

INSIDE CANBERRA
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HON CRAIG EMERSON MP

MINISTER FOR SMALL BUSINESS, INDEPENDENT CONTRACTORS AND
THE SERVICE ECONOMY
MINISTER ASSISTING THE MINISTER FOR FINANCE ON
DEREGULATION

KING: From the Summit to determine the future of our country to what we should be doing about political donations, let's go *Inside Canberra* with Dr Craig Emerson, Small Business Minister in the Rudd Government, good morning.

EMERSON: Good morning Madonna. I'm in a studio in Melbourne that's called the Tardis so anything could happen during this program.

KING: It could and Opposition Attorney-General Senator George Brandis. Senator Brandis good morning and welcome back to 612 ABC Brisbane.

BRANDIS: Good morning Madonna. Good morning Craig.

KING: Now I want to just share with both of you an email I received overnight from a woman commenting on the 2020 Summit and she said that the Steering Committee of ten men and one woman should not have women concerned. In fact women's groups should be cheering because one woman is equal to ten men.

Laughter.

KING: Comment?

BRANDIS: It is a little surprising that in selecting the leaders of the Summit and I've got no criticism, of course, of any individual, they are all very distinguished people, but it is a little surprising that, or more than a little surprising that the Prime Minister has only chosen one woman.

KING: But we don't choose things on gender do we? We choose the best for the job?

BRANDIS: Yeah, but I would suggest to you Madonna and I suspect you'd be very receptive to the view that, in that the statistical odds are that about half of the most talented people in Australia are women, not ten per cent.

KING: Have women been duded by your boss Craig Emerson?

EMERSON: Well if you total up all of the Chairs it's seven out of 21 are women. It's not 50/50 which is roughly what the population distribution would suggest but there is a pretty good representation. Six of the co-Chairs are female frontbenchers in the Rudd Government.

KING: Because you couldn't find women outside the frontbench to lead those groups?

EMERSON: There's plenty of good women around and plenty of good women will be attending the Summit. There's, I think, a thousand participants. We've already had, at this fairly early stage, 2,500 people applying to be members of that group. So there'll be a very strong representation of women at the Summit itself.

KING: Can I ask you seriously, Craig Emerson, how do you make it representative of the community? To say it represents the community, do you need to make sure there are tradespeople, there's someone who's unemployed, there's people who run companies? What does representative mean?

EMERSON: Well I think that's a very good point and there will be a strong representation, that is, of the sorts of the people that you're describing. It can't just be, if you like, a Summit amongst the intelligentsia, as important as they are to our economic and social development, we need really practical people coming to the Summit and I'm sure that the selection panel will...

KING: So who's doing it?

EMERSON: There's a selection panel, Madonna, basically coordinated by Glyn Davis, whose chairing, he's responsible for the whole thing and you'd know Glyn from Queensland.

KING: Sure.

EMERSON: If those amongst your listeners who do know Glyn will know that he is not in any way elitist. He'll be very concerned to ensure that there is broad representation, not only across genders but the very important and good point that you made that everyone doesn't need to be a rocket scientist to be a participant in that Summit. We want really earthy suggestions as well as some of those from other galaxies if you like.

KING: George Brandis?

BRANDIS: Well I hope you're not having the insufferable Professor Robert Manne as one of your participants. But look, can I just make this comment about the structure of...

KING: Why do you say that?

BRANDIS: Of the Summit. I think Professor Manne gets plenty of airplay without needing to be, to foist his views upon the 2020 Summit. Can I just make this point Madonna, the Opposition has lent its support to the Summit. Two former Ministers in the Howard Government, Warwick Smith and Tim Fischer, are co-Chairs, are Chairs of various working groups. There is, but I question this part of the structure of the Summit, you talk about co-Chairs Craig, and these co-Chairs are going to be Government Members of Parliament, and presumably as co-Chairs they will be active participants in the discussion. There is a limited period of time for these discussions and lot of people trying to participate. I think you would have been much better off if you had not made serving Members of Parliament co-Chairs because they've already got the opportunity on a daily basis for at least the next three years to put their views at the very seat of power and every minute they take up in this Summit is a minute that won't be available to people who don't have their access and their opportunity to influence policy.

