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E&OE TRANSCRIPT
TELEVISION INTERVIEW
SKY NEWS
WEDNESDAY, 29 APRIL 2020

SUBJECTS: Australia's diplomacy with China; easing of social distancing restrictions; proposed funding for private and independent schools; lifting the ban on golf.

KIERAN GILBERT, HOST: I am joined now by the Deputy Labor Leader, the Shadow Defence Minister Richard Marles. Now, Richard Marles thanks so much for your time. Very interesting diplomacy from the Chinese authorities in Australia over the last 24 hours, we're seeing the embassy pushing back really strongly at some of the language around the investigation, calls for that. In Melbourne today we saw the Consul in Melbourne alongside the Health Minister supporting the acquisition of Ten million coronavirus tests. What do you make of that?

RICHARD MARLES, DEPUTY LEADER OF THE AUSTRALIAN LABOR PARTY:

Well certainly the Consul assisting and in speaking with the Government around the acquisition of that equipment is really, is a good step forward. It's also to state the obvious to have this kind of exchange between China and Australia right now feels less than ideal. I mean, it is important to have ultimately an inquiry, and one that is transparent in relation to the origins of the coronavirus and that's not so much in my mind about applying blame- there'll be plenty of time for that- but it is about a search for understanding as to what has happened here from the point of view of China but also from the point of view of the world. But I think what we really need to see in relation to this latest exchange is a reduction in the heat around it.

GILBERT: Well, so you agree with Twiggy Forest, that things and that people should simmer down?

MARLES: Well there's a lot to be focussed on in Australia right now. The question of the social distancing that's in place, what the pathway out of that looks like. How the Government's relief package is operating, those people who are missing out but also how long it's going to stay in place and exactly how it will be withdrawn. I mean it's not as though we aren't faced with a huge menu of issues in Australia right now in terms of guiding our way through the coronavirus crisis and it seems to me that that should be the focus of Government.

GILBERT: So in terms of the investigation as well, Andrew Forrest said to me and you heard in that comment; he wants a timeline beyond the U.S. election that countries in our region as well, just entering the phase of infections. We thankfully look like we've got on top of it for now but others don't have that luxury.

MARLES: Well that's right. Look, I think it is fair enough to be talking about an inquiry which gives us a sense of understanding about what the origins of the coronavirus are because that will also, I think help work our way through this from a global point of view. I'd like to understand what diplomatic work the Government has undertaken with other countries around the world to make an inquiry of this kind a legitimate possibility. We haven't heard from the Government really about what efforts, diplomatic efforts they have engaged in globally around getting an independent inquiry off the ground. I think it would have been better to have got a sense of that before the Government was announcing this push. But to be fair we do need to get that kind of understanding. But we also need to be pretty focussed right here in Australia now about what's going on, about how we walk down the path of easing restrictions, and over what timeframe that occurs. And it seems to me that's where the focus of Government activity should be. And obviously the exchange that we've seen in the last 24 hours between Australia and China is less than ideal.

GILBERT: But when you- when you say that we haven't got enough information on what the Government's done diplomatically, the Prime Minister has released information that he's spoken to world leaders on coronavirus and the very issue that we're talking about.

MARLES: Well it's not clear to me what effort the Government has undertaken around the specifics of the proposal that they're putting forward in relation to an independent inquiry. Certainly that wasn't part of the announcement- if you like- that the Government made in relation to this. So, if this is a serious proposition, and I just think it's important that the Government is making clear to the Australian people who they've got on board in terms of pursuing this in terms of other countries around the world. But I also just think, surely the focus right now is here in Australia, and the issues that we are facing and how we guide our country through this crisis, and on the other side of it.

GILBERT: The Shadow Foreign Minister Penny Wong spoke in an opinion piece this week about the need for a reset, not disengagement with China. How does that work?

MARLES: Well, we've got to be clear that we are gonna be engaging with China for a long time to come. If anyone is walking along under the illusion that we can disengage with China, that is pure fantasy. And so it's a relationship that needs to be taken very seriously, and a relationship where we would want Australia to be taken as seriously as possible by Beijing. That's ultimately the currency which gives us the levers to navigate what is a very complex relationship. And so, it's resetting in a way which enables us to build our weight- if you like- in terms of how Beijing sees our country so that we can navigate these issues. Bearing in mind, that engagement with China is clearly going to be a necessary part of how we move forward.

GILBERT: When you look at some of the, more broadly now, you've been talking about the challenges we face with the coronavirus, the curve has been squashed, at least in the short term. That must be encouraging for you, as you watch this. And I know we've spoken over recent weeks about this this pandemic but what we've seen the results have been incredible. So the Prime Minister's now talking about relaxing some of the restrictions. How soon should we start seeing that, Richard Marles?

