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Transcript

Inside Canberra, ABC 612 Brisbane with Madonna King

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Interviewees: Dr Craig Emerson, Senator George Brandis

E&OE

Subjects: Tony Abbott's proposed parental leave scheme, health insurance rebate defeat, population growth, Michael Clarke, ANZAC march

KING: Well Tony Abbott this morning is the hero of the Green Movement. Hero for some feminists. And how did this happen? In the process, he's fallen out with some in his own party. And this is why his promise of a generous parental leave scheme - well at least more generous than Labor's - is now being backed by the Greens. But Tony Abbott didn't tell key members of his own party that he was going to go ahead and do this. In his words, 'Sometimes it's better to ask forgiveness than permission'. And given the fate that befell Malcolm Turnbull, are his colleagues going to wear this? Senator George Brandis, good morning.

BRANDIS: Good morning Madonna.

KING: Senator Brandis is the Opposition spokesman on Attorney's-General matters and Inside Canberra this morning, also with Rudd Government Minister Dr Craig Emerson. Welcome Dr Emerson.

EMERSON: Thank you very much Madonna, and good morning George.

BRANDIS: Good morning Craig.

KING: Senator Brandis, should Tony Abbott have told you about his parental leave plan?

BRANDIS: Well I think the point is Madonna, and I'm going to have to seek forgiveness rather than permission from you ...

EMERSON: Off to confession with you.

KING: [Laughs]

BRANDIS: ...for taking the wind out of your intro, but in fact, there was nobody who was in the Liberal and National Party room yesterday who was upset about the way in which this was done. Simply because there are a couple of people who muttered about process but the overwhelming sentiment...

KING: That is not true Senator Brandis.

BRANDIS: Yeah, I was...a number of people muttered about process. I wouldn't put it higher than mutter but the overwhelming...

KING: What about...

EMERSON: [Laughs]

BRANDIS: ...sentiment of the room was people were very enthusiastic about the policy. Now I...

EMERSON: Round up the usual mutterers.

KING: That's not true Senator Brandis. Some of your coalition colleagues are arguing that big business shouldn't have to pay. Some of your colleagues are arguing that Malcolm Turnbull lost the leadership because he didn't consult with the rest of you and Tony Abbott's falling the own way.

BRANDIS: Well I'm only talking about what happened in the coalition party room yesterday. And of course I was a member of the shadow cabinet that met on Monday afternoon and there was a little muttering in the coalition party room about process...

KING: Define mutter. Define mutter for me.

EMERSON: [Laughs]

BRANDIS: Well, a typical contribution would've gone like this: 'it's a shame that we heard about it this morning for the first time but what a bloody good idea.' That was the sentiment of the meeting. The sentiment of the meeting was overwhelmingly supportive of the policy and I think, frankly, Madonna your listeners are more interested in the substance of the policy than what happens in the bowels of the Liberal Party.

KING: Well I'm – and I'll come to you in a moment Craig Emerson – but I am quite interested in this and I believe that people listening too are - and it's not just your party, let's take the Labor Party too. Where a leader draws the line? I mean, what is leadership and what is making collegiate decisions? And where do you actually draw the line there?

BRANDIS: Well look there is a – in both parties – there is a hierarchy of positions, all right. Now the party room includes the backbench.

Then there's the full shadow ministry which includes not only the shadow cabinet but more junior front benchers. Then there's the shadow cabinet. But even within the shadow cabinet there is what we call the 'leadership group'. Now the leadership group, including the shadow treasurer, Joe Hockey, were participants in this decision making before the announcement was made. There's no doubt about that. And...

EMERSON: I think there is...about Joe Hockey...

BRANDIS: No, well I talked to him about it only last night Craig...

EMERSON: Hmm...

BRANDIS: And I can assure you...

KING: Well a lot of your coalition colleagues seemed to have changed their view overnight if you go on the analysis this morning, George Brandis. And I don't know about Joe Hockey, but certainly in some of their minds they see it quite differently from you. But even if they do or they don't, the issue – and it's not just your party – this issue of when a leader has the right to say 'this is going to be the policy we take to the election' and how much onus is on him to get approval for that policy from the leadership group of the party.

BRANDIS: Well, Malcolm did...I'm sorry Tony did get approval from the leadership group of the party. He gave a speech on International Women's Day on Monday. He came to the shadow cabinet, the shadow cabinet received the policy very well, very strongly, and endorsed it. He took it to the party room meeting. There was, as I've said, a little bit of muttering about the process but the overwhelming sentiment of that meeting was that it was a very good policy idea and there wasn't a person – not a person – who spoke against it.

