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Transcript

Inside Canberra, ABC 612 Brisbane with Madonna King

Wednesday, 27 January 2010

Interviewees: Dr Craig Emerson, Senator George Brandis

E&OE

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*Subjects:* Tony Abbott's recent comments on female virginity, moralising in politics, back to school, and the My School website launch.

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**KING:** Now, how do our decision-makers see some of the issues you've been hearing about? Let's go Inside Canberra to find out and good morning to Minister Dr Craig Emerson.

**EMERSON:** Good morning to you, Madonna.

**KING:** And to Opposition front bencher Senator George Brandis, good morning to you, too.

**BRANDIS:** Good morning, Madonna, good morning, Craig.

**EMERSON:** Hello, George.

**KING:** Well, Senator George Brandis, it's your boss that's dominating the headlines this morning, Tony Abbott. Is he out of line in what he's saying?

**BRANDIS:** No. I don't think he's out of line at all. He was asked a question. He gave a direct answer and, if anything, I'm surprised at the reaction of Julia Gillard. You see, I think that most parents, in fact, all - any parent I can think of would agree with what Tony Abbott said and I think Julia Gillard who is - has chosen not to be a parent - and, you know, everybody respects her right, in the vehemence of her reaction in fact shows that she just doesn't understand the way parents think about their children when they reach a particular age.

**KING:** Are you saying if she had children she may see this differently?

**BRANDIS:** I think so. I think that any parent I can imagine would agree with Tony Abbott.

**KING:** Can I ask if you think that as a parent of boys and girls?

**BRANDIS:** Yes.

**KING:** Or do you think parents of girls may be more adamant in that view?

**BRANDIS:** Look, I suspect, I say it as a parent of a son and a daughter but I suspect that parents of daughters might be more adamant about it, yes.

**KING:** And is there a level of sexism in that? Tony Abbott presumably said it because he has three daughters.

**BRANDIS:** Yes.

**KING:** But it's being portrayed and a lot of people are saying, well, is he directing the same view to young males in Australia?

**BRANDIS:** Well, I don't think he was asked about that so I think in a sense that's a hypothetical question. But the point I'd make to you is that what Tony Abbott and, as you rightly say, Madonna, he has raised three teenage - he and his wife have raised three teenage daughters - is the natural result, the natural reaction, I should say, of any parent I can think of.

**KING:** Craig Emerson, do you agree with Senator George Brandis there or is that a little bit of an old...

**EMERSON:** Totally disagree. I totally disagree. Tony Abbott should stay out of people's bedrooms. He's entitled to a private view ...

**BRANDIS:** That's what he's expressed.

**EMERSON:** ... in relation to his own family. No, he expressed it publicly and he didn't express it in relation to his three daughters. He expressed it more generally about the desirability or otherwise of women marrying as virgins. No reference to blokes. No reference to blokes. It's a gift from a woman if she is a virgin til she's married but no obligation, that I could see, on the part of Tony Abbott on blokes.

**KING:** In fairness to Tony Abbott he does have three teenage daughters.

**EMERSON:** I know, but he made a general set of remarks and this confirms the worst fears of many Australians, that he will be moralising and sermonising. I think people are quite capable of making their own judgments without having Tony Abbott telling them what to do and how to behave in relation to their sexual behaviour.

**KING:** But is he just saying, as Senator George Brandis was alluding to, just what every parent across Australia is actually thinking?

**EMERSON:** I don't believe that every parent shares that view and, you know, it's immaterial what my view is. That's what I'm saying. What my view is, is immaterial. This is not a matter for politicians to be sermonising to people, saying they should or should not be virgins, particularly women, but the blokes get a free run. I think it's wrong.

**BRANDIS:** He didn't say that.

**EMERSON:** And I think it's very worrying that you've got someone who's putting himself up as an alternative Prime Minister who is signalling now what sort of Prime Minister he would be if he was elected.

**KING:** Do you think...

**EMERSON:** Sermonising to people, telling them what to do in their private lives...

**KING:** You're on your high horse about this.

**EMERSON:** ...when I don't think he has any right to do that.

**KING:** But do you think this will turn women against him, come the election?

**EMERSON:** Well, I don't know and in a sense that doesn't bother me one way or another. What bothers me is politicians stepping in and becoming the moral crusader on an issue like this.

