



THE HON DR CRAIG EMERSON MP
MINISTER FOR SMALL BUSINESS, INDEPENDENT CONTRACTORS AND
THE SERVICE ECONOMY
MINISTER FOR COMPETITION POLICY AND CONSUMER AFFAIRS
MINISTER ASSISTING THE MINISTER FOR FINANCE ON
DEREGULATION

Transcript
Inside Canberra
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Dr Emerson with Madonna King and Senator George Brandis

E&OE

Subjects: Beef imports, identity numbers for students, Utegate vehicle in Queensland Museum, home insulation and Minister Garrett.

KING: But now to another issue. When you go to your butcher, and buy meat ... soon you won't be told from what country it comes. And whether it comes from a country that has a history of mad cow disease. And I'm wondering if that worries you. It certainly has created uproar in Parliament. So let's go Inside Canberra and find out why this morning. Dr Craig Emerson is a Minister in the Rudd Government. Good morning, doctor.

EMERSON: Hello Madonna.

KING: And Senator George Brandis, Opposition spokesman on Attorneys-General matters, good morning to you too.

BRANDIS: Good morning Madonna, good morning Craig.

EMERSON: And good morning to you George.

KING: Let's start with the great meat pie could soon have meat from the US, UK, Canada or Mexico. This has created a very big fuss, Dr Craig Emerson.

EMERSON: It seems to have. George and I were just speaking off-air and he can actually tell you the mad cow disease in Latin, so he's true to form, he's very good on his big words. And I'm sure he'll

take that opportunity, but look Madonna, there's negligible risk here. Mad cow disease ...

KING: But negligible is ... can I stop you there?

EMERSON: ... there was, well . . .

KING: ... when you tell me negligible risk, is that good enough?

EMERSON: Well, I reckon that people in the United Kingdom are eating beef now. And it's not as if ... and there was mad cow disease in the United Kingdom, I think, 10 years ago. They haven't, you know, sworn off beef completely in the United Kingdom. And this measure, when we hear - and I think validly - of people complaining about the cost of living in Australia, if we do allow imports of beef, then that will help restrain cost of living increases. So, I think that there are sound arguments for this. But if it was such a problem, why would people in the United Kingdom, who are sensible people, aware of the history of mad cow disease in that country, they would be taking advice and they are eating beef.

KING: All right. Senator George Brandis, your colleague, Liberal Senator Bill Heffernan said this, 'Australian consumers should rise up in anger and tell the government to go to hell.' Do you agree with him?

BRANDIS: Yes I do. I think this is a very serious issue and I think the government has misunderstood how serious the issue is. What we are doing Madonna, is we are allowing beef to be imported back into Australia from countries which were affected by BSE and it's all very well to say that the risk is negligible, but we're going from a situation in which there is zero risk to a situation in which there is a small risk and there has been no demonstrated public policy reason for doing so. But there is a deeper issue. And this is a point that Senator Heffernan - who, of course is himself a primary producer - knows very well. Australia's beef prices on the international market at the moment are the lowest they have been in 40 years. But Australia has one great competitive advantage on the international beef market. And that is because we were unaffected by BSE, and because no BSE affected meat, uh beef, has been allowed into the country for the last 10 years we have a very strong reputation. Our beef has a very strong international reputation. Now, at a time when the beef industry is struggling, what the government has, I think carelessly neglected to understand, is the huge reputational interest we have in the purity of our beef. And that will be lost the moment the import restrictions are lifted ...

KING: But I thought ...

BRANDIS: ... for that ...

KING: Sorry, could I? ...

EMERSON: I don't see how it would.

BRANDIS: Well, you obviously don't understand Craig. And that's the reason why next week the Opposition will be introducing a private Senator's Bill into the Senate, to revoke the relaxation of this restriction until there has been a proper import risk assessment, which hasn't been undertaken.

KING: But I understood ... can I just, hold on ...

EMERSON: Well the chief medical officer described it as negligible.

KING: I'll just butt in here if that's okay. I thought George Brandis, that some red meat organisations were actually supporting the Government in this move.

EMERSON: Indeed they are.

BRANDIS: Some of the importers are, but I'm talking about the exporters.

KING: So will it make meat cheaper though, for people to buy?

BRANDIS: I'm not sure what the price effect will be. But my concern and the Opposition's concern is on the effect on our international reputation of our beef exports.

KING: All right, you explained that.

EMERSON: Madonna, if it didn't make beef cheaper, why would people import it?

