



THE HON DR CRAIG EMERSON MP
MINISTER FOR SMALL BUSINESS, INDEPENDENT CONTRACTORS AND
THE SERVICE ECONOMY
MINISTER FOR COMPETITION POLICY AND CONSUMER AFFAIRS
MINISTER ASSISTING THE MINISTER FOR FINANCE ON
DEREGULATION

Transcript
SKY NEWS AM AGENDA
Tuesday, 16 March 2010
Ashleigh Gillon interviews Dr Craig Emerson and Senator George Brandis

E&OE

Subjects: US President's visit, Newspill, Asylum seekers, Welcome to country ceremonies.

- GILLON:** The Foreign Minister has confirmed to SKY News that the US President will be arriving here in Australia next week. Barack Obama will be arriving in Canberra on Thursday the 25th and will address the joint sitting of Parliament on the Friday. Mr Obama will be heading to Indonesia before he gets to Australia. Here's what the Foreign Minister had to say about the visit a short time ago.
- SMITH:** President Obama's had to put off his visit for a couple of days so the Parliament won't now sit on Monday and Tuesday to welcome him. In accordance with the most recent advice President Obama will be here arriving on Thursday with an address to the Parliament on Friday. So Parliament will sit on the Friday and that's the advice that the White House made clear overnight and we welcome very much his arrival, as the Prime Minister has said; any time President Obama wants to visit Australia, we're very pleased to roll out the welcome mat.
- GILLON:** This afternoon on PM Agenda, David Speers will be previewing the visit with the US Ambassador Jeff Bleich, but for now, joining me in our Canberra studio, our panel of politicians, the Small Business Minister, Craig Emerson and the Shadow Attorney-General, George Brandis. Good morning to you both.

BRANDIS: Good morning Ashleigh.

EMERSON: Hello Ashleigh. Good morning George.

BRANDIS: Good morning Craig.

GILLON: Craig, we finally know that Mr Obama will be here next Thursday but it looks like he'll only be here for 24 hours or so. Michelle and the kids aren't coming, shall we be disappointed at such a short trip or just grateful that he's making this trip at all, relatively early...

EMERSON: Well the fact that the President is giving priority to a trip to Australia is very important and very flattering for our country that he sees this as important. Of course he's going to Indonesia as well but he's got a massive health bill, a revolutionary health plan to get through the Congress, it's understandable that he would need to give that his first priority but he's doing that and then he's coming to Australia. I think all Australians would welcome that, on both sides of politics and it's not often that an American President visits our country and I think that it's a great honour that he is.

GILLON: George Brandis, there has been a lot of stuffing around with itineraries. Should we take that as a sleight or is it understandable, this is the leader of the free world.

BRANDIS: I don't think it's a sleight. President Obama is facing his biggest domestic political test at the moment trying to get his healthcare reform bill through the Congress and the clock is running down on that apparently. He is leaving at the latest possible opportunity after the vote in the House of Representatives on that Bill so I don't think Australia should interpret it a sleight. It's a good thing, whenever the leader of our greatest ally comes to Australia and the Opposition joins with the Government in warmly welcoming President Obama.

GILLON: Okay, let's look at domestic politics. Today the latest Newspoll shows that Kevin Rudd's satisfaction rating is the lowest it's been since Mr Rudd took over the Labor leadership from Kim Beazley. Joining us now from our Sydney studio for a full run-down of the poll results today, is the Newspoll CEO, Martin O'Shannessy. Martin good morning.

O'SHANNESY: Good morning.

GILLON: Just looking at that satisfaction rating, it was 71 per cent, that was the high when Mr Rudd took office, now it's dropped down to below 50 per cent. Is that sort of drop to be expected or do you think it is suggesting that voters are turning on Mr Rudd?

O'SHANNESSEY: I think there's a little bit of both of those things. Clearly people are getting to know Mr Rudd better and making up their minds about him and satisfaction rate position below 50 is the first time in the Newspan for Mr Rudd. It wouldn't be considered an absolute crisis. At the same time in the election cycle, John Howard had 51, or 41 satisfied and 50 dissatisfied so in fact quite the opposite of where Kevin Rudd is. But it does show that there is a slight fading away from the - if you like, the rock star kind of numbers that Kevin Rudd was achieving through his first two years.

