



4 March 2015. Subjects: Building Partner Capacity in Iraq; Daesh death cult; a strong and sustainable Medicare; higher education reform; domestic violence.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN:

Prime Minister, welcome to the programme.

PRIME MINISTER:

It's good to be with you.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN:

There's lots to talk about, but let's start with the troops announcement. If it's not mission creep, it's certainly mission change. Are you open to further mission change?

PRIME MINISTER:

What we're doing is we are working with the Iraqi regular army. We're working to train the Iraqi regular forces. For the last six months or so we've been helping to advise and assist the Iraqi Special Forces. So, I don't see this as a dramatic change. I just see this as a continuation of the mission that we began in about September last year to – with our allies – help disrupt, degrade and ultimately destroy the Daesh, or ISIL, death cult, because this is a fight, Michael, which is reaching out to us here in Australia. We are reluctant to reach out to the other side of the world, but whether we like it or not, those people are reaching out to us and that's why it's

important to understand that Australia's national security – our domestic security – actually involves work in Iraq and the Middle East as well.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN:

It's advise, assist and train, obviously, but we're about to enter a pretty big campaign for the city of Mosul. As that develops, surely there will be pressure for Australians to contribute more and to accompany Iraqi troops into the battlefield, won't there?

PRIME MINISTER:

That's not what the Iraqi Government wants. The Iraqi Government has been absolutely crystal clear that, while it wants our help with air strikes on terrorist positions, while it wants our help to train its own armed forces, it does not want foreign combat troops on the ground. So...

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN:

But if they change? I mean, if they change their mind and they do ask for it?

PRIME MINISTER:

They have been absolutely adamant, Michael, that they don't want that. They've been absolutely 100 per cent adamant that this is their fight. It's up to them to recapture their territory and, yes, they want our assistance with the air strikes and with the training, but they don't want to have Australian combat troops or, indeed, any foreign combat troops on the ground. They don't want us to be conducting combat missions of our own on the ground; they want us to be training, which is what we are doing.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN:

Ok. You've committed for up to two years for this latest deployment. Clearly, Barack Obama at the moment isn't up for another full-scale war but by the time this deployment runs out there will be a new US President. The situation could change considerably with a Bush presidency or a

Clinton presidency, couldn't it?

PRIME MINISTER:

It could, Michael, but nevertheless, we've got to deal with the situation that we find ourselves in now and, as I said, the Iraqi Government wants our help with air strikes, it wants our help be training. It certainly doesn't want to see another situation where foreign armies are fighting wars on its behalf. It wants to be sovereign on its own soil. It's a very understandable desire – very understandable desire – but still, there are all sorts of Australian national security issues at stake here because, as I say, the death cult has been reaching out to us. We have already seen two terrorist incidents here in Australia inspired by the death cult. There was another one that was narrowly averted inspired by the death cult and that's why it's in our national interest, as well as in the international interests of a better world, that we make this contribution.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN:

I guess the point is the situation is fluid. I mean, Peter Leahy, the former Chief of Army, talks about a century-long war and a two year commitment in a century-long war isn't much, clearly. We do have to be prepared to change our priorities and our commitments, don't we?

PRIME MINISTER:

We have to be prepared to respond to situations as they unfold and that's exactly what this Government has done, Michael.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN:

So you won't rule anything out is what you're saying?

PRIME MINISTER:

No, but I'm certainly not flagging anything either. This is a pretty clear mission. It's exactly what the Iraqis have asked us for. We couldn't do any more without the Iraqis' request and the Iraqis are adamant that they do not want foreign troops fighting their battles for them.

But the point I make, Michael, is that, as things have developed, we have responded. As the domestic threat increased last year, we strengthened funding for our security agencies, we have passed some stronger laws through the Parliament, this week I hope we will get metadata retention laws through the Parliament, and as the death cult swept out of Syria and into northern Iraq and started to consolidate its hold, that was when, with the Americans and our other allies, we made this powerful air contribution to the campaign in Iraq.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN:

Ok. Moving on to some other issues – the Bali Nine. Is there anything more you can do?

PRIME MINISTER:

Look, Michael, at every moment I am making Australia's position clear, as is the Foreign Minister. We, frankly, are revolted by the prospect of these executions. I think there are millions of Australians who feel sick in their stomachs at the thought of what's likely to happen to these

two men who have committed a terrible crime – an absolutely terrible crime – but the position of Australia is we abhor drug crime but we abhor the death penalty as well which we think is beneath a country such as Indonesia. I note that there are many people in Indonesia today who would like it not to go ahead with these executions and, as I said, Michael, we are making our position absolutely crystal clear through every possible channel. What I don't want, though, is to hold out false hope.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN:

Right, but you're not getting any indications at this stage that there is any change of heart?

PRIME MINISTER:

There were some suggestions earlier, that perhaps at least some people in the Indonesian system were having second thoughts, but I am afraid those signals seem to be dissipating.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN:

On the Budget, you do now obviously accept that you overreached in the last Budget. Is that correct?

