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Transcript  
Richard Glover's Drive on ABC 702 Sydney  
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Dr Craig Emerson; Jane Caro, public education advocate; Ross Cameron,  
Former Liberal MP for Parramatta

E&OE

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*Subjects: NAPLAN tests; impact of TV series Underbelly; status of asylum seekers and refugees.*

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**GLOVER:** Our Monday political forum. Craig Emerson is the Minister for Small Business and for Competition Policy and for Consumer Affairs and about half a dozen other things.

Craig, good afternoon to you.

**EMERSON:** Good afternoon, Richard.

**GLOVER:** And with me in Sydney, Jane Caro, advertising guru, who you might know from the Gruen Transfer, and public education advocate. And Ross Cameron, the former Liberal MP for Parramatta. Thank you very much for coming in.

**CARO:** Pleasure.

**GLOVER:** Now, teachers today voted to ban supervision of the next round of national education tests, their protest against the way the results are used on the My School website. This brings, of course, a stoush with the Deputy Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, who has vowed to recruit parents to supervise the tests and to hold them in town halls if need be.

Have the teachers chosen a battle they can't win, and has Julia Gillard gone too far in trying to get parents to scab, to use the word of one politician?

Craig Emerson, it must be interesting for you as somebody who's spent such a long time with Julia and in the union movement and in politics and so forth, to see her adopting so militant an action.

**EMERSON:** Well, I think this is an issue upon which we're determined to succeed mainly because this is what the public want us to do. The parents of Australia are very happy with the idea of shining a light on both good performance and not so good performance so that we can identify those aspects or those features in the under-performing schools that need improving. And also, Richard, where there are good techniques, proven practices in the schools that are going well, let's adopt the best practice, if you like, and apply that in the disadvantaged schools. So it'd be right up the alley...

**GLOVER:** But whether you're...

**EMERSON:** ...of a Labor Government actually supporting the disadvantaged schools around Australia.

**GLOVER:** Whether you're right or wrong on this issue of the My School website, you have to take the profession with you, don't you? You can't end up in a war with the people who actually have to carry out this so-called education revolution.

**EMERSON:** Well, not if they veto what the Government is seeking to do; not if they gut the My School website, which is what the teachers' union proposal would actually do. They say that it's to maintain the My School website, but to modify it. The effect of it would be to gut it. And parents are voting with their fingertips. They are logging on and having a look at this site and are enjoying the extra information that's now available to them for the first time through this revolutionary My School website. So we're determined to press on with it.

**GLOVER:** Julia Gillard's confrontation, though, is impractical, isn't it? We really can't have parents who are non, you know, not skilled professionals...

**EMERSON:** Parents would be supervising the tests.

**GLOVER:** ...supervising the tests, can we?

**EMERSON:** They're supervising the tests; they're not helping the kids through the tests. They're not marking the tests.

**GLOVER:** But wouldn't this create tensions in rural and city communities throughout Australia putting parents against their teachers and parents against other? This would create a kind of social nightmare, wouldn't it?

**EMERSON:** Well, let's not assume that every teacher is against the My School website. The Teachers' Federation might be against the My School website, but teachers who I speak to in Logan City in my electorate, not necessarily to the very last teacher but very many of them, are happy with it and think it's a good idea.

So I'm not sure that we would find the sort of confrontations that, you know, you think might happen in country towns. I think you'll find that there's pretty high support even within teaching.

But more importantly, parents want this, and I don't think that it's right that it should be stymied or abandoned simply because some teachers and the Teachers' Federation don't want it.

**GLOVER:** Jane Caro, the Teachers' Federation today have voted to, you know, have this ban on testing. Are they fighting just - they may be right, they may be wrong, but the Government won the election, this is the Government's policy, the polls show that individual parents support it by and large.

Isn't this a point where the Teachers' Federation just have to say, okay, we beg to differ but you guys have won, you're the Government, we'll do it?

**CARO:** That's a very interesting question you ask. I guess I look at it in two ways. The first is, my heart goes out to the teachers. I mean, I hate to differ with Craig, but I'm hearing a lot of anecdotal evidence that is really breaking my heart.

Here's just one example of a story I've heard recently. There's a lovely little primary school that's in the most disadvantaged area of its particular part of Australia. It enrolls really, really, really troubled, disadvantaged kids from chaotic and very difficult backgrounds.

Of course, unsurprisingly to everyone who knows the school, it's come bottom of the areas on the My School website because it's working with kids who are coming from the lowest base.

What's the result of that? Well, their top 20 achieving kids that they've worked really hard on for a long, long time have been taken out of the school and they're now going to other primary schools. And the principal, who is a woman I admire enormously - I've done work with her, she's one of those amazing inspirational principals who works with difficult kids and, you

know, is enthusiastic and always describe as a Kelly doll. You can knock her down, you can knock her down and she's back up again.