**KING:** But isn't that part of the job of a politician?

**EMERSON:** Well I think it is legitimate for a politician to have a private view about these matters but when they start saying, beyond his three daughters, women should save themselves for marriage ... it's a gift, but no gift from the blokes, of course, you know, the blokes can go and do what they want. I mean...

**BRANDIS:** He didn't - look, Craig...

**EMERSON:** I think he got it completely wrong.

**BRANDIS:** Craig....

**EMERSON:** And I think it is very worrying about what this fellow would bring to the Prime Ministership of Australia if he did become the Prime Minister.

**KING:** I want to go back to what Senator George Brandis said about Julia Gillard in just a moment but Senator Brandis?

**BRANDIS:** Okay, time to stop the nonsense, Craig. First of all, he wasn't asked about sons. He was asked a question in the context of being the father of three daughters and, as I said a moment ago, I think any parent I can think of would have exactly the same attitude about - about a teenage daughter when she reaches that stage in her development, approaching - approach it carefully, cautiously, with due consideration. That's all he's saying.

And can I make one other observation please, Madonna, it's not about moralising. I don't think most of your listeners would think that politicians should live in a moral vacuum so that when a politician says something about a moral issue they are, quote, unquote, moralising, as if that's a bad thing.

People want their political leaders to be moral people, to be ethical people, and they won't necessarily agree with every - with everybody's moral standards but the idea that a person, by expressing a view about morality is therefore forcing their morality down somebody else's throat is rubbish.

**EMERSON:** Well, he is.

**KING:** But can you go too far?

**EMERSON:** He's doing exactly that.

**KING:** Can you give away too much about yourself?

**BRANDIS:** Well, you know, I think people are entitled to know what their politicians think and beyond the narrow range of issues about public policy but it's - it is just bizarre - bizarre - to say that because a person - a politician says, well, this is my particular view about this particular moral issue, they are somehow forcing their morality down other people's throats, nonsense.

**KING:** Tony Abbott has said this morning he was answering questions and he was answering them as a parent in relation to his daughters which may explain why he didn't refer to young men. It may not either but I'm just saying that Tony Abbott said that this morning. Do you think Senator George Brandis was too tough on Julia Gillard though? Just because she doesn't have children doesn't mean she doesn't have a right to think the way she does, Craig Emerson?

**EMERSON:** Well, indeed, and Julia Gillard is a very intelligent person, a very compassionate person, someone who thinks about these issues a lot and I fully agree with Julia's point of view, and whether or not she has children is completely immaterial. It's something that the Coalition brings up from time to time. I don't think that's relevant at all. What's relevant is that Tony Abbott is saying to the women of Australia, the young women of Australia, that his view is that they should be virgins when they're - when they're married.

**KING:** All right.

**EMERSON:** Maybe...

**BRANDIS:** That's not what he said.

**EMERSON:** Different people have different attitudes...

**BRANDIS:** That's not what he said.

**EMERSON:** ...to this but he's doing it as the alternative Prime Minister of Australia and he is imparting, if you like, his values, his moral

values as if other people don't have morality, as if young women don't have a moral framework. Of course they do but let them make their decisions...

**BRANDIS:** And he's never suggested anything otherwise.

**EMERSON:** This idea that virginity from a woman to a bloke is a gift but not from a bloke to a woman.

**BRANDIS:** He didn't say that.

**KING:** He uses the word gift.

**EMERSON:** He did, he said it was a gift.

**BRANDIS:** He absolutely did not say that about...

**EMERSON:** Absolutely.

**BRANDIS:** He didn't address the issue of men because he wasn't asked about men because he was asked...

**EMERSON:** And he did say virginity is a gift.

**BRANDIS:** In the context of having - being a father of three female - of three daughters.

**EMERSON:** And what worries me is what his government policies would be in implementing or enforcing his moral...

**KING:** On virginity?

**EMERSON:** ...values.

**BRANDIS:** Dear oh dear. Dear oh dear oh dear.

**KING:** [Laughs]

**EMERSON:** We know on a number of issues that he has public policy...

**BRANDIS:** Look, coming back to Julia Gillard.

**EMERSON:** ...issues related to this moral framework that he has. He is entitled to have a moral framework.

**KING:** Dr Emerson...

**EMERSON:** I think lots of people do.

**KING:** Have a drink.

**BRANDIS:** Yes, settle down. Craig...

**EMERSON:** He shouldn't impose them on others.

**BRANDIS:** Craig, you're becoming excited. Settle down.

Now, can I just say this about Julia Gillard? As I said before, everybody respects - everybody respects her right to choose not to be a parent. A lot of women do choose not to be parents. Some men choose not to be parents.

