

INSIDE CANBERRA
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HON CRAIG EMERSON MP

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KING: Inside Canberra this morning Craig Emerson Small Business Minister in the Rudd Government, good morning.

EMERSON: Morning Madonna.

KING: And Opposition Attorney General Senator George Brandis, good to talk to you again Senator.

BRANDIS: Good Morning Madonna, morning Craig.

EMERSON: Hi George.

KING: All right. Well let's start with Beijing. Hilary Clinton this morning had called on her US President George W Bush to boycott the Beijing Olympics opening ceremony. What do you think should happen here, George Brandis?

BRANDIS: Well I am of the view although I don't favour a boycott of the Beijing Olympics I think that the case has been made for that. There is no reason at all why the Australian Government needs to be represented at the Beijing Olympics at the Ministerial Level.

KING: So send our sports stars but not our Prime Minister?

BRANDIS: Correct and the protocol of the Olympic Games are that each nation that participates is invited to send its head of Government and its Sports Minister. There is no reason why either Mr Rudd or the federal Sports Minister needs to be at the Olympic Games. There is no bearing on the performance of our athletes in having politicians represented there. If the Rudd Government wanted to make a statement about its concern about human rights in China in general and in Tibet more particularly, one very effective way they could do that would be to boycott the Olympics at the political level only.

KING: Craig Emerson does that sound like a reasonable idea?

EMERSON: I don't agree with that. That's my personal view. We would have been pretty upset in Sydney in the year 2000 if there were boycotts over any issue in Australia.

KING: It's a little bit different though what we are talking about in China.

EMERSON: Sure but there are always issues in every Olympics and if countries are going to start taking advice from George and not send political representatives then I think that that does damage the Olympic spirit.

KING: But what point should we consider boycotting? Kevin Rudd hasn't said he's going; he's leaving his options open then isn't he?

EMERSON: What Kevin is saying is that he hasn't made a decision because it depends on other commitments. But he certainly hasn't been saying "well we're interested in boycotting the opening ceremony" or anything like that.

KING: Are you seriously telling us it's a matter of what's in his diary in that week that will determine whether he goes or not, rather than the political ramifications of what happening in China?

EMERSON: Yeah well I think he's indicated that he will be looking at his diary and if he doesn't go the current thinking is that someone does go at the political level and that's why I don't agree with George. As I say, look I don't diminish the issue of Tibet in the slightest, not in the slightest. But at every Olympics there is an international or a national issue about which people are unhappy and if we start boycotting them, I mean the last big boycott was 1980 and that was damaging to the Olympic Games back then and I think some Australian athletes went and some others didn't. So look, I just have this personal view that we should allow the Olympics to go on. This issue was around before and that's my view.

KING: But wouldn't the Prime Minister know what was in his diary for that week now?

EMERSON: Let's get a little bit closer to the actual Olympics. I mean things go into diaries too and I'm not privy to, and this shouldn't surprise you, I'm not privy to what in Kevin's diary at that time. I think the issue you are really testing is whether there should be someone representing the Australian Government at the Olympics. My own personal view is there should be.

BRANDIS: Look Craig the people who represent Australia at the Olympic Games are the sport people, the athletes. For the politicians it's a good gig but their presence there is entirely surplus to requirements. The Moscow Olympic Games in 1980 that you picked up, referred to, was a sporting boycott where athletes were prevailed upon by the then Australian Government not to go at great career costs to those athletes. I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about the political leadership of Australia making a statement. And don't tell me that either Kevin Rudd or the Sports Minister isn't in a position to say right now we won't be going.

