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**TRANSCRIPT OF THE HON. ARTHUR SINODINOS AO
DOORSTOP
COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENTARY OFFICES - SYDNEY**

Subjects: Upcoming week in Parliament, Solicitor General, ACT election, ACOSS report, Pension reform, SSM, NSW Liberal Party reform, Discipline in Government benches, Voluntary euthanasia, Members & Senators Entitlements.

EO&E.....

ARTHUR SINODINOS

I just wanted to make a couple of remarks about the forthcoming week in the Federal Parliament. The last week you would have seen that the Government is on the front foot getting legislation passed, and in this coming week of Parliament in the House of Representatives we're hoping to bring the Registered Organisations Bill back, and over the next few weeks the Australian Building and Construction Commission Bill back in order to get those important pieces of legislation which hung over from the last Parliament considered in this Parliament, sooner rather than later. We're very keen to get on with those changes because they have an economic impact, particularly the Building and Construction commission. The Fair Work Building Construction, the current body, has had a forty-four per cent increase in its activity in this regard over the last year, and that's because we need to keep doing things to help clean up the building and construction sector. This is not about targeting unions; it's about targeting better work practices and putting the law back on the beat in construction in order to be able to get an improvement in construction costs. It's very important for us as a country, in a sector like this, building and construction, which is so important to be as competitive as we can be, and these changes will help in that regard. I'd also like to make the point that I think Bill Shorten should think further about the candidacy of Kimberley Kitching in terms of the upper house, the Senate. She's someone who was referred by the Heydon Royal Commission for further investigation and someone who's clearly close to Mr Shorten and one of the reasons I think Mr Shorten is supporting her candidacy for the Senate is because she would be a vote for him in the Party Room. This is a very important matter, it's very important that we understand that Mr Shorten knows that the longer that we stay in power, that the Coalition stays in power, the more tenuous his position is and I think it's another indication that he wants a further vote in the Party Room to buttress him against the claims of Mr Albanese. So for us a busy time ahead, we've passed legislation around personal tax cuts, we've had agreement with the Opposition, and we've thanked the Opposition for that, on \$6 billion of cuts in the Omnibus savings Bill, we've got plenty to do, plenty to get on with.

JOURNALIST

Does the Government retain confidence in the Solicitor-General? And do you believe his resignation is the only way to resolve the obvious breakdown in relations?

ARTHUR SINODINOS

As the Prime Minister indicated this last week in the Parliament, he retains confidence in both the Attorney-General and the Solicitor-General. Clearly there has been a difference of view; that needs to be resolved, but that can be best resolved by them working together. It's not a matter of seeking to ask one or the other to go.

JOURNALIST

Mr Sinodinos you also have a long association with the ACT Liberals, is there any message to Governments around Australia from the ACT Labor election win, particularly when it comes to investment in public infrastructure?

ARTHUR SINODINOS

The important thing to say about the ACT campaign first and foremost is that it was fought on local issues, and you alluded to one of those issues, and while Jeremy Hanson ran an energetic campaign, clearly fate was against him, for want of a better description, but what it says about investment in public infrastructure is this: to the extent there's any Federal resonance, it supports, I think, the sort of policies I think Malcolm Turnbull has been supporting since he became Prime Minister, which is about a better balance between how much we invest in road and rail, it's about how we make sure that infrastructure dollars at the Federal level – and we're spending record amounts – actually have conditions attached to them so that they support more reform of planning and land use systems at the state and local government level. It's a partnership, and we've got money there for further partnerships with the states. In the campaign we announced three city deals, and there are more deals to come, and I think this is actually an exciting phase in Australia's infrastructure development.

JOURNALIST

An ACROSS report has come out today and it says that 17.4 percent of children in Australia live in poverty. Now ACROSS is calling on Senators to reject further cuts to family payments that are currently before the upper house; do you oppose those cuts or do you support them?

ARTHUR SINODINOS

I support the policy of the Government, which is that we have to get budget repair. I know of the report, I've not read its contents as yet, ACOSS is a very credible body, I think the best way to deal with child poverty is to have a strong economy, because a lot of these kids are growing up in households where one or more parents, and maybe even grandparents, has not had a job, so part of the job is making sure we're encouraging participation in the workforce, and we're going to be doing that in a number of ways, it's not just about the stick, it's also about the carrot, and the current Minister for Social Services has put his stamp on the portfolio with welfare reform which is meant to encourage that.

JOURNALIST

Just in relation to those pension changes, obviously the Opposition Leader is in the Daily Telegraph today calling Malcolm Turnbull the Christmas Grinch for sending out those announcements on whether pensioners will lose or increase their pension at the end of the year. Is this a case of, you should have informed pensioners earlier? Why has it taken so long to inform pensioners of the change that was from the 2015 Budget?

ARTHUR SINODINOS

Well it's taken some time for the changes to be worked through. But first of all, let me say that those changes will benefit some pensioners. Eighty-eight to ninety per cent of pensioners will have no change, some pensioners will actually have an increase up to thirty dollars a fortnight, and yes some pensioners with greater assets above the new asset-free area they will be asked to contribute more from their own pocket, as it were, but for anyone who loses a pension as a result, they will still be able to keep their healthcare card or they'll be given a healthcare card. Now, in terms of the timing, that is more of a matter for Centrelink to work through, but any pensioner who has an issue should get on to Centrelink now and get it clarified, and they're waiting to answer their questions.

JOURNALIST

Pensioners are saying it's not fair you're not taking the money from elsewhere, obviously there's some discord about where that needs to happen, is that your argument?

