



THE HON DR CRAIG EMERSON MP
MINISTER FOR TRADE

Transcript
ABC News Radio with Marius Benson

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E&OE

Subjects: Asylum-seekers, Australian Workplace Agreements.

GLEN BARTHOLOMEW: Well, Federal Cabinet will meet tonight to decide on a way ahead on the troubled issue of asylum-seekers.

The Immigration Minister said yesterday legal advice to him was that last week's High Court decision had ruled out any offshore detention under existing law.

Well, Tony Abbott says he doesn't think the court's ruling has that effect, and he's offered to cooperate with the Government on changing the Immigration Act if that's needed to remove any doubts.

One of the Cabinet Ministers who'll be considering that thorny issue today is the Trade Minister, Craig Emerson, who's spoken to Marius Benson.

MARIUS BENSON:

Craig Emerson, how do you feel about the prospect of working with Tony Abbott on a key piece of legislation?

CRAIG EMERSON:

Oh well, working with people constructively is a hell of a lot better than three-word slogans. And Mr Abbott seems to be persisting with his three-word slogans: "stop the boats," "phone the President".

The High Court ruling did invalidate the regional processing centre in Malaysia, but it also cast very serious doubt on Mr Abbott's policy of picking up the phone to the President of Nauru. And it needs to be appreciated that Mr Abbott's policy is no more sustainable than the Malaysian solution. And we need to work on that basis.

BENSON:

Well, that's the reason he is now offering to change the Immigration Act in cooperation with you. Do you think this is an honest offer or do you think it is, as some in Labor believe, a disingenuous offer aimed at wedging Labor and dividing the Left off from the main body of opinion in Labor?

EMERSON: Well, I'm actually going to resist the temptation to make a pre-judgement here, but it is a very strong temptation based on Mr Abbott's record in the past of slogans and simplistic solutions.

We respect now the decision of the High Court. We need to work within the parameters that have been established by the High Court, and that means that we need to consider all options.

BENSON: Okay. Well, you'll be part of the Cabinet meeting which decides on the options. In your mind, which way should the Government go: join Tony Abbott and resolve any doubts about offshore detention or abandon offshore processing?

EMERSON: No. Well, I'm a team player and I want to hear the views of my colleagues and express my views in any Cabinet discussion on this. So I don't want to pre-empt in any way the consideration of options that could be on the table.

BENSON: Some leading figures on the Left of Labor have already publicly made up their mind about this. They say they are not going down the Opposition route; they won't go down any policy that involves the Nauru option or temporary protection visas. Do you believe the

Left will go along with whatever the Government does decide?

EMERSON: Well, it's a matter for individual members. I don't know that you can describe the decisions or views of individuals as the views of the Left or the Right, or the Centre or the Extreme Centre, or the left right out or anyone else. You know there's a diversity of views within the Labor Party; that is true. There's a diversity of views within the community; that is equally true. And it's quite probable that the diversity of views within the Labor Party reflects the diversity of views in the community.

BENSON: There's a Newspann out today just on the specific question of how well the Government is handling the issue of asylum seekers. Seventy-eight per cent of people say badly. Are they right?

EMERSON: Well, I think once a High Court brings down a decision that rules out - invalidates - a regional solution to a regional problem, people are going to say, 'well, that hasn't worked'. It's true: it hasn't worked. So I'm not surprised about the poll.

BENSON: Can I just turn to workplace law for a moment? Because the Australian Industry Group, one of the key employer groups, is holding a public conference today, and it is critical of Labor's

Fair Work Act for being one of the reasons that productivity growth is so low. They want a return to flexibility, these employers, and they want a return to individual contracts. Will Labor listen to those calls?

EMERSON:

Labor won't be going back to AWAs. AWAs were actually used to strip away penalty rates, pay and conditions for working Australians.

Now, when we talk about productivity, productivity is GDP per hour worked. So what's the proposition: that Australians aren't working enough hours, or that they're featherbedding; there's too much staff in shops and in factories?

And, again, if I could mention Mr Abbott in this context, he says he's the workers' friend. But on the steel industry he says, 'what we've got to do is deal with is featherbedding'. That's just another word for him arguing that there are too many steel workers and more steel workers should lose their jobs.

So, let's have a proper debate. But again, let's not go into slogans. And we will not be going back to the individual contracts - AWAs, individual contracts - that Mr Abbott wants to return to. And we know that the Coalition, in addition, wants to strip away penalty rates and they want to bring back unfair dismissal laws.

So, there is a very clear contrast between the policies of the Coalition and the policies of the Labor Government.

BENSON: Craig Emerson, thanks very much.

EMERSON: Thank you, Marius.

BARTHOLOMEW: The Trade Minister, Craig Emerson, speaking to Marius Benson ahead of the Cabinet meeting held tonight, looking at some of the issues that it will consider.

