



THE HON DR EMERSON MP
MINISTER FOR SMALL BUSINESS, INDEPENDENT CONTRACTORS AND
THE SERVICE ECONOMY
MINISTER FOR COMPETITION POLICY AND CONSUMER AFFAIRS
MINISTER ASSISTING THE MINISTER FOR FINANCE ON
DEREGULATION

Transcript
Inside Canberra, ABC 612 Brisbane with Madonna King
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Interviewees: Dr Craig Emerson, Senator George Brandis

E&OE

Subjects: Julie Bishop; Malcolm Fraser; leadership styles; Building the Education Revolution; State of Origin.

MADONNA: Former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser has quit the Liberal Party but it's his deputy, the deputy leader of the party who's in strife this morning. Julie Bishop has been strongly criticised for the suggestions that Australian spies use forged passports while on overseas operations. Her comments followed the government's decision to send Israel's top diplomat packing after an investigation found Israel stole the identity of four Australians. Was she just being honest? But is it something you just don't say? Or was it irresponsible? Let's go inside Canberra, Dr Craig Emerson Rudd Government Minister, Good morning.

EMERSON: Hello Madonna

MADONNA: And good morning to you Senator George Brandis

BRANDIS: Good morning Madonna, morning Craig

EMERSON: G'day George

MADONNA: Remember also your next chance to join our election sweep now too. You'll hear the answer to a question I'll ask you before 10 in the next 20 minutes. Get it right and you could walk away with \$300 worth of ABC prizes. Gentlemen let's start with Julie Bishop. Senator Brandis, do you back her comments?

BRANDIS: Well I think her comments are being misrepresented. I've in fact, just before I came on air I watched a tape of the interview concerned and it's

plain that what Julie Bishop was talking about was the use of forged Australian passports. They are the nation's, which is a matter that the Foreign Affairs Minister Stephen Smith acknowledged in the House of Representatives in his statement yesterday afternoon. She wasn't talking about Australian agencies using forged passports, she was talking about forged Australian passports I think –

MADONNA: This is, this is the radio interview in Melbourne that if you go, is that the one you are talking about?

BRANDIS: Oh well I've only seen one interview. I think there is only one interview.

MADONNA: Well, no, my understanding is it was in a Melbourne radio interview and she says other countries do that and wouldn't exclude Australia; I wouldn't insulate Australia from that – or to that effect.

EMERSON: She actually said, she said “and I would include Australia in that”.

BRANDIS: Let me, Let me t –

MADONNA: I would include Australia in that.

EMERSON: That's correct.

BRANDIS: Let, let me tell you what Julie Bishop said, let me read to you, it's very, very short -

MADONNA: No, no, no, but, but Senator Brandis that's one interview she's obviously done another because we've read the quotes of the other.

BRANDIS: No. Let, let, let me read to you her position in a statement she issued last night: “I did not state that Australian intelligence agencies forged the passports of other nations during my interview with Fairfax online this afternoon. My responses were referring to the fact that forged Australian passports have been used previously as noted by the Prime Minister today. I have no knowledge of any Australian authority forging any passports of any nation.” That is her position.

MADONNA: So has she been caught out and had to back down?

BRANDIS: No I think what, the, what she said has been mischaracterised. Perhaps she and the interviewer crossed purposes on this question of the use of forged Australian passports but her position is as I've stated.

EMERSON: Ah Madonna I think I can enlighten your listeners here. This is what actually was said. One was with Fairfax's Tim Lester; Julie Bishop said “It would be naive to think that Israel was the only country in the world that has used forged passports including Australian passports for security

operations". Tim Lester: "What? We do?" Julie Bishop "Yes." Then, so she said yes we do use forged passports –

BRANDIS: Now hang on you're interpolating those words Craig that's not fair -

EMERSON: Alright, he said, come on let me get to the facts -

BRANDIS: Listen given that this is a debate about a misunderstanding of an exchange of dialogue it's not fair for you to interpolate words into –

MADONNA: All right, okay, all right so –

EMERSON: Well that's radio.

MADONNA: All right so can I, can I interrupt here -

EMERSON: Look can we find out what she actually said.

MADONNA: Look can I say that what she's quoted as saying in her words, George Brandis, Ms Bishop told Melbourne talk radio yesterday quote "It wouldn't be the first time that another country forged passports for a particular operation..."

EMERSON: For a particular operation.

