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David Littleproud joins Insiders

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Fran Kelly interviews Water Resources Minister David Littleproud.

Transcript

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FRAN KELLY, PRESENTER: David Littleproud, welcome to Insiders.

DAVID LITTLEPROUD, DROUGHT MINISTER: Thanks for having me, Fran.

KELLY: You heard Joel Fitzgibbon there - "Just do something." What and where is the government's long-term drought strategy? The NFF have been calling for it for years now.

LITTLEPROUD: Well, look, I won't be lectured to by Joel Fitzgibbon. This crowd voted against the Future Drought Fund, a \$5 billion future fund that pays a dividend...

KELLY: But where's your drought strategy?

LITTLEPROUD: Our drought strategy, has for the first time in our nation's history, has a centrepiece - a \$5 billion Future Fund that pays a dividend, good and bad. That goes on top of the \$2 billion we are putting out in the here and now. We are doing something here and now. And we can't be lectured to by people who voted against that fund, that politicised the misery of Australian farmers. It took a change of leadership of the Australian Labor Party for them to come back after the election and vote for that. This is a centrepiece that gives us, to have a strategy for a long-term solution, but we've got to work in the here and now. Because the pain, as the Treasurer and I saw, is there for those communities and farmers. This drought is escalating. Our response - and as one of my mayors put it - is like going up a set of steps. As it increases and as the drought escalates, we need to take another step. And we've continued to take another step as the drought escalates. We don't have all the answers. If we did, we wouldn't go and tour. It would be good if the Labor Party went out and did a fair bit of the touring that we've done. They'll get an understanding.

KELLY: Well Anthony Albanese was out this week. Isn't the point that taking another step when the drought hits - NFF and farmers have, for years now - because I've been talking to them for years about it - saying we can't just have a response when the drought hits. We need to get out ahead of this, we need a national drought strategy. We still don't have one. Now you seem to have sectioned it off to the NFF to give you one.

LITTLEPROUD: With respect, Fran, we've had a drought strategy, in fact there's been a drought policy, bipartisan drought policy, since 1992. The Prime Minister called a drought summit and, from that, a drought strategy has been formulated.

KELLY: Where is it? What is it?

LITTLEPROUD: Well, out of respect, if you'll let me finish, we've also made sure that that has a centrepiece, a \$5 billion centrepiece, for the future. But the refinement of the programs is about making sure that the \$2 billion that we put out now we continued to work through with industry to understand that they are hitting the mark not just industry - it's not just farmers that hurt - it's also small communities and those businesses that hurt. So it's important we understand that they are working. And that's why our strategy is two-pronged.

In the here and now, and in the future. The NFF, out of respect to them - we are waiting for them to finalise their drought strategy. The peak agricultural group in this nation - we are waiting for their strategy so that I can put that in front of Cabinet, along with Major-General Day's report. There is nothing in Major-General Day's report that we are not already acting on. We will continue to make sure that we work with the states. It is not just the federal government's responsibility - it is also the state governments' responsibility. And it needs to be a whole-of-government - it's not just about agriculture, it's health, it's education, it's infrastructure. Because this is the complexity of drought - it's not just farmers, it's small business owners, building that infrastructure to build the resilience into the future.

KELLY: That's talking the talk. But what about walking the walk? You mentioned the drought coordinator, Major-General Stephen Day, who handed his report to the government almost six months ago. Drought is supposed to be the Prime Minister's No. 1 priority. Why hasn't this report even gone to Cabinet yet?

LITTLEPROUD: Out of respect to the NFF, who wanted their strategy considered by Cabinet as well...

KELLY: Hang on, the NFF are only coming up with a strategy because they've been asking you for six years to do one and haven't done one.

