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Transcript
2CC Breakfast with Mark Parton
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E&OE

Subjects: Asylum seekers, seamless economy

PARTON: Dr Craig Emerson is with us, Federal Minister for Small Business, Competition Policy and Consumer Affairs. So much to talk about this morning, I don't know where to start, Emmo!

EMERSON: How are you Parto?

PARTON: Yeah, good. And what an amazing day yesterday. Of course, under Kevin Rudd we had 'Sorry Day', yesterday we had 'Asylum Seeker Day', but there wasn't much about apologising yesterday, was there?

EMERSON: Oh look, it was a firm but fair policy. We don't agree with Tony Abbott's policy of towing boats out to sea. I can't see that Australians generally would think it's a good idea to cart a boat out to sea and risk the asylum seekers scuttling it with kids drowning in the sea. That's not really the Australian way; it's not really the Australian way at all. So what we're doing is looking at establishing a regional processing centre in East Timor and...

PARTON: And we've now told the East Timorese about that idea, haven't we?

EMERSON: Yes, there has been a discussion about that, and there's some initial positive indications coming back as well, but this is something that will need to be bedded down. You don't complete these discussions in one sitting. This regional

processing centre is designed to remove the incentive for people smuggling. Because we all know, Parto, that that itself offers a very dangerous business for the passengers and we just don't want to see people drowning.

PARTON: Wouldn't you actually lock that away before you reveal it to the public? Because I think there's a perception that this is really not anything to do with asylum seekers; that this is about the new Prime Minister being seen to be doing something about asylum seekers.

EMERSON: Bear in mind that the new prime minister was the shadow minister for immigration and population from about 2001, until about 2003.

PARTON: Right.

EMERSON: She knows a lot about this and she's bringing that knowledge to bear...

PARTON: She's had ten days as leader! I mean, how long has she had to develop this policy? She's had eleven days as leader or something.

EMERSON: Yeah, but she hasn't been - that's right, she's been in that position for about eleven days but she's had a lot of experience in thinking about working on policies of this sort when she was the shadow minister. She doesn't come to it with no ideas. She came to it with a set of ideas and this regional processing centre, we think, is a very important way of just removing the incentive for people to just get on these rickety boats because they would be processed at a regional processing centre. I might add: not out in the middle of the Pacific at Nauru, which seems to be what Tony Abbott's proposing.

PARTON: But what's the difference if it's out in the middle of the Pacific at Nauru or if it's in East Timor. I should say that if it's Nauru, you've got most of the infrastructure in place. We're going to have to spend a lot of money in East Timor, aren't we?

EMERSON: Well, not necessarily, but the point is that East Timor is in the locality of where these boats are being intercepted. To take people out and plonk them in the middle of the Pacific Ocean is nothing more nor less than punishment. It's just meant to punish people for seeking asylum in Australia. What we want to do is not punish people, but to remove the incentive for people to seek asylum via boats. And as you know, there's 13,750 people who come into Australia, under both governments, under the humanitarian program. We'd like an

orderly immigration program. Everyone, I think, agrees with an orderly immigration program, but we've got to stop this people smuggling trade.

PARTON: Well, fascinating day yesterday, and I'm sure we're going to have more fascinating days in the lead-up to August 28. I'm gathering you can confirm this morning that that is the election date?

EMERSON: (Laughs) I don't know. I can confirm that the State of Origin is on tonight.

PARTON: Ok. And the Maroons will make a clean sweep of it?

EMERSON: As you know, my State of Origin is NSW and I tend to only get into it to the extent of the Bulldogs players, because I'm a mad Bulldogs supporter and I think they've got one playing for Queensland – for NSW, and that's about it.

PARTON: Just before I move off asylum seekers – I'll leave State of Origin to the footy commentators: a caller has just rung in and said, does Labor seriously believe that Tony Abbott would leave refugees to die?

EMERSON: Well, the policy that he has embraced, he said they will tow boats out to sea. Now the last time boats were towed out to sea was in 2003 under John Howard, but what Tony Abbott is trying to do, is in those areas where there is deep anxiety about asylum seeker issues, is to have people say, 'Well that's good, he's going to tow them out to sea and fix the problem.' Well, it won't fix the problem. All it will do is endanger lives.

PARTON: Alright. You gave an address at the Australian National University yesterday...

EMERSON: Yeah, I did. It was great to be back there after about 27 years.

PARTON: And you declared that Labor's first term in office was a great success on the reform front because of its efforts to end the complacency of the Howard era by moving to complete a seamless economy. If it was such a rip-roaring success, why isn't Kevin Rudd still the Prime Minister?

EMERSON: One of the defining features of the work that we do on this seamless national economy is that it's really hard to get any media attention for it Parto. It's dry stuff, but it's important stuff. It's a recognition that we have to have in Australia one market, not eight separate State and Territory markets. And a lot of this stuff is pretty technical, not so sexy and this was an

attempt to get a bit of coverage for what we have been doing, which is - in the Hawke and Keating modes and traditions – actually get on with the work of creating a single national market instead of these eight separate State and Territory markets, by getting rid of all the duplicated and conflicting State and Territory regulations. But it's not the sexiest stuff in town, I've got to confess.

PARTON: Was it difficult to make that speech yesterday without mentioning Kevin's name?

EMERSON: I did mention Kevin's name actually. He oversaw, he actually was the guy who said, Lets make COAG, the Council of Australian Governments, the workhorse of the federation. Now probably we sought to do too many things all at once, but we've done pretty well with this business regulation. There are 27 different areas of business regulation that we've bit off and we've already knocked over 12 out of the 27, and another seven will be done by this time next year. So it's going pretty well. It's just an attempt to put this in the reforming tradition of the Hawke and Keating Governments and get a little bit of publicity for it, because it's the sort of hard-grinding work that's not all that sexy.

PARTON: Well, Emmo, I know one of the other things that you mentioned yesterday is traffic congestion in Australia and that this is one of the big understated sources of future productivity growth in Australia.

EMERSON: Yeah, I think so. I mean, you can get into all these bloody complicated economic models, but when you see people in Sydney sitting in cars for one and a half hours each way, three hours, sometimes four hours a day - that is completely unproductive. In fact, I'd say it's negatively productive, because by the time you get to work you're cranky; by the time you get home you're cranky and have a fight with the kids, and I just fundamentally believe that as a nation we have to invest much more heavily in infrastructure in our cities, but also, work out proper settlement patterns for our cities. You know, some medium density stuff instead of everyone having – they used to be quarter acre blocks, but they're smaller now – but our cities tend to spread right out and then people sit in traffic for half a day.

PARTON: It seems to defeat many, many purposes. We're out of time, but thank you coming in again today, really appreciate it.

EMERSON: Righto Parto, thanks a lot.

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