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ABC 612 with Madonna King
Interviewees: Dr Craig Emerson, Senator George Brandis

Subjects: Barack Obama, Prince William, ETS

KING: I will take you back to the last show of last year when you heard a particular politician sing a song he also authored. Just enjoy this and I'll watch him grow red here in front of me.

EMERSON: (Audio playback of Minister Emerson performing song) *Madonna, Madonna, she runs the show; she wants an answer, yes or no? Madonna, Madonna she runs the show, she wants an answer, yes or no? Dr Emerson can't you see your duckin' and a weavin' ain't a foolin' me. Madonna says George, you're a QC but your big words ain't no use to me. Craig says George it's plain to see, you just swallowed a dictionary. Craig says George you're a philistine, I use words like diaphanous all the time. Madonna, Madonna she runs the show, she wants an answer, yes or no? We're all here at the ABC, 612 and it's advertisement free. Madonna, George and Craig might disagree but we're sure glad of your company.*

KING: Dr Craig Emerson, Minister in the Rudd Government and singer, good morning.

EMERSON: I'm so embarrassed, I was so nervous singing that song.

KING: You can see that he has gone red. George Brandis, maligned in that song, welcome back to you too.

BRANDIS: Good Morning Madonna, I'm only sorry I wasn't there.

EMERSON: You would have belted me.

BRANDIS: I must say I think that's one of the best songs I've heard for years, I think you're lost on politics, I think you ought to go on to get an agent and perhaps you go on the stage.

KING: Well our poll on the day probably didn't really reflect that result. But it was a fairly good effort put in by Craig Emerson, you would agree with that?

BRANDIS: It was magnificent.

EMERSON: Can I tell you a quick story about your program, it's a bit of a follow-up. I've got a new staff member and he's come up to Queensland, this is from the ministerial office in Canberra and was talking to his grandma, sorry his girlfriend's grandmother, and said: I've got a new job Nan. And she said: oh, what's that? And he said: working for a minister. Who's that? Craig Emerson. She said: oh, Craig Emerson. I listen to the Madonna King show every Wednesday and I don't like him at all. But I like that George Brandis.

(Laughs)

BRANDIS: I think that's what most people would say Craig.

(More laughs)

KING: A poll would probably suggest that's what the case was.

BRANDIS: Supporters, ring in now. Please. Look the board's lighting up.

KING: Let me warn you, every time you become frustrating non-answering the question you will just hear this (audio playback of Minister Emerson performing song) and you will know you need to answer the question.

EMERSON: She wants an answer, yes or no.

KING: Christmas, New Year... favourite Christmas present Dr Craig Emerson?

EMERSON: It was in the giving actually. I got a couple of books and a top for surfing, which I did. I actually went into the cold water and I'm a squib with cold water. But when they gave me this surfing top, a rash shirt, I went in everyday so I was a brave boy. Being a country boy, I'm not used to the surf, so it was great with the kids.

KING: A rashie keeps the sun off you but it doesn't keep you warm does it?

EMERSON: They do a bit, but I get a real chill up my back, it's freezing. I find water freezing and I know I'm a squib but I think it's because I grew up in the country, it's still a bit unusual for me.

KING: So what was the present, was it the surf board, the rashie...

EMERSON: Oh no it's actually a rash shirt, it does actually help a bit, if the wind picks up in the surf.

KING: Did you do better than that George Brandis?

BRANDIS: Oh look, I always get books because that's what I ask for.

KING: I got a hot-pink snake-skin handbag.

EMERSON: I thought you were going to say hot-pink snake-skin hot pants.

KING: Oh yes, they'd look so good. Yes, yes. Up to your twenties they may just work. And George Brandis, what books?

BRANDIS: Well one was a collection of Alistair Cook's reportage from America. He was a great broadcaster. A lot of your listeners would remember him. I've always been a great fan of Alistair Cook, so it was one.

KING: You've just come back from America in the last twenty-four hours haven't you?

BRANDIS: I have.

KING: And, I'm interested to know what you think, Barack Obama is marking a year of power.

BRANDIS: Yes.

KING: Has he been a disappointment? I noticed half of Americans in one poll this morning say he's failed to actually deliver on what he's promised.

