



The Hon. David Littleproud MP
Minister for Agriculture and Northern Australia
Deputy Leader of the Nationals

T R A N S C R I P T

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Minister Littleproud iv ABC Local Radio Darwin

ADAM STEER: Well, as I was just saying, what you have is a new federal Minister for North Australia, Minister David Littleproud. Good morning.

DAVID LITTLEPROUD: Good morning. Thanks for having me.

ADAM STEER: Is this, the North Australia portfolio, is that the one you wanted in the Nationals reshuffle?

DAVID LITTLEPROUD: Oh, look, just to be made a cabinet minister is an honour, to represent your country and to represent that at a government level is an honour that is only bestowed on a few. So I was fortunate enough to be the Agriculture Minister since 2017, and I think this is a good fit. The Northern Australia, the opportunity not just for agriculture, but the intersection for further infrastructure that can support that, I think just makes sense. There's also some changes in the machinery of government. Northern Australia will come out of industry and go into infrastructure. Because if we're going to get Northern Australia going, we need to build stuff. And so I think that's also a very important move, not just about the change in ministry, but also the machinery of government, in saying we've got to get stuff done.

ADAM STEER: There- the minister- the agricultural portfolio has had a lot on your plate. You've had droughts like we've never seen before. We've had mouse plagues like you haven't seen before. We've got debates between the different states about water. That's a big job by itself, have you got enough time to manage North Australia at the same time?

DAVID LITTLEPROUD: Yeah, in addition to agriculture, also had emergency management. So I had the bushfires, I've had cyclones, drought, I've had it all. But the reality is, is the intersection with agriculture and a lot of this really comes to its fore. So I don't think there's any real issue. And I think there's some symbiotic, really synergies there that can be worked on and continue to work through. And that's where I think my opportunity now is, instead of being reactionary and trying to pull people out of their misery, I can now look to the future and build the opportunities that are here for these that have come to the frontier and really want to make a go of it up here. This is where the real growth of Australia will come, is in Northern Australia, not just for agriculture, but agriculture will underpin it. And I think the opportunity, by putting it in with infrastructure gives us the opportunity to build stuff, to get stuff done. And that's literally my mantra, is we've just simply got to get stuff done. We've got to get government out of your life, and let people do what they do best is make a quid. And when they make a quid, they get to pay for the doctors and the nurses and the teachers. And we just get out of their lives and our country grows because of it.

ADAM STEER: The Federal Government, though, handed the gas giants \$50 million that they didn't even ask for last year, to do some drilling and investigation around that Beetaloo Basin. Is that what you're talking about?

DAVID LITTLEPROUD: Well, those are the opportunities. I think we need to partner with industry. In fact, I come from western Queensland where the Surat Basin is really the centre of the gas industry. And I can tell you that when they first came, there was a lot of apprehension. But the industry themselves are now one of the major employers. A little town I grew up in called Chinchilla, 3000 people, is now 6500 people. Its economic base has changed. There's real jobs, there's career pathways for our kids. We're not just importing the workers now. We're generating the next generation of gas workers. They're out of the high school, the Chinchilla High School that I went to. These are the opportunities that we can come, and if we partner smartly with industry and we use Australian taxpayers' money wisely, we can create the jobs, we can create the wealth, we can give our generation the opportunity to stay.

We've lost generations of young people from not just Northern Australia, but from regional Australia. It is time to bring them home. And the opportunity to bring them home is to be smart with Australian taxpayers' money, get value for money and keep them at home, give them a career pathway. Give them the lifestyle that we all love and be able to stay here.

ADAM STEER: What does a Barnaby Joyce-led National Party mean for Darwin and its surrounds?

DAVID LITTLEPROUD: I think it shows that there's now an emphasis, particularly on those smaller regional areas. And, you know, while it's the capital of the Northern Territory, it's a big regional city. And what- that's what the National Party stands for. We're not interested in the capital cities. There's plenty of politicians running around Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. We're not going to get caught up in that space. But what we're interested in is the new frontiers, where those that have had the courage and the conviction to come up here and have a crack, is to be supported. We're supporting the little guy, and that's what we see, Darwin and Alice Springs and right through all these regional communities, as the new frontiers that will drive the growth of the Australian economy.

ADAM STEER: So there wasn't a focus on the regions under Michael McCormack? Is that it?

