

PM answers asylum policy questions and challenges Tony Abbott

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In his first in-depth interview since returning as Prime Minister and before visiting Indonesia, Kevin Rudd outlines his views on asylum policy while also challenging Opposition Leader Tony Abbott to debate policy in the lead up to the federal election.

Transcript

LEIGH SALES, PRESENTER: This time last week Labor MPs were cloistered in a room in Parliament House and the nation was waiting with bated breath to see who would emerge as Prime Minister. Since that night, Kevin Rudd has mostly remained behind closed doors, working with his team to come up with new policies, a fresh communications strategy and a plan for when to call an election. Tomorrow, Prime Minister Rudd heads to Indonesia, where arguably his biggest problem, asylum seeker policy, will be front and centre.

A short time ago, the Prime Minister joined me for his first in-depth interview since he resumed office.

Kevin Rudd, congratulations on returning as Prime Minister.

KEVIN RUDD, PRIME MINISTER: Thank you, Leigh. Thank you for having me on the program.

LEIGH SALES: Last year you said, "I will not under any circumstances mount a challenge on Julia Gillard's leadership, and I will go one step further: if anyone turns on Julia in the 18 months ahead, Julia, you will find me in your corner against them." How can Australians trust anything you say ever again?

KEVIN RUDD: Well the bottom line is, Leigh, when we got to the events of last week, I did not bring on this challenge; Julia Gillard decided to call a leadership ballot; and secondly, she then vacated the leadership. And it was invited for all to put their hand up and to nominate, and I did that. And the second is this - the second point's really important. As we get close to the election at the end of the year, the bottom line is pretty transparent to us all. The Australian Labor Party and the Government was on track towards a catastrophic defeat and I wasn't about to stand idly by and see everything we've worked for or the last five or six years go down the gurggle as Mr Abbott set about ripping it apart. They are the essential two reasons and I s'pose there's one other reason: I think at this stage we need to bring forth some new policies as well.

LEIGH SALES: Is there another reason: revenge?

KEVIN RUDD: Oh, good grief, no. Sort of past all that a long time ago. If I was so sorta wounded by the events of 2010, I would've gone offer whimpering into the corner a long time ago. I'm a positive sort of bloke, get on with the business and had we been travelling in much

better circumstances, then I'm sure none of these events would've happened. That didn't occur. And I'm determined to take the fight up to Mr Abbott so that the Australian people come this election have a real choice, a real choice between what we put on the table for the economy and for jobs and for growth and Mr Abbott's approach of slash and burn.

LEIGH SALES: The Opposition Leader Mr Abbott says he's not interested in a debate that you would like to have on deficit and debt until you call an election. Why don't you call one?

KEVIN RUDD: Well, can I just tackle Mr Abbott straight on here? I mean, Mr Abbott's been Leader of the Opposition now for, what?, four years or more. I've been Prime Minister of the country for four or five or six days. For the last three or four years he's campaigned continually on debt and deficit and the fact that the sky will fall in. He's campaigned continually on asylum seekers and campaigned continually on the carbon price. So what I'd say to Mr Abbott: you've been doing this for a long time. It's time we have a properly moderated debate by the National Press Club and that it should be on his chosen subjects to start with. He can have one on debt and deficit. He can have one after that on boats. He can have one after that, if he likes, on the carbon price. So, Mr Abbott, I think it's time you demonstrated to the country you had a bit of ticker on this. I mean, he's the boxing blue; I'm the glasses-wearing kid in the library - come on, let's have the Australian people form a view about whether his policies actually have substance, whether they actually work or whether they're just slogans and I'm prepared on each of these things to take him on directly.

LEIGH SALES: Let's talk about your asylum seeker policy. Where is your evidence that many people who come here via boat are economic migrants trying to pass themselves off as refugees?

KEVIN RUDD: Well because the determination process by the Department of Immigration and also on appeal finds that a certain proportion of people who come to this country are not bona fide refugees and as a result their motive for coming here is because they want to improve their standard of living.

LEIGH SALES: But it only finds 10 per cent of people aren't legitimate refugees currently.

