



THE HON DR CRAIG EMERSON MP
MINISTER FOR TRADE

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MADONNA KING: Now former Prime Minister John Howard has rejoined the political debate, and he has a message for Julia Gillard, along the lines that she lacks authority. I'm wondering if you think that's an astute assessment, or is it the pot calling the kettle black? Just one of the issues we'll look at *Inside Canberra* this morning. Dr Craig Emerson, a senior minister in the Gillard Government, acting Foreign Affairs Minister - good morning.

CRAIG EMERSON: Good morning, Madonna.

KING: Craig Emerson about to catch a plane overseas. Senator George Brandis, here in Brisbane with me, the Deputy Opposition Leader in the Senate. Senator, good morning.

GEORGE BRANDIS: Morning, Madonna. Morning, Craig.

KING: Sorry, Dr Emerson, did you hear Senator George ...

EMERSON: Yes, I did, and I said hello to George, and to you.

KING: Thank you. Let's start with John Howard. Craig Emerson, is it fair, do you think, that Julia Gillard is lacking some authority?

EMERSON: I don't think so. I think what we're seeing is a debate about policy, which is important. Then there's a separate debate about personalities and gossip, and all this sort of thing.

KING: Yes.

EMERSON: My own view, Madonna, is that people are actually interested in policy, how Government decisions affect them. They can get a bit kind of interested in gossip, but fundamentally what they expect of Governments and Oppositions, is to debate the big policy issues, whether it's about jobs, health, education, that sort of thing.

KING: All right, and I'm not interested in gossip, but do you think it's fair to say that Julia Gillard, perhaps in the way she got the job, perhaps in Queensland because it involved Kevin Rudd, that her personality is part of the factor in Labor being unpopular?

EMERSON: Again, I don't agree with that. I think Julia Gillard has a couple of key features that are very important in any Prime Minister, and that is that she is very determined to press ahead with what she considers is to be the right decisions. Now I wouldn't ordinarily make a lot of comparisons between Julia Gillard and John Howard, but he also had that characteristic, as have our important leaders of the past: Bob Hawke, Paul Keating. You need a real resolve and a determination to do what you consider to be in the national interest, and that's something that I think that she does share with John Howard and Paul Keating and Bob Hawke.

KING: But your point, George Brandis, will no doubt be that that only works if you carry the voters with you on those big decisions?

BRANDIS: Well, yeah, I mean the point I was going to make, Madonna, is this: it was always going to be difficult for any Prime Minister, Labor or Liberal, leading a minority Government to establish their authority, because almost by definition the authority is attenuated in a way that it isn't usually when you have a majority on the floor of the House of Representatives. But I think Julia Gillard's problems are being compounded by two things: the first is that people just feel they can't trust her; and you know, there are lots of reasons for that. But the most obvious is that everybody in the country knows that she won that election because she promised not to introduce a carbon tax. And whether you call that a broken promise or a lie, the fact is people feel they can't trust her.

KING: All right, and the second point?

BRANDIS: The second point I was going to make is this: that this isn't entirely a Labor Government. This is a Labor Government that is in alliance with the Greens. And you know, Senator Bob Brown, who has a very strong following among about 15 per cent of the people in the country, and is loathed and feared by most people in the country, does have undue influence over this Government.

KING: All right, back to you, Craig Emerson. Just picking up that point that Senator Brandis has made: in some ways, could the Greens be hurting Labor?

EMERSON: Well, I don't think so. The point I'd make about that, and I think it's a good discussion, Madonna, is that since, I think it was the Second World War, there's only been two Governments that have had a majority in the Senate. Why is that relevant? Because ...

BRANDIS: No, there have been three, Craig. There have been three, yes.

EMERSON: Okay, there was I think one under Malcolm Fraser; John Howard 2004 to 2007. And you're saying there's another one?

BRANDIS: Well, the Menzies Government had a majority in the Senate for about a third of the time, in fact.

EMERSON: Okay, well I have to confess, I don't remember that. But okay, so since 1970...

BRANDIS: Neither do I, Craig, but I read about it.

EMERSON: We've read about it in the books. Since about 1970, this has been pretty much the norm: that a Government doesn't have a majority in the Senate, and therefore it does work with the other parties, and that's what we're doing both in the Senate, and in this case with one Green in the House of Representatives, plus I think three or four other Independents. So in a sense, not having a majority to pass your legislation is the norm, not the exception. And the truth is we've passed all our legislation, I think, without amendment.

