

## **Transcript of Antarctica interview with ABC reporter Linda Hunt and Environment Minister Tony Burke at Casey Station, Antarctica**

**18 December 2012**

LINDA HUNT: You've been here for a full day. What are your impressions?

TONY BURKE: I guess it's the world's most ultimate example of wilderness. You don't get more wild, pristine country than what you've got in Antarctica and it's the enormity of it that just blows you away. When we first landed and everything around you is where people live and where the runway is, it was interesting, but I wasn't as overpowered as about half way through a very long drive when we stopped and you looked around at the vastness in every direction. You get that sense that you are somewhere that's like no other place on earth.

LINDA HUNT: Does it give you a better sense of the challenges that face Australians who are expeditioners here?

TONY BURKE: The thing that I've got a better appreciation of, even in the last 24 hours, is while the work that we do is very much science driven to make that science possible, the logistics required are enormous and simply the team of people, who've been working for six weeks to make sure that an airplane can land. I've got a much better handle on the emphasis on logistics now and the fact that, if you don't have your logistics in place, none of the science can occur at all.

LINDA HUNT: Well, given that the logistics are so important and they don't come cheaply, are we doing enough to support that happening?

TONY BURKE: We are at the critical time now, where over the next two to five years probably critical and final decisions have to be worked through for the future of our marine capacity and the future of our air capacity. You need to have both of them. If you don't have both, you don't have a program and the runway hasn't worked as effectively as Australia hoped it would. The ice breaker is nearing the end of its life and so there's some major decisions that have to be made in the next few years.

LINDA HUNT: What's going to influence the decision that you make?

TONY BURKE: The starting point of it is Australia is committed to continuing its Antarctic program. That means a marine capability and that means an air capability. So it then becomes a technical question of exactly what does the marine capability look like, how do you deal with the air capability. You know, it's not that many years ago, when an ice runway seemed like an absolutely brilliant outcome and the dedicated team that we've got do a fantastic job. The truth is though that we've had much less use out of that than was ever planned, when Malcolm Turnbull first opened it simply because the temperatures have been warmer than it'd been expected and frequently the runway is out of action. So we want to make sure that whatever the decisions we make in the next few years are decisions that last for decades, not that have to be revisited a handful of years later.

LINDA HUNT: So it's a bit of a suggestion that it was a mistake putting the runway down in the first place?

TONY BURKE: Look, I don't know what the advice was at that time. I don't know how unseasonal the higher temperatures over the last few years have been; I'm not sure of the answer to that and I haven't bothered going on some sort of a witch hunt to find out if the wrong decision was made. The truth is though we need a better capability into the future. There is no doubt about that. So whatever was done in the past is still fulfilling a function; that's how we got here today, but notwithstanding that we still have to make sure that the next decisions last a whole lot longer for both marine and for air.

LINDA HUNT: Australia currently has 42% of the continent, but we've got countries like China and Korea and India and Russia, who are putting a lot of money into their stake here. They are looking at flights, they are looking in ... a couple of them have got new ice breakers. Are we able to compete with them?

TONY BURKE: We don't resile from our territorial claim for one minute. At the same time the nature of our vision for Antarctica is one of cooperation, so you don't need to feel threatened by people coming if what they are doing is good quality scientific research and our cooperation with that I think is very important. So I don't see investment from other countries in the area as being some sort of threat. To my way of thinking, so long as it's consistent with that vision that Bob Hawke, Michel Rocard back when the Madrid Protocol was formed, where it was: let's reserve one continent, one continent for science, for peace, for cooperation and if other countries are coming and are being true to that, then they are participating here in a way that is absolutely what Australia wants.

LINDA HUNT: Have we in the past neglected, in the recent past neglected our stake here?

TONY BURKE: I don't think we have, I really don't. I've spent a fair bit of time, not just you know this trip, but I spend a bit of time with the Antarctic researchers just in my general work as Environment Minister and the research work that we do here is critical and is internationally renowned. A whole lot of the work that we do here in the marine environment is a critical part of us having the credibility to argue as we do at the International Whaling Commission about the power of non-lethal forms of science. So there's a big range of work we do, the climate change work relies so heavily on the ice core samples, that are taken from here, those little, you know, time capsules of the history of atmosphere and temperature, so I think the investment in science we have made hasn't just been significant in term of expense, it's been extraordinary in terms of outcome and as a nation we own that. I don't think in the face of that you can, you can use terms like neglect.

LINDA HUNT: There are a number of very significant research programs facing a funding loss, basically ACE CRC, the IMOS Program, they've got no guarantee of future funding. They are part of Australia being world leaders in science, in Antarctic science. Are we jeopardising it by not securing funding beyond 2014?