DAVID LITTLEPROUD: There always has been. But I think what Barnaby brings is a different colour and a different energy. And we all have different things that we bring to the table in terms of leadership. I'm different to Barnaby as I'm different to Michael, and I think Michael did an outstanding job. But the party room made a decision and that's this beautiful thing called democracy. We always sit there and we shun it and say, oh, this is horrible. But ultimately, that's the basis and the premise of which our society is built on is this thing called democracy, and we should be fierce custodians of that and make sure that we protect it. And sometimes it doesn't go your way, hasn't always gone my way. But that's the rules that you sign up to when you just got to get on with the job with what you're given.

ADAM STEER: But do you admit it's not an ideal move to change your leader so close to a federal election?

DAVID LITTLEPROUD: Oh, no. Again, because it comes back to this thing called democracy; the will of the room made the decision and you have to respect that, as what will happen at the next federal election. The will of the people will make that decision. We have to respect it, whether it goes our way or not. That's the rules you sign up to. And the decision that the party room made was that we believe that with a little bit more colour, then we may be able to get our message through, that places like Darwin, places like Katherine, Alice Springs are

important to the government, important to this nation. And they have to be put on a pedestal whereby everyone can see it, and Barnaby will probably bring that colour.

ADAM STEER: So locally, in recent pre-selection developments, incumbent Northern Territory CLP Senator Sam McMahon lost her number one Senate spot to Jacinta Price. Has Ms Price confirmed she'll sit in your party room?

DAVID LITTLEPROUD: That's a matter for the CLP. And obviously we're allowing them to work through that. And I have a good relationship with Jacinta. I think she's a talent and I would expect that if she joins the National Party party room, she will have a probably a greater chance of progressing further and having ministerial representation for the Northern Territory than she would in the Liberal Party. But that's a matter for the CLP. But also, I've got to say that Sam McMahon is a good mate of mine. In fact, I spoke to her yesterday. She's locked out, she got caught in Brisbane and isn't able to get home. But look, Sam's done an outstanding job. When you look at issues she's tackled, she's kept two members of the House of Representatives for the Northern Territory. She's the one that put that bill through. She also fought for the live export around the appeal of that case and around seasonal workers, the Ag visa, she was the one that actually was at the fore of that. So we're blessed to have the talent of not just Jacinta, but Sam. And I think, again, democracy has shone through. We respect what the CLP has decided. The membership always decides in our party. They've gone with Jacinta, and I think she'll be an absolute talent for the National Party and for the Northern Territory.

ADAM STEER: It's 22 to nine on ABC Radio Darwin. Adam Steer with you this morning. David Littleproud is the Federal Minister for North Australia. I'll get to those seasonal workers in a second, minister. But back in April, a Senate inquiry released its report into the effectiveness of the Federal Government's Northern Australia agenda, which revealed overall progress had been, quote: slower than the community expected. Do you admit your government has let the north down over the last three terms, nearly three terms now?

DAVID LITTLEPROUD: I don't think we let them down. I think there's been some constraints in terms of the governance of the funds that have been there, particularly the NAIF. And the previous minister, Keith Pitt, has made a lot of reforms around that to try and streamline that. And as I said, I think the big mantra that I want to get on with is just get stuff done. And so I'm meeting with the office of Northern Australia and the NAIF today to say, what is the pathway? What are the- what are you going to get done between now and the next election? What is then after the election? What is the flight plan you have for the delivery of not just the NAIF funding, that's just one component of Northern Australia, and I think we focus a whole lot just on the NAIF. There's a whole lot of other opportunities. And that's why going into infrastructure opens up that opportunity to complement and supplement what happens with the NAIF, with grant funding, that will actually get ...

ADAM STEER: But you only have to look at the North Australia Infrastructure Facility to get a grasp of how underwhelming the Northern Australia agenda has been for the Territory. Just four loans since it was established in 2016.

DAVID LITTLEPROUD: Yes, so there's- of the 5 billion, there's around 3.2 billion that's out the door at the moment. The majority has been Queensland, WA. There's under a billion, with respect, out of the Northern Territory. And that's why I'm meeting, not only with the chief minister, but with the opposition leader here as well this week to make sure that I have a clear understanding of the pathway in which we can collaborate and work together. Because we do need the states to come with us, because a lot of the resources are owned by the states and managed by the states, and if we're to unlock them we need them to come with us - it has to be a partnership. And I have a good relationship with the chief minister and the opposition

leader here. And I want to make sure that my job is, is the opportunity to leave a legacy, and the legacy is about making sure that people in Northern Australia, particularly in Darwin and right across the Northern Territory, get a fair crack. Get their fair share, and are able to be given that pathway to keep the next generation of Territorians here in the Territory.

