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MINISTER FOR TRADE

Transcript
SKY NEWS' AM AGENDA WITH KIERAN GILBERT
22 FEBRUARY 2011

E&OE

Subjects: Libya, Newspoll, party rifts, asylum seekers, bank fees.

KIERAN GILBERT: The Prime Minister has had a bounce in the latest Newspoll after a productive few weeks in the Parliament and outside it. The Prime Minister's approval rating is up, as is the primary vote for the Labor Government.

Internal tensions within Coalition ranks seem to have dented support for the Opposition. With me this morning to look at this and the other matters of the day, the Trade Minister, Craig Emerson, the Deputy Opposition Leader in the Senate, Senator George Brandis. Gentlemen, good morning to you both.

CRAIG EMERSON: Good morning, Kieran.

GILBERT: Before we get to the Newspoll I want to get your thoughts on the developments in Libya concerning reports of warplanes bombing protesters, Craig. This is a worry.

EMERSON:

Yes, I hadn't heard that but it's deplorable what's happening in Libya. There's always a place for peaceful protest and obviously the people of Libya, or a very large number of them, have got a very strong point of view. Obviously there's some sort of contagion coming out of Egypt and other countries. There are other countries of the Middle East that are also undergoing some upheaval but the Australian government has consistently said that protests should be peaceful and that responses to those protests should be peaceful. That's not happening in Libya and that's deplorable.

GILBERT:

And, Senator Brandis, from afar, again, it looks like a fragile regime trying to cling to power through the most concerning means.

GEORGE BRANDIS:

Well, it does and I agree with what Craig has said about this. I think what it also reminds us of is that notwithstanding the longevity of some of these regimes, President Mubarak in Egypt had been in power for 30 years, I think General Gaddafi in Libya has been in power for 42 years, but it just goes to show notwithstanding their longevity they're nevertheless fragile and they won't withstand popular sentiment for more democratic forms of governance.

EMERSON:

It reminds me of Lech Walesa in Gdansk, in the shipyards in Gdansk. Here's a trade union official, they had a

point of view, I think they expressed it, from memory, peacefully and, to cut a long story short that then spread to other countries of the Eastern Bloc and by 1989 the Berlin Wall had come down.

BRANDIS: Yes, but I think there are very big differences between the Polish revolution and what's happening on the southern shores of the Mediterranean.

GILBERT: I suppose across the region, a wave of unrest that is engulfing that region like that.

EMERSON: Well, they're people's movements. That's the point I'm making.

BRANDIS: Well, I think that's true, Craig, and I think President Obama has got it broadly right when he says that a movement towards more democratic forms of government across the region is ultimately what it's going to take to resolve this period of tension.

EMERSON: And a point I've made before, Kieran, is that political freedom is vital - it should be the right of any person - but if you don't have economic freedom, if these young people in particular don't have economic prospects, don't have a future for themselves and for their family, then that itself is a cause of unrest. So if political freedom comes, well, that's a

good thing but it needs to be associated with some liberalisation and not just on the political front but on the economic front.

GILBERT:

Well, that's a question and a doubt, I suppose, over all of this, that when there is change there's uncertainty about what would fill the vacuum of leadership and, as we saw in the Gaza Strip. Senator Brandis, it's not always what you like when or what the West likes, when there is a democratic vote.

BRANDIS:

That's right. I mean, we expected that Fatah would become the principal power in the Gaza Strip and it turned out that it was Hamas.

Equally, and I said this to you the other week, the Iranian, the Iranian revolution in the 1970s was originally expected to be a . . . to foreshadow a movement to more democratic forms of government but what it did was it opened the door for the most medieval extremist form of government that I think the Middle East knows. So . . .

GILBERT:

Are there similar risks?

BRANDIS:

. . . these are very unpredictable consequences.

GILBERT:

Yeah, indeed. There are risks that remain obviously in all of those countries.

Let's look at the Newspoll now. I want to bring in Martin O'Shannessy if we can. Martin O'Shannessy from Newspoll is in our Sky News Centre. Martin, Julia's had a jump in her approval rating. What do you put that down to?

O'SHANNESY: Well, she hasn't looked too bad in the last couple of weeks and certainly Tony Abbott has had a very tough month in politics. I don't want to go through the shopping list of things that went wrong for the Coalition in the last three weeks, but clearly there's a bit of lose from Tony Abbott and a bit of win from Julia Gillard.

GILBERT: And let's look at the parties, though. It's not just the leaders, it's translating into a jump in the primary vote as well.

