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Labor



TRANSCRIPT

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SUBJECT/S: Syrian refugee crisis; CHaFTA.

DAVID SPEERS: As the world grapples with this refugee crisis stemming out in Syria. Here in Australia the debate has dominated the resumption of Parliament today. Labor just prior to Question Time announced they want to see Australia take an immediate 10,000 additional refugees from Syria, that's on top of our annual program which for this financial year is 13,750. These would be 10,000 permanent refugee places over the next year it's hoped by Labor. The Government is not ruling that out but unlikely to go that far. The Immigration Minister Peter Dutton has gone to Europe for talks on this, when he gets back the Government will announce further steps as to what Australia is going to do. Richard Marles is the Shadow immigration Minister and joins me now, thank you for your time this afternoon how have you arrived at this 10,000 figure?

RICHARD MARLES, SHADOW MINISTER FOR IMMIGRATION AND BORDER PROTECTION: Well firstly we would think it's a doable number. It would be a very significant contribution for Australia to make. If you look at what European countries are being asked to consider this week it's in a similar ballpark to that. On Wednesday it's expected that the European Union will put a plan of 120,000 people being resettled across the EU to its member states and that's broken up into the various states, reports are 31,000 for example to Germany, 24,000 to France, 10,000 sits well within that but when you look at the community sentiment out there, when you look at the goodwill that's being displayed from the states and I think that's a real game changer in terms of the states coming forward saying they are prepared to make a contribution to this. We believe that if the Prime Minister was to show some leadership here, get everyone around a table, we can do this, and it should be possible for Australia to put 10,000 places out there.

SPEERS: Why not wait until the Europeans make a decision on this. As you say they're meeting on Wednesday. It's not long to wait and see what they can agree on

and see what Peter Dutton can achieve. I mean was it about politics today to get in with this announcement?

MARLES: It's not about politics, we've got a community sentiment out there, We're seeing leadership on the conservative side of politics not occurring from our Prime Minister but from the NSW Premier and today the Victorian Opposition Leader.

SPEERS: Surely they're saying do more? They're not saying this is the number.

MARLES: They're saying, they're asking the Government to do more, you've got Government MPs knocking on the Prime Minister's door literally begging him to do more, Now, we think this is the way forward. We think 10,000 is an achievable goal. We think if you can get everyone around the table, you can look at different ways in which you can deal with the costs associated with that and this is a very serious commitment.

SPEERS: Do you have a ball park cost for this?

MARLES: It depends on the way in which you do it, which is why it's important to get people around the table. To give you a sense it's less than one year's humanitarian intake right now.

SPEERS: Which costs what?

MARLES: Again that can vary from year to year but bear in mind that when we were in Government we had it at 20,000 places a year. That was cut almost straight away by this Government down to 13,750.

SPEERS: That was because the bulk of that was made up with boat arrivals

MARLES: But we have still got a situation where the Government cut back on that and so this is something that we ought to be able to afford.

SPEERS: I just want to get a ball park cost here. Are we talking millions, hundreds of millions?

MARLES: Well again I'm not going to walk down that path David.

SPEERS: You know what the annual intake costs?

MARLES: It depends on how it is done. What we're suggesting is for example, the number of, if you could do it on the basis of community sponsored visas, which was a program that we set up, that is going to the community here, the Syrian community base here, and saying would you be willing to sponsor a number of these people to come on a humanitarian basis.

SPEERS: That would help bring down the costs?

MARLES: That would bring down the cost. If you can get family arrivals as part of all that, If you get people working rights which was not done for the these Kosovars in

the late 90s, all of these can be done to affray the cost and we think that if you get people around the table you have exactly that conversation, you then go and cost the proposal, this is a doable achievement and that's what we should be pursuing.

SPEERS: Let me ask you about the community sponsored program that you talk about there. Just specifically, Labor set up a community proposal pilot which I think was up to 5,000 places from five approved community organisations. How would that work?

MARLES: Well, so let's go to the history of that we were offering, when we were in Government, communities coming to Australia saying they were willing to pay for people to, genuine refugees, people who had been persecuted in their original countries to come here. And there was very little under the existing program that could be done other than to say, well, we can't help you, we take our advice from the UNHCR. So what we looked at was whether or not it was possible and this pilot program was about testing that, and it worked well, to say to the community, alright, if you are prepared to pay the costs of those people coming under this program we will look at doing that within the humanitarian program. It's been successful. It think certainly reduces costs. When you think about it in the context of the totality of Australia putting an ask on the table or putting an offer on the table, this is the community making a direct contribution to that. I think what we need to be doing is getting community leaders from the Syrian community around the table to see what they are prepared to do and that will help us to get a sense of how we can get to that 10,000 figure.

SPEERS: Whatever that 10,000 costs you're saying on top of that, \$100 million for the UNHCR?

MARLES: Indeed focusing on the Syrian crisis and again we're talking about something like the \$2.9 billion which is the call that has been made by the UNHCR to deal with the Syrian crisis. There is probably a third of that which has been met by international donors in relation to this. We think \$100 million is an appropriate figure to put out there and the point of that David, is that easily the cheapest way in which you can deal with humanitarian issues is at source and in far and away the majority of people who are displaced actually don't want permanent resettlement somewhere else in the world they just want to go home as soon as they can and so by helping –

SPEERS: But do you think that will be the case from Syria though?