ADAM STEER: When you talk about development of infrastructure, what do you mean exactly?

DAVID LITTLEPROUD: So, so those are the key infrastructure, whether that- this goes back to the simple things from roads all the way up; to ports, right the way through, airports - making sure that the infrastructure connecting us to a global community, a global society that we actually have to trade in. I mean, we're a nation of 26 million people. With agriculture we produce enough food for 80 million people. So, if we don't engage with the world, we don't trade with the world, it's also about resources, making sure that we have a pathway of efficiency, of getting stuff out the door. And this is the thing, is when we build infrastructure, it's got to be not just about creating jobs when you're building it...

ADAM STEER: So, but- but are you talking roads? Like, infrastructures a big word. What do you actually mean?

DAVID LITTLEPROUD: Well, as I just said, it starts from roads and it can work all the way through. But this is the important, the important point. It's not just about creating jobs in building the infrastructure, it's actually creating jobs in operating it. Because last time we went through the GFC, the other mob, they put- doing the Pink Batts in school halls, and that created a lot of jobs in building it, but not a lot in operating it.

So, we're using Australian taxpayers' money here. So the lever I get to pull is the pull to make sure there's job creation in building it, but then in the operation creates jobs in the operation of it and builds the productivity and profitability of people out here. They're the ones that going to pay back this debt, not the government - government doesn't do that, it's the people. And our job is to put that environment and the infrastructure around it's people to do the job, and then get the hell out of their lives and just let them get on with doing what they do best.

ADAM STEER: Will you be pushing Federal Cabinet to fast track a couple of those election promises? Say, for example, it's more than \$200 million for Kakadu, including some road infrastructure. Will you be pushing Federal Cabinet to fast forward those spends?

DAVID LITTLEPROUD: And, and that's why I'm on the ground, to get an understanding of the priorities that are there; what can be achieved; what are the quick wins that should be knocked off now? What are the medium term and what are the long term so that we have an have a pathway, a flight plan to get there; and, what is the achievement of that- what is the means of achievement of that? Is that through the NAIF? Is it through infrastructure complementing? And is it through industry partnering? And these are the opportunities that are there. And I think my role is, is, in somewhat, co-ordination, and then advocacy, obviously at Cabinet level to make sure we get a quid to do it.

ADAM STEER: On climate change, do you personally support a net zero emissions target for Australia?

DAVID LITTLEPROUD: Well, so long as I can tell the Australian people how we get there and who pays for it, and I think the Prime Minister's made that clear. We've got a good track record as a global citizen. We've met our Kyoto, we've met our Paris, and in fact beat them. We- If we sign up to 2050 we want to be honest with the Australian people and the global community about how we get there and who pays for it, because we don't want to lose our standing in the

world. Of the 130 countries that have signed up to net zero emissions by 2050, only 14 can articulate in a specific way how they get there. Now, that sounds like a lot of platitudes from a lot of countries. Australia is a good global citizen, and if we're going to sign up to it, we'll tell people. We're going to look them in the eye and we'll say this is how we're going to get there.

ADAM STEER: I would say senior climate scientists argue Australia has already been left behind globally when it comes to climate change action. How much responsibility does the Nationals take for that?

DAVID LITTLEPROUD: Well, with respect, I think that's a false statement. As I've just said, 130 countries have signed up to it. They've given a platitude when only 14 can tell you how to get there. I mean, the world can sit there and say we're all signing up to it, but until you can actually say how you're going to get there and be honest, and look people in the eye and tell them how are you going to get there and who's going to pay for it, then it's nothing more than a platitude. And I think our record - we have this self-loathing in this country. We've actually beat Kyoto. We're got to meet and beat Paris. We've looked everyone in the eye and we said we're going to do it and we've done it. And we shouldn't stand up and say we're going to do it until we can say how we're going to do it and who pays for it. That's, that's the Australian way, and as Australians we should be damn proud of that. And anyone that keeps on knocking us, this extreme left that keeps on looking at us and saying- wants to knock us down, it's time for Australia to put their chin up and say, we've done the job and we're going to do it again. And when we do it, we're going to look everyone in the eye and we'll do it properly.

