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**E&OE TRANSCRIPT
DOORSTOP INTERVIEW
PARLIAMENT HOUSE, CANBERRA
THURSDAY, 14 MAY 2020**

SUBJECTS: ABS Labour Force data; unemployment/underemployment; bushfire crisis; people missing out on support from the Government during COVID-19; JobKeeper; Australia's relationship with China; Queensland's bid for an equity stake in Virgin.

BRENDAN O'CONNOR, SHADOW MINISTER FOR EMPLOYMENT AND

INDUSTRY: Well, thanks very much for coming. I just wanted to respond to the ABS figures today and just say a couple of things about the unemployment rate, underemployment rate, underutilisation rate of the labour market. What is clear is as a result of a number of factors, the labour market has contracted, and we have very, very high underemployment. And yes, unemployment has risen, and one of the reasons it hasn't even been higher is that the participation rate has collapsed. A very low participation rate and a very, very high underutilisation rate. Almost 20 per cent, which is, of course, unprecedented. And the other thing to remember is this is a picture of the labour market of last month. This is a month ago when the surveys were conducted. So, this is not telling us the story of today, it is telling us the story of a month ago. And yet, these figures are quite frightening. And I think it does go to the question, it was always going to be the case that our nation would be challenged by this pandemic. It is important to note a couple of things. Firstly, underemployment, the number of underemployed Australians was already at a record high before the pandemic. And that is really important to understand. Because Labor has been calling on the Government to respond to record underemployment even prior to the pandemic hitting. That is important to note. It is also important to note that Labor's call to broaden out the JobKeeper package to cover the sectors most affected has

not been listened to. And it is very unfortunate that the sectors most affected have the highest proportion of casuals, for example, and therefore have been given the least support by the stimulus package. And this is why the Government needs to tend to this. This is just the beginning of what is going to be increasingly frightening figures. And behind every number, as we know, there is a worker and their family. And they, of course, they will be dealing with this today. We need to think about them. So, just to finish off just before I turn to the Leader, underutilisation almost 20 per cent. Underemployment at 1.8 million. And we have, this is a great challenge for this nation. And the Government needs to consider what else it does to look after those people now that are unemployed and those who face the prospect of underemployment and unemployment in the very near future.

ANTHONY ALBANESE, LEADER OF THE AUSTRALIAN LABOR PARTY: Well, thanks very much, Brendan. What these figures reveal is that some time ago 600,000 Australians, 594,000 to be precise, less were in employment. That is a devastating figure. They are all people with families, with a need to put food on the table for their family and their kids. They are people who are our friends, our relatives, our neighbours, people in our community. They are people, also, who won't be receiving the sort of income that you get in work, which then helps to stimulate the economy. That is the problem here. There will be a cumulative event. Not the least of which because when we look at the JobKeeper program, the Government is still leaving people behind, particularly the most vulnerable. Our casual employees, people in whole sectors like the arts and entertainment sector aren't getting the support that they need. The Government needs to respond to this. We thought this week, frankly, Parliament coming back, Budget Day two days ago in the normal calendar, that we would see a response from Josh Frydenberg of substance. What we got was a speech out of Seinfeld. A speech about nothing. No substance, just a few old figures put together. A few press releases collated. And a speech which will only be remembered for Josh Frydenberg's coughing fit. Nothing else. There was nothing else that happened during that day. In contrast, Labor is looking towards the recovery and looking to how it needs to happen. We are putting forward practical suggestions about JobKeeper and JobSeeker. We are putting forward practical suggestions in areas like housing and construction that is due to fall off a cliff in just a few months' time when we look at projections. But for this Government, it is all about day to day political management. And there is nowhere that is more evident than the last few days in their rediscovery of the bushfire crisis. In a few minutes time, David Littleproud will stand up and give a Ministerial Statement about it. What we heard was when the cameras left, the political imperative to act left as well when it came to this Government's response. We have people still living in caravans. People still showering in community facilities. People who have suffered from the drought and then bushfires and then the coronavirus pandemic. Getting a triple whammy. And what the Government has done in today announcing additional funding, for example, in aerial firefighting, is do something that we wrote to the Prime Minister on the 22nd of November last year. Last year that was necessary. But it was dismissed. There were no COAG meetings then, you might recall. None. No response on an appropriate level. And when there was finally a response, the ad was ready to go. The marketing campaign was up there within a couple of hours with a 'Donate to the Liberal Party' button attached. What we actually need in this country is a government that has vision beyond day to day politics. But what we are getting from this Government is just that. So, we will respond to David Littleproud's Ministerial Statement. But we will also respond and the theme of my vision statement on Monday can be summed up in one word, jobs. That needs to be the focus of the Government. Making sure that we recover in a way that builds strength and resilience in the economy. I would ask Jim to make some comments.

JIM CHALMERS, SHADOW TREASURER: Thanks, Anthony. Too many Australians lost

their job in April because of a deliberate decision by the Government. The unemployment queues are longer than they need to be because too many Australian workers have been excluded from the Government's JobKeeper program. Unemployment will be higher for longer because the Government is bungling the implementation of the wage subsidies. Now, as Brendan has said, unemployment and underemployment have been turbo-charged by this crisis. But they are not new challenges. For some time now, there has been an issue with insecure and precarious work with underemployment, with underutilisation. The labour market has been weak for some time. The Government desperately wants Australians to believe that everything was perfect in the economy and then along came the coronavirus. But underemployment has been an issue which has hung around for too long. It has been turbo-charged by this crisis. Unemployment and underemployment will be worse than it needs to be because the Government has taken a good idea in JobKeeper and badly implemented it. Too many Australians are heading off to Centrelink as a deliberate consequence of the Government's decision to exclude them from the JobKeeper program.

