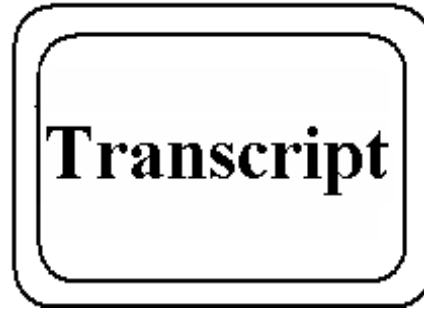




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Transcript

Senator Nick Sherry
Assistant Treasurer

Sky News AM Agenda

Other Panel member: Senator Mitch Fifield

Interviewer: Ashleigh Gillon

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SUBJECTS: Insulation Program, Asylum Seekers, Delivering on Commitments, Pauline Hanson to migrate to UK

ASHLEIGH GILLON: Joining me this morning is Assistant Treasurer Senator Nick Sherry, good morning.

NICK SHERRY: Good morning Ashleigh, good morning Mitch and good morning to your viewers.

GILLON: Well you've just stolen my next line, because Mitch Fifield, the Parliamentary secretary – Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Disabilities, the Liberal Senator, Mitch Fifield is in Melbourne. Good morning to you.

FIFIELD: Good morning Ashleigh, good morning Nick.

GILLON: I want to start on the insulation issue. Peter Garrett of course still under pressure over his handling of the Government's insulation programme, now we've learnt that the company that employed Matthew Fuller, the first person to die installing that insulation, that company is still operating. Another company, whose

work led to a house fire, was immediately struck off. Nick Sherry is that a decision that the Government should reassess?

NICK SHERRY: Well I understand that after the first death there was a re-examination of the process that occurs and subsequent deaths, those companies have been suspended. The first company, the old rules applied but their status is currently under examination under the old rules.

GILLON: Right, so you think that as of these new regulations that company will have to stop operating?

NICK SHERRY: Well it will depend on the facts and circumstances once the examination is completed.

GILLON: Electricians are meeting in Canberra today to discuss this scheme, but I understand Peter Garrett won't be there, he is out of Canberra launching an unrelated program, isn't the insulation issue more important at the moment?

NICK SHERRY: Well this is a meeting of technical officials that will discuss all of the detail and ultimately they'll make recommendations to Peter Garrett.

GILLON: So shouldn't he be at that meeting?

NICK SHERRY: Well I as a minister there's always important issues for ministers. But there are always lots of technical meetings being, taking place, I as a minister, I don't attend all the technical meetings on tax law, despite some tax law being very, very important. You then receive advice and make decisions on that advice.

GILLON: Mitch Fifield can Peter Garrett really be expected to personally be held responsible for those four deaths? Isn't there a line to ministerial responsibility? Do you think some of your colleagues may have stepped over a line in terms of blaming Mr Garrett for those deaths?

FIFIELD : Well no-one is suggesting that Peter Garrett is personally responsible – what the Opposition is saying is that he is responsible in a ministerial sense, he's responsible in a political sense and that if parliamentary accountability is to have any meaning at all, then he's also responsible in a parliamentary sense , and that being the case he should resign. I mean, what has happened was entirely expected. When you artificially, dramatically and quickly inflate demand for a particular product or service you will see fly-by-nighters come in and try and satisfy that demand. And it's within that environment, that environment that this Government has created, that these tragic deaths have happened. They shouldn't have happened, I don't think that this scheme should ever have been put in place in the first place, and for Peter Garrett today to be skiving up to Coffs Harbour when there's a technical meeting taking place in Canberra looking at ways to make this scheme safer, he should be there. No-one has criticised Peter Garret for not taking close enough interest in

detail, he's been criticised for not taking close enough interest, and I think Canberra is where he should be. Peter Garrett can't know too much detail about this.

