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MINISTER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT, HERITAGE AND THE ARTS

TRANSCRIPT

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DOORSTOP, IWC, SANTIAGO, CHILE

3.45pm, Santiago time, TUESDAY 24 JUNE 2008

Issues: Australian reform proposals for IWC

MINISTER GARRETT: Today we've seen something of a breakthrough in the International Whaling Commission with an agreement by member states that there will be a working group process that will be based on consensus. This is an attempt to break the logjams, the gridlocks that have characterised the debate in the Commission in the past. It is something that Australia does support. We recognise that there a number of really important issues that must be resolved and they must be resolved in a way that is constructive and because we have brought a number of strong and concrete proposals to the table, we want to see them discussed in this spirit of cooperation as well.

We're not pretending that it is going to be easy and it is the beginning of a process, not the end of it. I know that the support for member states at this Commission to look at these difficult issues, in a way that is free of acrimony and argument, is considered to be particularly important. So as a consequence, my remarks in the plenary of the Commission were supportive of that process. I think it's absolutely right for Australia to be saying we will still continue to take forward these issues in a constructive manner, but I also made it clear that we see some significant impediments in the longer term and particularly the capacity for countries to opt out of this via special permits goes very much against what the Commission has done, which is to have a moratorium on commercial whaling.

Notwithstanding that, this is a breaking of the gridlock, an opportunity for some forward and constructive discussion and we will be a part of those discussions from today

REPORTER: Minister you have already been here a couple of days. Have you got a sense of [inaudible]?

MINISTER: Well I don't think anyone underestimates the difficulty considering this is the 60th of these meetings and that for a decade or more, what we've seen is continuing discussion, continuing argument and frankly, increases in the quota of whales that have been taken in the Southern Ocean. The history up to this point in time has not been a positive and constructive history, but that's no reason to say we should not be working with other countries to try and really improve the way the Commission goes about its business, but particularly, as we are saying to the Commission, it is time for modernisation, it's time for the Commission to expand its work so that it becomes a conservation organisation in terms of its focus, and in order to do that, it has to address these issues in a way that has the agreement of the member states and now the process has begun, we'll do that.

REPORTER: Twelve months is a fair time isn't it before the working group reports back?

MINISTER: It is a reasonable period of time but given we've had years and years of a failure to reach an agreement, the fact that we on the floor today heard constructive commentary and supportive statements from a number of nations who have traditionally held a number of different opinions on these matters, and certainly speaking to both senior officials and some of the countries, it is clear that the language that is being used today is more cooperative and positive. That doesn't mean that the path ahead is easy. It won't happen overnight but it does represent the breaking of a gridlock in terms of process. It means the IWC is not falling apart. It's actually designing a future path for itself and that can only be a constructive thing.

REPORTER: Haven't we just created another gridlock though? Japan is never going to agree to what Australia wants without compromise.

MINISTER: Given that we have brought forward the first serious proposals for reform that look squarely at the issues of conserving these great whale populations, and offering the opportunity to work collaboratively with us, let that offer be on the table and let us see where that leads us. If we're serious about this issue we have to come to the table with positive offers and a positive contribution and that's what Australia's making at this Commission and today's announcement and the agreement that's been reached in the Commission is consistent with that approach that we've taken.

REPORTER: Could you sell a deal that abandoned scientific whaling in the Antarctic for small commercial coastal quotas for Japan? Could you sell that deal to the Australian public?

MINISTER: We have come here saying we are not compromising on our policy position or on the matters that we hold strongly and clearly and we are not talking here about deals. What we are talking about is having constructive process for discussion and engagement in a number of issues. If you look at the list of issues that has been identified for this working group, you will see that it includes matters that have been the subject of dissent, of acrimony, and of argument for decades and you will see issues that have arisen in the context of the proposals that we've brought forward, in the context of the strong push for things like whale sanctuaries, which have been evidenced by proposals that have been coming into the Commission at this meeting from the Latin American countries. We have a significant range of matters that countries have not been able to satisfactorily resolve at the time but you have a process for them to be discussed. This is not about compromise from Australia's point of view at all but it is about working cooperatively with other countries to discuss other points of view.

REPORTER: This Commission seems like it couldn't decide what to have for dinner let alone reforming it. Are you confident that in a year they are going to reach an agreement?