**KING:** Some would love to have children and are unable to.

**BRANDIS:** Indeed but my point is a broader one. I think that although Julia Gillard is a very clever politician, she is very much a one-dimensional person and I do think her reaction, her over-reaction to the, in my view, quite unexceptionable remarks Tony Abbott made as the father of daughters, is not something she would have said if she were herself the mother of teenage daughters.

**KING:** All right, let's leave...

**EMERSON:** That's complete rubbish.

**KING:** Let me just take a step back. When you were in before the last election, when I asked you a personal question, you would be more inclined to say I don't want to give a view on that. Like there have been claims that journalists are intruding too much into the privacy of politicians and often with good reason. Where do you actually draw the line? If politicians are going to answer questions like this, where do you draw the line on come the next election, how we should see both of you? How much of a right do we need to know about you?

**BRANDIS:** I think it's a very fair question, it's a good question and my answer would be people are entitled to know the views of politicians even if - even their views on topics that are not sort of specifically political issues of the day.

**KING:** Like sex?

**BRANDIS:** Yes, and Tony Abbott was asked his view about that matter and he expressed his view on it...

**KING:** But let's move on from here. You're saying that people should - voters should know their views on a wide range of things that may not even be part of public policy debate.

**BRANDIS:** I think people are entitled, particularly when it comes to leaders, by the way...

**KING:** Yes.

**BRANDIS:** ...to a symbol, a picture of the whole person, and you can't really assemble a picture of the whole person without knowing what their views are across a range of topics.

**EMERSON:** Look, I think that people are entitled to get some insights into the personality of politicians but that politicians themselves should not - and I'm not going back to the Tony Abbott matter - should not impose their set of values, if you like, on people who themselves might be perfectly entitled to have, for example, no religion. They could be moral and have no religion, for example. I think, yes, people need to know a bit about the character of politicians. I personally don't mind when you ask questions about my personal life but at some point, you know, people say, well, that's enough, that's enough of a look at someone's

personal life. It's just the effect that it has, the relevant criterion is: does it affect policy?

**KING:** And I guess - and it's an interesting debate to have because time and time again a report will come across my desk that the average age a child loses their virginity is something like 14 or, you know, that children are losing their virginity as young as 12, and then we've got another sector of society saying it's very realistic and thousands of kids remain virgins until they're married. I mean, we're - we don't go behind the closed doors of people, but it'd be an interesting perspective to know how those in this situation actually feel.

**BRANDIS:** Sure, can I just say...

**KING:** Briefly.

**BRANDIS:** Briefly a word about this idea of politicians forcing their views - their moral views on other people. That's not what they do. These moral issues, whenever they do come up in the context of, for example, RU486, or euthanasia is another one, they're almost always a conscience vote.

Now, if a politician has a particular personal set of moral standards, and it's a conscience vote, they're not forcing their morality on other people by voting in the Parliament according to their conscientious beliefs.

**EMERSON:** If it is a conscience vote, I agree with that, George, but they're not always conscience votes.

**KING:** Michael just raised an interesting - a listener just raised an interesting question. He says, if politicians shouldn't be moralising then why do we see Kevin Rudd being interviewed outside a church every Sunday morning.

**BRANDIS:** [Laughs]

**EMERSON:** Well, he's not giving a sermon. I mean, he's not standing and saying...

**KING:** But he gives a perception...

**EMERSON:** No, let's be clear about that. He is not saying therefore everyone should be a Christian. Now, if he wants to stand outside a church, he's entitled to stand outside a church. There's a lot of people who...