LITTLEPROUD: With respect, we do have one. Whether they like ours or not is something for them to comment on. Out of respect to them, I'm asking for them to add to it and add their views to it. That's what good government is - to take stakeholders into their arms and listen to them. Now, they don't have one, and they're working on it now. So, with all due respect, we've had one, we're working towards it, and that's in the here and now. Real relief, Fran - putting money out, stimulating these local economies, making sure farmers can have bread and butter on their table through Farm Household Allowance, making sure they have the dignity and respect they deserve, putting rural financial counsellors, who are the angels of this drought - these are the people who sit around the kitchen tables making sure the onus of paperwork is taken off them and put onto them. We've worked through that paperwork. And we've got to understand we're using taxpayers' money. Sadly, the Commonwealth and Queensland state government were defrauded by a farmer. So, when people say it's too onerous, it's onerous because we are protecting Australian taxpayers' money, but we try to make it as simple as we can. And we put people on the ground at the grass roots to the kitchen table to make sure we get those outcomes and people don't self-assess and shy away from it. We're going to continue to evolve with our response. As I said, we'll need to go up another set of stairs. We will. We'll take another step. But we need states to come with us. As I heard, and the Treasurer heard, the big-ticket items people were talking to us about was new water infrastructure, rate relief, a payroll tax relief - which the states have a responsibility with, and we haven't shirked. We're going to say we're there with them but we've all got a part to play in this.

KELLY: Just on that - the state's response. You made that point when you were out in Inverell this week, 'the states and Commonwealth have to work together, the state's had to do their part.' It didn't seem to go down so well. Your NSW counterpart, fellow National MP Adam Marshall didn't appreciate it, I'll just read you the quote, he said on radio, "I've had a gutful of this bloke - that's you - He flies in in his big plane, mouthing off, offers nothing, blames everyone, and flies off." Doesn't bode well for a coordinated national drought strategy, does it? What's gone wrong?

LITTLEPROUD: Well, look, I was surprised by that. In fact, most of my comments have been that New South Wales has done the heavy lifting. It's sadly been Victoria and Queensland that haven't lifted a finger. In fact, in Queensland, they're taking away some of the drought response right here and now. So I've been quite complimentary of New South Wales. I was surprised by that. But that still doesn't mean they get to run away from their responsibilities. All states and territories have a responsibility in this. And we intend to hold them to account, as people hold us to account. And we should be held to account. And that's why the Prime Minister's made it clear we need to get out there.

KELLY: And you should be held to account for every dollar of taxpayers' money spent, too. What about the \$1 million grant to the very lush and wet shire of Moyne in Victoria? It's not drought-affected at all. The mayor says, "We don't need it, we've had plenty of rain." Labor says the auditor-General needs to look at that program and all the drought money. That's fair enough, isn't it, given what happened?

LITTLEPROUD: Labor focuses on paperwork. We focus on outcomes. Let me just go back to Moyne Shire.

KELLY: What about accountability?

LITTLEPROUD: Well, I'm about to give you that, because you used an example, Fran, of Moyne Shire. While these national media outlets that ran and said that it was such a lush shire, you may not keep up to date with the Warrnambool Standard. Only this week, there are dairy farmers in the north of that shire that have come out and said it was premature of that council to hand it back, because they're in drought conditions.

KELLY: So the mayor was wrong? This wasn't the department misreading the data from the bureau?

LITTLEPROUD: The data was set - the predication of the criteria on that million dollars to shires goes on the agricultural workforce must be above 17% and weather data. The weather data is cut every quarter. At the end of June 30, over 60% of that shire was declared to be in drought. In July/August, after the data was cut, there was a rain event, a rain event in the southern part of that shire that had changed their circumstances. I thank them - I thank the Moyne Shire for handing that money back to the Australian taxpayer. But the reality is - that shire was in drought.

KELLY: OK, that wasn't a mistake?

LITTLEPROUD: There are 122 other shires out there, Fran, that believe this million dollars has been a stimulus, because it goes to actually rebuilding those communities in terms of keeping tradies going, procuring local materials out of local hardware stores. It's the communities that also hurt, not just farmers. We get caught up on this minutia that Labor want to run around with, but let me tell you, I haven't seen a drought policy from them at all. They are not going to say - they're more worried about paperwork than outcomes.

KELLY: Minister, you're in government. We all know the real solution here is rain. The bureau is forecasting a drier and hotter summer than usual. You keep saying the drought will break, it will rain - and it will - but a lot of farmers do think this is different now - that climate change means the days are hotter, droughts are meaner, rains are scarcer are and they're coming at different times. Do you accept that?

LITTLEPROUD: Totally. And in fact, primary production has been adapting to a change in climate since we first put a till in the soil - so much so that farmers themselves are partnering with governments, with over \$1 billion in research and development to equip them with the tools to be able to adapt. We're also part of the drought Future Fund - \$100 million a year part of that, I'm asking the panel to look at climate-adaptation tools for our farmers and how we help them. Even this week, we announced localised climate guides that compare the last 30 years to 30 years before that. And we're showing the difference in not only temperature rainfall, but frost patterns, so we're equipping our farmers, and we have to continue to do that.