KING: All right, but....

BRANDIS: Well that's not actually right, Craig, because...

EMERSON: We have passed all our legislation...

BRANDIS: ... some of your legislation, for example, in my area, the Attorney-General's area, has been passed with the Government conceding amendments that the Opposition has moved ...

KING: All right, but that...

EMERSON: And that would be cooperatively, and maybe – and I think it's fair that if you, George, and you and I have worked in this way: if you come up with amendments such as the Australian Consumer Law, that make sense, yes, we will make those amendments.

KING: All right, but in a way we're talking around the edges. Craig Emerson, do you think though that the Parliament as it sits stymies Labor to make big decisions and go for them? That in the back of your mind, you've got that you've got to keep the balance in the Parliament to maintain Government and that can mute the authority, the power of your party?

EMERSON: No, and we do disagree with, for example, the Greens, on issues such as the Malaysian solution for the asylum-seeker issue; we disagree on gay marriage; we disagree on matters related to trade and economic policy more generally. But that doesn't mean that the Greens are then determined to block all our legislation - they're not. But we have disagreements with them; the Coalition has disagreements with them, sometimes on big matters, or in fact...

KING: All right...

EMERSON: ...invariably on big matters. We actually have got the support for the mining tax, for putting a price on carbon, for training packages, for the big health packages...

KING: Yes, but a lot of negotiation involved in that.

BRANDIS: But look, it's all very well to say that, Craig. But these are sort of “nod, nod, wink, wink” sorts of disagreements. The fact is that you're in a formal alliance with them, and that's the big difference: that the ... you're right to say that most of the time, Governments haven't had a majority in the Senate, and they've had to work with the cross-bench parties. But this is the first time ever that there has been a formal alliance between the Government and cross-bench parties.

KING: Let's move on from that, but I still want to stick with the Independents in a sense. John Howard claimed last night

that I think Tony Windsor and Rob Oakeshott would lose their seats at the next election. George Brandis, how likely do you think that is? Do you agree with that assessment?

BRANDIS: Look, I don't know so much about New England, but I can assure you, I spent part of the weekend in Port Macquarie, Mr Oakeshott's electorate. And on Saturday morning, the local newspaper ran an opinion poll that showed that in the last 12 months, his popularity had slumped from 47 per cent, which is what he got at the 2010 election, to 14.8 per cent.

KING: Do you have to respect a politician in that position; that they're abiding by what they made as a decision when they were first elected?

BRANDIS: Look, I think you can respect anyone, regardless of their political opinions, who stands up for a principle. But I don't think anybody in this country thinks Mr Oakeshott stood up for a principle. I think most people, including everyone who remembers his endless 17-minute press conference, really thought this guy was just big-noting himself.

EMERSON: It was endless for you George, because he gave the wrong verdict.

BRANDIS: I think it was endless for everyone.

KING: It was a quite long speech, Craig Emerson, you'd agree with that?

EMERSON: Yeah, but I don't think that's the big picture here, and...

KING: No, of course it's not, but...

EMERSON: ...Rob Oakeshott obviously is making decisions that he considers to be in the national interest. And here's an example of 'yes, we negotiated the carbon price...'

KING: All right, but let me ask you, with Rob Oakeshott: he's obviously paying the price then, in his own electorate for that, isn't he?

EMERSON: Well, he is responsible for making the best assessment, I think, of his electoral standing and his electoral prospects and all that. It's not for me to judge. And I will say about opinion polls: goodness gracious, you can't roll out of bed anymore without an opinion poll saying something about someone, and about their electoral prospects when an election is held in two years' time.

KING: All right. Well, that throws me the segue to the next question, which is about opinion polls. But if we just look at what it is showing, and this intrigues me, that neither leader is really improving on their stocks in the polls. We've talked a little bit about Julia Gillard and why that might be, but George Brandis, why isn't Tony Abbott improving each time?