**KING:** [Interrupts] Would you say using a church is a prop in some ways?

**BRANDIS:** Of course it is.

**KING:** In saying, I'm a Christian...

**BRANDIS:** Of course it is, because the guy is a complete phoney, Craig. You know that as well as I do.

**EMERSON:** Oh, all right, so George...

**BRANDIS:** You can't say so.

**EMERSON:** ... George, you'll be at the ecumenical service, I imagine?

**BRANDIS:** I will be.

**EMERSON:** You know, at the beginning of Parliament. So will I. Is there anything wrong with that?

**BRANDIS:** But...

**KING:** [Talks over] But will you be - will you give a press conference?

**EMERSON:** Is that moralising, George?

**BRANDIS:** No, of course it's not. But I won't be there so as to pose for a TV camera after the service which is why Kevin Rudd...

**EMERSON:** So, when the cameras are there...

**BRANDIS:** Like, Kevin Rudd. If cameras are there, it's none of my business.

**EMERSON:** But if cameras are there on Malcolm Turnbull - on Tony Abbott and Kevin Rudd when they walk out, what should you do?

**BRANDIS:** Craig?

**EMERSON:** Put your hand up against the camera, George and say, oh no, we're - this would be moralising.

**BRANDIS:** Why does Kevin Rudd frame his shots outside a church on Sunday morning? If he wants to make remarks to the press, why doesn't he stand in front of a tree?

**KING:** Can I just say, Michael, thank you for asking that question [indistinct].  
[Laughter]

**EMERSON:** That got us going.

**KING:** I can almost feel an election in the air, and I'm just changing the topic.  
  
Speaking of where politicians are allowed and not allowed, they're going to be banned from campaigning in some of our biggest shopping malls because of the disruption they cause, we're told this morning.  
  
Do you see shopping centres and shopping malls as a public space? A bit like a village green, a town square, and a right for a politician to meet people. People - the voters can go up and say what they like to you. Or do you think that there is - it is reasonable to say shopping centres are more private space and politicians should go elsewhere.

**BRANDIS:** Look, I think there's a bit of a difference between the local member of parliament walking through a shopping centre in his electorate and saying hello to people. I don't think anybody would find that offensive.

But what increasingly happens now in election campaigns, as we all know, is you get a political leader walking through a shopping centre with a media scrum and you get - you know, six or seven cameramen running around, and sound recorders, and people with boom microphones and other journalists and, you know, I can understand why people would regard that frankly as a damn nuisance.

**EMERSON:** It's a decision for each shopping centre owner. In my own area there's one or two that would allow me in. Mostly they don't.

**KING:** Mostly they say, you're our local member and Craig Emerson, you're not welcome?

**EMERSON:** In election campaigns. They're quite happy to have me go in there, buy the, you know, bananas and the broccoli and the lamb chops, but it is very different around election time.

I respect the right of the owners of those shopping centres to make that decision.

**KING:** And I was unaware that actually was the case.

**EMERSON:** It is, yeah.

**KING:** That you're already...

**EMERSON:** It's a case by case, but the majority in my electorate are, no to all politicians.

**KING:** You're on 612 ABC Brisbane. Can we just take a break for news headlines and we'll be back.

Is it a big milestone in either the Brandis household or the Emerson household when it comes back - going back to school? That My School website up tomorrow morning. We will have a special edition of the mornings program tomorrow morning to deal with that.

But Inside Canberra with Dr Craig Emerson and George Brandis, back in just a moment.

[ News Headlines ]

**KING:** We're inside a fiery edition of Inside Canberra with Dr Craig Emerson and Senator George Brandis. We're not mentioning the initials TA or Tony Abbott again, at least for a little while until I start going through the dozens SMSs you have sent in this morning and I'll come to those. I'm not sure what they or whose side they fall on at this stage.

But, Dr Craig Emerson, Senator George Brandis, back to school across Queensland today. Half a million kids back into our state schools. Any big milestones in either of your homes?

**EMERSON:** Not really. Just the fond memories of taking our eldest boy, who's now 19, to school for the first time at Pius X at Salisbury, and he turned around - I still remember, he turned around and

waved goodbye, and sort of trundled off into the classroom and I cried.

**BRANDIS:** He was fine.

**KING:** And that's not unusual. My husband last year couldn't go because he thought he would just make a fool of himself, so he waved from the front veranda.