Well, the My School website's done her in. She is going to be leaving teaching at the end of the year. She said, it's too hard now, I can't, I cannot fight not only the disadvantage my kids coming to the school with, but my own employer.

**GLOVER:** But why shouldn't those parents, the parents of the 20 top performing kids, why shouldn't they have had that information that their school ...

**CARO:** But they do have the...

**GLOVER:** ...is actually not doing that well, for whatever reasons.

**EMERSON:** And let's remember that this is a comparison...

**CARO:** Well, they can have the information, but then...

**EMERSON:** ...with like kids elsewhere. It's not a comparison with...

**CARO:** No, Craig...

**EMERSON:** ...very wealthy schools. It's a comparison with like schools elsewhere.

**CARO:** You had a long time to talk. Let's just be clear about this. First of all, the NAPLAN testing is not designed to compare schools. It is designed as a diagnostic test for individual children so that teachers can help them to improve. So we're using a test that wasn't designed for this purpose, for the wrong purpose.

The second thing is there is absolutely no evidence internationally to show that this kind of naming and shaming of schools that are already doing it tough...

**EMERSON:** It's not naming and shaming.

**CARO:** Well, I'm sorry, that's the way that people are seeing it. If we're seeing the top kids being taken out of schools that are under-performing, eh, I don't know what you'd like to call it.

But anyway, the problem is we've seen in the UK and the US where similar kinds of regimes have been introduced that they are such a disaster that people are backing off them so fast you can see the skid marks on the road.

**GLOVER:** Given that the Government won the election, given that this is their policy, that they're the boss momentarily, and given that the polls show that the people by and large support it, isn't the wiser course for the teachers to say, okay, well, let's do it if it all - and we predict it'll be obviously bad in a couple of years' time, but...

**CARO:** Yes. My answer is: my heart goes out to the teachers. I absolutely understand why they are beside themselves. My heart is breaking over what is happening to education in Australia. I think the whole country should hang its head in shame.

But what I will say is: yes, I do think from a strategic perspective, this is a battle that's going to be very hard for the teachers to win. However, I have tremendous sympathy with their despair and their desperation to do something for the toughest and most difficult job they do, which is dealing with our most vulnerable children. It's not about them winning any elections or popularity contests.

**GLOVER:** Ross Cameron, have the teachers' union today chosen the wrong battle?

**CAMERON:** Well, Richard, my view is that the Australian Education Union and the NSW Teachers' Federation are both candidates for the worst-led organisations in Australian public life.

**CARO:** Too easy to say.

**CAMERON:** They could be - they're sort of up there with the PLO in terms of their capacity to destroy opportunities to actually make a positive difference in the lives of their constituents.

But we shouldn't - the truth is the My Schools website is one of the few really good initiatives of this Government. The Government should be applauded for it. It's not a perfect solution. Any time you have a significant change you will have sort of winners and losers, but...

**CARO:** Pity those vulnerable kids in Australia that lose.

**CAMERON:** In fact, the most vulnerable are likely to be the winners over the long run. The truth is that if you can't measure it, if you can't measure it, you can't manage it, and until the Government, until any of us - parents, students, governments - get some decent data on how schools are actually performing...

**CARO:** We have all this data.

**CAMERON:** That's not true.

**GLOVER:** We should move on. Thirteen to six is the time. We have Craig Emerson, Jane Caro and Ross Cameron with us.

[Irrelevant topic - traffic update]

**GLOVER:** Now, the Underbelly series again has trumped the ratings, this time with a story set in Kings Cross and featuring a very positive portrait of one of the dominant figures in the Cross today, John Ibrahim. Half the country seems to live the various instalments of the series. Others say it glorifies crime and makes criminals look sexy and glamorous.

What's your view, and do you think Australians have always had a soft spot for outlaws? We were talking about Ned Kelly only the other day.

Ross Cameron.

**CAMERON:** I see the painting of Ned Kelly has just fetched the highest price of any Australian painting. Probably Australia's most famous song, Waltzing Matilda, celebrates a sheep thief. Our first - Ned Kelly's probably our first iconic personality in kind of a hundred years of Australian history. Then obviously there is this convict, this whole convict legacy and a sort of Irish anti-establishment, anti-authoritarian legacy.

I'm sympathetic to Police Commissioner Scipione's remarks that it's hard for him to motivate his police force to get out there, to track down and arrest these guys, to have them convicted and put away when in effect Channel Nine is out there turning them into movie stars and sort of making it look like this sort of glamorous, sexy, attractive lifestyle. I can see how that could be demoralising to police.

