

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 water to drug testing in schools, combining league and union, did you see that this morning? To records in the pool. Just some of the issues we've been talking about. And it might be interesting to put a couple of those things to our politicians in *Inside Canberra* this morning. Craig Emerson is the Small Business Minister in the Rudd Government, good morning.

EMERSON: Good morning Madonna.

KING: And Opposition Attorney-General, Senator George Brandis, good morning Senator.

BRANDIS: Good morning Madonna, good morning Craig.

EMERSON: Hi George.

KING: In Winton it was a tie for the Mayor's position, so they've ended up pulling a name out of a hat. I just thought I'd start with that. Any merit in that form of selection to choose our politicians?

EMERSON: It's a bit cruel but there's a lot of criticisms of democracy but it's the best system that we have in the world and both of them were obviously meritorious candidates. They dead heated so it had to be decided some way.

KING: George Brandis, would we get a better crop in Canberra if we picked the names out of a hat?

BRANDIS: No, I don't think so. I think people in our democracy choose the people who represent them in Parliament and by a process of conscious choice, not a random act, but sometimes, this is a very unusual case of course, it's happened once or twice, I think, in Parliamentary history around the world, but you know, rather than it put the people of Winton to the expense of another election, it may well be that, you know, they've spoken, they're equally balanced so an act of random choice might not be so irrational in the circumstances.

EMERSON: Maybe job sharing?

KING: Oh, there you go. Good suggestion. Let's move on to drugs. We've been talking about whether drug testing should be introduced into our schools and you might have seen some of that this morning. Any support from either of you to drug test our students? George Brandis?

BRANDIS: Well I think first of all we have to define what the problem is. I mean we, it is a very serious problem but the way in which to deal with the serious problem is to target responses that prevent the development of a drug culture. Now, you know, I have a reasonably open mind on this. If you could demonstrate that there were a particular school in which there was a drug culture and there were certain, that needed to be attacked, then it might well be that there's an argument for it and the other distinction in that particular case. The other distinction I think we should make is people talk loosely about children, but of course children are technically, or legally anyone under the age of 18 I think, the presence of a problem in the upper secondary school and the measures you might take to deal with that problem is a very different thing from drug testing little kids.

KING: Dr Craig Emerson, you've got children. Is it something you would support at school?

EMERSON: I'd be very hesitant about it Madonna. The proponent of this, I heard on radio this morning saying that we should randomly test all children. Well if you're going to test all children, there's nothing random about it. It's very expensive and most children don't get into this. I think George makes a good point though. If there is a culture or a pattern in a particular school, by all means let's have a look at it. But a blanket testing of all kids at school would be both expensive and very invasive.

KING: The thing that struck me about it is while the use of illicit drugs had declined, half in the case of cannabis over the last ten years, which is quite surprising in itself, binge drinking or drinking in excess by 16 and 17 year olds, one in five do it. Does it shock you the amount of alcohol our young people are drinking? Craig Emerson?

EMERSON: It does and we know too, Madonna, that it still is sadly a big contributor to the road toll. Queensland did very badly again over the Easter break. I'm not saying anyone there was involved in drinking or was drunk at the time, but it's a big contributor. Still is and it's a major problem.

KING: You would have read about this Queensland Police Officer who had something like 18 drinks in 12 or 16 hours, I think 16 hours, on a day off. The Police Union yesterday said that isn't defined as binge drinking. What would you define binge drinking as?

EMERSON: Well, if I'd had 16 beers, I'd be drunk as a skunk. I mean, that's just the fact of the matter.

KING: But over 12 hours?

EMERSON: Well, even over 12 hours. He then, I understand, reported to work. I mean if you're going to do that, and I wouldn't recommend it to anyone, you wouldn't turn up to work and then argue that you weren't drunk or that your work performance was not affected in any way.

KING: George Brandis, all you politicians and community leaders are talking about how we stop binge drinking amongst our young. Do you think the male drinking age should be lifted to 21?

