

MEET THE PRESS

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INTERVIEW WITH BILL SHORTEN

KATHRYN ROBINSON, PRESENTER: Mr Shorten, you're in the process of persuading your rank-and-file members to vote for you as ALP leader over Anthony Albanese. How can they trust you to be loyal to them when many have questioned your loyalty to Julia Gillard this year?

BILL SHORTEN: Well, I believe that ALP members can trust me to always, always take the tough decisions in the best interests of the Labor Party and, indeed, the nation of Australia. The change of leadership from Julia Gillard to Kevin Rudd was undoubtedly the hardest thing I have ever been involved in. For three years I steadfastly and actively, on and off the record, supported Julia Gillard. But it became clear to me, even in the dying days of June of this year, that Tony Abbott's policies might get both houses of Parliament an unfettered run, and they would get an overwhelming victory, the Coalition. I don't believe it's in the nation's interests or our democracy's interest to have one side of politics having overwhelming control of all the parliamentary institutions. So, hard decisions had to be made. But what I also appreciate is that you can have all the political logic in the world, but for people, it's a deeply emotional issue too. So, I believe it was the right decision in terms of the nation and in terms of how the Labor Party contributes to the nation's policies. Because it helps put a brake on some of the Coalition's more radical policies. But - I also respect people's emotional reaction.

MALCOLM FARR: But loyalty did become an issue last week, didn't it, between you and Mr Albanese? He raised it, you responded and said, "This is not a time for sledging." Will it continue to be an issue in the final two weeks of this leadership campaign?

BILL SHORTEN: Well, I do believe it's time to rule a line underneath some of the Rudd-Gillard - and some of the arguments that were had in the last Parliament. But when I arrived at Parliament at the end of 2007, I probably had underestimated some of the despondency or some of the rivalries which had set in the long years of Opposition of the Howard government. I think it's important we engage in generational change. What the Labor Party members want, as far as I can tell, is they want certainty, they want to have a say. They're going to get that. They also want to see a contest of ideas. I think what Australian people want in our democracy is a competition between the conservatives and Labor as to who's got the clearest map for the future. What will our country be like in 2020 and 2030? I'm putting myself forward because I believe I can help work the Labor team to a position that we can explain and support Australia's bright future for 2020, 2030 and beyond.

PHIL JACOB: And, Bill, what do you foresee happening in the event that either you or your rival wins the ballots happening next week? Do you think that perhaps a move to the backbench could be on the cards?

BILL SHORTEN: Well, no. I believe that whoever is successful, uh, the other person has already indicated - and I certainly have - that I would serve in whatever capacity that he thought useful. You used the word 'rival'. Let me be really clear. I don't consider Anthony Albanese a rival. I believe he's well-motivated and he has a view about what he could contribute to the leadership. And I do too. My particular proposition is that for his strengths in Parliament, my strengths are also campaigning outside of Parliament, building a movement. People out in Australia want all sorts of things from their political parties. Labor needs to not just talk to its true believers - and they are important. We need to engage new constituents, small business, farmers, people who live in our regions, women. We need to do - I believe, talk about the future issues which are currently affecting our society. And I have already flagged, each day of the last three or four days, some of my priorities, if elected leader. Science, research and innovation. That's important.

MALCOLM FARR: Well, can we go to something-?

BILL SHORTEN: Tackling the taboo topic of domestic violence. And indeed dental care, yesterday I flagged as an ongoing issue for reform.

MALCOLM FARR: Can we go to something Mr Albanese raised today on ABCW – he said he would review or change the decision to move single parents to the dole, essentially. He says that was a bad move that collectively Cabinet had to take responsibility for. Do you agree with him? Would you also, at least, review that decision as part of ALP policy?

BILL SHORTEN: I actually said Monday night at member forums in Sydney that I think we sent all the wrong messages out about sole parents. What we want to do is support our sole parents be able to work. But I think the measures we took had the wrong consequences. I do agree that we should take responsibility for that. I'm looking forward to working with our members of the Labor team to revisit our position on sole parents. Sole parents do it hard. They work hard and a lot more sole parents are working, I think, than some of the initial debate about them gives them credit for. I was on the 'Q&A' show much earlier this year and I indicated then, too, that I thought there was some pretty strong arguments and evidence coming from some of the council for single parents and their children, and ACOSS. So yes, I think the Labor Party as a whole wants to revisit this and reposition the debate about sole parents, because I think there are legitimate grievances which have emerged from the policy that we articulated.

