

MEET THE PRESS

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INTERVIEW WITH SCOTT MORRISON

KATHRYN ROBINSON, PRESENTER: You've spoken to the PM of PNG – Mr O'Neill. What did he say to you, that he didn't say to Kevin Rudd? Because as far as we know, from all the ads that we're seeing, if you come by boat, you won't be settled in Australia. But is that necessarily the case?

SCOTT MORRISON: Well, the Prime Minister conceded to myself, and Tony Abbott, and Julie Bishop, that there is nothing in the agreement that prevents people being resettled back into Australia, and Minister Burke has confirmed that this morning on ABC. So what we have here is the Prime Minister saying big words, big announcement, never ever, can't be resettled in Australia – but the agreement does not back that up. So what this is is just Kevin Rudd's promise – it's just Kevin Rudd's talk, it's not an actual agreement. There is no compulsion under this agreement for Papua New Guinea to resettle everybody who turns up by boat in Papua New Guinea. And I think this is a yawning chasm that has opened up within just 24 hours of the big announcement, and this is what we always see with Labor's announcements on these issues – they've had seven goes, and on every occasion – now on their eighth – we see it unravel within days.

TORY SHEPHERD: But did Mr O'Neill give any indication that they wouldn't resettle everyone we sent to them?

SCOTT MORRISON: No, what we said was – and we pressed him on this, and he conceded – there is no compulsion, there was no – nothing barring them sending people back to Australia, and particularly, in this case, where someone is found not to be a refugee – so an Iranian asylum seeker, for example, found not to be a refugee – we know the difficulties getting people back to Iran. And the Government has not nominated one country, other, that they would take, Iranian people who failed on that test. So they will end up being Australia's problem, and that's what's been confirmed to us also by the PNG Foreign Minister. So the big claim is nothing more than a big claim. And that's what we always see from Kevin Rudd – it's always the big announcement, but the detail – it's a two page agreement. They haven't even worked out how they're going to pay for, let alone the procedures are going to be, for resettlement in Papua New Guinea. And once they're resettled in Papua New Guinea – what do they think they're going to do? I mean, it's not that hard to get from Papua New Guinea to Australia. That point was made by Campbell Newman yesterday. So look, they just haven't thought it through. We've seen it all before.

DENNIS ATKINS: Kevin Rudd has given the impression that this has already begun, that it started at 4:30pm Friday afternoon. Did Mr O'Neill give you any indication of when he thinks any asylum seekers will be processed and settled in PNG? Does – is he saying that it's already begun?

SCOTT MORRISON: Well, there are many stages to this. I mean, we already are transferring people to Papua New Guinea, so no-one's disputing the fact that in the short term, some people might be able to be transferred to Papua New Guinea. But they've been going for almost a year now, up in Papua New Guinea, and they have a capacity of less than 500. This agreement would require ramping that up to around 3,000. Now, Ronnie Knight, who's the member for Manus Island – who I've met when I've been up there – he was saying the other day that could take two years to occur. So – and that's the other big limit on this arrangement – it's how quickly the processing capacity can be established, and the processing of people's claims as well. So, I mean, what Kevin Rudd has done here is this usual clever political tactic. And he's announced something that can't be tested in the space of an election campaign, and hope everybody buys it. Now, what we know is – and it's just like the issue of a \$200,000 reward – big announcement on the eve of the election. If it was a great idea today – and we've always been supportive of those things – why didn't they do it a year ago? Why didn't they do it two years ago? Why? Because there's an election coming, and this is what you always get from Labor before an election.

TORY SHEPHERD: Just on your policy though, while you had the Prime Minister on the blower, did you suggest to him what a Coalition might keep, out of this deal, or what you'd jettison?