GILLON: Tony Abbott's personal support though, the levels don't seem to have changed much this fortnight?

O'SHANNESSEY: No, not much at all. Tony Abbott 47 per cent satisfied with his performance, 41 dissatisfied, which is about the same position that Mr Rudd is and I guess the interesting thing and the thing that would concern the Government is that the clear lead, the clean pair of heels that he's been showing his opponents over the last two years, isn't there. In the primary vote, in the difference between the performance ratings that we're seeing, the satisfaction ratings, it's not there and even the preferred or better Prime Minister rating is starting to narrow, still a pretty comfortable 25 per cent lead, but you know, much narrower than it was over either of Tony Abbott's two predecessors.

GILLON: Two party preferred though on that basis, the Government would still comfortably win an election if the vote was held today, your poll suggests?

O'SHANNESSEY: Yes, on a strict number probably with a, you know, slightly reduced majority, a lot of seats in there held around the one per cent mark. But basically what we're seeing is on a primary vote and a two-party vote, the Opposition is back where it was and we see a continuation if you like of the solidification and the back to basics that the Liberal Party and the Coalition are seeing under Tony Abbott and that's the fourth Newspan in a row where that's been apparent and I think the only concern that the Government has is when can they break free and start to lead again, right now that seems pretty tough.

GILLON: Martin O'Shannessy from Newspan, thanks as always, for your time this morning.

O'SHANNESSEY: Always a pleasure.

GILLON: Craig Emerson, how disappointing is it that the Government hasn't seen any sort of bounce it seems from the

announcements of the major health reforms over the last couple of weeks?

EMERSON: We've said all year, Ashleigh, on this program that we expected the polls would tighten. Kevin Rudd has said he thought we'd take a whacking in the polls. The poll numbers are down a bit.

GILLON: It's not exactly a whacking though yet.

EMERSON: Well, I think that's right. But I'm sure George will think it's a wonderful result for the Coalition. Fair enough, if he wants to make that argument. But the point is, here, that we're getting on with very difficult reforms, and a reforming government very often when they're doing the reforms doesn't bounce around in high stratospheric levels of popularity. And that's true of governments over the last 25 years. When governments get down and do the hard work, you're basically turning your back a little bit on populism, if you like, that can pick you up in the polls. If there's a long-term political result for these reforms, well, well and good. But it's why we're in government, to do reforms. I remember John Howard in his first year did the gun control stuff. Now, that was actually a good reform but he was pretty unpopular at the time for doing it. So we shouldn't be driven week by week by polls that say, oh, what sort of - you know, as Keating used to say...

GILLON: Don't pretend you don't pay attention to them though, Craig Emerson.

EMERSON: No, but this idea that Keating used to say of flicking the switch to vaudeville, you know, and be the all-singing, all-dancing Rudd Government, I think you're far better off doing the hard yards. And for that, you can pay a price in the polls. But that's what happens when you take on a huge issue such as health reform and the other reforms we're doing.

GILLON: George Brandis, similarly Tony Abbott didn't seem to get any sort of massive bounce out of the paid parental leave scheme that he flagged last week.

BRANDIS: Well look, I think the trend of the polls is, since December is pretty clear. And I think what Martin O'Shannessy said at the start of that little piece you had before, that people are getting to know Kevin Rudd better, is the key to this, that the more people see of Kevin Rudd, the more they are waking up to the fact that he's a fake. Now, this is a man who ran at the last election, he perched himself on a fence outside Nambour and said, the badge of fiscal conservative is a badge I wear with pride. Now, we now know that it wasn't a badge he wore with pride. In fact, it wasn't a badge he wore at all, because after he bluffed people

into voting for him, within 18 months he'd taken the country \$150 billion into debt.

EMERSON: Don't mention the global recession, George; don't mention the recession.

BRANDIS: A hundred and fifty billion dollars into debt, so people - and people know when he said that he wasn't fair dinkum. He was saying it not because he believed it but because an advertising agent told him to say it. And there have been so many issues in which people realise that what Kevin Rudd says and what he does are two different things. This is an all-talk, no-action Prime Minister. And Craig, honestly and truly, as for reform, what reforms have there been in the Rudd Government other than reversing, reversing the strongest financial position in the world that Australia enjoyed when you came into power, and in running the country into the greatest levels of debt this country has ever suffered. And that's what this Government will be remembered for - debt and incompetence, not reform.