You remember the first day either your daughter...

**BRANDIS:** Yes. I remember both my son and my daughter the first day at school, and, you know, because - I think Craig would share this feeling, because we're away so much, I always make a point when I'm Brisbane of driving my son to school and it's the - for me, it's one of the nicest parts of the day. And, you know, did that again this morning for the first time this year and it was lovely.

**KING:** Do either of you get a hard time, though, when you go to discipline a child, or say I don't think that's appropriate, that they say, well, you're always most of the year, Dad. You're in Canberra most of the year, it's none of your business?

**EMERSON:** No, not in my case.

**BRANDIS:** No.

**EMERSON:** I confess to, early on, smacking the children, and I stopped that really early on and I, frankly, I was doing that when - I noticed I was doing it more if I was under a bit of pressure and a bit of stress. And I thought, hey, what's - who's this about? Me or the kids?

So we developed some alternative time-out mechanisms. You know, that they'd miss their favourite TV show, or they'd be in their room for half an hour and it worked very, very well.

So, I think you just learn more about parenthood the longer it goes, the more kids you have. So, the kids, because of that, they know that if there is a bit of a discipline, that there's probably a pretty good reason for it.

**KING:** George Brandis, you said to me earlier that the public deserve the right to know any of your views. Smacking? Is that something that you banned in your house, or...?

**BRANDIS:** It's not something I do, no.

**KING:** Never done?

**BRANDIS:** Nup.

**KING:** Just say your child is going towards a heater. Do you send them for time-out?

**BRANDIS:** Well - to a heater?

**KING:** Yeah, a heater or a stove?

**EMERSON:** I'd crash tackle them.

[Laughter]

**KING:** How do you teach them about danger? Yes, crash tackling fine, smacking out [indistinct].

**BRANDIS:** You don't want to smack them. They understand a crash-tackle in our household.

[Laughter]

**KING:** In terms of milestones, we've covered that. So, today no last year of school, first year of university?

**BRANDIS:** Second-last year of school for my son, and this year is the first year of university for my daughter.

**EMERSON:** And last year of school for our middle child. He's not a child anymore, he's going into year 12.

**KING:** That's a pretty big move. As is the first year at university. It's like...

**EMERSON:** Yeah, and what's different about it, I think, is that he's sitting down with me saying, Dad, I really now need to start thinking about what I might do at university, and therefore that's going to influence what I do at school.

**KING:** Where - when did your - is it your daughter who's starting university?

**BRANDIS:** Yes.

**KING:** When did she decide what to study then?

**BRANDIS:** About, I would say, two or three years ago. She would've been about grade 10.

**KING:** And what's she doing?

**BRANDIS:** She's doing med... she's doing physiotherapy with a view to doing medicine.

**KING:** Good on her.

**EMERSON:** I've taken the view - a generalist education for as long as you can go and then start specialising.

**BRANDIS:** Well, I tell my kids that - and they don't understand, of course, because people - kids of that age are very impatient to get on with their lives. But I say to them, the longer you can stay in university the better, because it's such a great experience.

**KING:** Not all the parents would say that. I would've loved my parents to say something like that. I'd still be there.

This school ratings will be made publicly available nationally from tomorrow. This is something we will do a special edition of the program on tomorrow. So, if you're a teacher, if you're a parent, if you're a student, we will walk you through how to read

them, whether it's good or bad. And, of course, if you belong to a school, I'd love to hear from you too.

But, Craig Emerson, how far is the Government prepared to go given that teachers are planning walkouts, they're planning not implementing them. How far are you prepared to go to have this done?

**EMERSON:** The Government is determined to continue with the testing. The website will go live, as you say, tomorrow. The resolve is there, it's very strong, and what we're trying to do here, Madonna, is to shine a light on those schools that need some support.

You can't support schools if you don't know that they need some support and the worst thing that we can do for those kids is to cover it up.

**KING:** You could do this. Keep it private - but you could do that secretly. Find out the schools that are disadvantaged and give more money to them.

**EMERSON:** Well, parents are entitled to know and to be able to compare - and this is a very important point, I think we mentioned it last time - like with like. Not, you know, a GPS school with a very, very poor school. Of course the GPS school's going to do better. It's not about that.

