



THE HON DR CRAIG EMERSON MP
MINISTER FOR TRADE

Transcript
ABC 612 Mornings with Madonna King

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E&OE

Subjects: Craig Thomson, convoy protest, Parliamentary pairs.

MADONNA KING:

It's a big news day here in Brisbane, but Federally there are also some big issues happening. Labor backbencher Craig Thomson has quit as the head of the influential Parliamentary economics committee. Is that where this should end, do you think?

Let's go inside Canberra. Dr Craig Emerson, a senior Minister in the Gillard Government. Good morning.

CRAIG EMERSON:

Good morning Madonna.

KING:

And Senator George Brandis, Deputy Opposition Leader in the Senate. Hello to you Senator.

EMERSON:

Now he may not be here because I think he's gone to Sydney.

KING: No, let ... George Brandis, good morning.

GEORGE BRANDIS: I'm right here.

EMERSON: Okay.

KING: Yeah, jumping the gun there. I thought you were going to say he didn't give you a pair, but we'll come back to that shortly.

George Brandis, do you feel you have the scalp of Craig Thomson?

BRANDIS: Well what I think really doesn't matter Madonna. The fact is that there are a certain ... there are certain documents that I've put before the New South Wales Police Commissioner and invited him to arrive at a conclusion as to whether or not they show a *prima facie* case that a crime has been committed ... one or more crimes have been committed against the law of New South Wales. That's for him to decide.

But I must say the whole thing looks very, very shabby. There has been a crime committed here, whether you believe Mr Thomson or not. If you believe Mr Thomson, he is saying that his signature was forged by the person who went to the escort agency. So, Mr Thomson is saying there was a crime committed. If you don't believe Mr Thomson's story - and the ... the ... the story does seem to be rather implausible - then a tri... a different crime is committed ... has been committed: that is, fraudulent use of a credit card.

KING: All right ...

BRANDIS: You know, either...

KING: All right...

BRANDIS: ... way, a crime's been committed here.

KING: All right. But on your side, other people are facing charges. Or one person is facing charges; others have faced investigations. What is your aim here? Is your aim that he was not a fit and proper person to lead this economics committee, or do you think it's broader than that and he should ... he should consider stepping down from Parliament in some way until this is looked at?

BRANDIS: Well nobody so far as I'm aware has yet said that Mr Thomson should resign from Parliament. What the Opposition has said is that there are facts of sufficient weight and gravity - including admissions, by the way, that Mr Thomson himself made - that would suggest that there is at least *prima facie* evidence of a crime having been committed by him, and it's for the New South Wales authorities now to pursue the matter.

KING: All right, so what happens then? I mean does that change in any way his job in Parliament?

BRANDIS: Well he...

KING: No matter what happens?

BRANDIS: Well he has - obviously, under pressure from the Prime Minister - decided to resign as the chairman of the House of Representatives economics committee. But you know, for as long as he ... until... unless and until

he were to be convicted of a crime there's no reason why he couldn't continue to sit in Parliament.

KING: Is this about potential wrongdoing or is it about trying to knock off the Labor Government?

BRANDIS: Well, I think the two issues are intimately linked. But as I've said all along Madonna, this issue arises in a political context. It has obviously political implications that we all know. But the question that I've put to Mr Scipione, the New South Wales Police Commissioner, is a legal question.

The legal question is: ha... is there *prima facie* evidence of the commission of one or more criminal offences in New South Wales? Now, I happen to believe as a matter of professional judgement that there is a strong *prima facie* case...

KING: Yes, but that ... all right, but that of course is up to police. Can I just go to Dr Craig Emerson here? And Craig Emerson, you are Craig Thomson's flatmate in Canberra. To people in Queensland who don't know anything about him, just give us a little bit of knowledge about him before I ask you some questions.

EMERSON: Well in my experience he's a humble man who works very hard. He worked hard to win the seat of Dobell; it was actually held by the Coalition. He's regarded as a very effective and good local member and, indeed, at the last election when Labor was considered to be in trouble the seats of Robertson and Dobell were identified as two seats that might fall, neither did and, in fact, Mr Thomson did exceptionally well. So the people's verdict is that he is an effective local member and that's really what counts.

