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Interview by Madonna King with Minister Craig Emerson and Senator George Brandis

Subjects: Women serving on the frontline, Printing Allowance & Senator Steve Fielding.

KING: Just going on our previous caller, what do you think of this '*women should be able to serve in all frontline combat units*'. Is there a difference between a 16 year old girl and a 17 year old boy circumnavigating the globe? Do you think women should be able to serve in all frontline combat units? That's the suggestion being put by the Federal Government this morning and it will be interesting to see what Dr Craig Emerson and Senator George Brandis have to say. Along with their printing allowance which was certainly slashed yesterday. Many MP's not happy about that. Just a couple of issues we'll talk about we travel '*Inside Canberra*' and also on Senator Steve Fielding should our politicians represent us and all our failings? Or should they lead us, be more intelligent than the rest of us?

Rudd Government Minister Craig Emerson good morning.

EMERSON: Hello Madonna.

KING: And Opposition Attorney General Senator George Brandis good morning to you too.

BRANDIS: Good morning Madonna, morning Craig.

EMERSON: Hello George.

KING: We'll get to Senator Steve Fielding in just a moment because we have had a massive reaction to that this morning. But first to women in the frontline. Defence Personnel Minister Greg Combet is raising the idea that women should be able to serve in all frontline combat units, and that actually includes the SAS and Commando Units. This might actually solve the recruitment process. Agree or disagree?

EMERSON: I agree. That's a personal view Madonna, from Craig. The test would be based on physical capacity and obviously some women might not be suited, as some men are not suited, to serve in the frontline, but you know there are plenty of strong women around who prefer that kind of lifestyle. If I could just give you an example of visiting a plumbing apprenticeship traineeship course out at Salisbury. Ten of the 27 apprentice plumbers were women and they were pretty well built women and they have to cart around enormously heavy plumbing equipment. It's just an example of the fact that lots of women do prefer that kind of lifestyle. The difference would be about their physical capacity rather than about whether they are women or men.

KING: All right, there is a bit of a difference between a plumber and being a member of the SAS.

EMERSON: Well indeed there is and not all plumbers would be members of the SAS, whether they are blokes or women. The point is just the physical strength ...

KING: Not gender.

EMERSON: These are strong young women and not gender, so if they are up to it I reckon it's worth giving it a go.

KING: Senator George Brandis, agree with Craig Emerson there, or do you see a difference between males and females on the frontline?

BRANDIS: I think the test has got to be, as Craig says, that the capacity, including the physical strength and capacity to do the job. But there's another distinction that I think is being missed here Madonna, and as we are running together the idea of combat positions and frontline positions. Now not all frontline positions are combat positions, and let me give you an example; at Tarin Kowt, the intelligence, the Australian military intelligence operation, which is a front line operation, is being run by a woman and there are a number of frontline military activities which don't actually involve, as it were, hand to hand combat, which at the moment are in the hands of women.

KING: So this would open it up to combat. Do you support women in frontline combat roles?

BRANDIS: Well I think there are some roles, particularly in relation to physical combat, where ultimately physical strength is going to be the discriminating factor and that are not suitable for women, but not all of them. Let me give you another example you would regard the piloting of a fighter for example as a combat role. Now I don't see any reason why women wouldn't be suitable for a combat position like that, but there are other combat roles for example in the sort of activity the SAS engage in which of their very nature because, they depend on overbearing physical strength, may not be suitable for women, ordinarily at least.

EMERSON: I guess that's where we have a slight difference, I think if they're physically capable, whether they're men or women they should be considered for combat roles.

KING: You might have a view at home too, if you do 1300 222 612. Do women want it all, to be treated equals and then not have these roles open to them? Do you think it should be based on strength? Or have some role for gender there as well. Dr Craig Emerson, Senator George Brandis you've had your printing allowance pegged back a little bit. The Government announced yesterday it would slash many of the entitlements from next month: printing allowance from \$100,000 to \$75,000 a year; banning printing 'how to vote cards'; capping MP's spending on printer toner and paper at \$35,000 a year and publishing the names of journals and magazines to which MPs subscribe at public expense. Is Kevin Rudd being too reactive here George Brandis?

BRANDIS: Well the Government and the Opposition have both said yesterday that we welcome the clarification of these matters by the Auditor General's report. Let me make this point to you and the listeners Madonna, Members of Parliament are always at risk of being accused of doing the wrong thing with entitlements, when in fact 99 per cent of colleagues - both Labor and Liberal - I know are very, very conscientious and concerned not to do the wrong thing. So we always welcome further clarification of the definition of what is in and what is out.

KING: That hasn't really answered my question though.

BRANDIS: Well I think I answered it at the start when I said the Opposition and the Government accept the Auditor General's recommendations.

