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Transcript
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ABC 612 with Madonna King
Interviewees: Dr Craig Emerson, Senator George Brandis

Subjects: Double dissolution, voting age, War Memorial sponsorship, Dennis
Ferguson, ABC book competition.

KING: Eleven minutes past nine. Now from an early election to whether 16 year olds should be given the right to vote, from sponsorship of the War Memorial's last post ceremony to swearing at your colleagues. It's time we travel down the corridors of power with Dr Craig Emerson a Minister in the Rudd Government, good morning Doctor.

EMERSON: Good morning Madonna from the red heart of Sydney.

KING: And we'll come to that in a moment. Opposition frontbencher Senator George Brandis. Good morning and welcome.

BRANDIS: Morning Madonna, morning Craig.

EMERSON: Hello George.

KING: Now Dr Craig Emerson how bad is this dust in Sydney?

EMERSON: Visibility here is down to about three metres I reckon. It's pretty dark. Look it's not eerie but it's one of the stranger experiences I've had. I actually come from the bush and I haven't seen it as thick as this out in North West New South Wales.

KING: And Senator George Brandis you've just driven across Brisbane, there's a haze developing across Brisbane too.

BRANDIS: Yeah it's a bit hazy though nothing like that of course.

KING: Both of you seem to be struggling with a cold is that right?

EMERSON: I think it's the dust.

BRANDIS: No, I've got a touch of the flu Madonna I'm sorry to say.

KING: All right, well I don't want you kissing me or sharing my coffee cup or anything else.

BRANDIS: No I won't.

EMERSON: I'll tell on you two.

KING: Craig Emerson are you threatening an early election or is this a master ploy? Is there any chance we'll be going to an election in a matter of months? Yes or no?

EMERSON: You won't see Labor MP's arguing about an early election and it was made clear yesterday by some of our senior MPs, Ministers in New York. We're not seeking an early election. There is talk about it. A fair bit of it's coming from the Coalition. Some is coming from commentary. We can't really stop that. What we want to do is get this legislation through Parliament. That's what we're trying to do.

KING: But are you prepared to go to an early election to get it through?

EMERSON: Well again this is not in our contemplation, this is not what we're planning. We're trying to get the legislation through.

KING: But are you prepared, the question is are you prepared to go to an early election in a bid to get this through?

EMERSON: I can't say anything more than I have. We are not threatening it, we are not contemplating it, and what we are trying to do is get this legislation through.

KING: Senator George Brandis do you think the public could turn against the Coalition if they were forced into the position of going back to the polls in a matter of months and they turn the blame for that onto the Coalition?

BRANDIS: Well if there were to be an early election it would have nothing to do with the Coalition. Whether or not there's an election is entirely, entirely the decision of the Government and there is no case whatsoever for the Rudd Government not seeing out the term for which it was elected.

KING: But if you supported what they're putting up there wouldn't be any chance of an early election?

BRANDIS: Well we don't know that. I mean Mr Rudd has been kind of raising, or letting others in his name fly this kite for weeks on end. It's having a bad effect on business. There is concern about it, particularly in the business community and more generally. Rudd has said in a kind of weasily way, well basically what Craig said you know I'm not contemplating it but nevertheless

letting the story run. There is no case or justification whatsoever for the Government not seeing out the term for which it was elected.

EMERSON: The story ran yesterday morning in the newspapers Madonna and both Penny Wong and Steven Smith as senior Ministers in New York said we are not contemplating an early election so we are not letting it run but we do need this legislation through. Penny Wong has written to Malcolm Turnbull and said come on, come to the negotiating table, tell us what your amendments are. We're still waiting and meanwhile the clock is ticking, we'll be waiting for a very long time.

BRANDIS: Well hang on a second Craig. Craig if you needed this legislation through so urgently why didn't you bring it back last week? The fact that you are delaying it for three months can only be because you are behaving strategically to set up a double dissolution trigger. There is no necessity for a three month delay for any reason other than that.

EMERSON: If we brought it back in a week's time you would pass it? Are you saying you would pass it if we brought it back in a week's time?

BRANDIS: The Liberal Party is prepared to consider the legislation if you're prepared to consider the amendments we are proposing to improve it.

EMERSON: Well we can't consider until we've seen them and if we brought them back as you just suggested in a week you would've voted them down.

KING: All right well let me ask you both this. Are you there Dr Craig Emerson?

EMERSON: Yes I am.

KING: What changes this impasse? Where to from here?