GILLON: Ok, well there are a few issues I want to get through today, so I'm going to move on to some new data that we learnt about today from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees showing that applications for asylum globally rose by five percent in the nine months to September last year, but Nick Sherry in Australia they rose by more than 25 percent – what's to blame for that if it's not the Government's immigration policy?

NICK SHERRY: Well I think there are local push factors on a regional basis and the most obvious example are the circumstances in Sri Lanka where there's been a shocking civil war which is now come to an end, and there are hundreds of thousands of refugees. So those local push factors

GILLON... (inaudible)

SHERRY: A number of them are – a number of them are heading to Australia. And on a regional basis that, the outcome and the conclusion of that civil war has been an obvious factor in the increase in Sri Lankan refugees.

GILLON: Is that a fair enough argument Mitch Fifield, that push factors are to blame?

FIFIELD: No, not at all, you never hear from the Government, talk about pull factors, the fact that this government got rid of the temporary protection visas, that they softened their rhetoric and they've held out the prospect of on-shore processing in Australia. From my point of view that's given the people smugglers a terrific product to sell and that's exactly what they're doing. But you don't have to take the Opposition's word for this, overnight we had the figures from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees which showed that in the first nine months of last year there was an increase in applications for refugees of 25 percent in Australia compared to five percent in the rest of the world. So it strikes me as curious that the push factors are something that only Australia is experiencing. The UN data gives the lie to what the Government's been saying. This Government has made it easier for the people smugglers and that is putting refugees, asylum seekers in great danger, we want that to stop, the Government need to admit they've made a mistake and completely reassess.

GILLON: Well Mitch I understand that in your last party room meeting last week there was a question from one of your colleagues about this very issue raising concerns that Tony Abbott has been flagging new policies without running it past the party room, that for example his idea to turn back the boats, is this an issue that is still quite a divisive one in the Liberal Party?

FIFIELD: Well actually I'm in the happy position of not having been in the last party room meeting, I was sitting in Senate Estimates as Nick can attest, but I think one of the very positive things about Tony's leadership has been how consultative he's

been , how he puts to the party room important decisions, he's been doing that and there's practically unanimity in support for the Coalition position in relation to tougher border protection and at the weekend we had the announcement of the Shadow Cabinet sub-committee chaired by Shadow Customs and Border Protection Minister Michael Keenan, which is going to be putting the focus on even better ways of protecting our borders. He had a system that worked in Government, this Government has failed, we've shown how it can be done, it's up to this Government to reassess.

NICK SHERRY: It's very obvious that's there's lots of division within the Liberal Party, particularly about economic policy, we saw Senator Joyce's performance - or should I say non-performance – in Estimates last week. And it's a bitterly divided party, it's had four leaders in less than three years. And differences are emerging on policy all the time.

GILLON: Ok, well it seems like voters, though, like what they see under Tony Abbott. A new Galaxy opinion poll today shows that voter support for Kevin Rudd in the Prime Minister's own home state of Queensland has dropped significantly, Labor's primary vote slipped to 39 percent, Tony Abbott leading the Coalition has seen the Coalition go up to 46 percent, means on a two party preferred basis the Coalition's ahead by two points. As I mentioned to the Health Minister before, 49 percent of Queenslanders are saying Kevin Rudd's more talk than action, 46 percent thinking he's arrogant. What's going wrong with you?

NICK SHERRY: Well, look I've been around in politics for over 30 years and I've seen lots of good polls and lots of bad polls. What governments do and what this Government's doing is focussing on outcomes, on making sure for example Australia's economy is kept strong. Just look at Australia's economy – our unemployment rate, the strength of our economy, we've avoided recession – compared to other countries in the world. Delivering on health, for example, what Nicola Roxon outlined earlier, delivering – delivering – that's what we've been focussing on. And at the end of the day the people will judge us on that basis.

GILLON: Do you accept though Nick Sherry that the politics have really shifted over the last few weeks and the last couple of months since Tony Abbott took over?

