



THE HON DR CRAIG EMERSON MP
MINISTER FOR TRADE

Transcript
ABC 612 Mornings with Madonna King

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E&OE

Subjects: Nuclear industry, Japan, Libya no-fly zone, polls, euthanasia, skills shortages, respecting the office of Prime Minister.

MADONNA KING: Let's go Inside Canberra now - Senator George Brandis, the Deputy Leader of the Opposition in the Senate, good morning.

GEORGE BRANDIS: Good morning, Madonna.

MADONNA KING: And Dr Craig Emerson, from Julia Gillard's government, the Trade Minister - good morning, Dr Emerson.

CRAIG EMERSON: Hello Madonna, and hello to you, George.

BRANDIS: Good morning, Craig.

KING: Are we seeing the end of the nuclear industry world-wide, do you think, Craig Emerson?

EMERSON: I think that's taking it way too far. Obviously, what's happening in Japan is of great concern to the Japanese Government, and certainly of concern to the people who live in that zone, that exclusion zone.

The best advice that we've got to date is that beyond the exclusion zone, there doesn't seem to be a problem. There is some conflicting advice, depending on who's making the statements, but in respect of the Japanese Government, and they are being assisted by experts from other countries, this is rated as a four, which means that the issue remains a local issue, localised to the area ...

KING: I thought just a little while ago it was rated as a six?

EMERSON: Well, I've got this information that it's rated as a four, which means that it's still local. There have been suggestions from some French spokespeople, that it should be higher than that, but we have not, at this point, been able to verify that position as being a position of the Government of France.

KING: Alright, okay, so is there some confusion over whether it is rated a four or a six, are you saying?

EMERSON: I'm saying that the Japanese Government, and there is assistance from others as well, do rate it at a four.

Beyond four then the impacts obviously are more serious, but from one to four, that is the range at which it's defined as being a localised event.

KING: Alright. George Brandis, how do you think this will affect the nuclear industry?

BRANDIS: Well I think it does remind us that, you know, nuclear power stations are places where, you know, if they are breached or seriously damaged, they can create tremendous public health perils.

Now that having been said, I don't think, to go back to your first question, we are seeing anything like the end of the nuclear industry world-wide. I mean, a very substantial amount of base load power in Europe is provided by nuclear energy, including in a country like France - 80 per cent of it.

So I think although this is a very grave situation, equally I think that it's important that people not over-react.

KING: Okay. And just on this, you've both been in power for a long time between you - we've just been talking about disasters this morning. Have you seen a time like this before, outside war, so much heartache being suffered by so many people?

EMERSON: It's hard to recall anything on this scale. I suppose we didn't know what was going on in Rwanda in 1992. The massacre there was truly horrific.

Japan was causally related to the events that caused the flood or the cyclone in Queensland ...

KING: No-one's saying that, no-one's saying that. But I'm just saying as a time period, as a legislator, and in your time, can you ... because this has all sorts of implications for the mental health of people ...

BRANDIS: Sure.

KING: ... for our morale, of a country probably.

BRANDIS: Yes, well I think that's true. But if I can just finish by saying I think the point Craig makes about the Rwanda genocide, and the genocide in Kampuchea, they were in a sense worse events, more people suffered the consequences of them, and of course those were events that were caused by evil and malicious human beings, rather than by natural phenomena.

KING: Yeah, yeah. Alright, so Dr Craig Emerson, just back to you briefly, France's nuclear watchdog has upgraded the situation to a level six, placing it second to Chernobyl as the world's worst nuclear disaster. You're saying our official advice from the Japanese Government is that it remains rated a four?

EMERSON: I urge you and your listeners to truly stay tuned, because this is not a constant situation, it's evolving ...

KING: Yes, but ...

EMERSON: ... and let's all hope that it evolves for the best.

KING: But is that right, just so that I get that factually right ...