KELLY: I just want to test something with you there. Because even then when I asked you about the changing climate, you said "Ever since we first tilled the soil". The Treasurer, who was with you this week, conceded the drought is linked to climate change...?

LITTLEPROUD: So do I.

FRYDENBERG VT: We accept the science around climate change. We accept that it is part of what is happening here today //flash//Man is contributing to that. And the science has told us that.

KELLY: So you accept that?

LITTLEPROUD: Totally. 100%. I live it. This drought in my electorate alone has been going for eight years. The reality is, we can't run away from that. We simply have to get on with it and equip our farmers and communities with the tools to be able to adapt as best they can. We've got a responsibility to face up to try and reduce our emissions. And I think we've lived up to international commitments, and we're going to, and in fact we're going see 33,000 gigawatt of renewable energy put on in the next year or so. Most of that will happen in my own electorate. We actually want to become the renewable energy electorate. Western Downs Shire is screaming at me to become the renewable energy shire of the country with solar and wind. I have geothermal and gas.

KELLY: The Treasurer has been on the drought tour with you. He said he's going home and he's going to talk to the Prime Minister as a matter of urgency to come up with some more spending. What do you think the priorities should be - more direct support for farmers, more support for the small businesses in these struggling drought areas?

LITTLEPROUD: Yeah, look, obviously we understand this is going to cost more, and the Treasurer has been quite clear - he accepts that. What we want to make sure is what we heard from those people out there was around water infrastructure, big-ticket water infrastructure, about rate relief, about payroll tax, about how we can do that, and partner with the states. A lot of that is state responsibility. But we're not shirking our responsibility. The Treasurer's made it clear we'll work with that, and it will be a whole-of-government, Fran - it can't just be agriculture. There's infrastructure, education, health - within a federal perspective that we need to come together and make sure it's targeted as we take that next step up as the drought escalates, we work with communities to get a targeted response and keeps them going for when it does rain.

KELLY: Minister, do you accept when you look at the long-term temperature graphs, do you accept that some farms will soon become unviable, and do you have a strategy for farmers exiting the land?

LITTLEPROUD: Look, in many respects, Fran, the market's already done that. We've seen farmers change their practices from being broadacre back into grazing as the climate's changed and as that's taken its toll on its landscape. Farmers have already done that, and they continue to do that. How do we equip those that are left with those lands to continue to adapt and evolve...

KELLY: Are you thinking about things like incentivising grants?

LITTLEPROUD: Well, we already are, through carbon farming...

KELLY: The drought coordinator's talked about that.

LITTLEPROUD: We already are, through carbon farming, where farmers can lock up part of their country and [get] paid for their carbon abatement. In fact, before the election, one of the centrepieces - one of the proudest things I did as Ag Minister in the last budget was to get a biodiversity stewardship fund to reward farmers for the stewardship of their land not just in carbon abatement, but also improving the environment, improving the biodiversity on their property. So, we can look at this in a different way and make sure we support farming communities and farming families through this.

KELLY: Minister, just finally - the picture's getting a little ropy there from Maranoa - on another matter, Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton has called for climate protesters to be stripped of their Newstart payment if they're unemployed, and said they should be named and shamed, people should take these names and the photos of these people and distribute them as far and wide as they can, so that we can shame these people. Isn't that bullying?

LITTLEPROUD: Look, Fran, everyone wants a cause these days. They become angry and impose their will on the Australian people. What this should be is about respect. When they don't, we've got to call them out. We did that with those animal activists that impinged on the rights of farming families, and we passed legislation. But a lot of this comes back to the states. We wouldn't have to do the heavy lifting if the states got in there and imposed higher penalties for these activists so that the magistrates had nowhere to go but to slip into them.

KELLY: So name and shame - that's a good idea?

LITTLEPROUD: Well, if the states aren't going to do their job, unfortunately, the federal government - as we had to - we had to lead the way with those animal activists that were impinging on the rights of Australian farming families. They were trespassing on their property, and the states weren't doing anything. This is the frustration we get. It comes back to respect, Fran. Quite candidly, I get everyone wants a cause. Everyone's got to be angry these days. But for Christ's sakes, respect your fellow Australian.

KELLY: David Littleproud, thank you very much for joining us.

LITTLEPROUD: Great to be with you, Fran.

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