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Transcript

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Interviewees: Dr Craig Emerson, Senator George Brandis

E&OE

Subjects: *Gen 'Y' dole cuts, health reform plan, daylight saving, ANZAC Day, American-isms.*

KING: It's not only health making national headlines this morning. It's also Tony Abbott's proposal banning the dole for young people. Under the plan, he would cut the dole to those under 30 to take pressure off the welfare system, and reduce the need to bring in big numbers of skilled migrants to staff mining projects in places like Queensland also Western Australia. One of the issues to face debate next in Inside Canberra, and Senator George Brandis, Opposition Attorney-General, good morning.

BRANDIS: Good morning Madonna.

KING: Rudd Government Minister, Dr Craig Emerson hello. Welcome back to 612 ABC Brisbane.

EMERSON: Thank you very much Madonna. Good morning George.

BRANDIS: Morning Craig.

KING: Before we get to the issue of the dole, on health, and we'll get to the national reform too in just a moment. Do either of you as politicians struggle with the fact that a big government

department has now been unable to pay staff for four weeks, and it looks as though the problem this morning is just as bad? George Brandis - you start.

BRANDIS: I struggle with the fact. It's incomprehensible that you could have, as I heard reported on 612 a few minutes ago, that the government is suggesting that Lifeline would give out food vouchers to the State Government's own staff, including senior professional staff...

KING: You've got that a little bit wrong. It's not the government, it's Lifeline now saying that nurses are fronting up, getting a food voucher...

BRANDIS: Whatever, but it has come to this because a State Labor Government cannot get its act together. This has been going on for weeks on end.

KING: But are you playing politics? Does it matter if it's a State Labor or a State LNP Government?

BRANDIS: We and the Coalition have been saying for a very long time now that State Labor governments have been marked by incompetence and this is yet another example. And the Minister can't run away from responsibility for this. The fact is that this foul-up of monumental proportions, that has left potentially thousands of people destitute, who are entitled to be paid their wages by the State Government. This foul-up happened on the Minister's watch.

KING: All right. Dr Craig Emerson to you. Everyone is looking towards a solution, with your experience, you worked in the State bureaucracy, have you got any suggestion on how this could be fixed and we could move on?

EMERSON: I'd love to have suggestions but I'm just not close enough to it Madonna. I'd be making it up if I said: "Why don't they try this or that?" I'm sure they're trying. I can't imagine the Minister and the department are sanguine about this. Obviously they're deeply concerned and obviously there's a lot of distress amongst those health professionals who are not getting paid.

KING: Does it give credibility to George Brandis' argument that Labor struggles to deal with things like this?

EMERSON: I can understand why he'd be wanting to make a political point that this is because it's a Labor Government and nothing like

this could happen under an LNP Government. I think your listeners will make a judgement about that. These things happen. They are very regrettable and obviously I join with you and your listeners in expressing a real hope that this is resolved as quickly as possible, because as you point out it has gone on for a very long time.

KING: Is there a precedent for something like this? Either here or elsewhere?

EMERSON: In my time I can't think really think of an example like this. An honest answer to an honest question.

BRANDIS: I don't think there's ever been a fiasco of this magnitude. It's all very well Craig for you to say: "Don't make a political point". It actually is a political issue because somebody has to take responsibility for it. And the first principle is that the person at the top has to take responsibility.

KING: Let me just pull you up there. This is a payroll system. Because I think in people's minds they're wondering who is to blame, it's a payroll system. If you were the Minister and something went wrong with the payroll system is that really your responsibility or your Director General's, or the private company that installed it?

BRANDIS: Whether or not a minister should resign for a major mistake or fiasco that occurs on their watch depends on the circumstances. But one of the relevant circumstances is the magnitude of the mistake or the fiasco. Test it this way; could anybody have confidence in this Health Department that it can't get this right? And if they can't have confidence in the department then I think the Minister's scalp ought to be taken.

KING: Dr Craig Emerson, you've worked as a senior public servant and as a minister. Where does ministerial responsibility lie here?

EMERSON: There is a system called the Westminster system, and it means that the buck does stop with the minister as a general position on these matters. But if the minister is doing everything possible to remedy a payroll problem, an electronic problem, then I think that should be acknowledged, rather than whenever there's a breakdown in some sort of electronic or communications system call for the minister's scalp. It's a little bit superficial.

KING: This must be shocking for you on the morning that Labor want to gloat about what is an historic deal between the Commonwealth and the State. That Nicola Roxon speaking to me says: "Queensland Health will continue to pay staff. They will be

employed by local boards. The Commonwealth is where the buck stops, but the State will pay the employees.” Do you understand how people are confused as to who is responsible? And if the people now can’t get it right, is \$21 billion worth of reforms worth it?

