



THE HON DR CRAIG EMERSON MP
MINISTER FOR SMALL BUSINESS, INDEPENDENT CONTRACTORS AND
THE SERVICE ECONOMY
MINISTER FOR COMPETITION POLICY AND CONSUMER AFFAIRS
MINISTER ASSISTING THE MINISTER FOR FINANCE ON
DEREGULATION

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E&OE

Subjects: Tony Abbott, Michael Johnson, Queensland Liberal National Party.

EMERSON: ...the Liberal National Party in Queensland, with revelations that Tony Abbott rang Michael Johnson after Tony Abbott had received an adverse report on Michael Johnson, and sought to overrule the Liberal National Party. That didn't work. The LNP officials disendorsed Michael Johnson as the candidate for Ryan. And today it's been revealed that Mr Abbott, instead of fronting the media on this matter, has scurried away from Brisbane, scurried away from campaigning in the seat of Ryan, to go up to the safe seat of Groom.

So the fact is that the Liberal National Party are dis-endorsing candidates in the crucial state of Queensland faster than they are endorsing them. They've disendorsed the candidate for Wright, they've disendorsed the candidate for Ryan, they've disendorsed the candidate for Griffith. There have been defections at the state level, from the Liberal National Party to create a new National Party, a new Liberal Party, or some other party. The fact is that Tony Abbott is seeking the support of the Australian people to be the Prime Minister of Australia but there's confusion and chaos in the crucial state of Queensland. If they can't govern themselves, how can they expect the Australian people to give them a tick to govern the country?

QUESTION: Minister, do you think that Kevin Rudd still deserves a place on the front bench?

EMERSON: I think we've canvassed all of those issues yesterday at the National Press Club, and I don't really have anything to add to

that. Julia Gillard, I understand, is available today to answer questions on all manner of matters, and I'm sure she would respond to questions one way or another that are asked of her.

But what I'm saying today is that Tony Abbott should make himself available to the media, instead of scurrying away from Brisbane, up to Toowoomba, and avoiding media scrutiny on his phone call to Mr Johnson, the now Independent candidate for Ryan, who's been disendorsed by the Liberal National Party hierarchy, against the wishes of Mr Abbott.

QUESTION: This wasn't particularly canvassed at the Press Club yesterday. The question about what was said in Mr Rudd's office that night of the leadership wars, is this destabilising for Labor to have these revelations out here now, and does Kevin Rudd deserve to be on the front bench if Labor wins the next election?

EMERSON: Well, I'm not in a position to comment on these matters. Julia Gillard obviously made herself available yesterday, not only to answer questions from Mr Oakes, but to answer questions from all of the other members of the press gallery who asked questions. Julia will be available generally to do media conferences, and the contrast here is Tony Abbott. And Tony Abbott is scurrying away from media today once it had been revealed by Michael Johnson that Mr Abbott, after receiving an adverse report on Mr Johnson, sought to save him, but was overruled by the Liberal National Party hierarchy in Queensland.

QUESTION: Are the media reports that are out this morning that Labor insiders don't want Kevin Rudd on the frontbench, are they true?

EMERSON: Well, again, these are unnamed media - sorry, these are unnamed people within the Labor Party. The fact is we are a united party, we're moving forward. That's what's important for the Australian people, that a political party is moving forward, to invest in health, to invest in education, to have strong economic management. And the contrast again is with Tony Abbott, who wants to move back, bring back the worst elements of WorkChoices, cut education funding in terms of trade training centres, and computers in schools, and in health, get rid of the GP Super Clinics, and pull the plug on the National Broadband Network. There's the contrast: Julia Gillard and Labor moving forward, Tony Abbott taking Australia backwards.

QUESTION: Is it damaging though, to have this kind of speculation and talk out there, on the eve of an election?

