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Transcript
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Dr Emerson with Madonna King and Senator George Brandis

E&OE

Subjects: Labor Government state-of-play, Insulation Program, John Howard, Health Reforms, Dog Owners, Bullying.

KING: Dr Emerson, good morning.

EMERSON: Good morning Madonna.

KING: And before we get to your apology, Senator George Brandis Opposition spokesman on Attorneys-General matters, good morning.

BRANDIS: Morning Madonna, morning Craig.

EMERSON: Good morning, George. I'm sorry.

KING: Yes, Dr Emerson, what would you like to apologise for?

EMERSON: I took a stamp from a doctor in the country town I grew up in. I felt really guilty about that and I returned it to him after about three months. He didn't know I took it and I went to confession and...

KING: Did you really?

EMERSON: Yeah, fessed up.

KING: How old were you?

EMERSON: About nine. It really played on my mind for a very long time after that.

KING: So what - a doctor's stamp saying you've paid or...

EMERSON: No it was his - from his stamp collection. It was a really naughty thing to do.

KING: Right.

EMERSON: Yeah.

KING: Well that wasn't the apology I was thinking. Good on you for owning up to that one. I was thinking...

EMERSON: [Laughs]

BRANDIS: I thought Craig was going to apologise for presiding over this ludicrous policy that's forced up the prices of books.

EMERSON: Oh well, that's - I don't think the listeners would be quite on top of what you're talking about there, George, but...

BRANDIS: I think readers will be noticing the prices - their prices of books go up because you're maintaining these parallel import restrictions, a very unwise policy against which I know, to give you your due, Craig, you did argue strenuously but unfortunately were rolled in Cabinet.

KING: All right, let me go back to you, Craig Emerson. Treating this seriously...

EMERSON: Hmm mm.

KING: ...how much of what we've seen in the last couple of days is genuine remorse and how much of it is an attempt to not look arrogant ahead of the next election?

EMERSON: It certainly is an admission that we need to get back to basics.

KING: So why wait until a minister has had to be sacked, although he does keep his job? Why wait until then for an apology to be offered when Wayne Swan's talking yesterday, why say I could do much better then when asked to specify where, he doesn't? Why wait until then to apology - apologise?

EMERSON: Well, it's pretty clear that there's a community sentiment that we do get credit for keeping the economy out of recession and

protecting jobs. We do get credit for that. The government has embarked on a very ambitious reform program. Some of those reforms, very important ones, have already been completed. Others are still in the pipeline and coming out, including a couple today. But obviously the people feel that we need to get back to basics, such as health and education, and we're responding to that. In other words...

KING: Are you responding because of internal polling, because of - what prompted you?

EMERSON: Well, the truth is, Madonna, I've been picking this up in my own electorate for some time.

KING: What, that people are unhappy with you?

EMERSON: Actually, they seem to be reasonably happy with me, and I know that's - politicians aren't supposed to say things like that because it makes it look arrogant and out of touch, but...

KING: But reasonably unhappy with your boss.

EMERSON: Well, more with - that, okay, credit for the economy but what else is there? Now what we've tended to do a little bit, Madonna, is just do things and move on quickly. We got rid of WorkChoices, we've delivered tax cuts on time in full, education tax refund, My School website, a \$30 increase in the single age pension.

KING: So you should have been singing your praises louder, is that what you're saying?

EMERSON: I think perhaps we needed to spend a little bit more time on saying this is what we have done, have a debate around it. I actually think the debate around the My School website was healthy and good, and it reminded people day after day that we were doing this.

KING: All right...

EMERSON: With a lot of the other reforms we did them and then moved on to the next tasks and the next priorities and perhaps there was a little bit of a challenge there that we should take up.

KING: Okay.

EMERSON: And that is say we are going back to basics because we do need to do that and respond to those community concerns.

KING: Before I go to Senator George Brandis, but does it look - do you admit that some people may perceive it as a bit insincere when for example it's in the wake of the insulation debacle but the minister keeps his job...

EMERSON: Well...

