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Transcript
Inside Canberra ABC Brisbane 612 radio
With Madonna King and Liberal Senator George Brandis
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Subjects: Emissions Trading Scheme, flight crash in PNG, Question Time answers, printing allowance, special talents, the EKKA.

KING: Do you know since becoming Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has talked for nearly 2000 minutes in Question Time answering 655 questions? So if you do the maths, as I think it was the Sydney Morning Herald did this week, the average time: exactly three minutes. Julia Gillard was not as succinct. She took four minutes and twenty seconds to answer each question. Wayne Swan took only two minutes and thirty seconds. How parliament operates and whether question time could be overhauled – just one of the issues we might look at this morning as we go inside the corridors of power with Rudd Government Minister Dr Craig Emerson. Good morning.

EMERSON: Hello Madonna.

KING: And Opposition frontbencher Senator George Brandis. Good morning Senator.

BRANDIS: Good morning Madonna. Good morning Craig.

EMERSON: Hello George.

KING: Just before we start Inside Canberra, I just spoke to the head of the Civil Aviation Authority in Papua New Guinea who has said that wreckage from this flight has now been found and they'll mount a rescue bid as soon as they can. Craig Emerson you're a Government Cabinet Minister. Can you just explain our Government's role here, what we'll be sending and how we'll be helping?

EMERSON: Yes. There's a number of assets being deployed Madonna, a Caribou, a C-130 with a strategic aero-medical capability, two Blackhawk helicopters and the High Commissioner to PNG has been meeting with our ministers, Kevin Rudd, Stephen Smith and other relevant ministers. I think it was 6.30 this morning. So we're doing what we can in a terrible situation, a terrible tragedy. It's obviously the worst nightmare for a family to have a loved

one missing in a foreign country in these tragic circumstances and our hearts go out to those families.

KING: Yes and we were also talking about it here this morning. And when it relates to Kokoda there's probably some kind of special significance. A lot of people go there, you know. Men your age who decide "I'm going to be fit. I'm going to maintain my health". There's young people who go there perhaps to honour someone who went before them. There's a whole lot of different reasons for going there and lots of Australians do it every year don't they? So our hearts certainly go out to them.

EMERSON: Yes. There's really I think I could say a spiritual affinity of the Australian people with Kokoda and what happened in the Second World War and people do go to honour those who paid such a terrible price during the Second World War and their bravery.

KING: All right. So stay listening to 612 ABC Brisbane throughout the day and we'll bring you more details of that rescue bid as soon as they become available. The big issue federally is carbon emissions and what model should be adopted. A vote on the Federal Government's plan is due tomorrow. That's right?

BRANDIS: That's right.

KING: Isn't it? Gentlemen?

BRANDIS: In the Senate yes.

KING: Rather than an argument here can I give you both one minute to explain exactly what you think or exactly what your party plans – without referring to the other side – that people at home can make a decision on how they would vote given the opportunity? Is that fair?

EMERSON: Sure. Yeah, I think that's a good way of going Madonna.

KING: Okay. Craig Emerson, you're the Government Minister. You have something on the table. I'll give you a minute from here.

EMERSON: It's called an emissions trading scheme and it essentially limits the total emissions of carbon that can be discharged into the atmosphere. The Government's limit is five per cent by 2020 if we don't have a binding and effective international agreement and 25 per cent if we do. Now the purpose of this is to allow different industries to change their technologies, to reduce their emissions because they have to pay for permits to emit carbon into the atmosphere. So it's obviously smarter and cheaper for them if they can change their technology so that they don't have to pay those prices per ton of carbon emitted. That's essentially it Madonna.

KING: In 45 seconds! Well the offer was a minute. So George Brandis, you get the same offer. You've been unusually quiet so far. Feeling okay?

BRANDIS: You haven't asked me any questions yet Madonna.

KING: I'm sure you'll warm up. In a minute, without just attacking what the Government is planning, can you tell us what you would prefer and why? A minute from here.

BRANDIS: Sure. The Opposition supports an emissions trading scheme. And I think Craig's description of the principle on which an emissions trading scheme works is a good description. But we would do it differently from the Government now. On Monday Malcolm Turnbull and Andrew Robb published a major study from an economic consultancy called Frontier Economics which proposes a number of important changes to the Government's model. They include providing greater protection for trade-exposed industries, changing the basis on which electricity generators' emissions are assessed, excluding agricultural emissions from the scheme, but allowing the agricultural sector to contribute to abatement and earn new revenue by allowing for the inclusion of offsets such as carbon sequestrations, sequestrations in forests. And our scheme is more ambitious because we think for a lower price we can abate by 10 per cent – not five per cent.

KING: Time's up. All right Craig Emerson, I'm giving you 40 seconds. What is wrong with what the Opposition is proposing?