KING: Why isn't that a fair point Dr Craig Emerson?

EMERSON: Well if I could just say, George, you say the Opposition supports the Summit, you've spent all your time complaining about it, including on this program saying last week it was a talkfest. Now Brendan Nelson has joined and supported it...

KING: No, but what about...Dr Craig Emerson, what about answering the question. The question is "is that fair that your Government has co-Chairs, so politicians who have the microphone every day they want to, become such big participants, or is that the way you've made it?"

EMERSON: You'll find that the co-Chairs will not dominate discussion but in the end a Ministry is elected, a political party is elected to form a Government, a Ministry is elected from the Caucus then to implement policies, so I think it is a very good idea that we have Members of Parliament, that is Ministers, co-Chairing these things.

KING: All right, so can I go onto the next issue here then which is the issues that will be grappled with and I'm just wondering if you both can say to me one issue that you think, take the politics out of this, that's facing our country, that you really think if this thing is going to work that we might come up with a solution to? George Brandis?

BRANDIS: Well I...there are so many issues it's almost invidious to elevate one above others, but the one that does immediately come to mind, of course, is the continuing integration of Australia into the global economy. Now that task, that task has been undertaken with success by both the Hawke/Keating Government and by the Howard Government and the growth of Australia's economic prosperity, particularly in recent years, is very much a function of our integration into the world economy generally and the east-Asian economies in particular. We have to ensure that that process continues, that protectionist sentiment in this country is broken down and I think that's the key

to Australia's prosperity into the future. So obviously a very important issue for the Summit.

KING: And a big issue, Craig Emerson, is there a particular issue you could nominate like that?

EMERSON: There's two that I couldn't split. One is indigenous issues. Here we are in wealthy country, lots of people still struggling under high cost of living, but our indigenous community has really not shared in the benefits of our prosperity. I'd like to see, and this is a bit portfolio-related, a discussion at the Summit will be on about the role of small business development that might be able to support the aspirations of indigenous people. The other broader issue, Madonna, is people talk about labour shortages and skills shortages now. Yes, they are with us but they are going to be with us indefinitely with the ageing of the population. We're going to need to have a good discussion about how we fill these gaps. Whether we have more immigration, what that does to our housing stock and so on, and I think that's a very, very big discussion, aptly for the year 2020 because it is not a short term issue, it's an enduring issue for Australia now.

KING: All right, so we've got three big issues. There's the global economy and our role in that, indigenous and the skills crisis. Certainly can I add one and I don't know if I have the right to, but on behalf of my listeners the thing that keeps coming up is this single age pension and whether we value senior citizens in Australia. Is that earmarked for consideration at all? Craig Emerson?

EMERSON: Well certainly if people want to talk about that, they can. There is a section about supporting our older Australians.

KING: All right, well presumably it will come up in that and we look forward to that. Now, can I quickly go through some other issues? I'm not sure if you've had the chance to listen this morning but a case is before the Anti-Discrimination Commission, a young student has been refused enrolment at a Brisbane private school, he's a Sikh and he wears a patka, like a turban. Do we need to become more tolerant of different religions? George Brandis you were talking about our role in the global economy, or are rules rules and the school is doing the right thing here? George Brandis?

BRANDIS: Well I think that's a bit of false antithesis, with respect, because I think Australia is a country which is notably tolerant of different religions and different cultural practices and the enormous success of our post-war immigration policy and the fact that we've absorbed so many different cultures into this country over the last three generations, with the occasional, the occasional difficulty, but by comparison with other countries, remarkably few difficulties, just goes to show what a tolerant place Australia is.

KING: So what's your answer?