EMERSON: And by asking that question, you have revealed yet again that the Coalition is, was and always will be totally against the economic stimulus plan that kept this country out of the global recession. You're like a scene out of *Monty Python*, you know - actually it was John Cleese in *Fawlty Towers*, where he said "I only mentioned the war once but I think I got away with it". You never mentioned the global recession that took \$180 billion off our tax revenue...

BRANDIS: Craig, just come back to Earth for a moment. If we can just come back to reality for a moment. Two points. First of all, the Coalition said all along that we supported a measure of stimulus, but we thought you wasted too much money. And if you haven't got that message from the collapse of your pink batts program, I don't when you're going to get smart.

EMERSON: Well, you've got about 23 different messages.

GILLON: This is an argument we have had a few times...

EMERSON: Many, many times.

GILLON: ...before, gentlemen, and there are plenty of other issues I do want to get to today, and we will get to those issues just after this quick break. Stay with us.

[Advertisement break]

GILLON: Welcome back to AM Agenda. This morning, the Government has moved to quash a report in *The Daily Telegraph* suggesting that a move to process asylum seekers in Darwin is imminent. Joining me this morning on our panel of politicians, George Brandis and Craig Emerson. Good morning again. Craig, how much room is left on Christmas Island? Is the move to Darwin going to happen in the next few weeks. What are we looking at?

EMERSON: There is extra capacity on Christmas Island and...

GILLON: How much?

EMERSON: ...we can't comment on, you know, media reports and security reports, so I can't, I can't. I'm not in a position to elaborate on that newspaper report. I'm just saying there is capacity at Christmas Island. There have, I think, been suggestions that if people do go to Darwin, that makes it easier for them to come into Australia. That's not the case. They are treated just like anyone else, but I'm...

BRANDIS: But they're in Australia, they're on the mainland if they go to Darwin, obviously.

EMERSON: Well, they don't have any legal...

GILLON: We will get to that in a sec.

EMERSON: ...rights other than those that they would have from arriving on Christmas Island, so I just want to make that point.

GILLON: Craig Emerson, I understand though that the capacity is about 100 extra beds at Christmas Island at the moment. The Government's expanding that so by the end of the month I understand that there will be an extra 400 or so beds. But the rate that these boats keep coming, I think we've had four boats in the past week or so, that doesn't leave a lot of room at all, does it? So we could potentially see a move to Darwin within a couple of weeks.

EMERSON: Yeah, well as I say, I can't speculate. I know, you know, you'd like me to, and it's fair enough that you're asking the questions. I just can't respond to that. But I can say this, that the numbers that are coming to Australia are dwarfed by the numbers going to Italy, to Greece, to Spain - 36,000 to Italy. Now, George will say...

BRANDIS: We haven't had that problem in this country, that's the point...

EMERSON: ...George will say this...

BRANDIS: ...we haven't had that problem in this country until you came into power.

EMERSON: Actually, George will say this when it's George's turn.

GILLON: We will get to...

EMERSON: But George will say, oh, it's all because Labor got rid of temporary protection visas. So did us getting rid of temporary protection visas lead to 36,000 asylum seekers going to Spain? This is what's so absurd about it. There is a surge in the number of asylum seekers in the last two or three years because of conflicts in Sri Lanka, in Afghanistan, in other countries, and the push factors are so strong that they are being felt very strongly in countries like Italy, Spain and Canada and other parts of the Northern Hemisphere.

GILLON: Senator, look, the Government hasn't made any secret that the next stop is Darwin. Where else would you like to see these asylum seekers go? You can't just keep squishing them into Christmas Island, can you?

BRANDIS: Well, look, you know, the fact is this problem should never have arisen at all because when the Liberal Party was last in government we had the problem under control. And you know, Craig can talk about the push factors. The push factors were always there over the last...

EMERSON: That's not right.

BRANDIS: ...over the last 10 years...

EMERSON: That's not right.

BRANDIS: ...the push factors arising from instability in other regions of the world were always there. For heaven's sake...

EMERSON: Statistics show that to be...

GILLON: Let the Senator have his...