KING: All right. Craig Emerson, this actually puts the wood on you in a sense, because the Greens are now backing the 26 weeks leave offered by the coalition, not the 18 Labor has on offer. Do you now have to change your parental leave policy?

EMERSON: Well, we've designed this policy based on an election commitment, Madonna. And of course the Greens would prefer 26 weeks, they'd prefer 52, they'd prefer 104, and we could keep going and going and going. They'll always go for the most generous scheme. The funding of this [opposition] scheme as you know is via an increase in the corporate income tax rate on larger corporations. But here's a thought for your listeners. Maybe Tony Abbott hasn't changed since 2002 when he said, 'I would support – paid maternity leave would come in over my dead body'. When he made the announcement I think people were entitled to think that he'd changed his mind. But then, it has emerged that they are going to block Labor's paid parental leave scheme in the Senate. Now, that would be consistent with

Tony Abbott's original position of hating paid parental leave and having it come into Australia over his dead body.

KING: Doesn't he just want a 26 week leave policy as opposed to an 18 week...

EMERSON: His stated policy after he was elected Opposition Leader was 'if in doubt, oppose Labor', and he is going to do that time and time again. It's reckless and irresponsible.

BRANDIS: Well, you know, that's what Oppositions are for Craig.

EMERSON: Well not just for the point of opposing. Sometimes, just for a break, you might actually have a look at the national interest. This is a scheme that was introduced – announced, before the last election. We are proposing to implement it. And Tony Abbott is pretending that he supports his big 26-week scheme. Why would he then move to block Labor's scheme? We are the government after all. He should say 'they've got a mandate for it, they've promised it at the election in 2007'. He can go to the election with whatever scheme he wants but he should not block Labor's scheme.

BRANDIS: Look Craig, look Craig [sighs].

EMERSON: If he wants to enhance it, modify it if he became Prime Minister, that'd be up to him, but he is not fair dinkum.

KING: All right.

BRANDIS: Can I have a go? Look Craig, the problem you have is in comprehending that your view of the national interest, isn't the only view of the national interest. We in the Liberal Party actually think that our paid parental leave scheme is much more in the national interest than yours, because it's a better scheme. It reaches more people. It's more generous. It gives mothers more time with their kids and it is able to be funded off the budget by a modest impost on some of the wealthiest companies in the country.

EMERSON: Well, hello. Isn't the coalition, isn't the Liberal Party saying Labor should keep its election promises? When we keep our election promises, you say 'you haven't got a mandate for it and we're going to oppose it'.

BRANDIS: Well we do...we do raise our...

EMERSON: This is the point. You are opportunistic, George. The Liberal Party is opportunistic. It will continue to oppose everything that the Rudd Government seeks to do.

BRANDIS: Well, Craig I must say we in the Liberal Party do sometimes raise our eyebrows in wonderment and surprise when you do keep your election promises. But nevertheless, let's not, let's not confuse the issue.

EMERSON: Inconsistency is the sign of a poor mind, isn't that right George?

BRANDIS: Let's not...

EMERSON: That's your problem.

BRANDIS: ...let's not confuse the issue here. The contest between two paid parental leave schemes. Yours and ours and ours is better, more generous and the public will...it will have much more public appeal than yours.

EMERSON: What's the problem with supporting our scheme, go to the election with your pretend paid parental leave scheme...

BRANDIS: It's not a pretend paid parental scheme.

EMERSON: ...why? What is the problem of having ours come in on time, assuming we win the election it's then fully implemented. If you win the election as you wish to do so, you can augment it, modify it, do whatever you want with your scheme. Why oppose it? The answer is in 2002, Tony Abbott said this will come in over my dead body.

BRANDIS: Nothing to do with that, nothing to do with that. Tony has been very frank.

EMERSON: Phoney Tony.

BRANDIS: Frank has been – Tony has been very frank about the fact that his thinking on this – he's change his mind on this, his thinking has developed. I mean...

EMERSON: His actions haven't changed.

BRANDIS: His actions are to announce...

EMERSON: They haven't.

BRANDIS: ...that what would be the best, most family friendly, most child friendly, most woman friendly, paid parental leave scheme in the OECD...

EMERSON: They are just words.