PRIME MINISTER:

We were too ambitious, Michael. We wanted to set Australia up for the long-term. We asked more of this Senate than it was prepared to contemplate. We've got the Intergenerational Report coming out on Thursday. What it shows is that, had we got all of the budget measures through – the structural changes through – we would have set our country up for a generation. But what we have already done has halved those deficits going forward. So, I think that we have set ourselves up for the future, even with what has already been achieved.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN:

But you have got some big holes left by some of the stuff that you haven't been able to put through, for instance, the GP co-payment. You have dumped that and that's left you with a \$1 billion hole.

PRIME MINISTER:

That's right, but that is one-17th of one per cent of our annual budget. So, look, yes, we have had to accommodate the reality of the Senate. In the case of the Medicare co-payment, I've been reminded – very forcefully – over recent months that it is very difficult to bring about long-lasting health reform without the active backing of the medical profession and that is a lesson that I should have learned better from my days as a Health Minister when I worked very closely with the medical profession and having learnt that lesson, the co-payment is, as I said yesterday, dead, buried and cremated.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN:

And if there is continued complaints about university reform, are we likely to see university changes dropped, too?

PRIME MINISTER:

That is very different, Michael, because we've got the very strong backing of the university sector. Yes, they were initially a little anxious about it. But as Christopher Pyne has been working it through with them, just about every Vice-Chancellor in the country is adamant that this is going to be good for universities, good for students and ultimately very good for our country.

What I want to do, Michael, is not just to see one of our universities in the top 50. I'd like to see at least two of our universities in the top 20. But we won't do that if we persist with the idea of Canberra micro managing our campuses. This is what we are trying to do. We're trying to liberate our best and brightest people to be everything that they can be. Why should Canberra be micro-managing these places?

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN:

You still have to convince the Senate, though.

PRIME MINISTER:

Plainly Senator Dio Wang is very keen on our proposals and hopefully as the Palmer Party discusses this more and more, Senator Wang will be more and more influential.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN:

On the leadership you seem to have overcome the leadership instability at least for the moment. Last night Malcolm Turnbull was on 7:30 talking up your attributes as a leader. Presumably he has a few that you can think of as well?

PRIME MINISTER:

Absolutely right, and he is a great contributor. He's done a really, really good job with the

National Broadband Network which is rolling out much more reliably and much more affordably than it was under the former Government. I think we have passed five times the number of homes in a year that Labor was able to do in five years. So, things are getting much better with the NBN, thanks to Malcolm. Australia Post obviously has some issues, Malcolm has been dealing with them. And, look, I have got a very strong team, Michael. It was a very strong team and I'm honoured to be their captain.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN:

It's still a fairly fragile grip on the leadership, if I might say. Andrew Robb said the voters had spoken and the polls showed a strong movement back. The fact is that 39 people still did vote for a spill. If the polls turn back again, it's on again, isn't it?

PRIME MINISTER:

I accept, Michael, that every leader has two constituencies – you have got to satisfy the people at an election and you have got to satisfy your Party Room...

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN:

That is not what you said at the Press Club a few weeks ago.

PRIME MINISTER:

...on a sort of day-by-day, week-by-week, month-by-month basis. Every day, I will be focussed on doing the right thing by the people of Australia. That is what we have been doing. At all times perhaps we did get a little distracted for a while. But every day I am focussed on doing the right thing by the people of Australia and I think that the release of the Intergenerational Report later this week will demonstrate that sure we have some challenges ahead, but a hell of a lot has been achieved over the last 18 months.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN:

What have you learnt from this experience?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, I have learnt that you've got to stay focussed every day, and every day you have to demonstrate to the people of Australia that you are not focussed internally, you are focussed on them; on you, the voters, and that's what we're doing.

MICHAEL BRISENDEN:

You can't take your Party for granted?

PRIME MINISTER:

Naturally. Naturally, Michael, but the point I make – and I think there's only so much profit in these discussions – but the point I make is that it's quite a different mood in our Party Room today than just three weeks ago. Obviously, three weeks ago we had been through a rough patch. We had all had the trauma of watching the Queensland election result. But I think we have put all of that behind us and we are now focussed on governing, doing the right thing by the people of Australia every single day.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN:

Just quickly and finally, you have said the greatest responsibility a Prime Minister has is to protect its citizens. Since 9-11 two Australians have died at home due to terrorism and at least two women and children are dying each week in Australia because of domestic violence. Bill Shorten today is proposing a national summit to be held to tackle this. Would you support that?

PRIME MINISTER:

Well, effectively, that is what I have already proposed. I have said there will be a special COAG in the middle of the year to deal with this. I think that is the best way forward. In the end, if we are going to tackle domestic violence with more vigour and rigour, the states need to be our intimate partners and therefore the best way to handle this is through COAG.

I have appointed Rosie Batty, the Australian of the Year and Ken Lay, the retiring Victorian Police Commissioner, to a special task group who will work with us as part of this COAG process. What we want to see is a national Domestic Violence Order scheme so that if an order is taken out in Darwin and you move to Melbourne, maybe to get away from a difficult situation, your persecutor is equally bound by the domestic violence order in Melbourne as in Darwin. We need to also have a uniform national set of procedures around this – the way police handle these matters and we also need to have a much stronger approach to online violence because there is a lot of online persecution and harassment these days.

MICHAEL BRISSENDEN:

Prime Minister, thanks very much for joining us.

PRIME MINISTER:

Thank you.