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E&OE TRANSCRIPT

TELEVISION INTERVIEW

SKY NEWS

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SUBJECTS: Bushfire crisis; smoke haze; Climate Change; Iran.

TOM CONNELL: My next guest on the program is Labor's Deputy Leader, Richard Marles joining us from our Melbourne studio. Richard Marles, thanks very much for your time. We have got the Government's response to the bushfire crisis taking shape now. Obviously it is a \$2 billion recovery fund, wildlife fund as well. A Royal Commission on the way. These are all moves that Labor seemingly would welcome.

DEPUTY LEADER OF THE AUSTRALIAN LABOR PARTY, RICHARD MARLES: Sure. But it's taken the Government a long time to act here. And we actually need to see the Government taking a position of national leadership. I mean we had the Prime Minister doing an interview on Sunday where he essentially intimated that national crises were almost State issues and that there hadn't previously been an expectation of national leadership when it comes to this- which is patent rubbish. This is nothing more than an excuse from a Prime Minister who is trying to avoid responsibility for his consistent failures over the last two months. And we actually need to see Scott Morrison and this Government taking a position of leadership in response to this national crisis now.

CONNELL: Well there's, you know, leadership and I suppose getting out to fire grounds being the person there that people are hearing from each day and there's also the mechanics of Governments. What the Prime Minister was pointing out was various

mechanics including calling out the Defence Force did make this a bit difficult and he wanted to make a change in this area. Is that fair enough?

MARLES: Well firstly, we look to our Prime Minister for support, for empathy in a moment of national crisis like this. It's an important part of the job, of the role that he has to play and he is obviously failed in that. I mean walking around affected areas forcing people to shake his hand is not the kind of empathy that I think that we would be expecting from our Prime Minister. But even in terms of the practical decisions that you've described, this is a Prime Minister and a Government which has been very slow off the mark and you can look at the role of the ADF, I mean we were calling for a role for the ADF much earlier than this Government acted. It is good that we've seen the call out of reservists. It is good that we are seeing the ADF now playing a role and certainly we would applaud the exemplary work of all our men and women in uniform but it took a long time for the Government to act on it. And when they ultimately did there wasn't a heap of consultation or advice given to the various state authorities about what they were doing.

CONNELL: Well just on the ADF, the Government says they have been involved for months it's been more behind the scenes. We always had a very public call up of reservists recently. But what are you saying specifically should have been done earlier?

MARLES: Well we've seen a significant step up in the role of the ADF that could have happened earlier. You're right, the ADF has been playing a role in the background for some months. As in fact the ADF has played a role in crises of this kind over the decades. And again, the intimation that we saw from Minister Littleproud and from the Prime Minister that this is somehow unique, that the ADF are playing a role in a national crisis of this kind, is obviously wrong. This is something going back to Black Saturday- going back much earlier in fact. We've seen the ADF play roles in national crises of this kind. But I mean, the whole point here Tom, is that something of an unprecedented nature was unfolding towards the end of last year. We could see that, in fact the whole nation could see it. And so trying to work out a role for the ADF which was more significant than it was playing at that that point in time was an obvious step but ultimately the Government obviously took that step, but they were pretty slow.

CONNELL: Just on that, I mean if you look at the recent ramping up of the ADF; It's been about providing this support for evacuation, also providing support for example on Kangaroo Island, particularly bearing a lot of the livestock. I mean, these are not roles they could have done earlier. What are you saying they could have done earlier?

MARLES: Well I think that the Government was slow to move in terms of stepping up the role of the ADF in relation to this-

CONNELL: Can you put a specific element on that?

MARLES: Ultimately it is for the Government to map that out. The ADF have skills and capacities and abilities and assets- physical assets that it can bring to bear here it's not in fighting the fires so much, it's about providing support to those who are doing that. But ultimately we have seen what the ADF has been able to do in terms of providing that support with this step up. The point we make is that that could have happened earlier.

CONNELL: The smoke in Melbourne is a big talking point today. It's pretty bad from what we've seen in the reports. Are you experiencing it? Concern amongst people for their families as well.

MARLES: Yeah, I mean we're getting a taste I think today, and we've had a couple of times in the last few weeks of what Sydney has been going through really for months now. The air quality is hazardous, it has peaked at the level of hazardous. It's stopping a whole lot of activities over the Christmas holidays. Where people are looking down the end of their streets and not being able to see the end of their streets and kids who had a whole lot of activities have found that they have been cancelled as a result of the smoke today. And I guess what it says is that; this is something which is real. It's impacting everybody and you couldn't get a bigger indication of the need for action on the part of the Government. I think it is important that we see more funding for research into the impacts of this smoke haze. It's really important that the government is engaging in public warnings; particularly to those who are most affected the elderly and asthmatics. And we've also been calling for the Government to work with state authorities to make sure that people get access to the respiratory specialists that they need at this time because there is certainly a huge call on that expertise right now.

CONNELL: Yeah, I can tell you it's been weeks in Canberra- very bad air quality and quite a bit in Sydney too, so you are talking a lot of Australia's east coast, now. Just broadly; May of course was billed as a climate change action- voters turned up and didn't seem too concerned. Do you think that's changed?

MARLES: I think the events of the last few months have brought home exactly what

changes in our climate mean. This has been an unprecedented event and it's extended for months. I think the thing that most people are pointing out is that we've had fires going back I think as early as September, and there is the expectation of fires continuing for at least a couple of more months, and there's almost been a continuity- there hasn't been a break from that. And that's something which is very new and I think that people are registering that this is a very different circumstance and we need to be acting on this. I think people are also seeing that what we've got in the current Government is a Government which really has its head in the sand in respect of climate change action. I mean, I read a whole lot of the initiatives that they've put out to the press today; you know these are all things that we were talking about ten years ago. When people look back at the Abbott-Turnbull-Morrison Government they're going to see a lost decade when it comes to climate change action, at a point in time which was really critical.

CONNELL: Just wanted to get your thoughts finally, in your portfolio area; on Iran. The justification from the Trump Administration that there was an imminent attack that was going to be carried out by the Iranian General assassinated. There hasn't seen any evidence of that. Is that troubling?

MARLES: Well it's very difficult to comment on the American action here without all the information at hand. I mean we're not sitting in the chair that the Americans are and obviously I'm here as a member of the Opposition in Australia-

CONNELL: The Defence Secretary said; well he hasn't seen any evidence of that. Is that a concern that there's a sort of seemingly unilateral action on a state actor, here?

MARLES: Well it's a very big step that America took and I think obviously in those moments it's important, without passing judgment or comment on whether it was right or wrong, it's obviously important that those actions be justified and it's important that America does that.

CONNELL: Had they done that so far?

MARLES: Well again, I think it's I think it's important that America is out there explaining its actions. I'd leave it at that.

CONNELL: You are saying it is important they explain it, I'm just asking if you think they had explained them yet or there needs to be more explanation?

MARLES: I think there has been some explanation but I think it is important in a matter such as this that America explains what it's doing. But ultimately I think what is in the national interest, in fact the global interest is that we are urging all parties to engage in a de-escalation of tension within that region. That there has been a degree of that over the last few days which is obviously welcome. And it's obviously welcome in the context of HMAS Toowoomba heading off to that part of the world right now. And it is very important that we see a de-escalation of tensions and I'd call on all parties to engage in that.

CONNELL: Deputy Labor Leader, Richard Marles appreciate your time today. Thank you.

MARLES: Thanks, Tom.

ENDS

Authorised by Paul Erickson, ALP, Canberra.