BRANDIS: But, in relation to the particular case you've pointed to, Ormiston College, I think we can comment in general on this, although it's before the Anti-Discrimination Commission, because the facts, as I understand them are not in dispute. I don't think this is an example of discrimination because what the school has as a policy is a uniform. Now, by definition, a uniform applies uniformly and to require all students who want to enrol at the school to wear the uniform isn't to discriminate against any group of students. In fact, it's the opposite, it's to subject everyone to a common rule.

KING: Craig Emerson, do you agree?

EMERSON: Look, I do agree with that observation. Schools, by their nature when they're non-Government schools, can and do have rules as to who they allow in. Catholic schools may say well we only want Catholics. I know a lot of Catholic schools have more than Catholics coming along, but they do have some sort of rights in this regard and I think George's point about uniforms is perfectly correct and I'd also endorse his comment about our great ability to welcome people from all these homelands. You know Logan City very well Madonna, 160 homelands represented there, it's in my electorate and we hardly ever have any difficulties there. So I think Australia does a pretty good job of, you know, making sure that people are welcome in our country.

KING: All right, you're on 612 ABC Brisbane, *Inside Canberra* this morning with Dr Craig Emerson, the Small Business Minister in the Rudd Government and Senator George Brandis, the Opposition Attorney-General. I'll go to Craig Emerson first this time, Peter Costello, Alexander Downer, Peter McGauran, all planning to retire. Should a politician be able to retire so soon after they were elected?

EMERSON: This issue came up in respect of the Labor Party a couple of terms ago and we actually prevailed upon a Member not to retire and he didn't and he's still a Member of Parliament now.

KING: Who's that?

EMERSON: Duncan Kerr in Tasmania. Duncan was pretty keen to, I think was, to join the State Parliament and he was asked not to do that and the Leadership didn't think it was a great look when people are elected and then they leave very quickly afterwards. Duncan is now a Parliamentary Secretary, so it's all worked out in relation to him, but I think that there needs to be some recognition that the people have re-elected these MPs. I don't know that there can be a hard and fast rule saying that you must serve out the full term, but they certainly do need to make their intentions known and not end up at the Verve restaurant in Kingston when Question Time is on as Alexander Downer did.

BRANDIS: That's not a cheap shot by any chance is it Craig?

KING: Well it did happen.

BRANDIS: It did happen. Can I come in on this Madonna? And can I make two observations please? First of all, I think after the service and the financial sacrifice, in fact, that Peter Costello and Alexander Downer and Mark Vaile and people like that have made to this country over many, many years, I don't think we should be mean-spirited towards them if they choose to seek another career. They're all relatively young men. They are people in their early 50s and I think that they have served this country well and that fact should be appreciated and that should be appreciated in a non-partisan way. But can I make a second comment? I think it's a shame in Australia that we do, have developed this culture of the moment a person has been a senior Minister and is no longer a senior Minister, that we want to get rid of them out of the Parliament. Now...

KING: You mean why aren't we using their skills in another...

BRANDIS: Yeah, and there are a couple of exceptions to that. Can I give a very non-partisan example? Senator Robert Ray who was a senior Cabinet Minister throughout the Hawke/Keating Government continues to sit on the Senate backbench. He retires in fact in the middle of this year, but has sat on the Senate backbench for 12 years after he was a Minister and has been a very distinguished contributor to the Parliament. In Britain John Major, after he lost the 1997 election, remained a backbencher in the House of Commons and was a distinguished contributor from the backbench and I think it's a shame we've lost that culture in Australia.

KING: Craig Emerson, that's an interesting point too, using one of your own colleagues. Are we throwing away the expertise of people like Peter Costello, who ran the economy for ten years, Alexander Downer's foreign policy expertise? Do we have to try harder to keep our MPs on both sides?

EMERSON: Sure, and look I'll make the obvious point, we're not trying to get rid of any of those MPs.

KING: No, we understand that.

EMERSON: They seem to be the ones who want to go but, look, I think that there is a role for, if you like, wise elders in the Parliament. They can in fact, play a role with young people, mentoring them. They can if they wish also familiarise people with Parliamentary rules so that there's a bit of decent behaviour around the place, so I agree that there is a role for such people. We just would like to know the intentions of these particular MPs. They have served Australia as Ministers, I just think the Australian people need to know, sooner rather than later, but not immediately, but sooner rather than later, what their intentions are going to be.