KEVIN RUDD: Well, can I say - is based on experience, both in this country and around the world, there is a proportion of people who do that. It's just calling it a reality for what it is rather than pretending that it's something else. The key question, Leigh, is: what policies will actually deal with that problem as opposed to three-word slogans which might sound good, but don't add up to a row of beans. Mr Abbott says, "Turn the boats back." He says that's his policy. Let me add three more words. "Mr Abbott, how will you turn the boats back?" If it sinks, what will you do? Let people drown? Number two, if you turn the boat back to Indonesia and the Indonesian Navy says, "No, 'cause that's not our policy," what do you do then? Fair questions.

LEIGH SALES: Well, Prime Minister, your policy used to be to turn back the boats. Kevin Rudd, 2007: "Labor's policy is that if people are intercepted on the high seas then these vessels should be turned around."

KEVIN RUDD: I responded to these questions the other day. And what I said very plainly was that having become Prime Minister, the advice from the Navy and from a range of other senior officials was that that was simply not doable. Mr Howard, when he was Prime

Minister, with 250-odd boats of refugees coming to Australia in his period, he turned back four boats to Indonesia. Now that's the advice that I got from the officials. The truth is immigration policy and refugees policy is not set in stone. We've constantly got to adjust it according to circumstances.

LEIGH SALES: Let's return to this point about economic migrants. Basically our current system finds nine out of 10 people who come here are legitimate refugees. I ask again: where is your evidence that a "bunch", to use your words, of these people are economic migrants?

KEVIN RUDD: I think your question before, Leigh, was that where's your evidence that any of them were? You've just given me the nine out of 10 finding and I think it really depends which group is being looked at at a particular time. We have, based on my conversation with officials, deep concerns for example about what's coming out of Iran at the moment and Iranians who are seeking to come here. I can understand why people want to leave Iran, but the bottom line is it's not all about seeking freedom from persecution.

LEIGH SALES: But nobody's been processed in Australia since August last year, so how would you know why they're fleeing?

KEVIN RUDD: Well, one of the advantages of being Prime Minister, Leigh, is that you have advice from a whole bunch of officials who are dealing with those folks who are interviewing these people on the ground, looking at the intelligence, looking at what's happening with the people smugglers and I'm simply responding to the advice of my officials.

LEIGH SALES: Do you now accept that you were wrong when you were elected to dismantle the Howard Government's Pacific Solution?

KEVIN RUDD: Well what I said before was that we took a policy to the '07 election. We were returned on the basis of that policy. I said we'd implement the policies we took to the people. When we got to 2009-'10, what happened was that you suddenly had, as I said before, a war in Sri Lanka; you also had new people movements out of countries such as Afghanistan and elsewhere ...

LEIGH SALES: OK. I'm sorry to interrupt, but it's a pretty clear question: were you wrong to dismantle it?

KEVIN RUDD: We honoured our pre-election commitment and ...

LEIGH SALES: And was that pre-election commitment the wrong way to go?

KEVIN RUDD: Well, what I'm saying is we honoured our pre-election commitment. If we've made a mistake, Leigh - let me just say this - it was in perhaps not being quick enough to respond to the new change in external circumstances with an outflow from Sri Lanka from a civil war in 2009-'10. I go back to what I said before: there is nothing set in stone with immigration policy or asylum seekers policy. We constantly have to adjust our policy against circumstances. Mr Howard did that in 2001, 2004, 2007. We began to adjust in 2009-'10. And, I'm open to adjustments in the future.

LEIGH SALES: So Prime Minister, on one hand tonight you're saying that people are opportunistically coming here because they see it as an economic opportunity, but then on

the other hand you're saying, "Well the reason we've had such a huge increase in numbers is because people are fleeing persecution." Which is it?

KEVIN RUDD: Well, Leigh, the question assumes that you will have either one or the other. The truth is, both sorts of people come to this country. Ask any Immigration official who works for the Australian Government and that'll be the answer, and guess what? That's what Immigration officials will say to folks arriving, for example, across the Mediterranean, tens of thousands of them in any given period of time, across from Mexico into the United States. These are the challenges which Immigration officials face right around the world. My job as Prime Minister is to respond to changing circumstances. Mr Abbott's responsibility is to be fair dinkum about whether it's a policy of just "Turn the boats back", as he said would happen from day one, and further, how would that work? How would he make it work? He doesn't answer those questions.