BRANDIS: ...for heaven's sake, there's been a, there's been a civil war going on in Afghanistan for more than 20 years. The Iraq war began early in the last decade, early in this decade. So this talk about push factors is nonsense. There is a cause...

EMERSON: It's not nonsense.

BRANDIS: ...there is a cause and effect relationship, there is...

EMERSON: ...statistically clear that there is a surge now.

GILLON: Okay, what are your fears though about Darwin in particular? Why is this such a...

BRANDIS: We do not believe in onshore processing. The Liberal Party, the Coalition has made this perfectly clear. And I want to make this point, Ashleigh, that before the Rudd Government softened the policy in August of 2008, there wasn't a problem. The previous government had this under control. We had reduced the number of boats to an average of about three a year. The Rudd Government softened the policy and immediately the people smugglers saw the green light, they saw that Australia was now once again a soft option, a soft destination, and the number of boats has gone through the roof. We are reaching the stage, Ashleigh, at which there is going to be a boat a day, a boat a day. As you said yourself in your question, there have already been four boats this week. Now, this is a - this is an extraordinary reversal of where this country was at three years ago when we didn't even have a problem because the Liberal Party had tough policies.

GILLON: Can you just explain to our viewers though why you are so afraid of Darwin being a processing centre?

BRANDIS: We don't believe that the Australian public will accept or should be asked...

EMERSON: So it's political.

BRANDIS: ...or should be asked to accept onshore processing.

EMERSON: So it's political.

BRANDIS: Well, we don't believe the Australian people should...

EMERSON: ...this is the right question.

GILLON: Craig Emerson, let's not belabour...

BRANDIS: ...have this imposed upon them.

GILLON: Obviously it's not ideal to have it happening in Darwin, is it?

EMERSON: Christmas Island is there, it's a big facility, as you're saying. It's being expanded. That's our first - you know, that's where we would like to see processing occur, obviously.

BRANDIS: You condemned the Howard Government for building it, by the way.

EMERSON: But listen for a moment, if you could, George. If your analysis is right - and it is not - the fact is that there has been a surge in international asylum seeker numbers in the last two or three years, but...

GILLON: Do you think that George is right and we could soon see a boat a day?

EMERSON: ... but if George's analysis was right, Ashleigh, and he says that it's the change in policy, what policy would the Coalition re-institute? Is it the kids back behind the razor wire? Is it the Pacific Solution? Is it the re-introduction of temporary protection visas, given that the vast majority of those who were put on temporary protection visas ended up staying in Australia anyway?

BRANDIS: Well Craig, I'd like to know, please...

EMERSON: No, I asked the question.

BRANDIS: I'd like to know this. Do you say that there is not a cause and effect relationship between you softening the policy in August of 2008 and the much greater flow of boats seeking to enter Australia?

EMERSON: I'm asking you the question. No, we'll take it in turns. Answer the question: what would the Coalition do differently?

GILLON: Okay, we could keep going back and forth like this. Very quickly, George, that is a fair question. What is the Coalition planning to do?

BRANDIS: The Coalition, the Coalition will not adopt a policy as the Government seems to be opening the door to this morning of onshore processing.

GILLON: But what would you do?

BRANDIS: We would, by toughening the policy...

EMERSON: How?

BRANDIS: By returning to some of the Howard Government policies...

EMERSON: Which ones?

BRANDIS: ...that send a message to people smugglers...

EMERSON: Which ones?

BRANDIS: ...that Australia is no longer a soft target...

EMERSON: Kids behind razor wire.

BRANDIS: ...and the boats would stop coming, as they did when...

EMERSON: The Pacific Solution.

BRANDIS: ...as they did when last time the Liberal Party was in office...

EMERSON: Kids behind razor wire.

BRANDIS: ...and last time we also stopped the boats coming.

EMERSON: Pacific Solution.

GILLON: Okay, I don't think anyone can hear either of you [laughs] because we keep talking over each other.

EMERSON: I see kids behind razor wire, Pacific Solution coming your way.

GILLON: I do want to go onto another issue. We are running out of time. Yesterday there was a lot of debate over the welcome to country ceremonies that we've seen and the acknowledgement that politicians often do at the start of the speeches saying that we acknowledge the traditional owners of this land. And George, yesterday, your colleague, Wilson Tuckey, made this comment:

[Excerpt - file tape]

TUCKEY: The persons concerned were grossly overweight, and in fact, in no way added to that ceremony, and it's gone too far.

