



THE HON DR CRAIG EMERSON MP
MINISTER FOR TRADE

Transcript
Sky News AM Agenda with Kieran Gilbert

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E&OE

Subjects: Japanese disaster; Julian Assange; the PM on Q&A; carbon price.

KIERAN GILBERT:

Good morning and welcome to *AM Agenda* and the devastating aftermath of the Japanese quake and tsunami. Safety concerns remain at an atomic power plant in the affected region, as Australian assistance is now on the ground to try and help out in the enormous disaster response.

[Start of except - interview with Kevin Rudd]

KEVIN RUDD:

We've got a team which is already in Sendai where, as you know, there's been a lot of devastation in and around there. We also, yesterday, were able to get a team, for the first time, into a location called Ishinomaki, city which is north of Sendai. We're the first foreign consular team in there. And on that score they've succeeded in locating the safety of eight Australians in that area, which is good news, and providing them with consular assistance on the ground.

[End of excerpt]

GILBERT: The Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd there on the Seven Network this morning.

With me on the programme I have the Trade Minister Craig Emerson from the Sky News Centre.

Good morning Craig.

CRAIG EMERSON: Hello Kieran.

GILBERT: And from Brisbane we have the Deputy Opposition Leader in the Senate, Senator George Brandis, also the Shadow Attorney-General.

Good morning Senator.

GEORGE BRANDIS: Morning Kieran.

GILBERT: Craig Emerson, first to you. We heard a bit there from Kevin Rudd as to the Australian assistance. Can you give us the latest in terms of any Australians that are in the affected region; the numbers in terms of those that have now been confirmed safe?

EMERSON: Yeah, sure. Mercifully there are no reported Australian casualties at this stage Kieran. There's 2,631 Australians who have been located and are safe in Japan, 129 of those in the actual affected areas.

There's a considerably large number, 3,342, Australians registered in Japan and 306 in the affected areas, but I would hasten to add that because the communications are so damaged, we shouldn't

assume the worst in relation to those who are missing or, at least, have not been located. It could just be a communications issue. But the consular assistance and the teams are doing everything they possibly can to locate Australians and as you heard from Kevin Rudd, the Foreign Minister, we've had some success there.

GILBERT:

Minister, I'm not sure if you're aware that in the case of a Melbourne man who was fear... you know, the grave fears for him held by his family... apparently there have been reports that he's been in touch with his employer. Have we had any confirmation of his safety at all?

EMERSON:

No, I'm aware of that report, but I haven't heard the latest on ... any further update on that Kieran. But it is, I think, an example of fears being held, legitimately, for missing Australians, but then they do turn up because the whole area is so devastated including, of course, the communications system. So mobile phone coverage would be wrecked, essentially, and you know, then we've also got other forms of communication that are also badly compromised. So it must be a shocking, terrible time for loved ones and family and friends who are so anxious about Australians in the area, but we can't just assume the worst. It's just as plausible an explanation that the communications have not allowed them to make contact with the embassy or with their own loved ones back here in Australia.

GILBERT:

Yeah, let's hope that is the answer in all of those cases.

Senator Brandis, this is such an enormous logistical challenge. You have, on the one hand, the human tragedy and the search and recovery mission there.

And then on the other, this nuclear plant which is causing concerns by the minute, it seems, with the cooling problems at that plant in the affected area.

BRANDIS:

Yes, Kieran. I mean it's hard to overstate the magnitude of this and I think that everyone who's seen these dreadful pictures on the television and in the newspapers cannot but have been moved by both the tragedy and the magnitude of the tragedy. Now, of course, the Opposition lends its full bipartisan support to the Government in the Government's efforts to assist our Japanese friends and allies in dealing with the ... this terrible event that has happened to their country.

GILBERT:

Craig Emerson, as the Trade Minister, obviously this is a humanitarian crisis so, you know, it's too early for us to be looking at issues like, you know, the economic relationship. But, you know, that country, well, you know its economy well.

EMERSON:

Yeah.

GILBERT:

This is going to be a major setback for Japan, in not just the humanitarian sense, in the recovery sense. It's going to take so long.

EMERSON:

Well, undoubtedly, all of your viewers, Kieran, will have seen the devastation on the television sets and the reconstruction phase will be an enormous one. We're obviously still in the recovery phase of this disaster, in Japan. And you're right, I think it's too early to start talking about impacts on Australian exporters or imports. This is a humanitarian crisis and, as George said, the Japanese people are our friends and we've ... our hearts go out to them. There will be plenty of time

to do the sorts of calculations about impacts on Australian exports and all that later.

But it will be an enormous task in reconstructing these devastated areas. As you saw, many of them have just been completely obliterated.