BRANDIS: I'm not advocating that course. I think rather the answer lies in education and, as I said before, in the different context of drug taking, the key to everything is prevention and one of the important keys to prevention is education. Particularly education about the consequences.

KING: But how do you do that? You're telling a 13 year old, whose buying a bottle of whiskey from the shop that it's going to do him bad?

BRANDIS: Well, for a start, it is of course illegal to sell alcohol to an underage customer and I think one thing that we need to demand, and by and large I think the hotel industry does this pretty well, is to ensure that there isn't the sale of liquor to underage customers.

KING: That's not education though. Is that a big punitive stick to any retailer who does sell it?

BRANDIS: Well, that's a different point. You went on to a different point. But, there does, as I said before, need to be education, but there is also in the existing law a prohibition which I think is respected by the hotel industry against the sale of liquor to underage customers.

KING: Do you think it is respected? You don't think retailers are selling alcohol to kids underage?

BRANDIS: I'm sure on occasions that happens, but I do believe that the hotel industry does take their obligations seriously.

KING: Craig Emerson?

EMERSON: I think that's right. There's obviously cases where alcohol is sold to underage kids, often through an older brother, through parents. We know that's the case. But I agree with George. I mean imagine putting in a law which said that you can't consume alcohol below the age of 21. It would be violated all the time. Reminds me of the 1930s, the prohibition period in the United States which just lead to enormous organised crime. The kids are going to drink.

KING: As someone said to me, you can go to war, you can vote.

EMERSON: That's right. You could be conscripted into Vietnam. You can do all these sorts of things, you're a responsible adult at 18, but you can't drink until you're 21? I think that's pretty ridiculous.

KING: But if you're a parent at home, you're a grandparent at home and you're listening to this and everyone's talking about how we try to reduce binge drinking and the youth violence that often goes with it. What is the solution? Surely not putting a warning on the bottle which is what politicians are talking about. Would that really work?

EMERSON: Well that is something that's being contemplated and we do need to look at a range of solutions so let's see what comes out of today's meeting at the Council of Australian Governments.

KING: What are the solutions, is there something that you think we should be looking at Craig Emerson?

EMERSON: Look, I think the TV advertisements have been very effective. Remember the AIDS ads? They were very, very effective. Domestic violence ads have proven to be quite effective. I think a television advertising program could really be quite effective these days. They've proven to be so in the past.

KING: George Brandis?

BRANDIS: The other point, look I agree with that, but the other point I'd make is this, we can't test success or failure of something like this against an absolute standard because we know that young men and women, perhaps, you know, below the age of 18 are, on occasions, going to get their hands on grog and they're going to drink and they're going to drink to excess. It's not the definition of the failure of a policy that there isn't a 100 per cent success rate.

KING: No, both of you have teenage children don't you?

EMERSON: Yes I do.

BRANDIS: Yes I do.

KING: Is it a worry as a dad? Take off the political hat.

EMERSON: Astonishingly my 17 year old says he's not going to drink because he has had a few beers, I don't think he's ever been drunk, but he's done some reading on the effects of drinking on his brain and he wants to have a good brain for the rest of his life and he reckons it doesn't taste that great and he's not going to inflict that sort of damage on his brain.

KING: A lot of parents would be out there saying that's not fair that you have one like that! George Brandis?

BRANDIS: Well, my kids are a bit younger than that so the issue hasn't really arisen yet and I hope it doesn't.

KING: Well, there you are, how old are yours?

BRANDIS: My children?

KING: Your children, yeah.

BRANDIS: My daughter is 15 and my son turns 14 tomorrow.

KING: Oh! Happy birthday! Yeah, mine are four and three and I'm worrying already. League and union. Talk this morning of a hybrid rugby game combining union and league. Do you like this idea either of you?

EMERSON: Well, when I first heard of it, I have to confess I thought what a silly idea. Then I talked to myself about it, and others about it...laughs.

KING: How often do you do that?