KING: All right and Dr Craig Emerson presumably you do support the Government move there, so can I go onto this next issue, this is this big spending that's going to schools around Australia. All sorts of schools are getting hundreds of thousands of dollars, but the principal of a one student outback school was granted \$250,000 to build a new library, and that principal - according to *The Australian* this morning - didn't even apply for the grant. The acting principal said she never applied for the funding and it would be ridiculous to build a new library at a school should it close. It's got one student in it. Dr Craig Emerson, has this not been thought through properly?

EMERSON: Well the stimulus package itself is proving very effective in supporting tradies, supporting jobs at a very vulnerable time for the economy.

KING: Certainly if they are building a library for one student.

EMERSON: But I'll go now specifically now to the question, I just wanted to say that out the outset. The advice that we've had from Education Queensland is that there are discussions about amalgamation of this school with another school. Obviously in those circumstances you would build one set of buildings in the amalgamated school or refurbish the buildings in that school. So I think that's the best way of answering it. Obviously there are

some things that we would ... there's room for improvement there's no doubt about that. Kevin Rudd, Julia Gillard have said that, but the alternative is to do it much more slowly, or not do it at all, which in this case a lot of tradies in our community would be at grave risk of being unemployed.

KING: Yes, but I'm wondering ...

EMERSON: I'm very happy to support ...

KING: But I'm wondering what the criteria here is, how do you decide whether a school deserves \$250,000 of taxpayer's money?

EMERSON: Well under the School Pride Program that's part of this, all schools, at least primary schools, are getting \$200,000 to do various refurbishments. Then there is the libraries and community halls component as well. So an element of all of it is available to all schools and I would add to that Madonna not only government schools but non-government schools as well.

BRANDIS: Can I make an observation about this Madonna. I think that most people are feeling a little bit sorry for my friend Craig here having to defend a series of fiascos, but I think the Building the Education Revolution that the delivery has become a real fiasco. Let me give you another example. There is a report in *The Australian* this morning about a school in Abbotsford in western Sydney in which the school didn't want a particular grant to build a classroom block. They had an existing classroom block that they were perfectly satisfied with, but they were told you have to tear down the existing classroom block that you're perfectly happy with so as to build a new one because it's only if there is new building work going that the Labor Government can put up signs celebrating itself and celebrating the 'Julia Gillard Memorial School Projects'. Now this is the modus of directing economic stimulus money to school building programs may have been an appropriate motive, but the manner in which it has been done, the top down manner in which school communities have not been able to tell them what they want but they have been told by the Government what they will have and the projects are then being used as an opportunity for self advertisement by the Labor Party, now found to be illegal by the way by the Australian Electoral Commission, is disgraceful.

KING: Craig Emerson?

EMERSON: In many cases school communities have actually asked for variations and have received those variations. We don't for one moment resile from the importance of this economic stimulus. Treasury estimates are that 200,000 more Australians would be out of work. That is a very serious number, and the social consequences of that are enormous. Now of course there will be some bumps associated with the delivery of this program. The alternative is to do what Malcolm Turnbull is suggesting which is to withdraw the stimulus. Thirteen national and international organisations have come out

flatly opposing Malcolm Turnbull's plan to withdraw the stimulus because of the severe consequences for our small businesses and jobs.

KING: But Craig Emerson it's not a matter of withdrawing the stimulus is it? It's targeting it to schools in need. Is there any use employing a whole lot of tradies to build a new library just so that they have work and knock down a worthwhile library in the process?

EMERSON: I can recount this Madonna. Christopher Pyne has raised in Parliament many examples of what he has claimed to be problems and when they've been investigated they have not been problems or he's misrepresented the situation.

BRANDIS: Well that's just not right, that's not right, Christopher ...

EMERSON: ... sits in the House of Representatives and he does it time and time again.

BRANDIS: ... and I sit in the Senate and the Senate spokesman on Education, Senator Brett Mason, raises in the Senate every question time too and all of these examples stack up. There is example after example.

EMERSON: Time and time they have fallen to the ground.

BRANDIS: There are example after example.

KING: All right I might come in here because certainly this acting principal is saying to *The Australian* this morning she thinks it's ridiculous to build a new library at a school that's going to close and has one student. Craig Emerson?

EMERSON: And that's why I say the information we have from Education Queensland is that there is discussion going on about amalgamation that is obviously with another school and that the funds would be transferred to ensure the building will occur at a school with a viable school population.

KING: All right can we move on to our last topic and I feel this is one our listeners will strong views on either way and I guess is connected to education. Senator Steve Fielding admitted yesterday he only got 29 per cent for English in high school and he suffered learning difficulties. This was raised after he called 'fiscal' policy, 'physical' policy three times, and then spelled fiscal 'f-i-s-k-a-l'. Were either of you aware of his learning difficulty?

BRANDIS: Well I sit with Steve Fielding in the Senate, and no, I wasn't and it's not evident in his contributions in the Chamber which are always - in my view, whether you agree with them or not - are very articulate.

KING: So Craig Emerson?

EMERSON: No I'm not either. I was actually playing touch footy with Steve when he came off the field and did that interview yesterday. He might have

been a bit exhausted from running around, and he scored a slashing try this morning I must report Madonna, so I think we might see him on telly again tonight.