BRANDIS: ...which is what he announced on Monday...

EMERSON: ...They are just words.

BRANDIS: ...on International Women's Day...

EMERSON: They are just words. The action is what happens in the Senate.

BRANDIS: No it's...

EMERSON: And he is opposing...

BRANDIS: Craig.

EMERSON: Our legislation.

BRANDIS: Craig.

EMERSON: He is opposing our legislation.

BRANDIS: I think you're only convincing yourself Craig.

KING: All right gentlemen, I'm – look I'm back from my cup of coffee. I'm not sure what the upshot of that was. But I'll let you just...

EMERSON: I won, George lost.

KING: All right, well you can continue that argument for just a moment when we cross to news headlines with Gail Burke and then we're going to come back on another issue. That's Inside Canberra this week with Senator George Brandis and Doctor Craig Emerson. What's happening in the news? Let's find out from Gail Burke . . .

[News]

KING: Senator George Brandis, Dr Craig Emerson have you both calmed down?

EMERSON: Absolutely, George has had a Mogadon

BRANDIS: I'm not sure Craig, you're looking very calm.

EMERSON: And I had a Bex and a big lie down.

BRANDIS: You're looking very calm Craig. Perhaps...

KING: All right, well keeping that in mind that theme. Let's go on to health just briefly. The Federal Government's bid to means-test the 30 per cent private health insurance rebate has now been rejected by the Senate and to fill you in at home, Labor's Bill proposed to means-test and reduce the rebate for individuals earning more than \$75 000 a year and couples earning more than \$150 000. A Senate vote on the legislation I think has tied 34:34 and when that happens a bill is defeated. But this morning, what does that mean for people? Dr Craig Emerson?

EMERSON: Well it means that our efforts to bring the Budget back into balance and then into surplus are being thwarted, again, by the Liberal Party and their Coalition parties in the Senate. This was an important Budget measure and it's now been rejected twice by the Coalition.

KING: So...

EMERSON: As I said...

KING: It's an election trigger?

EMERSON: ...after he was elected he will oppose everything that Labor tries to do.

KING: Yes you've made that point. What I'm trying to...

BRANDIS: Actually that's not...

KING: ...find out this morning is, does this mean anything to people's health insurance rebate?

EMERSON: Well if they are above – or in effect it doesn't because nothing changes – because legislation has been defeated.

BRANDIS: That's right. And it shouldn't. Because what Craig neglected to tell you Madonna, is that this is a flagrant breach of an election promise. There was a rock-solid, rolled gold, unambiguous promise at the 2007 election from the Labor Party that they would not do this and they are doing it and they say 'well, we've got to do it to do something about the Budget'. Well, perhaps you should've thought about that Craig when last year, you were splashing up against the wall billions and billions of dollars in a poorly targeted...

EMERSON: And keeping 200 000 people in work.

BRANDIS: ...a poorly targeted stimulus program but we won't go there. This is a flagrant breach of an election promise. Not even you would have the chutzpah to claim that you have a mandate for this.

KING: Great word, chutzpah [Laughs].

BRANDIS: In fact we have a mandate to keep you to your promises.

KING: All right.

EMERSON: Oh well there you go. Now can I just say. If George was in the slightest bit consistent, they would therefore pass the paid parental leave scheme of Labor that was an election commitment.

BRANDIS: We're offering...

EMERSON: And they're opposing it.

BRANDIS: We're opposing it because we're offering a better alternative scheme.

EMERSON: And what's common to that? You oppose everything.

BRANDIS: Okay, alternative scheme. We don't oppose everything. But we do oppose selectively and we certainly oppose when you are in a, in flagrant breach of an election promise, not to make private health insurance more expensive for middle Australians.

KING: All right, I'm moving on to the next topic, and that is population. Can we be brief on this? Dick Smith is pleading with you two and your colleagues to take our ballooning population more seriously. He says, and he says he's not being sensationalist, but that we could run out of food eventually if we continue the current population growth rate. Do either of you agree with him that we have to start thinking about ways of containing our population? George Brandis.

BRANDIS: Well first of all I haven't seen Dick Smith's comments. So for that reason I'll...

KING: It was a matter of hearing them on my program.

BRANDIS: ...need to be a little...Uh, well I wasn't in that part of your program.

EMERSON: Uh.

KING: You don't read everything in the paper, Senator.

BRANDIS: I'm sorry Madonna but I have to be a bit circumspect about comments I haven't heard.