KING: All right. If we move onto the torch relay, protests are planned in Australia too and perhaps you want to call in this morning whether you think

Kevin Rudd should boycott the Olympics or not. Dr Craig Emerson, Senator George Brandis very different view on that. Where do you fall with the torch relay? You would have seen those protests on the news. We know protests are planned in Australia too, although everyone is saying there are peaceful ones. Should we take precautions, should the Olympic torch relay go ahead? And this is what Susie O'Neill just said: "Everyday everyone talks about the Olympics but when it's got bad publicity I think it might do the opposite. Every day there is a relay running and so its kind of probably going to be negative publicity, negative publicity the whole way. I think we should scrap it." Susie O'Neill saying I'd probably just scrap it. Craig Emerson first this time: should we scrape the torch relay?

EMERSON: No I don't think we should. That would, look I'm 100 per cent for the more peaceful protest. It makes that view known if you hold that view most strongly. I still have in my mind the image of that little girl when someone came to snatch the torch off her. She was terrified and I don't think it's right that people should disrupt it in that way. I mean I am happy for people to protest in all sorts of ways but let's do it peacefully and I think that there is a capacity in Australia for peaceful protests. By the way may I just point this out? The Olympic torch relay is not something that started in 1896. It actually started in 1936. So I just wanted to make the point it's not as if it is an integral part of the Olympics. But we again I just point here to 2000 in Australia and how proud we were that there was no disruption anywhere around the world. So I think we shouldn't just buckle under and say there could be protests and it could be disruptive and therefore we should abandon it.

KING: It's an interesting point Senator George Brandis that the protestors actually win if we abandon the torch relay.

BRANDIS: Well I hope the protestors do win. I mean let's remind ourselves of what the protestors are protesting against. The protestors are protesting against genocide against the Tibetan people. Now occasionally in Australia, in particular in the Aboriginal affairs debate, people throw around this word genocide far too loosely but what is happening in Tibet at the moment is real specific, serious genocide and the protestors, I'm completely with the protestors on this and I hope they make their point.

EMERSON: Well I hope you are not condoning violent protests.

BRANDIS: I am not condoning violent protests.

EMERSON: But that's what happening...

BRANDIS: But I am supporting the protests because that point the protestors are making is a very important point and it's a shame that the Australian Government has been so feeble and mute on the issue.

KING: So you are encouraging protests during the torch relay?

BRANDIS: I defend the right of peaceful protest.

EMERSON: George just said he hopes it is abandoned and he hopes the protestors win.

BRANDIS: I hope ... I am not encouraging the violent protests but I am encouraging and defending the right to protest and I agree with the protestors.

EMERSON: Really? Yet if there were no violent protestors, there wouldn't be any pressure to abandon the relay. It's because of the very disruptive nature of some...

KING: But is tarnishing the whole of the Olympic Games? If you're a mum or dad and your child's been chosen for this elite competition you'd almost have second thoughts in not wanting to send them would you?

EMERSON: Well let's see if the Olympic spirit prevails. I think it will.

KING: George Brandis?

BRANDIS: Well I hope the Olympic spirit does prevail but let's make a very sharp distinction here between what the Olympic Games are about and the politics of this issue. The Olympic spirit is the spirit of free and open competition and the pursuit of athletic excellence. What this issue is about is making those statements to the Chinese Government which the Australian Government is too feeble to make; that the genocide in Tibet is not to be condoned and that is why I have said that there should be no sporting boycott. The Olympic Games should continue, but at the political level have the level...

KING: You've made that point.

BRANDIS: ...people are perfectly entitled to express their views. The Australian Government has failed to express fully ...

KING: Craig Emerson?

EMERSON: The Federal election was on the 24th of November, not that long ago. I think, I don't remember you making all these remarks. I don't remember John Howard saying that he hoped that the protestors were successful. I don't remember John Howard saying we shouldn't send a political representative, a representative of the Government to the Beijing Games. Sounds like it's a new policy made on the run. I hope it's shared by Brendan Nelson and I will be very interested to hear what he has to say about it all.

BRANDIS: You obviously didn't hear my Press Club Speech when I was asked about this at the end of September when I was asked that there shouldn't be a sporting boycott of the Olympic Games but that human rights issues in China were very important issues and which needed to be dealt at the political level in an appropriate manner.