EMERSON: Well Penny Wong has written to Malcolm Turnbull overnight and said come on, the door is open, come forward with your amendments ...

KING: Yes we know that.

EMERSON: Well what changes it is if Malcolm Turnbull responds positively to it.

KING: And if he doesn't?

EMERSON: The Coalition has said they're going to vote it down.

KING: Yes, so if he doesn't change his mind. If that continues where to from here?

EMERSON: I think we'll just have to resubmit it, that's what we're saying. But I am going now from public statements from Coalition Shadow Ministers who

are saying they will contemplate amendments. Okay, let's see the amendments. Penny Wong has given a reasonable period of time for those amendments to be brought forward. They need to go through the Coalition party room because it is badly split on this, within the Liberal Party and between the Liberal Party and the National Party, that's not my problem.

KING: All right, Senator George Brandis?

BRANDIS: All right let me just put to rest this argument that the Coalition party room is badly split on this. We know that the National Party takes a different view but I'm just concentrating on the Liberal Party. There is a small, voluble, but small minority of people in the Liberal Party room who take a similar view to the National party that they won't wear an ETS at any price. They are a small minority and there is nothing wrong with the Liberal Party having a vigorous internal discussion about this. The problem with you Craig is in your party you're not allowed to have a vigorous internal discussion about any issue.

KING: All right, before I go back to Dr Craig Emerson you say look I'll just talk to the Liberal Party but you can't. You're a senior member of the Opposition, you're an Opposition frontbencher so whether it's the Nationals voting against it whether it's a couple, it is a split in the Coalition.

BRANDIS: The National Party senators, through their leader Senator Joyce, have made it quite clear that they take a different position from the rest of the Coalition.

KING: So doesn't that put Malcolm Turnbull in a terrible position? How can he come up with an agreed Coalition position?

BRANDIS: Well like all decisions, I mean there are about 60 or 70 people in the Opposition party room, most of them Liberals and there are about 15 Nationals. Now in any group of 60 or 70 people, particularly when you're discussing a complex issue, there's going to be a range of views. So what do you do? You take the majority view. In this case the majority is a very clear majority so this argument that Senator Wong has been running that we can't negotiate with the Opposition because there are different views is a nonsense argument.

EMERSON: We're just waiting for the amendments.

BRANDIS: Is a nonsense argument. Malcolm Turnbull speaks for the Opposition. Not those who want to go their own way and are a small minority within it.

KING: A final brief comment on this Dr Craig Emerson?

EMERSON: Wilson Tuckey says the majority of the Liberal Party is opposed. Now I accept that George may be right and Wilson Tuckey may be wrong, it's happened before. So what we're doing is waiting for the amendments but Ian

Macfarlane just yesterday said that the Coalition, including obviously the Liberal Party, will not contemplate anything that looks anything like the current Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme so if they put up amendments which say delete all words after 'This bill', that is not a constructive one.

BRANDIS: I think you can be reasonably confident that the amendments we propose will be substantive but the trivial example that you've given Craig, you can be reasonably confident that the amendments won't be of that character.

KING: Last question to Senator George Brandis and I then want to go on to whether we should be allowed to vote at the age of 16 but Senator George Brandis, take politics away from this, take, just forget the job you currently have. Out there in the community do you think most people support this emissions trading scheme or do you think people believe it will lead to the loss of jobs and should be fought against?

BRANDIS: Well there's pretty clear evidence what most people believe, it was in the Newspoll yesterday, 67 per cent of people believe in an emissions trading system in some form and 22 per cent of people are against it. But within the clear majority of people who want an emissions trading scheme, what they want is the right emissions trading scheme, the best emissions trading scheme which is what the Liberal Party is trying to achieve for them.

KING: It reminds me a little bit Craig Emerson of the republic debate, it's about the question that's asked. You know, maybe the majority of Queenslanders or Australians would support a republic but it fell because of the way the question was phrased.

EMERSON: I'm not sure about that in relation to the republic. My own guess is that if a different question was asked the same answer would be given, but they do, they do, to pick up George's point the voting population do want to see a negotiation. I think that's fair enough. So let's do it.

BRANDIS: Good.

KING: All right, so we've solved that one, let's move onto the next one. A Federal Government discussion paper is going to be released today and it raised this prospect of lowering the voting age to 16. Now given teenagers that age can seek a driving license, they're legally entitled to have sex, many of them are in the workforce full time, why shouldn't they be able to vote at the age of 16? George Brandis first.

