



SENATOR THE HON ARTHUR SINODINOS AO

Minister for Industry, Innovation and Science

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Interviewer: Patricia Karvelas

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E&OE

PATRICIA KARVELAS:

Australian values – that’s what the Government says are at the heart of changes to citizenship requirements announced today. As part of a major shake-up of the system, the citizenship test will be changed to embody a largely yet-to-be-determined set of values. Permanent residents will also have to wait longer to apply, and stricter English language requirements will come into force. To talk on this and many other issues of the day and the week, I’m joined by Senator Arthur Sinodinos, who is the Minister for Industry, Innovation and Science.

Senator, welcome back to *RN Drive*.

ARTHUR SINODINOS:

Hey Patricia, great to be with you.

PATRICIA KARVELAS:

What is it that the current citizenship process is lacking? What needs to actually be fixed? What’s broken?

ARTHUR SINODINOS:

I think when it comes to Australian citizenship, every so often it’s important for us to remind ourselves of what is it that makes us Australians, and why it’s important to affirm the importance of citizenship, and encouraging those people who want to come to Australia to ultimately become citizens and participate fully in the life of our society. There’s nothing wrong in the sense of a huge gap between where we’ve been and where we’re going – we’re building on the foundations of what’s already there. As you mentioned earlier, there have been earlier initiatives under the Howard Government and others in terms of citizenship tests and the like, and we’ve had a debate now for 20 or 30 years about the way in which the identity of Australia is changing. And what the citizenship test does, what reflecting on

Australian values does, I suppose, is ask each of us to think about what is it that makes us proud about being Australian, and what is it we want to say to others who come here that we want them to be part of.

PATRICIA KARVELAS:

Okay, so what are those values? Can you define them?

ARTHUR SINODINOS:

Well look, at one level the values are reflected in the institutions that we've got: the role of democracy, the rule of law, equality before the law, the respect that we should have for each other, the tolerance which we should have for each other. In other words, Australia is very much about, you know, as long as we can all get on with each other then in a sense it doesn't matter what we're about or what we do in our spare time. It's how we have regard for each other – live and let live.

PATRICIA KARVELAS:

Okay, but isn't that already in the pledge? That's already there.

ARTHUR SINODINOS:

Yes, but what I'm saying is every so often it's good to reaffirm that and put an emphasis on it, particularly at a time when there's uncertainty in society, when people are feeling under all sorts of pressures, to promote the fact that we are finding ways to bring Australians together and to remind them that the things that unite us are much bigger than the things that divide us.

PATRICIA KARVELAS:

How is the test going to ensure the person taking that test will have these values, rather than simply being able to remember a set of information?

ARTHUR SINODINOS:

Well, I think because having to do the test and having to have a period to reflect on it actually encourages people to think about what they're doing and why they are doing it, and why they want to be part of Australia, and why we want them to be part of Australia. We're on a journey; our identity has changed as the composition of our population has changed, and it's important for us to keep refreshing that test and reflecting on what it is that we are.

PATRICIA KARVELAS:

English language requirements for citizenship will be more robust than they are now. I mean, did your parents speak English when they came to Australia from Greece?

ARTHUR SINODINOS:

No, no they didn't, they learned English here, just as no doubt was the case with your parents.

PATRICIA KARVELAS:

That's right, and I don't think my parents would pass the test that Malcolm Turnbull described today.

ARTHUR SINODINOS:

And Patricia, we're talking about the post-war period, where we were going through this massive expansion of Australia in terms of population and development. Now, what's happening increasingly is that, you know, English is very much the lingua franca of the world – if I can put it like that. But the point is we have a lot of people wanting to come to Australia. We use the English test as a way of testing the commitment of people to be part of the broader Australian society. We need to show, all of us, that we can communicate with each other, that we're on a similar wavelength. I think that's very important. That's why we put so much effort into adult migrant education programs and learning English as a second language if you come here, whether as a child or as an adult now. The settlement services that we've put into the community, that's all about encouraging everybody to feel they're part of the broader Australian experience.

PATRICIA KARVELAS:

If you're just tuning in, Arthur Sinodinos, who is the Minister for Industry, Innovation and Science, is my guest, and our number is 0418226576. Shadow Foreign Minister Penny Wong was on *RN Breakfast* with Fran Kelly this morning, and she said the current test was in English, she says it's a test that was largely designed by John Howard. What's wrong with the English standard already required? Because it's in English, people are expected to know English. How high does the English test have to be?

