



Crean backs China FTA as boost for jobs, economy

EXCLUSIVE

JOE KELLY

Former Labor trade minister Simon Crean is urging Bill Shorten to support the China Free Trade Agreement and to pass the deal before the end of the year to secure tariff reductions worth hundreds of millions of dollars for vital Australian industries.

Mr Crean, a former Labor leader, former ACTU boss and the man who entered Australia into the Trans-Pacific Partnership talks, yesterday defended the China FTA as a tool to grow economic opportunities and jobs for Australian workers amid a fierce union campaign against the deal.

"World trade is a multiplier of economic growth. If people are looking for job opportunities and advanced incomes, the path to that is in opening up trade," he told *The Australian*.

"They (Labor) should not vote against the agreement."

Mr Crean warned that ongoing bipartisanship for the deal was critical and urged its passage through parliament this year.

"I think the sooner it's ratified, the better. It shouldn't be hastily ratified if there are still certain issues that should be resolved. Let's get the parties talking."

In a sign the militant construction union is locked into turning Labor voters and MPs against the agreement, it upped the ante in its campaign by launching an advertisement last night on the *Master-Chef* prime-time slot on the Ten Network.

The 45-second advertisement features a family scene, with the father telling his son across the kitchen table that he "wouldn't even get a look in" because, under the deal, Chinese companies

could bring in their own workers without first advertising locally.

Unions argue that if the agreement is not changed, it should be scuttled by Labor, with West Australian Labor senator Sue Lines telling an anti-FTA rally in Brisbane yesterday that the opposition would "stop what we can that disadvantages our trade, our workers (and) our unions".

Having marshalled their numbers to buttress Mr Shorten's leadership over boat turnbacks at the national conference, a coalition of Right and Left unions has secured a guarantee that Labor will now explore "every possible option" to attach safeguards to protect local workers in the FTA.

The move has concerned some industry groups, who expressed alarm that the Opposition Leader was obliged to stall the agreement to explore changes, pushing out its expected start-date from November into early next year.

This would delay by one year, the start of valuable tariff reductions — a move that would cost vital industries up to \$300 million a year, with the Minerals Council of Australia warning the coal export trade alone would face an extra impost of \$110m.

At the heart of the dispute lies a disagreement between Labor and the Coalition over the strength of the requirements on Chinese investors to test the market for Australian workers before they bring in skilled migrants.

Mr Crean cited Trade Minister Andrew Robb's assurance that there "had to be the offering of a job to Australians first" under the existing foreign labour provisions, but said that the concerns of unions needed to be addressed constructively and effectively by the government. "I think failing to

embrace a sensible bipartisanship approach does run the risk of politicising it and this isn't going to be resolved by the politics — it's going to be resolved by the soundness of its policy," he said.

Mr Robb has already shot down the prospect of bowing to Labor demands that he attach further safeguards to the agreement, slamming what he said was a xenophobic and misinformed union campaign.

"Labor's sadly sort of being told to do the same by the union heav-

ies, to query these things, even though all the detail is there for them to see," he told ABC radio. "This is a great deal for Australia and the unions need to pull their head in."

The warning was echoed by the Australian Mines and Metals Association yesterday, with chief executive Steve Knott urging Mr Shorten to move beyond "hysteria and opportunism".

"Notwithstanding what he may owe unions after the weekend's stage-managed ALP national conference, it's time for Mr Shorten and the ALP to rise above the politics of opposition and support this historic trade deal with our largest trading partner," Mr Knott said. "This agreement

makes clear that skilled overseas labour will only be used to supplement shortages in the Australian labour market, and represents no threat to local jobs, conditions and wages."