BRANDIS: Well the Coalition doesn't favour lowering the voting age and there are two problems with this proposal from our point of view. First of all, every society has to define when adulthood commences and in a sense it's going to be an arbitrary age. It used to be 21, now it's 18 but I'm reasonably comfortable that 18 is as good a definition as any of when adulthood commences and I think the right and the obligation of civic participation through elections is a function of adulthood. Now just quickly the other

problem we have with the proposal as we understand it is it proposes that for 16 and 17 year olds voting would be voluntary. Now you can't really have two classes of elections. Those who are obliged compulsorily to vote and those who vote voluntarily I think that would distort the system. So that's another problem we have.

KING: That makes sense doesn't it Dr Craig Emerson? You can't have some voters voluntary voters and others compulsorily?

EMERSON: Personally I'm not a fan of lowering the voting age. That's not a Government position. I don't think there is a Government position. It's a green paper that came out of this particular question Madonna, came out of the 2020 Summit.

KING: And do you ...

EMERSON: We gave an undertaking to put it up. Let's have a community discussion. My personal view, don't change it.

KING: And your personal view, is that along the lines that Senator George Brandis just articulated?

EMERSON: I think so and also, people have all of their adult lives to vote from 18 right through to when they finally fall off the perch. But honestly to say that we now want 16 year olds to immerse themselves, or at least familiarise themselves with the politics of the nation, I think is a bit of an early call on them.

KING: All right what about, and you at home might have a view on that, if you do you can give me a call 1300 22612 or go to my blog abc.net.au/Brisbane/radio and then click on Mornings with Madonna King. What about long term ex-pats? If someone's lived out of the country for years and years should they still be entitled to vote on issues here Craig Emerson?

EMERSON: I think so. Ex-pats, are very, you know not usually in a position where they say they'll never come back to Australia. They're still Australian citizens. I think if they lose their citizenship they can't vote, I'm sure of that. But if they're still Australian citizens and they work in London for seven years or nine years but intend to come back I don't see any problem with that.

KING: George Brandis?

BRANDIS: I'm satisfied with the current arrangements. The current system is that if you're out of the country for more than six years then you're culled from the electoral roll. I think that's fair enough. I don't think people should lose their rights merely because they go overseas for a long period of time but after six years I think you can really treat those people as having resettled in another country.

KING: Lots of issues to get through, it's yes or no on this. Do you favour identification, photo identification when you go to vote?

BRANDIS: Yes, I absolutely do and I was part of the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters that issued a report a few years ago.

KING: It was a yes or no.

EMERSON: I'm a no.

BRANDIS: Yes. It's ridiculous that one of the most important things you can do in our community, that is, exercise the right to vote - at the moment you require less identification than you do to hire a video.

KING: All right well let's go to the next one. And Craig Emerson you were able to give a yes or no on the last one so I'll start with you in the hope you've started a precedent. Are things that tough financially that now we're seeking sponsorship of the War Memorial's last post ceremony. Is there any merit in having sponsorship of things to do with the War Memorial?

EMERSON: No. In this respect. The last post I think is a very solemn occasion. If they want to sponsor a particular display and do and it helps in their presentation I don't have a problem with that. In fact there's dozens of sponsors now, dozens of them. But I just cannot come at the idea of a company sponsoring the playing of the last post each evening.

KING: All right well let me go straight to George Brandis yes or no?

BRANDIS: Yes I think it's an appalling situation that's been allowed to develop.

KING: All right so an agreement on that. Craig Emerson your boss has been applauded by some and criticized by others for the language he's used to some of his colleagues. Have you ever had one of Kevin Rudd's dressing downs?

EMERSON: Yes.

KING: All right. No you don't get to do a yes or no. More details ...

Laughter

EMERSON: You told me just to give a one word answer. You've got to be consistent Madonna.

KING: So what did you get a dressing down over?

EMERSON: Oh I can't remember. Kevin has - and I think he is not Robinson Crusoe, Napoleon Solo or the Lone Ranger here - sometimes he swears.

KING: But was it scary?

EMERSON: No.

KING: Did you give it back to him?

EMERSON: No I didn't.

KING: Tell me why.

EMERSON: I have an interest in my career. I'm just being humorous here. Look Kevin sometimes gets a bit robust, surprise surprise, so does Julia Gillard, I've heard I think just about, not all, but most frontbenchers sort of share their views.

KING: Use the f-word?

EMERSON: Ah well, I won't go into the details of the adjectives that are being used but colourful yes, robust yes.