SCOTT MORRISON: Well I think we do welcome Papua New Guinea's interest and preparedness to help here. They clearly have limits to that, and those limits are frankly – they will end up deciding, ultimately, who they will resettle. That will be their sovereign decision. But secondly, the practical limitations of what you can get on the ground quickly. And they were very honest about the fact that there are no other sites that have been identified, other than the sites on Manus Island. The landholder issues anywhere in Papua New Guinea are always difficult to work through. So the Prime Minister's claim that if "Oh well, if we can't take 'em to Manus, we can take them everywhere else." I mean, there is no detail on that, there are no agreements on that, and that would be very difficult. But on the key point – I mean, I'm sure there are things we can salvage out of this, but this is not an excuse not to do what the Coalition has always been proposing. It's certainly not a substitute, in any way, shape or form, for what the Coalition is proposing, and the Government's resolve, which is found wanting on every occasion, can never can replace the resolve the Coalition has always demonstrated – in Government, before an election, after election – in all seasons.

DENNIS ATKINS: Reading the agreement, it appears as if PNG could pull out of this at any time.

SCOTT MORRISON: That's true.

DENNIS ATKINS: Did Mr O'Neill make that plain to you?

SCOTT MORRISON: Well, that's what the agreement says, and I think that's the – I mean, there's a review after 12 months, but let's just – I mean, things in PNG can – you know, they fluctuate, as we all know. And – for example, even as we speak at the moment, there is a debate going on in the Papua New Guinea parliament about the acceptable nature of other religions in Papua New Guinea. Now, we know that there are a mix of religions of people who come on the boats to Australia.

I mean, if the political temperature was too hot on this in Papua New Guinea, they could pull the plug. Now they're the sort of scenarios that I don't think are anything more than realistic – that you'd have to consider through. Also there's, I think, the very real issues – and I know you'll have the Attorney on later – the legal challenge threat I think potentially is greater in Papua New Guinea than it is, actually, in Australia. But I'm sure David Mann will be working overtime on the loopholes there. And he'll have plenty of time to do it, because they won't be able to get the capacity in place quickly enough – and we know they're not good at that – I mean, Nauru's on fire, two nights ago, so that's no surprise about their ability to implement these things. There'll be plenty of time to work with people, because they'll be sitting in Australian detention centres waiting to go to PNG, not in PNG. So look, they had six months to get Malaysia right, and we know where that ended up in the court. They've had three weeks for this, and they're making the bold claims again.

KATHRYN ROBINSON: Can we take you back to costings? You said that we don't know how this is going to be funded, how much it is going to cost. What about the Coalition's costings on offshore processing? How much budget do you have there?

SCOTT MORRISON: Well look, we are going to make a few more announcements about these things, between here and the election. But the Government's budget is the one that has actually put the centres already in place, on Manus Island and in Nauru – now, what the impacts of events of the other night, where more than \$60 million of damage was done, when yet another detention centre was burnt down under Labor's administration, I mean, that's the form. These things burn down under Labor. And so the form there is very troubling. But the costs involved in further expanding that capacity are in – if, you know, the hundreds of millions, if that – and there is a clear track record of what the costs are of expanding those capacities, and the Government's made those announcements before, and any announcement we'd make in that area, we'd be very clear about those things as well.

TORY SHEPHERD: One of the things Mr Abbott said was that Australia should not subcontract out its asylum seeker issue, and that these things should be dealt with within Australia – but don't we need a regional solution?

SCOTT MORRISON: Well there's nothing wrong having a regional solution, but what this is being put forward as, as a substitute for taking action on our borders. In the same way the Prime Minister talks Indonesia, as a substitute for dealing with things on our borders. This Government always wants to do anything other than what John Howard did, and where they have been drawn to offshore processing, it has been kicking and screaming. And that's why you can't trust them to implement it well, because they don't believe in it. We believe we have to take our first responsibilities on our own borders, and turning back boats, where it's safe to do so is a critical element of that plan. The Government refuses to do it, and so they say we'll do this instead. We're saying well, we can salvage elements of this, but it's no substitute for doing what has to be done on our own borders, rather than just handing over sovereignty to Indonesia about our own border protection decisions, or dumping the problem on Papua New Guinea, which, frankly, has a lot of its own problems.