O'SHANNESY: Yes, we're seeing a jump in the primary vote for Labor of four points, to 36. That's still well behind the 41 enjoyed by the Coalition and ultimately 50-50 which is where we were at the election and, of course, really, when you look at it, the Coalition has had the lead three times since that, since the election. So it is not a, you know, terrific leap forward for Labor. Certainly, though, when it comes down to the personal ratings, the Prime Minister is ahead on who would make the better Prime Minister, doubling her lead almost to 22 points in the last two weeks.

Tony Abbott has suffered his worst approval rating in seven months, down at 38 per cent approving of him whereas Julia Gillard is up to 50, which is the best that she's done. So high water and low water for both players.

GILBERT:

You didn't look at the Queensland poll - you didn't poll Queensland extensively last time because of the ongoing natural disasters. Do you think that the Prime Minister's had a bit of a jump in the approval because of the Queensland factor?

O'SHANNESY:

I think the Queensland factor has played into both polls and what we're seeing is some uncertainty about really where the Coalition's position was. Initially, of course, Julia Gillard looked wooden and all of those other things compared to Anna Bligh, and wasn't making any ground there. I think, however, you characterise the economic sense or otherwise of the Coalition's position on the, on the flood levy. The fact is that they've been a voice that seems to be against the flow and I don't think that played for them.

I think that helped significantly.

We've polled in similar ways to the way we did two weeks ago, getting, you know, about 70 per cent of Queenslanders into the poll so I don't think this is going to be hurting the actual shape of the poll; the shape of the polling is going to hurt but certainly

the way it's played out in the last two weeks it would be pretty hard for the Coalition to sell their position on the flood levy as a positive for Queenslanders.

GILBERT: Martin O'Shannessy, thanks a lot for that. We've got a Queensland here and a member of, a senior member of the Coalition. What do you make of that?

BRANDIS: Well, what I always say about polls, Kieran, as you might expect, is that they bounce around and I neither get euphoric when they're high or dejected when they're low because they do bounce around. Opinion polls taken this far away from a Federal election have zero predictive ability or predictive significance.

Now, having said that, I would make just this one point. Even though, with the result at 50-50 in the two-party preferred vote, that is still surprisingly low for a relatively recently re-elected government.

GILBERT: What about the fact that there have been those internal tensions, leaks out of Shadow Cabinet? That obviously hasn't helped.

BRANDIS: Well, I think it's obvious that there's been a bit of untidiness on our side. There's been a bit of untidiness on the Government's side, too, so I think that the Australian people looking at both sides of politics in the last couple of

weeks and scoring it 50-50 has got it about right.

GILBERT: Is that true? Because, you know, a pox on both your houses because, you know, the Prime Minister's not that far in front and, indeed, it's 50-50 when it comes to the two-party comparison.

EMERSON: I think to be consistent, Kieran, I have, like George, consistently said that there's no point commenting on particular polls. I'm happy to talk about the last fortnight. The policy issues that have been debated - health policy, the flood levy that you raised, Scott Morrison's remarks dancing to the tune of One Nation at the time of the funerals . . .

BRANDIS: Rubbish, Craig.

EMERSON: . . . which was a terrible thing to do.

BRANDIS: That's a disgraceful thing to say.

EMERSON: And, well, Scott Morrison had some very disgraceful things, totally disgraceful things to say and he should be removed from the front bench and I think deep down, George, you'd probably agree with that. I don't know whether - what your relationship is with Scott Morrison - but I know you well enough to know that you would never embrace the policies of One Nation.

BRANDIS: Craig, Scott Morrison was decent enough to concede publicly that he said

the wrong thing at the wrong time in relation to . . .

EMERSON: No, no, he didn't. He said he said the right thing at the wrong time.

BRANDIS: In, In . . .

EMERSON: The right thing at the wrong time and he's wrong about that.

BRANDIS: In relation to the suggestion of dancing to the tune of the One Nation Party, that is a disgraceful thing to say. It is something that was put out there by your leader yesterday, but the One Nation Party and the Coalition have absolutely nothing in common.

EMERSON: Well, perhaps explain this . . .

BRANDIS: No, no let me finish, please.

We have put One Nation at the very bottom of our voting ticket at every election since the late 1990s and the suggestion that there is any relationship between the Coalition and One Nation, that their views, which in my view are loathsome and disgusting views, have any bearing ...

EMERSON: On that we agree.

BRANDIS: . . . on Coalition thinking is absolutely false.

GILBERT: Senator Brandis, there are reports in *The Age*...

EMERSON: Well, can I respond to that?