ALBANESE: Happy to take some questions.

JOURNALIST: Given that the unemployment rate was close to being 10 per cent, or predicted to be 10 per cent, isn't this a reason for celebration that more Australians aren't unemployed?

ALBANESE: No. Because as Brendan O'Connor outlined, these are old figures. And what we have seen is a significant decrease, even in these old figures, of some 600,000 people less being employed.

JOURNALIST: Do you believe China's assurances that their reasons for trade disputes over barley and meat are not related to Australia's push for an independent inquiry into the origins of the coronavirus?

ALBANESE: Look, Labor regards these issues as being separate. On the one hand we have made it very clear that there is nothing remarkable about having an inquiry into the pandemic which is affecting the world. When there is a death in this country and the circumstances of that death aren't clear, we have a coronial inquiry. There's been 300 [sic.] deaths from this pandemic. It is appropriate. It's not a criticism or an attack on any country. It should be just a matter of course that occurs. With regard to our trade situation with China, we have a good economic relationship with China. It is important that we continue to have that. We are not a protectionist country in terms of issues like barley. And any objective analysis will show that it is not reasonable that any sanctions be placed on Australia. And we will stand up for Australian jobs.

JOURNALIST: Do you, Mr Albanese, believe the AWU Secretary who has written that it is not time to perpetuate to the Communist states and that Australia should resist any attempts to (*inaudible*)?

ALBANESE: That letter could have been written by any AWU Secretary since 1891.

JOURNALIST: Mr Albanese, Kim Carr and Coalition MPs who questioned or wanted oversight on foreign scientists embedded in Australian labs to (*inaudible*). Do you think that is an acceptable comparison and will you condemn those comments?

ALBANESE: Look, I don't think, any comparison with that regime made by any individual

or any media organisation is always inappropriate. I say that in a consistent way. This is here question, not yours. Competing questions here. Can I say this though, that what would be really good and what we need in this nation is for the Government to get on top of its Government backbenchers. What we need to hear more of is from Marise Payne who made an appearance yesterday. I certainly agree with the statements that she has made. We have made that position clear. And more from the Prime Minister. And less from George Christensen making an appearance here in Australia. A rare appearance to make commentaries which don't add anything to the debate. What we need is a mature relationship, diplomacy is best done in a mature way. That is the way that nation states relate to each other. And it is important that the Government do that.

JOURNALIST: (*Inaudible*).

ALBANESE: The Government needs to focus on what Government members are doing.

JOURNALIST: Can I just make it clear, Mr Albanese.

ALBANESE: I have answered your question. So, if you ask the same question, you will get the same answer.

JOURNALIST: The AWU Secretary has said it before, but what do you make of their comments? Do you agree with them?

ALBANESE: I haven't read all the comments, to be frank. So, I am not going to comment on all of the comments. There is nothing new about AWU secretaries standing up for jobs in Australia. The union movement will always stand up for jobs in Australia.

JOURNALIST: Just on another issue, the Government has introduced a bill that is going to increase powers for Border Force in immigration detention centres. It is going to allow them to confiscate illegal materials, so drugs and also mobile phones and internet-enabled devices. Will Labor be supporting that?

ALBANESE: We will examine it in the usual way. It will go off to the Joint Committee and it will be examined in terms of the detail, there will be a report. National security issues should not be ones done on the run. They should be done with proper and appropriate consideration.

JOURNALIST: Obviously there is a lot of debate about the inquiry and about (*inaudible*). Putting that aside though, in your view, do you think our relationship with China is at the moment (*inaudible*).

ALBANESE: Well, I am not a commentator. I am a participant. People will make their own judgements about that. What is important is that people in responsible positions, whether they be the Prime Minister or the Leader of the Opposition, or the Minister for Foreign Affairs, or my Shadow, Penny Wong, make our positions clear and concise in a way that is appropriate between nation states. I have done that on the inquiry. I have done it very clearly. I agree with the Government's position. Can't answer the same question more than one way.

JOURNALIST: Mr Albanese, for someone who does want to be a commentator (*inaudible*). Is it laughable, is it financially wise for the Queensland Government to be pushing ahead with this?

ALBANESE: Peter Dutton needs to do his day job. There was a 22nd death associated with the Ruby Princess yesterday. And Peter Dutton has avoided any proper scrutiny over the role of the Commonwealth that controls our borders. He is quite happy to talk about border control and how he is in charge at various times. This has been a major incident and a major source of infection, not just for those 22 deaths but many others who have contracted the virus as a result of the mishandling of the Ruby Princess. When it comes to Virgin, it is good that there is a Government in Australia that is prepared to stand up for jobs. And that Government is the Palaszczuk Government. What they have put forward, through Cameron Dick, is a stake. It is an equity injection into Virgin. I note the quite remarkable comments of Peter Dutton saying that every single dollar of expenditure is adding to Queensland's debt. Well, it is actually an equity injection, not a debt position. That is the first point, that Queensland is proposing, that is them buying an asset. And there is no doubt that Virgin remains an asset with capital and a market. There is a market in this country for two airlines. And secondly that Queensland is standing up for Queensland jobs. I would have thought that was a good thing. And I think the intervention by the Queensland Government, someone has to care about jobs at Virgin. There's 16,000 of them. Someone should be caring about jobs at dnata as well. It used to be called Qantas Catering, by the way. There are people there who have worked essentially for the Australian national airline, Qantas, indirectly providing those catering services. It is the Government that approved the sale of those businesses to a foreign ownership and then it uses that sale to justify not allowing those workers to get JobKeeper. Surely, the circumstances are that they should have got that support. And that is why Labor has raised those issues in the Parliament. I've got to respond to the Ministerial Statement now. Sorry.

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