

Transcript: Federal Minister Craig Emerson debates the week in politics with Coalition frontbencher Senator George Brandis.

<http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/content/2010/s2831887.htm>

LEIGH SALES, PRESENTER: After weeks of standing by his "first-class Minister" Peter Garrett over the failed insulation program, late this afternoon the Prime Minister demoted him. Only yesterday Kevin Rudd took personal responsibility for the whole debacle, so why the sacking?

To help us find some answers and to discuss the week in politics, we're joined from Canberra by the Minister for Small Business, Craig Emerson, and from Brisbane by Senator George Brandis, shadow attorney-general.

Welcome to both of you.

CRAIG EMERSON, MINISTER FOR SMALL BUSINESS: Thanks a lot, Leigh.

GEORGE BRANDIS, SHADOW ATTORNEY-GENERAL: Hello, Leigh.

LEIGH SALES: Craig Emerson, as we said, a couple of weeks ago, the Prime Minister described Peter Garrett as a "first-class minister". In that case, why was he demoted?

CRAIG EMERSON: Well, some changes needed to be made and obviously Kevin Rudd took responsibility on behalf of the Government for the flaws in this scheme. Greg Combet has been brought in to do the work in relation to the insulation scheme - that is, winding up the existing one and then bringing in a revamped scheme. Peter's talents are being used in an area of great passion to him, which is the natural environment of Australia. But the truth is, as Kevin Rudd said, there have been problems here and he made the judgment that Greg's particular skills would be well deployed in winding up this scheme and bringing in the new one, and Peter could devote his energies to the very important exercise of, you know, the natural environment and the arts.

LEIGH SALES: So it could really only be seen as a vote of no confidence in Peter Garrett's management of that insulation scheme?

CRAIG EMERSON: We have said that there were problems and I think from day one we've not sought to duck that. Kevin Rudd said that he takes personal responsibility. But it's more ... I think the Australian people expect us not just to acknowledge fault here and deficiencies, but to get on with the job of fixing those problems, and that's what Kevin Rudd has devoted his attention to. He has said to all of us, "Get out there and be part of the solution. Yes, there have been problems. Let's be honest about it. Let's accept responsibility, but go that very important step further and that is work to remedy the problems that have existed."

LEIGH SALES: Well, George Brandis, the Prime Minister's taken personal responsibility, as Craig Emerson said. He's now moved Peter Garrett aside. He's pledged \$41 million to fix the situation. What more does the Opposition want?

GEORGE BRANDIS: Look, Leigh, the sad truth of the matter is that the Minister's a dud. The Opposition has been saying that for weeks now. At long last, after Parliament has finished for the week, I might say, the Prime Minister belatedly did, partly did, what he should have done as the Opposition said weeks ago and relieved the Minister of his responsibilities. But the problem is that he only half sacked him. He continues to be a Minister; he continues to sit in Cabinet. And the question the Opposition asks is this: how can the minister have no confidence in Peter Garrett in respect of some of his responsibilities in relation to the home insulation scheme, but have confidence in him to run other programs in what remains of his department? This was a political fix. The Prime Minister didn't even have the courage to face the Parliament. He announced the decision, as I said, after Parliament had finished for the fortnight. And the fact of the matter is that we are left with a dud minister administering half of a portfolio.

LEIGH SALES: Well, can you answer that, Craig Emerson? Why is Peter Garrett not good enough to be in charge of some things, but he's OK to be in charge of others?

CRAIG EMERSON: Sure. Sure. Because the structure probably less promoted in ...

GEORGE BRANDIS: Oh, come on. Come on. Come on, Craig.

CRAIG EMERSON: No. Hold on, George. Could I just squeak a word in here, George? Is that alright with you? I'm the one you usually complain is interrupting on you, but, well, OK, we've got the ground rules settled here, George. What I was going to say before George contributed was that less well known in the announcement, I suppose, and less publicised is the restructuring of the public service in relation to this. A Department of Climate Change and energy efficiency is one that is more capable of delivering the energy efficiency programs and the insulation program. And, look, the truth is the Environment Department ...