EMERSON: Well, I haven't had that advice about the French authorities. I have had suggestions that spokespeople of French origin are making statements. I haven't had that advice about ...

KING: Certainly the ABC News is reporting that as a fact.

EMERSON: Okay, well, and I accept that ...

KING: Yes.

EMERSON: ... but I'm saying that the advice we have from the Japanese authorities is that it's rated as a four, but the situation is evolving.

KING: Yes, absolutely, and in either case, it remains dangerous, doesn't it?

Look, can we go to an issue closer to home: Kevin Rudd, any chance of him leading the party again, Craig Emerson?

EMERSON: No, Julia Gillard is the leader, and she's leading us not only extremely well, she's leading us as we take

on a very big battle, and that is the battle over climate change ...

KING: Alright, but can I ask you, because when I asked you this last year, or before Julia Gillard was made the Prime Minister, you said almost a similar thing - didn't you? You know, Kevin Rudd is the leader, and he will lead us into the next election. He is a good leader.

EMERSON: And that was my belief, and the leadership changed, and I support the leader. I actually have a record of supporting each and every leader, because I think fundamentally it is a really tough job ...

KING: Yeah.

EMERSON: ... and people are tearing away at the leaders, from the Opposition, from the community, sometimes within your own political party. And I think maybe it's not appreciated as to how difficult that job is. And I'm not only referring to the Prime Ministership, I'm referring to the Leader of the Opposition because you did see, frankly, under Labor, when we were in opposition, a number of leadership changes. You've seen now under the Coalition - I'm not making a big political point of this - a number of leadership changes. And I actually think of the leader, and I think, well, it's so hard to please everyone, particularly when your job, in the long term national interest, might not be to please everyone.

KING: But polls are showing Kevin Rudd's more popular than Julia Gillard. Is that a distraction for Labor?

EMERSON: I don't think so. I mean, Newspolls - you'll hear George and I when we're asked about this say things like - we're not experts on polls. Newspolls come and go, and I think that's true. And I think it's the job of governments and of oppositions to behave in the long-term national interest, and that, from time to time, will mean the making of unpopular decisions. So if we just judge ourselves and alter our behaviour according to where we stand in a fortnightly ...

KING: Yes.

EMERSON: ... Newspoll, almost by definition, Madonna, that political party will not behave in the national interest ...

KING: No, but ...

EMERSON: ... because that involves decisions for the long term, where the benefits ...

KING: No, but you're not ...

EMERSON: ... come in the long term.

KING: No, but you're not answering the question. In a sense, with ...

EMERSON: I'm doing my very best, Madonna.

KING: [Laughs] Well, let me help you by ...

EMERSON: Thank you very much.

BRANDIS: You don't have a lot to work with there, Craig ...

KING: [Laughs] No ...

BRANDIS: ... I feel sorry for you.

EMERSON: I'm very happy to work with Julia Gillard ...

KING: Yes, yes, but ...

EMERSON: ... and I think she's a delight compared with Tony Abbott ...

MADONNA KING: Yes, but you're saying ...

CRAIG EMERSON: ... the climate-change denier.

MADONNA KING: No, just hold on a tic there. You're saying, you know - because the party acts this way or the party will be seen in this light - but we're actually talking about the same party. The polls are showing that Kevin Rudd, who is Labor, is more popular than Julia Gillard, who is Labor. Is that a distraction?

CRAIG EMERSON: No, I don't think so. And what I'm saying is that it is not a surprise that Julia Gillard's rating in these fortnightly Newspolls ...

MADONNA KING: Yes.

CRAIG EMERSON: ... would be affected by the decision to proceed to put a price on carbon.

MADONNA KING: But Kevin Rudd's not being tied in with that same decision by virtue of your argument there, is he?

CRAIG EMERSON: Well, I'd ... again, this then involves dissecting the polls. What is causing the particular movement in the polls and how Kevin's affected or not affected by the current decisions, how Julia is or isn't affected. I'd rather leave that to the experts and get on with the good policy work that we're embarked upon.