EMERSON: It's not proposing an emissions trading scheme for those sectors. It's a different arrangement and it says that any emissions above a particular level will be subject to some sort of penalty or limitation. This scheme has been used in Canada and Canada is moving away from it. It is in a sense a magic pudding in that the Coalition is saying they'll achieve greater greenhouse gas reductions for less cost which obviously raises the question, the clear question, how can you have a scheme that reduces greenhouse gases more by doing less and it just doesn't pass the laugh test unfortunately.

KING: George Brandis 40 seconds. Your response?

BRANDIS: Well our response is first of all, you can in fact reduce emissions by more. Just as for example in tax policy there are many studies that suggest that by lowering a tax rate you increase collections, although that initially sounds counter-intuitive. A somewhat analogous principle applies...

EMERSON: The old Laffer curve.

BRANDIS:applies to emissions trading. Now the question I have to ask Madonna is this. We have the Government's model. We have the Opposition's model. Nobody disputes that Frontier Economics is one of the leading economic consultancies in Australia. Just as the Opposition doesn't dispute that the Treasury is the leading...

KING: Time's almost up.

BRANDIS: ... economic adviser to the Government. Why won't the Government even discuss it, where we have two competing schemes?

KING: That is a legitimate question. Craig Emerson I'm going to offer you an answer to that. Why not discuss an alternative model?

EMERSON: We've had our model developed over a very long time. There's a very clear answer to that question. It is not Coalition policy. Malcolm Turnbull was asked is this Coalition....?

KING: But does it matter?

EMERSON: Well why don't we...I think it's not a high ambition to ask the Coalition party room, the Liberals and Nationals to have an agreed position that they then put to the Government.

BRANDIS: We do.

EMERSON: It is not agreed. It is not Coalition policy.

BRANDIS: Craig ...

EMERSON: Barnaby Joyce and the Queensland Nationals and the Nationals more generally say they will not vote for an emissions trading scheme under any circumstances.

BRANDIS: Well, can I correct you Craig? You may have been present in disguise at the Coalition party room meeting yesterday....

EMERSON: I didn't need to be. Public statements, George.

BRANDIS: ...but I was actually there and what I can tell you is that the economists from Frontier Economics made a presentation to the Coalition which the Coalition adopted. Now what we have is...

EMERSON: So it is Coalition policy?

KING: George Brandis just answer Craig Emerson there. So is it Coalition policy?

BRANDIS: Well I consider it to be. It's certainly the Coalition's position.

EMERSON: Well that's news to me.

BRANDIS: And it's the position from which we will propose to the Government amendments when presumably the Government comes back with this legislation later in the year.

KING: All right. So can I ask you for the biggest point of difference you both see in each other's policies? We've now established it as a policy in that, so

that people at home can work out is this something that's a priority that our government should be legislating on and our Opposition should be passing? Or are there higher priorities and the Government should listen to what the Opposition are saying? Craig Emerson, what is the biggest point of difference between what the Government's proposing and what the opposition is proposing?

EMERSON: We have a comprehensive plan to limit emissions. The Coalition has a report which is not Coalition policy. It does not constitute an alternative.

KING: But people don't care whether policies or proposals...

EMERSON: Well it must...

KING: It's the idea. Is this report..

EMERSON: We are interested in...

BRANDIS: It's a report we've adopted. I think you're playing a semantic game.

EMERSON: I'm not playing semantics.

BRANDIS: It's a report which we have.

EMERSON: How on earth can you deal with the Coalition when one part of it says they will not have an emissions trading scheme under any circumstances. That's the Nationals. The other part says...

BRANDIS: That's not right.

EMERSON: It is exactly right.

BRANDIS: Excuse me Craig. That's not right.

EMERSON: It was reaffirmed as recently as yesterday.

BRANDIS: That's Senator Joyce's view. But the National Party in Canberra is led by Mr Truss, who's a member of the Shadow Cabinet. He's the Deputy Leader of the Coalition.

EMERSON: And I think you'll find he said yesterday ...

BRANDIS: No he did not.

EMERSON: ...they will not support an ETS.

BRANDIS: He has subscribed to this position Craig.

EMERSON: ...and said he will not support an ETS.

KING: Well I get the final say. Can I ask this of you George Brandis? In that joint party meeting after Frontiers gave the briefing did the Nationals also adopt this as the policy position for the Coalition?

BRANDIS: The party room, the joint party room, adopted the report as our position. And this matter going whether it's policy or not, it's an economic study.

KING: All right. Okay. Let's leave that there. And you at home, this is a big issue. And if you want to have your say, you can do that by calling me on 1300 222 612. You can go to my blog abc.net.au/Brisbane/radio and then click on Mornings with Madonna King too. And in the lead-up to that vote tell me whether you support the Government or the Coalition or whether you think there is an alternative that we should be discussing as a nation too. Now both of you are members of Question Time in Federal Parliament, although in different houses. It's a bit of a rabble when you see it from our point of view. Can I ask is there any time limit to how long a minister takes to answer a question now?

