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Transcript
2CC Breakfast with Mark Parton
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E&OE

Subjects: Julia Gillard, Kevin Rudd, election date

PARTON: Craig Emerson joins us on a Wednesday morning and he's on the line right now, G'day Craig.

EMERSON: G'day Mark.

PARTON: Mate! Hasn't the world changed in seven days?

EMERSON: Yeah, it's sort of all quiet on the Western front now, but there was a bit of a kerfuffle that's for sure.

PARTON: Bit of a Kerfuffle, yes. Julia Gillard has come under fire from some for refusing to elevate you into Cabinet in the Cabinet reshuffle – did you see it as a snub?

EMERSON: No, not at all. In fact, I thought that was absolutely the right thing to do and I said so. And the reason for that, Mark, is I think at this time that some stability is really important, and moving people around leads to consequential movements and so it goes on. We're focused on getting on with the job – doing our best to deliver the sorts of services that Australian people need – rather than reshuffling positions on the front bench.

I thought that was the right move – maintain stability, give Simon Crean the responsibilities that Julia had, and then just add Trade to Stephen Smith's portfolio. And even that department is called Foreign Affairs and Trade, so that was a good fit.

PARTON: There's another Morgan Poll out, which I'm sure you've cast your eye across. I'm almost at the point where I want to ban polls on anything political.

EMERSON: I haven't actually cast my eye across it for that exact reason.

PARTON: Because, you know, it's a reality – if there was no polling Kevin Rudd would still be Prime Minister, wouldn't he?

EMERSON: Look, I'm not sure about that.

PARTON: Of course he would. Mate, if there was no polling, if public opinion hadn't turned against him, there's no possible way...

EMERSON: Well, that's a different proposition. There was a shift in public opinion against Kevin, and if there was no published polling, no doubt there would be private polling because both major parties do that. It helps keep the finger on the pulse and plays an important role...

PARTON: You see, I mean, even if there had been private polling, if these figures aren't in the public realm, the sort of discussion which followed – because there was rather caustic debate for quite some time – which surely has been instrumental in what went on last week.

EMERSON: I think one way of looking at it is this: Kevin, his particular way of operating was very centralised, and he made decisions himself or in a very small group and that's the way he wanted it done. People didn't necessarily dislike Kevin but they disliked that style of operation. Because we all believe as a party room – and the coalition would be the same – that we've got ideas and talent and experience to offer. And when that's not being utilised people get frustrated.

Julia, on the other hand, is very much into working with other people and drawing upon their experience and expertise and I think that endeared a lot of people to Julia.

PARTON: She's a very impressive lady and she's certainly made a splash in the first four days. They talk of the deposed leader as having no friends in the Labor party – is Kevin a friend of yours Craig?

EMERSON: Look, we've know each other for a very long time and we've been close at times and not so close at other times. Just sort of drifting in and out probably would be a way of describing that, which is understandable Mark, as the Prime Ministership of Australia is a very busy job.

Personally, my relationships with the office were good, but I'm just emphasising that what Julia has done all her professional career is bring people together – and that will include the Australian people, they will really feel part of show. She's really interested in the views and different

perspectives of different people and welcomes them and brings those in to help form her own decision making. And I think that's a great strength.

If I could make a comparison here: Bob Hawke was very similar to that. Bob really wanted to hear from people. You know how they used to say, he's out with the public all the time, getting a sort of hit with being in the public – he loved that, and I think you'll find Julia does too. But that sort of sense of engagement, of people feeling they belong to the show, the whole show, the big show – Australia. I think that's a great characteristic, a great quality of Julia and Bob Hawke.

PARTON: Piers Ackerman was never really a big fan of Kevin Rudd, as you wouldn't expect him to be...

EMERSON: He's not a big fan of the Labor Party...

PARTON: No, he's not. And he continued to put the boot in on Insiders on Sunday morning. Now Piers talked about the basic character flaws of the deposed prime minister and he suggested that these were again brought to light on Wednesday night and Thursday morning last week, in that, when he rang Labor MPs in a last ditch effort to get support in the leadership ballot, Piers suggested that he rang a number of MPs in the early hours of Thursday morning – and we can only assume, Craig, that you were one of them – that he got their support on the phone before realising some time later that the ballot was over, that he didn't have the numbers.

And Piers Ackerman suggested that a decent man would have got in touch with the likes of yourself, Craig, and informed you that he wasn't going to contest the leadership. Are you disappointed that Kevin Rudd left you hanging out to dry? That you did come forward and offer your public support to the then Prime Minister, without knowing that he had no intention of contesting that ballot?

EMERSON: Well, I did it anyway, and I wouldn't have expected anything one way or the other. What I did was make a decision - with a lot of difficulty, because I know Julia very, very well and I have long said, privately, that she would make a great prime minister, and so she will be a fantastic prime minister.

PARTON: That's not what I'm talking about – what I'm talking about is this whole process of...

EMERSON: Look, these are difficult times, as you know Mark, and going through the modern history of what happened on a Wednesday night and a Thursday morning – I'm not sure that it gets us very far. Everyone had to make a decision. Everyone got one vote, and as it turned out there was overwhelming support for Julia in the party room. And based on that and on whatever other considerations, Kevin decided not to contest.

PARTON: But are you disappointed that he didn't inform you of that, so you didn't have to go through that exercise of declaring your support for him?

EMERSON: Look, life goes on. I don't look back on things and have regrets. I look forward. And the truth is, I look forward to the prospect of reforming a Labor Government under Julia's prime ministership...

PARTON: After August 28...

EMERSON: This will be a really tough election and Tony Abbott's running around talking about a famous victory. This born-to-rule mentality is just coming out again. It'll be a tough election. Tony Abbott needs to understand that he's got a real fight on his hands and he oughtn't be declaring or anticipating famous victories. I remember they briefed out of the party room that that is what he said. Then he and just about fifteen other MPs denied that and then Tony Abbott outed them on the 7:30 Report on the Friday and night and said, 'yeah, well I did say it.' So, there you go.

PARTON: But was it the gospel truth though?

EMERSON: No, that's just what he said in the heat of the moment, yeah...

PARTON: I've got two final questions for you. What's in your diary for August 28?

EMERSON: Oh, I don't know. I just keep working away, put one foot in front of the other. Look, I don't know when an election will be held. I do know that it will be in the second half of this year. I know that doesn't give you a lot of information...

PARTON: So, it's not going to be today!

EMERSON: because the second half of the year starts tomorrow...

PARTON: And final question – it's a rough one to ask you, finally – do you believe in God, Craig?

EMERSON: Yes, I do, and I am a Christian, but each to his or her own. I certainly don't make judgements one way or the other about other people. Julia is a thoroughly decent person and has great values.

PARTON: Thanks Craig, I really appreciate your time this morning, as always.