TONY BURKE: I think we need to look at each of the funding programs for what they're intended to do. CRC funding is intended to be a program that is then able to leverage additional money outside of Government. That's the whole concept of the program, so to be looking at what's possible for funding outside of Government, it's got a bit to run before it reaches its final date. But to be having those conversations now is healthy and is what CRCs are meant to do, that's the nature of Corporate Research Centres. There's also some marine studies, which were put in place and were launched at

the International Whaling Commission, a whole lot of Blue Whale research, things like that, where the purpose of it was for Australia to lead the way and then other countries to come in and follow through. What I hope with the investment that we are getting from other countries is, that we can establish Hobart very much as an international hub for Antarctic research and I think if we can do that, we get a better research outcome, we keep a clear focus on Australia and we establish Hobart as the undeniable gateway to the Antarctic.

LINDA HUNT: But if ACE CRC is lost and IMOS is lost, there will be an exodus of scientists, very valuable scientists from Hobart?

TONY BURKE: I don't, well for one I don't accept that they're lost and I also don't accept that if they were to take a new form, then we would lose the scientists. The question I think always has to be: what's the next stage and how can the next stage drive the science in an even more effective way, how can the next stage build on that vision of Antarctica being treated differently to any other continent? So long as we're working it through that way, then I don't think we should box ourselves in and say: well, the only way to deal with the end date for funding is, let's just add two more years or three more years of funding and not look at how these concepts can be or the structures might be able to be effectively approved. So I don't lock in that the CRC in its current form is what we have to have continuing. What we do have to have continuing is its work and we have to find ways of doing that. And if international leverage, through Hobart, is a way of building on that, we may well end up with something more substantial, with a higher level of scientific rigor and even more funding if we are a bit creative over the next few years.

LINDA HUNT: So you're quite committed to maintaining Australia's leading role in Antarctic science?

TONY BURKE: Australia is incredibly proud of this and the Government is proud of it. Obviously a Labor government, we've got a particular affection for the role that Bob Hawke played, where we came within a whisker of this being a mining town. It came so close and the vision that was taken by Australia in the eighties and the nineties is one that we want to take into the next decades.

LINDA HUNT: Now, when we were at Casey earlier, a couple of the plumbers were telling us about the fact that Casey has sort of outgrown its capacity. There's basically plumbing for forty-five people that now copes with a hundred. When is that sort of issue going to be addressed, that the infrastructure perhaps hasn't developed along with the growing role of the bases?

TONY BURKE: Look, I am not across that particular issue you've just raised. All I can say on that is, I've been overwhelmed by the importance of logistics and am quite committed to... if you don't get the logistics right, there's no point funding the science, because you can't get the work done and all of those absolutely practical issues lie at the heart of making sure that some of the world's most cutting edge scientific work can be done here by Australian scientists.

LINDA HUNT: And there has been a drop in the number of people applying to work in Antarctica. Are people losing interest in it?

TONY BURKE: I don't know. I put a message up on Facebook that I was here and I had job applications instantly coming through, people wanting to know where to go. So I'm not sure if there has been a little less focus on it or what the reason for that would be, but there has not been a moment where there has been a backward step on the capacity of Antarctica to capture the

imagination of Australians. There has been a good discussion in the wake of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Mawson expedition and there are three frontiers that science tends to look at now: space, the depths of the ocean and Antarctica. That's what we've got and to have one of them here with such a close relationship to Australian scientists is something that, if there has been a temporary lull, I don't think for a minute that that will continue.

LINDA HUNT: At the end of this visit what do you hope to take away, what's the aim of it for you?

TONY BURKE: I had a business years ago, which we called 'Atticus' and the whole idea of it was that line from 'To Kill a Mockingbird' about if you want to understand what people do, you have to walk in their shoes and I've always taken the view that you can't do a Ministerial job at a desk and so, when I was Agricultural Minister, I spent a massive amount of time on farms. Now, as Environment Minister, I spend a lot of time in tents. The tents are usually not on snow, but I spend a lot of time in them and the reason is really simple: the decisions that I make are not about a desk or about a briefing note. The decisions I make are about scientific work that's done here and if I spend time here with the people, who are dedicating their professional life to studying Antarctica, then the decisions will be better. I've come here to try and make better decisions.

LINDA HUNT: Fantastic, hence a night in the tent?

TONY BURKE: That's right.

LINDA HUNT: Wonderful, thank you.

TONY BURKE: Real pleasure.