EMERSON: I think that the Liberal and National Parties now have a lot of explaining to do. Julia Gillard was asked questions yesterday. Fair enough. Now Tony Abbott is being asked questions today, but you can't find him, because he's scurried out of Brisbane, up

to Toowoomba Range to Toowoomba. Because this guy, who's supposed to be a tough guy, who's supposed to be a straight-talking guy, you know, 'I'm an honest fellow, you just ask me questions, and I might tell you the gospel truth, depending on whether I succumb and crumble in the heat of the moment.' Well, he's succumbed and crumbled, in the heat of the moment. Scurried up the range, scurried up the Toowoomba Range, to Toowoomba, because he doesn't have the guts to front the media on this really important question. And that is, why did he intervene on behalf of Michael Johnson, knowing that there were legal issues, after having received an adverse report from Phillip Ruddock? And why was he overruled by the Liberal National Party hierarchy in Brisbane, who are disendorsing candidates at a faster rate than they're endorsing them?

QUESTION: Considering the allegations against Michael Johnson that have been made, that saw him removed from the Liberal National Party, will Labor be preferencing him ahead of the Coalition?

EMERSON: Well, no decisions have been made about that, because we don't even know who is in the field in the seat of Ryan. What we do know is that Michael Johnson won the seat of Ryan for the Liberal National Party, has been disendorsed from the seat of Ryan by the Liberal National Party secretariat. Jane Prentice, I understand, is running as the endorsed Liberal National Party candidate in the seat of Ryan. But meanwhile, over in southern Brisbane, over in southern Brisbane, on the outskirts, Hajnal Ban has been disendorsed. She was the candidate for Wright. Bert Van Manen is the current Liberal National Party candidate for the very marginal seat of Forde, there is discussion about him being disendorsed. There's discussion about Wyatt Roy being disendorsed, and he is the candidate for Longman. The Liberal National Party candidate for Griffith was disendorsed just the other day. And as I say, they are disendorsing candidates at a faster rate than they are endorsing them. This is just confusion and chaos in the Liberal National Party. Yet Tony Abbott is saying, well trust me, I want to run Australia. He can't even run the Liberal National Party in the crucial state of Queensland.

QUESTION: You say that Mr Abbott's a straight talker. So are you. Why can't you answer the question about whether your fellow Queenslander, Kevin Rudd, deserves a gig, if Labor wins the next election?

EMERSON: Well, I can say this, that Julia Gillard has said that if Kevin Rudd seeks a position on the front bench, he will be given a very senior position on the front bench. There's a straight question - sorry, there's a straight answer to a straight question, it is a cold morning [laughs].

QUESTION: Given the speculation that this information about the leadership could have only come from one of three sources, fingers are pointing in Kevin Rudd's direction. Given that this has now been injected in the political debate, does he deserve a gig on the front bench?

EMERSON: I can only reiterate, and I'm happy to reiterate what Julia Gillard has said, and that is that if Kevin Rudd contests the election, wins his seat, and seeks a position on the front bench, he will be given a position on the front bench. That is a straight answer to a straight question.

Now Tony Abbott today ought to give a straight answer to a straight question: what was his involvement in seeking to protect the pre-selection of Michael Johnson? He won't give that answer. Why? Because he's scurried up the Toowoomba Range, he's scurried away. He's supposed to be this tough guy, Tony Abbott the tough guy, the straight talker. He's not talking straight, he's not talking crooked, he's not talking at all. He's scurried up the Toowoomba Range to avoid media scrutiny.

At least Julia Gillard was available for media scrutiny yesterday, a long series of questions by many journalists. She's available generally. And if Tony Abbott had any guts, he would front up to the media today, instead of scurrying away from the seat of Ryan, where it's just too hot for him.

You see, this is the point: Tony Abbott says that he melts under the heat of battle. Well, he's melted under the heat of battle today. Because he was supposed to be in the seat of Ryan, and instead of standing and fighting, and explaining himself, he's gutted out of there, and run up the Toowoomba Range to the safe seat of Groom. Tells you a lot about the character of Tony Abbott.

QUESTION: What do you say to voters that may have lost faith in the Labor Party after the way Kevin Rudd was treated by his own party?

