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Transcript
Lateline with Leigh Sales
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Subjects: Politicians' private lives, the Opposition's Budget reply, Resource Super Profits Tax.

SALES: To discuss private lives and the rest of the week in politics, I'm joined from Canberra by Small Business Minister Craig Emerson and in Sydney by shadow immigration spokesman Scott Morrison. Welcome to both of you.

MORRISON: Thank you.

EMERSON: Thank you very much, Leigh. G'day, Scott.

MORRISON: G'day, Craig.

SALES: Let's start with the story that everyone's been talking about today: David Campbell's resignation. Scott Morrison, in a comment piece in the Sydney Morning Herald today it said, "The chapter of Australian history in which politicians' private lives were their own to live, secure in the knowledge no journalist would report their nocturnal behaviour, ended long ago." Do you think that's true?

MORRISON: Well, I think all of us who are in public life, for better or for worse, will always be open to scrutiny and I think everyone who's involved in this process has to exercise some judgments about where they're going to pry and what they're going to ask. But as public figures I suppose we just accept that everything's out there, potentially, for scrutiny. But I think the events of the

last 24 hours are just very, very sad. I feel terribly sad for David's family and just the stresses they'd be going through at the moment. This wasn't something that was brought out by either side of politics. This was something that was shone a light on from outside and it's been a very sad day.

SALES: Do you think it is something that legitimately should have come out?

MORRISON: Well, I think that's for others to judge, at the end of the day. I mean, as politicians, as people in public life, you know, we represent ourselves to the electorate; we live our lives; we say what we say and we're open to scrutiny. How much scrutiny and what type of scrutiny is for others to make judgments about in the choices they make.

SALES: What do you think, Craig Emerson?

EMERSON: I pretty much agree with what Scott's had to say. I think a story like that is likely to come out. We have to assume the worst in terms of media coverage. The line between your private life and your public office, sometimes it's blurred. I'd prefer that it wasn't. Sometimes we - Scott and I - would object to intrusion into our private lives. I think one of the principles though, and this doesn't apply to Mr Campbell, is that if you are living a public life which is that you are presenting as fundamentally different to your private life, for example, if you were an evangelist and invoking the Bible and so on and living a very different life, that does make you fair game. That does because you're trying to gain a political advantage about your persona that is not accurate. But that doesn't apply in the case of David Campbell, no. And I agree with Scott. I feel it's a very sad case.

SALES: But was it legitimate then that this should be reported if, as you say, there wasn't that sort of case?

EMERSON: Well, I suppose the argument was that Mr Campbell used a taxpayer-funded vehicle to get to this particular location. That might be enough. I'm a bit in the same camp as Scott on this: it's not really for us to decide, and if we were to decide no one would take any notice of us anyway.

MORRISON: That's right.

EMERSON: You know, you just bat on and do your best and try to conduct yourself as best as you can. But the truth is none of us are saints and the day we present ourselves as in some way saints and we're not, then we'll be found out. But I hasten to add that's not the case with Mr Campbell.

SALES: I hear what you're both saying, that you think it's for others to judge, but I am curious in your point of views because you are the sort of people that are at the receiving end of this type of thing. Scott Morrison, do you feel that you have to live your life, assuming that all aspects of it, even your private life, are potentially going to be a matter of public discussion?

MORRISON: Well, for better or for worse, Leigh, I think that's the reality. And as Craig said, you seek to live your life honestly and openly and consistently.

SALES: But what effect does that have on you, feeling that you have to ... constantly, every single thing you do might be under scrutiny?

MORRISON: Well, I think it's a very personal thing, but I suspect, you know, you try and live true to yourself and who you are and you don't live a private life and a public life; you live your life. That's what one tries to do. But, as Craig says, none of us are saints, but we all, I think, try to do the right thing and that's certainly the practice I follow.

SALES: Craig Emerson, do you live your life under that sort of guideline: that you think everything that's going on in your life, public and private, is open slather?

