



Australian
Chamber of Commerce
and Industry

TRANSCRIPT

Event: Andrew McKellar interview with Allison Langdon and Karl Stefanovic, The Today Show Nine Network.

Speakers: Andrew McKellar, chief executive Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Allison Langdon and Karl Stefanovic, co-hosts The Today Show, Nine Network.

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Topics: International tourists, international border closures, Omicron cases peak, international students, working holiday makers, staff shortages, skilled migration, labour participation.

E&OE

Allison Langdon, co-host The Today Show: Well with a vaccination rate that's the envy of the world, there are renewed calls for Australia to do away with tough international border restrictions and officially reopen.

Karl Stefanovic, co-host The Today Show: Leading the charge is the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and CEO Andrew McKellar joins us now in Canberra. Andrew. Good morning to you. Australia's been closed to tourist markets for 679 long days. How dire is the situation?

Andrew McKellar, chief executive Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry: Yes, good morning to you, Karl, and also to Ally. Look, what we're urging here is that government now starts to talk directly to the industry and takes the steps or at least puts forward the plan as to when we can fully reopen the international borders. As you say, it's been a very long time that they've been shut. The tourism industry, which is a huge industry, it's a \$60 billion a year contribution to our gross domestic product. It's employing more than 600,000 Australians. It's critical that we give the signal as to how quickly we can reopen international borders. And really, at the moment, there's no real basis for keeping them closed. Of course, we understand that

with the Omicron surge at the moment that that will slow things down a little bit, but we have to plan for the weeks ahead.

Allison: As you said, our vaccination rate are so high, what reason is the government giving you for no opening up completely at this point to people who are double-vaxxed?

Andrew: Well, I think that's the real question. So we would say, that as we get past the immediate pressure point on the health system, and I think that that's fully understandable. We need to see the Omicron surge peaking and falling back. We need to take some pressure off the health system. But really now, if we are saying that fully vaccinated people can come in, then that's the step that we need to take. We're doing that at the moment for some limited categories, but really there's no justification for keeping those restrictions in place.

Karl: Look, staffing shortages seems to be a little bit of a patchwork quilt depending on where various parts of the country are in the fight against Omicron or trying to deal with it. But almost every element or every part of the supply chain at the moment is being affected by this, and this is a huge crisis. Will alleviating some of that pressure or allowing more people in through the borders alleviate more of that pressure?

Andrew: Oh, absolutely, Karl. It has to be part of the solution, and we've been saying that now for some time. We have seen some initial steps with international students, or at least about 150,000 international students who have visas being allowed to come back in, and that's starting to occur, and also some working holiday makers. But look, we do need to open up to skilled migrants. We need to ensure that we're taking steps to increase participation. Because as you say, at the moment the pressure in the labour market, the pressure to get people into jobs in many sectors is absolutely acute. If we can't do that very quickly, then it's going to be a drag on growth in the months ahead.

Karl: Massive.

Allison: Yeah. You've got international students coming back, at this point it's still a trickle. But what type of timeframe are you working to? Because we know that with case numbers are still quite high, Queensland has still to hit its peak. It's about a week away. Hospitals are still under pressure. When do you think it is safe and that the system can manage more people coming in?

Andrew: I think we're very hopeful that perhaps in another three or four weeks, we can be at a position where that decision can be safely taken. Of course, as soon as possible, and really here, I think it's sending a signal to the industry. So we're very keen to sit down with government. I think industry needs to see that there's clear criteria, a clear plan, and that decision will be taken as soon as it's feasible, because honestly-

Karl: Yeah. Sorry, go ahead.

Andrew: Sorry, Karl.

Karl: Again, we go- Sorry, my apologies. Again, we come back to this. We want a clear plan. We need to be able to plan. If you're a coffee shop owner, if you're a truck company delivering goods, if you're a farmer, we just need this plan, that it seems to who be avoiding us still after two years.

Andrew: Well, it is an issue, and I think here really, we need to have that dialogue with government about what that health advice is that they've got at the moment and the criteria then to reopen. Because we should say it should happen as soon as it possibly can. If there's no health reason to keep this going, then let's get on with it. Let's get the borders open and let's not forget, we have to compete. We've had European governments and in the United States, the Government saying, "Don't go to Australia, it's not safe." Well, we think that's wrong and we can't just take it for granted that people will flow back in again. We are going to get out there and have to present the reason as to why people should come back to Australia.

Karl: And you want to take advantage of any window you have, right? Because you don't know what's going to happen down the track.

Andrew: Absolutely.

Karl: Okay. Really good to talk to you.

Allison: Thanks, Andrew.

Karl: Articulating the problems right across Australia. Appreciate your time.

Andrew: Thanks very much.

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