[End of excerpt]

GILLON: Mr Tuckey said that these sorts of customs of acknowledging traditional owners is a farce. The Greens are today calling on him to apologise. Should he?

BRANDIS: No, I don't think he should. I think...

EMERSON: Oh.

BRANDIS: ...I think Mr Tuckey has drawn attention to an issue that people...

EMERSON: You are so disappointing.

BRANDIS: ...that people are talking about. And let me tell you what I think about this, that I think that the idea of welcome to country ceremonies, in the appropriate circumstances, particularly when there is a special connection with Aboriginal tradition and culture, are appropriate and seemly, but I'm afraid that in recent - in the last couple of years, they've almost become a fetish of the politically correct left. And I think people are getting sick of them for having these welcome to country ceremonies imposed upon almost any public occasion, whether it's got anything to do with Aborigines or not.

EMERSON: Oh George, how disappointing.

BRANDIS: And let me give you an example, Ashleigh. Last Friday morning, I was at a ceremony at the Federal Court in Sydney to farewell the retiring Chief Justice. Now this was a court ceremony on the 17th floor of an inner city building. And at the start of the ceremony, the Commonwealth Solicitor General, rose to address the court, and he started his remarks with - by... acknowledging the traditional owners of the land. It had nothing to do with what was going on in the ceremony. It had nothing to do with the 17th floor of an inner city building. And I'm sure he wouldn't - it was quite inappropriate. And I'm sure he wouldn't have done it unless he was under instructions from the Government to do so. So I think...

EMERSON: Oh, was under instructions from the Government, come one.

BRANDIS: The Solicitor General who takes his instruction from the Government, as a matter of fact.

GILLON: Okay. Well let Craig Emerson [indistinct], because we are short on time, so we do need to let the minister respond.

EMERSON: Well what a sad day. But what a sad day when Wilson Tuckey becomes the moral compass of the Liberal Party. What a sad day. What you saw on television there...

BRANDIS: [Interrupts] He's entitled to his view.

EMERSON: ... and George has backed it in. I think that, frankly is a total disgrace, that Wilson Tuckey is setting the pace - setting the moral position of the Coalition. And George Brandis falls in behind him. Tony Abbott falls in behind him. These acknowledgments of the traditional owners do no harm, and quite a bit of good.

BRANDIS: On occasions they're appropriate.

EMERSON: It does no harm whatsoever, and for you to roll this out is frankly disgraceful.

BRANDIS: On occasions they're appropriate, but look, Craig...

EMERSON: And backing Wilson Tuckey is a total disgrace.

BRANDIS: Look Craig, you've got to accept, you've just got to get used to the idea that sometimes people will have a different view from yours, and they're entitled to it.

EMERSON: Yeah, but why backing Wilson Tuckey...

BRANDIS: What Wilson Tuckey said, I think, is something that a lot of Australians would agree with.

EMERSON: Well I'm very disappointed in you and in the Liberal Party for backing in Wilson Tuckey. It's a bloody disgrace.

BRANDIS: Well don't be outraged because somebody has a different opinion from you.

EMERSON: Well I don't mind that. You backed him in, Wilson Tuckey saying, oh, people are fat and all this. I mean, oh, that is a disgrace, George, if you could back that in. It is just a complete disgrace.

BRANDIS: I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about the fact that these welcome to country ceremonies...

EMERSON: You agreed with him...

BRANDIS: ...and the acknowledgment of the traditional owners of the land where sometimes appropriate have become almost a fetish of the politically correct left, and people don't like it.

EMERSON: It does no harm, and does a fair bit of good.

GILLON: Okay, gentlemen, next week I'm sure we'll make sure we bring in the boxing gloves so that you can take this...

EMERSON: I broke a finger playing rugby.

GILLON: Keeps our viewers entertained at least.

EMERSON: Don't squeeze it.

GILLON: Craig Emerson, George Brandis, thank you for the fiery end to the program there. Thanks for your time. And we'll see you both next week as always. Thank you.

EMERSON: Righty-o.

END