ADAM STEER: Quarter to nine, Radio Darwin. Adam Steer with you. David Littleproud is the Federal Minister for North Australia. Minister, I know you've got a busy schedule in front of you, so I've got to let you go in a moment. I've just got a couple more questions...

DAVID LITTLEPROUD: Yeah.

ADAM STEER: ... for you. Let's go to the mango farmers. They're desperate for a workforce ahead of the upcoming mango season. What are you doing to help them?

DAVID LITTLEPROUD: Well, we started back in March last year in extending the Pacific and Seasonal Worker Programmes, allowing them to stay longer. We also opened up in country quarantine, so every state and territory in this country can now go to Vanuatu or Fiji and allow in country quarantine to take place. South Australia has signed up to that, no other territory or state would. In fact, in August, South Australia will sign up with Vanuatu to trial that.

So, of the 25,000 men and women that we found in the Pacific, there's been about 7000 who have come in. So the states and territories give the health approvals, we give the visa approval. So the states have to get comfortable in the way in which they bring them in. They signed up to that in March last year through National Cabinet and they were to do that in addition to the caps, the caps of international arrivals. So in the Territory they've used Howard Springs, there's another facility here also - Bladin Village, I think it is. But...

ADAM STEER: Bladin Point.

DAVID LITTLEPROUD: Yeah. That is, is...

ADAM STEER: Is that- Is the Federal Government still keen on that? Because the Vanuatu workers were in Howard Springs last year, that's out- obviously now off the table because it's being used for those repat flights. Is the Federal Government still keen on Bladin Point? The Northern Territory Chief Minister has all but ruled it out as Defence are using it until September.

DAVID LITTLEPROUD: So the opportunities are there for the Northern Territory Government. And this is what the South Australia Government did, is, they're all pointing at one another, but the reality is South Australia's led the way on this. Not only are they doing in country quarantining in Vanuatu, but they've, they've used a village of their own in, in South Australia, where they're bringing in 1200 workers themselves.

So it's the opportunity of the states and territories to come up with these things. We have no problems with that. In fact, every state and territory were given a plan by Palladian Health and Aspen Medical back in October last year to bring workers in where they would look after them in a tent city environment - quarantine them. We had- in fact Greg Hunt, in fact, was one that actually promoted this to the health ministers to say, this is a good way to do it, to bring in seasonal workers in addition to your caps. So the opportunity's there. The states said they want to sign up to this, they're the ones that want to own it, but they've got to do something about it. We will, we will support them - make no mistake, we will be there to support them.

ADAM STEER: Final question because we are running out of time...

DAVID LITTLEPROUD: Yeah.

ADAM STEER: ... this morning, Minister. There's been a push from hospitality to ask for a temporary adjustment to how those overseas visas work. Currently, they have to go to 88 days' work in rural, helping pick fruit. Would you be supporting some- a temporary change to allow those overseas workers - how many we've got here in the Northern Territory - to remain working in hospitality rather than having to go and pick fruit for 88 days?

DAVID LITTLEPROUD: Yeah. So, so look, agriculture isn't just the only ones that are doing it hard on labour, because we've had, for the working holiday maker, about 160,000 before COVID, down to under 40,000 now. So the Immigration Minister, in fact, announced last week some changes to that with respect to northern Australia and remote Australia, where they can actually work up here and not have to do their 88 days in agriculture, but share it with, with hospitality because of the sheer shortage that's there.

ADAM STEER: Yeah.

DAVID LITTLEPROUD: So we need we need to get the AG visa up and going to support the agricultural sector. And I've got a commitment, I negotiated with the Prime Minister an AG visa to be up and going before the end of the year, but COVID is still the overlying issue of getting people in. But we've got to have all these, all these foundation stones put in place so that we can support everybody through this. But, I mean, the opportunity's there for every Australian to get a, to get a job at the moment, there's- people screaming out for this, and where better up here in the Territory where it's 30 degrees. I left home near Warwick yesterday and it was 14 - so, loving Darwin.

ADAM STEER: Well Minister, enjoy your time up here. I'd be keen to catch up with you once you've checked in with a few people and got, got your handle on exactly what's going on for North Australia. It's really great to meet you, and congratulations in your new role.

DAVID LITTLEPROUD: Yeah. Thanks for having me. Great to be in the NT.

ADAM STEER: There's Minister David Littleproud, he's the Minister for North Australia.

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