KING: All right, so Dr Craig Emerson you're saying it will be cheaper. Can I ask you another couple of questions?

EMERSON: Well I'm saying that – no, I didn't. I said if people import the beef into Australia, they don't do it for charity. They do it because they can make a profit. Therefore, if they do import it, then that would have a depressing effect on meat prices.

BRANDIS: Yeah, but ...

EMERSON: Which is important in the cost of living.

BRANDIS: ... yeah but Craig, these health and quarantine decisions should be made – shouldn't be made on the basis of the commercial interests of Australian importers.

EMERSON: It's not about ...

KING: All right well let's move on to another issue. Let's move onto another issue in relation to this though. Craig Emerson at the moment, if you've spent a lot of time in the United Kingdom, you can't actually give blood now in Australia. Will that change? Will people who eat meat be able to give blood?

EMERSON: Well I have no idea. And I'm just giving you a correct answer there, you know, an honest answer. I'm not going to make up an answer. I'm not aware of the situation with blood, giving blood in the United Kingdom or in Australia. I'll take it on notice and happy to come back to you next week.

KING: Yeah, that would be good. What about the labelling? We label imported seafood, it's got to carry a label. Pork too. Why not beef?

EMERSON: Well I did see comment from Senator Xenophon that a meat pie that is labelled 'made in Australia' does not need to be made in Australia because the packaging and the pastry ...

KING: Yes.

EMERSON: ... all need, well, that's just not correct. It needs to be at least 50 per cent Australian content. Otherwise, it's false and misleading conduct. False and deceptive conduct and it is – action can be taken ...

BRANDIS: Misleading and deceptive conduct.

EMERSON: Sorry, thank you George. Misleading and deceptive conduct under the Trade Practices Act, and action can be taken against that false advertising.

KING: So it could have 50 per cent of beef from overseas, the pastry made in Australia, and be sold as Australian made?

EMERSON: Well what I'm saying is that ... well I'm just saying that it can't just be the package and a bit of pastry, and then the beef is all from overseas. That's what I'm saying and Senator Xenophon is not correct about that.

KING: So how much beef could be in it for it to still be labelled 'Australian made'?

EMERSON: Well, you'd have to get the total value of the meat pie and the value of the inputs, and then make sure that it's more than 50 per cent Australian made. That's the only way that you can qualify for being Australian made.

KING: George Brandis, would you – will this change your shopping habits? Would you be concerned at all? Or is it more from a primary producer point of view that the Opposition oppose this?

BRANDIS: Well I buy Australian made meat, Australian produced meat and will continue to do so. It really is from the point of view of the international reputation, the effect on the international reputation of our beef that the Opposition is concerned. And that's why we are moving to reverse this very poorly thought through decision.

EMERSON: I cannot see how it would affect the international reputation of Australian beef exports ...

BRANDIS: ... because Australia is a BSE free country.

EMERSON: So as a proposition, you believe the proposition is that we are going to bring in live cattle with mad cow disease?

BRANDIS: No. Craig, Craig ...

EMERSON: Well, how on earth is it going to affect Australian beef ...

BRANDIS: Craig ...

EMERSON: ... grown in paddocks ...

BRANDIS: ... Craig ...

EMERSON: ... around Australia? I don't get the link in this. It's just another bit of overreach by the Coalition.

BRANDIS: [Sighs]

EMERSON: Trying to you know ...

BRANDIS: ... We're not ...

EMERSON: ... take a step too far, saying this is going to affect our international reputation when it obviously is not going to do so.

BRANDIS: [Sighs] Well Craig, I'm really alarmed that you just don't seem to understand this. Reputation in the international marketplace ...

EMERSON: In the international marketplace I can't see how it will tarnished

...

BRANDIS: Can I speak please? Can I speak please?

EMERSON: ... by bringing in beef from overseas that's already been processed.

BRANDIS: Reputation in the international market is an extremely fragile commodity but it is the best thing that the Australian beef industry has going for it at the moment because of Australia's BSE free, clean image. You bring in product for which your own government says there is a small, negligible risk, but a risk nevertheless ...

EMERSON: ... From the chief health officer ...

BRANDIS: ... that it may be BSE affected, and that will affect the reputation of our BSE free ...

EMERSON: How can it possibly affect our exports of beef? You're going to feed this meat to cattle? [Laughs] It's so absurd.

BRANDIS: I hope Craig, you're not one of the decision-makers because you really don't seem to be getting this.

EMERSON: Well I think you have no idea.

