



THE HON DR CRAIG EMERSON MP
MINISTER FOR TRADE

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Subjects: Poker machine reforms, 2011 in review, 2012 in preview

MARIUS BENSON: Craig Emerson looking at the poker machine issue there is a near-universal view now that pre-commitment, the Andrew Wilkie scheme, it's just not going to happen. Is that a reasonable reading of things, the numbers in parliament?

CRAIG EMERSON: Well that's up to individual parliamentarians. But what's absolutely certain is that we are committed to addressing the problem of problem gambling. We need to acknowledge as a community that there is a real problem here; that on average \$21,000 a year is lost by problem gamblers. And the human dimension of this, Marius, is broken homes, sometimes domestic violence, but at least problem gamblers returning home after being at a pub or a club having blown the weekly or fortnightly pay packet. So I think that anyone who is reasonable about these things would agree that we need to address this problem.

BENSON: Nick Xenophon will certainly agree with that. He's the South Australian senator who is an anti-pokies

campaigner. But he's very critical of the Government in its dealings with Mr Wilkie, saying that you are simply stringing Mr Wilkie along, you know the numbers aren't there, you're basically double-crossing him. What do you say to that?

EMERSON: I note that Mr Wilkie himself, who's directly involved in these discussions, described them as productive and having been conducted in good spirit. It's not of itself productive to run an on-going commentary of how it's going, what's being discussed, motives behind it. There's absolute certainty that we are committed to dealing with problem gambling, and Mr Xenophon can say anything he wants, it's a free democracy. But I think the more productive approach is the one that the Prime Minister is pursuing, and that is having genuine discussions with Mr Wilkie in good faith.

BENSON: How concerned is Labor about Andrew Wilkie withdrawing his support from the Government, as he's threatened to do on this issue, now that you've got a bit more breathing space ever since you removed Peter Slipper's vote from the opposition numbers by giving him the speakership?

EMERSON: It's easy to see these things in political terms but we're actually interested in the policy. And I don't blame the media for asking questions about the politics of poker machine reform, the politics of problem gambling. The fact is there is an issue here and we're determined to address that issue.

BENSON: Okay, can I turn to a wider perspective politically because this is the beginning of a new political year. 2011 was by virtually any measure a disastrous year in purely political terms. Not policy terms, I'm sure you'd argue that. But in political terms, if you look at public support, a disastrous year for Labor. You'd be hoping for something better in terms of public acceptance in 2012?

EMERSON: Julia Gillard has shown great leadership in taking on some of the really important reforms that Australia needs. And obviously reforms are not always popular in the short term, most particularly putting a price on carbon. She has taken that on and she's succeeded. The same with the mining tax where we've sought to share the benefits of the mining boom. So these are big achievements, but with reforms it is the case that when you turn to politics that sometimes it takes a while for the political benefits of those reforms to flow. But we're motivated by setting up a better future for all Australians, and most particularly working Australians.

BENSON: That is the Labor sales pitch, but one thing that is clear if you...

EMERSON: Each one of those is a fact.

BENSON: Okay, if you look at last year one of the striking things politically is the depth of unpopularity for both leaders – both Julia Gillard and Tony Abbott deeply unpopular with the electorate. There's a common view around now that by the end of 2012 they won't both be there. There will

be a change at the top somewhere. You'd probably agree on one side of politics on that?

EMERSON:

Well, if we're talking about alternatives, let's talk about alternative policies because Julia Gillard has shown tremendous leadership and she'll be rewarded for that. So we've got the reform track record, we've got a reform program ahead of us, and as for the leadership of the Coalition – who can tell?

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