KING: All right. You're there very, very specifically talking about his politically ... political value. What ... how do you see him as a person? Is he a good mate? Is he...

EMERSON: As I said I...

KING: Is he...

EMERSON: Yeah he's a friend of mine and I'm proud to say he's a friend of mine. Now, that will probably lead to Coalition smears of me for daring to associate with Mr Thomson. So be it. I declare him a friend of mine.

KING: If any of these accusations are proved true, have you misjudged him?

EMERSON: I would actually rather not speculate on the outcome of an investigation that has not been initiated...

KING: And he has denied this but...but...

EMERSON: Despite ... no, no, can I finish? I think George had a good run here Madonna.

Mr Abbott yesterday falsely claimed that the police are investigating Mr Thomson. That is false and he knows it is false and of course George Brandis will confirm that the police are assessing the material that George has sent to them, which is the proper thing to do. They're not going to chuck it in the bin. But Mr Abbott sought further to smear Mr Thomson by saying an investigation is now underway.

KING: Yeah, but that's not my question. That's not my ... my question is...

EMERSON:

I think it's an important point.

KING:

All right, but if an investigation is launched ... if an investigation is launched how, does that change the balance here and what Labor ... how's Labor see it?

EMERSON:

If an investigation is launched it doesn't change my view of Mr Thomson. And the reason is I cherish the presumption of innocence. That is the cornerstone of our justice system and indeed Mr Howard had a similar thing to say when he said that for three of his Coalition MPs who were being investigated by the police that 'a lot of people who are under investigation end up having nothing to answer for'.

KING:

But you know, he ... he has said he has nothing to answer for; he is innocent. As you say, an investigation is not currently underway. But he has made the decision to step down from the economics committee, saying the focus on this was taking away from the Government's work.

Does there come a time ... this is all your party is talking about when you're trying to get a carbon tax through, when there is a gay marriage discussion scheduled for this week on the anniversary of your Government taking election. At what point does the publicity surrounding this hurt Labor to the point that ... that his value is very limited?

EMERSON:

Well, that's the judgement for other's to make. I'm standing by Mr Thomson because I believe in the presumption of innocence and no charges have been laid against him...

KING: No, I'm not saying they are. What I'm saying ... I'm saying the public perception...

EMERSON: Well look ... yep I know, and what do you want me to say, Madonna: 'Oh look, he's a really bad guy or there's a public perception'? What I want...

KING: No, what I'm trying to say ... what I'm trying to ask you is so much is about perception and how electors see a situation...

EMERSON: Well, then that's it. So you're saying - are you saying he...

KING: So whether it's the carbon tax...

EMERSON: ...should resign because of perception?

KING: No, would you let me finish? No, I'm not saying he should resign at all. I'm asking you as a senior decision-maker in the Gillard Government how you...

EMERSON: And I'm standing by Craig Thomson.

KING: Yes, I'm not asking you whether you're standing by him. I'm asking you how does the Labor Party deal with this. Presumably, your Government has other things to make decision on, like a carbon tax. How much is this...

EMERSON: But the legisla....

KING: ...eating up...

EMERSON: The legisla...

KING: ...eating up the things that you want it...

EMERSON: It's not. It's not. The legislative program is not being affected by this. And that's what matters for the Australian people. What matters for the Australian people, too, is the presumption of innocence and with ... when Mr Abbott himself was charged with indecent assault many, many years ago, he would have cherished the presumption of innocence.

When others were under investigation only a few years ago they would have cherished the presumption of innocence. All Australians should cherish the presumption of innocence. And Mr Abbott should respect it instead of being a total hypocrite and trying to slide and slither into The Lodge. He should do the policy work that the Australian people expect, including finding money to plug his \$70 billion black hole.

KING: Cra ... to you George Brandis.

BRANDIS: Madonna, can I ... well look, can I say a couple of things Madonna? And first of all, I can understand why Craig is upset and can I start by saying that I admire Craig for the fact that he's say... that he is standing by his friend.

When people are in difficulties, that is when they need their friends most to stand by them. And I always admire people who stand by their friends in difficult times.

KING: All right, but what's your point here?