BRANDIS: I think Tony Abbott's doing just fine. You've got to remember that Oppositions, and Opposition Leaders, have to spend most of their time attacking the Government, and criticising the Government, and sometimes that's a reasonably unattractive role. I remember, for example, if I can give an historical comparison, in the years, literally years, leading up to the 1995 Queensland election, Rob Borbidge and Joan Sheldon were written off routinely by the Courier Mail as a pair of whingers because they had nothing good to say about the Goss Government. Well, they actually managed to pull the 1995 election around, and formed the Government.

KING: All right, but...

BRANDIS: But my point Madonna is this: that the task of being an Opposition Leader does involve a lot of negative stuff - it should - but that doesn't necessarily make the person who is the negative advocate look attractive.

KING: All right, but Joan Sheldon, Rob Borbidge was quite a while ago. I think you would agree the nature of politics has changed enormously in the last 15 or 20 years?

BRANDIS: I think the nature of this Parliament is different from most Parliaments because there is a sense of illegitimacy about the Government - not because it's a minority Government but because it was elected on a lie.

KING: But there's also a sense of - and I say this with respect - but certainly claims of some nastiness on the Opposition too, for example, on the pairing process.

BRANDIS: Well, I mean, it's a tough game, and the pairing is an informal arrangement.

KING: Yes.

BRANDIS: And I'm completely unabashed about this, Madonna. We are going to do everything in our constitutional power to stop this Government foisting on the Australian public an economy-destroying carbon tax that they were elected promising not to introduce.

KING: All right, Craig Emerson, to you, and to Tony Abbott's leadership. Would you prefer ... is he your preferred Coalition Leader to face in the next poll?

EMERSON: Yes, he is.

KING: Do you think Julia Gillard could defeat him? Certainly she couldn't, if a poll was held now, could she?

EMERSON: Well, a poll isn't being held now, and this is my point about rolling out of bed every morning, checking the polls, and adjusting policy according to the latest opinion polls. That would be a recipe for the betrayal of the Australian people, in not doing the right thing by them, in implementing the policies that are needed to secure jobs and prosperity in this country.

KING: But when we're talking about leadership: when her stocks are so low, it always raises debate. And this morning we've got this US cable leak showing Bill Shorten big on ambition. It's courtesy of Wikileaks, and it says despite his luke-warm relationship with Prime Minister Rudd, Shorten struck us as highly ambitious, but willing to wait, at least for a while, for his moment in the sun. Do you believe Julia Gillard will lead Labor to the next election?

EMERSON: I do, and I'm very sure of that, and the Wikileaks stuff is just more gossip. And the point I was making earlier, which I think is an important point Madonna, is that the Australian public see through the gossip, and what they actually want is not gossip. Not whether George likes me, or I like George, or Tony Abbott gets on with Malcolm Turnbull ...

KING: But do they want Julia Gillard as the Leader of the Labor Party?

EMERSON: Well, she is the Leader of the Labor Party; she's our best leader; she has the features that a leader should have, and that is the determination to operate in the national interests.

KING: Do you think Bill Shorten has the talent to lead the Labor Party at some time?

EMERSON: I'm not interested in talking about future leaders. I'm interested in backing Julia Gillard because what I've found with Julia Gillard is on all the big calls that I think are very important to this country, such as whether we, you know, continue with an open, competitive economy, or go down Tony Abbott's road of Fortress Australia, she always makes the right calls.

BRANDIS: Look, I don't think, Madonna, you need to be sort of a cutting-edge CIA operative to work out that Bill Shorten covets the office of Prime Minister. And you know, the fact that we're having this conversation just goes to show how much the authority has bled away from Julia Gillard. You talk to Labor politicians in the corridors in Parliament, and you know, some of them say it's a question of not if, but when. And you know, I feel quite sorry for them, in a sense, because they are stuck with a leader whom the public have no confidence in, and no trust in. And what do they do? I mean do they follow the course of the New South Wales Labor Party, which went from Bob Carr to Morris Iemma, to Nathan Rees, to Kristina Keneally? They've stabbed Kevin Rudd in the back...

KING: But to be...

BRANDIS: ...and then they go to Julia Gillard. If they get rid of her, they would look as if they're in a death spiral.

KING: But to be fair, you have been unable to throw, or the Coalition has been unable to throw, the claim that Tony Abbott will necessarily be there come the next election. There's...

BRANDIS: I have absolutely no doubt whatsoever that Tony Abbott will be the Leader of the Liberal Party at the next election. None.