GILBERT: Yeah, in a moment. But Senator Brandis, I want to ask you about a report in *The Age* newspaper today, and Michelle Grattan reports that you, Malcolm Turnbull and Julie Bishop in the Shadow Cabinet yesterday urged Tony Abbott to restate the Coalition's commitment to a non-discriminatory immigration policy . . .

EMERSON: Good on you!

GILBERT: . . . is that true?

BRANDIS: Well, I'm not going to disclose what is discussed in the Shadow Cabinet. But let me just make this point: Tony Abbott needs no urging to commit the Coalition to a non-discriminatory immigration policy and a multicultural vision for Australia because that is, has always been his very strong view and continues to be.

GILBERT: And is the Government then just trying to whip this up? Because last night Judi Moylan, a Liberal moderate of long standing, said that it's not just her side. She criticised Scott Morrison when he stood up and argued there'd be a cap on boat arrival refugee visas last night. There were only two speakers when Scott Morrison moved that motion -

Scott Morrison and Judi Moylan - and one of them was critical of the motion.

She's also critical of your side of politics, [Craig], saying that you're politicising it. Now, you've been putting the boot into the Governm. . . to the Coalition, as did the Prime Minister yesterday. Aren't you politicising this issue as well?

EMERSON:

Look, there was a funeral, and relatives of asylum seekers, including orphans, were at the funeral. And yes, they had been transported to the funeral at taxpayers' expense. That is the truth of the matter.

Scott Morrison did not say he said the wrong thing at the wrong time. He said, he said the right thing at the wrong time. All he did in recanting was to say, 'I shouldn't have said it on the day of the funeral'.

Who joined him in that? Tony Abbott said he shouldn't have said it on the day of the funeral. Dancing to the tune of One Nation? Of course. Of course the Coalition is. Not George Brandis, not Judi Moylan . . .

BRANDIS:

No, Craig, this is . . .

EMERSON:

. . . not Russell Broadbent, but when you see the emails . . .

BRANDIS:

. . . this is absolute nonsense.

EMERSON . . .when you see the emails about Muslim schools - and I've had dozens and dozens of emails about Muslim schools in Indonesia and how we shouldn't be funding them because this is radical Islam - completely untrue, but . . .

GILBERT: But aren't you politicising this as well?

EMERSON: . . . but repeated, but repeated . . .

GILBERT: Judi Moylan said last night that you're both politicising . .

EMERSON: . . . but repeated by the Coalition.

GILBERT . . . both sides are politicising this and it should come to an end.

EMERSON: We will take on, we will take on . . .

GILBERT: You're not politicising this at all?

EMERSON: . . . any argument that supports a One Nation philosophy.

BRANDIS: So will we.

EMERSON: Now, I was, I was . . .

BRANDIS: So will the Coalition and . . .

EMERSON: I believe you will. I will believe you but the Coalition will not.

BRANDIS: No, the Coalition, Craig.

EMERSON: And I was proud enough in 1988 to be sitting in the adviser's box when Bob Hawke took into the Parliament, after John Howard talked about too much Asian immigration, a motion reaffirming a commitment to a non-discriminatory immigration policy. And Philip Ruddock, in the good old days, actually crossed the floor . . .

BRANDIS; Every, every. . .

EMERSON: . . . and we will fight this at every instance whenever the Coalition or members of the Coalition. . .

BRANDIS: Except, Craig. . .

EMERSON: . . . embrace One Nation. Yes, we will fight it. And if you say that's politicisation, that's true.

BRANDIS: Now, Craig, can I have my turn? My turn. You're setting up a straw man because there is, I believe, not one member of the Labor Party and there is not one member of the Coalition in the Australian Parliament who believes in a discriminatory immigration policy. Those battles were fought and won decades ago.

EMERSON: Well, why did Scott Morrison, in the Shadow Cabinet, say that we should take some advantage or make some use or raise some issue about . . .

BRANDIS: Craig, Craig, I'm not. . .

EMERSON: . . . the level of Muslim. . .

BRANDIS: . . . I'm not going, I'm not going to discuss . . .

EMERSON: . . . Muslim presence here in Australia?

BRANDIS: . . . on the public record. . .

EMERSON: Of course you're not.

BRANDIS: . . . what may be said at a Shadow Cabinet. But let me point out to you that Scott Morrison has said - and I know this to be true - that what was attributed to him does not represent his views.

GILBERT; What about last night, Senator Brandis, the comments of Scott Morrison moving a motion to put a cap on the number of refugee visas afforded those that arrive by boat?

BRANDIS: Well, I think that was a very sensible motion, because let's, let me explain to you the structure of the motion.