**GLOVER:** It's funny, isn't it, because the 6.30 shows, A Current Affair and Today Tonight, are so sort of pro-law and order, and then the dramas that come afterwards are pro the other side. Maybe that's balance.

**CAMERON:** Well, maybe it is. I do feel - I mean, one of the thing - this has got a sort of a bit of reality TV feel to it. It can be gripping but it is such recent history that I am also conscious of the fact that when you're getting such a ratings blockbuster there's a morality of television that says, look, it doesn't matter if a few human reputations are just roadkill along the way to this blockbuster. And it's very recent.

I think even a guy like Ibrahim in the Cross, I mean, the bloke has never been convicted of anything. I don't know him, I've never met him, you know, but I think he's entitled to a

presumption of innocence as far as I'm concerned, as is 20 million other Australians.

**GLOVER:** And you know, maybe because of that reason, maybe because of the defamation lawyers, the portrayal of him is intensely positive, at least on the first outing.

Jane Caro, what do you think of the way they're playing crime in Sydney?

**CARO:** Well, you know, I'm sorry, I just love the series. I watched it on DVD. I think it's one of the best produced, best written, best acted, best directed TV series made in Australia for a very long time. I'm nearly as addicted to it as I was with West Wing, and I thought that was impossible.

Look, I don't really have a moral view on this. It's bloody good television and I really like watching it. And that boy who's playing John Ibrahim, he is hot. I have never...

**GLOVER:** But isn't that the problem, and this is not particularly about John Ibrahim, but most criminals are thick, stupid...

**CARO:** Stupid, ugly.

**GLOVER:** ...ugly, don't wash, drug habits, you know...

**CARO:** Well, most of them on there are.

**GLOVER:** ...they are not glamorous.

**EMERSON:** There are criminals out there listening to you. [Laughter]

**CARO:** Most of them on there are. But I think most people are able to draw a line between what is a dramatised TV series. The same argument was put forward about the Godfather films and about a lot of the treatment of the mafia in America, that it glamorises thugs. Yes, I think there's some truth in that, but I think it's human nature. I think if you look back on all the stories, books, histories, you know, we're interested in this stuff.

**GLOVER:** Craig Emerson?

**EMERSON:** Look, if it's a morality play it's a bad play, but I don't - I hope it's not that. I hope it is some sort of dramatisation with an increasingly large component of fiction in it. And the truth is that we've always liked these sorts of shows, perhaps not as graphic and one-sided as this.

I remember when I was growing up, Division Four and Homicide, and old Kragg used to be a bad guy and then he became a good guy in Division Four. We've always liked...

**GLOVER:** Well, we were mainly on the side of the coppers in Division Four though, weren't we?

**EMERSON:** That's what I mean about the morality. You wouldn't want, you know, the public barracking for the bad guys, and I think maybe there's a little bit of that here. And I don't think we should be glorifying the underbelly of Kings Cross myself.

But if people can make that step, in a sense the reason that people like these sorts of shows, whether Australian made or American made or even British, is they like a bit of excitement in their lives but they wouldn't actually like it happening to them. You know, if there were gunshots going off they'd be ducking their heads and probably going to the toilet pretty quick.

So I'm just saying that I think people understand that it's not the world that they really would like to inhabit, but as a bit of a flight of fantasy, they'd probably think, well, what's wrong with me having a, you know, a bit of excitement in my life so long as it's safely sitting at the lounge room and watching it on TV.

**GLOVER:** So with the remote in hand in case he's...

**EMERSON:** With the remote in hand if it gets too gory you can turn it off.

**GLOVER:** It is eight to six on the Political Forum. Craig Emerson the Minister for Small Business and Competition Policy. Jane Caro advertising guru and public education advocate and Ross Cameron, the former Liberal MP for Parramatta.

[Unrelated material]

The situation in both Afghanistan and Sri Lanka is improving according to the Government, so much so that it makes sense to suspend the processing of refugee claims from these countries.

Is this just a cynical attempt to diffuse the asylum seeker issue until after the election or is there a case that things are really getting better in these two countries?

Craig Emerson, as many people have made the point, we've got soldiers in Afghanistan, Department of Foreign Affairs officials list the country as a place that they really don't think Australians should visit. Is it just a joke to say that things are getting better there?

**EMERSON:** I think the difference is that it's not that we're not saying that anyone - any Hazari who is coming from Afghanistan is not a refugee. We're just saying that the situation has improved so that it's not automatically the case that they are a genuine refugee. And so this review will give the UNHCR, the relevant authorities, the time to make an assessment of the stabilisation in so far as persecution of the Hazaris is concerned.

