



THE HON DR CRAIG EMERSON MP
MINISTER FOR TRADE

Transcript
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E&OE

Subjects: ANAO report, Caucus meeting, car industry assistance, Australia Day.

JORIAN GARDNER: Let's go to Dr Craig Emerson, the Federal Trade Minister.
Good morning, Dr Emerson.

CRAIG EMERSON: Good morning, Jorian.

GARDNER: How are you today, sir?

EMERSON: I'm very well. It's pretty wet up here in Queensland though, I must say.

GARDNER: I bet it is. Are you looking towards some not-so-great weather up there, mate?

EMERSON: Yeah, it's bucketing down and I think the outlook for the next two or three days is pretty grim, too. But it must be, you know, a bit unnerving for those who went through such a terrible time last year. But I don't think we have the problems with the Wivenhoe Dam that we did last time, so I don't think we're going to have anything like a repetition of last year. But as I say, people who had damage to their homes and were badly affected will probably have a sense of déjà vu, which is not so good.

GARDNER: Yes, I'm sure there'll be a few nervous people out there. Let's turn our attention straight away to this crisis summit, which is being called apparently. Julia Gillard wants all Labor backbenchers to an unprecedented brainstorming session. Tell me about this.

EMERSON: It's been called a 'crisis summit' by the Daily Telegraph. Another word for it is a 'caucus meeting.'

GARDNER: Yeah. Well, look a brainstorming session is what other people are calling it today, as well as the Daily Telegraph. Don't you have them all the time?

EMERSON: Well, of course we do actually have as long a discussion in Caucus as we can manage. And I can tell you this about Caucus: if there's a bit of extra time to be filled up the Caucus members will fill it up because they have got plenty of opinions to express, talk about what's happening in their local electorates. But when parliament is actually on, there's not all that much time. And here's an opportunity to spend more time, to give Caucus members an opportunity to express their opinions about the policy issues that are going on in their own electorates, make representations generally, have a discussion. So it is curious that the Daily Telegraph decided to describe it as a – what was it? A crisis...?

GARDNER: A 'crisis summit'. Well, they've got to write about something.

EMERSON: Very dramatic, very dramatic.

GARDNER: Very dramatic indeed. There's a report out by the Australian National Audit Office today apparently that found 33 cases in which Labor ministers approved grants to organisations in the own electorates. Are you guys pork barrelling?

EMERSON: Well, I can tell you a little bit about that. That was out of 800 ministerial briefs: 33 cases were found. The reason they were found is that we set up the guidelines. And the guidelines and their administration are not perfect, that's true. But the reason we set up the guidelines is that there was a Regional Partnership Agreement Program under the previous Howard Government, which colloquially became known as 'Regional Rorts.' And in that system you could actually get money, and then apply for it later. I remember they wanted to open the

mouth of a creek called 'Tumby Creek', which had already been opened through a downpour. And so they reopened it. So we need to deal with that. It's not perfect but it's certainly the first time that a Commonwealth government has set up these sorts of accountabilities and we welcome the audit office report. And if we can improve it, we will.

GARDNER: So you deny the pork barrelling by a bunch of ministers?

EMERSON: I do. These decisions are very much made at the departmental level. And sometimes of course you can't exclude the possibility that departments, let's say with a schools grants program, are going to include recommendations or decisions in a minister's own electorate. I mean, you can't have a situation where ministers in their electorates don't get any grants approved. This is about reporting those. And in the case, I think it was raised with respect to the Prime Minister, those grants didn't actually get paid. They were never paid and the criticism was actually about the department not advising another department.

GARDNER: Unions have split in the wake of job cuts at Toyota, with a senior unionist attacking calls by ACTU President, Ged Kearney, for greater transparency over taxpayer-funded assistance to the struggling car industry. Are we right to be giving money to the car industry, mate?

EMERSON: Well, we are. And it is an important industry. And it is the backbone of much of manufacturing in Australia, but we don't just give out money. What we do is look to support innovation because these days it's a much more sophisticated task than simply assembling cars. You need to be at the front end of new ideas and innovative inventions for cars. You know how much electronics is in cars these days, for example. And just to make sure that we're co-investing, that is, that the industry itself is investing in new models. That's what we're doing. Again, there's an alternative here and that's Mr Abbott's alternative of taking half a billion dollars out of the automotive industry, while at the same time criticising this government for supporting the industry. But then if you ask Sophie Mirabella, she's criticising this government for not supporting the industry enough.

GARDNER: Yeah, well I think they need support. Can I just ask you Craig Emerson, what are you doing tomorrow for Australia Day?

EMERSON: Well, we've got a Logan Citizenship Ceremony. I've got the great privilege of having been appointed – even in opposition – as a Presiding Officer who can actually swear in Australian citizens over in Springwood, and I'll be doing that as well.

GARDNER: You must take great pride in that.

EMERSON: Yeah I do. It is always a moving moment. And I say this on your program: when people make a commitment to our country I think that's a great thing and we encourage everyone who is capable of becoming an Australian citizen to make that commitment to our country.

GARDNER: Dr Craig Emerson, thanks for coming on the program. Have a great Aussie Day tomorrow, mate.

EMERSON: Thanks very much. All the best.

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