PHIL JACOB: And, Bill, how important do you think it is that these changes were made to the way that Labor elects their new leader? Do you think perhaps that it will dilute the role that perhaps the unions have played in the past?

BILL SHORTEN: Well, I understand that unions play an important role in the Labor Party and, indeed, in our modern society and I am a trade unionist. But what I also understand is we need to modernise our relationship. I think giving 40,000 branch members is an outstanding idea. I spoke in favour of this at the Balmain Caucus meeting before the election, where the rule changes were mooted. And I spoke strongly, because I believe that Labor can steal a march on other groups in Australian politics. If you get the message that if you join the Labor Party you have a say in the important decisions, you're not just cannon fodder to hand out leaflets. And so I think this is a good move.

I don't think anyone who is genuinely interested in the advancement of the Labor movement is concerned about more people having a say. And I know the parliamentary party endorse this change. And I certainly do.

MALCOLM FARR: Look, it's a lot of travel involved for you and Mr Albanese. And I think you're up to your 18th public forum today. This has been very civil this time around. But in future contests, it might get very uncivil and very expensive. Could it be a case that the wealthiest candidate will win?

BILL SHORTEN: No. We will have transparent guidelines for all of the resources in terms of travel and other matters, and donations will go through the Labor Party. So, I think we can get that right. I think we've learned a few lessons from what's happened in NSW, that's for sure. What I do also believe, though, in terms of campaigning, is this is a good test. I mean, if you want to say that you're going to be a campaigning leader of the Labor Party, you have got to be prepared to campaign within the Labor Party with the members. I am pleased that not only am I visiting Brisbane a number of times, Sydney a number of times, and, of course, my home town of Melbourne, but I have got scheduled visits to go up to the coastline in Queensland - Cairns and Townsville, ideally - Tasmania, to people in Adelaide, I will be there, and also to people in Perth. This is important that we get out to regional centres and I'm looking forward to ideally touching ground in a couple of our large, provincial cities as well. So this is good experience. It's good for me to hear what people have to say. If I'm elected leader, I will have to do this anyway. So I regard this as a great opportunity also to advance new ideas. There is some freedom to think. That's why I have been able, for the first time I believe, to talk about science, research and innovation, which is an important Labor area which I think we need to do more in. I have spoken yesterday about dental care. There was great work done by Tanya Plibersek and by Nicola Roxon. And Tanya I hope would be deputy, if I get elected leader. But I think dental care is an ongoing issue in Australian society. And the very important issue of domestic violence. You know, win, lose or draw this leadership ballot, I'm optimistic that I will succeed in making it a national political issue for the Labor Party how we deal with the hidden stigma and taboo topic of domestic violence.

KATHRYN ROBINSON, PRESENTER: You've accused – or the Labor Party has accused the Government of a culture of secrecy regarding boat arrivals. If withholding information about how many boats arrive on our shores to the Australian public, and it actually helps stop the boats, isn't this a good thing?

BILL SHORTEN: If a boat sinks where vulnerable asylum seekers and people drown, I don't think the Government has a right to not tell people that this tragedy has occurred. I think that's a disgrace.

MALCOLM FARR: Do you recall – just quickly, do you recall at any stage in Cabinet or in any other area of government, the border protection authorities coming to the Government and saying, "It would be best if we didn't release information on arrivals or disasters at sea."?

BILL SHORTEN: Mal, I certainly am not going to talk about what happened in Cabinet. I think you can appreciate that, being around politics even longer than I have. We have to rule a line under Labor leaking or talking about what's happened in the past. What I do know is that I think it is reasonable to hold the Government to account. They said they would stop the boats. Then they said they would buy the boats. Now they're saying they're gonna hide the boats. This is not policy. This is just sloganeering. What is important - I think it is a disgrace. If people drown at sea, the idea that we won't tell anyone is - I can't imagine. I hope they reconsider. I can't imagine who dreamed that up, not telling people about deaths at sea.