At the moment we have 13,750 humanitarian refugee places in our

immigration program. The way it works is that when a person arrives unlawfully by boat - as 9,000 people have arrived since the Labor Party weakened our border protection policies in August 2008 - they displace a refugee applicant who is waiting in the queue in some refugee centre overseas doing the right thing.

What Scott Morrison's motion said is that we should reserve at least 10,000 of those 13,750 places for people who are doing the right thing and waiting in the queue.

Now, I think that's, I think that is just and right.

GILBERT: You don't agree with that, obviously. What about the argument that those who are waiting in camps internationally should be afforded the same right?

EMERSON: I think it is perfectly reasonable to have such debates. I do not consider that to be a breach of a non-discriminatory immigration policy. My argument with Scott Morrison is about his desire, as expressed in Shadow Cabinet, about. . .

BRANDIS: Don't tell. . .

EMERSON: . . . raising. . . now look, Laurie Oakes is a respected economic journalist, a respected journalist. . .

BRANDIS: This is second-handed. . .

EMERSON: . . . he has said. . . yeah, so he spoke...

BRANDIS: Craig, don't tell me what was said at a meeting which I . . .

EMERSON: So who's going to interrupt here, George? Who's going to interrupt?

BRANDIS: Don't tell me what was said at a meeting which I attended and you didn't, and I've already told you is a false report.

EMERSON: Yeah, well I actually respect Laurie Oakes. He contacted . . .

BRANDIS: He wasn't there either.

EMERSON: No, but he did speak directly with other Ministers, Shadow Ministers, and they confirmed this is exactly what Scott Morrison was on about.

BRANDIS: Well, Craig . . .

EMERSON: So we've got the raising of the Muslim schools in Indonesia . . .

GILBERT: Okay, let's . . .

EMERSON . . . we've got the funeral, we've got . .

GILBERT: We've covered this, we've covered this, Craig.

EMERSON: . . . him carrying on and on and on about Muslims in Australia . . .

BRANDIS: None of these . . .

EMERSON: . . . and I think it is a total disgrace.

GILBERT: We have to . . .

EMERSON: Now, let me make it clear . . .

BRANDIS: Craig, Craig . . .

EMERSON: . . . I think it is a filthy total disgrace.

BRANDIS: Craig, none of these journalists you're talking of were in the Shadow Cabinet. I was.

EMERSON: Yeah, and I was there . . .

BRANDIS: You're talking to me now and I am telling you that those reports are false.

EMERSON: . . . and I was there, I was there when Scott Morrison came out on the day of the funeral and disgracefully, disgustingly, said these people should not be funded to go and bury their relatives, including orphan kids.

GILBERT: Well, what about . . .

BRANDIS: I think the public . . .

EMERSON: And you should never have endorsed that. It was an absolute disgrace.

GILBERT: Craig, let me ask you, though, what about the fact . . . okay, the Government's faced criticism for not allowing the children, orphans of this Christmas Island tragedy, one, to remain in Sydney, and to take so long to grant them approval to stay in Australia. Why has it taken so long?

EMERSON: Well, Chris Bowen, I think - and I'll say this clearly - has done a fantastic job. He is a decent human being. There are processing requirements that need to be fulfilled, and he moved to complete those processing requirements for the nine-year-old boy - Seena I think his name is - as quickly as he possibly could.

GILBERT: That doesn't show a lack of compassion, to send an orphan back?

EMERSON: What has to happen is that everyone in Australia would expect that the normal identity and security and health checks are done - everyone.

GILBERT: For a nine-year-old?

EMERSON: Bipartisan - everyone.

GILBERT: All right, let's . . .

EMERSON: That's what he did, but he moved very quickly to make sure that that boy could be . . .

GILBERT: Senator Brandis, quickly.

EMERSON . . . with his relatives in Sydney.

BRANDIS: Can we get this into a reasonable amount of perspective? The real lack of compassion here is in executing a policy which encourages people-smugglers to put people at risk so that lives are lost on the high seas.

GILBERT: Okay. Let's take a break. We'll be right back. Stay with us on *AM Agenda*.

[Advertisement break]

GILBERT: Welcome back to *AM Agenda*. With me this morning, the Trade Minister, Craig Emerson, and the Deputy Opposition Leader in the Senate, Senator George Brandis.

Craig, you were the subject of some fairly fierce criticism, described as a dishonourable rat by the AWU boss, Bill Ludwig.

Now, you haven't responded publicly. Here's your chance.

