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Transcript
AM Agenda with Kieran Gilbert
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E&OE

Subjects: Casualties in Afghanistan, Newspoll analysis.

GILBERT: With me on the program this morning from the Liberal Party, Steve Ciobo.

Good morning, Steve.

CIOBO: Good morning, Kieran.

GILBERT: And from Sydney, Craig Emerson, of course Labor frontbencher.

Craig, I'll start with you. A tragic few days, a tragic few weeks. Five Australian soldiers killed. We've seen the numbers in the polling, Essential Research yesterday, 61 per cent of people want the Diggers, want the ADF brought home.

Is this war being won? Are people convinced?

EMERSON: Well, I'm certainly not convinced that the Essential Research polling reflects general community attitudes. But even if it did, Kieran, the fact is that Afghanistan has been a safe haven for terrorists, who have killed more than 100 Australians. Let us not forget the Bali bombings. It's a training ground for al-Qaeda, and we just cannot relent in ensuring that young people, people all around the world, are safe from terrorism both here and overseas. And that's why we have to be committed to Afghanistan.

Our hearts go out to the loved ones and the comrades of those who have lost their lives in this latest tragedy. It is just a terrible thing, and as you say, it comes on the heels of two other Aussies who have died recently.

So war is horrible; war is terrible, but terrorist attacks on Australians, and for that matter on others, are also terrible, and we cannot just afford to sit back and let that happen.

GILBERT: Craig Emerson, do you think that - unfortunately, the casualties continue, as the Minister has warned they will, particularly with the Kandahar offensive due within the next few weeks?

Are you concerned that public support will be diminished because they simply don't want to see so many Australian lives lost?

EMERSON: We have to do the right thing by our nation and by our nation's security. The focus is on training up the Afghan security forces. That's what we're doing. We've got 1550 personnel in Afghanistan; it's the biggest non-NATO presence in Afghanistan. And these tragedies are a terrible reminder of the fact that this is very, very risky work. And we're just full of praise, and the tributes are pouring in for the efforts of our soldiers there in doing this terribly risky work.

But Kieran, I don't believe that it should be determined that the policy of ourselves - that is, Labor or the Coalition for that matter - should be determined through some sort of popularity contest. This is much more important than that. It should be determined on the basis of ensuring the security of our people, of our young people all around the world and here in Australia. And we cannot relent in dealing with the threat of terrorism.

GILBERT: Steve Ciobo, I'm sure you'll agree with Craig, and I suppose, I mean, first and foremost in our thoughts this morning are the two Diggers that are in intensive care, one in a serious condition. They're at the forefront of our minds. And all the other debates, I suppose, are secondary to that at the moment, aren't they?

CIOBO: I mean, our thoughts and prayers can really only go out to the families, the loved ones of not only of course the Diggers that have died in combat but those that now are critically injured and those that are in hospital and receiving treatment.

I mean, the cost of and the horror of war, I think, is well known by everyone, and it shouldn't be popular. Of course it shouldn't be popular. But you don't make these decisions on the basis of what's popular; you make these decisions on the basis of what's right.

And the horror that's taking place over there needs to be put in a context, and that is that unless we in western democracies are willing to stand up for the freedoms and values that we hold near and dear. The fact is that it's a lot of very bad people over there that would use this country as a launching pad to kill potentially hundreds or thousands of innocent civilians, as they have done in the past and there's no doubt they will attempt to again in the future.

So unfortunately we have to steer the course because it's the right thing to do.

GILBERT: And what about the Greens' argument that there should be at least a debate about the deployment? Do you think it's fair enough to say, okay, let's have a debate? Or is that undermining...

CIOBO: Sure.

GILBERT: ...if you have a parliamentary debate now with our soldiers there in harm's way, does that undermine support in any way?

CIOBO: I think discussion in the community about what's happening over there is vital, and no one would ever frown upon the opportunity to discuss the merits or otherwise of these decisions.

But fundamentally, I think all the major parties are aligned with what I would also think is probably the common consensus, that it's the right thing to do based on the track record and based on the very real future threat that these countries would present to us in democracies and civilians if we didn't unfortunately stand up for the freedoms that we hold near.

GILBERT: Well, the Prime Minister made some statements yesterday to Parliament in response to this, these tragic events. Let's hear a little of those comments now.

[Grabs from PM, members of public]

GILBERT: Welcome back to AM Agenda. With me from the Liberal Party, Steve Ciobo and Labor frontbencher, Craig Emerson.

Craig, you look at these marginal seat polls in The Australian today, the news - the latest Newspoll analysis and that's diabolical isn't it? When you look at Lindsay, Longman, Flynn, Dawson, they'd all be wiped out.