KING: ...but an apology's offered instead?

EMERSON: Well, he didn't keep all of his responsibilities, as you know.

KING: He kept his pay packet.

EMERSON: Well, I'm not sure that that's the major issue in all of this. Peter Garrett, as I have said before and I will say it again, is a very committed Australian to the protection of our natural environment. And I worked with him on the World Heritage listing of the wet tropics in our state of Queensland...

KING: Yeah, but he was given the job of implementing the insulation...

EMERSON: Yes, he was, and he will now be concentrating more on protection of the natural environment in such areas as Kakadu National Park, other major environment reforms...

KING: All right...

EMERSON: ...stopping mining...

KING: I...

EMERSON: ...going ahead in Antarctica...

KING: All right, I've given you a good run here. George Brandis, you're champing at the bit.

BRANDIS: I'm not really champing at the bit, I was wondering when I might have a go. But look, you know, the problem Madonna is this - there's all this fake contrition, there's no sincerity in it. And people who see the Prime Minister carrying on all of a sudden about - with all these mea culpas, they know that this is a political strategy. Now, you know, how can you go from saying last Thursday, as Kevin Rudd did, that Peter Garrett is a first class minister to sacking him, or half sacking him on Friday? And the point that the Opposition's been making is, by taking responsibility for the largest single program he was running out of his hands, because he was plainly incompetence and therefore by that act, declaring that he had no confidence in him to run it - how can the Prime Minister have confidence in him to run what's left of his department?

KING: But shouldn't you give the government the benefit of the doubt? A Prime Minister - it mustn't be easy to come out and say I'm sorry, I could do better and not just in this field, across the board?

BRANDIS: No, I think the problem with Kevin Rudd is that he is a deeply insincere man. I think that is what people are picking up, that this is all political spin. Test it this way Madonna. I mean, if Kevin Rudd had the capacity to be genuinely humble - he's pretending in a sort of slightly Uriah Heepish way all of a sudden to be very humble - if he were genuine about it, you'd think on occasions in his political past there would have been some intimations of this, but no. There has been this full of himself arrogance for two-and-a-half years and all of a sudden, presumably because they got some advice from the spin doctors that this wasn't working, we have this campaign of blanketing the radios and the TVs over a 72 hour apology session of almost biblical proportions saying how sorry we are. I mean, doesn't that seem insincere? Doesn't that look just like political spin?

KING: You say it is. You say he's deeply insecure, he's full of himself arrogance, but the voters don't think like that given the polls. He's still wrapping rings around your boss.

BRANDIS: Well, I - well, if you look at the trend in the polls in the last three months Kevin Rudd's net favourability has halved - has halved. It's now - the number of people who approve of him in the job of Prime Minister, is now down - over those who disapprove - is now down to 11 per cent. So I think people are starting to see through this man. He is not - everybody has their strengths and everybody has their weaknesses. But there is a deep insincerity at the heart of Kevin Rudd.

KING: Craig Emerson, Greg Combet has taken over responsibility for the insulation program. He's a junior minister but no doubt considered one on the rise. Is that right? What can you tell us about him?

EMERSON: He is a good guy obviously and he is on the rise. He's been called upon to help out in a number of areas. Now, he's a very good friend of mine, one of my best friends in life including in political life. Greg very much is a team player and will contribute to the overall efforts of this government to deliver services, and to do it well. I've got nothing but praise for the guy, but will point out that he is a team player.

KING: All right. This morning there's a story in the paper where fraudsters are going through phone books, taking names and addresses and then cashing in on the Federal Government's

insulation program. I've checked this with the Australian Federal Police. They say they've had several referrals but won't talk about it. So people listening this morning don't know if their name's been misused. They don't know how many cases. We don't know if it's a network across the nation, whether it's focused in Brisbane. Are you able to fill us in any further on that?

EMERSON: No, I can't enlighten you on that but I can say this, Madonna, if it's of some help - we visited a local insulation company yesterday in Kingston in Logan City, and they were laying off people. I met the people who were losing their jobs. They're going from 21 down to 10. They came up with some really constructive suggestions - I probably shouldn't canvas them - as to how bridge the gap if you like between now and when the new scheme starts up. So...

