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Interview with Alan Jones

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SUBJECTS: *Queensland floods and recovery*

ALAN JONES: I spoke to Bob Katter earlier this week about the awful problems in north Queensland. They continue to battle monsoonal rains. The Ingham floods have finally eased. Home owners have had a chance to mop up but you know what homes and business will be like with two and a half feet of water having been in it for weeks. The stench would knock your head off. The clean up of 2900 homes has begun. Vital supply roads have opened but a major flood and medical supply operation continues from Queensland's north east coast west to the Northern Territory border and south to South Australia. That was the area Bob Katter was talking about, about Karumba when I spoke to him on Tuesday. Emergency services staff are now using anything they can get their hands on – Black Hawk choppers, RAAF Carabou transport planes, barges, trucks, trains, government and privately owned choppers and fixed-wing aircraft for food drops.

Since the flood began in November, there's been seven deaths, one man is still missing, but believe this, since the 1st of January Paluma Dam, I made this point yesterday, between Ingham and Townsville, has had 2.67 metres of rain. That's easy to say. It trips off the tongue. That is over 101 inches of rain and they are still fearing more. The damage bill will be hundreds of millions of dollars and in the Gulf it's still raining.

Craig Emerson is the Federal Minister for Small Business in the Rudd Government. Good man this fellow. He's a bushy and he's bright. And he's been up there and will be there I understand for at least week. He's on the line from Townsville. Craig, good morning.

CRAIG EMERSON: Good Morning Alan, how are you going mate?

ALAN JONES: Not too badly, thank you I suppose people up there feel that they are a bit forgotten.

CRAIG EMERSON: Oh look I think there's a fair bit of optimism around the Ingham-Townsville area. We went to the little town of Halifax which until yesterday morning had been isolated. We drove in there and you know there are some amazing stories. They were out mowing their lawns Alan and one of the reasons for doing that is probably because they had no opportunity to do that for two weeks because they were under water. But these houses are right next to the cane paddocks and I reckon they'd be pretty worried about taipans and browns coming out of there. It's also an indication of community pride as soon as they get a chance to spruce the place, they have...

ALAN JONES: Bob Katter told the Federal Parliament earlier this week and you weren't there, I know you were in North Queensland via Tony Windsor, that his entire electorate is under water and we're only half way through the wet season so, I suppose any further monsoonal cyclonic rain influence will have very serious consequences.

CRAIG EMERSON: Yeah look they're pretty vulnerable and as you said in your introduction Bob was talking particularly about the Gulf country. We've got communities like Karumba and Normanton still isolated. Sixty two per cent of Queensland has been under water. There are trying to do fodder drops but one of the problems.....

ALAN JONES: We say that quickly don't we, we say that quickly, 52 per cent of Queensland.

CRAIG EMERSON: Sixty two. It's just incredible. But you know there's two areas really - in the Gulf country still inundated and better developments in and around Halifax and around Ingham. I was there yesterday of course and it is amazing. This is the place with the pub with no beer. We actually had a beer, we had a beer there at the pub with no beer. They've got some but when the relief effort came and governments were giving out cash, the bank ran out of money, so we were in the town with the pub with no beer and bank with no cash.

ALAN JONES: (Laughs)

CRAIG EMERSON: I didn't want to go over to the pie shop in case there where no pies.

ALAN JONES: (Laughs). Bob Katter told me that the Gulf community from Georgetown West have been cut off now for over two weeks. You just made the point about food drops. Are these people, are we getting food into these people?

CRAIG EMERSON: There have been ration drops, ration packs have been dropped in. I mean I'm not by any means wanting to paint a rosy story. They must be incredibly frustrated there. But it is very flood-prone country and you're right that if there were further monsoonal rain they'd be in more strife.

ALAN JONES: Yeah I mean, on these monsoonal rains, you know this Craig as a bushy, but I mean he talked 50 per cent loss of the cane crop. Now without the cane there'd be a massive loss of top soil because cane binds the soil and of course minimises some of the catastrophic impacts of the flooding so that's a big issue for the topography isn't it?

CRAIG EMERSON: Well it is, but a little bit good news, you won't believe I'm about to say this but it rained last night in Ingham and Townsville and they welcomed it. And the reason is because that can actually wash the mud off the cane and mud off the houses, mud off the lawns, mud off the street. So that's not too bad, like a short sharp burst of rain which is very typical up here as you know.

ALAN JONES: Yep.

CRAIG EMERSON: But it will be the persistent rain and the latest weather reports are that the rain depression that went south is not likely to come all the way back up here. So that's good news particularly for the Ingham-Halifax area but we've still got big problems in the Gulf country.

ALAN JONES: Absolutely. Now on that, I mean Bob Katter has been going on you know, in the parliament about a bridge over the Einasleigh River.

