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**DEPUTY LEADER OF THE AUSTRALIAN LABOR PARTY**  
**SHADOW MINISTER FOR DEFENCE**  
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**E&OE TRANSCRIPT**  
**TELEVISION INTERVIEW**  
**ABC 24 AFTERNOON BRIEFINGS**  
**WEDNESDAY, 13 MAY 2020**

***SUBJECTS: Trade tensions with China; the economy; Sports Rorts; Chair of the Covid Commission***

**PATRICIA KARVELAS, HOST:** China's move to ban some Australian beef imports, and its threat to impose tariffs on barley producers has been a cause of concern in Canberra. I spoke to the Deputy Labor Leader Richard Marles, a little earlier. Richard Marles, welcome.

**RICHARD MARLES, DEPUTY LEADER OF THE AUSTRALIAN LABOR PARTY:** Good afternoon, Patricia. How are you?

**KARVELAS:** Good. Labor has accused the Government of mismanaging our relationship with China. What evidence do you have that the Government has mismanaged the relationship?

**MARLES:** Well obviously we have got a very worrying development at the moment, but the relationship with China has not been heading in a good direction for years now. And I think what we are missing from the Government is a clear articulation of what its strategy is, in relation to our relationship with China. And making it clear, obviously, that it is a relationship that we value. China is our largest trading partner and in the absence of that clear articulation from the leading figures in the Government, from the Prime Minister, from the Foreign Minister, what we are left with is a whole lot of comments from backbenchers-

Government backbenchers- which are quite inflammatory, and in a sense end up filling the void of not actually hearing from the Government and the senior Ministers about what they are trying to do with this relationship.

**KARVELAS:** What would you have done differently, then? I mean, is it just that if you are in government, shut up your backbenchers? What could they have actually done differently that would have had different outcomes in these instances this week?

**MARLES:** I think what is really important here is that you build relationships, and that you proceed along the path of placing front and centre that this is a relationship that we value. I mean, one of the problems we have got right now is it is hard to point to a significant relationship which exists between any member of the Morrison Cabinet and a senior Chinese figure. And so there is no ballast to the relationship and the problem with that is, not only does it mean that it is difficult to make headway in times like this but also in terms of providing the really critical ballast so that we can have our voice when difficult things need to be said. That ballast is not there. So, it is important that we understand the origins of the coronavirus. We do have lots of difficult discussions that we need to have with China. And we need to conduct them from a place where we are able to make clear what our national interest is, but this is all the more reason why there needs to be that fundamental ballast in the relationship from the start and evidently that doesn't exist.

**KARVELAS:** Victoria's Treasurer, Tim Pallas, has blamed 'inelegant interventions and a use of language to vilify China' for the country's decision to suspend beef imports- these four Australian abattoirs we have been talking about- also these tariffs in relation to barley. Do you agree with him?

**MARLES:** I think we have to take what the Chinese have said in relation to their decisions at face value. But certainly the comments that have been made by the Victorian Treasurer, I think those sentiments are felt elsewhere in the community- and certainly if you look at our agricultural sector, I think they are very worried that what is playing out in relation to them is a consequence of how the Government has managed this-

**KARVELAS:** Sure, but you are saying that you don't agree, that there is no evidence?

**MARLES:** What I am saying is- I am taking the Chinese at face value. But clearly, there have been issues in respect of the relationship with China, which predate the call for an

independent inquiry into the origins of the coronavirus. Really this is a relationship that has been on the slide now for a number of years, and it means that in a difficult moment as this, there just isn't the ballast in place to be able to deal with this. Like, we really need to hear from the Prime Minister right now about how he sees the relationship progressing, and specifically, how he sees the management of these issues, because our agricultural sector is facing real threats, if we do see a decline in trade with China, for States around the country. And we just end up at the starting point here; China is our largest trading partner. Evidently, it is a relationship that we have to value.

**KARVELAS:** Sure, but do you accept that this isn't an easy thing to manage? Labor has provided bipartisan support for the Government's call for an inquiry into the origins of coronavirus. If that has inflamed tensions with China- and clearly if we trust the words of the Chinese Ambassador, it has, at least on that issue- what could the Government have done differently? You have provided support on that issue, but you are sort of saying, fix the relationship with China, I suppose it is not that easy to fix, is it?