ARTHUR SINODINOS:

Well, I think the level that's been struck is reasonable enough, particularly in a context where increasingly we're pitching the migration program to get the most skilled people that we can, because there's a lot of people that want to come to Australia and we want to encourage that. I think the English level that we're talking about is quite reasonable in all the circumstances. To the extent that that takes pressure off some of our adult migrant education programs in Australia, that means that that funding can go to other things, but I don't think we should get hung up about the standard of English. The important thing is we're sending a signal as a community that we want to celebrate what we are as Australians, and that becoming part of the Australian family carries with it a set of rights and responsibilities.

PATRICIA KARVELAS:

The Government will add questions to the current test, aimed at cracking down on inappropriate attitudes on issues such as violence against women, child and forced marriage, female genital mutilation. Why just these issues? Why have they been raised specifically? Shouldn't the test also ask about attitudes, then, towards, for instance, gay people in the community?

ARTHUR SINODINOS:

Well, I think the issue with some of the first set of questions that you raise is it was making a point about how we have regard for each other and respecting the rights of the individual. That's very much a part of, if you like, Western civilisation – the civilisation that's formed so much of the basis of what we are about as a society. That's what those sorts of questions are about.

PATRICIA KARVELAS:

So do you think they should be expanded beyond, I mean, those issues I raise about domestic violence which, let's be clear, is illegal and should be. So it's already illegal – you can't live in Australia and do that without ...

ARTHUR SINODINOS:

[Interrupts] Patricia, there will be a process of consultation. So in that sense, you know, there's further work that can be done on this based on feedback from the community, and I think that's a good way to do this.

PATRICIA KARVELAS:

Would you favour being broader than just focussing on, for instance, just domestic violence? Should it focus on other crimes that we also don't accept as a community?

ARTHUR SINODINOS:

Well I haven't had much chance since the announcement to think about that, but that's why I'll be interested to see what the feedback from the public is, in the sense that it doesn't matter what I think, it's what the public thinks that will matter.

PATRICIA KARVELAS:

Just on 457 changes, which were the other big announcement of the week which certainly you as a portfolio minister have some responsibility over as well. How many new jobs for Australians will be created by scrapping 457 visas?

ARTHUR SINODINOS:

Well, we're in a process of only starting to implement these changes now, so I'm not across any estimates or modelling that's been done to date about where this will ultimately end up in terms of net increase in jobs available for Australians. This will take some time to bed down, and some of these changes don't come into effect until March 2018. But what's important about this is to understand that these changes will sharpen and make those programs more effective, but we're not throwing the baby out with the bathwater. We're going to make sure that the skills that we need that are in short supply in Australia, and particularly those skills that can supplement what we do here, will still be able to be supplied through these sorts of arrangements. But, at the same time, we're putting an obligation on ourselves as a government and as a community to put more focus on training and providing the, if you like, the upgrading of skills of our own domestic workforce so they can fill more of these jobs. So in the budget there will be further announcements around things like training funds and the like, and how they will be administered to maximise the impact of improving our skill levels.

PATRICIA KARVELAS:

The 216 occupations that have been removed from the system account for just 8.6 per cent of the 457 visas granted between June and December last year. How was the decision made to remove these particular professions?

ARTHUR SINODINOS:

Well there was consultation within government, and some consultation with bodies outside government, around occupations and the likely shortages in those areas. In some cases it

was to remove occupations where it was clearly based on outdated information, or where applications to come here had not occurred for a number of years.

But, look, there will be a further process and I'll be certainly encouraging the tech community to communicate with me about their issues to make sure that we're not throwing out the baby with the bathwater in making these changes. But please understand, every so often with government programs, you have to go through a process of looking at them because they can get flabby over time, they can become outdated, there were circumstances over the last few years where there were blowouts in areas where clearly the skill levels have to be questioned, and this is something where we need to have taken action. We have taken that action ...

PATRICIA KARVELAS:

So, you're saying to the tech sector we might review this, we understand that you have acute shortages?

ARTHUR SINODINOS:

What I'm saying to the tech sector is we don't want any unintended consequences with this and therefore I will engage in a dialogue with them to make sure that we are not throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

PATRICIA KARVELAS:

Okay, so does that mean there is an opening there? That there would be an adjustment for the tech sector on the 457s?