BRANDIS:

Well I just wanted to make that point. But that is ... but nevertheless, we have to make a judgement about Mr Thomson's conduct. Nobody is saying that he is not entitled to the presumption of innocence. Nobody is saying that.

It's because he's entitled to the presumption of innocence that I said before. Until he would be convicted of a crime, he's entitled to continue to sit in the parliament.

But that having been said, there is a body of material, including...

KING:

[Interrupts] Yes okay, and you've gone through this.

BRANDIS:

... admissions he himself made.

KING:

Yes, and you've gone through this. You've gone through this.

BRANDIS:

Yep. Well that...

KING:

Okay, well look. Let's move onto the next issue, which broadens it to other issues involving the Government and how electors think, I think, is this convoy to Canberra we saw this week. Craig Emerson, with people streaming in from around the country, do you think they have genuine concerns with the Government? Or is this a bit of a stunt?

EMERSON:

They have genuine concerns in terms of their views of the Government. They're entitled to have those views; they're entitled to express those views. The "convoy of no confidence" was rather smaller than they had

anticipated. We had one radio host saying that the police had stopped them at the border. I suppose this is this extension of the one world government cooperating with the Australian Federal Police. But to the credit of the organisers themselves, they did not make that claim.

The point I'm making: yes they're entitled to their view. They expressed it, and they expressed it in a civil way.

KING:

Do you think their concerns are genuine - that their saying that the Government doesn't reflect what voters asked for at the last election? Or do you think this is what voters voted for - this is what they got? I mean, minority government where any big decision has to go through several filters.

EMERSON:

I do think that politicians and such people should respect the will of the Australian people in a democracy. Now, that doesn't mean, and it never has meant, that everyone should agree with every policy position or statement of the elected government of the day.

Usually governments are elected around 51 to 49 per cent in Australia - that's the way it falls, maybe 52-48. Which means that there's 48 per cent of people who don't agree with the government and may be ... you know, that's just democracy. So I don't expect people to agree with the Government. I expect people to be civil, and they were civil.

KING:

Okay.

EMERSON:

As distinct from Mr Rob yesterday - and I wanted to make this point the day before - when he used

Parliamentary Privilege again against Craig Thomson to say there is evidence that he has lied and he is a thief.

KING:

All right, I'm moving on from Craig Thomson, because my issue was not what ... any investigation into him. It was whether that is robbing the Government of time to focus on bigger issues that may be at the centre of their plan. And perhaps this is the biggest issue. From what you're saying, obviously, it is an issue on both sides.

Let's go ... well, just before I go onto the next thing though, George Brandis: on this convoy to Canberra...

BRANDIS:

Well, let ... well, can I just say two things about that?

First of all, I think we know what this Government thinks of the Australian people. From what Mr Albanese, the Leader of the ... the Manager of the Government in the House of Representatives, had to say when he contemptuously dismissed it as a 'convoy of in consequence'. Now, you know, that's not the way in which any Minister of a Government ought to be describing people just because they disagree with him, who have a grievance.

Now - and secondly, let me correct something that Craig said - the convoy, or elements of the convoy, actually were stopped at the ACT border by the Australian Federal Police. That claim was made by Alan Jones who was the MC of the protest meeting.

It was disputed by the Government, but I happened to be on Alan Jones' radio show a little earlier this morning and callers were ringing in saying it cert... the

convoy certainly was stopped at the ACT border because I was there and I saw it.

KING: All right. Well I think that's not at the centre of what they were...

BRANDIS: No but....

KING: ... arguing for, but can I ask you that same question? Do you think there's a feeling in the community that the makeup of the Parliament means that we are not moving ahead?

BRANDIS: I do, and I think that the most ... the starkest evidence of that, Madonna, is the fact that in an opinion poll about two weeks ago, 53 per cent of people said they wanted an election.

Now, Australians hate elections. Most Australians think elections are a huge pain in the neck. If 53 per cent of the people say 'we want an election now', that tells you that at least 53 per cent of the people have given up on the Government and want it chucked out.

KING: It's an easy thing for people to say, though, in a survey.

BRANDIS: Oh well, they...

KING: When they know how much an election costs, would they still think the same, do you think?