KING: A final quick answer to this. No doubt everyone's been reading the shenanigans going on in Wollongong. A woman considering applications to the Council sleeping with developers. The Prime Minister says he's going to tidy it up. What should be allowed? Do you both support changes to political donations or are they best as they are? Craig Emerson first?

EMERSON: No, there definitely needs to be change. We will reduce the threshold for disclosure. That is the size of the donation that needs to be disclosed publicly, from the \$10,000 that the previous Coalition Government legislated, back to \$1,500 or less. I think it's wrong that donors can contribute up to \$10,000 and not even need to reveal their identity.

KING: Ok, can I ask you Craig Emerson, will you name who the donors are to the Parties before going to the polls or those returns are only sighted after an election?

EMERSON: Look, I can't give a commitment on naming before the polls because a lot of the donations are made very, very close to polls.

KING: I'm just wondering if voters though, think that they have a right to know who is donating, unions or developers, to what Party before they actually lodge their vote?

EMERSON: Well they certainly, and you know this is an obvious point, they certainly are able to know exactly who's making the donations to whom under the electoral laws. We just think that they need to be improved and we think that \$10,000 is beyond the pale and if we can get it down to \$1,500 or less, that would be a worthwhile reform.

KING: Craig Emerson, thank you. Senator George Brandis?

BRANDIS: Well, can I say in relation to this, I've read what Mr Rudd said about this the day before yesterday and I think both sides of politics accept that transparency when it comes to political donations is a good thing. The purpose of transparency is not an end in itself. The purpose of transparency is to throw light on the possibility of undue influence being exercised by donors and let me throw another idea into the mix which hasn't been considered in Australia, or certainly hasn't been legislated for in Australia to the best of my knowledge. If the real vice we're concerned about is undue influence, why don't we go the whole hog and do what the Americans do and place a ceiling on donations?

KING: In what way? Each party can only accept a certain amount of money?

BRANDIS: From any individual donor. Now, you know, I come at this, I'll concede from the needy end of the argument because the Labor Party is a much wealthier Party than the Liberal Party. It gets a large quantum of donations from trade unions, a source that's inaccessible to us, but, so I declare my interest in the interest of transparency, but, you know, if you are going to really reform political donations, why not have a look at what the Americans have done and some European nations have done and place a ceiling.

KING: Yes or no? A good idea Craig Emerson?

EMERSON: No, I don't agree with that. I think the people can make a judgement...

BRANDIS: You just got \$20 million from the Trade Union movement.

EMERSON: Well, you talk about transparency, George, you think transparency is a good idea above \$10,000, but not below it? So, you know...

BRANDIS: Well no, that's not right. We both...

EMERSON: You legislated the \$10,000 limit. Your Government, in the previous term, lifted it from \$1,500 to \$10,000.

BRANDIS: And your Government, during the Hawke/Keating years, set it at \$1,500. It was lifted because there was a view that in the years that had gone by and given the escalation of the costs, in particular, of television advertising, \$10,000 was roughly in these days what \$1,500 was twenty years ago when your side set that limit.

KING: All right, we're going to have to leave it there. We're way over time, but political donations – a big issue and we're going to put it *In Focus* next Tuesday. We're just trying to find the right people who can join that panel next week and have a discussion about what you want shown in political donations and if there's a specific question on political donations you'd like answered next Tuesday, you can either give us a buzz on 1300 222 612 or send us an email. Senator George Brandis, great to talk to you again.

BRANDIS: Good to be with you Madonna.

KING: Dr Craig Emerson, enjoy Melbourne.

EMERSON: Ok, thanks Madonna. Bye George.

KING: Dr Craig Emerson, Small Business Minister in the Rudd Government and Senator George Brandis, Opposition Attorney-General, and we will return to Inside Canberra...

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