MARLES: I definitely think that would be the case from Syria. I had the benefit earlier this year of visiting the Zaatari refugee camp which is in Jordan, on the border of Syria. About 83,000 people are within that camp and the vast majority of those people just want to go home. I spoke to a Syrian olive farmer, he and his family. That's what he any does -

SPEERS: That's not going to happen going any time soon in Syria though is it?

MARLES: I don't think it's going to happen in the next few months, we can say that. It's going to be a time frame measured in years. There are certainly going to be a

number of people who are going to want to seek permanent resettlement elsewhere in the world on an ongoing basis, but we need to help that source as well.

SPEERS: Let me ask you, you say you visited that refugee camp and you did say this afternoon this is not a new problem. This has been going for four years I think in Syria, why hasn't Labor said this before that you want to do more to help?

MARLES: We have said it before. We have absolutely said it before; the proposition that we put forward David at our national conference was exactly about doing more. We announced -

SPEERS: For Syria?

MARLES: For the world's problems, Syria being the central part of that.

SPEERS: No, but today you're talking specifically 10,000 from Syria.

MARLES: Of course but -

SPEERS: So Why weren't you doing that before?

MARLES: The contribution that we were proposing at our national conference, the \$450 about million to the UNHCR that we are talking about, is over a three year period that is dealing with the world's displaced and the crisis that the world is facing at the moment and the biggest component of that is Syria. So, inevitably a large component of that is going to be about Syria. When we talk about increasing our humanitarian intake over the next 10 years inevitably a significant component of that is going to be Syria.

SPEERS: This problem has been there for a long, a long time. People have been suffering in the refugee camps for years. Yes what's happened with the images of the toddler from Syria washing up on a Turkish beach has grabbed the world's attention, the influx now into Europe. But this is a problem that's been there for years in Syria.

MARLES: Well when you say years, the last couple of years. The Zaatari refugee camp for example is about 2.5 years old - so yes but we're not talking decades. It's really in the last 18 months or so that the UNHCR have come out and said that we really are seeing a spike in humanitarian need at the moment and the world needs to grapple with that, which is why the policy that we put through our national conference was really about Australia saying that we need to do more in the world today and the offering that we made at our national conference represents the single biggest offering by a potential Australian Government in our history and would represent the most generous offering of any country in the world today. You know, so it's not like we've just completely discovered this today, we were completely aware of this, but we need to be acting right now, there is a crisis. There is a history of Australia dealing with crises in the past. I mean Kosovo, Hawke dealing with the Chinese students in the aftermath of Tiananmen and indeed Fraser going back to Vietnam.

SPEERS: This year we have also seen a refugee crisis in our region with the Rohingya, why aren't we seeing a similar sort of response to that?

MARLES: Well the answer to that David is all these issues have their own complexities and have their own different stories. I was in Myanmar again in May of this year, I spoke to some of the Rohingya leadership, Rohingya political leadership and there is very mixed views in Myanmar itself about the resettlement of Rohingya in resettlement countries like Australia and partly their concern, which is understandable, is that if a lot of that happens it may well empty the Rohingya population out of Myanmar which is not what they want so these are difficult questions to grapple with, they each have their own story, but what is happening right now is a humanitarian crisis in in Europe we should be responding and we've who got a Prime Minister to be honest who has been dragged kicking and screaming to this, his language up until today has been that all that will be offered is what's out of the existing program which is the equivalent of going out there and saying we're not going to offer a cent.

SPEERS: Well he's been a bit more open -

MARLES: Not much David and there's been more leadership shown by the NSW Premier, by the Victorian Opposition Leader than we have seen from our Prime Minister.

SPEERS: Let me ask you finally, because we've got to wrap it up on the free trade agreement with China, you're a former Trade Minister under Labor, what is your view on whether at the end of the day this no should be supported or not?

MARLES: There's no doubt a China free trade agreement is critical to Australia's economic strategy going forward and we've been completely consistent on that and we played a very large role in negotiations in relation to a China free trade agreement when we were in Government. Indeed the current Trade Minister talks about these negotiations going on for 10 years, the bulk of that was under us. That said, there is a labour mobility clause which is in this particular agreement that we believe is open for abuse and we're legitimately prosecuting the case about that. We're concerned about what it would mean. It's not the labour mobility cause that we would have gone for if we were still in Government.

SPEERS: What specifically worries you about that?

MARLES: The absence of labour market testing, the ability for Chinese nationals to come on relatively small projects \$150 million is not a huge project.

SPEERS: They still have to do labour market testing when they come in.

MARLES: Well there are labour market testings exemptions in relation to that and we think -

SPEERS: But they existed under 457s for a long time. Exceptions for most 457s.

MARLES: The labour market testing exemptions which are provided for under this labour mobility clause go well beyond what currently applies under the 457 regime. That's our concern. We see this as having the potential for abuse and we're prosecuting that case.

SPEERS: But at the end of the day, you're not going to vote against a free trade agreement with China?

MARLES: We will see what happens when we get to that point in terms of what is actually put before the Parliament, but I think it's completely legitimate that we're arguing a case around that labour mobility clause now.

SPEERS: Richard Marles thanks for joining us this afternoon.

MARLES: Thanks David

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