

MEET THE PRESS

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INTERVIEW WITH JULIE BISHOP

KATHRYN ROBINSON, PRESENTER: Ms Bishop, overnight it looks as though the US and Russia has brokered a deal to disarm Syria of chemical weapons. Do you think it would work?

JULIE BISHOP: I certainly welcome the news overnight that the United States and Russia have come to an agreement on a framework to secure and dismantle Syria's chemical weapons program. The agreement is to, over time, secure and dismantle the weapons stock under international control. And Secretary Kerry and Foreign Minister Lavrov have agreed a timetable that should see the complete elimination of the chemical weapons stocks by mid-2014. But in the meantime they have a shared assessment on the type of chemical weapons and the number that are actually in Syria. So there has been an acknowledgment that there is a significant stockpile.

KATHRYN ROBINSON: Barack Obama has come under criticism, particularly from the Republicans in the United States, for his handling of the events in Syria. Do you think he has done a good job?

JULIE BISHOP: Well this is a significant and very important step overnight. The idea that we now have an acknowledgment of the number and amount of chemical weapons in the Syrian stockpile, there is now a framework for the securing of that stockpile under international control, the United Nations will be considering a resolution that will be put forward jointly by the United States and Russia – so this is a positive step in the right direction. And is, as a result, I believe, of the United States making it quite clear that they would use military force if need be. And now, under the partnership, if you like, of the United States and Russia, we have this framework agreement and that's a positive sign.

BRENDAN NICHOLSON: Australia has got a key role in the United Nations over this month, as President of the Security Council. The American ambassador has suggested that if a military strike does become a last resort, if it's – if they do decide to proceed with it, the President of the Security Council has a right – and apparently it's been done in the past – to prepare a statement, which might, even if the Russians veto Security Council support for any military action, might actually allow the President to give a statement on behalf of the majority. Is that likely to happen?

JULIE BISHOP: That has been done in the past. And Australia certainly will have a role to play as the President of the Security Council for the month of September in particular, but also as a member of the Security Council more broadly. We're part of the permanent 15. But first things first, we want to see how this agreement between the US and Russia plays out in terms of the chemical weapons use. I note that during their joint press conference the signature Ronald Reagan phrase of “trust but verify” was used, and so it is a matter of ensuring that the Assad regime is completely open and accountable about its chemical weapons stockpiles. But this doesn't resolve the overall conflict that is continuing in Syria. And all sides are urging a political solution, and the UN Security Council will no doubt at times be debating a resolution in relation to the political solution in Syria.

PAUL BONGIORNO: Coming much closer to home, it looks like the new – the incoming Coalition Government is on a very sticky wicket when it comes to relations with Indonesia.

JULIE BISHOP: No, I don't accept that. In relation to the question of border protection, both Australia and Indonesia want to see an end to the people smuggling trade that is going on in Indonesia. And we both want to see an end to the deaths at sea. So we will work cooperatively with Indonesia to achieve those goals. And Indonesia has said that it doesn't want to see any breach of its sovereignty. We certainly respect that. We respect each other's sovereignty as enshrined in the Lombok Treaty. But we have policies that we wish to implement as soon as we're sworn in, and we will be working with Indonesia through a series of bilateral meetings and broader meetings that will occur as soon as I'm sworn in.

PAUL BONGIORNO: But does it seem that there was one message for the electorate in Australia and another message for Indonesia in face-to-face diplomatic meetings?

JULIE BISHOP: No. We are determined to ensure that we can dismantle the people smuggling trade and that we can stop these tragic deaths at sea. Indonesia understands that. What foreign minister Natalegawa said the other day was that he looked forward to getting the detail of our policies once we were in Government, and that's exactly what will happen. Over the next few days and weeks we will be working cooperatively with Indonesia. But I point out we're not seeking Indonesia's permission to implement our policies, we're seeking their understanding.

BRENDAN NICHOLSON: But some of those policies would have – you would have to get Indonesian permission, buying back boats, gathering in- virtually intelligence, Indonesian villages, on people smuggling. The Indonesian foreign minister has suggested that this would be an intrusion on their sovereignty and affect the partnership. How are you going to get around that?

JULIE BISHOP: No, of course we respect Indonesian sovereignty, as they respect ours. But the IOM is already operating in Indonesia collecting intelligence. And the idea of financial rewards, for example, for information, is hardly novel. The United States has been doing it for decades. And so, we will look at what policies we will implement-

PAUL BONGIORNO: Well, espionage isn't novel either. But you have to do it?

JULIE BISHOP: Well, I'm not talking about security and intelligence matters on Meet The Press, as much as you want me to, Paul. But there are many operational matters. We will get underway as soon as we can. I know that the briefings that Tony Abbott has already had with Defence and with our Operation Sovereign Borders team have already got under way. I have been present at a number of them. And so, we will work cooperatively with Indonesia, where we need to.

PAUL BONGIORNO: But do you think the Indonesians are trying on the new Government, announcing that they want 1.5 million hectares of cattle grazing country to then take that cattle directly to Indonesia? It has certainly upset your colleague Barnaby Joyce.

JULIE BISHOP: It has been embraced in other parts of the agricultural sector. The National Farmers' Federation thinks it's a good idea. It's one of these matters that we will discuss with Indonesia. And I have said before that we're going to have-

PAUL BONGIORNO: And with Barnaby Joyce?

JULIE BISHOP: And with my colleagues. I have said before that we are going to have a no-surprises approach to Indonesia, and I'm looking forward to sitting down with foreign minister Natalegawa.

PAUL BONGIORNO: Do you welcome their investment into agricultural land?

JULIE BISHOP: We certainly welcome foreign investment as long as it's in the national interest. And we have a robust foreign investment review board process and that will continue to be in place. We will make some changes to it, as we've indicated in the lead-up to this election, to make it more accountable, more transparent and give people greater understanding of what foreign investment review board processes involve.

BRENDAN NICHOLSON: Are you likely to make it to Indonesia before the talks in Bali?

JULIE BISHOP: Yes, I am planning to. We hope to meet up with the foreign minister Natalegawa in New York during the United Nations General Assembly Leaders' Week – that's the week after next. And we have plans to have a number of meetings actually, not just bilateral but also trilateral – Indonesia, East Timor, Australia – a number of meetings. And then I'm hoping to accompany Prime Minister Abbott – that's the first time I have said that – Prime Minister Abbott to Indonesia before the APEC meetings in Bali.

KATHRYN ROBINSON: Ah, Ms Bishop, if I can quickly take you to, before we hit the break, the ALP leadership tussle that's going on at the moment. Given that they are now giving their rank and file members the opportunity to vote for their leader, does that put pressure on the Liberal Party to do the same? To adopt the same style of voting for their leaders?

JULIE BISHOP: This is a matter for the Labor Party, how they wish to elect their leader, but it to me it appears they are setting themselves up for a Shorten versus Albanese contest for the long term, reminiscent of the Rudd-Gillard contest. And you don't have to be an observer to be able to see that this will end up as a Shorten versus Albanese versus Rudd contest in the longer term, because of course-

KATHRYN ROBINSON: So that's not something the Liberal Party would do?

JULIE BISHOP: Well, I wouldn't want to see that kind of contest occurring.

PAUL BONGIORNO: We wouldn't want Turnbull-Abbott, would we?

JULIE BISHOP: Well, we have our leader firmly in place, I can assure you. But this seems to be a recipe for more division. And given that the last two Labor leaders were betrayed by one Bill Shorten, I guess the only way you stop that betrayal going on is for Labor to vote in Bill Shorten. I mean, he can't stab himself in the back, can he?

KATHRYN ROBINSON, PRESENTER: Ms Bishop, the likely loss of Sophie Mirabella in Indi could mean that you will be the only woman in Cabinet next week. Do you think that would be a bad look for the Government?

JULIE BISHOP: Tony Abbott has indicated that he wants to see stability and maintain that stability in the leadership team and in the Cabinet. And of course, had Sophie Mirabella won her seat, she would have been in the Cabinet. But we do have many talented women in the Liberal Party, in the Coalition. And we have certainly seen a number of outstanding women come in as new candidates and now new members. So in time I expect to see many more women promoted, not only into the Ministry but also into the Cabinet. But at this time Tony's indicated that he wants to maintain the stability of the team that he took to the election.

KATHRYN ROBINSON: Okay-

BRENDAN NICHOLSON: Given that – Sophie Mirabella appears to have pulled off a most remarkable achievement in losing a rusted-on Coalition seat against the tide of a significant Coalition victory. Do you have any ideas how that happened?

JULIE BISHOP: Brendan, there is no such thing as a rusted-on seat on either side of politics. And nobody can take their seat for granted. And in this instance an Independent ran with the support of other parties and the preference flows went against Sophie. Sophie has been a real warrior for the Coalition. She's a very impressive contributor and I will certainly be sorry to see her go. But this is what happens in some seats, and so that's why we never take seats for granted. You try and get every single vote in every single seat across the country.

PAUL BONGIORNO: So you don't think it's a left wing conspiracy against Sophie?

JULIE BISHOP: Oh, I'm not into conspiracies.

PAUL BONGIORNO: Well, just – just going on to the Steve Bracks affair, um-

JULIE BISHOP: Oh, it's now been elevated to an affair, has it?