EMERSON: I'd say, look to the future, look to a party that is going to bring Australia forward, to take Australia forward. Because we have the plans to invest in education. We have the plans to invest in health. We have the plans to run an economic management program that is good for job creation in this country. Julia Gillard outlined those plans, so you've got Julia Gillard and Labor, working together as a team, to take Australia forward. Tony Abbott pulled the plug on the National Broadband Network, cut trade training centres - why on earth would you cut the trade training centre program for schools? Why would you cut computers in schools? Why would you cut GP Super Clinics? Why would you deny small businesses a much-deserved tax break, and give the revenue from the mining tax back to the

mining companies, who are quite happy to pay the \$10.5 billion in revenue because they believe it is fair that they pay more tax? Tony Abbott says no, we'll give the money back to the mining companies, who aren't asking for it back, and therefore deny small businesses a tax break, and denying working Australians an increase in their superannuation.

These are the stark differences between a political party, the Labor Party, that wants to take Australia forward, and take Australians with us, and a divided, chaotic, Liberal National Party that has no sense of purpose, other than to take Australia backwards, and to cut vital services to the people of this country.

QUESTION: Craig, haven't these latest revelations simply further damaged the Labor brand, in voters' minds?

EMERSON: Well, as I say, we're moving forward. Julia Gillard is the Prime Minister of Australia and we are all strongly supporting Julia Gillard, because what really matters to the Australian people are the services that they legitimately expect governments to provide, and strong economic management, and a sense of consensus, that is, Australians working together.

And I have likened Julia Gillard to Bob Hawke in this regard. And there's been a fair bit of publicity about Bob's book, just recently. Bob Hawke was a consensus politician. His way of operating was to bring Australians together. And in the famous three Rs of the 1983 campaign - they were a recovery from a recession, reconstruction of the Australian economy, but before you could do either of those, reconciliation, the third R but the most important R. That is, having Australians working with Australians, not against each other. That's what Julia Gillard is offering.

But we've got in Tony Abbott a divided Liberal National Party. You've got people like Mal Brough saying that he would never stand for pre-selection under this Liberal National Party grouping in Queensland, because he opposed it at the time, and was deposed as the Liberal Party President at that time.

QUESTION: Senator, if you're going to talk about division, then you went on national television the night after the coup with Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard and you publicly said, I'll be voting for Kevin Rudd, and that's what needs to be done, so how are you going now?

EMERSON: I'm going fine thanks, and in fact that was before the caucus meeting, and people were entitled to express a view before a caucus meeting. And do you know what I did straight after the caucus meeting? When I turned around the corner and there were television cameras there, I said, 'I'm backing Julia Gillard 100 per cent, and we're going to take on Tony Abbott', because

the future of the country is too important to go on with all that sort of stuff.

We're a united party, and we're very proud of being a united party. You don't even have a single party on the other side. You've got a Liberal Party, you've got a National Party. And in Queensland, you've got a Liberal National Party, and they've done nothing but fight and disendorse candidates.

QUESTION: You talked about Bob Hawke before. The relationship between Bob Hawke and Paul Keating, as we witnessed yesterday, a bit dysfunctional. Is Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard's relationship in danger of going the same way?

EMERSON: Well, as I say, we are working together as a team, we are driving the Labor Party forward, but far more important than the...

QUESTION: Yes, but the question was specifically about whether their relationship will be as dysfunctional as Bob Hawke and Paul Keating's?

EMERSON: I don't believe that we have difficulties on our side of politics. When you compare the situation of the Liberal National Party in Queensland, and when you've got a situation where Tony Abbott is overruled by the Liberal National Party hierarchy in Queensland.

If you're talking about divisions within political parties, look - I'll say that again, if you're talking about divisions in political parties, look no further than the dysfunctional Liberal and National Parties in Queensland, where the hatred is coming to the surface, where they're disendorsing candidates faster than they're endorsing them, where they're overruling their national leader, who is asking the Australian people to trust him to govern a country, and he can't even govern the Liberal and National Parties in the crucial state of Queensland.

QUESTION: Speaking of Bob Hawke and Paul Keating, you were economic adviser to both of those...

EMERSON: No, that's not right.

QUESTION: Really? You didn't work for both of those?

EMERSON: No.

QUESTION: Okay, sure.

EMERSON: Okey-dokey, thank you very much.

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