EMERSON: All the time. Trouble is I never listen. Laughs. I actually think it has merit if young people do it and then make a choice later. They've developed the skills in both codes and they can, therefore, be really quite skilled in both. So having reflected upon it I think it actually does have a bit of merit.

KING: George Brandis, support that?

BRANDIS: No, it doesn't much appeal to me I must say. I think that the publics that follow the respective codes are very loyal and very dedicated to those codes and I think there's a broader dimension to this. It's not just the rules of the game, it's the culture of the fan base...

EMERSON: You're just a rah rah George!

BRANDIS: I'm not, far from it Craig. But I think that, you know, when you talk about consolidating two sports that are somewhat similar there are lots of issues beyond merely what are the rules of the game on the field.

KING: Yeah, but when I read it I wondered about whether it shows that AFL has become the predominant game and this a bit of a fightback at the grassroots. George Brandis?

BRANDIS: Well I think, in fact, the game, the football game that is very much on the rise in Australia at the moment is soccer or what is now, we should now refer to technically as football.

EMERSON: I agree on both those points. Yours Madonna, I think AFL is making big inroads.

KING: I was just asking the question. Don't look at me and say I was claiming that, for goodness sake.

EMERSON: And George is right about soccer and while we have, you know, amongst the world's best coaches that brings along the, they then motivate the best players, I think there's an enormous amount of excitement about soccer.

KING: What would you call it if you combined the rugby – the league and the union?

Silence

KING: Any good ideas, give me a call this morning. 1300 222 612. What would you call the hybrid game of league and union and remember Kelly Higgins Divine is broadcasting live from training at the Gabba as the Lions prepare to take on Collingwood today. Listen in from three. Let's go on to COAG. The Council of Australian Governments meeting in Adelaide today. Everyone's from Labor. Does this mean things will get done Craig Emerson? Or will it all just be politics? I'm sure you'll probably disagree here.

EMERSON: We probably will. I think it is a great opportunity and there's already progress being made on, as Co-Chair on one of the working groups on red tape Madonna, and we've got an agenda now that extends to more than 20 items. So we're going to cut red tape for small business and I've been really heartened by the attitude of the States. Instead of saying here are all the problems, they are saying come on, let's work on the solutions. But there are other issues too. There's education issues, health. You will have seen some reporting on that overnight and so I think we will be able to end that blame-game and actually get some results, fix the federation. It's really important that we don't just keep passing the buck and that's what Kevin Rudd and the Premiers are working on today.

KING: George Brandis, just a hunch, but I'm thinking you'll disagree with Craig?

BRANDIS: Well, I was going to say Madonna, a couple of points if I may. First of all, I hope that we eventually rise above these slogans like 'end the blame game' and 'fix the federation'. It's something I've said before and I'll say it again, that there have been far too much sloganeering and far too much symbolism in the early days of this Government and not a lot of actual, not enough actual outcomes. That's the first point I want to make. The second point I want to make though is this. Good luck to any Commonwealth Government of whatever political persuasion in persuading the States to cut their bloated bureaucracies. The States Governments of Australia have been the worst run level of Government. At the moment they're all in the hands of the Labor Party. You have shocking Governments like the Government of New South Wales. The Queensland Government is not much better. Most of their budgets are in deficit. The bureaucracies are overmanned and the test

of Mr Rudd's cooperative federalism is whether he persuades his Labor State colleagues to do something about that.

KING: You say shocking Governments. New South Wales and Queensland are Labor Governments, but the people voted them in, George Brandis.

BRANDIS: Of course and people are entitled to make mistakes. That's one of the...

EMERSON: That sounds like a pretty shocking Opposition to me.

BRANDIS: They are.

EMERSON: Thank you George.

BRANDIS: They are entitled to make mistakes. They are entitled to make mistakes and that's one of the tests of a democracy. You know, there is a bit of buyer's remorse, I think, about some of these Governments now.

KING: In ten seconds, I just want an issue. What do you think is THE number one issue that should be resolved between the States and the Commonwealth? Is it red tape for small business? Is it an end to waiting lists on public hospitals? If both of you had to nominate the one that you think is most important, what would it be George Brandis?

