



The Hon. David Littleproud MP
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Management
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T R A N S C R I P T

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DEBORAH KNIGHT: Now we've spoken to the farming and the agricultural sector a few times over the last few weeks about real concerns in getting in the crops, harvest season. International borders of course closed means that we don't have the usual number of backpackers or international workforce to make up the bulk of the labour force to bring in the fruit, bring in the crops. And a group of federal MPs, they've got a plan. They want to get school leavers to spend their gap year not heading off overseas - well, they can't do that at the moment anyway - but to stay here in Australia and pick fruit, bring in the crops, help the farmers meet that labour shortage, and in exchange, get a discount on their HECS debt, which we know can add up quite significantly for students and for graduates. I reckon it's a ripper of an idea. David Littleproud is the Federal Agriculture Minister. He's on the line for us now. Minister, thanks for joining us.

DAVID LITTLEPROUD: Thanks for having me.

DEBORAH KNIGHT: I want to talk about the fruit idea, the fruit picking idea in just a tick, but can you just clarify what's happening with the cap on international arrivals? Because your leader Michael McCormack, he's confusing me a little bit. He held a presser this morning about lifting the cap on international arrivals into Australia. Is it actually happening or does it still need to be signed off?

DAVID LITTLEPROUD: Well my understanding is that the states will agree and in fact have had consultation with them increasing those numbers. It's basically the formalisation of that so that we can get more Australians home. And this obviously is a result of the fact that the states look after the quarantine when people come back to Australia. So we're working hand-in-hand with them, and I know the Deputy Prime Minister's had conversations with all premiers around this. So the formalisation, as I understand it, is basically a fait accompli and it's basically just making sure that they're ready for that capacity.

DEBORAH KNIGHT: So it's set in stone, the cap will be lifted from the current weekly rate of 4000 to 6000. Where will those extra numbers go to?

DAVID LITTLEPROUD: Look, each individual state has its own quota, and not being the Transport Minister, I apologise, I don't have those numbers in front of me. But as I understand, each state has worked in collaboration with the Federal Government around what capacity they can handle, and obviously with the facilities they've got and the

quarantine that they can handle. So that's why this has been done in consultation, and the states are fully cognisant of what was announced today.

DEBORAH KNIGHT: And what do you think of this idea being put forward by Labor leader Anthony Albanese that either commercial flights could be chartered or that the VIP fleet, the jets usually used to move the pollies around the country, they be used to get the Aussies back here from overseas? Because as it stands, I think there's close to 26,000 Australians who are still overseas and who want to come home.

DAVID LITTLEPROUD: Yeah look, I think everything is being explored. You know, important appreciate some of those Air Force aircraft that are used are not just for politicians but for the Defence Force that don't carry significant numbers but it is worth exploring. And then you've got to look at the cost effectiveness of this. We've got airline industries that are doing it really tough. So is it better to expend taxpayers' money supporting them, bringing Australians home, and every effort has been done. I know that we spend a lot of money on behalf of the Australian taxpayer in trying to incentivise airlines to bring flights in, and I know that will continue. And that's why the caps were so important in being able to bring these people in safely so that we don't put Australians at risk from bringing people in from other parts of the world where COVID is very prevalent.

DEBORAH KNIGHT: And what do you think about the comments from the Queensland Premier Anastacia Palaszczuk this morning, saying that the Federal Government needs to stump up more resources when it comes to helping out Aussies overseas? Are you not lifting your game here?

DAVID LITTLEPROUD: Oh no. I think Anastacia Palaszczuk is starting to panic about an election. I'm a Queenslander. You only have to see the strain on her face after the last couple of weeks of the bungling of borders that she's grasping at anything at the moment. The reality is the Federal Government has expended, on behalf of the Australian taxpayers, 16 per cent of GDP. The states and in Queensland it's around two and a half of gross state product. So they're three-fifths of bugger all. So I just think the states need to take a cold shower. We want to work with them, but that sort of pettiness doesn't help and it just goes to show the desperation of Anastacia Palaszczuk.

DEBORAH KNIGHT: Alright, let's look at this plan to get school leavers to go fruit picking in their gap year. I reckon it's a great idea. Is it going to fly?

DAVID LITTLEPROUD: Yeah look, we've already started some work on this, Deb. And in fact, whether it be HECS or other mechanisms, work has already started. And it's got to be costed up and we've worked very closely with Julian Leeser who's done an outstanding job, working in a bipartisan way across party lines, talking to industry, understanding the pressures. So we're obviously going to work through that. There are some measures that will come into effect on the 25th of September for those on JobSeeker. They'll be able to earn \$1257 a fortnight before removing their JobSeeker payments. So, there's going to be some support there for them to go and incentivize them. The problem we've got with JobSeeker, those that are on JobSeeker aren't necessarily close to where the jobs are and they're very transient jobs. That's why we're working up particularly those that are on youth allowance, and that goes to those that are at university or those that are finishing year 12 to consider travelling the country. Have a look at Australia, put a quid in your pocket, come back and be able to help us get through this shortage that we're going to have in the coming months. So, the government's working through this and this report will feed into the recommendations. Finance Department will have to cost all this, and we're working with

industry to also appreciate the extent of numbers that that'll achieve, because we've seen a significant reduction in the number of overseas workers who have traditionally done this. But also, don't forget there's a number of grey nomads running around the country as well. And we'll look at measures and not forget them, and particularly, being a Queenslander, there's plenty of them up here at the moment because it's warm up here.

