



Australian
Chamber of Commerce
and Industry

TRANSCRIPT

Event: Andrew McKellar interview with Peter Stefanovic, host First Edition, Sky News.

Speakers: Andrew McKellar, chief executive Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Peter Stefanovic, host First Edition, Sky News.

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E&OE

Peter Stefanovic, host First Edition, Sky News: Well, unions are threatening to take strike action unless employers vow to provide free rapid antigen tests to their staff, if they can get them that that is. ACTU issued the demands after a meeting of union leaders, seeking assurance that companies will protect employees from Omicron. Joining us live now is the CEO of the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Andrew McKellar. What's your thoughts on this, Andrew?

Andrew McKellar, chief executive Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry: Hello, Peter. Look, I mean, business is in a very, very difficult situation at the moment. It's been hit really by a triple whammy. It's been hit by supply chain shortages, it's been hit by labour shortages, and we've got customer uncertainty all as a result of what we're seeing with the Omicron variant. Yes, of course, business needs to provide safe and healthy workplaces and of course wants to fulfill that responsibility. Now, rapid antigen tests can be part of that solution. But here, the fundamental failure that we are seeing is the failure to adequately get into the marketplace and get these tests ordered by governments and to make these tests freely and widely available in the community and to business, particularly to small business. And I think that's where the fundamental responsibility needs to rest. This is a public health

measure. We need support to get out there and get active in this space. It's not something where unions and employers should be fighting each other on this issue.

Peter: No, and so many businesses are just going to find that unaffordable at this stage too. Andrew, do you have a rough estimate of how many businesses at the moment can actually afford to do that or actually are doing that, providing free tests to their employees?

Andrew: We are seeing some at the larger end of the business community who may have supplies and who can do that. But when you look at small and medium sized businesses, this is a huge challenge. Just yesterday, we saw some initial survey results coming out of Business New South Wales. They were showing that at the moment out of a survey of 2000 businesses, about 40% of them are saying they are going to struggle with cashflow to keep going over the next three months. So there's huge pressure on those businesses. They really can't afford to take on extra expense at the moment. This is where we think this is a public health challenge. It's a challenge for National Cabinet, and we are looking for them to help respond if we're going to keep the economy going and balance those economic pressures as well as the pressures on the health system.

Peter: Yeah. And the Government's got a lot on order. There was 1.2 million of them as we've been reporting today that arrived in New South Wales overnight. But primarily that will go to schools and those workers on the frontline too. So for everyone else, the backlog's not really going to clear for another month. So, these sorts of issues are going to persist. Before we go, Andrew, I just want to ask you about supply chain issues at the moment. Now, as you know, the government did make it easier for close contacts to go and get back to work once they get a negative RAT test, if they can get one of those. What more needs to be done to be able to clear that backlog and help out those supply chains?

Andrew: Well, there are many sectors, many areas in the economy at the moment where those measures haven't been extended to. So much of retail, the hospitality, restaurants and catering, many small businesses are not covered by those exemptions at the moment. So they're struggling to get staff. If we can get people safely back into the workplace, if we can get access to the testing kits, if we can apply the measures, the upgraded masks, then these things will help. Now we're urging National Cabinet to keep going on these issues. I think they didn't go far enough last week, we would urge them to have a rethink. And also importantly, to make these rapid antigen tests freely and widely available in the community. That's absolutely essential.

Peter: Well, just adding to that point there, just from the food distributors, they're reporting an average loss of up to 40% at the moment. Sydney, it's up to 50%. And that goes on to provide product to some 70,000 cafes, restaurants, pubs, clubs, et cetera. So it needs to be expanded to include all of that is your point.

Andrew: Absolutely. As we're saying, at the moment the arrangements have been extended last week, but it's only covered a fraction of the economy, still some important areas of the supply chain. But there are many, many businesses who are not picked up in that. They're really struggling. And honestly we are risking the health of the economy if we don't go further in the coming weeks. And I think this is where really National Cabinet has got to sit down and revisit some of those issues urgently.

Peter: Okay. Andrew McKellar, good to have you with us. Talk to you soon.

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