BRANDIS: Look, I just think Australians don't have a great appetite for elections. We're always hearing there are too many elections. So when you have more than half the people in the country demanding an election less

than a year after the last election, you know the Government is in deep, deep trouble and have lost the confidence of the public.

KING: Craig Emerson, when is the anniversary of your election?

EMERSON: I don't know - it's in September. What an absurd proposition. What an absurd proposition.

KING: What?

EMERSON: That because 53 per cent of the people say that they'd like an election we should have one. [Laughs] I mean, that's a completely absurd. This is just so typical of George Brandis and the Coalition. How could you run the country by conducting an opinion poll every fortnight to see if people wanted an election and then say, 'oh there's ... a majority do so we better go...

KING: But...

EMERSON: ...and have an election?

The problem is that George Brandis, Tony Abbott have never got over the fact that as born-to-rule Liberals, they are not in government.

KING: All right but...

EMERSON: You've just got to get over it, George.

KING: Back to this, though, and how voters think, Craig Emerson.

Do you think voters feel a frustration that there is a minority government and each decision has to go through a particular filter; that if Labor had a strong majority, there may be a different policy platform? If the Coalition was in there may be a different policy platform?

EMERSON: Well there would be a different policy platform if the Coalition...

KING: [Interrupts] Or with Labor. Or with Labor.

EMERSON: The modern history of politics - and George will back this up - is that only three times, I think, since the second World War - certainly since 1970 - have there been majority government in the Senate. And I'm afraid, Madonna, I have to go to a division right now because Mr Abbott won't give a pair toward Malcolm Turnbull and Simon Crean as the Arts Minister to go to Margaret Olley's funeral, despite having written it down that he would. He reneged on it today - it's a disgrace.

KING: Are you required at that division now?

EMERSON: I have to go right now.

KING: All right, I appreciate your time this morning.

EMERSON: Thank you. Bye bye.

KING: That's Dr Craig Emerson. Before I let you go, George Brandis, why has the Coalition reneged on that pair agreement?

BRANDIS: Well it's the Coal ... pairs are decided on a case-by-case basis. And the Leader of the Opposition has decided that there will be no pairs. The Government is trying to use its numbers in the House of Representatives to force through a carbon tax that it promised not to introduce, and we think that's - you know, I bet - the Government is fair game. And we will do everything in our power to stop that carbon tax being legislated for against the wishes of the people. Can ... may I...

KING: Did this change the rules a little bit, though?

BRANDIS: No, no it doesn't because pairing is a casual, informal arrangement assessed on a case-by-case basis.

KING: Okay.

BRANDIS: Can I just correct something Craig said, though, please?

KING: No, no, no, no. Craig's not here so...

BRANDIS: Well, well I just want to correct the record though.

Craig said, well you know, the Arts Minister can't go to Margaret Olley's memorial service in Sydney today. The Government could be represented. That's where I am. I'm in Sydney for the purpose of attending Margaret Olley's memorial service.

KING: Yeah, but you're a Senator.

BRANDIS: As Shadow Minister for the Arts, that's my point. The Arts Minister is represented in the Senate by a Senator: Senator Mark Arbib, in fact.

The pairing arrangements are continuing today in the Senate, so if the Government wanted to be represented at this memorial service, it could be through the Senator who represents the Arts Minister.

KING: Well, yes, that is slightly different, though.

Michelle Grattan was interesting this morning. She said she hasn't such a tense and divisive atmosphere in Canberra since 1975. Is she right?

BRANDIS: Well, look, I don't know. I've only been in Canberra since 2000. But Michelle Grattan, I think, has been in Canberra since about 1971. So she would know.

Certainly, it is more tense than I have seen it. And I think the reason for that is partly because of the political composition of the House of Representatives. But it's also partly because the very central plank of the Government's program - that is the carbon tax - is the very thing it solemnly promised not to do.

KING: All right. I want to leave it here because Craig Emerson is not there to counteract. I appreciate your time this morning to.

BRANDIS: Thank you very much, Madonna.

KING: That's Senator George Brandis, the Deputy Opposition Leader in the Senate. Before that, Dr Craig Emerson.

Date:
