



THE HON DR CRAIG EMERSON MP
MINISTER FOR TRADE

Transcript
ABC 612 Mornings with Madonna King

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E&OE

Subjects: Coal seam gas, Queensland election, powerful political figures.

MADONNA KING: Independent MP Tony Windsor wants to introduce a Private Member's Bill into Parliament next week which could allow the Commonwealth to override the States and impose limits on coal seam gas development. Will that get the support of either Labor or the Coalition? Let's go inside Canberra.

Dr Craig Emerson, a senior Minister in the Gillard Government, good morning.

CRAIG EMERSON: Hello Madonna.

KING: And Senator George Brandis, Deputy Opposition Leader in the Senate, hello.

BRANDIS: Good morning Madonna.

KING: Do you understand...

BRANDIS: Good morning Craig.

EMERSON: Good morning to you George.

BRANDIS: Can I say how glad I am to see you Craig, you know...

KING: Yes, I'm asking the questions Senator. Just concentrate on what I'm saying, okay?

BRANDIS: Keep the show up [indistinct].

KING: I've just turned your mike off.

BRANDIS: ... Craig.

EMERSON: Mark Dreyfus was available. But George, you must be worried about it.

KING: Now, can I just tell you gentlemen, no-one is listening to this conversation ...

BRANDIS: Labor Minister to debate us.

EMERSON: Mark Dreyfus, QC, was available to debate you...

BRANDIS: Well, I would have been happy to debate [indistinct]...

MADONNA KING: Senator George Brandis, are you listening to me?

GEORGE BRANDIS: Yes, I am, I'm just making the point...

MADONNA KING: No, well you didn't make that point because no-one heard it. We choose who comes on and who participates. And last week, *Inside Canberra*, was cancelled, because I was unhappy with who the two people would be debating.

BRANDIS: Well I was avail...

KING: Labor put up someone. Labor offered someone, and I said no to that. Okay?

EMERSON: Well there you go, correct the record.

BRANDIS: I'm just making the point that I was available. Correct?

KING: You were available, you were available. And on some occasions when we've tried to get you in the past over the last six years, you have not been unavailable. So, you know, them's the breaks.

BRANDIS: But we've always proposed a senior shadow in ... as an intended...

EMERSON: Oh George, take a break.

KING: I r... yeah. I think we probably could move on to something our listeners might be interested in.

And I've got something to say that makes me feel a little bit guilty. I was just listening to your conversation for the last couple of minutes while we were playing that song.

EMERSON: Yes.

KING: You don't like Bapa? You don't like Gurrumul? Famous Australian artist.

EMERSON: No, no, we weren't. We weren't saying that at all.

KING: You were saying it was show music.

EMERSON: I didn't say that at all.

BRANDIS: No I think I said it was lift music.

KING: It really divides people. It's a polariser, and I absolutely love it. Some people love it.

EMERSON: And I said, 'George be careful, they might be listening'.

KING: Yes, you did. Oh no, I think it was one of your staffers who said that.

EMERSON: No, I did. And we want to give Travis a really hard time today too. He's George's media adviser and he's getting married.

BRANDIS: And he's also very famous.

EMERSON: And he's getting married in between parliamentary sitting weeks. I mean, how desperate is that?

[Laughter]

KING: I think that probably shows a commitment to the job.

EMERSON: Yeah, but he's got to show a commitment to his wife.

KING: Yeah - he should show a commitment to his wife.

KING: All right, let's get on to more serious issues this morning. And we'll start with coal seam gas. Do you think there is an argument that this should be governed by federal law, not state law?

EMERSON: I don't Madonna. I think the way the Act actually operates is that if it is an area or an issue of national environmental significance, it can be enlivened. And it actually has been enlivened in relation to large-scale projects. But essentially this is a state government land management issue. And as a former Director-General of the Queensland Environment Department, I know that we would have applied very rigorous Environmental Protection Agency standards.

KING: All right. Let me ask you, though. You say, 'look, you think it's a state government land use issue; but it's an issue in Western Australia. It's an issue in Queensland. It's an issue in New South Wales. It involves national and international companies. Why is something like this a state-based issue and yet on other issues, whether it be education and the imposition of a national curriculum, things are more national?

EMERSON: Yeah, well, it is a good question. An equally good response, I think, is that businesses at least, and many others, complain that there are two levels of approval for major projects.