BRANDIS: I think it's too early to say that. The expectations were impossibly high so he was always going to come off a big cliff of expectations. At the moment his favourability is about the same as his unfavourability, about forty-six or forty-seven.

KING: Is favourability a word?

BRANDIS: Umm...

KING: You might have to start collecting these Craig Emerson.

EMERSON: Yeah, well, we had "diaphanous" last year, there's "pseudonymisation". Can I put my hand up for "pseudonymisation"? That's on the front page of the Courier Mail.

KING: I thought it was someone on your side that said it though?

BRANDIS: Kevin Rudd. If it's not in the English language it's Kevin Rudd.

EMERSON: No its public service speak about this electronic card. I just thought "pseudonymisation" was right up there for 2010.

KING: So, Barack Obama.

BRANDIS: Well I think the jury's out. The jury is going to come in in a big way today as a matter of fact because there's a very important special election in America today for Senator Kennedy's Massachusetts Senate seat which the Republicans are expected to win. That's a Senate seat they haven't held since 1946 and if they win that seat in Massachusetts – we'll know in about three or four hours time – then that will be regarded as a very significant blow to President Obama.

KING: And if you're interested in US politics, I can't recommend a book, but a book I am reading at the moment that has got great detail on inside the election, it's called *Game Change* in America and it's called I think, *Race of a Lifetime* in Australia. So from America to Australia and Prince William, either of you lining up to see him? Or would like to have lined up to see him?

BRANDIS: Well I'm not seeing him but he's not coming to Queensland.

EMERSON: I don't think he is, no he's not coming to Queensland.

BRANDIS: No ministerial reception for him Craig?

EMERSON: Not that I know of. I met his mum Diana in the UK and she was absolutely striking...

KING: Stunning looking...

EMERSON: Stunning looking and had enormous presence about her.

KING: As tall as you?

EMERSON: I reckon she was six-foot-one, maybe six-foot but seemed six-foot-one, would have been in heels I guess as well. I've met Prince Charles with Molly Robson, the Environment Minister. We actually took him to Fraser Island on a ferry and yakked away about his great distrust for the public service in London because his view was that London was being destroyed by modern, kitschy sort of buildings and destroying the character of London. He was a real interesting guy.

KING: Does he have a limited radar on what is appropriate to say or is that out of cheekiness that he sometimes says the things he does?

EMERSON: I think with Prince Charles it's a bit of irascibility. Is that a word? We're into big words today aren't we?

KING: I'm writing it down.

EMERSON: We'll write that one down.

BRANDIS: Irascibility is okay.

EMERSON: Got the tick from George.

KING: Can I just ask what it means?

BRANDIS: Irritable and grumpy and cranky.

EMERSON: No, oh sorry I actually mean something else. I meant that he's a bit of a lad, and he would know when he was speaking outside of the boundaries so he'd just push outside the boundaries every now and again.

KING: So if your new staff member's mum is listening – and good morning mum – I don't think you're winning her over.

EMERSON: No. I think I'm a lost cause with her anyway.

KING: Now on Prince William. You're a monarchist Senator George Brandis.

BRANDIS: I don't describe myself as a monarchist. I'm somebody who is not persuaded that we should go to all the trouble of changing the constitutional arrangements which exist very well. And I'm also a bit of a sentimentalist too. I think that the British connection and the British heritage is something which I think we ought to acknowledge and be proud of

EMERSON: For me, a republic and in its own good time.

KING: Yeah, but isn't that just sitting on the fence? You're either a republican or you're not?

EMERSON: I am a republican but I'm also a realist and I don't think these things can be shoved down the throats of the Australian people. The last time that was attempted it was 1999 and it was a spectacular flop.

KING: But let's forget how the head of state would be elected. Do you think a vast majority of Australians, Craig Emerson, support becoming a republic?

EMERSON: I would think a majority does. But for a referendum what is needed is a majority of Australians and a majority of the states. I think that is quite a big ask.

