

MEET THE PRESS

21 JULY 2013

INTERVIEW WITH MARK DREYFUS

KATHRYN ROBINSON, PRESENTER: We're hearing this morning that these refugees, that will be headed to PNG under this new deal, may not indeed be resettled there – that, indeed, they could end up back in Australia. We found that out after discussions with Shadow Immigration Minister Scott Morrison this morning. Is that the case?

MARK DREYFUS: Ah, well not at all. The agreement that we've reached with Papua New Guinea is for an unlimited number of asylum seekers who – anyone who arrives by boat in Australia will be transferred to Papua New Guinea, and will not be resettled in Australia. And I think what you heard from Scott Morrison, unfortunately, is just more of the negativity that we've become used to from the Opposition. It's very clear there's an unlimited number that can be sent. That's what the arrangement is with Papua New Guinea, and we've made it clear what our policy is.

DENNIS ATKINS: But Attorney, Mr Morrison based his assertion on a conversation with the PNG Prime Minister, Peter O'Neill, who said that, indeed, these people could be resettled in Australia.

MARK DREYFUS: Well, I don't think that's right, and I'm certain that's not what Prime Minister O'Neill said. I also met with Prime Minister O'Neill on Friday. You've seen the arrangement that – the signed arrangement that's been released, and it's a matter for Australia. Papua New Guinea has here agreed to take an unlimited number of people arriving by boat in Australia, transferred from Australia – they'll be dealt with under the Refugees Convention, to which Papua New Guinea a signatory, and will receive the full rights of the Refugees Convention, and be resettled in Papua New Guinea. And it's a matter of Australian policy – I'll say again, we will be sending everybody who arrives by boat to Papua New Guinea. You will no longer be resettled in Australia, and I'm not quite sure what Scott Morrison's talking about there.

TORY SHEPHERD: Well, Attorney-General, what if Mr O'Neill had a change of heart, or what if there's a coup and we have another leader – I mean, is it watertight? Is there actually, you know, a way to compel them to take every single person that we want to send to them?

MARK DREYFUS: You can speculate endlessly about what can occur in other countries. That's the difficulty of international relations, always. I know who I'd trust on international relations, and that would be Kevin Rudd, who has tremendous experience – he's built immediately on his longstanding relationships in the region.

He's been able to deal directly with the President of Indonesia, and you've seen a terrific outcome there from Indonesia, and that they've announced they're bringing to and end the visa-on-arrival arrangements in Indonesia for Iranians, you've seen the terrific outcome here with Papua New Guinea, where Prime Minister O'Neill met with our Prime Minister some weeks back, offered the arrangement that you now see put in place, and of course, came to Brisbane on Friday to sign up to this arrangement. I don't think there can be any doubt about the skill that our Prime Minister has shown. Kevin Rudd knows the region. This is part of the regional arrangements that everybody says we need to be putting in place to deal with this dreadful problem of people drowning at sea – more than 800 men, women and children – and babies – have drowned in recent years, trying to come to Australia through people smugglers, in unseaworthy boats. We just have to put it to an end.

DENNIS ATKINS: Mr Dreyfus, yesterday, and today, the Australian Government has advertised in all of the major newspapers around the country – are you expecting to sell a lot of copies of the 'Brisbane Sunday Mail' in South Java. This is politicking, isn't it?

MARK DREYFUS: On the contrary, there's an advertising campaign – multimedia advertising campaign – throughout the region, and as part of that campaign, we've got newspaper advertisements here in Australia, because, of course, we need to communicate in every way we can, with anybody that is contemplating paying a people smuggler to come to Australia, putting their lives at risk. They need to know that they will not be resettled in Australia. And one of the ways to communicate that in a quick way is to communicate with immigrant communities here in Australia, who will be in contact with their relatives, who may be considering coming to Australia. I think it's absolutely appropriate that we advertise in this way, in Australian newspapers.

TORY SHEPHERD: Attorney, how confident are you that this new PNG deal is going to hold up against any legal challenges? Refugee advocates are already saying it contravenes certain parts of the Refugee Convention.

MARK DREYFUS: Lawyers can say – they're free to say whatever they wish, but we have given very careful consideration to this arrangement with Papua New Guinea. We have the advantage of recent decisions of the High Court on which to base the course that we're adopting here. This arrangement with Papua New Guinea complies with our international obligations under the Refugees Convention, and it complies with Australian law, and I am confident that it will withstand challenge.

TORY SHEPHERD: There's a lot of language in the Convention, though, that we would seem to be abrogating our responsibility to look after the asylum seekers, by sending them away to Papua New Guinea. Are you absolutely confident that no challenge would be successful?

MARK DREYFUS: Well, I don't think it's right to suggest that that's what the Refugees Convention means. What the Refugees Convention means is that people are to be protected from persecution, and they are to be cared for appropriately.

And both of those things will occur in Papua New Guinea – which is, as I said earlier, is a signatory to the Refugees Convention, has withdrawn its reservations to the Convention in relation to people being transferred from Australia. So – and what that means is that people coming from Australia will have the full rights available to them under the Refugees Convention in Papua New Guinea.

DENNIS ATKINS: Mr Dreyfus, back in 2006, Kevin Rudd wrote in the ‘Monthly Magazine’ – talking about asylum seekers, and the UN Convention – that the Parable of the Good Samaritan is but one of many that deal with the matter of asylum seekers, and how we should respond to a vulnerable stranger in our midst. Hasn’t Kevin Rudd given up any idea of Australia being a Good Samaritan here?

MARK DREYFUS: Absolutely not. We are taking 20,000 refugees a year, that’s an increase from our previous level of 13,000. As the Prime Minister indicated on Friday, we are considering increasing the number to something closer to the 27,000 that the Houston panel recommended. We’re going to continue to take that 20,000, and you’ve got – I suppose one way of looking at it, Dennis, is you’ve got competing compassions here. It’s not compassionate to allow people to continue to drown at sea – men, women, children, whole families, drowning at sea. And it’s also not compassionate to not do what we can for people who have been languishing in refugee camps around the world. You’ve got that dreadful comparison, of is it more compassionate to take someone who arrives by boat or someone who’s been languishing in a refugee camp for, in some cases, more than a decade? Bear in mind that if someone does arrive by boat, and is assessed as a refugee, and is settled in Australia, that’s one less place in that 20,000 that would otherwise go to someone who is in a camp somewhere else in the world. There are no easy choices here in this area. It’s a very difficult policy area, and we’ve made some very tough decisions here in relation to the arrangement with Papua New Guinea.

KATHRYN ROBINSON: Attorney, is it compassionate to send people to PNG, when the Government’s own website, Smartraveller, urges a high degree of caution for Australians travelling to the area?

MARK DREYFUS: We are going to make sure that there are appropriate arrangements for anyone transferred from Australia – that’s someone who’s arrived by boat – to Papua New Guinea. And the starting point is that Papua New Guinea is a signatory to the Refugees Convention, and we’ll make sure that the full rights available under the Refugees Convention are available to anyone transferred. The second point is that we will be assisting Papua New Guinea, working with Papua New Guinea, making sure they’ve got appropriate resources, appropriate procedures in place, for everyone that’s transferred. But it is going to start straightaway, and that’s the message – that no-one who arrives by boat in Australia from now is going to be settled in Australia.