KING: Are you saying there that this was a bit of a publicity stunt?

EMERSON: No, not at all. I'm saying that it's just coincidental that we were playing touch football yesterday and this morning.

KING: So do you think the role of a politician is to represent us and therefore we have politicians who are dyslexic and politicians who have perhaps mental challenges, politicians with learning difficulties and they reflect the population at large? Or are our politicians supposed to be our leaders, to be intelligent, to navigate that policy and work out what is the best for us?

BRANDIS: Well first of all let's get back to basics here. It's the public who chooses the politicians and there are 226 members, for example of the two houses of the Commonwealth Parliament, and from all over the country and in that 226 you are going to get a cross section. But you know there have been some successful and very senior Australian politicians who have, for example, had dyslexia. I believe it was something that Paul Keating suffered from and it was said of him - this has been written about in biographies - that Paul Keating didn't like being briefed by documents. He liked being briefed orally because that was the way he was better able to pick up information. But that doesn't of course reflect on his intelligence or his articulateness of course. I mean there are very few more intelligent or articulate people than Paul Keating.

EMERSON: Yes, I don't know if that's the reason, but I can confirm that as someone who worked in the Hawke Government that Paul would rather stand around in his office and discuss an issue rather than get whole lots of bits of paper put in front of him. Could I add Ben Chifley was a locomotive train driver, Mick Young was a shearer. Look we could spend another half hour going through the enormous diversity of the politicians here.

KING: Can I pull you up there on a locomotive train driver, my father was one. My father-in-law was one. Are you suggesting that locomotive train drivers are not bright?

EMERSON: Quite the opposite. I'm suggesting quite the opposite, I'm suggesting they were both very successful politicians. I don't know your dad but he's produced a very fine daughter ...

KING: (Laughing)

EMERSON: ... but the point I'm making is though a fine politician represented not only their constituents very well, but did this country proud and would not have claimed a very high level of education. And I think Paul Keating left school when he was 14.

BRANDIS: I think that's right and other example that comes to mind is a person who is immensely admired by both sides of politics is Tim Fischer.

EMERSON: That's true.

BRANDIS: Who had a reading difficulty. So I think we should never assume that because somebody has a form of learning difficulty that they're not highly intelligent, because they may well be.

KING: And he has an engineering degree. Does he have any other degree that you're aware of?

EMERSON: Who's this, Steve or Tim Fischer?

KING: Steve Fielding.

EMERSON: No, not that I know of. I mean I get on very well with Steve and I agree with George, we have different views of policy from time to time. He's got a lot of passion in what he says and I think he makes a valuable contribution to the Senate. Sometimes we get very frustrated but that's the nature of the Senate.

KING: So accolades to him for coming out and admitting he got 29 per cent in English, and it's something we can tell our kids that they can actually make the dizzy heights of Parliament because someone like Steve Fielding did too. Is that the take out?

EMERSON: Yes I think so, but I would add this that I do think kids should put a lot of effort into learning to spell, so I'm moving on from the Steve Fielding issue now. My own view is that spelling by the younger generation of kids is not up to scratch and I'd like to see it improved. It's a view I've had for a long time.

BRANDIS: I agree with that. Nothing annoys me more than seeing documents, particularly sometimes documents written by public servants. Occasionally I'm pained to say Madonna newspaper reports written by journalists in which there are misspellings or grammatical infallisitudes.

KING: Oh?

EMERSON: Yes they call me 'Dr Grammar' in the Department, but so be it. I just think that people should make the effort. And frankly, sometimes it's not the kids' fault. I'll say something more provocative again, and that it's often the teachers who don't know how to spell and that then is passed onto the kids.

KING: Ah, ah.

BRANDIS: Which is infuriating.

KING: So you actually agree on that, that teachers need to carry a bit of this blame?

EMERSON: Not all obviously. Well, I think if teachers aren't taught to spell at school themselves then they are hardly likely to pick it up in their 20s at university and then that gets passed onto the next generation.

BRANDIS: This raises a broader issue too Madonna, and I don't claim, nor do I think does Craig claim to be an education expert, but I notice a year or two ago David Malouf, the very respected Australian author, said something about lamenting the decline of rote learning. Now for years now rote learning has been regarded as an almost medieval practice by modern educational theory and it's all about understanding and seeing the meta-narrative and all this nonsense. There is I think a very, very strong benefit for kids, particularly in the primary school, who actually are made to learn - spelling's the best example - who are made to learn in that more traditional orthodox tables and the times tables too.

KING: All right we need to leave it there gentlemen, six times seven what is it?

EMERSON: 42

BRANDIS: I agree

KING: Eight, eights?

EMERSON: And that's the answer to life, the universe and everything by the way.

KING: (Laughing) All right Craig Emerson, George Brandis, good to talk to you. Catch up with you next week.

EMERSON & BRANDIS: Thank you Madonna good bye.

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