DEBORAH KNIGHT: My mum's up there, don't you worry. She's having a wonderful time.

DAVID LITTLEPROUD: Exactly. So, there's an opportunity there also. We shouldn't forget them being a labour force and those in particular that are on pensions to be able to give them. So, we should look at this holistically, but I think there is merit because they are transient jobs. And those people that are on JobSeeker that are out of work in Sydney or Melbourne, 2500, 3000 kilometres away from some of these jobs, and have family commitments. So, while we want to- and every job is market tested, the Australian gets first crack at these jobs, we need to make sure we look at everything because this is getting to a pivotal point. But we also need all the states to sign up to the ag workers code because if they don't there'll be no free movement of these workers anyway across states.

DEBORAH KNIGHT: Exactly. Yeah, the borders have got to definitely allow people to move between the different jurisdictions to begin with.

DAVID LITTLEPROUD: Exactly. And in Queensland the arrangement with New South Wales runs out on 22 September, and there has been nothing said about this. And Queensland is putting a lot of uncertainty for New South Wales and Queensland farmers who have properties on both sides, but also those ag workers. And particularly when most of them are coming from COVID-free areas, this is just where common sense has got to take hold by 22 September. Farmers are making investment decisions now, and we're not talking a couple hundred dollars. These farmers are making million dollar decisions and that's a lot to gamble, and when you don't have that certainty we just need to make sure we work together with state and federal, and I think these ideas feed into that federally, but it ain't gonna be worth a cracker unless we can get the states to allow them to go across the borders.

DEBORAH KNIGHT: Do we need to change the treatment and the facilities and pay though because a lot of complaints are that, A) they don't pay very well, if you're a fruit picker the accommodation isn't up to scratch. And a lot of the backpackers, they might be willing to do it but a lot of Aussie workers say bugger it, I'm not going to do that.

DAVID LITTLEPROUD: I think there's been some poor cases but they are the minority, and in fact some of the labour hire companies we're going to make sure - I know Christian Porter is doing some work now around this - to formulate some frameworks to keep some regulation on them. But invariably, I mean, up here in Queensland I saw the other day you could make \$3800 a week picking strawberries. I mean, that's not a bad week's work. So, you've got to understand there is awards that are paid. There are people that always cut corners in any industry that try and take advantage of people, and that's what we've got to cut out as a government. But I think there has been a stigma, and I think as a society we change. I mean, I remember when I went to school I used to pick watermelons and potatoes, and then my first job was chipping cotton.

DEBORAH KNIGHT: It's tough work, though. I mean, a lot of people say the young people are too soft.

DAVID LITTLEPROUD: I think also- but I think it gets to the point, Deb, that our societies have got aspirations, different aspirations. We've got a high living standard here and our education system has meant that many young people decide they want to go and get an education and move into different roles. But these roles are still there, they're still open, and this is why I think it's that cohort that are just leaving school or just about to finish uni for the year to get an opportunity to travel Australia, have a good look around, because they're not going to see the rest of the world for a fair while so they may as well have a good look around us. Enjoy that, have a great time and put some money in their pockets.

DEBORAH KNIGHT: It's a pretty good backyard. And just quickly, your New South Wales colleague John Barilaro facing a no confidence vote today in Parliament. The Federal Deputy Leader of the Nationals, are you disappointed by the way this has all played out with Barra?

DAVID LITTLEPROUD: No, I think you have got to put this in perspective. Barra's going to get a result on this koala issue, and everyone's saying, oh, well, we're all going to run to these minority parties. Well, the only reason it got a result was because Barra's in the room. Let's put that in perspective. We're there to get results. And you can be a professional complaints desk and sit outside and yell and scream, you might get a warm fuzzy feeling-

DEBORAH KNIGHT: But do you do it so publicly or do you just do it behind closed doors?

DAVID LITTLEPROUD: Results are results, and Barra's going to get a result for regional New South Wales. Whether it's perfect, that's for him to know, I'm not ensconced in New South Wales politics, but you've got to say, the National Party has scored a win here and Barra's led it. So, good on him.

DEBORAH KNIGHT: Has Michael had a chat to- Michael McCormack to Barra directly about how it's all played out or are they still on no talky terms?

DAVID LITTLEPROUD: Oh, you'd have to ask Michael that. I think we work as closely as we can. I know I deal with Barra and his job as recovering from the fire victims in New South Wales, and he's doing a great job on that and he's standing up for regional New South Wales, that's what the Nats do.

DEBORAH KNIGHT: Alright, well, good on you. Thanks for joining us David.

DAVID LITTLEPROUD: Anytime Deb, thanks.

DEBORAH KNIGHT: David Littleproud there, the Minister for Agriculture.

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