KING: Twenty-four minutes past nine. Inside Canberra this morning with Dr Craig Emerson and Senator George Brandis. Obviously the issue of Olympic torch relay is a difference of opinion there too and you might have a view sitting at home. You've seen the protests. You heard what George Brandis has said about China and about people's rights of protests 1300 222 612. Where do you fall in that debate? Now back overseas for just a moment. I've felt for Therese Rein this week. Some people would say that she's more successful than her husband and everyone's been commenting on whether she's worn the same dress twice and whether she changes her shoes more often or should change her shoes more often. Craig Emerson what do you think here?

EMERSON: Well we are on the big picture now. I'm here sitting in the studio, a boy from the country – Baradine in the north west of New South Wales, in a purple shirt with a purple tie so I'm probably not the person to ask about fashion. Having said that I think she looks terrific. I think the bright colours and what she is wearing are great.

KING: So is that really unfair in the sense of what is said, we don't look at your clothes and comment on those?

EMERSON: Thank goodness.

KING: Thank goodness. But are women fair game in this?

EMERSON: Look I don't think they are but we are again a democracy. A lot of this is sort of media – the gossip columns and the gossip magazines – that's part of our system. Australians like anyone around the world like to have a bit of a natter about these things. But I think she looks great and I also make the point that Therese is doing a terrific job overseas with Kevin and doing some separate things such as supporting a charity for the homeless here in Australia and overseas and I think that's a very worthy thing to do.

KING: George Brandis, agree with all of that?

BRANDIS: I think the criticism of Therese Rein from the point of view of fashion is trivial and tasteless. I think that she is not fair game. I don't think politicians' spouses of either gender are fair game and I agree with Craig. I have never met Ms Rein but the fact that she has taken an interest in serious policy issues I think is very much to her credit.

KING: I think we are all in agreement on it being a trivial issue. I must say I was surprised. I didn't think it would be talked about. I was listening to Kelly Higgins Devine and there was a flood of calls, from people on sides of the equation. Obviously it is something that people have been talking about but you raise the issue of saying that families are out of bounds. Do politicians on a regular basis suffer intrusions in their family, their children being photographed or their wives being commented on, I say wives because principally it is wives?

EMERSON: Well in my opinion, on that one Madonna, if you run your political life on the basis of not promoting your family and so on; that is as an individual, you're entitled to complete privacy. If a politician says well this is me and my family, these are my kids and so on, then people will photograph them. So I think politicians have a little bit of a say in this. Then it can go either way. It just depends on which politician we are talking about.

KING: Sounds reasonable, George Brandis?

BRANDIS: Sounds reasonable to me. I think if I may say so that the Australian press are pretty good, not always but in general, are pretty good at respecting the separateness between public and private life.

KING: There's a whole furore or controversy over the salute. Similarly a trivial matter we took too far, George Brandis?

BRANDIS: If I can make a couple of comments about the salute Madonna. First of all I can't resist saying that if it had been John Howard and not Kevin Rudd who had done that all of the lounge lizard lefties like David Marr and Phillip Adams would have been down on him like a tonne of bricks. But these very same people were falling over themselves to excuse Kevin Rudd. So I think the symbolism does count. Secondly I noticed that when the Prime Minister went to call upon the Queen yesterday he didn't make the customary neck bow. Now that mightn't be a big issue either but I think it is worth pointing out

KING: What's the neck bow?

BRANDIS: Well you just sort of bow....

KING: And that's what you are supposed to do?

BRANDIS: It's a courtesy. Just like when a barrister goes into the court he makes a neck bow to the judge. I'm old fashioned. I believe in these courtesies. They are nothing more than courtesies but they do matter. I think it's interesting that the Prime Minister of Australia doesn't afford the appropriate formal courtesy to the person who is at least nominally Australia's head of state but makes this flamboyant and rather obsequies gesture to the President of the United States.