EMERSON: Yeah, very much so and in a related area of entitlements or, you know, if you're going to the football or going to do something, declare it. Assume that everything that you're doing will become known. You must assume that everything that you're doing will become known, and therefore, if you want to do something that you don't want to become known, don't do it. Don't do it.

SALES: So, is that a point then of criticism of David Campbell, that someone in his position was living this secret aspect to his life?

EMERSON: Well, he's only human, and, you know, I can't and won't in any way make a negative comment about Mr Campbell. His wife reportedly is struggling with cancer. For God's sake, let's give them a bit of space now. This is terribly sad for the whole family and I appreciate Scott's sentiments. It's got nothing to do with politics - Liberal, Labor or calathumpian - one way or the other. But, I think you just have to ... my own view, Leigh, is that the Australian public is in fact pretty tolerant. You know, they ... like I said, we aren't saints. Only if you present yourself as a saint, then you're in strife. But if you are like other Australians, you've got failings, weaknesses - maybe you said something you shouldn't have or did something that you shouldn't have - just so long as you're prepared to be open about that, I think they're very understanding.

SALES: Sorry.

MORRISON: I think there's one line that I think all politicians agree on should never be crossed and that is the line of family.

EMERSON: Exactly.

MORRISON: I mean, we put ourselves in the public frame; our families don't make those choices. And so, tonight, I mean, I think, you know, I don't want to say anything that would add to anything to the pain of that family. I'm sure Craig has the same view, so...

SALES: Do these sorts of stories when they're reported ever give you pause about having a career in politics?

MORRISON: Oh, no. I mean, we've both been around politics for a long time, Craig a little longer than me. But whether it's how much you're paid, what you're exposed to, we all know this. We all do it for the right reasons, I believe, in the vast majority of cases and we want to make a contribution, so we just get on and make it.

SALES: Craig Emerson, have you ever had an experience where you've felt that the media has crossed over the line and intruded too much into your private life?

EMERSON: Yes, I did and it did relate to the fact I have a house in Canberra and the criticism was that I should not be able to contribute towards the cost of that house in Canberra through travel allowance, which is available to all MPs, every one of them who stays in Canberra. But if I'd had the house at the Gold Coast or in Vanuatu, that would have been fine. But the fact I had it in Canberra, because my children live in Canberra and I love my children and want to spend time with them as a dad, I thought was a pretty reasonable thing. And that was portrayed as a rort, and I thought that was unfair and I said so. In other circumstances, you know, I don't mind the scrutiny, but I absolutely agree with Scott: keep family out of it. We'll be very protective of our family and if any journalist thinks that he or she is going to make a career out of attacking a politician's family, you will find a very, very defensive father or mother.

SALES: In terms of privacy laws, Craig Emerson, do you think that there should be a penalty for a media organisation that violates a public figure's privacy if there's no demonstrable public interest or benefit?

EMERSON: No, I don't. I think peer scrutiny comes into play then and, you know, the truth is journalists themselves - I know, because I know many of them - are quite sensitive to criticism. Not so much from people like Scott and me, but from their colleagues,

from their peers. And if a journalist clearly steps over the line as far as the others are concerned, it will become known and that puts pressure on that journalist. I would rather the peer pressure, rather than more and more regulation: Big Brother and all these steps and procedures that journalists have to go through, would have to go through. My view is it's an open democracy. We are essentially an open book as far as politicians are concerned, but just keep the family out of it.

SALES: Scott Morrison, do you agree with that point about privacy laws: that it should be a peer-related thing. And I guess sort of parallel to that, do you feel that in your position you can't be too critical of journalists because there could be some payback coming your way?

MORRISON: Oh, look, again, we all know how things work in politics and the to and fro and back and forth, but I think Craig's right. I'm not interested in more regulation of this area. I do think there has to be a strong peer culture that sort of ... we all get the reputation at the end of the day we deserve by what we do; what we say; how we act. I think that's as true for journalists as it is for politicians as it is for anyone else. And you live accordingly.