EMERSON: I think your listeners would make the judgement that this big reform, the biggest since Medicare, is well worth it. It’s a lot of extra money, and it’s a lot of reform. It will be a situation where the Commonwealth is the dominant funder, local hospital networks will be funded nationally but they will be run locally. I think that’s a good model, so it is a fundamental reform.

KING: So they will be set up by the Federal Government, they will fund them. They will be run locally, but they will be appointed by Anna Bligh. The people running the local boards are appointed by the State.

EMERSON: Sure. I don’t see the problem with which particular person appoints which particular member of a local hospital network. This is a fundamental reform and it is a well-funded fundamental reform - 1,300 new hospital beds, 2,500 new aged care beds, 20,000 more young people will have access to mental health services, 6,000 more doctors. So these are very big injections of funding because we do believe - and we seem to be alone between the Coalition and ourselves - we do believe in fundamental reform of the health system.

KING: George Brandis shouldn’t you be congratulating Craig Emerson when you hear of how many extra beds, the addition to mental health services that this \$21 billion will deliver?

BRANDIS: We are completely bewildered by the speed with which the Prime Minister is changing his position. This is policy on the run. This is not the position that the Prime Minister was devoted to when the Premiers’ conference of the COAG meeting started on Monday morning. It’s an entirely different arrangement that’s been announced. It’s not a comprehensive national arrangement, it doesn’t include Western Australia. It’s light on the detail. We know what the Labor Party is like in promising to spend billions of dollars in the out years because Labor governments never keep their promises. So we are completely unimpressed in the way in which Rudd seems to be making this up as he goes along.

KING: Should you call him Rudd or should you call him Prime Minister?

BRANDIS: Mr Rudd. Mr Rudd.

KING: Can I move to another issue, and this is Tony Abbott proposing banning the dole for young people, those under 30, to take pressure off the welfare system and reduce the need to bring in migrants to staff mining projects like you might see in Western Australia or indeed Queensland. Senator Brandis, is this Tony Abbott's personal view or is it party policy?

BRANDIS: The way you've characterised this is based on a report of something that was said in a discussion with some mining industry leaders in Western Australia recently. But what I think Tony has been at pains to emphasise is the Coalition has always been committed to is the idea that able-bodied people who can find work should get a job and not rely on the welfare system. I don't understand Mr Abbott to have gone any further than that.

KING: What about you Craig Emerson? How do you view this?

EMERSON: As a thought bubble. It's been denied, as I understand it, on radio this morning. That is that it's not Coalition policy. That he was musing, having a bit of a think about things out loud.

KING: ...But he's entitled to do that.

EMERSON: Well sure. But we are one-third of the way into an election year. And at some stage, sooner I hope rather than later, we'll actually get policies from Tony Abbott rather than these thought bubbles which are then denied the next day.

KING: You say it's dangerous, a thought bubble from the leader of the party is taken as policy. Is that your point?

EMERSON: Well it is. And more fundamentally, I understand and George will make this point, that it is the role of an Opposition to criticise and bring to account the government of the day. I accept that. It is also, particularly in an election year, the role of the Opposition to present alternative policies because Tony Abbott is presenting himself as the alternative Prime Minister. And he cannot sustain the position that he currently occupies opposing for the sake of opposition. He needs to come up with alternative policies. And just when it looks like he's going to, he's out there denying his own policy the next day, saying it was just musing behind closed doors with mining company executives.

BRANDIS: Hang on, please don't verbal Tony Abbott, Craig. The fact is that every time the Liberal Party expresses the view that welfare and the dole ought not to be given to able-bodied people who are

perfectly well able to find work, the Labor Party goes berserk about it. At the time of the 1996 election for example...

EMERSON: Here we go. I remember in 1923...

BRANDIS: The last time government changed we proposed Work for the Dole and the Labor Party said "this is the worst policy", "this is discriminating against young people", and so on...

KING: But that was 15 years ago. That was a long time ago.

BRANDIS: I'm saying that to illustrate the point that when it comes to actually adopting policies ...

EMERSON: I remember the 1950s...

BRANDIS: ... when it actually comes to adopting policies that give effect to the proposition that able-bodied people who can find work shouldn't be relying upon the dole. It has always been the Liberal Party's taken the lead, and the Labor Party has always tried to get in the way and we're seeing it again today.

KING: Craig Emerson?

EMERSON: I can tell you, entitlements to Newstart are activity tested. That is, you must report and seek work, and under Labor instead of just being told "go and work for the dole", we are actually providing support services in the form of training. And those people who are unemployed for any length of time tend to be...

BRANDIS: Based on policy set up by the last Liberal Government.

