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Transcript
2CC BREAKFAST WITH MARK PARTON
Wednesday, 17 February 2010

E&OE

Subjects:– industrial relations policy and climate change.

PARTON: More polling out showing that the Coalition has recaptured popular leadership on the economy from the Rudd Government, which seems to have lost political gains made on economic management during the global financial crisis, as the fear of recession to Australia passes and unemployment peaks. It looks as though the battleground in coming weeks, and perhaps, the battleground for much of this election campaign, may be industrial relations. We've got Dr Craig Emerson on the line. He's the Small Business, Consumer Affairs and Competition Policy Minister. Morning Craig.

EMERSON: G'day Mark.

PARTON: So much of the anti-Abbott rumblings this week are about Work Choices. The Rudd Government banking on Tony Abbott and his team re-introducing major planks of the failed Work Choices policy. What are you gonna do if he doesn't go down that path?

EMERSON: Oh well, he is going down that path.

PARTON: In part.

EMERSON: Well, at the heart of Work Choices is the removal of protection from unfair dismissal for working Australians. They're going to

do that, for almost two million working Australians. Secondly, it's to reintroduce statutory individual contracts formerly known as AWAs, which are designed to strip away protections for workers. And third, they are saying that they will at least reduce penalty rates. Now those three elements defined Work Choices. Tony Abbott, as a clever politician, when he was asked about this once he was elected Leader of the Opposition, said "the name Work Choices" is gone. I don't think it's much reassurance to your listeners, Mark . . .

PARTON: Hmm.

EMERSON: . . . that these things would come back under another name. I think as my colleague Julia Gillard has said, if it quacks like a duck, and waddles like a duck, it's a duck.

PARTON: Well Julia also said yesterday that workers would have no unfair dismissal right under an Abbott government. The reality is that the Coalition's likely to substantially reduce the exemption from 100 under Work Choices to 20.

EMERSON: Yes and that would involve the loss of protection from unfair dismissal for almost two million working Australians. They would be able to be dismissed on the spot with no explanation and no remedy. Some of them may have been working in the same business for 10 or 20 years. The employer can just say to them, 'I don't like you any more, I'm in a bad mood, you're out, no remedy.' Now, at the last election, the Australian people voted very strongly to get rid of that sort of unfair treatment. Tony Abbott has confirmed out of his own mouth that it will come back.

PARTON: The polling numbers are heading south for Kevin Rudd and for your government. And it's inspired the Prime Minister to remark publicly on how close things could be at the next election. Tell me about the vibe, tell me about the mood.

EMERSON: We have felt all along that the polls would tighten in an election year. I don't remember, and in fact there has been no election won 58 to 42 per cent, which is what the polls have shown at times last year. Elections are much much tighter than that. And in fact, if two or three out of every hundred Australians were to change their vote at the next election, then we would have Work Choices back with all its unfair features, by another name.

PARTON: Looks to be a lot of scaremongering going on from both sides, because I mean let's face it, the industrial relations policy isn't on the table in full from the Opposition at this stage. We're guessing . . .

EMERSON: These were words Mark, out of Tony Abbott's mouth. And it's repeated again in this morning's newspapers that they would exempt from unfair dismissal protections two million working Australians. That they will bring back individual contracts and at the very least they will cut penalty rates. Now, penalty rates are really important for struggling working Australians who are trying to make ends meet. They're not a little luxury that are added on to the end. These are basic to their living standards, to their struggle to make ends meet. And when Tony Abbott says, 'well we'll reduce penalty rates', it just rolls off his tongue, as if he's got absolutely no feeling or empathy for those vulnerable Australians who rely on penalty rates to make ends meet.

PARTON: Craig Emerson's with me, Small Business, Consumer Affairs and Competition Policy Minister. Will industrial relations be as far as you're concerned, the main battleground in . . .

EMERSON: I think there'll be two, and they are related. The economy and who's best at managing the economy, and the related issue of industrial relations because people care about the economy of course, because the state of the economy affects their living standards and similarly, industrial relations goes to the heart of the living standards of working Australians. So I think they will now be linked, because of Tony Abbott's indications that he will bring back the core elements of Work Choices.

PARTON: And so, is this an indication that the wind change, when it comes to climate change in this country, is going to mean that climate change is not your chosen battleground?

EMERSON: Well we have a very clear policy on climate change, as you know Mark. It's fully costed. It actually does reduce emissions. Even John Howard said an emissions trading system is the most effective and efficient way of reducing emissions. Tony Abbott's got a climate change con-job, which by the way, going back to economic management, is unfunded. Now, what do I mean by unfunded? They haven't said where they would get the money to fund this \$10 billion climate change con-job, except Barnaby Joyce, had said in Canberra - the week before last - he referred to the tax system and he said 'that's the whole place we're going to get the money'. Now, that affects the living standards of Working Australians because Barnaby Joyce in a moment of honesty, is basically saying 'we will find \$10 billion by increasing taxes'.

PARTON: Hmm. Craig, always a pleasure to have you on the program. Thanks for coming on this morning.

EMERSON: Okay, thanks Mark.

PARTON: Doctor Craig Emerson, Small Business, Consumer Affairs and Competition Policy Minister. It's ten to 9, this is 2CC

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