LEIGH SALES: But that doesn't explain why Peter Garrett wasn't good enough to stay on in that role.

CRAIG EMERSON: I think it does, because the Environment Department wasn't really set up to do this. When the Environment Department was set up and revamped under this government, that was before the global recession set in. This was part of an effort to get people into work and perhaps the Environment Department wasn't the best suited. Now, we've adapted to the realities, to the circumstances, and so Greg Combet, who assists Penny Wong, is doing that within that portfolio structure and departmental structure, while Peter is working directly with the Environment Department.

LEIGH SALES: OK. Alright. Senator Brandis, do you accept that explanation?

CRAIG EMERSON: I don't think George will.

GEORGE BRANDIS: No, no, no. Not at all. Not at all.

CRAIG EMERSON: I'm surprised, George.

GEORGE BRANDIS: Why didn't the Prime Minister have the courage to face the Parliament and make this announcement yesterday rather than scurry away like a coward up to Sydney ...

CRAIG EMERSON: Oh, don't sook.

GEORGE BRANDIS: ... after Parliament has been closed down and avoid the scrutiny of the Canberra press gallery? That's the first point.

LEIGH SALES: Well, indeed. Before you go on, could I pick up on that and put that to you, Craig Emerson, in that on Tuesday, as recently as Tuesday, the Prime Minister said, "I stand by the Minister, as I did last week, as I will do next week." Well, that didn't even last a week. What changed between all those statements of support during the week and then the demotion at four o'clock today?

CRAIG EMERSON: Well, what I'm saying is that - can I just answer the first bit of George and then I'll come to your question, Leigh. We had Parliament this week. There is one week off and two weeks on. There is ample time and most of the parliamentary Question Time was devoted to this issue.

LEIGH SALES: But you know good and well now that Parliament won't sit for a week and so this issue won't come up for a week, and by the time Parliament reconvenes, we will have moved onto something else.

CRAIG EMERSON: I reckon the Opposition will be going its hardest. The Opposition will be going its hardest and George will be there, you know, revelling in it and saying, "Oh, well, the Minister should go. The Prime Minister should go. The Government should go." Well, you've got your right to say that, George, and there'll be plenty of time to do it. We resume Parliament in just over a week and I'm sure you'll be full of voice doing all of that. We worked our way through these issues during the week, Leigh. Kevin Rudd met with the Caucus. We had a special Caucus meeting to be very much involved in the solution to these problems. Kevin Rudd took responsibility for it. I mean, I think this is a pretty comprehensive response to what has obviously been a problematic program.

LEIGH SALES: Senator Brandis?

GEORGE BRANDIS: Except he didn't get rid of the Minister. He declared he had no confidence in the Minister. He relieved him of his ...

CRAIG EMERSON: He didn't declare he had no confidence in the minister!

GEORGE BRANDIS: He declared he had no confidence in the minister.

CRAIG EMERSON: Don't make it up as you go along, George.

GEORGE BRANDIS: Excuse me, Craig. Please don't interrupt.

CRAIG EMERSON: That's the pot calling the kettle black!

GEORGE BRANDIS: He declared he had no confidence in the Minister by relieving him of his responsibilities for these program and all the other programs in relation to sustainable energy, and yet he didn't get rid of the Minister. So you have a minister in whom the Prime Minister by his own act has declared he has no confidence in running what is left of the Environment Department and the Arts Department.

LEIGH SALES: George Brandis, isn't it a bit rich for the Coalition to bang the drum on ministerial accountability? To cite just one example that I recall during the Howard years: the defence minister ...

CRAIG EMERSON: Children overboard.

LEIGH SALES: Well, I was going to actually say the defence minister didn't resign after the body of Private Jake Kovco was lost during repatriation. Isn't it a bit rich for the Coalition to go on about ministerial responsibility?

