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TRANSCRIPT

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Interview on Sky News News Day

Subjects: Guardian political editor moves to PM's office, government backflip on UNRWA funding, abhorrent neo-Nazis in Sydney

KIERAN GILBERT: Let's bring in Shadow Minister for Home Affairs James Paterson. Interesting response from your leader, Peter Dutton. What do you make of that? Having a bit of a dig at the outgoing Murpharoo going to the PM's office and, and the Nine political correspondent along the way, David Crowe.

JAMES PATERSON: Kieran, I think that was a lighthearted way of wishing Katharine all the best for her role resurrecting the Prime Minister's tattered public image. I do think it's interesting. She's a very senior member of the press gallery, but also very much at the progressive end of the spectrum from the Guardian publication. And I think it's interesting, that the Prime Minister is obviously much more concerned about his left flank, if he's employing someone like that, much more than the middle Australia that he talks about. Not that there are a lot of middle Australian readers of the Guardian, no disrespect to the work that I do.

GILBERT: Interesting analysis, wishing her all the best. Thank you for responding to that, that story and as I say, it's an unusual contribution from the Opposition Leader when it comes to this appointment. But I do have some more substantive issues I do need to talk to you about. One of them is this decision by Australia to pause the funding for what's known as UNRWA? That's the UN agency providing humanitarian relief for Palestinians. Is this the right outcome? Do you welcome this? The fact that Australia, along with the UK and other donors, have paused funding to UNRWA?

PATERSON: It certainly is the right outcome Kieran, but I'm surprised it's taken as long as it has for the government to do this. They have been repeatedly warned about the risk of giving Australian taxpayers money to UNRWA. There are very well documented concerns about UNRWA, and the way in which it controls its spending and the people that it employs, particularly in Gaza. That includes using anti-Semitic material and pro-terrorist content in their schoolbooks that are taught in UNRWA's schools. That includes, funds from UNRWA that have been siphoned and given to Hamas to pay for their tunnels and other activities. And it includes allegations that UNRWA employees were directly involved

on the 7th of October in the terrorist attacks. These are very well documented concerns. And yet, on the 16th of January, the Foreign Minister announced an extra \$6 million on top of the existing Australian government funding for UNRWA. And it has emerged today in the Australian newspaper that was also a letter from Jewish community leaders on the 19th of December warning her and the Prime Minister not to do this. Now, the Foreign Minister didn't even have the courtesy to respond to that letter, and now has had to humiliatingly, embarrassingly back down by putting this funding on hold.

GILBERT: The Foreign Minister did meet with the head of UNWRA during her visit to the Middle East earlier this month, raised her concerns about the need for transparency and reform in the organisation, and then subsequently paused the funding. Isn't that the right course of action that she's undertaken here? Given what a crisis those in Gaza are facing at a humanitarian level. The UN secretary general says there were 12 people identified. Nine have already been sacked. One is dead.

PATERSON: You're right Kieran, there is a genuine humanitarian need in Gaza, and there is a role for Australia to play there no one is suggesting otherwise. What we're suggesting is UNRWA is not the right place for it. And if the Foreign Minister knew enough when she met with the head of UNRWA in the region when she visited to have concerns about how Australian government money would be handled, and that she needed to raise that with him, then the question is, should we be giving money to UNRWA at all? Let's remember that the potential alleged beneficiary of this Australian government funding is Hamas, an organisation which is listed in its entirety as a terrorist organisation. And if an Australian citizen raised money or gave money that ultimately went to Hamas they would be committing a very serious crime under the Commonwealth Criminal Code and could be prosecuted for it. So if the Australian Government is inadvertently or carelessly participating in the same benefit to Hamas, then that's deeply concerning, and it was foreseeable. There's been warnings about this for years. The Foreign Minister should have been able to anticipate that and act accordingly by not giving these extra funds in this high risk way.

GILBERT: On another matter. We saw those neo-Nazis on the train in Sydney and the law enforcement agencies, to their credit, moving quickly to respond to those individuals. But are you surprised that we're seeing that sort of number involved, these sorts of disgraceful individuals happy to parade their appalling views publicly?

PATERSON: Kieran, they're pathetic individuals. But sadly, there are some people in our community who do hold these abhorrent views, and it is very important that the community and political leaders send a very strong signal that these are utterly unacceptable behaviours and there are consequences for them. It is good to see New South Wales Police taking this seriously. I should say, also take it much more seriously than the other protests, which have been inciting violence against the Jewish community and much more seriously than the Islamic hate preachers. I hope we don't make those mistakes again and let these people off with a slap on the wrist, or in fact, no consequences at all. Because when this behaviour occurs, if it is allowed to occur unchecked, it will spread and it will foster much broader and much more disturbing things. And we can allow that to happen in the 21st century in Australia.

GILBERT: James Paterson, appreciate your time as always.

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