KING: You can trust me, he's says...

BRANDIS: Of course I can trust you.

KING: He says that perhaps we have to think about reducing our immigration rate, certainly not the humanitarian part of it. But we also need to encourage Australians to have only two children.

BRANDIS: Well I think if that's what he's said I think there's an inconsistency there, because I mean you only have population growth from two sources: from natural increase and from migration, obviously. Now what happened has been happening in Australia, in common with a lot of western nations over many years, is a slow decline in the birth rate. That was turned around a bit during the last period of Liberal government. Particularly after Peter Costello's Budget ... the famous 'one for Mum, one for Dad, one for the country Budget'. But nevertheless, it is important that we do encourage families to have more children. And that's – if I may say so – one of the main reasons, main policy reasons behind the paid parental leave scheme...

KING: Yes.

BRANDIS: ...that we were talking about earlier.

KING: All right but stop this politic-speak. Do you think we need to start containing our population or should Australia be growing? Yes or no?

BRANDIS: I think Australia should be growing.

KING: Okay.

EMERSON: And I agree with George. On this, there's a big debate in this country, as there should be, around the ageing of the population.

BRANDIS: Sure.

EMERSON: We've actually been trying to increase the birth rate in this country.

BRANDIS: That's right, and that's a bipartisan position.

EMERSON: Exactly, and a number of countries overseas – their population is not only shrinking...

BRANDIS: Yeah.

EMERSON: But it is getting much older so there are far fewer working-aged people...

BRANDIS: Yes.

EMERSON: ...to support those who are retired.

KING: But do we have the infrastructure, the resources, that Dick Smith says we don't, to be able to facilitate the growth rate that's happening now?

EMERSON: Well if you followed that argument, then in 1930, we would've stopped population growth because we didn't have the infrastructure you know, to cater for an increased population after the Second World War or the 50s.

BRANDIS: Well I think also what that argument completely misses, is the greatest resource any country has, is its people.

EMERSON: And remember the immigration program itself is designed – if you like – to freshen up the aged profile of the Australian population.

BRANDIS: Yeah.

EMERSON: And what's emerged over the last two or three years is that it's proving to be quite effective. So you do have a fair bit of bipartisanship here. And I'll even go further and say that the Howard Government substantially increased the immigration program and we're keeping it at around those levels. And I think that that is good for the long-term future of this country.

BRANDIS: Well I agree with that but can I make this one comment. That – and this is where we perhaps differ a little – we in the Liberal Party believe that there ought to be more incentives given for a natural increase of the population rather than merely replacing the population through immigration.

KING: All right.

EMERSON: We actually agree with that too.

BRANDIS: Okay.

EMERSON: But...but the point is...

KING: Well stop agreeing, let's move on to something...

EMERSON: All right let's have a blue.

KING: ...it's always much more fun.

This is a story that you might not be interested in although I suspect 99 per cent of the people saying they're not interested in it, really are. Do think Michael Clarke is letting the Australian team down by flying home to his girlfriend? Or if he was your son, would you actually be proud that he's addressing a relationship issue, ahead of a sporting issue?

EMERSON: He's not letting the Australian side down. The personal relationships are very very important and they certainly have the potential and very often extend beyond the life of a sporting career so I think Michael Clarke's doing the right thing there. And if I can just add I suppose that you know the distribution of

these photographs are acutely embarrassing to Lara Bingle and a violation of her privacy. So I can understand why they would be going through a pretty tough time.

KING: George Brandis?

BRANDIS: Look Laura, this is a very personal matter for the people concerned. And I...

KING: Did you just call me Lara?

EMERSON: [Laughs]

BRANDIS: Madonna, did I? I'm sorry. This is a very personal...

KING: I wouldn't mind looking like her myself.

BRANDIS: I'm sorry. This is a very personal matter for the people concerned and I really don't feel qualified to be a commentator on the relationship.

KING: No, but it's...no and I'm not asking you to be a commentator about the relationship because yesterday it was about Lara Bingle, I give you that, and we didn't cover it. This morning you have people like cricketers saying 'this hurts Michael Clarke's aspirations to be captain'. Australian Cricket, which I interviewed before nine o'clock this morning saying 'No, Australian Cricket now has to be much more open to people's family situations – if you've got a happy family you've probably got a good cricketer'. What I'm asking you is – and we talk about young people all the time and whether they get up to too much mischief or whether there's too much alcohol – I think you're dodging the question Senator Brandis, when it is: is this young man someone, as a country, we should be proud of for addressing a relationship issue, or do you think once you are chosen for an Australian team in a sport, his job is with the Australian team?