KING: Craig Emerson what do you think of that?

EMERSON: I think it is all pretty trivial actually. I mean it was just a joking motion from Kevin at the time. H has explained this fully. It's not going to in any way affect our relationship with the United States or anyone else and I didn't notice whether Kevin sort of bowed his head ever so slightly to the Queen. I mean honestly George if you are getting excited about these sorts of things I think there are some bigger policy issues that you ought to be taking about.

BRANDIS: Well, Craig, Craig of course there are bigger policy issues but symbolism counts as we both know and there is an even bigger policy issue and it's this. On this trip, and we touched on this in the earlier context of the debate about the Beijing Olympics, is Mr Rudd going to be so concerned with ingratiating himself to the Chinese, who he is obviously very fond of and somewhat obsessed by, that he doesn't sufficiently recognise....

KING: All right. I don't want to go back to China. I want to ask you Craig Emerson, something George Brandis brought up. If that had been John Howard saluting George Bush how do you think that would have been portrayed? Would it have been portrayed in a different way?

EMERSON: It would have and that's the honest answer because he described himself in the Bulletin magazine as the Deputy Sheriff of the United States. So he bought that upon himself and he was doing pretty much whatever George Bush wanted him to do. We have a different view; that is, we fully support the alliance but where differences arise we can have differences amongst friends and we will make that clear. But I think John Howard was far too obsequious to the administration, the US administration.

KING: You both know that word. Did you both look that up in a dictionary?

EMERSON: No. George got me going on it.

KING: George Brandis in his commentary about Kevin Rudd not nodding his head at the Queen. We know he supports a republic. Would something like that have come up yesterday at talks with the Queen?

BRANDIS: Well I imagine it would have done because Mr Rudd has been very open in his views about the way in which Australia's constitutional development should go. I think that it is interesting he seemed at his press conference afterwards to have rather elevated the republic issue on the agenda in a way in that, before the election by the way he said that he wasn't intending to do.

KING: All right. Craig Emerson what do you think? Will we see a republic in the short term?

EMERSON: My guess is no and the reason I say that is the people made their view very clear in 1999 and, okay there was a debate about the form of the republic and republicans at the time said well if we had asked the right question we would have got the right answer. I'm not sure that's the case. I'm not sure they would have got the right answer in any circumstance. I support a republic but I personally don't believe that this is a really pressing issue and it shouldn't take precedence over issues such as homelessness and care for the disadvantaged and the elderly.

KING: A very, very short answer to this George Brandis. It's a question from Robert via SMS. Is Senator Brandis a member of the same ex-government that was too scared even to meet the Dalai Lama; when did they develop their concern for the people of Tibet?

BRANDIS: The question is based on a false premise. The former Prime Minister Mr Howard did meet the Dalai Lama. Mr Rudd hasn't yet as Prime Minister.

EMERSON: He has met the Dalai Lama twice.

BRANDIS: But not as Prime Minister.

EMERSON: Well he's only been Prime Minister for a few months.

BRANDIS It is an important distinction Craig because what leaders in Opposition are able to do they don't do on behalf of their country. John Howard, on behalf Australia, as the Prime Minister, met the Dalai Lama. Mr Rudd hasn't done so yet.

KING: A last very short word Craig Emerson

EMERSON: Well I think George has obviously got very big problems with China. It's an important nation in our region, it's important to Australia and I must say that I am surprised at the vehemence of George's opposition to just about everything that China does.

KING: Well....

BRANDIS: I just don't like genocide Craig...

KING: All right we're going to leave it there this morning and we will hear your verdict on what you thought in relation to Craig Emerson and George Brandis. Gentlemen thank you.

EMERSON: Thanks very much Madonna.

BRANDIS: Thank you.

KING: I appreciate your time and we will talk to you again as we go Inside Canberra again next week.