EMERSON: There's no doubt that the Government faces real challenges. We've got an ambitious plan for Australia, Kieran, and we're making solid progress. We kept the economy out of recession, we got rid of WorkChoices, three rounds of tax cuts delivered on

time in full, \$30 increase in the age pension, 1,000 extra nursing places a year, 1300 GPs.

GILBERT: The real challenge - you say you've got real challenges Craig, that's got to be the understatement of the year doesn't it? Real challenges, I mean look at Lindsay, it's just flipped on its head.

EMERSON: We will continue to do what is in the national interest and it's the sort of investments that I'm talking about, that increase in the age pension, 300,000 computers in school, trade training centres, it's an ambitious program. We're making solid progress, but obviously there's more work to be done, but we'll continue to work and govern in the national interest.

It's not a matter of checking the polls every week and trying to win popularity contests every week. What we've got to do is the important reforms for Australia's future.

There are two choices basically facing governments: you can sit around and watch the world go by, be a spectator, sit on the shiny leather seats; or you can get in there and do the hard work of reform and the thing - the defining feature of reform is that it costs early and the dividends come later. It's an investment in the country's future and the cost might not only be financial Kieran, it might be in terms of political support. But in the great Labor tradition, we need to make these investments in the future. Sometimes they'll be controversial, sometimes they might not be immediately popular, but we need to secure this country's future prosperity and its economic security and that's what we're working on.

GILBERT: Steve Ciobo, the Liberal Party doesn't even have a candidate in Lindsay yet and it's polling as strongly as it is. This has got to be very encouraging for the Liberals. Lindsay was of course held by Jackie Kelly for 10, 11 years.

CIOBO: Well what's going on Kieran is that Australians are seeing through the Rudd Government. I mean, Kevin Rudd was elected on the basis of all sorts of grand promises, but what he's delivered is very different to what was promised. But the fact is that this Government has driven Australia into a huge level of debt and deficit. This Government has not delivered on what they said they were going to do. They said they'd give every child between Years 9 and 12 at school a laptop computer...

EMERSON: Yeah 300,000 of them ...

CIOBO: Craig, hold your horses. I listened to you. I know you're excited, but Craig you're just going to have to settle down a little bit. The fact is that...

EMERSON: [Laughs] [indistinct]...

CIOBO: Well it's just polite Craig to let the other side have their say as well.

The fact is that this Government has failed on so many measures. We heard about the promise of ending the double school drop off. That was scrapped. We heard about Grocery Watch, that was scrapped, Fuel Watch was scrapped. This Government ran up \$94 billion of debt, a \$41 billion deficit and Australians are turning against Kevin Rudd because they know that he's all talk and no action.

GILBERT: But Steve, do you think as well that there's some other issues biting here. If you look at Western Sydney, asylum seekers in the [indistinct] were enormous back in 2001. Do you think that that issue is resonating? There could be different issues at play all over the place that in Western Sydney particularly that is one which is biting.

CIOBO: That's exactly it. I mean the level of ineptitude by this Labor Government is on so many different fronts. I mean it's not just the economic devastation that Labor has caused, it's the fact that because of their policy changes our border is...

GILBERT: That's rich - that's rich to say economic devastation.

CIOBO: No, no, no, no, hang on, hang on, this is...

GILBERT: Hasn't the Government kept us out of recession?

CIOBO: Absolutely not. The fact is that this Government...

EMERSON: Sorry?

CIOBO: I went to a school hall opening recently. Labor crows about their so-called Building the Education Revolution, and they stood up and Labor likes to do this and crow about their great vision at building these massively over-priced school halls. I looked at the kids in the eyes and I said, 'children you should own this school hall, you know what, because you'll be paying the debt off on this school hall for the next 20 years'.

When these kids, that are currently 14 are 34, they might finally have paid off Labor's debt, so I do think it's devastating that Labor took what was a \$50 billion surplus into now a mountain of debt that Aussie kids have to pay off for generations.

GILBERT: Craig Emerson, do you think that issues like asylum seekers are hurting, for example, your prospects in Lindsay and those outer suburbs? Is it something that the polling is showing you in the Labor Party?

EMERSON: Look the asylum seeker issue probably is an issue that is affecting people's votes, but I can't let Steve's comments go through to the keeper - that we are in a situation of economic devastation.

We're the only developed country to stay out of recession and all this debt and deficit stuff, we will return the budget to surplus in three years time, that's three years early. Now you don't hear any of that from Steve, you don't hear any acknowledgement of all of the achievements that I've just recited to your viewers Kieran. The fact is we've made solid progress.

To answer your question about asylum seekers, yes I think that is an issue in the community. We have a different approach to the Coalition. But when Tony Abbott was asked, will he stop the boats coming, he was given three or four opportunities and he would not answer that question. He would not answer that question.