KING: Because Greg from Camp Hill has just called and he said could I ask you about the impact of cancellation on the insulation rebate, and what you are doing as the Minister for Small Business for all the small businesses in Brisbane affected?

EMERSON: Exactly what I did yesterday in visiting with departmental officials - not my department - but from the department that Greg's overseeing or that part of the department - to talk to them about their ideas. Obviously it's one thing to get an appreciation of the problems that are being caused and to meet the people who are losing their jobs, but that's only a part of the step. The real step is to then come up with constructive suggestions, because there will be a new program in a few months.

KING: Yeah, but you probably should have done this beforehand, shouldn't you...?

EMERSON: Well, the thing is that the program was closed down just the other day. I mean, you can't put in place measures to deal with the closure of the program before the program is closed.

KING: All right. Okay. George Brandis, Greg Combet, a view on him as a star of the Labor Government?

BRANDIS: Well, I don't have a particular view of Mr Combet. I've never actually met Mr Combet, so we'll wait and see. But he's obviously been brought in as a trouble-shooter and the reason the government has needed a trouble-shooter, is because of the policy fiasco that he's been asked to clean up. I must say that it occurred to me, Madonna, that when Craig was - I'm sure sincerely - lamenting the fate of these people he met - he visited in his electorate yesterday who had lost their jobs as a result of

the home insulation program debacle - what those people would have thought about Peter Garrett keeping his.

KING: That's George Brandis on Inside Canberra this week with Dr Craig Emerson. Moving onto a new topic, and I'll start with you here Senator George Brandis. John Howard will become president of the International Cricket Council in two years time. Isn't this just another former politician being given a plum job?

BRANDIS: No. No, it's a - look, I can't think of anybody, and as you know I was Minister for Sport in 2007, and I got to know the administrative and political side of the cricket world reasonably well, and it's - you know, he's a perfect fit for this job. I mean, cricket is - as an international game it's a big business. It's a - because of the different countries involved, there are political and international relations dimensions to it, believe it or not, particularly with the rise of power of South Asia within the ICC. And - but, both because of his acknowledged passion for cricket, as a spectator it should be said, not as a player, and also because of his great political skills, I can't think of a better person for the job.

KING: Craig Emerson, would you support that?

EMERSON: I welcome the appointment of John Howard. He has a great passion for cricket. We all know that. That's not enough if it's - in its own right. You need organisational skills. Someone who's been Prime Minister of this country for nearly 12 years obviously has organisational skills. George is right. I think we've seen in relation to tennis recently, these sports do have a very clear political dimension, and having some political skills to get your way through the maze of politics to a decent outcome is important. So I think he ticks all of those boxes. I just hope he's not involved in coaching spin-bowling. [Laughter]

KING: I think...

EMERSON: I don't know what he's trying to bowl; it's sort of a left-hand, inside out googly.

KING: I think George Brandis is actually agreeing with you on that. But can I take the politics out of all of this for a moment. How much time do you - either of you spend thinking about what you might like to do next. When the time comes, as it inevitably does, and voters pass you by, or you decide to step aside. Craig Emerson, just briefly, you first.

EMERSON: A little bit about a third career, I guess. Maybe a fourth in my - if I count them all up it could be even more than that. Started in academic life and public service and so on.

KING: But do you know what you want to do?

EMERSON: No, I don't. And I love what I'm doing so I don't dwell upon it. And I think if you do, to be honest, Madonna, then you should go.

KING: All right. George Brandis?

BRANDIS: Occasionally the thought crosses my mind. It would be in the law. I would either go back to the bar, or I would, perhaps, if a University would have me, become a law professor.

KING: Well, with all those big words, you'd think you can - you'd give him a reference, wouldn't you, Craig Emerson?

EMERSON: Absolutely. I just wouldn't be able to spell the big words, that's all.