MADONNA: I'll do this Craig Emerson, I'll do this Craig - "And I would include in that Australia." That seems pretty certain.

BRANDIS: Well look Madonna, I have told you I have read onto the record what Julie Bishop's position is, and that's that.

EMERSON: Well Julie Bishop has changed, she's denied she's said something that she obviously did say: "and I would include Australia in that." And what she has said –

BRANDIS: Well what she's talking about is the use of forged -

EMERSON: No –

BRANDIS: Australian passports by other countries.

EMERSON: And she said "It wouldn't be the first time that another country forged passports for a particular operation and I would include Australia in that."

BRANDIS: Yeah exactly what she, what she –

EMERSON: That is that Australia forged passports for a particular operation.

BRANDIS: But Craig you could interpret it that way if you like.

EMERSON: That's the only way to interpret it.

BRANDIS: No it's not. Because what she's talking about, the way this whole dispute began was an allegation that Israel forged Australian passports and when she said "I'd include Australia in that" she's talking about the use of forged Australian passports.

EMERSON: No it's not. She said "It wouldn't be the first time that another country forged passports for a particular operation and I would include Australia in that."

BRANDIS: Why is, why is, why is that not equally able to be understood as saying it's not the first time another country has forged passports and I'd include Australia –

EMERSON: Australia in the forging.

BRANDIS: - include Australia in the country whose passports were forged?

MADONNA: All right well I'm going to leave that to our listeners to decide. Let me read you the exact quote. This is Julie Bishop: "It wouldn't be the first time that another country forged passports for a particular operation and I would include in that Australia." How do you interpret that? That Australia is forging passports in the same way that we accused Israel of doing? Or in the way Senator George Brandis has just explained? You tell us. 1300 222 612. We'll run a quick off air poll and let you know the results by 10 o'clock this morning. But gentlemen, just on that issue Julie Bishop had received a National Security briefing ahead of the diplomat's removal, how much of things like that should, does a politician keep to themselves and how much are they allowed to say?

EMERSON: I think it's a matter of common sense. You don't divulge very sensitive National Security information. You use that information on which to base your conclusions. That's really what should happen. But blurting out these sorts of remarks is highly irresponsible and highly reckless.

BRANDIS: Well Craig you're not being fair to her.

EMERSON: It just shows that you're not fit to govern.

MADONNA: We're going back to that issue. I don't want to go back to that issue.

BRANDIS: You're not, you're not being fair to her because if what she said is what she has, what I understood her to have said and is clarified in a statement she's said then there is no issue here. I mean you –

MADONNA: Look I, I don't want to go back to this issue, we're running a poll. Our phone lines have gone into a virtual meltdown so keep them calling, you'll get through if you're trying. Just try again in a minute or two and you will get through. And on that basis I'm going to go on to the next issue and that's Malcolm Fraser. He's not answering his mobile, he's not taking interviews but he's quit the Liberal Party. Senator Brandis how much of a loss is this?

BRANDIS: Well I think it's showing Malcolm Fraser resigned from the Liberal Party but not withstanding his decision to do so he is and always will be a great Australian Liberal. Malcolm Fraser's, by the way, Malcolm Fraser's most recent contribution to public debate in this country a few days ago was when he described the Rudd Government as even worse than the Whitlam Government. So I think Malcolm will go down as the man who got rid of the second worst government in Australian history, just as Tony Abbott I think will go down as the man who got rid of the worst government in Australian history.

MADONNA: All right but you're going off track in terms, this is a bit –

BRANDIS: Oh I like Malcolm Fraser.

MADONNA: Yeah but it's a bit of a, it's a bit of a....are you there?

BRANDIS: Yes.

MADONNA: Sorry I just lost you temporarily. It's a bit of a kick in the guts to the Liberal Party when a former Prime Minister quits the party not happy with the direction it's going.

BRANDIS: Well look you know when people finish their political career sometimes they do that. There are former Labor leaders who've left the Labor party at various times, some under a cloud I might say, so this is not unheard of in politics. But to me Malcolm Fraser has always been and will remain a great Australian Liberal, the man who saved us from the Whitlam Government.

MADONNA: All right, it's interesting because on the back of that Tony Abbott's said to the Liberal Party, you've got to forget he's not going to be John Howard in a sense. He's told colleagues that the Abbott Government's not going to be an action replay of the Howard Government. "I'm as conservative as anyone in this room, but a true conservative moves with the times." It's interesting how you own your period, like how does Kevin Rudd own the ALP? How much is riding on Tony Abbott putting an Abbott angle on the Coalition?