MADONNA KING: All right.

Senator George Brandis, you've been unusually quiet. Is this just a bit of mischief making? A poll shows this and Kevin Rudd is unlikely to be leader again, is that how you see it?

GEORGE BRANDIS: Well, I must say I do feel sorry for my friend Craig. He's increasingly starting to sound like the famous Iraqi information minister who was telling everyone that Saddam Hussein's forces were prevailing over the infidels, and people were

watching on CNN the American tanks in the outer suburbs of Baghdad a few years ago.

CRAIG EMERSON: Your colleague ...

GEORGE BRANDIS: Look ...

CRAIG EMERSON: ... Peter Dutton ...

GEORGE BRANDIS: Look, all I'm ...

CRAIG EMERSON: ... made this exact comparison ...

GEORGE BRANDIS: All jokes ...

CRAIG EMERSON: ... and I resent it.

GEORGE BRANDIS: All jokes aside, there is - it is obvious to everybody in the country - that there is now a deep and intractable split at the highest levels of the government between Gillard and Rudd, and it is beginning to affect the national interest. Let me give you an example.

Last week, Mr Rudd was in North Africa promoting the Australian Government's policy for a no-fly zone over Libya, so as to stop Gaddafi's air force strafing the protestors. That was the policy of the Australian Government. Meanwhile in Washington, Julia Gillard, who had obviously been swept off her feet by Barack Obama, extemporised on that policy.

She said, well, a no-fly zone isn't the only option. When she was asked about that, and whether there was a split between the two of them, she said, well, we haven't been able - we haven't spoken. And when she was pressed she said, we haven't spoken to each other in the last 24 hours because we're in different time zones and we're both travelling. Now, you know, I'm not a great advocate for prime ministerial lying, but I hope that was a lie because if it was the truth, what it shows is that the breakdown of relationships between the Prime Minister and the Foreign Minister were so severe that they weren't even able to organise ...

MADONNA KING: But their advisors ...

GEORGE BRANDIS: ... a trans-Atlantic telephone call to sort it out.

MADONNA KING: But their advisors may have been speaking, mightn't they, Senator Brandis?

GEORGE BRANDIS: Well, their advisors ...

CRAIG EMERSON: Their advisors were speaking.

GEORGE BRANDIS: The contribution of the advisors was a briefing by one of Julia Gillard's senior advisors to the Fairfax media that Kevin Rudd was out of control. And ... but it's not Kevin Rudd who's out of control on this occasion. Kevin Rudd was faithfully and, I must say, skilfully executing the policy of the Australian Government. What is out of control is the fact that

you have the Prime Minister and the next most senior politician in the Cabinet not on speaking terms.

CRAIG EMERSON: All of that is bunkum. And what you actually missed out - and deliberately missed out - in Julia's answer to that question is this. She said, there is no difference in the position of Kevin Rudd and myself on this matter. Interesting that you decided not to let Madonna's listeners know that as being the completion of the sentence, George, and it's so typical of the Coalition, the selective quoting. You're doing your best - I understand that - to try to change the Government. That's your job. But let's try to do it truthfully.

GEORGE BRANDIS: Look, I ... it's not my job to repeat Labor Party lies and excuses. When Julia Gillard was asked, have you spoken to Mr Rudd in the last 24 hours - this was when he was prosecuting one policy on one side of the Atlantic and Julia Gillard was expressing a different policy on the other side of the Atlantic - the answer was, no, we're in different time zones, we haven't been able to speak in 24 ...

MADONNA KING: [Interrupts] All right. I'm going to actually leave it there and move on to the next topic.

There's of other things I want to briefly touch on. One of them is this survey in the papers this morning, a report showing that more than 40 per cent of Australians would take the option of

euthanasia if available if they were terminally ill with just weeks to live. And the poll's by Alzheimer's Australia. Do either of you believe this is becoming an issue in the public arena and that Federal Parliament will have to grapple with it in some way? Craig Emerson.