KATHRYN ROBINSON, PRESENTER: Mr Morrison, speculation is mounting that an election will be called this week. We could see voters heading to the polls August 31. Is the Coalition ready for such an election date?

SCOTT MORRISON: Oh, of course we are. We've always been ready for an election. We think an election should have been held well before now, under this – the chaos of these last three years. I think the Australian public are crying out for an election, and it's clear that all Kevin Rudd has been doing, since he became Prime Minister, has all been focused on an election. Everything's just been about announcements for an election. And what I've noticed with this Prime Minister, from the first time around when he was elected, is there's always lots of big announcements made, but you always see those things unravel on the other side. And I think that's the scrutiny that I think Australians will increasingly want to place on what Kevin Rudd is saying. And I think this issue with the agreement, that we've talked about this morning, is a classic example of that.

DENNIS ATKINS: But after what we've seen from Kevin Rudd – first of all, he had some plans to reform the Labor Party, get rid of the power of the faceless men, then he acted on the carbon tax, and now he's done this on boat people – hasn't he neutralised your game plan?

SCOTT MORRISON: No, look, he's made an announcement on a range of things, he actually hasn't delivered on any of these things yet. And particularly on the issue of the carbon tax, I mean, the only business model he's destroyed in the last couple of days has been that of car leasing companies. So, I mean, I think that's a very real issue, and I think that's another example of when we see how the Prime Minister's announcements aren't thought through in terms of their practical policy implications. And he's just hoping he can keep the wheels spinning as fast as he can, between now and election – planes everywhere, selfies all over the place – all of these sort of contrived situations to keep the buzz going. But when the buzz stops, you've got Kevin Rudd as Prime Minister. And the implications of his ill-thought-through decisions all happen again. I may have talked about it before. You vote for 'Kevin the Campaigner', and you ended up with 'Rudd the Wrecker' – and whether it's on pink batts, or on school halls, or on border protection – and that's his record. And our pitch will be very clear – we have an alternative plan, we have a plan that is based on years of experience, of an experienced team, and particularly on border protection, commitments going back over a decade. Or you've got a Government, frankly, who, as a ministry, some of them haven't even been in the job for a month. And I think their form in Government is what they need to be judged on. They can't run on their record, because they've actually trashed two Prime Ministers because of their record.

TORY SHEPHERD: But those polls must have you slightly unsettled.

SCOTT MORRISON: Oh, look, I think our message doesn't change. I mean, this is a Government that has failed to perform, in Government, under two Prime Ministers, and now they've recycled the first one. And we'll be inviting people to look past the hype of Kevin Rudd, and look at his actual form as a Prime Minister, because that's what you have to look at. You know you can never trust what Kevin Rudd says before an election, because you know the results on the other side. And I think they're the real issues – he's all talk before an election, and it's all chaos afterwards.

DENNIS ATKINS: But it looks like he's got under Tony Abbott's skin. Mr Abbott made a speech in Brisbane, where about three quarters of the speech was all about Kevin Rudd. Mr Abbott says that Kevin Rudd spends too much time talking about Kevin Rudd – isn't Tony Abbott spending too much time talking about Kevin Rudd?

SCOTT MORRISON: Well I think, initially, when you've got a new Prime Minister who's making a whole range of claims, I think obviously they have to be contested and challenged. And we have to draw people back to Kevin Rudd's record, and that's what Tony Abbott is doing, that's what Joe Hockey is doing, that's what Julie Bishop is doing, that's what I'm doing, and Christopher Pyne, and the whole team, because Kevin Rudd's record is relevant. And if Kevin Rudd doesn't want that –

TORY SHEPHERD: But we'd like to hear more about your plans.

SCOTT MORRISON: Well, you've been hearing about our plans all year, and you've been hearing them over many years. I don't think anybody is in any doubt about what the Coalition's plans are on border protection. I've answered I don't know how many questions, whether it's on this program, or many others, about not only the details of those plans, but our commitment to them, and the substance of them.