BRANDIS: I think, I think Kevin Rudd doesn't own the ALP. I think Kevin Rudd has been renting the ALP and the lease is about to expire.

MADONNA: Well you, you answer on Tony Abbott and I'll let Craig Emerson answer on Kevin Rudd.

EMERSON: Well Kevin Rudd has implemented a number of very important reforms. We are a moderate political party.

MADONNA: Yeah but what -

BRANDIS: Julia Gillard, the memorial school halls, the pink batts, the –

EMERSON: Well we've gotten - George I didn't interrupt once, not once.

MADONNA: No but Craig Emerson can I get you to answer the question because the answer isn't for you to give a litany of what you think Kevin Rudd has done good for the country.

EMERSON: Well you asked me a straight question and I gave you a straight answer.

MADONNA: No. My question is he's the leader. What is his leadership that wouldn't be a Craig Emerson leader or a Julia Gillard leadership? What does the leader bring and what does Kevin Rudd bring to the Labor Party?

EMERSON: The leader brings his or her own personal philosophy to the party. But a party that is rich in philosophy in the first place. And the Liberal Party under Malcolm Fraser was rich in philosophy. The Labor Party is rich in philosophy about ensuring that we have a growing economy, but that we look after the disadvantaged and we make sure that every child, irrespective of the wealth of their parents or circumstances, has a good future through a good education.

MADONNA: But, but how would that be different –

EMERSON: That's a pretty good summary of it.

BRANDIS: That's what we believe in.

MADONNA: - over a Julia Gillard leadership?

EMERSON: Well Julia Gillard or anyone else would have a similar philosophy. That's the truth of it. We do believe in supporting those who need some support in terms of extra opportunity, a fair go all round. That's why we did get rid of WorkChoices. And the fact is, look to give Tony Abbott his credit the Australian people have a very clear choice at the coming election and between Tony Abbott and his far, he's got extreme policies far to the right of those of Malcolm Fraser and those of George Brandis.

BRANDIS: No it's not. You wouldn't say that in a -

EMERSON: And the reason why Malcolm Fraser quit, the reason he actually gave was the ads that Tony Abbott put to air of the yellow hoards and the red peril going back to the 1960s. The Bob Askin days, you know trying to just get-

BRANDIS: The yellow hoards and the red peril?

EMERSON: Exactly. There's arrows –

BRANDIS: What are you talking about? You have lost it.

EMERSON: You weren't around George. These arrows –

BRANDIS: Craig you've lost it again –

EMERSON: This is exactly what used to come out of Ashfield in Sydney with Bob Askin and his Liberal –

BRANDIS: Bob Askin has been dead for 30 years for goodness sake. Doesn't the Rudd Government have anything to say?

EMERSON: And that's exactly right, and that's exactly right and Tony Abbott is going back to those very bad olden days ...

BRANDIS: Like Paid Parental Leave?

EMERSON: ... of xenophobia saying all these people are coming in to invade us ...

BRANDIS: That is complete rubbish Craig.

EMERSON: Such a terrible message to send to the Australian people.

BRANDIS: You are ...

EMERSON: And if we are looking for extremism bringing back WorkChoices, saying climate change is crap, he is a very risky leader because he is far to the right, with his extreme policies, of George Brandis and Malcolm Fraser.

BRANDIS: Can I have a go?

EMERSON: Malcolm Fraser did the right thing and quit the Liberal Party.

BRANDIS: Could I have go?

MADONNA: Well but George Brandis in answering this I want you –

BRANDIS: This can't go on I'm sorry.

MADONNA: No but I want you to answer, I want you to answer this, that the question -

EMERSON: Answer the question George.

MADONNA: Well you didn't Craig Emerson so the jury's still out on George Brandis. If Tony Abbott is saying, you know, it's not going to be an action replay of the Howard Government and every leader has their own stamp, I'm trying to get to allow you guys to explain to listeners at home what your individual leader offers that perhaps no one else in the party does.

BRANDIS: Well let me –

MADONNA: So what is Tony Abbott's coalition?

BRANDIS: Okay let me explain to you what I believe are Tony Abbott's core values. I wrote a piece about this in fact in The Australian newspaper earlier in the year. Tony Abbott is somebody I've known for 29 years so I think I can speak with some authority about and I've had many, many conversations with him about political philosophy over three decades.