LEIGH SALES: He at least has a policy. You currently don't have a policy for how you would stop these boats coming?

KEVIN RUDD: Well can I say with due respect, Leigh, we are dealing actively with all the source countries, we are working cooperatively with the International Office of Migration, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. We have programs within Indonesia to sustain people who are there currently under the protection of the International Office of Migration. We have huge investments in our police resources in Indonesia and other source countries across the country. We have massive assets deployed on the high seas and aerial surveillance. And, of course, we must continue to adjust those policies. But the reality that's out there at the moment doesn't disappear because Mr Abbott has gone out and said, "Here's my three-word policy: stop the boats."

LEIGH SALES: But the reality is nothing of what you're doing's working.

KEVIN RUDD: Well, can I say, Leigh, the best thing to do is to constantly review your policy. We're doing that.

LEIGH SALES: Prime Minister, on another policy matter, do you still believe that climate change is the great moral, environmental and economic challenge of our age?

KEVIN RUDD: Well my views on climate change have not changed. The science is real. And for goodness sake, for anyone including Mr Abbott to have ever uttered the phrase that climate change is "crap" I think also poses a real alternative for the Australian people to consider when we go to the polls.

LEIGH SALES: Well let's stick with your views. You still consider it to be the great challenge facing Australia?

KEVIN RUDD: I said, Leigh, that my views on the science underpinning climate change and the need for entire humanity to respond to it - as in fact the Chinese are now starting to do - is the right way to approach this. That's why I went out and promised a mandatory renewable energy target of 20 per cent by 2020. We legislated that. Secondly, we sought twice to legislate the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme. The Greens joined party with the Liberals to block that twice in the House, and therefore that, together with global actions, like we are seeing around the planet at the moment from the Chinese, is the way forward.

LEIGH SALES: I know that you've said that at the moment you're working through a range of policy things, including what you'd like to do with the carbon price. How soon though should Australians expect to start seeing you making announcements on what you're planning to do? Are we talking within the next week, are we talking within the next month, within the next three months? How soon?

KEVIN RUDD: Well, Leigh, one of the criticisms which you and your colleagues have often made about me is concerning the orderly processes of government decision making. Today's Wednesday. On Monday we sworn in in a cabinet. We've met once and we're in the process of working through each of these decisions step by step. That's one of the things that you learn with the benefit of having acted in this job before. Also ...

LEIGH SALES: There is some urgency, though, isn't there given that we're so close to an election?

KEVIN RUDD: Well you know something?: it's - everyone could say, whether you're from the housing sector, the health sector, the - you're in business, that everything is urgent. One of the other things you learn from this job in the past is to make sure that you're using your time effectively. And by that I mean providing yourself with some time to think and to take the best advice. For example - just one example if you'll bear with me just for 30 seconds: on the economy, our economic circumstances are now changing. What most Australians are concerned about is what do we now do to maintain a strong economy and jobs growth now that the China resources boom has ended? This is a practical and it's a new challenge. Our response to that, our plan is to number one, ensure that we diversify our economy and grow jobs out of other sectors like manufacturing, food processing as well as the services industries, so that we don't have all our eggs in one basket, and number two, to make sure that we can do that by boosting national competitiveness. Because my fear is that we might end up in the future pricing ourselves out of international business. But to do all of that, you gotta take time to think it through, and again, to make it happen, you've got to actually bring Australians together. Unite rather than divide. A positive plan for the future, not negative. And that - I think if we get those settings right, that approach right, with that sort of plan in play, we can meet these big challenges for the future. That's what I intend to do.

LEIGH SALES: Prime Minister Rudd, thank you very much for joining us.

KEVIN RUDD: Thanks, Leigh.

LEIGH SALES: And we've invited the Opposition Leader Tony Abbott to join the program tomorrow night to talk us through his policies and plans. Hopefully he'll be available.