



THE HON DR CRAIG EMERSON MP
MINISTER FOR TRADE

Transcript
Sky News AM Agenda with Kieran Gilbert

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E&OE

Subjects: Asylum-seeker deal, carbon tax.

KIERAN GILBERT:

The Government is reportedly on the verge of sealing its asylum-seeker deal with Malaysia after finalising the text of the controversial Memorandum of Understanding.

On another issue today, the Treasurer will release some of the economic modelling around the carbon tax. He says he's modelled a variety of scenarios and will today give a snapshot of results showing that GDP will grow strongly with a carbon tax.

WAYNE SWAN:

[Excerpt]

There's no commitment here to one particular price, but through a variety of those prices that are modelled in the modelling, we see that the economy will continue to grow very strongly while we make deep cuts in carbon pollution.

[End of excerpt]

GILBERT: The Treasurer there, talking to Fran Kelly on the ABC this morning.

With me now the Trade Minister Craig Emerson. We're going to be joined shortly by the Deputy Opposition Leader in the Senate, Senator Brandis. First, though, Craig Emerson, if we look at the Malaysia deal - we'll get to the carbon tax modelling in just a moment, but the Malaysia deal - apparently it's about to be sealed with the MOU being agreed to.

CRAIG EMERSON: Well, obviously, it's not my position to pre-empt when that would happen but ...

GILBERT: It's close.

EMERSON: Well, a lot of work has gone into this from the Immigration Minister Chris Bowen and the Prime Minister, so a lot of effort justifies some reward at the end of the that process and the only document that will count will be the final document rather than drafts that we've seen, I think, ventilated and then a lot of speculation

about those drafts. Let's reserve judgement to the actual document.

KIERAN GILBERT: Okay but some of your colleagues, Melissa Parke, the Fremantle MP, former United Nations lawyer ...

EMERSON: Yeah.

GILBERT: ... and others who have raised concerns about the prospect of sending unaccompanied children for example to Malaysia or other concerns about whether or not the United Nations will have full oversight of this process. Do you share those concerns? Do you understand where they're coming from with those?

EMERSON: Yeah, well Melissa's a good person and she has a lot of experience working in and with the United Nations. Obviously, everyone in the Government and, I think, right across Australia shares concerns about the welfare of children. And we're working with the United Nations High Commission for refugees in finalising this agreement with Malaysia.

But let me just add a couple of other dimensions. We also share concerns for children arriving unauthorised in very risky circumstances. We share concerns for the children who lost their lives when they were

smashed up against rocks at Christmas Island before Christmas of last year. We share concerns for the children who are in Malaysia now. There's a very large Burmese population in Malaysia and there's a lot of children there, and 4,000 for 800 would come - this is a five to one ratio ...

GILBERT: Andrew Wilkie ...

EMERSON: ... and they're children and we should be concerned about those children.

GILBERT: Andrew Wilkie says the Government's lost its moral compass on this and other issues. What do you say to him?

EMERSON: Well my point is a continuation of the one I was making and remains totally relevant, and that is there are children who are assessed as refugees in Malaysia right now - little Burmese kids - and I'm concerned for their welfare too and I'm sure Andrew Wilkie is ...

GILBERT: So the Government hasn't lost its moral compass?

EMERSON: Well, if we have the concern for children coming across risky seas and losing their lives, I wouldn't think that that would be a loss of moral compass. If we have concerns for children being brought to Australia as genuine

refugees, I wouldn't think that was a loss of moral compass. And if we have concerns that we work with the United Nations High Commission for refugees and the Malaysian Government on the treatment of children and, in fact, all who may end up in Malaysia, I wouldn't think we've lost our moral compass.

GILBERT:

We've got the Deputy Opposition Leader in the Senate, Senator George Brandis, with us in Brisbane. Senator Brandis, the Coalition's been critical of the Government attacking it from the left and from the right. But is it not a bit rich to take the moral high-ground when hundreds of asylum seekers were left stranded in limbo on Nauru for years under the Coalition?

GEORGE BRANDIS:

Well let me make a couple of points about that Kieran. First of all, almost everyone who is a participant in this debate now accepts that if you are going to have offshore processing, Nauru is a much better option than Malaysia. Even people who are critics of offshore processing, like Julian Burnside, came out on the weekend and said 'well, we don't agree with offshore processing, but if there is to be offshore processing, Nauru - where there is a purpose-built Australian facility, where the people who are sent to that facility are not at risk as they are in Malaysia of being subjected to cruel and inhumane punishments, including

corporal punishments - is a better option'. So that's the first point to be made.