EMERSON: Leigh, just one final point. If you have a setback, like if a politician has a setback and is treated poorly, it goes away pretty quickly. You know, most politicians who have made any impression on the Australian community and Australian policy-making will get into strife either for policy reasons or personal reasons at some time. But when you look back on that politician's career, they'll barely remember it. You know, they just say, "Well, look, they've made a contribution. That's good."

SALES: True, but it must be terrible at the time when you're a David Campbell or a John Brogden. It must be awful to be ... it must be sort of cold comfort to think it'll go away.

EMERSON: Well, I agree and I think the treatment of John Brogden was despicable, absolutely despicable. I'm not going to make a political point about the internal workings of the Liberal Party. But I only met him for the first time the other day. He seems like a fine man to me and a real loss to politics.

SALES: Okay. All right, let's turn to the rest of the week in federal politics. Scott Morrison, given where we are in the electoral cycle, can the Opposition afford another week of own goals like the one you've just had?

MORRISON: Well, this week we announced \$46 billion, including capital, of savings, compared to when the last Shadow Treasurer's speech was given. When the Government was in Opposition, they

announced \$3 billion. We also put out costings on the line of \$4.8 billion.

SALES: But you also ... I know you want to focus on the positives of the week, but you also had Tony Abbott on 7.30 Report making a bit of a spectacle; you had the issue about Peter Dutton's shares; you had the Jockey Hockey-Andrew Robb double act; you had Michael Johnson disendorsed in Queensland. It wasn't your greatest week.

MORRISON: Well, look, I think in all of those areas I think these things have turned out to be largely sort of minor events. The big events of the week were the fact that we came out and announced \$46.7 billion worth of savings including capital. Now that was the actual point that Joe was making this week. That was the point that Andrew Robb was making this week. I know others like to focus on the theatrics of the way that the day panned out, and that's, I suppose, interesting to commentators.

SALES: They all create an impression to the electorate.

MORRISON: Well, what creates an impression is \$46.7 billion worth of hard decisions and savings. That's what we've put out there, and we've outlined what our costs to date have been in the policies we've announced: \$4.8 billion. That's clear, it's transparent and compared to what we saw from the then Leader of the Opposition and the Treasurer: \$3 billion of savings. They announced, I think, 2,600 trade training skills, of which we've seen about dozen. We saw the big promises about cutting taxes for offshore investors. That was what we saw in their last effort in that situation. I think Joe and Andrew put out some very solid information.

SALES: Craig Emerson, the Government was quick this week to jump on this point that people couldn't trust Tony Abbott after what he said on the 7.30 Report, but don't the polls show that Kevin Rudd is the one with the public trust problem, given the way the bottom is falling out of his personal approval ratings?

EMERSON: Well, if I could just quickly say in relation to Scott's comments: Scott, if you believe you had a good week this week, I wish more good weeks on you from now on to election day. Because if we can have a week like that every week between now and the election, all the best to you, because it was a disaster.

And in relation to Kevin Rudd's standing, the difference, Leigh, is this: if we are not able to keep a commitment - and sometimes you have to make an actual hard decision for budgetary reasons not to keep a commitment - we expect that the media and the public will hold us to account for that. What Tony Abbott did was

fundamentally different. He said that if he makes a promise and it's a heat-of-the-moment promise, he will not be held to account, and worse, the Australian public will not know until after the election whether it was a carefully-scripted gospel truth comment or a heat-of-the-moment comment. That is an escape route to break any and every promise.

SALES: All right. Let's get Scott Morrison to respond to that.

EMERSON: Any and every promise.

MORRISON: I think that's just hyper-inflated spin, frankly, Craig. I mean, Tony's comments were very honest, upfront statements. I mean, the problem we have with Labor is you can't even believe what they put in writing, let alone what they say. When they were in Opposition they made a range of promises. The day before the election Kevin Rudd said he would turn boats back, for goodness sake. Now none of these things, none of these things have transpired, so if the Government wants to debate about who can be believed, then I think the public are making it pretty clear what they think about Kevin Rudd's believability.