MADONNA: All right get to the point.

BRANDIS: Right-o. Tony Abbott is more so than I think most Liberal leaders in the past have been, a communitarian. He believes in strong, –

EMERSON: What?

BRANDIS: - stable communities and a strong social fabric based on families and individuals having the right to choose their own course in life. He, one respect in which Tony I think has taken the Liberal Party on a somewhat different path from John Howard is that the last thing you could say about Tony Abbott is that he's a Neo-liberal. He's not somebody who believes in a society of isolated individuals in incessant competition with each other. He is the opposite of the extremists that Craig Emerson seeks to paint him as being.

EMERSON: He's more extreme than the others.

BRANDIS: He, he is a person who believes in the community and community standards and, a strong social fabric.

EMERSON: Madonna if I can bring this –

MADONNA: And that underlines his leadership. Is that –

BRANDIS: I think that defines him. I mean you're talking about a man who when he was in his 20s was proposing to devote his life to being a priest. I mean this is a person who is not a materialistic man. He's a person with a very strong ethic of community service as witnessed by the fact that he spends a lot of his life as a volunteer fire fighter, as a surf life saver, active parishioner. I mean these are backdrops for photo opportunities for Kevin Rudd but they're part of the fabric of Tony Abbott's everyday life.

MADONNA: All right Dr Craig Emerson ...

EMERSON: Madonna if I could bring one particular picture ...

MADONNA: No, no, no you can't. I'm going to go back to ...

EMERSON: ... of Kevin Rudd. You don't want me to answer that question you said I didn't answer?

MADONNA: Yeah you went on for five minutes. I'm going to be nice to you and go back to you and say in the same way, what is something Kevin Rudd by himself brings to the Labor Party that no one else does? In 30 seconds.

EMERSON: And that was the question I was about to answer. He has a special concern, and said so in the first caucus meeting or thereabouts, about homelessness. He really wants to make a big difference, as Prime Minister, to the plight of the homeless in Australia. Whether they just be down and out, whether they've got mental illnesses and he's putting a lot of effort into –

BRANDIS: How's that going Craig? Because after 2 ½ years there hasn't been any reduction in homelessness.

EMERSON: Well I thought you'd say something like that. And there are thousands of public housing units being built right now ...

BRANDIS: Being built. None of them have been finished.

EMERSON: ... right around Australia. We've been in Government for just over two years ...

BRANDIS: None of them have been finished.

MADONNA: George ...

BRANDIS: This is another failed service delivery ...

EMERSON: Will you just put a cork in it.

MADONNA: Yeah Senator Brandis would you just let Craig Emerson finish.

EMERSON: And you asked what he's specially brought from his personal life, values. That's it, a very deep concern about the plight of homeless people in Australia. We didn't say we would fix homelessness within 2 ½ years but we're giving it a very big go, putting a lot of money into this. I'm not going to make a political point about the Liberals. This is something that Kevin Rudd personally brings to the Prime Minister role.

MADONNA: All right. You've answered that now. Can I ask you a question Craig Emerson? I remember Kevin Rudd brought that up and I think we talked about it in an interview and he'd just become Prime Minister and he said to me that he wanted every one of his Labor MPs to go out to a homeless

shelter and to talk to people about what people went through when they discovered that they didn't have a home. Have you done that?

EMERSON: Yes I have. But the problem is in Logan City that there's very few, very little by the way of homeless shelters. But the good news is the Hope Centre is going ahead and it will accommodate 40 families, including those who are victims of abuse. And so that is just a very tangible practical outcome of Kevin Rudd's commitment to dealing with the homeless problem, including in Logan City. And I think it's wonderful and probably my proudest achievement, because we worked hard with Tanya Plibersek on that and it's just been announced.

BRANDIS: Well that's good, that's good Craig but can I say and I don't devalue your achievement, but can I say to you, good intentions aren't enough. I mean let's take it at face value what you say, that this is Kevin Rudd's passion. One thing that you did say that I agree with is that he's put a lot of money into this. But spending a lot of money and having good intentions gets you nowhere unless you have the competency to deliver the outcomes. And this is the problem with the Rudd Government. Whether it's the education revolution so called, whether it's the insulation program, whether it's the indigenous housing program in which there have been ten houses completed.