PAUL BONGIORNO: Well I – no, I have elevated it to an affair. Because, look, Tony Abbott, especially in recent weeks and months, has been talking the language of uniting the nation, governing for all. And it seems that the first, most dramatic move of the Government was to – to sack Steve Bracks, the former Labor Premier, from his job as consul-general. Was it – it looked a bit nasty, even?

JULIE BISHOP: Not at all. This should not have come as a surprise to everyone – we flagged it from the moment it was announced back in May. And what Labor did was highly unethical and highly inappropriate. And they were playing games with this appointment – a very significant appointment.

PAUL BONGIORNO: Well, hang on-

JULIE BISHOP: Just let me finish.

PAUL BONGIORNO: But they were Government.

JULIE BISHOP: No, let-

PAUL BONGIORNO: They were Government. You were Opposition.

JULIE BISHOP: Just let – No, let me finish.

PAUL BONGIORNO: They weren't caretakers.

JULIE BISHOP: They were playing games for the timing of this appointment to take effect a week after the election. Now in the normal course of things – and I've had this from senior DFAT people – in the normal course of things, the appointment would wait until the new Government was sworn in. And neither Steve Bracks nor Bob Carr consulted me about it. And in the meantime Steve Bracks got involved in campaigning against the Government – sorry, against the Coalition, in a couple of very high-profile instances, which was inappropriate. I did question his judgment over that. And I know Mr Bracks was advised by a number of people not to take up the position but to wait until the election. And as a-

PAUL BONGIORNO: But doesn't that still seem like it's partisan politics? Rather than-

JULIE BISHOP: Not at all. Not at all. Because at the same time I confirmed that ambassador Kim Beazley will remain in Washington for at least another 15 months under the Abbott Government. There are-

PAUL BONGIORNO: Is Nick Minchin the P for the job, now?

JULIE BISHOP: No, we have no – no candidate in mind. Over the next few weeks I will be looking to find the most appropriate person for the job in New York.

PAUL BONGIORNO: So a professional diplomat? Or a Liberal Party person?

JULIE BISHOP: I'm looking to see who is the most appropriate. I'm not against political appointments. But the political appointment is meant to have the ear of the government of the day, and the circumstances surrounding Steve Bracks' appointment, his subsequent behaviour, Labor's unethical behaviour, which was all to occur after the election, means that this was inevitable. But there are a number of Labor political appointments – a number of them – and I have not made any statement about them. And in fact, in the case of the most important political appointment and the most important diplomatic post – that is Washington – I have confirmed that Kim Beazley will be our man in Washington. We trust him. We know him. We think he is doing a good job.

BRENDAN NICHOLSON: Ah, Ms Bishop, over the last three years the Coalition has thundered about the parlous state of the Australian economy. Do we have a Budget emergency, and are there – or what are the immediate steps that the Coalition Government will take to deal with it?

JULIE BISHOP: Yes, the Budget is certainly in a parlous state. All this week Joe Hockey and Tony Abbott have been receiving briefings about it. We're doing the hard work now of getting on top of the briefing so that when we're sworn in, hopefully on Wednesday this week, then Joe will be able to issue directions, get on top of things to bring the Budget under control. And we will do the preparatory work now. We will not be making grandiose announcements and then not delivering on them. This will be the best-prepared Opposition coming into Government in living memory. And we're being purposeful and methodical, getting on top of the detail. And then once we are sworn in, then you will see some significant announcements.

BRENDAN NICHOLSON: But you believe – you believe that it, the state of the Budget is, or the economy is, as bad as you feared it would be?

JULIE BISHOP: I'm certainly concerned about the state of the Budget. The \$200 billion debt. The ongoing waste in programs that are still in place. Are things to be deeply concerned about. And you will be hearing a lot more from Joe Hockey on that, after he's sworn in as Treasurer.

KATHRYN ROBINSON: Ms Bishop, we're almost out of time, but there are some pictures on the front page of some of the papers today of Tony Abbott's new digs when he's in Canberra. Um, obviously he – the renovations going on at the residence down there. Is it a good look for the PM to be staying in student-like accommodation when he has got the best job in the country, the highest job in the country?

JULIE BISHOP: We are deeply aware that the Budget is \$200 billion in the red. We're deeply aware that Labor did not respect taxpayers' money.

PAUL BONGIORNO: Are you going to follow his example?

JULIE BISHOP: I'm already following his example. During briefings about my trip to New York I was told that ministers and departmental heads fly first-class on long trips. And I was told that the first-class fare to New York was \$32,000. And I said, "We are not travelling first-class. We are going business." \$32,000 when you can have an airfare for the fraction of the cost. So, we will respect taxpayers' money and we will put in place appropriate travel arrangements, accommodation, and I think that it's a good thing to save Australian taxpayers' money by having Tony staying where his security detail stay.