EMERSON: In the House of Representatives there's no standing order that prescribes a time limit.

KING: The answer would be no then.

EMERSON: Correct.

BRANDIS: But in the Senate there is a time limit.

KING: What is the time limit?

BRANDIS: Well, we have a completely different procedure. We have both questions and supplementary questions and the time limit on the primary question is two minutes. And the time limit on each of the supplementary questions is one minute.

KING: You mean on answering those questions?

BRANDIS: Answering those questions. That's right.

KING: Yes okay. Craig Emerson a study I think published in the Sydney Morning Herald of how long it takes ministers to answer the questions. I did read it said Craig Emerson didn't do very well but then didn't go on...

EMERSON: No. I was over limit, the four minute limit.

KING: How long does it take you to answer a question?

EMERSON: Well on average obviously a bit over four minutes. That, I think, but I'm not sure of this Madonna because I didn't see the basis for it. or if it

includes the points of order that are taken by the Opposition. They seem to take lots of points of order when I'm on the floor.

BRANDIS: Well you never answer the questions!

KING: The reason I'm asking is because I just say...

EMERSON: I think they like to interrupt my flow.

KING: ...how much more than four minutes do you take? Most people would have said "I don't know." But you managed to spend about four minutes answering me.

EMERSON: Oh look it's an average Madonna. I'm sorry about that. I'll give you a yes or no answer next time.

BRANDIS: Madonna.

KING: Yes.

BRANDIS: If I may say so, I think Question Time in the House of Representatives has reached a pretty low ebb in the last year or so. John Howard used to have a rule of thumb. It wasn't part of the standing orders. But he used to encourage House of Representatives to confine their answers to two minutes.

KING: For goodness sake.

BRANDIS: Sometimes they went a bit longer. But the rule of thumb was to get the answer out in two minutes and ministers who were long and verbose used to attract the Prime Minister's displeasure. Now we've seen, I think, more recently under – because Mr Rudd has a more strangulated style of speaking – these long mini-speeches being given in answer to questions. And Question Time has deteriorated. No doubt about it.

KING: I don't know if you'd call it strangulated. But this is what Kevin Rudd said yesterday. This is an exact quote. "This is an absolute rolled gold unreconstructed Liberal Party magic pudding from central casting".

EMERSON: Well that was pretty brief.

BRANDIS: I wouldn't call that strangulated so much as a set of very mixed metaphors.

KING: Well there are a few different mixed metaphors there. But when you're on your feet and you're asked a question obviously you don't have time to sit down and prepare it. Let's just move on.

BRANDIS: Well you do as a matter of fact. What ministers do and I remember this when I was a minister and it's a very good discipline....

KING: You were slow to get started but you're definitely making up for it now.

EMERSON: He's on fire.

BRANDIS:you get across your brief. The ministers have briefing books in Question Time covering the whole range of their portfolio and they study them. And after you've been a minister for a little while you should really not have to rely very heavily on those briefing books because you should know your department and the Government's policy.

EMERSON: If only I could get a question from my Opposition Shadow Small Business Minister.

KING: All right. I am moving right on now. And this is one that was reported this morning. Accusations in one of the newspapers that federal politicians are rorting millions of dollars in taxpayer funded entitlements. Apparently uncovered by the Auditor-General, this printing allowance has been misused. It follows an audit of 144 MPs and Senators from New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland and allegedly has found a high proportion had breached entitlement guidelines by using it for partisan material. What is a printing allowance and what is it allowed to be used for?

EMERSON: A printing allowance is an amount that is allocated for the production of documents in your local electorate to alert your constituents to what you're doing in Parliament, to provide information, to provide support for them. It used to be unlimited.

KING: So non-election non-political material.

EMERSON: It doesn't really say that.

BRANDIS: It doesn't say that at all.

EMERSON: The guidelines that I've seen say that the allowance can be used for the re-election of the member. That's the guidelines I've seen.

BRANDIS: Can I also come in on this, Madonna. We are politicians. We are elected to parliament to be partisans for the political party the people in our electorate vote for. Now, you know, the suggestion that a member of parliament is doing something wrong by being political is a nonsense.

KING: Even if the Auditor-General says it? I'm only going on....

BRANDIS: Well the Auditor-General didn't say that. The Auditor-General reviewed I think the particular sample was electorate newsletters which we all produce...

KING: Yes.

BRANDIS: ...that contain a variety of material. But in my case I regard it as a report on my activities as a Senator. There's no party badging on it. It's just a report from me. It contains extracts of parliamentary speeches.