CRAIG EMERSON: That's right.

ALAN JONES: Costing only \$15 million which would have enabled road access to Georgetown, Croydon and Normanton. Would you be able to get them the 15 million? Is someone in Canberra listening to you?

CRAIG EMERSON: Well people are certainly listening to us, and listening to Bob. In fact Bob Katter had a meeting with Wayne Swan just yesterday and I was in touch with Bob after that meeting so, you know we're doing what we can. I think Bob is a very good, effective local member. He never leaves you in any doubt...

ALAN JONES: No.

CRAIG EMERSON:as to his opinions and look could I also say and I know it's easy to get stuck into the relief effort and the public servants. People have learned a lot here from Cyclone Larry and the coordination between all the levels of government and all the different agencies has been terrific. Emergency services have been great. We've even managed to get out to a bridge over the Seymour River just the other day and the water had receded enough, we rang the police service and they opened that bridge. That meant that the produce, six to eight million dollars of produce, started going down...

ALAN JONES: Yeah he's been going on about that for about a week. That's the fresh fruit and vegetables ...

CRAIG EMERSON: Yep, yeah you're right.

ALAN JONES: Just, I mean he said there was water lapping on the edges of houses through Karumba and he says it won't abate for six to nine weeks. How in hell do these people manage?

CRAIG EMERSON: Yeah I know, it is flood country, you know the whole Gulf is flood country and you can't flood-proof it. But all you can do is make sure that as human beings and as governments we are as effective as possible.

ALAN JONES: But even if it's flood country Craig shouldn't we be harvesting some of this for God's sake? Where no-one, I mean the Howard Government did nothing on this infrastructure front and now in this so called stimulus package, we've got all the social infrastructure, schools and Bradford bats, but haven't we got to develop mechanisms where we can harvest this water and use it and investigate whether we can transport it. I mean you're from Northern New South Wales originally as a kid. I mean if we can have water and a regular supply of water there we could feed the whole of Asia.

CRAIG EMERSON: It could be a food bowl couldn't it?

ALAN JONES: Definitely.

CRAIG EMERSON: And work's going on on that and I don't want to just fob it off. There is a study going on and I think it was initiated by the previous government and we're continuing it. I've always been interested in the idea of the Gulf country being a food bowl. There are enormous amounts of water there and then we go down further south where the dry Murray-Darling Basin is and then even further south to the tragic bush fires in Victoria. It's just hard to believe our continent has got such variability.

ALAN JONES: Yeah variability is a dangerous thing.

CRAIG EMERSON: They say there's not enough water in Australia.

ALAN JONES: No.

CRAIG EMERSON: There's ample water in Australia.

ALAN JONES: Ample water. It's what we do with it. There's just one thing while I've got you here. Because forgive me, I'm not patronising you but you've got some brains and you're capable of putting ideas together. Governments tend to inherit what the previous government did, what the previous government did and so on. I had raised this issue a million times with everybody about a national disaster fund, where we'd have a sinking fund. At every budget we'd stick money in it. It would be appropriately invested. It could be managed by former Prime Ministers and unionists, a worker or in a nurse, whatever, and you'd be able to have immediate access to this for the money to relieve communities like Victoria and North Queensland without taking around a begging bowl. Isn't this worth considering as to how we can have immediate access to the resources that are needed to restore these communities?

CRAIG EMERSON: Well that's absolutely true, that we need immediate access to money. What they do at the moment, and I'm not saying it's prefect Alan, is there's a contingency fund every year and they just pour the natural disaster money out of that, they don't make a new appropriation for it. But you know there's always a case and an argument for better coordination and making sure that money flows quickly. I can't speak about the Victorian fire situation, but I do know up here, apart from the one bank running out of money which they fixed quickly, there were 20 Centrelink staff dispatched immediately. The state people were giving out cheques....

ALAN JONES: ...yeah,but people lost their businesses, they've lost their business.

CRAIG EMERSON: Yeah listen, I think this is a big issue Alan.

ALAN JONES: Yeah that's why we need to be able to say look as taxpayers we'll pitch in. We've already stuck the money there for a rainy day, now here we go.

CRAIG EMERSON: As Small Business Minister I'll be pushing that very hard but I'm pushing it to a very receptive Prime Minister who is acutely aware of the need, when we're rebuilding the communities in Victoria and in Queensland, it's not just the homes, the families but it's also the small businesses that serve them.

ALAN JONES: Absolutely, good on you Craig. Good to talk to you.

CRAIG EMERSON: OK mate, all the best.

ALAN JONES: That's Craig Emerson the Federal Minister for Small Business in Townsville and he is very receptive that fellow. We may well get somewhere yet. Let's check Sydney traffic.

ENDS.

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