So the State goes through its processes, then the Federal Government goes through its processes, and the companies are subjected to two processes.

A better way is for the Federal Government to recognise the integrity of state environmental assessment processes, and avoid this duplication.

It's one of the main complaints of business in this country. And that's what we're trying to do: streamline the processes - not to weaken environmental standards, but not to have them duplicated.

KING: All right, over to you George Brandis on this one. Do you think there is any argument that it be looked after federally, as obviously Tony Windsor would like?

BRANDIS: Well, no, I don't. This is a state issue.

And I think like almost everything else Mr Windsor does, this is a bit of a stunt. This is a land management issue, and the matter ... what's important here is to get the balance right between the interests of the land owners, between the legitimate interests of the mining industry, who will of course bring enormous job opportunities to these regions, and the broader public interest in the environment.

Now you know where that balance lies is a fine judgement.

KING: Well let me ask you about that balance.

How far do you think the rights of a farmer should go, Senator Brandis?

BRANDIS:

Well I ... look, I don't want to be prescriptive about this. I think that most people in the community have an intuitive sense that it's the farmer's land, and people don't like the thought of people barging on to the farmer's land.

But it's not as simple as that, because there is a variety of different property rights involved here.

KING:

Yes. Your boss, Tony Abbott, though, did say the other day that they should have the right to say no.

BRANDIS:

Well, they do have the right to say no in some respects under the...

KING:

In some respects?

BRANDIS:

... under the p... because the miner's access depends upon the issue of a permit, and those permits contain certain conditions. And mining law is a reasonably complex area. But the fact is that once the miners are given a permit then they have certain rights to exploit, or to explore for and to exploit the resource.

Now, as I say, the way in which they deal with those rights consistently with the rights of the

landowners is going to be a fine judgment. And it may be that the balance isn't perfect at the moment. But the point to make, to emphasise, is that it does involve a balancing of interests.

It's not all one way.

KING:

All right, so it's obviously very important for the Government, for good government to have a policy here.

As the resources boom takes off, as there is more coal seam gas exploration in Australia, and it seems that both parties are grappling to get on top of it. Craig Emerson, your side changed the goal post this week.

Now they're ... in Queensland there is an exclusion zone put around those towns of more than 1,000 people - an exclusion zone of about two kilometres.

Those companies that already have permits in those areas - and there's a lot of them, in the vicinity of almost 300 - do you think they deserve compensation?

EMERSON:

I really can't comment on that specific detail about compensation. I do try to answer your questions directly. But I don't have enough information on that. I do know that Anna Bligh has put in this buffer zone, or exclusion zone. I

would say this: Anna Bligh has been put under a fair bit of pressure on this issue, and the coal seam gas companies of Queensland, and the international ones, have failed to support her.

In not supporting her it's not unusual in a democracy you'll have a Premier taking steps such as this.

And if the lack of support continues I wouldn't be surprised if Ms Bligh comes under even further pressure. I think it would be smart on the part of the companies to actually indicate a little bit of public support ...

KING: All right, just ...

EMERSON: ... for her position on property rights, which is that the minerals under the ground are owned by the people.

KING: All right, just hold on, hold on. All right, yeah. Just go back a step. How do you mean when you say these companies are not supporting her?

EMERSON: Well, I haven't seen any statements of support against the position of Campbell Newman and against the position of Tony Abbott...

KING: Yes.

EMERSON: Which says that there should be a right of veto. Now that's not Mr Newman's exact position. It is or has been Mr Abbott's, and that is...

BRANDIS: That's not quite right...

EMERSON: ...that... He did. He said that the landholders should be able to say no. That is exactly what he said. And that is a right of veto. And that overturns the property right system in this country, such that landholders will have a veto over the right of explorers to minerals which are the property, not of the landholders, but of the people of Australia.

KING: All right, but it's fairly hard if you're one of these companies. You don't know if Tony Abbott's going to be in next time, whether Campbell Newman will be the Premier in six months time. Why is it in their best interests?

EMERSON: Well if they don't have a view ...I'm just saying, if they don't have a view and if they're relaxed and comfortable about the idea...

KING: But why the need to express that view though? Do you think there is onus...

EMERSON: Because they are being asked their opinions. And they don't have one. And if they don't have an opinion about whether gas and other mineral resources are actually the property of

the people of Australia, and not the property of landholders, that's fine. They're perfectly entitled to that opinion.