BRANDIS: Well, I really, aren't trying to dodge your question Madonna, I genuinely don't know enough about the particular circumstances. But if I can respond in this way. I think most people would regard – well in fact, I'm sure almost anybody would regard - obligations to family as ultimately the paramount obligations.

KING: Yes.

EMERSON: And Madonna the point you're making too is that successful sportspeople do rely on a solid family support base.

BRANDIS: Hmm.

EMERSON: And you will see photographs of the Boxing Day Test of all the families coming together, of the cricketers, obviously for Christmas Day and so on, and it's well known that cricketers miss their partners and rely on their partners and their partners make great sacrifices. So I think it's entirely reasonable that Michael Clarke recognises, you know, the value of all that, and

the Australian cricketing authorities do so as well. And by the sound of what you're saying, they are.

KING: Yes I mean, it's just something that has just – and Australian Cricket said to me 'you ask your listeners and you will find two very, very separate camps'. And when I have, and just looking at the SMSs this morning. One of those, Lynn from Chapel Hill says 'If Michael Clarke was a soldier in Iraq, could he leave his team to come home to patch something up at home?'

EMERSON: Well he's not a soldier in Iraq, he's a cricketer in New Zealand.

BRANDIS: Yeah but in fairness though. I mean it's not as if there's only one side to this story. I mean, and as you quite rightly said Craig, professional sportspeople who have to go on tour do make great family sacrifices and their families make great sacrifices to enable them to have those careers. It's not as if they are never presented with this choice between being present with the family when the family needs them, and pursuing their career which takes them overseas for months at a time so often. In fact, every day they have to reconcile those two somewhat inconsistent...

KING: Yeah.

BRANDIS: ...imperatives. And the obligation of Michael Clarke as a professional sportsman to his team is itself an obligation. Now, how you balance those competing obligations will depend on the particular facts...

EMERSON: Absolutely.

BRANDIS: ...on the particular case. Now as I'm sure I said before, if it's an acute family situation everybody would expect the family to come first...

KING: Yeah okay.

BRANDIS: ...but let's not pretend there isn't a balancing act. (inaudible)...

EMERSON: And rugby league and rugby union players will miss games.

BRANDIS: Hmm.

EMERSON: ...of league or union if their wives or partners are ill or having a baby, or if someone in the family dies...

BRANDIS: Sure, sure.

EMERSON: ...and it is well understood by those clubs that that's just how it is because they know that those families support the players.

KING: All right, now you've answered that one. And I know you've got another job to do but just very quickly before you go. There's been debate up here about children not being allowed to march with their granddads, vets, alongside them on ANZAC Day. Is that right or wrong?

EMERSON: I'd say that I would want to respect the wishes of the organisers of the march. And they are the veterans and the RSL Clubs. I

think the idea isn't it, Madonna, is that the children march at the back of the march...

KING: Yes.

EMERSON: ...so as not to exclude them altogether...

KING: But not alongside them...

EMERSON: ...but when people come along to watch the veterans – and look I accept there's a dwindling number of veterans, they can't, the view of the RSL Club and so on - clubs – is that, that gets a bit more difficult to watch the veterans...

KING: All right. Senator Brandis?

EMERSON: ...so I think it can be managed.

KING: Just quickly?

BRANDIS: Well I'm a bit in two minds about this. And I'm not, frankly convinced of one way or the other. I've got a little bit more sympathy frankly for the view that particularly with the older gentlemen and the older ladies that they might want their grandchildren to march beside them basically for support during the long march.

KING: Yeah.

EMERSON: Hmm.

BRANDIS: And considerations like that I think also have to be borne in mind.

KING: All right.

EMERSON: Well I think that's fair enough and maybe one or two with the veteran but not you know, dominating if you like, the march.

BRANDIS: I think that's probably fair enough.

KING: All right I'm now getting off that fence I hope neither of you tear your pants on that issue. Thank you very much for your time this week. We'll talk to you next week.

BRANDIS: Thank you Madonna, thanks Craig.

EMERSON: Okay, Madonna.

KING: That's Senator George Brandis and Doctor Craig Emerson Inside Canberra for this week. And interesting what they say about that the Michael Clarke case.

ENDS