BRANDIS: Well I think the issue that most people would regard as most acute, particularly in Queensland where we've been so badly let down, is health.

KING: All right, what would you say Craig Emerson?

EMERSON: I'd pump for education. Getting our education system right and making sure that kids in disadvantaged areas get the best possible education.

KING: George Brandis...

BRANDIS: Can I make an observation though arising out of that. You know, health and education are primarily issues for which State Governments are responsible. Who's been running the State Governments in Australia? Most of them for most of the last decade. It's been the Labor Party.

EMERSON: Well, you're just having a whinge George, which you're entitled to. We're seriously trying to make a real difference to the federation, fixing the federation, ending the blame game. I know you hate the term, but it's been around for a long time for good reason because the buck-passing has been going on for the best part of a century and it's got to stop.

KING: I suspect it'll go on for a while longer, Dr Craig Emerson, Senator George Brandis, our politicians on *Inside Canberra* this week. A

quick one for you Senator George Brandis. The State Liberal Party, your State Liberal Party are going to select a new President on the weekend. Have you got a preference for who should lead it? I see Mal Brough's name brought up?

BRANDIS: Well, I'm not a member of the State Council of the Liberal Party and I'm perfectly happy to work with whoever they choose. You know, I...

KING: But you have influence.

BRANDIS: Well, I don't know about that. I...

EMERSON: I understand you're a power-broker George?

BRANDIS: Well, that's another slogan Craig. There are a lot of very, very good people on the Liberal Party State Council and I think it's a very positive development that there is more than one person evidently offering themselves. It's a hard job, being the State President of the Liberal Party.

KING: Would Mal Brough, Mal Brough make a good State Liberal Party President?

BRANDIS: Well, I think Mal Brough is a person of tremendous quality, who has shown in his political career to date, which is only on pause I might say, that he's a great....

EMERSON: You heard it here first Madonna.

BRANDIS:great Queensland Liberal.

KING: Why do you say his career's on pause? Do you think he'll go back into Federal Parliament, in State Parliament. Is he a possible Leader for the State Liberal Party?

BRANDIS: I don't know what Mal will do, but I'll make this prediction, that we'll hear a lot more of Mal Brough as a Member of Parliament in years to come.

KING: All right, can I move onto a final topic? We spoke to Stephanie Rice earlier. She's broken two world records and I'm wondering about any sporting prowess any of you might have had in your youth? Do you want to...broken any records?

EMERSON: Ah well, in my case Madonna I tried hard, didn't really achieve very much. I did make State League in volleyball. So that's probably the best I could do.

KING: All right, that's pretty good. Do you still play volleyball?

EMERSON: Ah, no, I can't above the height of the net.

KING: That's age. George Brandis?

EMERSON: Whatever contribution I made to Australian Sport I made as the Minister for Sport last year. In terms of prowess I have absolutely none.

KING: I couldn't help thinking as well as Stephanie Rice and maybe it's a factor of age, just how proud her family would be, particularly her parents. You're both parents. Something your children have done that you've just thought, oh, you're so proud of them?

EMERSON: Well, imagine how they would have felt when she broke her personal best by six seconds. Ok, the world record by about one, but her personal best by six. What a phenomenal performance!

KING: Anything to match that with George Brandis in your family?

BRANDIS: I suspect not.

KING: Well, can I just say my four year old opened her mouth during show and tell yesterday, so I was doing victory laps of the lounge room last night. She actually said 'this is puppy'.

EMERSON: That's great.

BRANDIS: Congratulations.

KING: Big thank you.

EMERSON: We've had birthdays and four year olds piping up for show and tell.

KING: Gentlemen, a great way to end it, thank you.

EMERSON: Thanks a lot Madonna.

BRANDIS: Thanks Madonna. Bye Craig.

KING: Dr Craig Emerson, Small Business Minister in the Rudd Government and Senator George Brandis, the Opposition Attorney-General and they'll return for *Inside Canberra* next week.