EMERSON: This was in place before that George. For goodness sake, I'm not going to compete with you in an historic analysis as to who brought in the idea of mutual obligation. But we consider it to be a two-way street.

BRANDIS: Well I can tell you, John Howard did.

EMERSON: Not true. It was done by Bob Hawke. The point is it needs to be a two-way street. That is, you need to support people who do not have the skills. And that is what is happening under the current system. And it is true that that was happening under the system of John Howard. I'm just saying he didn't invent the idea.

KING: All right. Just before we move onto another topic. One listener Gary says: "Isn't that what Anna Bligh had on daylight saving; a thought bubble?"

EMERSON: Do you want me to respond on that?

KING: It was directed at you.

EMERSON: Well okay, obviously there should be a discussion about daylight saving. Is there any problem having a discussion about daylight saving? I don't think so, I think it should be encouraged.

KING: Let's move onto another issue.

BRANDIS: Why doesn't that apply across the board Craig? Because that's all I'm saying. We can't get in this habit in Australia of saying there are 'no-go' areas so we can't have a discussion about areas of policy without the Labor Party verballing us and saying...

EMERSON: ...We're not verballing you. It was Tony Abbott that verballled himself.

BRANDIS: It is not legitimate for you to say that. What we need is constructive, courageous thinking about policy in Australia. Not political correctness.

KING: Can I just end it there? But George Brandis, so it's not party policy that Tony Abbott's idea of cutting the dole to those under 30 was just raising the issue of what we do with the welfare system, and how we reduce the number of skilled migrants coming into the country. Is that your understanding?

BRANDIS: For a start I'm not sure that Tony Abbott even said that. But it is not the Coalition's policy, no.

KING: Let's move onto Anzac Day. A historian, James Jupp is quoted in the Herald Sun this morning saying that Anzac Day is becoming less important as the number of World War II veterans dwindle. He's from the ANU and this is what he's quoted saying: "You could say that there's a limit on this because the people who took part in the second World War and even the Korean War are getting a bit old to march and there's nobody left from the first World War. In that sense, there's a limit to its relevance". Now I know it might be an unpopular thing to say but is there some truth in that?

BRANDIS: I think that's an extraordinary thing to say. I think all of our experience, and this is not a party political thing, all of our experience of those of us who've been concerned in Anzac Day celebrations over the years has been the marches get bigger and bigger. And in particular the pilgrimage to Gallipoli is now a real rite of passage for young Australians.

KING: If he's quoted correctly he's just saying that the people who participated in those, the numbers are getting fewer and fewer. So over time does it lose its relevance?

BRANDIS: Well it's plainly not, because there are no World War I veterans still alive yet more and more young Australians are making the pilgrimage to Gallipoli.

KING: What would you say Craig Emerson?

EMERSON: The freedoms that we enjoy as result of the sacrifices of Australian military personnel, men and women in the first World War and the second World War are enduring. The freedoms are enduring. And therefore our gratitude to those military personnel, to those soldiers and to those nurses, must be enduring.

KING: So you're saying we need to carry on their memory and that's what makes it continually relevant.

EMERSON: Absolutely. And we're already in a situation where there are no World War I diggers left. The last of them died, I think, in the last year. But that doesn't mean we forget. The saying is 'Lest we forget'.

KING: There are so many other issues I wanted to get through this morning and we won't have time. If we can end on this; there's a letter writer to the *Queensland Times* this morning saying that: "Australia is now flooded with 'American-isms'" and ties it in with ANZAC Day. He says the one that really irritates him is ANZAC cookies. He says: "Believe me, they have never existed. They don't exist now and they never will". I know you're a bit of an Americo-phile yourself George Brandis. Are there some 'American-isms' that you just can't tolerate?

BRANDIS: There probably are, I can't immediately call any to mind. The cultural similarities between Australia and America, particularly in popular culture I think have been growing over the years, especially through cinema and television shows. I don't feel particularly threatened by it, and if they want to call ANZAC biscuits 'ANZAC cookies'...

KING: ...You're not upset by that?

BRANDIS: It's not something that infuriates me no. It doesn't upset me. My kids were devoted The Simpsons viewers and I think The Simpsons has had a big impact on the vernacular speech of kids.

KING: Craig Emerson, ANZAC cookies. Does that rub you up the wrong way or is there another American-ism that you really dislike?

[Pause]

KING: We've just lost Dr Craig Emerson.

BRANDIS: I'm sure he would have...

KING: Do you want his response this week or can answer for you next week?

BRANDIS: I was just going to say I'm sure he would have agreed with me.

KING: Okay we'll leave it at that point. George Brandis thank you. And our apologies, Dr Craig Emerson falling out there. But Dr Craig Emerson and Senator George Brandis back at the same time next week.

ENDS