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Transcript
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Ashleigh Gillon interviews Dr Craig Emerson and Senator Mitch Fifield

E&OE

Subjects: Newspoll, WorkChoices, Health plan, National curriculum, Peter Garrett

GILLON: For more reaction now, let's go to our panel of politicians.

Joining me from business, the Small Business Minister, Craig Emerson and from Melbourne, the Liberal Senator and Parliamentary Secretary for Disabilities, Mitch Fifield. Good morning to you both.

Craig Emerson, let's start with you. Voters were kinder to Labor than the Prime Minister expected. Why do you think that was?

EMERSON: Well, we believe that the polls would tighten in an election year, and the reality from this poll is that if just two or three out of every 100 Australians changed their vote, then Tony Abbott is Prime Minister and WorkChoices is back.

We don't need polls, Ashleigh, to tell us that we need to get back to basics, and that's what the Prime Minister's doing with the curriculum - national curriculum launch yesterday with Julia Gillard and with a health policy coming out in the fairly near future. So it is a matter of getting back to basics, but this isn't a surprise to us, and Kevin Rudd really foreshadowed that there would be tightening in the polls.

GILLON: Craig Emerson, the mere fact that you mentioned WorkChoices in the first sentence of your answer there makes me think that you might be a bit worried because support for Tony Abbott is

climbing steadily. The Prime Minister certainly seems to be a bit rattled by that.

EMERSON: Oh well, it's just a reality. This poll suggests that we're at 52/48 per cent. I don't want to over-diagnose polls - they do come and go - but we have said that they would tighten and I think the Australian people probably understand that if there's a small shift of two to three in a 100 Australians towards Tony Abbott, then they will get WorkChoices.

This is the guy who said - just after he was elected, he said, the name WorkChoices is dead. His colleagues before him, before he became leader, were all declaring hand on heart that WorkChoices is dead. When he gets asked, he says the name WorkChoices is dead but they're going to bring back - remove unfair dismissal protections for two million or more working Australians. They're talking about reducing or getting rid of penalty rates and putting people back on individual contracts. That's WorkChoices.

GILLON: Well, of course, the Coalition is yet to unveil its industrial relations policy.

EMERSON: They're all commitments they've already made.

GILLON: So we don't actually know what the Coalition is going to do in that area.

EMERSON: Well, we do, Ashleigh, they've made those commitments. They have made those commitments already to individual contracts. Tony Abbott has absolutely said that he will remove unfair dismissal protections for people working in small businesses, and that's more than two million working Australians. He's already made those commitments. And his deputy has said...

FIFIELD: Come on Craig...

EMERSON: ... that these penalty rates need to go down or be wiped out. So that's the core of WorkChoices.

GILLON: Okay. Well, it's only fair to let Mitch Fifield respond to some of those comments about WorkChoices, and also Mitch, it does seem clear to me from my conversations with Coalition MPs that confidence levels are up in the Coalition despite that turmoil last year. It seems like you have got your act together a bit. The party's looking a lot more united under Tony Abbott. Are you confident that the sort of polls we've seen today, and over the recent weeks, are the sort of trends that Mr Abbott will continue to get more and more support from here?

FIFIELD: I'll address that, Ashleigh, but I can't let Craig's comments on industrial relations go unchallenged. All Tony Abbott has said...

EMERSON: They're not my comments, Mitch, they're Tony Abbott's.

FIFIELD: No, no.

GILLON: Okay, Mitch Fifield, let's hear from you.

FIFIELD: Cr... all Tony Abbott has reiterated is the Coalition's fundamental commitment to the right of an individual to sell their labour on terms acceptable to them, and that's all individual contracts are. And the Coalition has always been committed to reasonable unfair dismissal laws that don't unjustly penalise small business.

Now, those two things are elements of our industrial relations policy which long pre-date WorkChoices.

So WorkChoices is dead, but our commitment to a better, and freer and fairer labour market remains.

Ashleigh, in relation to the poll, obviously, the trend is encouraging. I think it partly reflects the Opposition's decision at the end of last year to adopt a new leader, a new policy and a new attitude.

But I think it also reflects the growing realisation that this is a government that just can't get anything right. Whether it be health, whether it be rolling out free pink batts, whether it be Julia Gillard memorial school halls. This government bungles, it wastes money and it breaks promises.

And it's clearly a case of spin over substance, as we've been saying for quite some time. In fact, so much spinning that you could say that this government is spinning out of control.

The trend is encouraging in the polls, but we're still behind. We've still got a lot of hard work to do and you'd have to say that the Government, at this stage, are still the favourites.

GILLON: Mitch Fifield, could this just be a bit of a honeymoon for Tony Abbott though? Some Labor MPs have been saying that they hope the election is later in the year to give Tony Abbott enough rope to hang himself. Is that a risk, a common fear among Coalition MPs that Tony Abbott could put his foot in it and somehow ruin the cha... party's chances?

FIFIELD: No, colleagues have tremendous faith and tremendous confidence in Tony Abbott. He's got great judgement and he's got a real capacity to put the Government under pressure.

Tony's also someone who believes that the guts of politics is good policy, and that's what we're seeing Tony articulate is an alternative policy agenda, and that's what the Australian public want to see, and that's ultimately what will determine the next election is the public judgement as to who has the best policies and who's best placed to manage. We're seeing growing evidence every day that this government is a hopeless manager.

GILLON: Well, health reform, of course, is one area the Prime Minister says has been more complex than he imagined.

Today, a number of newspapers seemed to have leaks about just exactly what the Government will do in this area, and the reports suggest that the Government is going to go through on its threat to take over funding from the stra... states.

Craig Emerson, Labor premiers aren't likely to be too thrilled with that idea are they?

EMERSON: Oh well, this is media speculation, Ashleigh, and I can't comment on that. I don't think Kevin Rudd or Nicola Roxon would see the funny side of me speculating about what will be in this health plan, but it's very...

GILLON: It was worth a try though wasn't it, Craig?

FIFIELD: It was worth a try.

EMERSON: It's - you're showing that you're worth your salt, Ashleigh, by asking. But look, what we won't do, of course, is rip a billion dollars out of the public hospital system, like Tony Abbott did when he was Health Minister.

In fact, our \$64 billion health agreement is a 50 per cent increase on the previous health agreement.

So if you're looking for a political party that's committed to proper healthcare and health reform in this country, you need look no further than the Australian Labor Party.

GILLON: But Minister, despite all that extra funding, elective surgery waiting lists have grown, emergency waiting times are longer, aren't they?

EMERSON: And this is one of the features of health care in a western democracy. There's always a demand for extra quality care, and that's why we need to have a look at fundamentals of health care in this country.

We're facing up to that. I think the state Premiers realise that they've got a real funding problem on their hands, Ashleigh. So we're committed to health reform, and we will be positive about this. I'd just like to hear something positive, anything positive from Mitch, from Tony Abbott. They criticise everything we do. And Tony Abbott has actually said that, if in doubt, we will oppose.

And he's carried through on that.

Mitch talks about the rich array of policies that Tony Abbott has unveiled. Well beyond bringing back WorkChoices, I can't think of too many. Their policy is to do the opposite of what Labor has done.

And Labor's policy, and we've seen that, and I'm sure we'll get on to the national curriculum, with Christopher Pyne out there saying, well, they'll review it. And if they don't like it they'll start again.

We've been waiting 106 - 108 years for a national curriculum. And before it was even out, the Coalition was opposing.

GILLON: Okay. I do want to get to the national curriculum, but just back to health reform, Mitch Fifield, the Coalition isn't against taking over funding from the states is it. In principle, is it really a bad idea?

FIFIELD: Well what we're expecting from the Government, shortly, on health is more blah blah.

We've already indicated the direction that we think national health should go. We've... the policy...

EMERSON: In two states.

FIFIELD: We've put out a policy which is to put power back in the hand of local boards, of regional boards in Queensland and New South Wales, so that local clinicians, the local health care community, and the local community more broadly have a say in the running of the hospital, [indistinct] closest to the patients...

GILLON: But Senator, as the Minister's pointed out, though, that's the plan for New South Wales and Queensland.

We have no idea what you're planning to do across the rest of the country.

EMERSON: It's a mystery.

FIFIELD: Well Western Australia already has something close to these local boards. Victoria also has regional boards. But you'll see the rest of our policy in due course. We've got no reason to have any confidence at all in what this government is going to propose in relation to health. They break their promises. They promised 31 GP super clinics. There are only two out there. This Government promised that they wouldn't touch the private health insurance rebate - yet they've got a meat axe ready and waiting for private health insurance. This Government promised that they'd fix private health insurance by the middle of last year. They didn't. This Government promised that they'd take over public hospitals...

EMERSON: What do you mean we'd fix private health insurance by the middle of last year?

FIFIELD: ... if public hospitals hadn't been fixed in the middle of last year, and they haven't. If they were serious about taking over public hospitals, they'd have introduced a referendum bill into the Parliament.

They haven't.

What they'll be proposing, probably another damp squib. But they've broken their promises to date. And now it looks like they might perhaps be starting to move close to what Tony Abbott has been advocating, which is, more local control.

Well we'll have to wait and see what there is in their policy, but what we do know is that they lack the capacity to deliver.

GILLON: Well yes. We do need to wait and see more details from both sides in politics on this.

EMERSON: And you see Ashleigh, there's Mitch shaping up to say we're going to oppose whatever Kevin Rudd and Nicola Roxon reveal about our health reform package, he's already readying the Coalition to...

FIFIELD: Craig, I'll [indistinct]...

GILLON: Just as the Government has been attacking the Coalition's plan, I'll point out as well. Gentlemen, we're going to leave it there, because I know that you've both made your points. But when we come back just after the break, we'll be looking at the national curriculum and the controversy over history lessons. Stay with us.

We'll be back in a sec.

[Unrelated items]

GILLON: Welcome back to AM Agenda. It appears as though the history wars have begun again, this time over what students will be taught in Australian schools. The Shadow Education Minister Chris Pyne says the Government wants to give Australian students a black armband view of Australia's history. He says there are 118 references to Aboriginal and Indigenous issues in the new national curriculum, but there are no mentions of Westminster or the Magna Carta.

Joining me this morning on our panel of politicians is Craig Emerson and Mitch Fifield. Craig Emerson, firstly to you - is there too much emphasis on Indigenous issues in our new curriculum?

EMERSON: Well of course not. There's a balanced reference to Indigenous issues. And isn't it amazing that Tony Abbott is out visiting remote Aboriginal communities, and that's a good thing. But - and so he's empathising and supporting Aboriginal communities, that's the impression he wants to give, and then he's got his education spokesman back in the cities saying, before the whole policy, the curriculum was unveiled, based on newspaper reports, saying, oh, this is all about Aboriginal history and how badly we treated Aboriginal people.

It's so typical. It's pathetic that Tony Abbott would have his education spokesman trying to undermine a massive achievement, the first national curriculum in the first 108 years, and before it's out, they're attacking it, they're undermining it, because they just can't get used to the idea of supporting a good initiative.

I actually think it would reflect better on the Coalition if just every now and again they supported something that the Government did.

And there's widespread support for this national curriculum that will allow kids to move from one state to another, a contribution, by the way, to our efforts for a seamless national economy.

We are a single nation, Ashleigh, and people have been calling for this national curriculum for so long. And before it's even delivered, the Coalition is bagging out on it and saying that they'll review it, and if they're not going to have - not happy with it, they'll tear it up.

GILLON: Well, of course...

EMERSON: How irresponsible is that?

GILLON: ... the Coalition isn't against a national curriculum, it's against what...

EMERSON: They're against this one, yes.

GILLON: It's the content of the national curriculum.

EMERSON: And they've said they will tear this one up.

GILLON: Mitch Fifield...

EMERSON: Now, that is so irresponsible.

GILLON: Mitch Fifield, let's get your take on this. It's important, isn't it, to give students a good understanding of Asian and Indigenous cultures. History teachers - the consensus this morning, seems to be that Chris Pyne overreacted and gave a real knee-jerk reaction to yesterday's announcements.

FIFIELD: Well look, sure, those are important things to include a national curriculum, and the Opposition supports a national curriculum. I, myself, went to five different schools in three different states growing up, so I appreciate the difficulties kids have when they move interstate and they have different curriculums.

But in supporting the concept of a national curriculum, it doesn't mean that we support just any old national curriculum. It's important that a national curriculum isn't a lowest common denominator curriculum, that it raises standards overall.

I mean, it's also important that it's a balanced curriculum and it has been mentioned many times over the last couple of days, 118 references to Aboriginal and Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander culture. That's a good thing. It's important to...

GILLON: Chris Pyne didn't seem to think it would be.

FIFIELD: ... cover that important part of Australian...

EMERSON: Exactly [laughs].

FIFIELD: ... life and history. But it's important to have that balanced. There are only something of the order of 60 references to Asia, only 10 references to Great Britain. So it's important that we also have adequate balance for the region in which we live, and also the nation which gave birth to Australia.

But I think, perhaps, there's another element which should be considered in the wake of the mea culpas from the Government. I think, perhaps, there should be a very substantial section in the new national curriculum on Maoist self-criticism.

GILLON: [Laughs] Mitch Fifield.

EMERSON: Oh, that's so hilarious.

[Laughter]

FIFIELD: I think it's quite good actually.

GILLON: It's a good line though. Give him credit for that, Craig Emerson [laughs].

EMERSON: You've been working on that one.

FIFIELD: [Indistinct] self-criticism from you, Craig.

GILLON: That one had a few practices. Listen, we are running out of time, so I want to get to another issue.

Peter Garrett emerged publicly last night. He's still, of course, defending the actions he took over the insulation program's rollout. Mr Garrett had this to say last night on the ABC.

[File tape played]

PETER GARRETT: At all times, for me, the most important thing was to make sure that not only the advice I received I acted on, but we made sure that the program could be rolled out safely, and that's why I moved for its suspension.

[End of file tape]

GILLON: Mitch Fifield, you've got to give Mr Garrett points, don't you, for fronting up last night and facing voters on a show like that where he was open to all sorts of questions.

FIFIELD: He's sure got more front than Myers, but I think last night we saw exactly why Peter Garrett should be sacked. He just doesn't get it.

He admitted that at no stage did he consider offering his resignation. Well, that's stunning that he lacks that lack - he has that lack of insight and self-awareness. But also, the fact that he said that he acted on the advice that he received on all occasions.

Well, we don't put ministers in the Cabinet to simply act on bureaucratic advice. Their job is to question that advice. Their job is to probe. Their job is to say, I'm sorry, that's not good enough, go away, come back. We don't want ministers who just

sit there as some, sort of, glorified post box. Ministers are there on behalf of the Australian public to make sure that taxpayers are getting value for money in programs, and that the taxpayer is safe. Peter Garrett failed on both those counts, and his great defence is, oh well, I accepted advice. That's not what you're there for. You're there to ask questions, you're there to do your job.

GILLON: Craig Emerson, of course, we all have seen what a debacle this has been, and the Opposition over the last few days has been saying, well, if the Government can't even handle an insulation program, how on earth are we meant to trust it to run hospitals, for example. How much of a blow was it to see someone like Peter Garrett, who's such a star member of Cabinet, to be demoted by the Prime Minister, and then for Mr Garrett to say, it wasn't my idea, I didn't even offer it up.

EMERSON: Well, Peter Garrett is a great human being, and I think most Australians would agree with that observation.

GILLON: No-one is doubting that.

EMERSON: Yeah. Well [laughs], I'm not sure about that. You just heard...

FIFIELD: He's just a dud as a minister, that's all.

EMERSON: ... if you just heard from Mitch. But he is a great human being. He said that he responded to advice. And you don't know, Mitch, that he didn't instigate extra work or the generation of extra advice.

The test that the Coalition's applying...

FIFIELD: Well, let him show us.

EMERSON: ... to Rudd Government ministers, is that they must act on advice that they didn't receive. They must act on briefings that they didn't receive. This is so plainly absurd.

And if you contrast it...

FIFIELD: Craig, you're talking gibberish, mate.

EMERSON: ... to George Brandis's defence...

FIFIELD: This is more blah blah.

EMERSON: If you contrast it to George Brandis's defence of John Howard and Peter Reith on the children overboard affair, where every Australian knows that they were in that up to their necks.

FIFIELD: That's right, Craig, all roads lead back to WorkChoices.

EMERSON: And I'm saying that the standard...

FIFIELD: All roads lead back to children overboard.

EMERSON: The standard, Mitch...

FIFIELD: You've got to do better, sorry.

EMERSON: ... that you've been applying - the standard that you've been applying to Peter Garrett is a vastly different standard to the one that you applied to your own prime minister and your own defence minister. Hypocrisy, thy name is Liberal.

Now, Peter Garrett will be working in the natural environment. I've known Peter for 25 years. He has a great passion for it. We worked on banning mining in Antarctica, Kakadu stage two World Heritage listing. The World Heritage listing of the north wet tropics of north Queensland. He has a wonderful...

FIFIELD: It's just more blah blah, Craig.

EMERSON: ... record in that area, and he will do great things in supporting and protecting the natural environment of this country.

GILLON: Okay Mitch Fifield and Craig Emerson, thank you, as always, for joining us. We have run out of time for today's program. Thank you.

EMERSON: Righto, thanks Ashleigh.

FIFIELD: Thanks Ashleigh.