GILBERT:

The nuclear energy debate, Senator Brandis, is one which has emerged already. But given the impact on the safety of these atomic power plants, do you think that things will be ... you know, the debate will take on a different complexion here, now, in the wake of this Japanese disaster?

BRANDIS:

Well I think that the thing to remember about the nuclear debate is that the ... until such time as the Labor Party approaches the issue of the use of nuclear power in a non-ideological way, we're not really going to have a sensible nuclear debate in Australia.

There is a range of views about the desirability of nuclear power. We, in Australia, really don't need to use nuclear energy because we are so well endowed with coal which is, you know, the cheapest way in which Australia can produce a base load power. But you have one side of politics, which I represent, that's prepared at least to have an adult discussion about this. But the Labor Party is still mired in these ideological obsessions of the 1970s that nuclear power is ipso facto evil.

GILBERT:

Let's ... I'll get Craig Emerson to respond on another day to that. We've got plenty of time to have that debate over coming weeks. I do want to move...

EMERSON: And I'd feel more comfortable having it a little later. There's plenty I could say of a political nature, but I do not think that this is the right time to have a political barney in Australia about these matters.

GILBERT: Okay, we'll...

EMERSON: We should be concentrating on the people of Japan in my view.

GILBERT: Well let's move on. There are another few issues that we want to talk about today in terms of the domestic political scene. Last night the Prime Minister was confronted on the Q&A programme by Julian Assange making claims about the treatment of WikiLeaks members; the fact that some of ... some information, according to him, has been provided by the Australian Government to other authorities. Let's hear a little bit of the question and the answer from the Prime Minister.

[Start of excerpt - question put to the Prime Minister by Julian Assange]

JULIAN ASSANGE: So, Prime Minister, my question to you is this: When will you come clean about precisely what information you have supplied to foreign powers, about Australian citizens working, or affiliated with WikiLeaks? And, if you cannot give a full and frank answer to that question, should perhaps the Australian people consider charging you with treason?

JULIA GILLARD: On the exchange of information he's talking about, I honestly don't know what he is talking about. So I'm afraid I can't help him with full and frank disclosures. I don't know anything about exchanging information about people who work for WikiLeaks.

TONY JONES: So it hasn't happened to your knowledge?

JULIA GILLARD: To my knowledge, it hasn't happened.

[End of excerpt]

GILBERT: Senator Brandis, what did you make of the question and the response from the Prime Minister? Was it fair enough, given that she was ... this was put to her on live television, that she might not have been across the specific allegations?

GEORGE BRANDIS: To deal with both the question and the answer, I thought the question was absurd and it was obviously a question asked for rhetorical effect. There's no doubt at all that the Australian Government exchanges information, particularly in relation to issues such as drug trafficking, or international terrorism, or other policing matters with other governments, and to suggest that there's something wrong with that is idiotic.

But I thought the Prime Minister didn't handle it well, because she shouldn't have said 'to my knowledge no such information has been exchanged'.

What the Prime Minister, or indeed any minister, when challenged about exchanges of intelligence should do is not to comment on them, not to rule them out as the Prime Minister did. Now that, I think, perhaps reflects her lack of sure footedness when it comes to international affairs. But when we're talking about exchange and what is essentially intelligence or policing information with foreign countries, you don't rule it out; you don't comment on it.

GILBERT: Craig Emerson, isn't that good advice there?

EMERSON: George Brandis is criticising Prime Minister Gillard for sharing too much information with the Australian public. I think that's absurd, in fact, George. But I will say that the...

BRANDIS: But you don't share intelligence information Craig; you should know that.

EMERSON: She simply said she was not aware of any such information being exchanged. This is not an unreasonable thing to say when she's asked a direct question. I agree with you, though, George that I think the line of questioning behind it belies a conspiracy theory. Behind every lounge chair, Mr Assange believes the entire western world is constructed on conspiracies.

Well, he's entitled to his belief, but sometimes people are just a bit too busy to spend their lives engaging in conspiracies, particularly conspiracies against Mr Assange. He's not the centre of the universe. He's got an issue. He's perfectly free in a democratic system to articulate his views. But the world is not rotating around Mr Assange. Not everything that the Australian Government does is a conspiracy against Mr Assange, and I think he probably should get a bit more balance in the way that he approaches these matters.

GILBERT: Okay, gentlemen. We've got to take a quick break. We'll be right back on *AM Agenda*. Stay with us.

[Unrelated item - advertisement break]

GILBERT: Thanks for being with us this morning on *AM Agenda*. We're awaiting a phone call from Australia's Ambassador to Japan, Murray McLean. As soon as he phones in, we'll cross to him live from Tokyo.