BRANDIS: Well, unlike ...

EMERSON: How on earth you would import beef and give it to Australian cows and give them mad cow disease? It's crazy! You are crazy today George.

BRANDIS: If you run the risk of introducing BSE into the Australian marketplace, it surprises me that you don't ...

EMERSON: So what, the human would give it to the cow, is that it?

BRANDIS: You don't understand and I think ... I think you're mistaking BSE and CJD, Craig.

EMERSON: A human being'd bite a cattle on the, a cow on the leg?

KING: All right now, guys, I'm back from making my coffee. So if I can ask the next question, and I think we might leave this here. But we've heard both your sides, and I want you at home, or if you're in your car, just to have a think about the issues that George Brandis and Craig Emerson raised. And give me a call and tell me what you think. 1300 222 612. And we might move on to the next question. It's 23 minutes past nine.

And Craig Emerson, Senator George Brandis, each child in Australia according to the *Sydney Morning Herald* this morning, will get an identity number via a program designed to track their progress through their schooling. Now this is very similar to what Julia Gillard did tell me in her last interview. And the *Sydney Morning Herald* is saying it could be announced as early as today. And what it will do, will allow parents to access a database documenting a child's performance. Craig Emerson, can you explain it in any more detail?

EMERSON: The identifier number obviously would attach to the child, as they progress through school, or move from one school to another. And I'll give you two advantages that I can think of this.

KING: Yeah.

EMERSON: One – some schools say in relation to the My School website, that though their performance in the early years might not be great, in subsequent years it's a lot better, so the rate of increase is good.

KING: Yes.

EMERSON: Now, what I've heard these schools say is, 'We get a lot of kids from all around, they may not be at a very high level, but we lift them up, and we want recognition for that enhancement of their, you know, of their performance'. Without the student identifier number, you can't really quantify that. So I think that would give credit to schools who maybe get kids in ...

KING: Yep.

EMERSON: ... who aren't at a very high level, but who improve. Another one that occurs to me, and I haven't discussed this with Julia: I have a little concern, that's, when they leave primary school, we assume that they all enrol in secondary school. We assume that they do. Well let's hope that's the case, because I do have a small concern that some kids may never enrol in secondary school, and you can't track them.

KING: All right, so let me ask you this. This means that my children will be given a number. And that means I will be able to log on to the My School website, over years and track how they go in relation to their class and how their class goes in relation to other classes. If they move schools, they keep the number ...

EMERSON: That's right, they keep the number.

KING: So my child, and anyone who gets the number of my child can do the same thing.

EMERSON: Well, I don't think anyone's going to be sharing around the identifier numbers of kids.

KING: No.

BRANDIS: How do you know?

KING: And that's what I'm just wondering here. Is there privacy issues in relation to - is there advice for parents not to give it to someone else? What, in the case of a split family in an acrimonious divorce, and an AVO taken out, will parents not be given access to it so that children can't be tracked? I ...

BRANDIS: Well, could I come in on it? So the Opposition does have concerns about this because there are the privacy issues that you mention. Now, you know, the thing about Labor governments is they love slapping identity numbers on people. It's all part of their enthusiasm for social planning. Children are identifiable by their names. And the Opposition's attitude ...

EMERSON: John Smith.

BRANDIS: ... as Mr Abbott indicated this morning, is that we think that this is unnecessary. It's unnecessary to have yet another identity number on top of the various identifiers that Australian citizens carry around with them at the moment. We believe that children should be able to be identified by name and address and school rather than this kind of Orwellian idea of the moment you go to prep school, you become part of – you become identified by a number that you'll carry for the rest of your schooling and ...

KING: But why? Why, is it because you're worried that it's open to abuse? Is it an abuse of civil liberties? Is it privacy concerns? Just articulate why, Senator Brandis.

BRANDIS: First of all because we are suspicious of any attempts to impose labels or numbers on citizens, particularly children. Secondly, as you've rightly said Madonna, there are privacy concerns about this, there are issues of identity theft which could apply as much to children as to adults. But generally, and it's a philosophical difference between the Labor Party and the Liberal Party, we actually don't like the idea of governments having too much information and knowing too much, more than they need to know, about the affairs of individual citizens. But that extends to children as well.

EMERSON: I seem to recall Joe Hockey as Human Services Minister wanting to do this in the area of health.

BRANDIS: What he was trying to do in fact was to simplify the system so that people carry fewer identifiers.

