

CAPITAL HILL

ABC NEWS 24

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Presenter: But first let's welcome our panel in Melbourne Labor MP Anna Burke and in Brisbane, Liberal MP Jane Prentice. Welcome to you both. Firstly, this morning we saw the Agriculture Minister Joe Ludwig confirm that there would be a six month suspension of live cattle exports to Indonesia but when the minister was asked about compensation arrangements for producers, the answers weren't as forthcoming.

Joe Ludwig: What I want to do is talk to industry. I do understand there's been significant impacts to industry as a consequence of this decision. This decision is based on all the available advice that I've received and of course what we have seen in terms of welfare outcomes for animals.

Presenter: Many people were of course very happy with this decision following the distressing scenes seen on Four Corners but one person who is a very vocal critic of today's decision is the independent MP for the seat of Kennedy in northern Queensland Bob Katter, and this is what he had to say a short time later.

Bob Katter: I think that there is a legal case for legal action, against the MLA and Government for gross dereliction of duty and irresponsibility on this issue.

Presenter: Firstly to you Jane Prentice in Brisbane, is the Opposition generally happy with the direction of today's Government suspension on the trade to Indonesia?

Jane Prentice: Andrew I think the first thing that has to be said is that everyone and that includes everyone in all parties was absolutely appalled at the footage we saw the other night on Four Corners. The people who complained to me most about it were in fact the farmers and the beef producers themselves. They don't ever want to see their animals treated this way. Having said that, we needed to take immediate action. I'm glad to see the Government did ban export of livestock, but the point is this is a very heavy-handed approach. There are abattoirs in Indonesia that have the same standards that we've set in Australia and to penalise the good guys along with the bad guys is overdoing it and also sending the wrong messages.

Presenter: But how can you have a partial ban? Once the cattle arrive in Indonesia it's really, we've lost control of where they end up.

Jane Prentice: No, it's quite possibly to control where they go and to which abattoirs they go. We need to make sure the abattoirs to which they go have the same standards that we approve and they must be checked out regularly. The minister did know about this before the footage on ABC. I understood he was aware of the programme coming up and I believe we should have immediately investigated which abattoirs were doing the wrong thing immediately banned any liaison or any projects with them, but we can't penalise the good guys. Can I give you an analogy? It is a bit like when we had the incidents with Indian students in Australia and India wanted to ban all their students from coming here. We said no, that's an isolated incident. We've got great places for students to study at, we've got great places for students, we will look after your students. How would we have felt would being tarnished with the

same brush as those couple of unfortunate incidents? It is a bit like that the way we are treating Indonesia now saying that just because of those bad ones, we're treating the whole of Indonesia the same way.

Presenter: Anna Burke to you now in Melbourne. Do you agree with any of those sentiments? There was of course also a lively debate in your caucus room when these allegations first came out?

Anna Burke: Andrew, I agree with Jane that there has been horror across the board from all parties and disgust at the footage we saw aired on Four Corners and congratulations to the ABC for the programme. But I have for many months been getting complaints from constituents, predominantly about the live export trade of sheep to the Middle East and now more forcefully about cattle to Indonesia. When the minister came out and said we would have a ban on the 11 abattoirs indicated in that programme, the industry then said, no, that wasn't sufficient. They were going to increase it to 25. Then the confusion reined about how do you monitor the supply chain. The only way to do that is have a ban for the six month period to actually get in place with the industry, with the Indonesians, the supply chain route to ensure that the cattle, our cattle, Australian beef, is ending up in abattoirs and being treated in a way that Australians think is appropriate. I, like all members of Parliament, have been flooded by emails concerned about this issue. I think for once we should actually listen to our constituents who are actually asking for this ban.

Presenter: So why did it take the Minister Joe Ludwig so long to announce what he did today?

Anna Burke: I think difficulty is that the industry had been trying to work with the Indonesians and for a long time had been telling the Government that things were on track. Obviously they weren't. This is an issue they've known about for a long time. The minister only had the footage for two days prior to the release of the Four Corners programme and think he's got it and acted appropriately.

Presenter: Jane to you now. Do you believe there's a real case now for compensation for these producers who have cattle stranded on docks?

Jane Prentice: Well, I think they have a real case to make. The problem we have is that people are already being put off in the trucking industry I had a call this afternoon from someone who has lost their job until the situation changes. But you know, Anna pointed out about the ban to the Middle East. That was under the Howard Government and there was a total ban, but that was because every single place there was doing it the wrong way. I just don't think we need a whole of the six months before we can gradually put back into the abattoirs that are doing the right way, the Australian way and I think we need to make a difference and point out the difference between the people who are doing the right thing who have invested money in their companies, who have invested money and employ people in Indonesia and doing it right way compared to the appalling atrocities we saw the other night on TV.

Presenter: Is that a fair call for you Anna? Do you think that six months is perhaps a bit too heavy-handed?