ARTHUR SINODINOS

Fiscal repair is part of the argument, but also this is a way to put more money into the pockets of those on the full pension rate, those pensioners with very few assets. Also what we're doing in Government, as you know from our superannuation changes, is we're trying to make sure the super system is fairer and we're putting more money into the pockets, through superannuation, of low income people and women in particular coming in and out of the workforce, it's about fairness across the board.

JOURNALIST

So same sex marriage Senator, the Prime Minister walked away a number of times last week from a question directly about whether he would at some point allow a free vote in the party room, now what is your personal standing on this and is there a plan b for the government now that the plebiscite looks doomed to failure.

ARTHUR SINODINOS

Well I don't have personal stands in the sense that I've signed up to the government's policy. That policy was enunciated or developed as a result of a marathon, which you will remember, a marathon meeting of the party when Tony Abbott was Prime Minister. And the agreement was that there would be a plebiscite put as our policy to the election. That remains our policy, it's our policy that we are putting to the Senate and I'm really I suppose just asking Tanya Plibersek, Anthony Albanese, Bill Shorten, all the rest of them, to let us keep our promises. That is a promise; we can have a plebiscite very quickly, by February next year if they are prepared to keep this promise. And I take you back to what Don Farrell said in the paper this morning, in the article, I think it was in the Sunday Telegraph where he talked about how he accepted as part of a compromise that he would not necessarily be able to exercise his conscience in the way he wanted to as part of an agreement within the Labor party about the handling of this matter. The fact is in all political parties from time to time you have to make agreements so you can keep the party position as one. That is what Labor has done, that is what we have done, and what we are asking in the Senate is to keep us to our promises. And can I just say on promises, there is a lot of hypocrisy in Australian politics, often people say to us in the Senate 'oh you should not do this because it's a bad thing, or you should not do this because you're breaking a promise'. Well stop us from doing bad things but please keep us to our promises.

JOURNALIST

[Inaudible]

ARTHUR SINODINOS

The plan b, c, d, e is to keep persisting with getting this through the Senate

JOURNALIST

On a side issue, do you support Tony Abbotts call for plebiscites for Liberal party members in NSW for party preselections?

ARTHUR SINODINOS

Well it's not just Tony Abbott's call, I think John Howard has said similar things, the Prime Minister has said similar things, Mike Baird has said. It's not about so much the end goal but how we get there. The point I've made about the process is I believe there should be a vote

of the division as a whole, all of the membership of the division on what the changes should be because then I think they will stick. Doing it through State Council is one thing, but I think it should be the membership as a whole, I think we need to speed up the process of having plebiscites. It's happened in Victoria, they have got a process to do it, it's worked pretty well and I think there have to be safeguards, you have to make sure that people can't just be knocked back from becoming members of a particular branch because others are seeking to keep that branch to themselves. You have to have that change, that's why it has to be a considered change.

JOURNALIST

So it could take some time?

ARTHUR SINODINOS

Good change always takes time but I believe we can speed these changes up.

JOURNALIST

Do you think the Coalition needs better discipline after accidentally passing that Labor amendments this week?

ARTHUR SINODINOS

I'm from the Senate and I'm biased. I think in the Senate we have learned over many years that you have to be on your guard every minute of every day. I think In the House of Reps sometimes in the past because they have had a majority outlook, there's not been quite the same psyche but I think they are now getting a couple of good lessons in that psyche and I think things will be better from here.

JOURNALIST

Is it laziness though?

ARTHUR SINODINOS

No I think it's the psyche as I said before.

JOURNALIST

Senator is the voluntary euthanasia Bill that's going to South Australian parliament this week, is this something the federal government is concerned about?

ARTHUR SINODINOS

Well it's a matter for the South Australian Government.

JOURNALIST

The Prime Minister has said the Special Minister of State is working on a reform package that will reform the ambiguities from MP's entitlements, what are the major elements of that package and will it result in a net reduction to MP's and Senators?

ARTHUR SINODINOS

The first change and this may appear a semantic change, but it's actually quite important. It's about not talking about these as entitlements. These are not entitlements; these are work expenses which are paid for by the taxpayer. And the substance of the changes is to tighten up the circumstances under which expenses can be claimed, and to make it very clear that we don't want too many of the grey areas. The big problem is that in the past I think there has been too much discretion as to how to interpret the rules and I think we need to move to a system which is a bit more black and white. And what some people may say is that is becoming more rigid, but the fact of the matter is in terms of public confidence in the system, I think we have to have a system where they can say 'yeah if this was my workplace, this is how work expenses would be administered.'

JOURNALIST

So less (sic) expenses will be afforded to MP's?

ARTHUR SINODINOS

I think it will be done in a more rigorous way which over time probably does mean there will be less (sic) expenses.

JOURNALIST

Mr Irons. Has anyone in government taking him to task over the \$17,000 that he clocked up on a number of trips thousands of miles from his electorate which he claimed as parliamentary expenses?

ARTHUR SINODINOS

I understand that he or a spokesperson for him has said that they are within the guidelines but that is a matter that is being pursued by the Special Minister of State.

JOURNALIST

Is this an example of what you are talking about, grey areas and difficulty of definitions?

ARTHUR SINODINOS

Under the existing system yes.

JOURNALIST

Just going back to voluntary euthanasia, if South Australia does pass that Bill would you move to stop that being legalised?

ARTHUR SINODINOS

I'm not aware of potentially what the powers for us to do that would be; in the past it has been an issue in territories where we have had overriding powers. I think we have enough on our plate at the moment.

Anything else?

Thank you.

[ENDS]