EMERSON: Well, Bill's got a strong view about me, and he's entitled to have a view about me. In politics things can get pretty robust. Bill Ludwig has expressed those

sorts of views in the past, may do so in the future.

But I'll say this about Bill Ludwig. He and I share the basic Labor values. And while we don't agree on an assessment of my personality and on a number of other issues, at heart Bill Ludwig is a very strong Labor person who believes incidentally in a non-discriminatory immigration policy. And I'll point this out: [he] was absolutely dedicated to getting rid of Pauline Hanson . . .

BRANDIS: Yeah . . .

EMERSON: . . . in 1998. I know that because we talked about who would run in the seat of Oxley to get rid of Pauline Hanson.

GILBERT: Well, Paul Howes, Paul Howes also had a go at you, one of the young up-and-comers in the Labor movement.

EMERSON: Yeah.

GILBERT: What do you put that down to? They seem to have it in for you. What did you say to rile them up so much last week?

EMERSON: Well, I think what I said was, I responded to a question in a radio interview about Paul's comments. I basically said what was then subsequently reported in *The Australian* newspaper the next day, and that is that my preference is to go down the conciliatory path.

GILBERT: That's all you said and they put the boot in like that?

EMERSON: That's what I said.

GILBERT: Okay. Well, the . . . Kevin Rudd's calling for an open review.

[To George Brandis] I don't really need to get your thoughts on that.

BRANDIS: Well, can I just make this observation though?

EMERSON: [Laughs] He can't wait.

BRANDIS: I'm not going to say you're a dishonourable rat, Craig, because I don't think you are but I mean, you know, to say that Bill Ludwig represents the soul of the Labor movement . . .

EMERSON: I didn't say that.

BRANDIS: Anybody who saw Bill Ludwig putting the boot into you and putting the boot into others, too, at the AWU conference last week, would have seen nothing but an unreconstructed factional thug. If that's the heart and soul of the Labor Party . . .

EMERSON: I didn't say that.

BRANDIS . . . you know, that's, that's very alarming and, I might say, that even in this great, much-vaunted review that

Senator Faulkner and Mr Carr and Mr Bracks delivered last week to the Labor Party, they would still give people like that, trade union thugs like Bill Ludwig, a 20 per cent share of pre-selection votes to decide which people can represent the Labor Party in the Federal Parliament.

- GILBERT: A lot of that, a lot of that review . . .
- BRANDIS: Very concerning.
- GILBERT: A lot of that review we don't know about because it was kept secret . . .
- BRANDIS: Most of it's been redacted.
- GILBERT: And Kevin Rudd, the former Prime Minister, wants it all open. What do you make of his contribution, Craig? Is that helpful or does it just show that he's going to be an irritant for the Government?
- EMERSON: Look, Kevin's making a great contribution as Foreign Minister of this country. In terms of party reviews, as a Cabinet Minister I have to tell you that I'm not deeply involved in them. I think obviously it's a worthwhile thing to do. So is the Coalition. I think Peter Reith is doing a review or has completed one for the Coalition. This usually happens after elections. There's nothing particularly new in the idea of reviews but my fundamental interest is in policy.

GILBERT: All right. Let's just have one last issue before we go. We've got less than two minutes but I want to get your thoughts on this: the ban on exit fees. Treasury released, through freedom of information, some advice that says this could actually be counter-productive, Craig.

EMERSON: Well, we empowered ASIC late last year to go after banks that seek to recoup, if you like, the lost revenue from not being able to apply exit fees, through other means.

There is, in the Australian consumer law, a capacity to pursue any business that has unfair fees and I thank here, on television, George Brandis for somewhat improving that law when I was the Minister for Competition Policy and Consumer Affairs. We worked on that and through George's leadership it passed through the Senate.

GILBERT: Well, let's get, let's get Senator Brandis's thoughts just quickly.

BRANDIS: Well, look, I'm a bit agnostic on the question. I'm not a professional economist, unlike Craig, but ordinarily the mobility of capital is a good thing which would be an argument against exit fees. On the other hand, in the Senate inquiry on which I've been sitting we've heard some very interesting economic evidence about cautioning us against making the liquidity too mobile because if liquidity can shift between banks with no

barriers whatsoever, then that can make the system less stable than it should be. So I'm . . . it's a technical question about which I am agnostic.

GILBERT: Okay.

EMERSON: Competition is good, more competition is better.

GILBERT: All right.

EMERSON: That's what we want, competition.

GILBERT: Trade Minister, Craig Emerson, Senator George Brandis, as always . . .

BRANDIS: Thank you.

EMERSON: Thanks, Kieran.

GILBERT: Thanks for a lively chat today.