Mr Shorten said yesterday Labor was committed to ensuring jobs were not "thrown on the scrap heap". "I sincerely hope that ... (Tony) Abbott and his team are not so keen to sell out Australian jobs and they'll work co-operatively with the Labor team to get the best deal," he said. "We believe

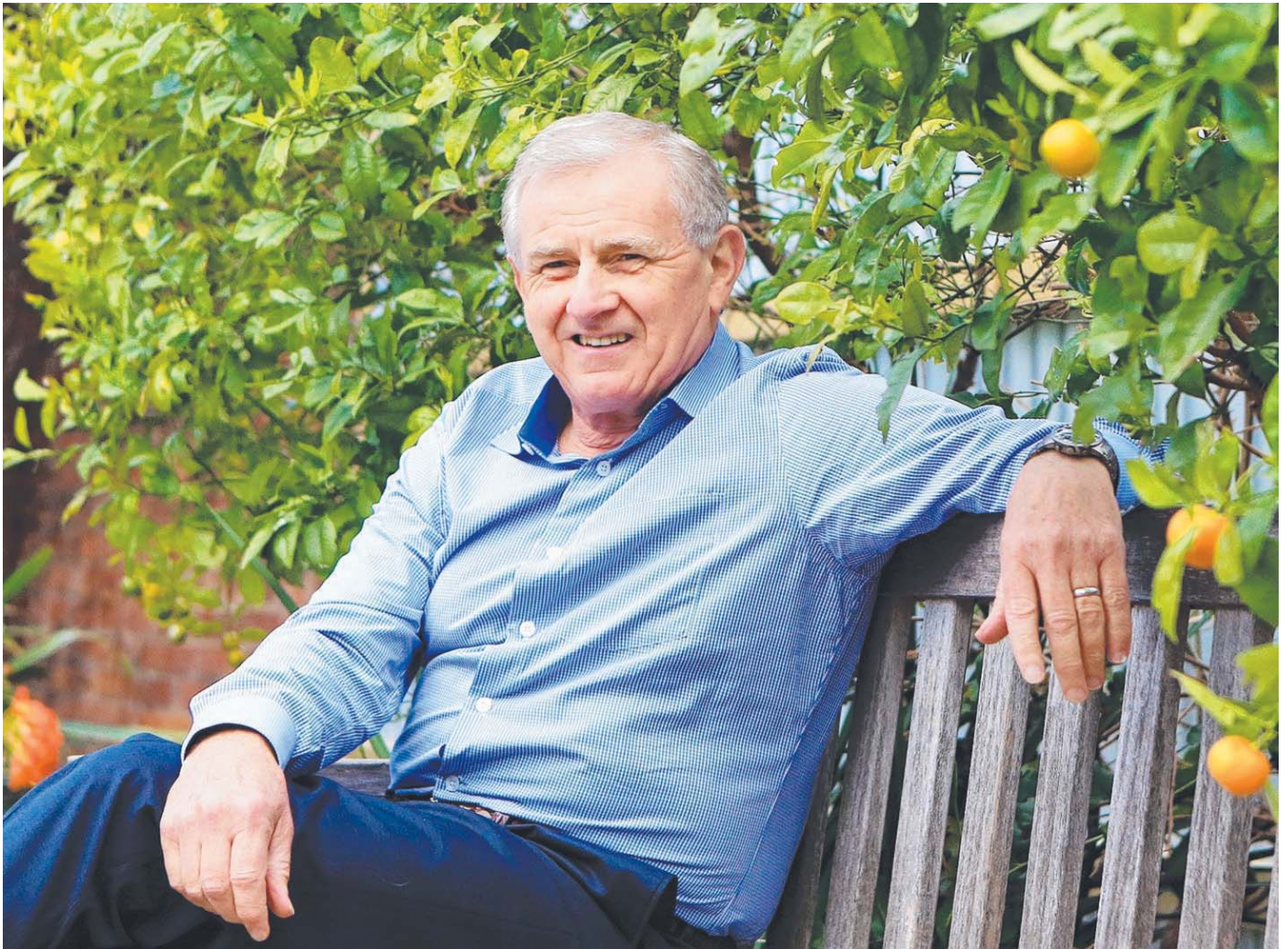


in improving our trade relations with China — indeed all of the emerging economies of Asia — and the established economies.”

EDITORIAL P13

‘This isn’t going to be resolved by the politics. It’s going to be resolved by the soundness of policy’

SIMON CREAN
FORMER TRADE MINISTER



AARON FRANCIS

Retired MP and former trade minister Simon Crean has called for ‘sensible bipartisanship’ over the China free-trade deal