GEORGE BRANDIS: Well, I will account for every single occasion, Leigh, you can say that a Howard Government minister is to be compared with Peter Garrett, because there is no comparison. There is never a case during the entire life of the Howard Government when a minister was warned on 21 occasions that a program within his administration, for which he was responsible, was potentially so dangerous that it could cost lives; that it did cost four lives; that it destroyed 93 homes; that it left more than 1,000 homes in acute hazard of being destroyed by fire and 240,000 homes inadequately catered for by the installation of the insulation. This has been a comprehensive policy fiasco and the Minister negligently failed even to interest himself in the matter sufficient to get a briefing. What was revealed in the Senate committee this morning by the way, Leigh, is not after the first, nor the second, nor even the third death as a result of the negligent administration of this program did the Minister so much as seek a briefing.

LEIGH SALES: Well, Craig Emerson, this government came ... sorry, go on.

CRAIG EMERSON: That's not right. That evidence was in relation to Mr Murdach, the coordinator-general.

GEORGE BRANDIS: The Minister didn't even seek a briefing.

CRAIG EMERSON: And, George, listen, you talk about ministerial responsibility; you ran the argument for John Howard and Peter Reith that they didn't know about children overboard. You actually made your reputation ...

GEORGE BRANDIS: They didn't. They didn't.

CRAIG EMERSON: Oh, see! Exactly! Everyone knows what was going on then and you made your reputation as a Senator, it got you on the frontbench, saying there was no case for John Howard ...

GEORGE BRANDIS: Twenty-one warnings.

CRAIG EMERSON: ... to answer or for Peter Reith to answer on the fiasco of the children overboard affair.

LEIGH SALES: OK. Craig Emerson ...

GEORGE BRANDIS: Twenty-one warnings to this minister that the program was dangerous and he ignored every one of them.

LEIGH SALES: Craig Emerson, let me ask you: this government came to office promising to raise ministerial standards after the Howard Government. How is the way that the Garrett episode's been handled evidence of that?

CRAIG EMERSON: Well, we do take responsibility for errors that we make, but we also do a few things right. If you listen to the Opposition, you wouldn't believe that that's the case. They say that we've done nothing.

GEORGE BRANDIS: There hasn't been much in evidence lately, Craig.

CRAIG EMERSON: Well, hold on, George. It's just that you don't like the things we've done, like getting rid of WorkChoices for a start. You know, that's a pretty important achievement. Keeping Australia out of recession is a pretty important achievement. A teen dental plan, a education tax refund, delivering tax cuts on time and in full, the MySchool website, getting rid of temporary protection visas, which you hated, George.

GEORGE BRANDIS: Blah, blah, blah, Craig. Blah, blah, blah.

CRAIG EMERSON: All achievements. All delivered.

LEIGH SALES: Let me pick up - I hear George Brandis saying, "Blah, blah, blah," which we've heard a bit of this week.

CRAIG EMERSON: Yeah, it's a very intelligent contribution from George.

LEIGH SALES: Craig Emerson, the Opposition's tagged Kevin Rudd "Prime Minister Blah Blah" this week. How much of a problem is it for the Government that Mr Rudd is perceived to speak in bureaucratese, if you like?

CRAIG EMERSON: Well, Kevin Rudd is who he is and I don't think you should go around trying to make people into someone who they are not. Now I will make this concession: Tony Abbott is a straight speaker. He said, for example, that he would make a rolled gold iron clad promise not to change the Medicare safety net after the election. He changed it. He said many, many times in the Parliament that the Howard Government is the best friend that Medicare ever had while he was stripping \$1 billion out of the public hospital system. Tony Abbott said, and it's only three words: WorkChoices is dead - 'cause WorkChoices is one word - is dead. Yeah.

LEIGH SALES: George Brandis, the Coalition is working hard to paint Kevin Rudd as this Prime Minister Blah Blah, to make his personality and manner an issue, but the reality is that his personal popularity is still very, very high. John Howard's success shows that for many years - his success for many years shows that the public doesn't mind if someone's perhaps a little bit dull as long as the public perceives that they're competent. Are you wasting your time with these personal attacks on Kevin Rudd?

GEORGE BRANDIS: Well, for a start, Leigh, they're not personal attacks. I mean, the problem ...

LEIGH SALES: Well you're attacking his manner and the way that he speaks.

GEORGE BRANDIS: Well, let me explain what I am saying. One of the problems with Kevin Rudd is that he is all talk, no action, and so often the lack of action by the Government gets lost in this mist of bureaucratese, to use the word you used, and language which basically means nothing. People don't

even understand what he's talking about and he's meant to be the Prime Minister of the country.

CRAIG EMERSON: I think they understand keeping the economy out of the recession.

GEORGE BRANDIS: Now the fact is that we have had fiasco after fiasco from this government.

CRAIG EMERSON: Not true.

GEORGE BRANDIS: The education revolution that achieved nothing.

CRAIG EMERSON: Oh, come on: the MySchool website.

GEORGE BRANDIS: Excuse me! Excuse me!

LEIGH SALES: Alright.

GEORGE BRANDIS: That has more than three quarters of the computers still in the warehouse. The promise to take control of public hospitals that went nowhere.

LEIGH SALES: We could go back and forth on these points all night and argue about whether the Government's good or bad. I'd like to touch on a couple of other issues before we run out of time, particularly on this incredible story of the assassination of the Hamas operative and how that may affect Australia's relations with Israel. George Brandis, if your side wins the election you could be the Attorney-General in a few months. So let me ask you. The Foreign Minister Stephen Smith says that if the abuse of Australian passports was in any way sponsored or condoned by Israeli officials then Australia would not regard that as the action of a friend. As the Shadow Attorney-General, do you agree?

GEORGE BRANDIS: Well I don't want to get involved in the realm of conjecture because I want to point - draw attention to another thing that Mr Smith said which I think was very important that people be reminded of. Mr Smith said yesterday that the Australian Government draws no conclusions - those were his words - as to whether or not Israel, or an Israeli state agency, was involved in this event. We simply don't know. Now this afternoon Julie Bishop, the Shadow Foreign Minister, and I had a briefing with the director-general of ASIO, with commissioner Negus, the head of the Australian Federal Police and with Mr Richardson, the head of DFAT, and as the Government has announced, Australian Federal Police inquiries are proceeding. They're proceeding in two particular respects. First of all, the Australian Federal Police is under international policing agreements, lending assistance to the Abu Dhabi police - the United Arab Emirates police, I should say - in investigating the killing of this man in Dubai. And secondly, it appears that at least one, if not as many as potentially three offences under Australian law have been committed by unknown persons in relation to Australian passports, and those are crimes under the Australian Passports Act.

LEIGH SALES: These are things that we already know. I'm asking do you agree with Stephen Smith's remarks that if it's found that Israel had an involvement that that's not the action of a friend of Australia?

GEORGE BRANDIS: Well I would rather not be involved in that sort of conjecture because there is no clear evidence as to who was responsible for this act.

LEIGH SALES: Craig Emerson, what would be an appropriate action for Australia to take in response to this if Israel is found to have involvement?

CRAIG EMERSON: Well just when you thought that George and I wouldn't agree on anything, I think getting into conjecture on this and hypotheticals is - it serves no useful purpose. It's a very serious matter, as outlined by both Stephen Smith and the Prime Minister. It's very, very disturbing as far as we're concerned. If I could perhaps make one point about Australian passports: this is a 2003 passport. We actually have now some of the best technology in the world in terms of facial recognition and microchips and so on, so I think people don't need to be so concerned, you know, about the quality of our new passports. But it's a very worrying development and Kevin Rudd and Stephen Smith are basically indicating that we're not gonna let this go, we're not gonna just say, "Oh, well, let's

bygones be bygones." It's a very serious matter and we will pursue it with all necessary vigour. And to the extent that I think we got it, I welcome the bipartisan support that George is just providing to that.

LEIGH SALES: We are out of time. Craig Emerson, George Brandis, thankyou very much for joining us tonight.

GEORGE BRANDIS: Thankyou very much, Lateline.

CRAIG EMERSON: Thanks, Leigh.