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MINISTER FOR TRADE

Transcript
2CC with Mark Parton
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E&OE

Subjects: asylum-seekers, Cairns Group meeting.

MARK PARTON: Can I tell you, I am just about over talking about asylum-seekers. It just goes on and on and on, and I do get the distinct feeling that we're not done yet. It's set to take more twists and turns in this next week and, of course, we've got the situation where we may not be finished with Malaysia as a possible solution.

I do get the distinct feeling, though, with all respect to my next guest, that the only real solution is going to involve a change of government. What an amazing turn of events in the last week in that we've seen Julia Gillard reach out to Tony Abbott to try and get her out of this mess. The Prime Minister's contacted Tony Abbott to try to end the legal impasse that's paralysed policy on asylum-seekers. Now, where it sits at the moment is that the Opposition Leader has accepted Julia Gillard's offer of a briefing from officials; refused to agree to legislation, though, that would allow the Government to send asylum-seekers to Malaysia as it desires.

He told the Prime Minister yesterday that he was open to legislation that would see asylum-seekers sent offshore for processing which rules in locations such as Nauru and Manus Island but rules out Malaysia. And as Craig Emerson joins us I think it's a wonderful opportunity for Tony Abbott here, Mr Emerson, to basically prove that he's in this for the good of the country rather than for political gain. Would you agree?

CRAIG EMERSON: There is an opportunity for him to prove that - there is. But he would need to be open to various processing options offshore. And the early evidence - early evidence,

I stress - is that he is in it for the politics and not for the policy, by saying he would consider some places such as Nauru but not others such as Malaysia. Now if, in fact, he is open to all possibilities and has an open mind at the briefings that are being offered, well that's one thing. But if he says 'look, I'll help but only if you implement my policy', that's another. I would also point out very quickly that the High Court ruling not only cast very serious doubt on Malaysia, it also cast very serious doubt on Nauru, which is Tony Abbott's and John Howard's policy.

PARTON: He could well be cutting off his nose to spite his face here if, indeed, there is an impasse in that when he wins government - and I'm sorry but looking at the polls it really is a case of when and not if - ...

EMERSON: I don't agree with that.

PARTON: It could make it impossible for him to achieve what he wants to achieve in immigration policy unless he links arms with you guys now.

EMERSON: I think so. And the question then would be asked if he didn't have an open mind about different processing options, then does he want actually for the boats to stop during the period of this Government, or does he want them to keep coming. And the reason that this is relevant is while boats are arriving people's lives are at risk, as we saw when 45 people including very young children lost their lives, smashed up against the rocks at Christmas Island.

PARTON: And yet you're having difficulty convincing the Left of your party to go with that point of view at this stage in the game.

EMERSON: My point of view, my take on that is that the diversity within our party room reflects the diversity of opinion within the community. There are plenty of people within the community that think there should be no offshore processing. They're entitled to that view. Others think that there should be offshore processing because that's the only way of breaking the people-smugglers' model. And that's what we must break because we do want an orderly immigration program, and we don't want people losing their lives either on the high seas or getting smashed up against the rocks at Christmas Island. And, I think, my own view is that people accept that there be an orderly immigration program. They do know we're a nation of immigrants; they grumble from time to time, but basically

they accept that if you come through the front door that's okay, if you don't that's not okay. And, as I say, there's that second point that it is a very dangerous journey and we should not be encouraging people to take that dangerous journey at the hands of an evil trade, which is people-smuggling.

PARTON: All right. I've got to ask you, and I want to start by saying here thank you so much for actually making time to come on this program because, wow, you've got a bit on. How far away are you from jumping on the plane and flying off to Canada?

EMERSON: About an hour now, and I did go to Paris last week; didn't even stay overnight there. But that was for an incredibly important meeting as Acting Foreign Minister for this world meeting on a new Libya. So that was a great honour.

This time I'm going to a Cairns Group meeting. Australia actually established the Cairns Group meeting when I was Trade Adviser to Bob Hawke, way back in 1986. It's still going and the Cairns Group is about agricultural free trade. And what we want to do is make sure we do everything possible as a group to open up markets for our farmers, because they are very efficient but some of the markets are closed or have big barriers to them. And we want to do everything we can to keep this Doha Round of trade negotiations alive. And also, with the looming issue of food security, we want to head off any temptation on the part of countries to impose export controls on their food, which only forces food prices up.

PARTON: Craig, we'll let you catch the plane. Thanks for coming on the program this morning.

EMERSON: Thanks Mark.

PARTON: Dr Craig Emerson, the Federal Trade Minister.