KING: All right. Okay, to you George Brandis.

BRANDIS: Well, look, I just ... I know it might be a subtle distinction, but I think there's an important distinction between saying that landowners have a veto, and landowners have a right to say no to mining companies barging into their property. Now, there is a difference, because what Craig is suggesting is that Mr Abbott said that landowners should be able to prohibit the exploitation of this resource by miners.

EMERSON: He did say that.

BRANDIS: No, he didn't.

KING: No, let me just...

BRANDIS: No, no, no, no. That's not what he said, Craig. Let's get the record straight here.

KING: He said ... no, well, look, let me say, he said they should have the right to say no. He didn't ...

BRANDIS: Yeah. And he was talking about entering - as I pointed out earlier...

EMERSON: You can't explore it if you can't enter.

BRANDIS: No, hang on. Let's just ... listen to me, please, Craig. What I said earlier in the interview ... these ... the exploitation of these resource does operate on a permit system, okay? And there are conditions imposed by those permits. And those conditions include the appropriate arrangements for the access to the minerals which do involve having regard to the fact that the minerals may lie beneath land occupied by landowners. So the companies do have to talk to...

EMERSON: I agree with that. I agree with that.

BRANDIS: ...the companies do have to talk to the landowners. And for Tony to have said, 'well, you know, the landowners should be able to say no'. Well, as a matter of fact, under the permit system, the companies are obliged to ask.

EMERSON: Yeah, of course, they are. They are obliged to ask. They are obliged to work with the landholders, so there is not undue interference ...

BRANDIS: Precisely. Precisely.

EMERSON: ...with the agricultural land.

BRANDIS: And Tony was saying nothing more than that, Craig.

EMERSON: He said that they have a right to say no. Anyway, I think we've covered that.

KING: Okay. And I think what you're saying is you want this to remain a state issue. You talked about Anna Bligh and the support she may not be receiving from these companies. Can I just come to that with both of you? You're seasoned political observers. How do you read what is happening, Craig Emerson, with Anna Bligh? Do you think she'll be looking for a new job at the end of the year?

EMERSON: Well, I think she won't. I think she will be re-elected as the Premier, but there are some obvious challenges ahead.

KING: What is the biggest challenge, being really honest?

EMERSON: I think the length of the time that Labor has been in government. With a period, I think, of two years when Rob Borbidge was Premier - that interrupted a period of about 20. And so, people might be looking around for a different approach. What I'd say, in the area in which I live, which is Logan City through Brisbane, if you look at the modernisation of the transport

system alone, I think that has been a fantastic achievement, and it continues.

KING: Okay. All right. George Brandis, do you think that length of time is something that's really going in the LNP's favour?

BRANDIS: I think the longer governments are in power, the more there is an appetite for change. Sooner or later, an "It's Time" factor does develop.

But I think there's a deeper issue, Madonna. People are just sick of the Labor Party. They really are. I mean, what I pick up, and I don't think they particularly differentiate between state and federal because it's all the same. They are sick of Labor governments. They are sick of the debt; they are sick of the waste; they are sick of the lies; they are sick of the arrogance; they are sick of the broken promises. And, you know, I ...

KING: And so, you're saying what we saw in New South Wales is just headed for Queensland?

BRANDIS: Well, I'm not predicting that. You know, we have to win 13 seats to change the Government.

KING: Yes.

BRANDIS: And that's a very big ask. So I'm not going to be ...

KING: I'm interested in you saying ...

BRANDIS: ... complacent about it.

KING: No.

BRANDIS: It is a very big ask. But my general sense of the community - and, believe it or not, I'm not trying to be party political here -

KING: No.

EMERSON: I don't believe that.

BRANDIS: I really ...

EMERSON: I don't believe that.

BRANDIS: I think that most people in Queensland are sick to death of the Labor Party.

EMERSON: Oh, that's not a party political statement!

KING: No, no, no, no, no. And, George Brandis, just to keep going on that issue, then: do you think when a run is on - let's say 1996 and Federal Labor - when a run is on, it's on, and this is something that would be very hard for Anna

Bligh to stop? Or how much of this hinges on Ashgrove, do you think?

EMERSON: Look, I'm not an expert on the seat of Ashgrove.

KING: No, no, I was asking George Brandis.

EMERSON: Sorry, sorry, Madonna.

BRANDIS: Well, I mean...