Anna Burke: No, I don't think so. I think for us to work through the supply chain route that we need to have that in place and we need to assure the public we've taken those measures and that we do have the actual processes in place, the oversight to ensure that the ban is there. Late last year or early this year, the Indonesian Government actually changed the rules about the size of beef that we could export to Indonesia, overnight without any consultation with the cattle industry. The cattle industry copped that. There was literally cows on the docks that couldn't go because they weighed too much. I think there is an issue to work through with the industry how we progress this six months and ensure they are part of this solution. They are there. It is their cows and as Jane rightly points out, most of those producers were more horrified than anybody that their livestock was being treated in that manner. It's a supply chain route, the cows, the beef get exported to Indonesia, they're then fed up and sent off to abattoirs, they are then sent into the markets. We should also be looking though at value adding in Australia. If we're talking about jobs, where are the jobs in our abattoirs? We now have sufficient halal accredited abattoirs where we can respect the rights of the religious, the Muslim's religious rights and I think we should be taking a look at that as well and ensuring we are protecting jobs at home as much as we are abroad.

Presenter: We will move now to the ongoing debate over asylum seekers. Today, the Opposition Leader has challenged Julia Gillard to tour Malaysian detention centres as he confirmed he would be travelling to Nauru again. Jane, is this another stunt, the Nauru situation and does Julia Gillard really need to go to Malaysia given that we are still working out this deal?

Jane Prentice: Look, the bottom line is Julia Gillard needs to make up her mind what she's doing. First it was East Timor, then it was Nauru. Now it's Malaysia. Sorry, it wasn't Nauru, it was Manus. Every day she's got a different solution and she's the one that condemned Howard Government. Yet, under her government the boats have increased from six in 2006 under Howard to 138 last year in 2009, with 135 people in 2008, to over 6,500 in 2009. Obviously whatever her solution is, it is not working. It is like a sinking boat that's popping holes every day of the week and I think Tony is quite genuine in saying if she is serious about sending people into Malaysia she needs to go and look at conditions herself because they are not good. People are not treated well. As everyone is aware, Malaysia isn't a signatory to the UNHCR on refugees and it more importantly is not a signatory to UNHCR against torture. And Nauru on the other hand is prepared to honour the conditions that Australia sets. So I think Tony is being incredibly genuine by looking at Nauru, checking what needs to be done to make the place habitable whereas the Prime Minister needs to look at other end of the spectrum where she wants to send people.

Presenter: Anna, are you entirely comfortable with the Malaysian Solution as it sits currently? We know it's still being worked out but with unaccompanied minors and some other elements that have emerged?

Anna Burke: No, I've actually expressed my concern about the situation with out asylum seeker issue to the relevant minister. I have taken that opportunity within the appropriate processes within the party to express my concern, particularly to express the concern of many within my constituency who view this with some, you know caution. I think, though, I marvel at Tony Abbott's latter day humanity. He was the man who wanted to tow the boats out to sea. Now he's throwing up Nauru as a greater solution. When asylum seekers were on Nauru, many of them were left to linger there for many years. The majority then came to Australia. We then accepted them after leaving them for years. Many of them, unaccompanied minors. I

find Tony Abbott's position in this just a little too cute by half. They've demonised these individuals, these are asylum seekers, they are people who are in an insidious situation and I'm sick to death with people playing politics with other people's lives.

Presenter: Having said that, we do still need to see the final details of this document but we have also seen in the past week a lot of refugee advocates or at least one in Marion Le come out and support Nauru over Malaysia. What elements particularly concern you about Malaysia?

Anna Burke: I think the situation with Malaysia is we're not 100 per cent sure where they would go. It would be hard to actually tour a detention centre. Many of the asylum seekers in Malaysia are living within the community in situations and I think that's difficult to see. The bottom line is we need to find a solution to an insidious problem, you know, that Australia really doesn't have huge problem with. I think we blow this out of proportion. Australia is receiving a very small proportion of those seeking asylum across the world. But we need to be deterring people from getting on boats. I'm fully supportive of anything that stops people getting on boats and risking their lives. Or in the situation of putting their children on a boat to come as the vanguard for the family. I think we need to be looking at all those solutions. We need to be talking to our regions. Why is it so easy for people to get within Malaysia and Indonesia? How come those situations happen? I just find it difficult that we are looking at stopping boats as opposed to the whole situation. As I've said, I've raised my concerns within the party forum and I'm going to leave it that.

Presenter: And Anna, are you also uncomfortable with the accompanied minor's element of this deal?

Anna Burke: I think the difficulty is if you say we're going to keep all accompanied minors, then families will send out boatloads of unaccompanied minors. We've seen that in the past. I would hate to send that as a flag to people smugglers that this is how you are going to ply your trade. I think it's a very difficult area that's fraught with danger. I don't think we have had a good public discourse about it. I've received thousands of emails about cows and sheep and the terrible treatment of that. I haven't received thousands of emails concerned about people getting on to leaking boats and drowning. We honestly don't know how many people have lost their lives in that situation. So I just find it a funny debate where people don't get things into I suppose the perspective I would have on them. We need to find a solution. We need to be continually talking to our region and coming up with something that will ensure we are looking after people who are very vulnerable.

Presenter: And on that note, that's all we have time for this evening on Capital Hill.

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