KING: But can I ask you George Brandis, couldn't this be a good idea, if we just take law abiding families, and presumably 99 per cent of them are, this would actually help you monitor your child's progress in a transparent way that hasn't been available before?

BRANDIS: Well why can't you monitor your child's progress through using its name and address?

EMERSON: Well, I – can I come in here Madonna?

KING: Yes.

EMERSON: As I said, it's an enhancement to the My School website. George said, 'Oh people can be identified by their names'. What if it's John Smith, Tom Williams, and so on. You don't know who necessarily they are. If they move from school to school it is even more difficult. And this is a way of – if you like – giving credit to schools who lift the performance of individual kids, particularly if those kids come in with a low level of education.

BRANDIS: You're confusing two issues. You're confusing two different issues here.

EMERSON: And I think that is a very important enhancement. I know one school has actually asked for that enhancement because they say that they should be given credit for lifting the performance of kids who come into their school.

KING: All right, you've both had a good say on this one. And I want to go through a couple of other things, so I am going to move on.

The notorious vehicle at the centre of Utegate political scandal has found a permanent parking spot at the Queensland Museum. Is that a good place for it to be, Craig Emerson?

EMERSON: I'm not sure what state of repair it's in, but you know ...

KING: [Laughs]

EMERSON: ... it's probably been around the block a few times, if you add it all up. I understand it wasn't in any way a modern vehicle, so it's been brought into infamy by Godwin Grech and the false emails that actually led to the downfall of Malcolm Turnbull.

KING: George Brandis, a good final resting place?

BRANDIS: Well, look. I think we should respect the independence of curatorial decisions by the people who run museums, but I've got to say that space in museums, including the Queensland Museum, is pretty much at a premium. And it does surprise me that the amount of space that would be necessary to display a vehicle would be given over to something that wasn't, that was – it had an incidental interest in a political story last year, which of course was of some consequence. But I think is essential an ephemeral matter. I mean, in years to come, I don't think that people will be dwelling upon the Utegate affair. It will be gone and forgotten within a few years.

KING: All right. The final question.

And this is, Peter Garrett – we can't go to this morning without discussing it briefly. Why is the Prime Minister defending him so strongly, Craig Emerson?

EMERSON: The reason is that Peter Garrett acted on advice when it came to him. And it's very difficult to act on any advice that either was not generated and, or not put in front of him ...

KING: All right, let me not be smart, but he's refusing to say isn't he, Peter Garrett, when bureaucrats first informed him of warnings about the safety risk to the home insulation program. So how do we know that he did actually act when he said he did?

EMERSON: Well the Coalition has made a lot of allegations and this is not one of them.

BRANDIS: We've asked a lot of questions but we haven't got any answers.

EMERSON: It is not one of the allegations – well you make allegations very willy-nilly I might say.

BRANDIS: We've asked a lot of questions and got no answers.

EMERSON: It is not an allegation and there is no evidence being presented that Peter Garrett received advice and refused to act on it. When you act on your advice from your department, and take all the recommended precautions, then I don't see that there's a ...

KING: So why doesn't he come out, why doesn't he nip this in the bud and come out and say 'This is when I was first informed of the warnings. This is what I did. This is when I acted'?

EMERSON: Well, he has been saying that he received advice, he acted on the advice. And in some cases he was actually proactive out in

front of that. So, that's the reason that not only Kevin Rudd – and good on Kevin Rudd for doing it – but the whole Government is standing behind Peter Garrett. The Coalition's allegation is that he should've acted on advice that he did not receive, which is absolutely ridiculous.

BRANDIS: No, he should've made ... he should've made it his business to ensure he was properly informed. That's what Ministers are obliged to do and this was a big deal, as you well know, Craig. What this is all about is the fact that Mr Rudd when he said, 'The buck stops with me', when he said 'The buck stops with my Ministers', didn't mean a word of it.

KING: All right, we need to leave it there. It's 28 minutes to 10 gentlemen. A fiery episode of Inside Canberra this week. I look forward to talking to you both again next week.

EMERSON: Rightio Madonna.

BRANDIS: Thank you Madonna.

KING: That's Senator George Brandis and Dr Craig Emerson who'll keep that battle going I think for a little while and just to let you know, according to the *Australian* this morning, no Australian Minister has ever stepped down in accordance with the traditional doctrine of Ministerial Responsibility, whereby a Minister should resign over public service failures within their department. That's according to the *Australian* this morning. Your dilemma, coming up shortly here on 612 ABC Brisbane.

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