EMERSON: We were just arguing, while you were asking the question...

BRANDIS: Craig ...

EMERSON: ... about George's objectivity.

BRANDIS: Well, no. Well, the observation I made is verified empirically by the opinion polls.

Now, in relation to Ashgrove, obviously, Campbell Newman has to win Ashgrove. Again, looking to the objective or the empirical evidence from the opinion polls, he seems to be on track to do that. But I'm at pains to say, once again, we are taking nothing for granted.

KING: No, no, no, no. Look, understand.

BRANDIS: This is a big ask.

KING: I understand that. My question was more, not - hopefully, not a party political question - but how much hinges on Ashgrove? Or are people voting, do you think, for Campbell Newman? Are they voting for a change to the current Government or ...

BRANDIS: I think...

KING: ... is Ashgrove becoming just this focal point for the whole state? And what happens there will happen across the state?

BRANDIS: Well, I ... a couple of points. It's not all about Ashgrove. But I think you can expect that, you know, for obvious reasons, Ashgrove will attract more attention than any other seat. And I think Ashgrove will reflect the state-wide trend.

But it's partly about Campbell Newman, who came away from the mayoralty of Brisbane with an extremely good reputation as somebody who could get things done. It's about the quality of the frontbench team that the Liberal National Party is putting up.

EMERSON: Well, that's a problem.

BRANDIS: For example, Tim Nicholls is a much more credible economics spokesman than Andrew Fraser.

EMERSON: This is George being objective.

KING: Who else?

BRANDIS: Well, no, I'm putting a view.

KING: Who else?

BRANDIS: And I think it is also about the fact that people feel they have just had enough of Anna Bligh and they have had enough of all of them.

KING: All right. Okay. Just, you said the depth of the front bench. Apart from Tim Nicholls, who would be the next best performer on a frontbench in Queensland for the conservatives?

BRANDIS: Well, I think they're all good performers. But my mind goes to people like Scott Emerson; my mind goes to people...

EMERSON: No relation.

BRANDIS: No relation of yours, Craig.

EMERSON: No. I get on all right with him, but no relation.

BRANDIS: But Scott Emerson is a very good man. My mind goes to people like Jarrod Bleijie, the Shadow Attorney General, the state Shadow Attorney General, who is a very impressive performer. You know, they're just a couple of names that occur to me immediately, but ...

KING: Okay. And to you, Craig Emerson. You were honest in saying that, you know, Anna Bligh has a big challenge ahead of her. What do you think the chances are ... or what would happen, from your political experience, what would have to happen for there to be a circuit-breaker?

EMERSON: I will try to answer that question by taking you back to the last election. I walked into the studios and the tally room, Madonna, with - and I won't name them, but Coalition MPs, federal Coalition MPs - who were declaring victory before the actual count started because of the very strong showing that the Coalition, or the LNP, whatever they're called, would put in on the Gold Coast - that they'd win seats all up and down the length and breadth of Queensland and in Brisbane. And they lost. And they lost.

Now, that, I think was a shock to the LNP. It was a pleasant surprise, I think...

KING: So what's your point? What's your point?

EMERSON: My point is you don't count your chickens before they hatch.

BRANDIS: Well ...

KING: All right. And I think that's a point you have both made, George Brandis, making the same point.

Look, we were going to talk about the health warnings on alcohol and the plain wrapping of cigarettes. If you're at home and want to chat about those issues, please give me a call on 1300 222 612.

But, gentlemen, before you go, there is one other issue I wanted to talk to you about. And this is ... there was a list of the most powerful political operatives released on Monday. I'm wondering why neither of you have made the list.

BRANDIS: Obviously, because we're not powerful political operatives, Craig.

EMERSON: Yeah, that could be it.

KING: Well, it ... people are really intrigued, listeners are intrigued about this because some people are public figures, but some people are not public figures at all. And, George Brandis, who

would you nominate as the most powerful Labor person currently in Australia?

BRANDIS: In Australia?

KING: Yeah.

BRANDIS: Probably, Paul Howes, the trade union official, who decided to remove Kevin Rudd a year ago. And instructed on *Lateline*, that good ABC program *Lateline*, instructed the Labor Caucus what they were to do the next morning when they went in to the Caucus meeting.

KING: All right. Who else?

BRANDIS: Anybody who can remove a Prime Minister with the flick of his fingers is a pretty powerful individual.

