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Transcript
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David Speers interviews Dr Craig Emerson

E&OE

Subjects: Health reform plan, school stimulus

SPEERS: Welcome back to AM Agenda. We're out the front of Parliament House this morning at a barbecue breakfast for Tony Abbott and his fellow riders in the Pollie Pedal charity ride. They're about to take off in about 15 minutes from now in the next leg of their journey from Melbourne to Sydney. In the meantime we're going to cross to Small Business Minister Craig Emerson, who's inside the building in our Parliament House studio. Craig Emerson, thank you for joining us this morning. Now Labor was a little critical of Tony Abbott for taking the nine days out to do this. It is a charity cycle too. Looking at the first week of this ride, do you think it really has been such a bad thing for the Opposition leader to do?

EMERSON: Well I haven't criticised the Pollie Pedal exercise of itself and I don't think others have. What we've said is that someone in the meantime needs to come up with an alternative policy, and we just heard 10 minutes of Tony Abbott opposing for the sake of opposition - saying not one positive word about a Government policy and spending not one breath in articulating an alternative policy. So my advice to Tony Abbott is get back on the bike Tony and keep pedalling. Keep pedalling because you are not part of the solution, you are part of the problem of simply opposing for the sake of opposing, and it is probably better for you to get out of the way. Tony, you're just a roadblock to reform. We've got the biggest health reform proposal since

Medicare - not one positive word from Tony Abbott, just carping criticism. This is the Abbott habit of a crabby Abbott always criticising for the sake of criticism. Get back on the bike Tony and keep pedalling.

SPEERS: Well let's get into the policy that is on the table, because it is not so much Tony Abbott but the Labor State premiers who are the roadblock at the moment for Kevin Rudd's reform plan. Do you think there is going to be agreement? It doesn't sound like John Brumby or Kristina Kenneally overnight welcomed the final plan put on the table.

EMERSON: It is a massive reform. I heard Kristina Kenneally earlier this morning saying that she thought that it may well be the basis of a settlement; we will know that really when the discussions occur next week. It's a comprehensive plan, a large document with a lot of detail. It's all there for the officials and the Premiers to evaluate. I understand there's a meeting in Canberra today involving the Commonwealth and State officials. Let's have the meeting take place, let's have it take place as I'm sure it will in the spirit of goodwill, but the only people who are not demonstrating goodwill in relation to health reform are the Coalition led by Tony Abbott, who of course when he became Opposition Leader said that it's his job to oppose. Well only to an extent, Mr Abbott, because you are seeking to be the alternative Prime Minister of Australia and you come up with no alternative policies, just this Abbott habit of carping criticism. How about being part of the solution instead of just being part of the problem?

SPEERS: Well he says he will put out those alternative policies...

EMERSON: Yeah well he says that.

SPEERS: He says he will be putting out those alternative policies but I do want to raise one of the points he makes about your health plan, your Government's health plan, and that is; the lack of any fresh commitments on mental health or dental health. Now, they are pretty important issues to a lot of Australians. Where are they in this plan?

EMERSON: And they will be the subject of future discussion with the Premiers and the Chief Ministers, but this is a very far reaching...

SPEERS: But this is supposed to be a whole-of the health system reform...

EMERSON: Well it is a far reaching plan. It is the biggest reform to the health system since Medicare. Now...

SPEERS: ...So we just have to wait for the mental health and dental health elements?

EMERSON: ...The dimensions of this reform are enormous. It is a fundamental reform of Australia's health system. Every Australian other than the Opposition leader believes that it is important to have a reformed health system. This Opposition leader, when he was the Health Minister and had been for some time, said that no one should get anxious and no one should fret about an unreformed health system. As a former Health Minister who had plenty of time to put up alternative policies, he should be in a position to articulate at least the framework of an alternative policy. What he's come up with is hospital boards in two states.

SPEERS: Just back to the question though on your policy. Where is, and why do Australians and indeed the Premiers who have to sign up to this or decide whether to sign up to this, why should they have to wait for more information on mental health and dental health?

EMERSON: Because this is very large and it involves an enormous amount of money. It is a comprehensive health plan. There is ample substance in this document and the Premiers will, I'm confident, indicate that there's plenty of substance on which to make a decision. Now, the only people saying there is not enough substance in this plan are the people that have no alternative plan whatsoever. Those two matters of themselves will not decide whether there is an agreement early next week. That will be determined on the basis of what is in the plan, and I've also heard this argument from Tony Abbott that there's no new money until 2014 or something. There's been a 50 per cent increase in public hospital funding under this Government after Mr Abbott reduced funding in the forward estimates, pulled out from the forward estimates \$1 billion. So again all we've got is criticism; this is a huge reform where the Commonwealth would be the dominant funder of health in this country and it's time for Mr Abbott either to come up with some alternatives, which he has failed to do, or get back on the bike and pedal, and keep pedalling and keep pedalling because he is the true roadblock to reform.

SPEERS: If I can turn to the schools building program Craig Emerson, after months of criticism and examples of cost over-runs, of potential roting and price gouging under this \$16 billion scheme, Julia Gillard yesterday announced a new task force will investigate complaints. Is this a concession from the Government that it could have put more checks and balances into the program from the outset?

EMERSON: Of course this was a stimulus program. A stimulus program means getting money into our tradies, into the small businesses so that they would not go into a downward spiral, and would have work during the deepest global recession since the Great Depression. That of itself has been very important in keeping the Australian economy out of recession - one of the few economies that has been out of recession - so let's look at the positives. The positives are overwhelming, in terms of keeping Australia out of recession, keeping our small businesses in work and of course the greatest school modernisation program since federation. In respect of the announcement from Julia, of course if there are further checks and balances that can be put in place, if people have legitimate complaints, rather than the sort of complaints that the Shadow Education Minister Christopher Pyne has, and he could not on radio nominate one school in his own electorate where there has been a problem, and he was invited to many times, that actually David is the experience in my electorate. I've already opened one of these buildings, and the school pride was just enormous, I'll be doing more of those and in our electorate in Logan City, a relatively poor area, the sense of community, of hope and optimism that this has created has been very very strong and I'm very proud of that.

SPEERS: There have been problems as you know at the Hastings School in Port Macquarie, at the Berridale School in southern NSW, largely coming out of NSW because it's the only State producing the figures through an audit process for us all to see. The other States aren't living up to that level of accountability in this program so we just don't know how widespread some of the problems may be...

EMERSON: ...Well I doubt that that's the problem. I doubt that that's the problem. You've got a newspaper which is running a campaign on this, you've got an Opposition which is calling for...

SPEERS: ...But surely that's a good thing? Highlight where taxpayers money is being wasted...

EMERSON: ...But it doesn't fit too comfortably with the suggestion, David, that there is no way for people to come forward and expose any problems with the program. I think there are ample ways with The Australian newspaper, with the Opposition, with the Government itself, which has said if you do have any problems please come forward to us. I don't think that's really the issue, with respect, and remember there's 28,000 projects here, 28,000 projects. Of course from time to time there'll be some problems, but how about we look at the positives, which are overwhelming in this case, around 99 per cent of these projects

are going very well thank you very much, and are an enormous source of both jobs and school pride.

SPEERS: All right, looking at the positives, I think we'll leave it on that note, the glass half full...

EMERSON: ...99 per cent full.

SPEERS: [Laughs] Small Business Minister Craig Emerson thank you very much for joining us this morning.

EMERSON: Okay thanks David.

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