GILBERT: Tell me, will you need to go specific to individual campaigns for each electorate more than you have in the past where issues relevant, pertinent to that demographic, that seat, are going to have to be addressed, because you look at these polls for individual areas and you're copping it even worse in the marginal seats than the rest of the electorate?

EMERSON: Well it's always been thus that there are particular local issues or even if they are, in a sense, national issues, they might be more pressing in the minds of some people in some parts of Australia than in others.

For example, the mining tax obviously is more pressing in the minds of people in regional Queensland and in Western Australia than it might be in the inner city seats of Sydney or Melbourne. That's just the way it is. It's always been that case. The asylum seeker issue might be more pressing in the minds of people in Western Sydney and other parts of Queensland including in my own electorate of Logan City. But look, we've just got to continue working with the Australian people for the Australian people.

I'm not going to make a big deal out of - to say, but watch out, Tony Abbott's worse. I'm not going to say that, but I am going to say this: that his policies are extreme, that he's a guy who under pressure just comes up with anything and then later apologies for it. He - I look at him across the chamber and I think, is this guy capable of handling the pressures associated with the global recession or even what's happening in Europe now? And I've got to come up with the answer of no, that he's a risk.

GILBERT: Well let's get Steve's response to that because clearly the Government is going to now put everything at Tony Abbott to put the spotlight on him to try and undermine his credibility.

CIOBO: There's no doubt there's a nasty, negative campaign and Craig's at the forefront of that on behalf of the Labor Party. There's a number of other Labor ministers who have Tony Abbott in their sights. They're going to attempt to belittle him...

GILBERT: But why shouldn't he be scrutinised...

CIOBO: No, there's no problem with scrutiny...

GILBERT: ...if you can be Prime Minister.

CIOBO: No problem with scrutiny at all and the fact is Kieran is that Tony Abbott has a very strong track record. I mean this is a bloke that was a senior Minister in the Howard Government...

EMERSON: He took \$1 billion out of the public hospital system.

CIOBO: Well that's rubbish Craig. This is a bloke that was senior Minister in the Howard Government, that successfully stewarded our health system and a number of other portfolios...

EMERSON: C'mon...

CIOBO: ...very well for a number of years. Australians know Tony Abbott but most importantly the key difference between Tony Abbott and Kevin Rudd is that Australians know that with Tony Abbott what you see is what you get and that is in stark contrast to the Prime Minister, who Australians are starting to recognise presents a very different picture publicly to the real Kevin Rudd, and I think we see increasingly stories emerge of the kind of tantrums, the kind of abuse that staff and others have to face at the hands of this Prime Minister, and it stands in contrast to Tony Abbott who really is a case of saying what he believes and acting upon it.

EMERSON: Saying what he believes like he's the key architect of Work Choices.

GILBERT: Today's the last caucus - okay I'll come to you in a minute Craig Emerson. I just want to get your thoughts Steve, last caucus meeting, Labor caucus before the election probably or possibly, it looks like you will be facing Kevin Rudd with all of the flaws that you think he has.

CIOBO: Well I mean we'll find out in a couple of hours. I couldn't help but notice Kieran that Julia Gillard had a bit of a makeover, it would appear over the weekend, new dye through the hair and looking very sporting and I wondered what...

EMERSON: C'mon, give us a break, how can you say we're being nasty towards Tony Abbott and you're going on with this rubbish?

CIOBO: No, no, no, hang on Craig, I'm not being nasty. It was just a statement of fact that Julia appeared to have had a makeover over the weekend. There's nothing nasty about that. It's just a statement of fact and I just wonder whether or not there's something behind that as she walked into today's caucus meeting...

EMERSON: [Laughs] This is laughable...

CIOBO: But you know I've got to say we'll find out what happens, we know there's a lot of very nervous Labor backbenchers, they're angry that Kevin Rudd isn't listening to what they're saying their electorates want. We know that they're angry that Kevin Rudd isn't acting upon what their electorates want so we'll see what happens.

GILBERT: Okay, let's go to you Craig just quickly, we're almost out of time but all the speculation about the leadership looks like it's come to nought and that Kevin Rudd will be the leader as you've been asserting to us for weeks now.

EMERSON: I have. I've said Kevin Rudd will lead us through the election. I think we're a winning chance in the election but we have more work to do in implementing this ambitious program that I'm talking about and as I say Tony Abbott, architect of Work Choices, took \$1 billion out of the public hospital system. But we're not going to get the people's support simply by criticising Tony Abbott as nasty as Steve might think that is; we've got an ambitious reform agenda, we're making good progress and we'll continue to do that in the national interest.

GILBERT: All right we're out of time, Craig Emerson and Steve Ciobo, as always appreciate your time, thank you.

CIOBO: Thanks a lot.

EMERSON: Thanks a lot.

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