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Interview on 2GB, Afternoons, with Deborah Knight.

Topics: coronavirus outbreak impact, Brexit, possible trade deal with the UK

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Deborah Knight: It is the historic moment that we've been waiting four years for. After three prime ministers and many, many attempts, Brexit is finally happening. The divorce is underway and can we cash in on it? Trade Minister Simon Birmingham is expected to meet with British officials within two months to talk free trade deals. And Simon Birmingham joins us on the line now.

Minister, good afternoon.

Simon Birmingham: Good afternoon, Deb. Great to be with you.

Deborah Knight: We'll get to Brexit in a moment. But you've just come out of the National Security Committee meeting, talking, amongst other things, coronavirus. Any new information to shed on Australia's handling of it?

Simon Birmingham: Well, Deb, we continue to act fully in relation to the public health advice that's available to us and Australia's approach to that is it is doing an outstanding job in terms of protecting Australians and ensuring that we contain the spread of this virus. And Australia has great experience in this in relation to SARS and previously, we have done so successfully. That's occurring again. I think it's really important to reassure Australians in terms of the fact that people should be going about their everyday business, engaging with their fellow Australians, planning travel across Australia with confidence because of the safety and precautions that are being taken and in the knowledge that we are acting fully in accordance with all of those public health measures.

Deborah Knight: Are the flights from China going to be stopped?

Simon Birmingham: No Deb, but we continue to make sure that we provide the additional screening, information, monitoring as everybody would expect in that regard, and we're doing all of that based on the best available public health advice to us. And that's what critical that we follow, and that is precisely what the Government is doing.

Deborah Knight: We are seeing other airlines from other countries stopping their operations into and out of China. We've just seen the US upgrading their travel advice, warning their citizens to avoid travel to all parts of China, not just Hubei province. People are asking, Minister, why aren't the flights from China being stopped. Is it the case that economic concerns and the impact on things like tourism are trumping the health concerns?

Simon Birmingham: So, Deb, let's step through a few of those things. Australia had already upgraded our advice in relation to travel to China. We are telling people not to travel to Hubei province and telling people to reconsider the need to travel to mainland China in general. In terms of airline decisions – and no other nation to my knowledge has instructed their airlines to cease services – but airlines have made commercial decisions of their own accord to cease services in various cases, and that's a very significant distinction there. In terms of why we continue to allow flights to occur, well, we are acting firmly in accordance with the public health

advice there. Obviously, there are no flights in and out of Hubei province. That is a step where the Chinese authorities locked down that province and of course, that means that there are no airline connections coming out of that province. But China is a big and vast country, and whilst there are incidences of this virus in other parts of the country, the public health advice is very clear that containment can occur without needing to take those sorts of steps of shutting down those other air services that are not within Hubei province and are in parts of the country where the virus is less prevalent.

Deborah Knight: Are you concerned about the economic impacts of this though, not just on tourism, but on our broader trade and our broader industries?

Simon Birmingham: Absolutely, Deb. This is a concern. It will have impacts at a number of levels. We would anticipate that there will be a global slowdown in travel as a result of people's concerns and that's especially why I urge people to continue, with confidence, to go about travelling within Australia. And please, if you're thinking about your holidays for this year, choose to holiday in Australia, make a booking soon, because you may well be saving the job of a fellow Australian by doing so, because our tourism industry is feeling the double effects of concerns about the bushfires and the impacts of those, as well as this downturn globally in travel that the coronavirus will drive, and of course, the loss very directly of Chinese visitors to Australia at present with the Chinese government having urged all of their citizens to reconsider their need to travel as well.

In trade terms, yes there are impacts too, especially in consumer goods. Most initially, seafood sector, who I am just about to have a teleconference with, and they are perhaps right at the front line because they tend to deliver fresh seafood product into China in a just-in-time basis. This is a high period of consumption, being the Lunar New Year period, usually of events and celebrations and so on in China – many of which are not occurring – and therefore, demand for that product has reduced significantly. And I would expect that will flow through in terms of our high quality premium beef, our high quality premium wines, all of those factors. And then, dependent upon how long the circumstance lasts in China, of course, there could be other impacts for our resources sector or elsewhere.

So we're monitoring all of that very closely. They are events beyond our control. And public health and safety is firmly coming first, and we act firstly on the advice of all of those public safety and public health officials. But then, beyond that, once we've dealt with their advice and acted on it, of course, we look to make sure how we can try to assist our businesses and our industry through these challenging times.

Deborah Knight: So when can we see – when it comes to Brexit, of course, with one door closing, the divorce underway, another one opening potentially for other countries – a trade deal with the UK? Can we be cashing in on this?

Simon Birmingham: So we hope to work to secure a free trade agreement with the UK sometime this year and this is absolutely about, indeed, creating new choices and additional options for Australian businesses. We've done that with free trade agreements with China, with Japan, with Korea, with Indonesia through the Trans-Pacific Partnership. These are all things that our government has done and delivered to give Australian farmers and businesses more markets they can get into. And the UK, a high priority for us, as indeed is the European Union now with 27 member states, not 28.

With the UK, we want to get negotiations started as quickly as we can. I spoke last night to the UK Trade Secretary to emphasise that Australia is ready to roll the minute the UK complete their domestic processes of agreeing their cabinet mandate and being ready to go.

Deborah Knight: Okay.

Simon Birmingham: They haven't been able to do that until they've formally left the EU, but they will be able to do that from tomorrow onwards.

Deborah Knight: Alright. Well, we wish you all the best in securing that trade deal and let's hope that the efforts to secure coronavirus and stop its spread actually are effective. Minister, we thank you for your time.

Simon Birmingham: Thank you, Deb. My pleasure.

Deborah Knight: Trade Minister and Tourism Minister, Simon Birmingham, there.

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