



TRANSCRIPT

The Hon Peter Garrett MP

Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts

Doorstop at the Embassy of the People's Republic of China, Canberra
2:30pm, 15 January 2008

RETURN OF CHINESE FOSSILS

GARRETT: Today's hand back by the Australian Government to the Chinese Government marks a really significant stage in sending a strong message to those who trade illegally in fossils. These fossils have great value to the Chinese people, and it's been fantastic for Australia to hand these fossils back. It sends a strong message right out into the world community that the illegal trade in fossils of this kind simply won't be tolerated. I want to commend the work of the Federal Police and Customs, of my department, and to acknowledge the great and close relationship that we've had with the Embassy. And just reflect, if you like, on the significance of there being fossils of this antiquity that tell us a lot about the world that our predecessors have lived in and tell us a lot about the world has evolved and I think mark a true stage of cooperation between the two countries. So I think it's a really positive and strong indication of the relationship between Australia and China, it shows that we take our responsibilities under the UNESCO convention seriously and it's a really great pleasure for us to be able to send back such a quantity of fossils of this importance to the Chinese people today. I'm happy to take any questions.

REPORTER: Mr Garrett, the Humane Society International has just won its case in the Federal Court has declared that the Japanese are in breach of Australian law. What's your response to that?

GARRETT: I want to have a look at the details of that case - that's happened literally while we've been handing back these fossils to the Chinese Government, so I'll look very closely at the details of that decision.

REPORTER: Mr Garrett, how long before the Oceanic Viking reaches the Japanese whaling fleet?

GARRETT: I'm not going to start speculating immediately about the number of days it'll take or otherwise, in what's happening in relation to the Oceanic Viking. What I can say is that we will have an adequate and comprehensive monitoring in place. It will enable us to have every good opportunity to take in material and information in the event that we will be able to take a case forward, which is our intention, to take a case forward. And I would say that the combination of the Oceanic Viking heading into the Southern Ocean now and also the future surveillance flights which will be undertaken by the A319s will give us the very best opportunity to assemble that material necessary to take a legal case forward if in fact that's what we do.

REPORTER: If as many as 150 whales have been killed in the time that you promised to send the Oceanic Viking back in December and now, do you feel bad about that?

GARRETT: Well, what I would say is that the whaling season lasts up until the end of February, it may even go to early March. We have a responsibility to make sure that when these vessels are committed to sea, that they are properly and adequately prepared - that has happened. And we have a responsibility to make sure that the 20 days that we've committed the Oceanic Viking to can be used productively as possible. And I'm sure that will be the case here.

REPORTER: Is the Federal Court decision likely to be any help in terms of future legal action by the Australian Government?

GARRETT: Again, let me have a look at the details of what the judges said; I don't have the details at hand. It was an action that was taken privately; the Commonwealth wasn't a party to this case. But our intention to continue to have an overall holistic and fair dinkum approach to oppose Japanese so-called scientific whaling is absolutely clear. We have the Oceanic Viking on its way, air flights and surveillance, which will be undertaken in the future. We have strong diplomatic action, including for the first time a demarche which was signed by the EU. We have the prospects of stronger action in the International Whaling Commission. We want to look at the ways of closing the loopholes that are in the Commission; we'll be working very hard to do that. We'll have a special envoy on whale conservation. I mean, these are fair dinkum measures that this Government has undertaken, and this going to be a long, and a tough, and a protracted endeavour and we're committed to taking it through all the way.

REPORTER: Regarding the Port Philip Bay decision: that's just come down too and the judge has given it the go-ahead, the dredging. You're obviously pleased with that?

GARRETT: I think my department would be able to say that the measures and the processes that were undertaken in us looking closely at that Port Philip Bay project were absolutely appropriate. That is now clearly the decision of the court as well. It's important to remember that we imposed a set of stringent conditions and we were clear that no matters of national environment significance should be adversely impacted as a consequence of the proposal. Now, we were absolutely thorough in our approach to that and the court has found that today.

REPORTER: The EU says that it's going to reassess its position of biofuels, saying its actually destroying rainforests. Is the Australian Government considering following suit and is ethanol the answer?

GARRETT: I think we need to have a look at what the EU is saying - again, I haven't seen those reports. We're going to need a mix of measures to deal with alternative fuel supplies and it is the case that in some countries and some parts of the world people are raising concerns about the impact that biofuels might be having overall on biodiversity. But that again is a matter for relevant ministers and also I'd like to see that report before commenting any further.

REPORTER: In opposition, Labor appeared to be supportive of the Humane Society International action, you're saying you criticised the Government for not joining it and actually opposing the action. How do you feel about it now that you're in Government? Do you support what they've done?

GARRETT: I think it's absolutely appropriate for private organisations and individuals to take up where they can through the legal system those issues of concern to them – as the HSI have done. We've said we'd remove the objections that the previous Australian Government had but they've done it. I want to see the details of what the judges said. I don't propose to further comment on it until I've actually had the opportunity to see the details of the judges' decision.

REPORTER: Does the Government approve of what Greenpeace are doing in the southern ocean in regards to the Japanese fleet?

GARRETT: The Government ministers have been, I think, consistent in making clear that for the Australian Government it's important that everybody respects the appropriate laws of the sea that apply in

situations of this kind, that safe conduct is a matter of necessity in those waters. I have to say, having had the tremendous opportunity to visit Antarctica quite recently, that no one should underestimate the difficulties associated with the Government's endeavours to monitor the activities of the fleet. I mean this is something that the former Howard Government did not do, I see Mr Pyne being very critical about the Oceanic Viking. It's time these people sort of got off the bench and decided whether they support what we're doing or not. If they support it, then make comments that accurately reflect a decent understanding of what's going on and I think that vessel is well-equipped to do the task that's been given to it by the Australian Government and I expect this to be an important measure that we follow through in the coming months.

REPORTER: Minister, the Indian envoy on nuclear issues is meeting with the Government in Perth this afternoon. Can we expect a fairly uncompromising message to him on uranium sales under the non-proliferation agreement?

GARRETT: Matters of the Indian envoy talking to the Australian Government are rightly the province of the Minister for Foreign Affairs and I'll certainly let him take questions from you on that. What I would say is that the position that the Government had, which was made clear in the run-up to the election, is our position. I'm sure that would be communicated to him.

REPORTER: One more question: on uranium, if I could ask you about a uranium mine in Bachelor called Rum Jungle. The company says it fears that you could impose impossible environmental conditions on the uranium mine. Is that well-founded and is that a way of saying "well, we've abolished the no new mines policy, but here's a way around it"?

GARRETT: My responsibilities - as they were in relation to determining the Port Philip Bay issue – are to scrupulously adhere to the laws, to the legislation, to the regulations that are in place for the Environment Minister, and I would consider that the same thing should apply to Uranium mining as it would to any other activity.

REPORTER: On your trip to Antarctica, did you report back to Penny Wong's office at all about the climate change issues?

GARRETT: I haven't had a chance to brief any of my ministerial colleagues on the Antarctic trip, but I certainly intend to do that when I get a chance. I think I'll be seeing them in Perth at the end of the coming week and I'll look forward to sharing with them my experiences on Antarctica and not only the incredible job that...Look, I've just got to, I mean press conferences, you know, we're here to something really important in handing back these fossils to the Chinese Government, but the task that was undertaken by the Australian team in the Antarctic to construct this air-strip, this Wilkins air-strip, in the middle of the Antarctic wasteland was an absolutely extraordinary feat. It was a great privilege to be there and I look forward to sharing with my colleagues some of our stories and some of our recollections of that event. Thank you.

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