But secondly, of course the Coalition has the moral high ground here. Because when we went out of office in November 2007, do you know how many children there were in detention in Australia? Not one, not a single child, because we released the children in detention as a result of a decision made in the Liberal Party room. Today there are more than 1,000 children in detention in Australia, among the more than 6,000 asylum-seekers in detention.

GILBERT:

Okay we're going to have to move on because we've got a few issues here. The carbon tax modelling out today, Craig Emerson. Well, some of the modelling released by the Treasurer. The multi-party committee, though - the Greens, Christine Milne, the Independent Tony Windsor - they're not happy that the Treasurer is releasing these numbers before they were briefed. Obviously, you've got to be fairly sensitive about this don't you, to bring them with you?

EMERSON:

Well, I think that whether they had a briefing before or after won't determine the outcome of the negotiations in the multi-party committee. I mean they've registered their concern about not having access to this document. Wayne

Swan will be releasing material at the National Press Club ...

GILBERT: Senator Milne said it was bad faith negotiations here.

EMERSON: Well, as I say I don't think it's going to be a factor determining the progress of negotiations, and I think really that is what Australians are concerned about. Australians are concerned about reducing carbon emissions. We want to put a price on carbon. We're being opposed from every which way from Tony Abbott - who's occupied, by the way, every possible position on this, to no action, to climate change is crap, to emissions trading scheme, to a carbon tax. You name it, Tony Abbott has advocated it and he actually went to Malcolm Turnbull and said 'I'm a weathervane on this: lick the finger, see which way the wind's blowing and then I, Tony Abbott, being very good at determining which way the wind's going, will then advise Malcolm Turnbull on what to do'. This is complete cynicism, complete opportunism on the part of Mr Abbott.

But what Wayne Swan will be releasing today is modelling showing very strong growth in Australian incomes with the existence of a price on carbon.

GILBERT: So, Tony Abbott, a comment that he made a few years ago re-emerged yesterday. The comment was made on Sky News. I want to play you a little bit of that and also Wayne Swan's reaction before we go to Senator Brandis.

TONY ABBOTT: [Excerpt]

If you want to put a price on carbon, why not just do it with a simple tax. Why not ask motorists to pay more? Why not ask electricity consumers to pay more? And then, at the end of the year, you can take your invoices to the tax office and get a rebate.

[End of excerpt]

WAYNE SWAN: [Excerpt]

Tony Abbott is running round trying to scare the pants off people at the moment and we know that only two years ago he was an advocate of a carbon tax. I mean this is phony Tony in full scare campaign mode.

[End of excerpt]

GILBERT: That was Wayne Swan responding, and that comment from Tony Abbott, as I say, was on Sky News originally a couple of years ago. It was replayed last night on the ABC. Senator

Brandis, tell me how do you reconcile those comments with the position today?

BRANDIS: Well I must say - I'll come to your question, but before I do let me say I think we all detect a tone of plaintive desperation from Government spokesmen, whether it be Wayne Swan or Craig Emerson ...

EMERSON: Yeah, yeah [indistinct] ...

BRANDIS: ... because ... yes you are because 64 per cent of the people in the country say you shouldn't do this without going to an election, and you are scared to death of an election because you know what the consequences for you would be.

Now, coming to Tony Abbott's tape - it's not a new tape by the way - I mean, this has been about for years. I think all it tells you is that this has been, on both sides of politics, an evolving debate. There's no question ...

EMERSON: [Laughs].

BRANDIS: Of course, it's been an evolving debate. You started with one scheme and you're now proposing another scheme and the Coalition ... the debate originally began with the Howard Government proposing a CPRS. But as everybody in Australia knows, in December

2009 as the inadequacies of that scheme became apparent, the Coalition moved from that position to a position of directly attacking climate change ... carbon pollution at source with measures like reforestation, with measures like soil sequestration of carbon and retro-fitting power plants and other heavy polluting industrial facilities.

Now, if anybody is questioning that this has been an evolving debate and that at various times both sides of politics have been considering different approaches to this, then they haven't been paying much attention to Australian politics for the last few years. But what matters is where the parties have ultimately landed.

GILBERT:

Okay, let me just ask you Craig Emerson a question: I just received an email from a former Coalition staffer on economic modelling and it is quoting you from an institute ... a Lowy Institute speech where you said 'modellers are handed the assumptions by government officials. The computer models produce the results. This process is best described as an expensive farce to hoodwink the public'.