That's different from the military situation overall in Afghanistan. And the other group as we know, from Sri Lanka where there are going to be elections so on the face of it things have stabilised there.

**GLOVER:** It's just a cynical attempt to put the timing onto the other side of the election isn't it?

**EMERSON:** Well I don't think so but I'd like to keep this in perspective too. The total number of people who have arrived on our shores via boat is 22,000. Now that's not this year, it's not last year, it's not in the last 10 years, it's in the last 35 years.

So it's not hard for some hysteria to be whipped up about asylum seekers, you know, flooding into Australia. The facts are otherwise. That 22,000 would be – what, a half decent crowd at at a semi-final rugby league match. You'd be disappointed with that crowd so I think we do need to keep it in perspective. But we're simply saying it's not automatically the case that if you are an asylum seeker from Sri Lanka or from Afghanistan that you do have a well-founded fear of persecution and therefore are a genuine refugee and if you're not then you'd have to go back, go back home.

**GLOVER:** Ross Cameron, just an attempt to let things settle so we can make a good determination, is that fair enough?

**CAMERON:** Well Richard, you don't have to be a sort of one nation supporter to recognise this as a conspicuous and gross policy failure by the Australian Labor Party. And here is a situation where Chris Evans walked out after Labor was elected and sort of covered himself in this warm inner glow of a new set of detention values because this is a compassionate government which is distancing itself from the heartless mean Howard era.

And what he did was send out to the people smugglers of this planet a guilt edged invitation to go back into business as far as Australian Border Control was concerned.

We know 107 boats have arrived since then. We don't know how many have left, we don't know how many Hazaris...

**GLOVER:** How many are still to come you mean?

**CAMERON:** No, no what I mean is, we don't know how many have perished...

**GLOVER:** I see.

**CAMERON:** ...we know that quite a few have, you know, we know that people have died because they left the shores of Sri Lanka in a leaky boat, having paid a people smuggler US\$10,000 and they have never arrived.

**GLOVER:** Okay, you may be right there of some pull factors but there are definitely push factors as well aren't there? There's a war in Afghanistan, there's been a civil - terrible civil unrest in Sri Lanka.

**CAMERON:** Well what we saw was a period under a tough border protection measure of mandatory detection of all offshore processing of temporary protection visas and 45 day insistence that you apply immediately after you arrive.

We saw a - Australia's in this unusual situation where we can't - we do actually have a capacity to control our borders in a way in which most European countries don't, and the Howard Government did it.

The difference between - you have a Liberal government then you have the government setting Australia's immigration policy. If you have a Labor government you have the people smugglers.

**EMERSON:** Well Ross how do you explain this? With the 22,000 who have arrived by boat, 14,000 arrived under Liberal governments and 8,000 under Labor governments - which completely contradicts the point you're trying to make.

**CAMERON:** Well happily the Liberal governments have been actually very - in a range of situations, for example, under the Fraser era, strongly encouraged the South Vietnamese refugees, we took thousands of boat arrivals and we regarded...

**EMERSON:** Two thousand actually.

**CAMERON:** ...it was a great thing for the world.

**EMERSON:** Two thousand.

**CAMERON:** The thing that people can't understand right now Craig is that three weeks ago your minister came out and said, don't worry Australia, this significant surge in arrivals is actually related to a

surge in unrest in the two key countries we're discussing, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka. Three weeks later he comes out and says the situation...

**GLOVER:** [Interrupts] I want to give Jane Caro a chance before we hit the six o'clock news.

**CARO:** Thank you [laughs].

**GLOVER:** Jane.

**CARO:** Look I am so glad I am not the person who has to make the decision about this. I dislike the harsh lacking of compassion; we will control the number of people who come in the manner in which they come. I find that just repugnant, and at the same time I understand how difficult it is to make it too easy so I have sympathy in a way with both situations.

On a purely humanitarian basis, I think every woman who arrives here from Afghanistan has a prima facie case for refugee status.

If any men in the world were treated the way women are routinely treated in Afghanistan, we would consider them to be persecuted, because they're women we don't.

The Sri Lankan's situation's pretty difficult. I think it is interesting isn't it? We get advice not to go to

those countries but somehow it's okay for those people to stay there and not come here. It does worry me. We're a big rich country, we can afford to be compassionate and we should be.

**CAMERON:** Well there's 10 million refugees according to the UNHCR around the world. Another four and a half million Gaza in the West Bank.

**GLOVER:** Well we have to leave it there.

**CARO:** Well we need to get to those problems.

**GLOVER:** Craig Emerson thank you very much for joining us.

**EMERSON:** Thank you Richard.

**GLOVER:** Craig Emerson the Minister for Small Business with me in Sydney Jane Caro and Ross Cameron, thank you very much.