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MINISTER FOR TRADE

Transcript
Sky News AM Agenda with Kieran Gilbert
9 August 2011

E&OE

*Subjects: High Court injunction against Malaysia deal; global markets instability;
Australia China 2.0*

KIERAN GILBERT: Welcome back to AM Agenda. I'm joined now by the acting Foreign Minister Craig Emerson, who joins us from China, and in Brisbane we have the Deputy Opposition Leader in the Senate, the shadow Attorney General Senator Brandis. Senator Brandis, first to you. On the Malaysia deal, this delay in the High Court that we're seeing, the Government's still confident of winning this case. It's not... it is the case that other Governments in the past - Australian governments - have sent asylum seekers to third countries before. It has happened before.

GEORGE BRANDIS: Well Kieran, let me just respond to a couple of things Mr Bowen said. The fact that Mr Bowen might puff out his chest and insist that the Government will win in the High Court means absolutely nothing. The fact is that we were reassured by this Minister some weeks ago that this deal was signed, sealed and delivered. It wasn't. We were assured that it stacked up legally. There is now sufficiently grave doubt about its legality that the High Court has issued an interlocutory injunction pending a full hearing to test its legality. And I think the Australian people are just looking at this and once again shaking their heads and saying to themselves, 'well, why can't this Government get anything right?' In this area of policy, as in so many other areas of policy - whether it be pink batts or school halls or green loans or live cattle exports - however many you care to name, this Government has the reverse Midas touch. Everything it tries to turn its hand to, turns to lead.

GILBERT: But Senator Brandis, as an esteemed lawyer yourself you know that there is a precedent in this for governments to send asylum seekers to third countries.

BRANDIS: But, well indeed. And the Howard Government did that with the Nauru solution and we have to look at this, as I always remind you Kieran, in the context of the fact that the only reason we have this cascading policy fiasco that is the Gillard Government's immigration policy is because Ms Gillard's predecessor Mr Rudd, unwound the successful policies that Mr Howard had introduced that reduced asylum seekers to a negligible number. An average of three boats a year for six years. Today there are more than 5,000 people in detention. When the Government reversed the strong policies of the Howard Government, there were hardly any. Talk about sending a signal to the people smugglers. I'll tell you what the people smugglers are hearing from this: what they're hearing is that this Government has neither the policy courage, nor the simple competence to maintain a tough policy.

GILBERT: Well we have heard the Government's line on this. Acting Foreign Minister Emerson joins me from Chongqing in China. I won't ask you about this, as I say we heard from Mr Bowen before. Let me ask you about the instability on global markets though, Craig Emerson. We've seen instability in more ways than one: the riots in London; the Wall Street plunge by more than 5 per cent overnight; European markets down to two-year-lows as well. Does nothing for our investor confidence at all.

EMERSON: Well, I think the best thing for our investor confidence is the fiscal position and the broader policy position of the Australian Government, and that is that we'll be bringing that budget back to surplus by 2012-13 and our debt is around seven per cent of GDP, Kieran. And countries that we're talking about here, in Europe and also in the United States, it's an average of around 75 per cent of GDP, so obviously we're in a much stronger position. And here from Chongqing, a little country town in Western China with a population of thirty million, I must say, it seems a long way away from the stock market turmoil because there's cranes on the skyline, enormous development going on in the west and not through good luck but through good management over 25 years has Australia linked itself to China and that itself provides a real buffer in terms of our economic future.

GILBERT: Yeah, just quickly on that. You're conducting a trade mission to China. How confident are you that that will be a sufficient buffer amid the faltering global economy this time around?

EMERSON: Well I think it is important in this respect: we're touring provincial China, we've been through five cities with a contingent of more than 100 business people from the service economy. Now our traditional relationship with China has been built around minerals and energy and will continue to be strong and to grow strongly. But the level of interest in provincial China in our service providers – whether its education, architectural design, logistics, you name it we've got it, and they are very interested in getting their hands on it. It's just been fantastic at the

lunches and the seminars, the engagement with the Chinese business counterparts that's been organised by Austrade on this tour, has been really intense and I think it's been a real success. And of course I would say that because I'm leading it, but I'm pleasantly surprised about the level of engagement with our Chinese counterparts and the access that we're getting to the provincial leadership.

GILBERT: Okay, Acting Foreign Minister and Trade Minister Craig Emerson in Chongqing China, we'll leave it there.