EMERSON:

Yeah, I was actually talking about contracting out modelling to private organisations on the impacts of free trade agreements.

GILBERT: But not Treasury modelling?

EMERSON: We're ... no. And - that's right. So, another bit of mischievous, false, misleading crap from the Coalition. Not Treasury modelling. I was actually talking about this contracting-out where they say, 'oh, a free trade agreement will achieve these particular impacts on gross domestic product', and so on, assuming total free trade. They're the assumptions I was talking about. Free trade agreements very rarely, if ever, involve total free trade.

So, the little crap machine that operates out of the Opposition Leader's office has got it wrong again.

But what George was saying there, in his inimitable way about evolving policy positions, is that Tony Abbott has had every possible policy position and George articulated them. An emissions trading scheme, a carbon tax, direct action, climate change is crap. This is it, Tony Abbott saying 'I have no values, I have no beliefs whatsoever on these matters. I will simply test the mood of the electorate and I'll go with them, and then I'll run the mother of all scare campaigns'.

GILBERT: Okay gentlemen, we've got to take ...

BRANDIS: Craig, you can ...

GILBERT: Okay, Senator Brandis ...

EMERSON: That's not leadership, George.

BRANDIS: ... score ... you could score...

GILBERT: Senator Brandis, just quickly. We've got to take a break, but your response, yeah.

BRANDIS: Sure. You can score all the debating points you like, and it won't get past the fact that by a majority of more than two to one, the Australian people don't want this carbon tax. And by a majority of more than three to one they demand that you not introduce it until you put it to an election.

EMERSON: If we have economic reform in this country, George, determined by opinion polls ... and then governments will say, 'we will not implement ... we will not...'

BRANDIS: Economic reform like the GST which John Howard took to an election in 1998.

EMERSON: Yeah, which wasn't popular either, by the way.

BRANDIS: Yeah, that's right.

EMERSON: But we will ... if the proposition, George ... if the proposition ...

BRANDIS: But John Howard had the courage to take it to an election.

EMERSON: Can I finish, George? If the proposition is that you do not implement anything that at a particular point in time isn't top of the pops, then that is exactly a recipe for doing nothing, for doing absolutely nothing. The Liberal way.

BRANDIS: There's a huge difference between doing that and implementing a tax you promised six days before the election you wouldn't implement.

EMERSON: This is an important economic reform and you know it actually, George, because you did support an emissions trading scheme.

GILBERT: All right.

BRANDIS: Why did Julia Gillard lie about it six days before the election?

EMERSON: Remember George, you used to support an emissions trading scheme.

BRANDIS: But why did Julia Gillard lie about it six days before the election, Craig?

EMERSON: You remember, George, you used to say to me, 'Craig, it's all right, we'll get the emissions trading scheme through the Senate. I'll vote for

the emissions trading scheme'. Do you remember saying that to me, George? Because I certainly do. That was before Tony Abbott said ...

BRANDIS: Well I ... what ... I think what everybody remembers, Craig ...

EMERSON: ... well, we've got [indistinct], which is to harvest as many votes as you possibly can.

BRANDIS: ... is Julia Gillard saying six days before the election campaign there'll be no carbon tax under the government I lead.

EMERSON: Well, do you deny saying to me that 'we will' - that is we, the Coalition and Labor - 'we'll get the emissions trading scheme through the Senate'?

BRANDIS: Craig, do you ... Craig, do you deny that Julia Gillard went to the election promising ...

EMERSON: I asked the question. We've been through ... we've been through that matter.

BRANDIS: ... there would be no carbon tax? And your government is now trying to avoid ...

EMERSON: Why don't you answer my question, George?

BRANDIS: ... putting that issue to an election because it knows the public is not with it.

EMERSON: You won't answer my question because you know you said to me ...

BRANDIS: Craig, it's your policy ...

EMERSON: ... that 'we will get the ETS through the Senate'.

BRANDIS: It's your side of politics that is breaking an election promise. It's your side of politics that is trying to rot the democratic system by implementing a policy you promised not to implement before the election.

GILBERT: All right, gentlemen ...

EMERSON: Which you supported.

GILBERT: Okay, I've got to interrupt. I was going to interrupt two minutes ago ...

EMERSON: Which you supported time and time again.

GILBERT: ... but I was enjoying the chat.

[Laughter]

Thank you both for your time this morning. Trade Minister Craig Emerson and the Shadow Attorney-General, Senator George Brandis, thank you as well from Brisbane.

EMERSON:

Thanks Kieran.

BRANDIS:

Thanks Kieran.

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