BRANDIS: Well I tell you who wouldn't have behaved like that and that's John Howard and I can't think of any other ...

KING: What about Malcolm Turnbull?

BRANDIS: Um no, I don't think so. The issue here Madonna, I mean, we can make light of but it's a deeper issue beyond the swearing most blokes swear at some stage or another. But the issue here is not swearing, the issue is bullying. And Kevin Rudd I'm sorry to say ...

KING: They're pretty tough, they're politicians.

BRANDIS: No hang on, hear me out. Kevin Rudd I'm sorry to say, has form when it comes to bullying women. He bullied so as to reduce to tears the RAAF hostess because she served the wrong meal that didn't meet his dietary preference. Three of the seven participants according to Glenn Milne's report in this meeting in the Prime Minister's office were female politicians.

KING: But four of them were men so aren't you being discriminatory there saying it's directed at women?

BRANDIS: Maybe I'm old fashioned Madonna, but I don't think that men, particularly men in a powerful position should scream foul abuse at women in the workplace.

EMERSON: He didn't. He was abusing, he was expressing a very clear and colourful view to a bloke, Senator David Feeney according to the news reports and I know David Feeney and he can take it, and so can the women.

KING: All right well let's move on. I want a brief answer to this but it's a question and it's a vexed problem that no-one seems to have an answer for. The NSW Government this morning has announced it's going to introduce special legislation to allow it to evict the convicted paedophile Dennis Ferguson. What do you do with someone like him? He's got to live somewhere in Australia? George Brandis.

BRANDIS: I think you've put your finger on the problem. The difficulty here is that this guy has served his sentence, he's out in the community, but he remains a present risk and I think special arrangements do have to be made to keep an eye on people like this and in Victoria I think the State Government has built a sort of half way house that isn't a prison but nevertheless it suits...

KING: Even though after their sentence?

BRANDIS: Well this is the problem and it's not a problem by the way that just arises in relation to sex offenders it's also a problem that arises in relation to terrorism where people, you know, you have, you can be reasonably certain that there is a likelihood that these people will reoffend. Now our criminal law is based on punishing people for crimes they have committed but there are some categories of people who are imminently about to commit dangerous acts to damage the community and we have to deal with that.

KING: Craig Emerson briefly do you agree with George Brandis.

EMERSON: Yeah look I do. I think George put it well and the defining feature of this is that there is a risk of reoffending. Now no one can quantify that but I don't think any authority wants to take the chance. Look I think, you will recall Madonna that Dennis Ferguson was out on a property in Logan City ...

KING: Yeah, we all know his background yep.

EMERSON: But the point is this is not the first time. He's been located and then relocated time and time again out of Queensland, now into NSW. I think the idea of just relocating using the same formula is not going to work so maybe some sort of special facility as George is talking about.

KING: And just quickly to Craig Emerson to you first. You can win 50 books, a library of 50 books this Friday by captioning a photo on our blog. It's got you talking to George Brandis. Dr Karl in the middle. What caption would you put on that photo?

EMERSON: Well the background would be something like, apparently there's a lot more energy in the universe than people have calculated before so I could be saying to George, 'George it turns out that E equals mc^2 squared multiplied by your mother's age'.

KING: And George Brandis.

BRANDIS: Well in that photograph Craig and I are very volubly disputing with each other and Dr Karl is sitting there with an almost saintly look on his face so I would say pick the one who's not the politician.

KING: Yes you could do that easily. Dr Craig Emerson thank you.

EMERSON: Okay thanks Madonna. Thanks George.

KING: And George Brandis I thought your entry into our novel competition, yesterday, last week, was quite a stand out. I was surprised you didn't actually win at the end of the day.

BRANDIS: Well I was disappointed myself.

KING: Well I don't know if it's a compliment or not perhaps I'm thinking your writing skills are better than your political skills.

BRANDIS: Perhaps they are.

KING: Perhaps they are. Thank you we look forward to talking to you both next week.

BRANDIS: Thanks Craig.

KING: That's Senator George Brandis and Dr Craig Emerson and they'll be back with us at the same time next week. The photo of Dr Emerson and Senator Brandis is on our blog, gesticulating and talking to each other in the middle Dr Karl is sitting and you need to write a caption on that page and write a caption, and either put it on the blog or call me this morning and give it to me after 10 this morning and if you do you could win a library of 50 books. You're on 612 ABC Brisbane you can see the photograph on abc.net.au/Brisbane/radio and then click on Mornings with Madonna King.

Ends.