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JOE O'BRIEN: The political year in Australia has been warming up this week. There have been teething problems on the My School website, and debate about Tony Abbott's comments on virginity.

VIRGINIA TRIOLI: Parliament resumes next week, so it begins all over again. So, for a look ahead at what's on the agenda for the year, the Minister for Small Business, Craig Emerson joins us now from Sydney.

Craig Emerson, good morning. Thanks for your time.

CRAIG EMERSON: It's a pleasure, Virginia and happy year of the tiger to you. I think it probably will be quite an aggressive year coming up.

VIRGINIA TRIOLI: Yeah. Just like the one before. Well, look it's interesting. To look at the papers today, just the day after the My School website has gone live, and what do we have? Instant school tables. Now, the Government must have known that this would've happened and I suspect that perhaps members of the Government are not even so sorry that state and private schools have been compared in this way. What's your response?

CRAIG EMERSON: My response is that we always said that there would be available a comparison of like schools with like schools. So, for example, schools that are operating in high income areas, they would be comparable. But you wouldn't get through the My School website a comparison of a school that is in a very high income area, say a very high fee school, with another school that it's in a very low income area.

So, the whole idea of the My School website is to compare like with like, to shine a light on both good performance, Virginia and also sub-par performance so that the government authorities can come in and support those schools that aren't doing so well. So, it's not stigmatising or punishing, but about giving parents and governments the capacity to come in and support those schools where perhaps they're not performing quite so well, and apply the best of the best that's going on in those schools that are doing really well, with a comparable demographic, income levels and so on.

VIRGINIA TRIOLI: Sure, look...

CRAIG EMERSON: So, it's really picking the best of the best and applying that to the struggling school.

VIRGINIA TRIOLI: No, I hear that, and I've heard the speech many times before, but here's your problem. Today...

CRAIG EMERSON: I thought it was a particularly good speech.

VIRGINIA TRIOLI: But today in the papers, what you've done by taking this site live and providing that information is that you've provided the basis now for comparison of, not like with like. So, on the front page of The Age, you've got the comparison there of the Arthurs Creek Primary School with Geelong Grammar, and we all know, even living around the country, what Geelong Grammar represents in terms of wealth and status and its well-funded status. And they're described as statistically similar schools. Now, you can't be happy with that.

CRAIG EMERSON: Well, what I'm saying is that this does shine a light on sub-par performance. The fact that four and a half million hits were made on this website yesterday, gives the lie to the assertions that have been around the place that parents don't want this information – that they're not interested in the information. They're hungry for the information; they want the information. The media would've had the capacity to compare unlike with unlike schools before. They may do that in the future. What we're saying is let's shine a light on good

performance and on sub-par performance to lift the sub-par performances. It's not about punishment. It's about shining a light on that performance...

VIRGINIA TRIOLI: Okay.

CRAIG EMERSON: ...and helping kids in disadvantaged schools. That's what it's all about, Virginia. This government, the Labor government, is committed to helping kids in disadvantaged schools by identifying problems and coming in and fixing them up, including half a billion dollars to improve teacher quality, and a special program for disadvantaged schools. So, I think people will like it. I think people do like it. The four and a half million hits indicate that they do.

VIRGINIA TRIOLI: All right. Well, let's talk about the legislative agenda for the year. The Emission Trading Bill is not yet listed for the start of the Parliamentary year. When will you revisit that debate?

CRAIG EMERSON: Well, there will be a debate on emissions trading. I expect it will be in the coming week, but we will be very interested...

VIRGINIA TRIOLI: So, you'll list that for debate sometime soon, will you?

CRAIG EMERSON: Well, we'll be very interested in seeing - there will be a debate on it soon. So, I'm answering

your question. But we are now at Friday, before the start of Parliament on Tuesday, and Tony Abbott said he would have his alternate climate change policy out before the resumption of Parliament. Well, what's he got? Today, tomorrow, the next day and the one after that to unveil his alternative policy. Now, assuming he does that; assuming he keeps his word, then we can have a debate about the two policies. But Labor is committed to an emissions trading scheme as the most efficient way of reducing carbon emissions.

VIRGINIA TRIOLI: I'll have to hurry us along, because we are a bit short of time this morning. I'm sorry about that, Minister.

CRAIG EMERSON: You're right.

VIRGINIA TRIOLI: But if you talk to the Greens about reductions targets, you might just then have a partner in the Senate with whom you can negotiate. Is that negotiation at all possible?

CRAIG EMERSON: Well, Penny Wong has reaffirmed our targets of five per cent and up to 25 per cent, and they were the ones before the Copenhagen conference. The Greens seem to have shifted ground to some extent.

VIRGINIA TRIOLI: Yep.

CRAIG EMERSON: I don't know whether they'll shift ground further. In order to get this...

VIRGINIA TRIOLI: But could you shift ground a little more?

CRAIG EMERSON: Well, in order to get this scheme through and this is a scheme that was a result of discussions and negotiations with the Coalition, we need the Greens and I've seen speculation about two Liberal Senators not ruling out crossing the floor. Perhaps they will; perhaps the Greens will come on board. Then the thing passes. But what really worries me is that Tony Abbott is applying a very oppositionist approach to this and every other issue. What he's basically said is whatever the Government proposes he will oppose. We are going to continue governing in the national interest, and I think it'll be quite an aggressive week, in the year of the tiger, judging by the sorts of attacks on, for example, Julia Gillard, by George Brandis this week, obviously sanctioned by Tony Abbott. So, I think we're in for a pretty rough period of aggression from Tony Abbott. No alternative policies just opposing everything that we do and then attacking individual front benchers. So, it'll be a pretty willing year.

VIRGINIA TRIOLI: So, it could very well be a willing year. So, just finally then, are you prepared to attack back? Because, I guess, as you mentioned, that's a remarkably personal and surprisingly moralising tone that the political year has started with. You'll have to fight back, won't you?

CRAIG EMERSON: Well, I think the Australian people want, and expect, a government to govern in the national

interest. Our contest with the Coalition should be, and as far as we're concerned will be, about policy. But they need to develop alternative policies so that the Australian people can see the debate about the future of this country. That's what the Australian people want. That's what we're offering. We'll just see what Tony Abbott comes up with, but the early signs are pretty bad.

VIRGINIA TRIOLI: Craig Emerson, good to talk to you. Thanks so much.

CRAIG EMERSON: Okay. Thanks, Virginia.