In the meantime, let's go back to Craig Emerson and Senator George Brandis.

I want to look at the issue of the carbon tax debate now. Gentlemen, before I get your thoughts on it, I want to play you a comment that Tony Abbott made yesterday at a community forum in Perth.

[Start of excerpt - part of speech given at community forum by Tony Abbott]

TONY ABBOTT: I don't think we can say that the science is settled here. There is no doubt that we should do our best to rest lightly on the planet. There is no doubt that we should do our best to emit as few waste products as possible. But having said that, whether carbon dioxide is quite the environmental villain that some people make it out to be is not yet proven.

[End of excerpt]

GILBERT: Senator Brandis, that was a bit of a surprise to hear that from Tony Abbott yesterday, given in recent weeks he's repeatedly said that he accepts the science of climate change.

BRANDIS: I don't think so at all. I thought what he said was perfectly unexceptional. The fact is that science is never absolutely settled. If science were ever absolutely settled, there would be no new scientific research or scientific inquiry.

Now what Mr Abbott said is completely consistent with the Coalition's position, as articulated by him in recent times: that we accept that the consensus of the majority of the scientific opinion is that climate change is a reality and that human activity contributes to it. And nothing that he had to say yesterday is inconsistent with that.

There is a range of views. There is a minority of scientists who dispute the consensus of most climate change scientists. Then, within the majority of the scientific community who do believe that climate change is a reality and that human agency contributes to it there is a multiplicity of views about issues like the causality; the relevance of particular emissions; the properties of carbon dioxide, which is what Tony Abbott was particularly talking about and the nature in which that impinges on the upper atmosphere. There is such a range of scientific debate about this, that to suggest that the science is kind of set in concrete, is something that only a very ignorant person would say.

GILBERT: Craig Emerson...

EMERSON: Well Kieran...

GILBERT: ...I guess you're going to have a different analysis of the comment.

EMERSON: Well, of course. You're right that Tony Abbott has been saying, because it's been convenient for him to say, that the science is settled. Now he's questioning the most fundamental aspect of the climate change science, as to whether carbon dioxide is actually the cause of human-induced climate change.

Well, it is. I mean the ... it is the issue. That's why we're putting a price on carbon and Tony Abbott's saying 'well, it might not be carbon dioxide'. What, is it? Could it be hydrogen, or nitrogen, or something like that? I mean this is absurd. It comes straight out of the One Nation play book in that the ... when I get emails, I know what Tony Abbott's going to say, because I get emailed from One Nation a few weeks before, even a few days before and this is the sort of stuff that they've been saying as well.

Now, if you've got a leader who does not believe, or is very, very sceptical about whether carbon contributes to climate change, he's not going to do anything about it.

BRANDIS: That's not what he said, Craig.

EMERSON: He is not going to do ... he said carbon dioxide is not, maybe not quite the villain that people suggest. Now carbon is in the atmosphere, in the form of carbon dioxide - one carbon atom, two oxygen atoms, carbon dioxide. And Tony Abbot says 'oh, that might not be the cause of it'. [Laughs] I mean it's absurd. What it does expose...

GILBERT: Well, okay...

EMERSON: ...is that Tony Abbott...

GILBERT: ...let's get, let's get Senator Brandis...

EMERSON: ...does not believe...

GILBERT: ...to respond to that.

EMERSON: ...in climate change being caused by human beings.

GILBERT: Craig Emerson, let... should get ... let's give Senator Brandis a chance to respond to that, particularly the comment that Tony Abbott made, and it's a quote from him yesterday that carbon dioxide might not be the villain here.

BRANDIS: What he said was, and the quote was - that you just played - that carbon dioxide might not be quite the environmental villain that some people make it out to be. Now, that's a perfectly unexceptionable thing to say, because, as I said in my earlier remarks, there is a range of views even within the majority of the scientific community that accepts the reality of climate change about the particular significance of different trace elements in the atmosphere.

So I ... and I think what we've just seen...

EMERSON: Well, what do you think's causing it, George?

BRANDIS: May I ... well, I think that's something that we should leave to the scientists, Craig, because they're having a vigorous debate about it with one another.

EMERSON: Science is settled on carbon.

BRANDIS: But what, what I ... well no, Craig, get this in your head - science is never absolutely settled. The people who say the science is settled are saying we should have no more research...

EMERSON: No, I'm not.

BRANDIS: ...we should have no more inquiry.

EMERSON: I said on carbon.

BRANDIS: We should publish no more journal articles.

EMERSON: I said on carbon.

BRANDIS: We should test no scientific propositions.