It's one school, perhaps in a low socio-economic area with a very big multicultural mix, with another school, perhaps in another stated with the same - and then find out the differences; why the differences exist, and apply the best from the schools that are doing well.

**KING:** The Opposition have been fairly quiet on this whole issue, George Brandis. Most of the Opposition to it has come from teachers and principals. Is that because, largely, you agree with the parents right to have more information?

**BRANDIS:** I absolutely agree with that and I think that we discussed this last week, Madonna. I think that the parents are absolutely entitled to the fullest information about how their kids are going and how their school compares with other schools.

The one point I would make, though, is the unions are really cutting it very rough about this, and I think one of the reasons they are is because trade unions always feel they have more purchase over Labor Governments, because, you know, the Labor Party is the creature of trade unions. Trade union officials dominate Labor Party pre-selections and Labor Party recruitment processes. So, I think unions always feel that they're in a better position to boss Labor Governments around, which is one of the reasons, I think, that they are being as disruptive as they are.

**EMERSON:** Well, can I just point out many years ago, Terry Metherell in New South Wales was the education minister in the Greiner

Government. Tried to implement some reforms, I can't comment on whether they were good or bad, but he was driven out of office by the teachers' union back then. So, they certainly targeted a Liberal government.

Look, we've got the greatest respect for teachers. On this matter, we believe the teachers' union is wrong and parents do have a right to know.

**KING:** All right. We're out of time, but I always put our daily dilemma to you and I'd like to that this morning.

This Queensland meat processor is about to travel, apparently, overseas to negotiate a trade deal that would see toads exported and used for food and medicinal purposes, because - this is a true story - the demand for cane toads is big in China. Not only for the meat, but also the poison is used in medicine.

**EMERSON:** They're welcome to them.

**KING:** They're welcome to them.

But this prompts today's dilemma. You're invited to a dinner party this Friday night. There's not toad on the menu, but there is something you just can't stomach. Now, it could be perhaps brain or liver, it could be salmon, it could be raw meat. Something you just - makes you sick. You'd rather starve than eat it. What do you do?

Do you shut your mouth and eat it because you are a guest and you don't want to be disrespectful to your host? Do you fake an allergy? Or do you come clean, be honest, and say you just don't like it, and risk offending your host?

**EMERSON:** I might say that my New Year's Resolution is not to eat liver or tripe or whatever it is on the plate. It's the only way I can think out of it - to get out of that, other than, as you say, basically saying, I'm sorry it's just not something that I...

**KING:** So you wouldn't eat it?

**EMERSON:** I wouldn't eat it, no. I mean - and I - they call me old iron guts, I'll eat just about anything, I can tell you. But there's a few things that I just can't.

**KING:** Like what is the one thing? Liver?

**EMERSON:** Yeah. Liver and kidneys. Yuck.

**KING:** George Brandis?

**BRANDIS:** I think it will - it is partly a question of whether it's something that, you know, you might have an allergic reaction to, or just you can't stomach it, literally. Or whether it's just something you don't especially care for.

If it's the latter, I think politeness would dictate that you have a go at it.

[Laughter]

**BRANDIS:** But if it's something...

**EMERSON:** Just don't chew very much.

**KING:** And what is the thing that you hate put on plate at a dinner party?

**BRANDIS:** I think, yeah - like Craig, I think those offal.

**KING:** Liver. Well...

**EMERSON:** Mind you, I've never had anyone do it, and it'd be taking an extraordinary risk.

**BRANDIS:** No.

**EMERSON:** I reckon three out of five people around the dinner table are saying, mmm, what's for dessert?

**KING:** Well, it's interesting because some person - a listener has called in to ask, why don't you like liver, Craig Emerson?

**EMERSON:** The texture of it, the smell of it and the taste of it.

**KING:** The look?

**EMERSON:** The look of it, and apart from that, it's great.

[Laughter]

**KING:** And Senator George Brandis looks as though he might be agreeing.

Gentlemen, thank you. Talk to you next week.

**BRANDIS:** Thank you, Madonna.

**EMERSON:** Thanks, Madonna. Bye George.

**BRANDIS:** Bye Craig.

**KING:** That's Senator George Brandis and Dr Craig Emerson.