EMERSON: George they're being built and ...-

BRANDIS: They, they are not being delivered. These things are always coming in over cost and over budget if they come in at all.

EMERSON: John Howard had no commitment to this. John Howard and your Liberals had no commitment to this.

BRANDIS: Well I tell you what ...

EMERSON: The Rudd Government does. The Rudd Government is building housing units right now partly out of the stimulus, partly out of a national partnership agreement with the states to deal with the problem.

BRANDIS: But you're not delivering on them.

EMERSON: All you're doing is criticizing. You didn't even give it a go.

BRANDIS: You're not delivering on them. You're not delivering Craig.

EMERSON: That's what's so disgusting about the Liberal Party. You didn't even give it a go because you don't believe in public housing.

BRANDIS: Now settle down, don't become emotional. What we believe in ...

EMERSON: I did become emotional about your lack of belief in public housing.

BRANDIS: What we, what we, what we believe is in fact making people prosperous which is why the last time the Liberal Party was in power...

EMERSON: Okay exactly. Let's be prosperous and not have a home.

BRANDIS: ... unemployment had never been so low and real wages had never been so high.

MADONNA: Can I ask you Craig Emerson, when talking about the BER that this Building Education Revolution, when that investigation prompted by Julia Gillard will be released, will be reporting?

EMERSON: Well look I haven't got the figures in front of me or the date in front of me but I can say this, but very briefly about the Building of the Education Revolution. Every time this comes up I will defend it and I will defend it strongly based again on my experience in Queensland and in Logan City.

MADONNA: All right have you one in Queensland this morning reported on in The Australian where taxpayers have been billed hundreds of thousands of dollars in consultancy fees to design and plan a \$3 million school hall that breaches the building regulations, Brookside State School.

EMERSON: No I haven't seen that.

MADONNA: There's no plumbing approval because the suburb is not connected to sewerage and the school is banned from connecting the hall's toilets to the septic system.

EMERSON: Madonna I'm proud of the Building the Education Revolution program derogatorily called the school hall program and described as ...

BRANDIS: Julia Gillard ...

EMERSON: Yeah exactly, and it just shows that the Liberals just don't believe it either. No, they don't believe in science centres, in learning centres, they don't believe in better classroom facilities for schools.

MADONNA: No but Dr Craig, Dr Craig Emerson you're just jumping on that because this is a legitimate concern. Something like this is a legitimate concern and rather than addressing it you're just saying well the Liberals won't do this, they won't do that, maybe they won't.

EMERSON: Because George started interjecting over the top of me and I was responding to George.

MADONNA: Yeah but you must be concerned.

EMERSON: On the program itself, any alleged problem deserves attention. There's no doubt about that. If there is a problem or an assertion of a problem it deserves attention.

BRANDIS: Well it deserves a solution, Craig, it deserves a solution.

EMERSON: It deserves termination as far as you're concerned, of the greatest school modernisation program in Australia's history. You've criticized it, bagged it out. Including Tony Abbott from the outset describing it as 'a very low grade spend'. That is the view and all your listeners who are interested in what's happening with classroom expansion, with science and language centres need to know this: Tony Abbott will abolish the Trade Training Centres program and he will terminate the school modernisation program on every project that is not yet signed.

MADONNA: So but is there a middle ground here? Is there a building education plan that actually works, that millions of dollars in consultancy isn't wasted?

EMERSON: Well this is working. The Building Education Revolution program is working.

BRANDIS: How many billions of dollars have been wasted?

EMERSON: You don't even have an electorate George. I do. I've been to a number of schools, I've been to ...

BRANDIS: I have the entire state of Queensland.

EMERSON: Yeah well go to some of the schools where ...

BRANDIS: I do.

EMERSON: ... these great facilities have been installed, instead of bagging out on them and depriving parents and kids including in disadvantaged areas of the really great value of these facilities.

MADONNA: All right we're going to have to leave it there for now gentlemen. One last question, two words, who's the Captain of the Blues Team? Craig Emerson?

EMERSON: Kurt Gidley.

MADONNA: Do you agree with that or disagree George Brandis?

BRANDIS: No, Kurt Gidley is the captain.

MADONNA: Oh I just wanted you to agree on something.

EMERSON: Aw can't we argue about something?

MADONNA: Gentlemen talk to you next week.

BRANDIS: Thanks Madonna.

EMERSON: Thanks Madonna, thanks George.

END