MINISTER: Let's be clear about the fact that the IWC is the only legitimate international body that we have to discuss and resolve these matters and so Australia is committed to working with other countries within the Commission process. Firstly, to resolve some of these outstanding issues where we can, secondly to have substantial discussions about the proposals we've brought forward. What we're saying is that it is time for the Commission to modernise itself. It is time for it to recognise that we are no longer in the 1950s. We're in the 21st century and the range of threats that cetaceans populations face is incredible, as are the opportunities, particularly the economic opportunities for developing and developed countries to watch whales, as opposed to kill them. The Commission is the appropriate forum for those matters to be discussed and hopefully, in the future resolved, and on that basis, today's announcement is a positive.

REPORTER: At the same time you got [inaudible] saying the benefits of whale watching have been grossly exaggerated and you've been in there saying people are making millions out of it. Who do we believe?

MINISTER: I commissioned specific research to estimate the value of whale watching in economic terms and the statistics are clear that firstly, whale watching provides an economic benefit to the Australian community of at least \$300 million a year, but secondly and critically, it is an activity that is increasing in popularity year after year. So it has an exponential capacity to provide a sustainable basis for communities and countries that want to encourage and build whale watching activities. There is no question about that and the data is very clear.

REPORTER: Have you spoken to Shoji Morishita or any of the Japanese officials and will you be seeking one-on-one bi-laterals?

MINISTER: At this time I haven't spoken to the Japanese delegation in one-on-ones but I'm happy to meet with them if the situation arises.

REPORTER: Will you be seeking that?

MINISTER: Over the course of the day if there is an opportunity arises that we can speak to them, then we'll take it.

REPORTER: Your statement clearly called for open debate as a civil society on this but it's happening behind closed doors. How do you square that?

MINISTER: The decision that was taken by the Commissioner to effectively start to resolve some of these matters was seen as a way of trying to bring the process forward. Australia has made it very clear that we think civil society has an important and vital role to play in these discussions. I want that to happen. Now that we have a working group we have access to the information, we have identified the issues that need to be discussed and we'll be working closely with our civil society as this process goes forward.

REPORTER: But the observers are shut out of those negotiations?

MINISTER: That is a decision that has been reached as a process by the Commission and the Commissioner in order to advance it. We truly recognise that civil society plays and I anticipate they will continue to play that role and I anticipate that Australia will continue to have a close association with our civil society on this issue.

REPORTER: You were praising efforts of diplomacy. Were your predecessors wrong to come to these meetings and ritually condemn the Japanese slaughter?

MINISTER: What I think we can say about our predecessors and about the former government is that notwithstanding the number of speeches they made, press releases they put out and strong comments that they made, they did not achieve anything. We had an International Whaling Commission meeting that went through a continual process of disagreement with no clear signs of how that disagreement was going to be dealt with in process terms and an escalation in the quota for the Japanese activities in the Southern Ocean.

What we've done is different. We brought a clear set of reform proposals to the Commission for it to be discussed and they are about modernising an organisation that needs to come into the 21st Century and we've done that in a way that is considered and deliberate and cooperative. We haven't compromised our views at all. We've been very clear about what our view are, but we've

said if we want to resolve and discuss these issues and if we want to understand that for many countries there are tremendous opportunities to conserve whales and their whale populations, then this is the place to do it and we are already seeing the benefits of that approach.

REPORTER: You also raised the special permits as one of the critical issues? As a show of faith in this working group process, should Japan stop special permit whaling or at least suspend it during the process?

MINISTER: We've made clear our views, both through our diplomatic engagement and in discussions with our officials on a range of matters, including the special permit matter. Today, there is a clear sign that the gridlock has been broken. Today there is a clear sign that the cooperative language that has emerged from a number of parties and a number of states in the Commission and we will have a further opportunity to make contributions in the days coming. We've still got a long way to go in the International Whaling Commission. Some of you will be aware of the history here. It's not by any means guaranteed that we will move in a deliberate and a productive fashion, one day to the next. We will soon come back to talk about those issues more fully as the Commission unfolds.

REPORTER: Given we're talking about cooperation and consensus, wouldn't it be nice if Japan could look at abandoning its scientific whaling for one summer while this working group gets moving though?

MINISTER: I think the thing that is clear to me is that we will want to understand the capacity that member states have to pick up on both the gridlock breakage that's happened today and the spirit of greater cooperative engagement that is evident in the Commission. Member states have to make their own decisions about what actions they will and won't take, but it's very clear that, with the platform for change here, we will be watching very closely whether they will or they can.

REPORTER: Is it fair to say then that Australia is likely to tone down the rhetoric against Japan over the next year while this process is underway [inaudible?]

MINISTER: What we will do is we will continue to engage fully on the issue. We will be clear about our policy objectives. They remain absolutely unchanged and we will communicate that at each and every opportunity in a way that is appropriate.

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