MARLES: Well look, it's a fair question and it's a good question and you know you're right that

the curve is very encouraging. And the small number of cases that we're now seeing appear, based on social distancing that's been put in place and the way in which the border has effectively been closed to people coming into Australia is obviously a very good thing. You know, we were arguing very strongly that those measures needed to be done sooner rather than later- and precisely so that we could get to this point and minimise the size of the problem that the country was facing. I think, as we now look forward and think about how we navigate our way out of this, it's important that we are thinking about the economy and the way that the Prime Minister described that today. But we need to be thinking about that not just over the coming weeks but actually over the coming months and the coming years. In that sense, whatever steps we take have to have that kind of timeframe in mind because we clearly don't want to be easing restrictions again. This is a process we only want to do once. And to move too early for example and give rise to a situation where there was another outbreak which meant that we had to move into some social distancing situation again, is obviously the last thing that we would want. So, I think it's really important that we are- we're approaching this cautiously and in a measured way so that the easing of restrictions is a process we only have to do it once.

MARLES: Do you like the sound of this submission from the Restaurant and Caterers Association that my colleague, Andrew Clennell reported on, presented to New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia and Queensland Premiers obtained by him and reporting; the best practice approach would be things like pre bookings or sign ins, to have everyone's details, phone numbers, e-mails, names of every individual that goes to a cafe or restaurant, therefore having that tracing capacity, if required. That there'd be tap and go only payments, no condiments on tables, laminated or disposable menus- the whole list of things in this submission that make the reopening of cafes and restaurants viable within weeks, hopefully.

MARLES: Well it's a really interesting proposal and I heard Andrew describe it and hopefully I'm sure it will be taken very seriously by the National Cabinet. I think it speaks to a few things; firstly there is obviously a keen desire, as we all completely understand and is right for the hospitality industry to get back, up and running and working. And when we get to a point that we're going back to restaurants again, there will be a feeling that normality has returned. I think placing case tracing at the centre of their proposal makes sense to me, I mean you would want to look at the detail of that but part of our pathway to normality- or a pathway out of the social distancing we're experiencing at the moment is going to have a lot to do with effective case tracing, and the Government is obviously focussed on that as well. But I come back to that other point that I make; when we're thinking about what's best in respect of the economy, we need to be thinking about it over the medium and the long term. We only want to have to do this once. And so really we need to be very cautious in the way in which we approach the question of how we ease restrictions and make sure that we're getting this right, so that we only have to do it once and I think proposals of this kind are really a constructive offering from the private sector to help us navigate our path into the next phase of this very strange year that we are living through.

GILBRET: And very strange indeed. The Government's talking about its federal funding being tied to the reopening of private and independent Catholic schools by mid-year. There could be an inequity, couldn't there between the state schools and particularly Victoria and New South Wales and those independent schools.

MARLES: Well again, in terms of what the Government has put forward it does raise a whole lot of questions and probably more questions than it answers actually. And we want to have a proper understanding of exactly what the Government is proposing here and we'll have a good look at it. But the question you raise, about the relative equity between the private school system- the Catholic school system and the state school system, I think is a really good question and we need to understand how that would work. And it's to state the obvious that it would be far better if

we were in a situation where there was a set of consistent and clear messages coming at a national level around what should be happening here. And this worries me about what this says to the functioning of the National Cabinet that we are in this kind of debate at the moment, and that the Government has gone to this place. We really do need one set of messages from the Federal Government and ultimately what underpins this is the question you raised earlier; what is a pathway out? And how do we make sure that we navigate this pathway on terms where we only do it once? And that's really got to be the priority in terms of how we start the process of easing restrictions. We want to make sure we only ever have to do this once.

GILBERT: You talk about the need for one message, but the Prime Minister has been quite consistent hasn't he? In terms of saying that he thinks that schools should be reopened, the medical advice suggests that, he's being consistent right throughout. So isn't the Government simply doing what he has argued? The states are more cautious on that front.

MARLES: Well I don't think that there has been consistent messaging at all, actually, on a whole range of issues from the Government over the journey. And, I think schools has probably been the high point of that. I mean, there needs to be- it would be much better if there were one national position in relation to this. And at the end of the day, the Prime Minister is our national leader, he's the person who's established this national process, through the National Cabinet and that's where the buck stops. And it would be much better if we had one approach to this across the country- so the kind of questions around inequities that you suggested don't ultimately come to fruition. If we get to a situation where we've got different systems going at different paces, that is obviously going to be less than ideal.

GILBERT: You'll be hoping that Daniel Andrews lifts the golf ban pretty soon, I would've thought.

MARLES: Well, you're speaking to a passion of yours and mine. So I have to say, my fingers are crossed there. I'm being a very good golfer at the moment by not playing golf in this State given what the State's position is. But when that particular moment happens, I will be- there'll be one person in this town who will be rejoicing.

GILBERT: Yeah, absolutely very predictable that, no doubt you'll be out there straightaway. Thank you very much for that, Richard Marles, I appreciate it.

MARLES: Pleasure, Kieran.

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Authorised by Paul Erickson, ALP, Canberra.