SALES: OK, let's ...

EMERSON: Well, I don't think people believe that Labor has kept none of its promises. We've kept many and indeed most of our promises. Some we haven't been able to keep and we will be held to account.

MORRISON: Well, greatest moral challenge of our time.

EMERSON: We will be held to account for those, Scott. But you say, well, at least yours are written down. They didn't add up. You wrote them down and they didn't add up.

MORRISON: They did add up, Craig, I'll send you a calculator. You're obviously needing this technology.

SALES: Speaking of things adding up ... speaking of things adding up ...

EMERSON: This week, we saw Phony Tony's funny money scheme.

SALES: ... I want to ask a few questions to do with the economy before we run out of time. There's been a debate about whether or not the super-profits tax is contributing to a bit of a battering of the Australian dollar. Craig Emerson, is that the case?

EMERSON: No, there are some powerful influences in Europe. What's happening in Greece is very bad and that's spreading - it appears at least to be spreading - to other countries. There was

a tightening of monetary policy in the last week or so in China, which means that the authorities expect the Chinese economy to slow down. So when you have a crisis or the possible emergence of a crisis in Europe, there is a flight to the United States dollar. So the United States dollar ...

SALES: You don't believe this tax has anything to do with the Australian dollar?

EMERSON: Well, ask Deutsche Bank. Deutsche Bank regarded it as disingenuous and actually said: "We struggle to see any merit in that exact argument". Now, you know, Scott Morrison currency trader will say, "Yes, it's all to do with the RSPT." I'd rather believe, I'd rather believe Deutsche Bank, thank you very much.

SALES: Why don't we actually let Scott Morrison speak?

MORRISON: Look, I think one thing that no-one can disagree with is it certainly hasn't helped. And we would argue that obviously it's played its role and the commentary in the markets today was mixed and varied, but no-one can say and particularly the Government can't say that it has helped or has contributed. I think it highlights the fact that at the moment there are a number of uncertain things happening, so why you would put a dagger in the heart of the mining sector with there's this sort of initiative and create the uncertainty with this type of measure? It really defies belief.

SALES: On this point about uncertainty, Craig Emerson, the Government has said the tax is under negotiation and could be tinkered with. Given that the ripples that it may or may not be causing, wouldn't it be better to nail down all the details sooner rather than later?

EMERSON: Well we are in constructive consultation with major mining companies. I think you on ABC reported of BHP today - I think it was Rio yesterday. But, look, the real uncertainty would be created by Tony Abbott making his heat-of-the-moment comments. Imagine in the circumstances of the re-emergence of a financial crisis in Europe, Tony Abbott standing there and making proclamations about the value of the dollar and where interest rates are and then saying, "Oh, I only said that in the heat of the moment." You know, "I'll have to correct myself."

MORRISON: Craig, come on, that is a ridiculous comment. That is a ridiculous comment, Craig.

EMERSON: This is the last guy - Phony Tony would be the last guy ...

MORRISON: Okay, well come out with the cliches and the slogans. I know you always do, Craig, but...

EMERSON: ... you want in charge of the Australian economy during times of uncertainty. He changes his position.

SALES: Okay, quick brief final word for Scott Morrison.

MORRISON: Let me address the point, because in the middle of this crisis that's going on with Greece and the other things, what has this Government done? Gone and slapped a great big tax on the mining sector in the middle of it. Now that is far more damaging, far more damaging than anything that Craig can protest about it. And that's what this Government has done: in the middle of the crisis, racked up debt and spending out of control. That's what they've actually done.

SALES: Okay. We are unfortunately out of time. Scott Morrison, Craig Emerson, thank you very much.

MORRISON: Thanks, Leigh.

EMERSON: Okay, thanks, Leigh.

MORRISON: Thanks, Craig.

EMERSON: Righteo.