EMERSON: I'll say it again. I said on carbon.

BRANDIS: That is the most profoundly un...

EMERSON: And what you're indicating, George...

BRANDIS: The most profoundly unscientific...

EMERSON: What you're indicating...

BRANDIS: ...and ignorant thing you could possibly say.

EMERSON: ...is that the Coalition, if it formed government, would do nothing about climate change because...

BRANDIS: No, I didn't say that at all.

CRAIG EMERSON: ...it believes the science is not settled, that carbon may not be quite the villain, using Tony Abbott's words, that the scientists are...

BRANDIS: That some people say it, yes.

EMERSON: Yes, exactly.

GILBERT: Okay, let's...

BRANDIS: No, no, no...

EMERSON: And, therefore, you will do nothing about climate change.

GILBERT: Look, okay, let's play...

EMERSON: Everyone knows that.

GILBERT: Let's play a bit of what the Prime Minister said - the Prime Minister was on the ABC last night talking about her broken promise on this issue, admitting that it was a broken promise and that she's walked away from it.

As frank as she has been - in fact, more frank than she has been over recent weeks.

[Excerpt from Q&A]

GILLARD: Now, I did say during the last election campaign ... I promised that there would be no carbon tax. That's true and I've walked away from that commitment and I'm not going to try and pretend anything else.

I also said to the Australian people in the last election campaign that we needed to act on climate change, we needed to price carbon, and I wanted to see an emissions trading scheme.

[End of excerpt]

GILBERT: So, the Prime Minister frank there, Craig Emerson. I think more so than she has been in this debate up until now. Why not admit that from the outset that, yes, a broken promise has been undertaken here as part of this carbon tax solution that you're adopting?

CRAIG EMERSON: Sure. Julia's made the point before that she was confronted with one of two choices: either to walk away from doing anything about climate change or to maintain the position that there would be no carbon tax, or effective carbon tax or the like.

Now, she had to confront that choice with the composition of the parliament. She has made the choice, which we fully support as a government, as a Labor Party, that you can't afford to walk away, like Tony Abbott wants to walk away, and do nothing about climate change.

And she was frank in that explanation of her position, and now the Australian people do have a very clear choice. A Prime Minister, a Labor Prime Minister committed to putting a price on carbon and an Opposition Leader who believes the science is not settled, that carbon dioxide might not be the villain and, therefore, will do nothing - will do nothing! - about climate change around...

GILBERT: Okay.

EMERSON: ...the world and in this country.

GILBERT: Senator Brandis, do you concede that what the Prime Minister said there, and throughout her argument last night, that her fundamental position has not changed, that the Labor Government - then Labor Opposition in

'07 - took an ETS to the 2007 election and then in 2010 as well? So, they've been arguing for a market mechanism to deal with carbon and carbon pollution for some time.

BRANDIS:

Look, I think the Labor Party are trying to make a virtue of the Prime Minister's frankness about this. Well, you know, Kieran, guilty pleas are always frank.

What the Prime Minister did last night was she pleaded guilty to misleading the Australian people and walking away from a promise.

What she did, in fact, was to verify what we in the Opposition have been saying all along: that Julia Gillard decided to pay the price for an alliance with the Greens by breaking her promise not to introduce a carbon tax by, to use her words, "walking away from it". And in doing so, [she is] selling out the interests of Australian households and Australian working families to dance to Bob Brown's tune.

Now, you know, I've been saying that for weeks, and people like Craig and other Labor Party apologists have been criticising me. At least now we have the Prime Minister admitting herself that that's what she did and that that's what her motivation was.

EMERSON:

George, you like to pretend that at no point in the last three or four years has the Labor Party said that it wants to put a price on carbon.

BRANDIS:

Tax, tax.

EMERSON:

You are a me...

BRANDIS: The Prime Minister's now said it's a tax.

EMERSON: You are a member of the Senate.

BRANDIS: You could use the forbidden T word, Craig.

EMERSON: You're a member of the Senate that three times blocked an attempt by Labor to put a price on carbon. Now, whether it's a fixed price...

GILBERT: Okay.

EMERSON: ...or a floating price, you will still call it a tax.

BRANDIS: Craig...

EMERSON: Okay, that's a reality...

GILBERT: I'm sorry, I've got to interrupt, mate.

EMERSON: ...but we will put a price on carbon.

GILBERT: Craig and Senator Brandis, thank you, as always, for a robust discussion, gentlemen. We'll catch you again next week. That's all we've got time for...

EMERSON: Thanks very much.

GILBERT: ... this edition of *AM Agenda*.

BRANDIS: Thank you, Craig, thank you.