KING: The Henry Tax Review. Dr Craig Emerson, yes or no? Do we still expect that out before the May Budget?

EMERSON: Yeah. Well, we certainly expect it out in the first part of this year. So, given that the May Budget is in May...

BRANDIS: Well done Craig.

EMERSON: ...I would expect it will be out. [Laughter]

BRANDIS: See.

EMERSON: See, George, I could help. I could be your sidekick in the bar.

KING: I was thinking, yes, perhaps you could go into academia too. The Centre for Independent Studies this morning, says the top marginal tax rate should be slashed to 35 per cent, while most tax payers should pay a rate of about 27 per cent. Is income tax going to be included in this Henry Tax Review?

EMERSON: The only thing that's excluded is the GST. I could point out that we took to the last election, as did the Coalition, a policy of reducing marginal tax rates and the 40 per cent rate is going down.

KING: Yeah, so what do you think of the idea of 27 per cent for most taxpayers?

EMERSON: Well, it's easy - it rolls off the tongue easily, doesn't it? Let's make it 20, 15, 10 or 5.

BRANDIS: Are you announcing policy here, Craig?

KING: Well, it's the Centre for Independent Studies.

EMERSON: No, quite the opposite. It's easy for people to say, cut taxes dramatically, but keep up the services for education, health, the defence of the nation and so on. If they ran their own households like that, they'd be out the back door.

KING: All right. To George Brandis. A quick comment on that.

BRANDIS: Well, they haven't seen the CIS report, obviously. The Liberal Party is and always has been the low tax party, and I can remind your listeners...

KING: Although Labor is about to reduce your tax rates.

BRANDIS: Can I remind your listeners, Madonna, that in the last period of Liberal government, we reduced the rate of tax in seven consecutive budgets. And, you know, one of the basic differences between the Labor Party, which in Kevin Rudd's words want to put government at the centre of the economy, and the Liberal Party, is we will always have a stronger disposition to lowering taxes when we can.

KING: I'm going to leave health, because we've done that before nine and we'll be doing it again, but the RSPCA today has urged the Victorian Government to consider introducing what they call a competency test for would-be dog-owners. That's essentially a licence to own a dog. Either of you support that?

EMERSON: No.

BRANDIS: No.

KING: Well, that was fairly quick agreement. Why? You were supposed to say yes, and I was going to say, so you would support...
[Laughter]

EMERSON: Come on, support it George and then we can have an argument.

KING: ... you would support a licence for a dog but not for a child?

BRANDIS: I - look, I just am sick of governments and NGOs dreaming up new ways to regulate people's lives.

EMERSON: Here, here.

BRANDIS: I'm just sick of it.

KING: But - and that's what our listeners are saying. But isn't it you two part of the problem.

EMERSON: No.

KING: Drawing up all sorts of laws, and regulations.

EMERSON: No, no, that's not right.

BRANDIS: Well, I don't know if it's still the case but when Craig was initially a Minister the department of which he was the Junior Minister was known as the Department of Finance and Deregulation.

EMERSON: Deregulation.

BRANDIS: I think that was because the view of - that we were over-regulated had been inherited from my side of politics, and adopted for a while by the Labor Party, but they seem to have abandoned it now, I might say.

KING: Very quickly...

EMERSON: No we haven't. Twenty-seven areas of regulatory reform and I - if - you know, well, you're talking about the way...

KING: Briefly.

EMERSON: ... you might be thought of, I'm actually involved quite heavily in stopping new laws being introduced.

BRANDIS: Good for you.

EMERSON: Now, you won't ever get credit for that, because people don't know the law that didn't get introduced, but I think there may be some merit in assessing the performance of ministers not by the number of laws they introduce, but the number of laws they get rid of when those laws are just a pain in the butt.

KING: [Laughs]

BRANDIS: You should - he should be in the Liberal Party, Craig.

EMERSON: Yeah, well...

KING: All right. Stop it. I want two really quick views on the final two issues. One is, on health, and I said we're not going into it, but do you see the role of the state government disappearing in years to come, given how much is being just sliced off the role and the funding of state government along the way? Senator George Brandis?