NICK SHERRY: Politics shifts every day, every hour, every year, as I say, I don't get terribly focussed on polls, this is a disciplined government, it's a unified government, it's focussed on outcomes, as I've said. Whether it's maintaining the strength of the Australian economy in the face of the global financial and economic crisis, good outcomes on health, that's what we're focussed on.

GILLON: Well Mitch Fifield as you heard there the Government is going to be spruiking its economic credentials all the way to the next poll, that is something that ... certainly is going to get some traction. If Australia did get through the GFC very well compared to other developed countries around the world, is it too early for you

to be popping the champagne corks? Do you think Tony Abbott might just be experiencing a bit of a honeymoon?

FIFIELD: Well the champagne corks are very firmly in place actually. We're the underdogs in this contest, what's changed over the last couple of months is that we've become competitive. The Government knows that they have an Opposition and we're holding them to account. And as a result of that the public are starting to see that this is a Government that's all talk, that doesn't deliver. Nicola Roxon before was talking about GP super clinics, well they promised 31 GP super clinics, they've delivered two. Still on health, the Government promised before the last election they wouldn't means test the private health insurance rebate, they put their hand on their heart, but guess what – they lied. They introduced legislation to do just that. The Government promised that they would fix public hospitals by the middle of last year, if they didn't they'd take them over. Well, another broken promise. They didn't fix public hospitals and they haven't taken them over, they haven't even introduced a referendum bill into the Parliament to try and give effect to that at the next election. So the public are getting used to the fact that this Government talk and talk, but it doesn't deliver and on top of that they've got to contend with I think what Laurie Oakes described as the Prime Minister's "verbal sludge". The public aren't getting a clear message from this government, they just get spin, they don't actually get results.

GILLON: Nick Sherry there's a lot to respond to there, but ...

NICK SHERRY: Just on the issue of GP super clinics, look I'll give you an example. Thirty one were promised – you can't build them overnight. I had to go unfortunately to the doctor a number of times over Christmas/New Year, and that's where they're constructing – it was a construction site. And the GP super clinic in my own backyard in Devonport will be open shortly. You just can't wave out of thin air and say they'll be there tomorrow.

GILLON: What about the computers in schools program, now the Coalition's saying this is another promise which isn't happening, yesterday it was confirmed that none of the \$100m budgeted to bring in the high speed broadband to schools has actually been spent.

NICK SHERRY: Over 200,000 computers delivered in schools ... 200,000 delivered in the first two years of a Rudd Labor Government. That is decisive action, that is delivering on our election promise. And by the time we get to the election we'll be able to benchmark what we've said – don't forget governments are elected for three years, not two years – there's another 10 months and I've given the example ...

GILLON: Ten months ... inaudible

NICK SHERRY: If the election's at the end of this year, three-year term, that's what's normally expected. I've given the example of a GP super clinic, you just don't wave

these things out of thin air. Two hundred and twenty thousand computers delivered in two years, and that's a good effort. Just as the GP super clinics are being rolled out, once they're being built.

GILLON: Ok, we are almost out of time but Mitch Fifield I just wanted to get your reaction to the story today that Pauline Hanson says she's moving to the UK, she says Australia is no longer the land of opportunity, will you miss her presence in Australia Mitch?

FIFIELD: Well, I've spent a little bit of time in the UK, clearly Pauline Hanson hasn't, because if you're concerned that Australia's not the land of opportunity you sure as heck ain't going to find it in the UK. Australia is a far better place to raise a family, you can achieve whatever you want in Australia, and well good luck to Pauline Hanson in the searching for what she's looking for.

NICK SHERRY: Absolutely agree with Mitch, I was born in London, I've got lots of family there, I go there every couple of years, but I can tell you Australia is the greatest place on this planet to be living in, and good luck to Pauline Hanson.

GILLON: Ok, well good luck to her as you said, she wants peace in her life, we hope she finds it. That's all we have for this edition of AM Agenda, Nick Sherry, Mitch Fifield, thank you for joining us.