CRAIG EMERSON: Look, I don't think it's a big mainstream issue, to be honest with you Madonna, and I wonder, too, in relation to euthanasia what people's understanding of what's involved? Euthanasia does not mean removal of life support for someone who's ... who otherwise would not survive if it weren't for the life support. It does not mean ... you can give palliative care for pain relief and so on. But euthanasia, effectively, is assisted suicide. Now, I'm not sure how many Australians would support assisted suicide. If there were euthanasia issues, fine, people say, well that sounds like it's giving people the dignity to die.

MADONNA KING: Yes.

CRAIG EMERSON: Well, removing life support does that. Palliative care addresses ... I'm not saying it fixes pain by any means, and I'm sure many of your listeners would have watched a lot of suffering. But euthanasia, effectively, is assisted suicide ...

MADONNA KING: All right.

CRAIG EMERSON: ... and people will need to make up their minds on that basis in the community. I don't think it's going to be a particularly big debate in the Parliament because, as I understand it, before I arrived this matter was resolved in the Parliament.

MADONNA KING: Okay. Senator George Brandis, do you see it the same way as Craig Emerson there?

GEORGE BRANDIS: On the issue of euthanasia, I am largely in agreement with what I think I understand Craig to be saying. I'm against euthanasia, and that's ... I don't need to elaborate on it, I'm just against it.

In relation to the rising significance of the issue in political discussion at the moment ...

MADONNA KING: Yes.

GEORGE BRANDIS: I think that's partly due to the rise of the Greens because Senator Brown has been very concerned to put euthanasia and gay marriage and a number of other issues of that sort of, that very sort of socially ... what is called socially progressive kind at the top of the national agenda.

And I'm sorry to say that the Labor Government, who are of course only in power because he supports them, are allowing him to get away with it.

MADONNA KING: Look, there's several other issues I'd like to get to this morning, but one I definitely want to. It's on

whether or not Australia has a skills shortage. Do we have a critical lack of skills in any particular area? And can I ask you first, Craig Emerson, very briefly, do you think we have and in what areas?

CRAIG EMERSON: Oh well, we do have skill shortages. But I just want to say very quickly on the euthanasia thing where I believe I deserve a right of reply that there was a big debate on this in 1997, and it was ... and that was under the Coalition. Does that mean it was the rise of the Greens, of course it doesn't. Now on your question about skills ...

GEORGE BRANDIS: No that was to stop euthanasia. The Greens want to start euthanasia.

CRAIG EMERSON: You said that the whole origin of the debate is the Greens. Well that's actually not the case. And it wasn't the case in 1997. If you're being logical you'd say it was the rise of the Greens in 1997.

MADONNA KING: All right, you've had your right of reply. Can we move on to skills. Is there a skills shortage, and in 10 seconds Craig Emerson, can you say if there is - and what that shortage is?

CRAIG EMERSON: Sure, in engineering, construction, in the mining sector there are skill shortages. It's spreading right through to other parts of the economy. And from time to time lists, in fact regularly, lists are prepared of skill shortages, Madonna. I think there's up to

about 90 categories of skill shortages, and they are varied from time to time.

MADONNA KING: And recently they were changed? I think hairdressers, chefs, cabinet makers taken off them; is that right?

CRAIG EMERSON: Yes, that's right, and that is to address the fact that we might be generating those skills here in Australia or there might be a sufficient number of migrants such that the shortage no longer exists.

And that's a prudent thing for any government to do.

MADONNA KING: We spoke to a man in Brisbane this week who is a cabinet maker. His wife is a patisserie chef. Three children born here. Those two skills are no longer on the list - so they could now be sent home unless they're allowed to stay in Australia under another sort of visa.

Should it be retrospective though, if someone's come and made their life here and had three children in Australia?