ARTHUR SINODINOS:

Smart governments always look to adjust to make sure that policy initiatives are meeting their requirements or their policy objectives and avoiding unintended consequences.

PATRICIA KARVELAS:

So you think there might be some unintended consequences? You're hearing what they're saying and you're worried?

ARTHUR SINODINOS:

[Talks over] What I'm saying ... what I'm saying is there has been debate in the tech community around some of these measures and I'm happy to engage in a dialogue on that. That's what open government is about.

PATRICIA KARVELAS:

If you're just tuning in, Arthur Sinodinos is my guest, the Minister for Industry, Innovation and Science. 0418226576 is our number. You were in the PM's meeting with the gas industry yesterday which has developed along with AEMO a framework to make sure gas is delivered at times of peak electricity demand to prevent blackouts. Can you give us some more detail, how is this going to work?

ARTHUR SINODINOS:

Well, what happened is that at the first meeting a few weeks ago with the gas producers, the Prime Minister asked for undertakings in this regard and the gas producers went away, reviewed potential supply, and came back and indicated that they believed that there was sufficient supply available to avoid some of the situations we saw last year. We have AEMO,

the Electricity Market Operator, going away to model the information that's been provided and at the meeting yesterday, the Prime Minister made it clear that subject to that information, if we're not satisfied with the potential supply response, clearly there may be scope for us to take further regulatory action in order to ensure that Australians don't suffer shortfalls in supply and have the optics of gas going offshore being exported at the same time as we're having to potentially import gas to meet domestic needs ...

PATRICIA KARVELAS:

[Talks over] So, you are prepared to ...

ARTHUR SINODINOS:

... or we're starving domestic industry of needed feed stock.

PATRICIA KARVELAS:

So, you are prepared to flex your regulatory muscle? Because you haven't yet. You're still saying that might happen?

ARTHUR SINODINOS:

Well, this is a government which essentially is pro-market, so we're dealing with the industry, the gas industry in this case, on the basis of seeking to achieve some desired outcomes without the need to take stronger action. If stronger action is required, the Prime Minister has made it clear that he's asked the gas exporters to provide information, and we will look at possibly regulatory options to address any short-term market issues.

PATRICIA KARVELAS:

Just a final question, Tony Abbott has declared that sneaky and underhand leaking needs to stop after polling was published indicating he could've lost his seat of Warringah in the last federal election. Who's being sneaky and underhanded and trying to undermine Tony Abbott?

ARTHUR SINODINOS:

Well, I don't know where that polling has come from but like a lot of government ministers, I don't like leaking, I agree with him.

PATRICIA KARVELAS:

Do you think there's a campaign against Tony Abbott? He seems pretty cranky today.

ARTHUR SINODINOS:

No, I don't believe there is. These things happen from time to time but we all have to get on with life and Tony and I and everyone else will be traipsing back to Canberra soon for the budget and getting on with providing good economic outcomes for Australia.

PATRICIA KARVELAS:

In the meantime, do you look forward to his ongoing interventions? I know there's some government ministers including Peter Dutton who've defended his right to speak out and say, you know, he's right on what he's warning.

ARTHUR SINODINOS:

[Talks over] Well, look, I've always said that as a former leader- and he's now a backbencher and, of course, backbenchers can say things that ministers can't say, but as a former leader he has the privilege of being able to speak on a variety of issues. Always, of course, it's got to be measured and proportionate, and I'm sure if you spoke to him he would say that he's trying to do this in that party interest and that national interest.

PATRICIA KARVELAS:

He would say that. Do you think he is though?

ARTHUR SINODINOS:

Well, I always look forward to the orations and quotations from my colleagues.

PATRICIA KARVELAS:

So you think he's doing it just for the good of the party?

ARTHUR SINODINOS:

Look, I think it's important for all of us in public life to say what we really think. You should never stop people from being authentic.

PATRICIA KARVELAS:

[Talks over] So I want you to say what you really think.

ARTHUR SINODINOS:

So, what I really think is that as a former Prime Minister he has the capacity to speak out on issues. He's doing that, and as I said before, there's also responsibility to be proportionate and of course always having an eye to the party interest and the national interest.

PATRICIA KARVELAS:

Fair enough. Arthur Sinodinos, thank you so much for joining us tonight.

ARTHUR SINODINOS:

Thank you.

PATRICIA KARVELAS:

That's the Minister for Industry, Innovation and Science Arthur Sinodinos.