BRANDIS: Well I think that's true, but I think you can't simply say: well, do a majority of Australians support being a republic? I think if you ask them that question, the top of mind response for the majority, though not a huge majority, would be yes. But the problem the republicans have always had, and it's never going to go away, is that the moment you put that question it immediately raises another question, and that is what's wrong with the system we have at the moment? So a republic referendum almost immediately and inevitably morphs into a vote of confidence in the success of the Australian constitution.

KING: But if you put it like that, the motor car wouldn't have advanced. What's wrong with walking?

EMERSON: If it ain't broke don't fix it. We'd never have technological change.

BRANDIS: I don't agree with that.

EMERSON: Old horse and cart worked perfectly well.

BRANDIS: I don't agree with that at all because a technological development is always going to be attractive to people, subject to issues of cost if it demonstrably improves their way of life.

KING: That's Senator George Brandis you're listening with Dr Craig Emerson here Inside Canberra this morning. Can we get back to Australian political issues again briefly. Parliament resumes again next month. Labor's going to reintroduce this amended Emissions Trading Scheme, Tony Abbott is calling it a great big tax. Is there any chance on God's good earth of this passing?

EMERSON: I wouldn't say that there's a big chance

KING: Well, why do it?

EMERSON: Well there are definitely Coalition Senators who support an ETS, but will they cross the floor is the question and you won't know until you know...

KING: Because there are Labor MPs who wouldn't agree either ...

EMERSON: ...and some did ... and in fact George came in and listened to the speech, I think, one of the Senators crossed the floor. You don't need that many to cross the floor.

KING: How many will you need to cross the floor?

EMERSON: Well George you're the Senator (inaudible) the Greens still voting against ...?

BRANDIS: Look, it's a bit of an academic debate because the answer to your question is that there's no chance of it passing. Two Liberal senators crossed the floor last time.

KING: So what's going to happen, it goes to the Senate ...?

BRANDIS: Well, I don't know why the Labor Party is going through this exercise once again when they know what the outcome is going to be. What I think has happened on this issue, it's very interesting to watch the way it's developed over the last few months, I think we started from a position where a lot of people regarded having an ETS as being in effect synonymous with doing something meaningful about climate change. What has happened and I think that Tony Abbott has achieved a great coup in this in that we have decoupled those two issues so that most people I know think it is necessary to do something about climate change but I think most people now do not think that an ETS is necessarily the answer.

EMERSON: Well in that period between now and the resumption of Parliament which is less than two weeks I think, Tony Abbott has said that he will come out with his alternative policy which will be fascinating in this respect ... he is going to come up with ways of substantially reducing emissions that don't cost anything. Well that will be a brilliant effort and I say that facetiously because if there were no cost simple solutions don't you reckon that people will have already cottoned onto them. So this will be a great big con from Tony Abbott.

KING: That's Dr Craig Emerson with Senator George Brandis on *Inside Canberra* this morning. This is a Federal election year. We expect an election later this year. Is it climate change or what do you think is *the* issue my listeners are sitting at home thinking that they will determine their vote over?

BRANDIS: Well I think the big issue is people will compare where Australia stood when the Howard Government was tossed out at the end of 2007 and their own personal circumstances compared to where they stand in 2010.

KING: So they'll be voting on economics ...

BRANDIS: Well I think what the Liberal Party will be reminding people of, as is the case is that Australia, when the Liberal Party period of office came to an end in 2007, the country had no debt, taxes were low there money in the bank, there was about \$60 or \$70 billion dollars in accumulated national savings. In the space of less than two years the Labor Party has driven us into a generation of debt.

KING: I'll come to you in a minute Craig Emerson. You say that - but the polls that show Kevin Rudd's popularity has dipped in the past couple of days also show that Labor will romp home in an election. You paint the picture of Australia so poorly George Brandis, why isn't the Liberal National Party doing much better in the polls?

BRANDIS: I'm not painting the picture of Australia so poorly, I'm painting a picture of the Rudd Government's performance in the conduct of the affairs of Australia very poorly.

KING: So are the voters not seeing that that they're still in the polls?

BRANDIS: Well, I think everything changes when an election is called, because when an election is called the Government goes into caretaker mode and people are confronted with the choice - Do we really want to go on the way we're going or were we better off were we safer with a more fiscally prudent Government? And remember Kevin Rudd promised to be a fiscal conservative at the 2007 election and within 18 months he'd driven the country into more than \$200 billion - almost a quarter of a trillion dollars in debt.