**MARLES:** No-one is suggesting this is easy. But the relationship with China is enormously complex, and that is the point. This has been going on now for a number of years, in terms of seeing a decline in the relationship, and it is not just since the Government has called for an inquiry in relation to the origins of the coronavirus. Yeah, we do think that is an important inquiry to occur. We do think it is important for the world to understand how this virus started. And it is not just for China but for the world. And we need to do that less from a point of view of blame but much more from the point of view of having an understanding, so we can prevent this from occurring again. But precisely because there are difficult conversations that need to be had in the context of this relationship, there needs to be a significant amount of ballast in the first place. And that quite evidently is not there, and it is not helped by, a void being created, so much of the time by the leadership of this Government, which is fuelled by their backbenchers who, one after another, come out with a series of inflammatory comments.

**KARVELAS:** Do you expect more bans or tariffs to be announced by China? Should we be prepared for that?

**MARLES:** Well I certainly hope not. I certainly understand the considerable concern within the agricultural sector about the prospect of that. And it is again why ultimately we need to be hearing from the Prime Minister as to how he is going to act in a way which stops that from occurring.

**KARVELAS:** Just finally, Marise Payne, who is the Foreign Minister has responded to Labor's concerns that she is not doing enough media, that she is not out there enough, saying that it is not necessarily for her to have a public argument with the Opposition. Doesn't she have a point? Do you want megaphone diplomacy from the Foreign Minister? She has clearly been working throughout this coronavirus crisis; rescue flights, all of the work that DFAT and she have been doing. Why should she be doing more media interviews?

**MARLES:** I think that is actually a ridiculous comment on Marise Payne's part- it implies that the only point of making public comment about anything in public policy is in order to have an argument with your opponent. That is not what we're saying at all. Foreign policy is a critical part of government action. And the Australian people deserve to hear from our Foreign Minister about how that policy is being carried out. That is not about megaphone diplomacy. I think it is really important that there is not megaphone diplomacy. And that diplomacy can happen in the normal way, but it is completely possible within the context of that to give an explanation to the Australian people about what is the guiding philosophy behind the way in which the Government is conducting our foreign policy which is critically important to us, as a nation. Instead, we hear nothing. And we hear so much more from a whole lot of the Government backbenchers who are filling the space of this Government's voice when it comes to their relationship with China.

**KARVELAS:** Labor hasn't really spent an overwhelming amount of time on the 'sports rorts' issue. Is that because you figure it has run out of steam or there's not enough public interest in it?

**MARLES:** No, I think there is considerable interest in the expenditure of public money and the extraordinary way in which that money was spent in the lead up to the last election- and the completely biased way in which this particular program was allocated. There are real questions about who was the decision-maker in all of this. And I think that the Australian people do want to understand that. Not surprisingly, Patricia, we have been through- and are still going through- a significant crisis and it is understandable that people's attention is focused on that. But as we return to a more normal environment, and there is obviously still a way to go in that, I don't think the issues that the Australian public had prior to the arrival of coronavirus will suddenly disappear. And I think they are all still there. And I think people want answers to those questions and we will still be pursuing them.

**KARVELAS:** Oh look, accountability is important, I will agree with you there on the broader issue. I just want to get your response to this news that Nev Power, who is heading this Covid-19 Commission, is to be paid \$500,000. I mean, this is obviously as so many Australians lose their jobs and others are taking pay cuts, what do you make of that?

**MARLES:** Ultimately I think that is a matter for the Government to provide explanation for that, I am obviously not aware of the circumstances of how he has been hired.

**KARVELAS:** Does it make you raise your eyebrows in the economic environment we are in?

**MARLES:** I think with all of these decisions, it is a matter for the Government to give a clear explanation of the remuneration they are providing- and to provide that sense of comfort and confidence within the community that they are making a decision such as this appropriately.

**KARVELAS:** Thanks for your time.

***ENDS***

Authorised by Paul Erickson, ALP, Canberra.