CRAIG EMERSON: I'd be happy to get back to you on that, but that doesn't sound right to me. I ... as I say I'm not doubting the sincerity of your caller, but when people come out in response to a skill shortage, if it's under the permanent migration program then they are here permanently. If they are, for example,

students coming out to study in particular courses - such as hairdressing, and that has happened - then they can complete their studies.

But if that's a temporary student visa, Madonna, then of course it is temporary in its nature. Now you're describing someone who sounds different from that in having three children. They wouldn't have done that in a very short space of time.

But let me get that information back to you.

But we do need to change those categories and I agree with you generally, not retrospectively.

MADONNA KING: All right, I will pass that information on to your office. I know Kevin Rudd has been working with them and what prompted the debate ...

GEORGE BRANDIS: Of course he has.

CRAIG EMERSON: Oh, what a terrible thing George, isn't that shocking.

GEORGE BRANDIS: Of course he has. You can't ... Kevin Rudd seems to be bobbing up everywhere at the moment.

CRAIG EMERSON: They might be constituents. You'd probably wouldn't be ...

MADONNA KING: Yes, they are constituents.

CRAIG EMERSON: Yeah, you wouldn't be familiar with that George, working with constituents.

MADONNA KING: No, but one thing that came up out of this ...

GEORGE BRANDIS: [Laughs] I just think it's remarkable that Kevin Rudd's name crops up in every conversation these days.

CRAIG EMERSON: Oh it's remarkable, he's working with constituents. Yeah, it shows how out of touch the Liberal Party is. Imagine an MP working with his or her constituents.

MADONNA KING: All right, well let me just finish this though. The children I understand are not Australian residents. They have to be 10. The oldest is six. Or one of their parents has to be born at ... has to be an Australian resident when the child is born to be considered an Australian resident.

Take this case out of it. What would happen if parents were made to leave Australia ... one child is 10 and the other children are younger than that?

Is the 10 year old an Australian resident and allowed to stay by themselves, Craig Emerson?

CRAIG EMERSON: Oh look, you've got me there Madonna. This is a particularly complex question. I am genuinely interested - and I will get the information back to you.

MADONNA KING: Okay.

CRAIG EMERSON: But I would be winging it now. And I'm not going to do that.

MADONNA KING: All right, and my final question then is Andrew from Cleveland says he wants both parties to show respect for the office of the Prime Minister, and he believes both of you should not call her by the name Julia.

Does he have a point?

CRAIG EMERSON: I think she's very happy to be called by the name Julia.

MADONNA KING: George Brandis.

GEORGE BRANDIS: I think that people are generally reasonably respectful towards political leaders. But I think also that it's one of the good things about our democracy that they're not too deferential - and it's part of the robustness of Australian democracy. I don't think that anyone has gone over the line particularly.

MADONNA KING: Well can I just raise ... heaven forbid I raise Kevin Rudd's name, but did he encourage this in a way by introducing himself as saying, hi, I'm from Kevin, and I'm from Queensland.

CRAIG EMERSON: And I'm here to help.

MADONNA KING: And I'm here to help.

GEORGE BRANDIS: Kevin 07. Or now it's Kevin 11.

CRAIG EMERSON: Yeah, look I ... sometimes I use the phrase Mr Abbott, other times I use the word Tony because I've played a couple of games of touch football and rugby with him and it just ... I don't think it matters that much you know. I think George is right. As Australians, it's not that we're disrespectful. We're just familiar.

MADONNA KING: Okay, can we leave it there, and I hope you two have enjoyed it as much as I have this morning. I've had a ball.

CRAIG EMERSON: Oh, so have I.

GEORGE BRANDIS: Madonna, we aim to please.

MADONNA KING: All right, that's ...

CRAIG EMERSON: Goodbye Senator Brandis.

GEORGE BRANDIS: Goodbye Dr Emerson PhD.

MADONNA KING: All right, thanks Dr Craig Emerson and Senator George Brandis. Back inside Canberra at the same time next week.

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