, and it is that failure of investment which is seeing an ageing and deteriorating grid

giving rise to the concerns that have been expressed in this report and the possibility of blackouts.

So the buck absolutely stops at the Government's door here, there's no question about that. They're about to go to their seventh year of Government, their sixteenth energy policy. This is a Government which simply cannot get a policy together and we would like to work with them in a bipartisan way, but you can't even start talking about that until the Government get to the starting line of having a policy that they can get through their own party room - and this is a direct function of the failure to do that.

**SPEERS:** Bipartisanship is often talked about here, but hard to achieve. I mean I appreciate Labor's reviewing its policy positions, but let me ask you one thing. Do you still want to reduce emissions by 45 per cent or is that now open?

**MARLES:** We have made it clear that we will be reviewing all the policies that we took to the last election and in that sense we're - you know, we're starting again. But really, this is not about us.

This is about what's going to happen this summer, and that's on the Government - and its failure to come up with settled policy in relation to energy is why we are facing the prospect of blackouts in Victoria over the course of this summer. And, we would like to achieve bipartisanship but we're nowhere near that until we've actually got a settled position from the Government itself about what it intends to do - it's up to its sixteenth energy policy - this is a government which has got no idea.

**SPEERS:** Richard Marles, Acting Labor Leader, thanks very much for joining us this afternoon.

**MARLES:** Thanks David.

**ENDS**

Authorised by Paul Erickson, ALP, Canberra.