BRANDIS: It's hard to make predictions, but certainly the state government, I think, is the - of the three tiers of government in Australia, state governments are famously the most inefficient. There's the kind of double handling of resources when there's Commonwealth funding. That's why for example, the Liberal Party wants to, in its health plan, put the power into the hands of local hospital boards, rather than fund the state government bureaucracy.

KING: Yes. But my question's about state governments. So you're saying they're becoming less and less relevant as these decisions are being made?

BRANDIS: I think they're becoming less and less efficient. Now, what - I mean, you'll - I don't think any of us will live to see the day when there are no state governments in Australia.

KING: All right, Craig Emerson?

EMERSON: Well, state governments themselves are a bit of an artificial construct, when you think of it. You know, there - a few explorers wandered around Australia and borders were established as to, you know...

KING: Your friend, Anna Bligh won't like that answer.

EMERSON: Well, I'm just saying that they are probably a more artificial construct than a national government and than local governments. But that doesn't mean they have no purpose. They do. For example, land use planning, Madonna. You should not have Canberra deciding what should go on, on the Gold Coast in terms of land use planning. The planning of Brisbane's infrastructure and so on. That needs to happen on a more local level and I think state governments and the Brisbane City Council in this case are well-placed to do it.

KING: My final question today, and it's our daily dilemma that I ask you about each week.

EMERSON: This is the hardest bit.

KING: Well - and this one is a really serious one this morning. I interviewed a woman whose eight-year-old son is lying in an intensive care bed of the Townsville Hospital after an alleged case of bullying. Now, police are investigating and I don't want to go there because we don't know - there's often two sides to a story - but certainly witnesses have told the mother that kids were chasing him saying we're going to kill you. He ran out in front of a car. He has a history of being bullied at that school, or at that bus stop. And I'm just wondering, each time we talk

about this, and you talk to psychologists, they say go and see the teacher.

Talk to me as fathers, as opposed to politicians, for a moment. At what point does a parent decide, look, I've tried the teacher, I've tried the principle. I'm going to actually do something myself. I'm going to contact the parents of the bully, or the bully themselves, or I'm going to arm my children with these sentences to fight back.

EMERSON: Just so long as they don't arm them with anything else. Vigilantism is out as far I'm concerned. But I think that there is merit in - you cannot have parents knowing that your kid's being bullied but powerless to do anything about it. And the other th...

KING: But what do you do? What do you do as a parent?

EMERSON: Well, I would sa... I would go to the school. This happened to me when I was a little kid and my mum turned up in the block where we were being beaten and she belted the daylights out of the kids who did it, and we became good friends after that. Now, I'm not recommending that. This is a long time ago in the 1960s.

KING: Yes.

EMERSON: I'm not recommending vigilantism of that kind, but...

BRANDIS: It worked for you though, Craig.

EMERSON: But if I could add one more point, and that is I think the parents of the kids who are doing the bullying have a responsibility. Instead of just saying oh they're just being kids. And we don't debate and think enough about putting the onus back on those parents, not so much the parents of the victims of bullying but allowing their kids to go and brutalise other kids. And I reckon that's where we should be focusing a lot more attention.

KING: George Brandis?

BRANDIS: I agree. I agree with what Craig has said. I think you've initially got to go through the school, but if you don't get satisfactory outcomes from the school - and it would be shocking if you don't by the way, but sometimes people...

KING: It's happening.

BRANDIS: It is happening. You don't get satisfactory outcomes always from the school, then I think you do have to approach the parents of the other kid.

KING: Senator George Brandis, thank you.

BRANDIS: Thank you, Madonna.

KING: Dr Craig Emerson, good morning. We'll talk to you again next week.

EMERSON: Okay. Thanks, Madonna. See you, George.

BRANDIS: See you, Craig.

KING: And that's Inside Canberra for this week. Senator George Brandis and Dr Craig Emerson back at the same time next Wednesday.

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