KING: Right of reply Minister Craig Emerson - just first of all on the issues that you think mums and dads out there are thinking about the most?

EMERSON: Usually it is the economy, and there will be a few other issues as well but at the centre of the campaign at the centre of people's thinking will be the economy and I noticed that George studiously avoided using two words, global recession. Now this is what the Coalition is going to try to do - assume away the deepest global recession in 75 years and the fact that this Government, the Australian Government has helped ensure that Australia is one of only three countries that did not go into recession ...

KING: Are you sure we've escaped that?

EMERSON: ... and with the second lowest unemployment in the developed world and we have done it through an economic stimulus which includes importantly the biggest school modernisation program in Australia's history, which the Coalition voted against. All those school works, all that work for small businesses, for tradies, the Coalition is against.

BRANDIS: But Craig so much of that money was wasted ...

EMERSON: I don't think the tradies would agree with that.

BRANDIS: ... and everyone knows that an enormous amount of that money was wasted. The Coalition said that should be some economic stimulus that was common ground the question was where and how it should be spent

and how much should there be and it was spent extravagantly and carelessly...

EMERSON: It should have been supporting small businesses.

KING: We've only got a couple of minutes to go and I want to go through a couple of other things and you might want to email me or jump onto my blog and tell me what you think the issue is that you will base your vote on at this stage and we'll do a lot more later in the year but ABC dot net dot au slash Brisbane slash radio click on Mornings with Madonna King and tell me the issues. League tables where parents get access to information comparing their school class with others, do you support that strongly or not, Craig Emerson you do ...

EMERSON: I support the website, I don't support league tables, this is not a league table the website will allow parents to know how a school's going compared with other like schools in the same State and in other States.

KING: That's a league table, they'll say we came third, we came fourth...

EMERSON: ...No it is not. No you will be comparing for example a school in Woodridge with say a school in Footscray in Melbourne, now I don't see how that's a league table and the Courier Mail has been incredibly responsible to date in its reporting of this and I think every parent deserves to know how their school is going compared with other like schools and the Government and the Government so that if there are problems you can come in and help fix the problem.

KING: ...so why are teachers so against it...

EMERSON: Well I just think covering up bad performance is just irresponsible. We've got to get in and support those schools that are struggling and apply the best practice from other comparable schools in other states or in other areas so as to lift them up. It is a positive initiative for poor schools.

KING: So George Brandis do you support what Craig Emerson is saying?

BRANDIS: I strongly support league tables I don't know why Craig says he doesn't because what he has then gone onto describe is what league tables mean to me - that is the publication of data that enables parents and others to make a comparison with other schools.

EMERSON: ...with other comparable schools not with, you know, the GPS exclusive schools and then they say: oh a school in Logan City is way below those. It's with other comparable schools with similar demographics. Similar - that's the point.

BRANDIS: Let's come back to the main point and I think it's a point on which we agree. Parents are entitled to the maximum information from their school

which includes comparative information too about how the school is going and how their kids are going and I am deeply suspicious and scornful of teachers' unions that try to keep that information away from parents.

KING: Do you have a view on that? Let me know. 1300 222 612. A final quick question - your personal New Year's resolution, what's it going to be?

EMERSON: I'm running again, I've been doing a lot of running, and I went running around Ewing Road last night and I did it again this morning before coming on.

KING: How far did you run?

EMERSON: It's about 5kms. In Queensland, it's quite warm even at 7 o'clock in the morning.

KING: George Brandis, I suspect running was not your New Year's resolution? I don't know why I say that.

BRANDIS: It wasn't. My New Year's resolution was to be very single minded about doing everything I can to win the election this year.

EMERSON: Chill out George!

KING: That's a professional New Year's resolution. What about a personal one? Craig Emerson's could be to sing better.

EMERSON: There's room for improvement.

KING: Read more books?

BRANDIS: That was one.

EMERSON: You can't read more books!

BRANDIS: My New Year's resolution was what I said it was – to be very single minded about doing everything I can to win the election because it's going to be a very important election.

EMERSON: You'll be a lot of fun George.