KATHRYN ROBINSON: Okay, let's move on to domestic violence. You spoke about that just before we hit the break before. What are your measures to tackle this problem, Mr Shorten?

BILL SHORTEN: First of all, domestic violence is a taboo topic in too much of society. I believe people expect the Labor Party to be a brave party, even in Opposition. The reason why I have taken this interest in domestic violence over a period of time is, in part, through the informed work of the Victoria Police Force who have been talking to me about this matter. I estimate there's about 250,000 assaults by men against women in Australia. People expect the Labor Party to show leadership. And just because we're in Opposition doesn't mean we can't dominate some of the debate. Now, I believe there will be bipartisanship on this topic. But some of the observations and policies which I want to work with people on both sides of the political fence, if elected leader, is, first of all, domestic violence contributes to - it is the greatest single contributor, I believe, to homelessness in terms of women having to leave their home. Secondly, I'm interested to explore some of the rules that I have seen in South Australia - this is a very difficult topic - where if men are doing the assaulting, they have to leave the house. I also know that some of the greatest tragedies we see recorded in our newspapers about the murder of women by men who say they love them is that some of these men have already received warnings and have received admonishment by the system for breaking the law already. It's not just a women's issue. It's not just a state issue. The police do a great job, the courts do a great job. We've got to enforce our laws. This is a men's issue and this is also a national issue. And I believe one of the functions of our Parliament is to sometimes not get an upward tick in the poll or a downward tick in someone else's popularity - it is about using the national Parliament to set a standard which we expect in this nation about protecting women from men. I think this is an important issue and I hope, regardless indeed who wins this leadership ballot, that we have been able to put some new issues, or some existing issues, further up the political food chain. And I'm determined to use this ballot competition to demonstrate that ideas will always trump gossip and events.

PHIL JACOB: And Bill, the economy is an issue quite close to your heart. Obviously both sides of politics need to address a number of the economic challenges facing Australia over the next three years. On the topic of superannuation, perhaps in particular, you have spoken in the past of your desire to see the threshold raised from 9% to 12%. Do you still see that as a real possibility over the next three years? I can assure all Australians that, if I'm elected leader, I will never, never, never give up trying to lift superannuation from 9% to 12%. I am alarmed that the Opposition said they want to freeze it at 9.25%. This, to me, is a recipe for people not having enough money to live on when they retire. I also believe that superannuation is a distinct national advantage and we should keep building it. What I mean by that is that I think that there are financial ways and instruments we can unlock to incentivise and encourage greater superannuation investment in the infrastructure of Australia.

I'm also acutely aware - and I'll have more to say on this topic if elected leader - that we need to come up with better options for helping people in their late 70s, their 80s and early 90s, be able to have the financial security that they need, as older Australians, coping with perhaps more challenging health costs, but also access to dignity. So, I think that superannuation is a great national advantage. I think we should keep building it, and I certainly will oppose, tooth and nail, the Government's proposition to introduce a new 15% tax. You heard that right - a 15% tax on people who earn less than \$37,000 a year. A 15% tax, Coalition tax, on their superannuation savings. Currently they pay nothing and they are the - the Government's said they want to give money back to mining companies, multinationals, and slug 3.5 million Aussies a new 15% tax. So, superannuation is really important, Phil, and it's going to - we also want to push this idea of depoliticising super, taking it off the hands of the government of the day, by creating a Reserve Bank of Superannuation. And that process hopefully is underway and won't be derailed by the Coalition.

KATHRYN ROBINSON: Mr Shorten, we are almost out of time. But finally, it's widely publicised that you are married to the Governor-General's daughter. Should you win this ballot and become leader of the ALP, do you think that there will be a conflict of interest in what you do and what the Governor-General does?

BILL SHORTEN: Well, not only is it publicised, I am married to my wife! In terms of the conflict, no, there isn't one. And the advice I've got is that that's the case. So, no, I don't see that as an issue. And we're not in Government and I'm not the Prime Minister. I'm not even leader of the Labor Party. Although, I sincerely hope enough rank-and-file members show their confidence in me, that we can pursue an agenda of ideas, such as I have articulated today, outlining a map for the future of Australia, and making sure the Labor Party is repositioned to be as relevant as it can to the mainstream of Australian society.