MINISTER FOR DEFENCE – INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL ROWLAND, ABC NEWS BREAKFAST

3 FEBRUARY 2012

TRANSCRIPT: INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL ROWLAND, ABC NEWS BREAKFAST

TRANSCRIPTION: PROOF COPY E & OE

DATE: 03 FEBRUARY 2012

TOPICS: Afghanistan transition; NATO-ISAF Defence Ministers’ meeting; Chicago summit; Leadership.

MICHAEL ROWLAND: Minister, good morning.

STEPHEN SMITH: Good morning Michael.

MICHAEL ROWLAND: What impact would a much sooner American draw-down in Afghanistan have on our contribution there?

STEPHEN SMITH: Well, I’ve seen those media reports. I saw them when I arrived and I’ve seen them in Australian media this morning, but they bear no relation to what Secretary Panetta actually said. I’ve read his transcript and they bear no relationship to what he has said to me and other NATO and ISAF colleagues in the course of my meetings today. The point he made was that everyone who has committed to the Lisbon Strategy, which is transition to Afghan-led security responsibility by the end of 2014 – that means an ongoing and continuing presence by the international security assistance forces by the end of 2014, but we believe we’re making progress on transition and believe that by the middle of 2013, we should see most if not all of Afghanistan in the lead responsibility of the Afghan national security forces. That means that United States forces and other forces will still be there to support and assess and to take part in combat roles as that is necessary, but it essentially means that the Lisbon transition strategy is on track and that’s a good thing.

MICHAEL ROWLAND: So if that is the case and that mid-2013 timetable holds out, could we see much fewer direct Australian combat troops on the ground in Afghanistan, with a greater focus on a smaller – albeit smaller band of mentors?

STEPHEN SMITH: Well, what we’re describing 2013 is we’re describing that as a Lisbon summit milestone. The Lisbon process was essentially to have provinces and districts transferred to Afghan-led responsibility. There’s essentially five proposed tranches. We think there’s a good prospect that Australia will be in the third tranche. We’ve already seen two
tranches of transition and that already has seen about 50 per cent of Afghanistan territory now subject to Afghan security force lead responsibility. So we think in our case, we’re on track certainly in Uruzgan Province to transition by 2014, and as the Prime Minister and I have said in recent months, we think we might be able to get there earlier. So the third tranche, we expect to see in the course of the middle or the second half of this year. We expect that Uruzgan will be a candidate for that and that would see Uruzgan start to transition over the next 12 to 18 month period-

MICHAEL ROWLAND: So to clarify, we could see that drawn-down -

STEPHEN SMITH: -On track and as transition occurs, then there is a chance that we will see a need for fewer Australians engaged in the training and mentoring role, but we continue to see a need for an Australian presence in Uruzgan until the end of 2014, just as we’ll see the ongoing presence of the United Nations and other NATO and International Security Assistance Force countries there until the end of 2014. But also importantly, the conversation that we’re having today and tomorrow in Brussels is what will be the international security presence in Afghanistan after that, and we believe there will be a need for some ongoing support by the international community – military advisors, training, and potentially special forces.

MICHAEL ROWLAND: Just to clarify, Minister, if all those pre-conditions are met, all those ducks are lined up, we could see earlier pull out happening as soon as the middle of 2013? A faster draw-down of Australian troops?

STEPHEN SMITH: Well we don’t describe it as an earlier pull-out and nor does Secretary Panetta. One of the phrases that I’ve heard repeatedly today from my European colleagues and from Secretary Panetta is the phrase in-together, out-together. That underlines the Lisbon Summit arrangement which is transition by the end of 2014. If we make better than expected progress on transition then yes, there is a prospect that of the 1550 on average Defence Force personnel that we have in Afghanistan, the bulk of those are engaged in training and mentoring. As we are successful in transitioning to Afghan-led responsibility that does open up the prospect of drawing down. But it doesn’t mean there won’t be an ongoing Australian presence, there will, and indeed as I’ve said for almost a year now, there is also the distinct possibility that there’ll be an Australian presence after 2014 in a different form, in a different contribution. That might be continuing training, it might be military advisors and it might also be an ongoing contribution so far as special forces are concerned, either training Afghan special forces or actually continuing to do particular operations.

MICHAEL ROWLAND: You’ve met the Afghan Defence Minister there today as part of your consultations, how confident is he about the situation ahead in his country?

STEPHEN SMITH: Well yes I’ve met with Minister Wardak. He is confident that we are continuing to make progress. He made the point to me he thought that perceptions were
lagging behind reality on the ground, and we do believe that we have made up security
ground over the last 18 months to two years. In the course of the last six months on the
ground in Afghanistan the Taliban have not made up any ground, or taken further ground,
and they’ve resorted to the high profile propaganda style attacks. But General Wardak, the
Afghan Defence Minister has the same view as I do that the job is not yet done. There’s a
continuing need to support the Afghan authorities, the Afghan security forces and there will
be a need after 2014 for the international community to continue to make some contribution.
And all of these issues, the size of the Afghan National Security Force after 2014, how the
Afghan National Security Force is resourced, what ongoing international presence there will
be from the international community, all of these issues we see as being addressed in the run
up to the NATO/ISAF Leaders’ Summit in Chicago in May and hopefully some clarity, come
conclusions drawn at the Chicago Summit just as there were significant decisions and
conclusions made at the Lisbon Summit at the end of 2010.

MICHAEL ROWLAND: And finally Minister as you are overseas prosecuting Australia’s national
security interest, how frustrating is it to you that we’re seeing back home people and I
assume that means Labor MPs briefing journalists about an increase in Labour leadership
tensions?

STEPHEN SMITH: Well I’ve seen for a period speculation from time to time in the papers and
I make the same point today as I have in the past. There’s no vacancy. I’m a strong
supporter of the Prime Minister. Anyone who has been mentioned in despatches has indicated
their strong support of the Prime Minister, whether that’s me, whether that’s the Foreign
Minister and my view is that we’re all best served in the national interests by getting on with
the job and that’s what I’m trying to do here which is to get on with the job of protecting and
defending Australia’s national security interests by trying to ensure that Afghanistan doesn’t
again become a breeding ground for terrorists who strike internationally whether that’s in the
United States or Europe or in Indonesia.

MICHAEL ROWLAND: So by getting on with the job, is that a message of sorts to those who
are causing mischief within Labor ranks?

STEPHEN SMITH: Well people should just in my view get on with their jobs. I see plenty of
suggestions by journalists, I see from time to time anonymous comments. I think the interest
of the Government, the interest of the nation are best served by people getting on with their
job, whether that this is as a backbencher Member of Parliament or whether it’s as a Minister
and that’s what I’m doing. That’s what the Foreign Minister is doing and he’s working very
hard in his capacity and that’s what all in the Government should be doing. That’s the best
way of working through some of our political difficulties. We’ve made it clear that we’ve got a
series of difficult decisions that we’ve had to take in recent times- that occurs to governments
when you’re in the course of your first year in the Parliament or mid-term. But we’re
confident that as the election approaches in August/September/October of 2013 that we’re
going to be very competitive, and the community will make a judgement of the choice between the Prime Minister and Tony Abbott. And I don’t think Tony Abbott will measure up so far as judgement is concerned on serious issues like running the economy and running national security.

MICHAEL ROWLAND: Okay Stephen Smith we’ll let you get on with your job in Brussels. Thank you very much for you taking the time to talk to us this morning.

STEPHEN SMITH: Thanks Michael, thanks very much.