KING: Do you think Julia Gillard will lead the Labor Party?

BRANDIS: I don't know. And the reason I don't know is I think they don't know. I mean they're having this debate among themselves. You've got a few show ponies, like Bill Shorten and Stephen Smith, profiling themselves. And then there are those who say, 'well, we need a wise old head, so what about Simon Crean?' And...

KING: What about Craig Emerson? How do you think he'd go?

BRANDIS: Well, look, I've made no secret of the fact - and this is perhaps not something I should confess to on the radio - but I've made no secret of the fact that I think Craig is one of the best Ministers in the Government. He's one of the few Ministers in the Government who is economically articulate. And it must be a very lonely thing, Craig, to be an economically literate man in that Government of illiterates.

KING: Craig Emerson, I don't know if that's the accolade you want from George Brandis...

EMERSON: But I'm happy to talk about economic literacy, and the fact...

BRANDIS: At least somebody is...

KING: Pretty good response.

EMERSON: Yeah, and the fact that, if we're going to get into this gossip that George likes, in the media, in the newspapers, a senior Shadow Minister has said if Mr Abbott continues to go the way he is on economic policy – this is an Abbott supporter – he said 'we'll have to pull the plug on him'. And what this means is that there's a lot of tension within the Coalition on policy, and that's what I want to talk about.

KING: All right, well let's move on. Let's move on from leadership. There's a couple of quick things I do want to talk to you about before you leave. This inquiry into the ABC, the Senate Inquiry into the ABC that will be set up on what shows should be cut, what should stay. Is there a favourite program that both of you have from the ABC that you would hate to see cut?

BRANDIS: Yes, *Songs of Praise* on the ABC at 11.30 on Sunday mornings, which broadcasts choral music. I'm very fond of.

KING: Are you really?

BRANDIS: Yes.

KING: There you go: *Songs of Praise* gets the tick from George Brandis. Craig Emerson, top that.

EMERSON: [Sings] Come sing a song of joy, of love and understanding. Oh look, I know Barry Cassidy very well, and I hope they're not looking at doing anything nasty about *The Insiders*.

KING: All right, so that's *Insiders*, and we're going to talk more with Nick Xenophon after 10, about this, this morning. In the Economist Intelligence Unit's latest survey, Melbourne has taken the top honours as the world's most liveable city. Brisbane comes in after Sydney, Perth and Adelaide. Do either of you want to defend Melbourne this morning? What makes it so liveable?

EMERSON: I can't think of anything in relation to the weather that would make it liveable, and you'd think that the weather would have been number one criterion. It is the only city on earth that does literally have four seasons in one day.

KING: All right, Craig Emerson. I must say I'm with Craig Emerson there. George Brandis?

BRANDIS: I like Melbourne; I think Melbourne's a very attractive city. It has a great cultural life, and I'm not at all surprised to see it doing so well, although I'm a bit surprised and disappointed frankly that Brisbane wasn't up there as well.

KING: Yeah, I certainly thought that was a surprise. Just before I let you go, Craig Emerson - I think you're off to Paris in the next hour or so - how do you handle long haul flights?

EMERSON: Ah, despite what people might think, they're not a lot of fun.

KING: Do you wear your pyjamas?

EMERSON: I will be wearing my jimmy-jams, but not onto the plane. I'll change into them.

BRANDIS: Too much information.

KING: I think that just defines people. I'm always intrigued about that, though. You see half the passengers on a long-haul flight go and put their pyjamas on, the other half not. And I've just always been intrigued. George Brandis?

BRANDIS: Yes, what?

EMERSON: Yes, admit you put your jimmy-jams on.

KING: He was hoping to avoid that question.

BRANDIS: No, I don't, really.

KING: No, well I'm with you on that one, George Brandis. They should be barred, I think. Craig Emerson, safe flight, and thanks for your time this morning.

EMERSON: Thanks, Madonna. Thanks, George.

BRANDIS: Bon voyage, Craig.

EMERSON: Thanks, George.

KING: And talk to you next week. That's Craig Emerson as Acting Foreign Minister – he's off to Paris for talks on the Libyan situation. And Senator George Brandis, thank you very much for your time, too.

BRANDIS: Thank you.

KING:

Back next week with *Inside Canberra*.