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E&OE

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**PARTON:** It is a quarter to nine, the political climate changing day by day here in this political year, if there was a weather map for this it's like there'd be a cyclone developing and I'm sure there'll be many more twists and turns in it today. We've got the big address from the Prime Minister on health reform today. Here's an interesting story that's doing the rounds today, suggestion that Kevin Rudd's bad vibes have scuppered the chance of an early election, but research by Labor has uncovered a negative shift in mood towards the Prime Minister in key marginal seats, especially among women voters. That's the suggestion, that separate polling has found that an increasing number of voters think that Mr Rudd's complacent and superficial. Now Dr Craig Emerson is among the movers and shakers at the top of the Labor tree, he's the Minister for Small Business, Competition Policy and Consumer Affairs; you haven't seen this research have you Craig?

**EMERSON:** No I haven't seen it Mark and there's always going to be research and news polls and private polls and public polls. This seems to be the year of the polls because it's an election year and people get excited about it and does make news; this one you're talking about made the front page of the Daily Tele. I guess what comes out of these polls is that if somewhere between two and three in a hundred Australians change their

vote at the coming election later in the year then they've got Tony Abbott as Prime Minister and WorkChoices is back.

**PARTON:** Let's talk about WorkChoices because I mean obviously Tony has made some inroads and he says he's rattled the Prime Minister but you guys are fighting back on a number of fronts today, one of them is these health reforms that are going to be announced, but you've taken the big stick to Tony Abbott over WorkChoices.

**EMERSON:** Very unlike me, it's out of character [Laughs]. Well I have, but not because of anything that we've said Mark but because of what Tony Abbott himself has said. And he has said that they would bring back individual contracts, he said that he would remove protection from unfair dismissals for around two million working Australians, and the Opposition has said these penalty rates either need to be reduced or obliterated altogether. Now penalty rates very often are what allows working families to make ends meet, what allows kids, young people to make ends meet, if they're going to university, they get some penalty rates perhaps for working on weekends. Well under Tony Abbott they would go. Now I've just described the heart of WorkChoices, I've just described the three features, defining features of WorkChoices. Now Tony Abbott says "Well the name WorkChoices is dead", his predecessor Malcolm Turnbull and his before him, Brendan Nelson said "WorkChoices is dead", well that's a big shift. They're going to kill the name and revive the beast and WorkChoices is coming back if two or three in a hundred Australians change their vote at the next election.

**PARTON:** Is it your belief that this will be one of the big issues come election time? That if you can convince Australians that we are just going to drift back into WorkChoices, that it's going to make a marked effect, or have a marked effect on...

**EMERSON:** Well I know the Australian people rejected WorkChoices en masse at the last election. I also know that of the Coalition frontbenchers there is no more dedicated exponent, champion of WorkChoices than Tony Abbott. He was when he was the Industrial Relations Minister, always wanted it, finally got it, and even after the election he lamented on programs and debates that I was involved with him that this Government, the Rudd Government is getting rid of the greatest reform the Howard Government put in place, and he's referring to WorkChoices. The fact is the guy likes it; this is what he believes in and let's acknowledge that, at least he's not beating around the bush...

**PARTON:** No he's not, he's not...

- EMERSON:** He's a guy who says "I like WorkChoices, I like that industrial relations system and it will come back if I am elected Prime Minister".
- PARTON:** Just reading between the lines there with your last statement, it really does appear as though you have a grudging respect for the Opposition Leader.
- EMERSON:** He is someone who has basically set out his philosophic views over a 20-year period. Since he's become Opposition Leader I've been a little bit disappointed, and maybe I would say that as a Labor guy, but he's tended to say one thing to one audience and another thing to another. But you can trace Tony Abbott over 20 years and a consistent Liberal philosophic framework and that Liberal philosophic framework is very much about an almost completely deregulated Labor market. Now one of the things that really defines Labor is that we don't believe in a completely deregulated Labor market. Never have, never will.
- PARTON:** Would you suggest that perhaps if your leader had been as clear and concise with his position that perhaps the polls wouldn't have stagnated or fallen back as they have?
- EMERSON:** What Kevin is saying is that we could have done things better, and that's true. The polls that have come out do tell us what we already knew I suppose and that is we need to get back to basics with health reform and there's an announcement today as you foreshadowed, with education reform, with the My School website, the national curriculum, Julia Gillard making a further announcement today.
- PARTON:** You could leak any of those now if you want Craig, if there's any of those you want to leak on the radio here feel free.
- EMERSON:** [Laughs]... Well I think it's a big day for policy. And that's a good thing.
- PARTON:** Well it is. Yes it is. Another old friend of yours in Peter Costello has got a piece in the Sydney Morning Herald this morning and he says, right to the crux of the matter, he says "The Federal Government couldn't run a home insulation program, do you think it can run every hospital and hospital department in the country?", which I've got to say Craig, seems like a pretty good point to me?
- EMERSON:** That is speculation Mark, about what is going to be announced today and in the coming weeks and I'm not in a position to speculate with you and your listeners. I'm sorry to disappoint you on that. But look, just in 30 seconds, what has this Government done? It's avoided a recession, Australia going into

a recession. Tax cuts delivered twice on time and in full. An education tax refund, a doubling of funding for public hospitals and 1130 odd extra nurses. We've done some thing like the Coalition hates, like getting rid of WorkChoices...

**PARTON:** And spending a lot of money...

**EMERSON:** We've gotten rid of Temporary Protection Visas. Now the Coalition on one hand says "You've done that and that's a terrible thing, but you've done nothing", now you can't have it both ways...

**PARTON:** Fair call...

**EMERSON:** And you go through in my portfolio, and I won't bore your listeners, but honestly there's a vast array of decisions that have been made and policies that have been introduced, promises that have been kept. But we accept the judgement of the Australian people that we need to do more, and we need to do more in the basics of health and education.

**PARTON:** Craig thanks for coming on the radio this morning, I know your big fan Dell is listening closely. Don't worry I don't have her on the phone but I just thought I'd mention her [Laughs]...

**EMERSON:** [Laughs]... Oh righty-o. All the best to you and Dell.

**END**