KING: All right. Before I go to you, Craig Emerson, who else, who else was involved in that? Who else do you think actually carries that level of weight in the Labor Party?

BRANDIS: Well, I think we know that the people that pull the strings in the Labor Party are the trade union officials. Paul Howes is the most obvious one. There are others as well. There's that man Joe de Bruyn, who runs the what is called the shoppies union, the right wing Labor union, who has about ...

- EMERSON: It's a very good union. Very good union.
- BRANDIS: ... about 20 per cent of the Labor Caucus owes their pre-selection to his whim...
- KING: All right, yeah.
- BRANDIS: ...so he's a very powerful man.
- EMERSON: I think you'd quite like Joe de Bruyn, George.
- KING: I will go to the list in just a moment. And you're not far off the mark in some of those comments, George Brandis.
- Let me ask you the same question, Craig Emerson. Who would you award that title to on the other side of politics?
- EMERSON: Well, on our side, I'd say it would be Julia Gillard, Prime Minister of Australia.
- KING: No. I'm asking you on the other side.
- EMERSON: On the other side, the most powerful ...
- KING: Because Julia Gillard doesn't make... certainly doesn't make the Top Ten.
- EMERSON: The most powerful political operative on the other side of politics, that would be a toss-up

between Pauline Hanson, who writes Tony Abbott's script, and he's certainly embracing economic Hansonism...

KING: Yes.

EMERSON: ... and she was in the gallery behind him yesterday in Parliament and probably ducked downstairs to tactics committee to draw up a few questions for the rest of Parliament.

KING: Now, seriously, who?

EMERSON: I think she actually has had a profound effect on Tony Abbott's thinking because he is embracing Economic Hansonism.

KING: Yeah, but I'm not asking ... I'm not asking you about their profound, you know, view on their thinking.

EMERSON: I thought you were talking about background operatives.

KING: I'm asking you about political operatives. Political operatives and how they act.

EMERSON: Well, she is a political operative. And she certainly impresses Tony Abbott.

KING: Yes.

BRANDIS: Well, you know, I tell you, if I may say so, Craig, I don't agree with Pauline Hanson's views about many ...

EMERSON: No, you don't, but your party does. Tony Abbott does.

BRANDIS: ... things, but I tell you what made Pauline Hanson, Craig. What made Pauline Hanson was people being condescending about her, and the people who are not political insiders like you and me taking offence at political insiders being condescending about this woman.

EMERSON: I'm entitled to a view of Pauline Hanson, and I think everyone in Australia is. And Pauline Hanson is entitled to a view of me.

KING: All right. Well, Pauline Hanson doesn't make this list. The most powerful Labor person, Craig Emerson, is Bill Shorten.

EMERSON: Is that right? I was just talking to Bill about Pauline Hanson's attitude towards foreign investment.

KING: Yeah. And, Senator George Brandis, Christopher Pyne. Surprise you?

- BRANDIS: No, that doesn't surprise me. Christopher Pyne is a good friend of mine, as a matter of fact. He's the Manager of Business...
- EMERSON: Well, you'd better get to know him even better.
- BRANDIS: ...in the House of Representatives, so he sort of runs the tactics on a day-to-day basis, and I think he does so with great alacrity and skill.
- KING: Bruce McIver from Queensland and Bill Ludwig on the Labor side also making the Top Five. Don Farrell, Nick Minchin, Mark Butler, Michael Photios, David Feeney and Mark Arbib rounding out that list. Something to aspire to?
- EMERSON: Well, George and I are actually backroom operators.
- BRANDIS: Well, I...
- EMERSON: We're just so far back in the backroom that people don't notice us there.
- BRANDIS: I'm pleased to say, Madonna, that each of the Liberals on your list is a friend of mine.
- EMERSON: Well, they'd need to be, by the sound of it.

KING: Better off having powerful friends than enemies, I guess. George Brandis, thank you very much for your time.

BRANDIS: Thank you, Madonna.

KING: Dr Craig Emerson, thank you for your time, too.

EMERSON: Thanks, Madonna. Bye-bye, George.

KING: Let's hope they're a bit better behaved this time, next week, here on 612 ABC Brisbane.

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KING:

Dr Craig Emerson, thank you for your time, too.

EMERSON:

Thanks, Madonna. Bye-bye, George.

KING:

Let's hope they're a bit better behaved this time, next week, here on 612 ABC Brisbane.