KING: But is it political?

BRANDIS: Well it's political in the sense that, for example, one of the things in my electorate newsletter is a report on what I do as Shadow Attorney-General where the Opposition has a different policy in areas in which the Attorney-General's portfolio from the Government. Then it will contain my comments and criticisms of the Government's policies and the alternative point of views of the Opposition. Now you can say that's political but that's my job.

KING: And both of you believe you've done it by the book?

BRANDIS: Well I got a letter of clearance from the Auditor-General in relation to mine. So I'm...

KING: Craig Emerson you've got that letter of clearance on you?

EMERSON: No I don't have a letter of clearance or otherwise on me. I believe always that I've abided by the proper standards. I think George's point is right. I'll give an example so that you...

KING: A brief one because I want to get through a few other things. In two minutes.

EMERSON: Yeah sure. Let's say there's a debate about whether the Coalition's Work Choices plan is the right plan for Australia. And Labor says no and the Coalition says yes. Is it improper, is it wrong to put that information in front of people, in your electorate?

KING: Okay. Maybe people at home want to answer that this morning. Now really quick answers please. Warnings this morning that predictive text messaging changes the way children's brains work. I wonder do either of you text on the phone?

EMERSON: I do and I use predictive text messaging.

KING: Senator George Brandis do you text?

BRANDIS: I do a bit but I'm a little bit technophobic myself. I'm a late uptake sort of guy when it comes to technology.

EMERSON: There's hope for you yet George.

KING: What about a twitter account? Yes or no? I don't want a commentary.

BRANDIS: No.

EMERSON: No.

KING: Have either of you got a twitter account?

EMERSON: No.

BRANDIS: Definitely not.

KING: You've both got a personal...see, you can't say no. You say "definitely not". This is the problem with polly-speak.

EMERSON: I promised I'd say no.

BRANDIS: I agree with what David Cameron, the British Opposition Leader, said about Twitter. I think the idea that you can send meaningful messages to people about political events is a nonsense.

KING: Okay. What about a private email account. Do either of you have that?

EMERSON: I think I do but I can't find it.

KING: All right. It's like my phone in my handbag. What about you George Brandis?

BRANDIS: Yes I do.

KING: You see this increase in the popularity of skills-based TV rather than the type that denigrates people. You know, that Master Chef celebrated amateur cooks, I think there's You Think You Can Dance - things people are personally good at. Given that neither of you proclaim to be a technical whiz, what is something that you're really good at that we mightn't know about?

(silence)

KING: And then there was silence.

EMERSON: A stony silence. Well you'll only let me answer with one sentence.

KING: No. You can have a sentence.

EMERSON: Okay. Guitar.

KING: You're good at the guitar. Next time you're in Brisbane will you bring it in?

EMERSON: I will.

KING: And George Brandis something that you're good at that we may not know about?

BRANDIS: My recreation tend to be a bit more passive like reading and listening to music so I...

KING: You can't say you're good at reading.

EMERSON: He's a speed reader.

BRANDIS: I'm not. I'm not saying that at all.

KING: Can you sing?

BRANDIS: My recreations are somewhat more passive. Oh only when I've had a few too many.

KING: Well maybe we can give you a few too many next time you're in and you can sing along to Craig Emerson's guitar.

EMERSON: All the old songs.

BRANDIS: (laughs)

KING: Last thing before you go. It's an Ekka Show Day in Brisbane. Your favourite thing last time you visited the Ekka. What was it?

EMERSON: I think it was eating those Dagwood dogs, battered savs and Pluto pups. I'm now Consumer Affairs Minister so I'll have to have a good look at them.

BRANDIS: Careful of that.

KING: How many years ago was that Craig Emerson?

EMERSON: Not many I can tell you and I love them.

KING: And what about you George Brandis, when did you last go to the Ekka?

BRANDIS: About three or four years ago I'd say. I've always had a peculiar and rather nerdish fascination for those agricultural exhibits. All of the tomatoes and...

EMERSON: The big bulls.

BRANDIS: No, no, no. All the produce, the tomatoes, the oranges and the bananas are displayed in these...

EMERSON: True confessions.

BRANDIS: ...miracle patterns.

EMERSON: I do too. True confessions. It's all coming out Madonna.

KING: Do you know, with respect Senator, I can imagine you at these displays probably easier than I can imagine you at sideshow alley.

BRANDIS: Oh no. I used to take the kids when the kids were small enough sideshow alley and had a great time.

KING: All right. Good on you and we look forward to talking to you both next week.

BRANDIS: Thanks Madonna.

EMERSON: Righto Madonna thanks.

KING: Dr Craig Emerson, Small Business Minister in the Rudd Government and Opposition Attorney-General Senator George Brandis. Inside Canberra, back at the same time next week.

Ends.