



THE HON DR CRAIG EMERSON MP
MINISTER FOR TRADE

Transcript
Sky News AM Agenda with Ashleigh Gillon

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E&OE

Subjects: President Obama's visit, Kevin Rudd's health, carbon pricing, asylum-seekers, Craig Thomson.

ASHLEIGH GILLON: Good morning, welcome to the program. I'm Ashleigh Gillon.

This morning, the White House has confirmed President Obama is heading to Australia. The US President will be here for two days from November 16. But no word yet on which cities he'll visit or if his family will be accompanying him.

We are hoping that he will actually turn up this time. It will be, after all, third time lucky after the President was forced to cancel his last two scheduled visits to our shores.

Joining me this morning on our panel of politicians, the Trade Minister and Acting Foreign Minister, Craig Emerson. Good morning to you.

CRAIG EMERSON: Morning Ashleigh.

GILLON: And the Leader of the Opposition in the Senate, Senator Eric Abetz.

ERIC ABETZ: Morning.

GILLON: Good morning to you as well.

Craig, let's start with you. President Obama coming here to Australia. What's going to be on the agenda for the talks?

EMERSON: Oh well, obviously, a wide range of issues but it is the 60th Anniversary of the Alliance - and if I could acknowledge that both major political parties have been staunch supporters of the Alliance over that period. It's served Australia's interests well; it's served the interests of peace and stability well.

On the economic front, we have in the developed world a pretty feeble economic recovery after the global recession, which was the deepest since the Great Depression. And, of course, I'm going to express a bit of bias from my other portfolio responsibilities: that is,

on trade. Free and open trade is the formula to getting the global economy really moving again, and we do have a problem with the Doha Round being stuck. So, I'm sure that will figure in the discussions that the Prime Minister and the President have here in Australia.

GILLON:

Yes. And the President's coming via Honolulu, where he'll be at the APEC meeting. He's chairing that, and then heading to Bali straight after to go to the East Asia Summit. What's the Coalition hoping to get out of this visit, Senator? And would you like, perhaps, to see Parliament recalled so that the President can address both Houses if he wishes?

ABETZ:

If that were the Government's view - having the Parliament sit in honour of President Obama - I think that would be something that would be welcomed by all sides of politics and the Australian people.

Our relationship with the United States is our most important relationship. They were with us in the Second World War; they were vitally important in the defence of Australia, especial in the Coral Sea etcetera.

So, I think we have bonds that are etched not only in our history, but also blood bonds in war, especially during the Second World War. So, any United States President is always welcome

in Australia. And we as a Coalition welcome anything that strengthens those ties.

GILLON: Minister, is that an option: recalling Parliament if President Obama would like to address both Houses?

And do you think Julia Gillard might get a bounce in the polls when she's standing there shaking hands with the US President.

ABETZ: Oh, that's a big "if", isn't it, Ashleigh?

EMERSON: Look, I can't say anything pre-emptive in relation to a possible recall of Parliament. But the President's visit is not about polls. I think, when we saw President Bush visiting he was welcomed very warmly by both sides of politics. And there were, in fact, some real differences between our side of politics and the Republicans at that time. But those differences never cloud the visit of a president and that's what we're seeking to do: build on that relationship as we modernise the relationship in the 21st Century.

GILLON: Kevin Rudd and Barack Obama seemed to get on well last time. Kevin Rudd was in Washington and Barack Obama just popped in to say hi...

EMERSON: [Laughs]

GILLON: ... in an unscheduled meeting. How is Kevin Rudd going, Craig Emerson? You've been...

EMERSON: Yeah, he's going pretty well.

GILLON: ... acting in his role.

EMERSON: He's going pretty well.

GILLON: Do you think he'll be back on deck soon?

EMERSON: He'll be back on deck soon. I understand he will be going to the AUSMIN talks, with Stephen Smith, our Defence Minister. So, my period as Acting Foreign Minister is about to come to a close.

But, then again, when he goes overseas, they'll need another Acting Foreign Minister and it could well be me.

GILLON: And you might be...

EMERSON: So, I'll be back in this as soon as Kevin's back; then I'll be back into Acting Foreign Minister mode.

GILLON: Would you expect to see a bounce in the polls when President Obama's here, for Labor?

ABETZ: Oh, look, let's wait and see what happens. I think it's always a good news story when an important figure such as the President of the United States visits. But, at the end of the day, the difficulties the Government has got are domestic policies; not so much its relationship with the United States.

GILLON: Well, let's move on to those domestic policies. Before we get into our chatter about those, though, I do want to flag with you that we are standing by to take you live to Julia Gillard. She's addressing the Steel Institute conference here in Canberra. That's coming up in about 10 or 15 minutes time, so we'll take you live there when it does happen. That's...

EMERSON: We're going to get trumped, Eric.

[Laughter]

GILLON: We're going to cut short our discussion for the Prime Minister.

Let's move on to what's happening in Parliament today. The carbon tax legislation is going to be presented about midday today. There are 18 Bills.

Senator, the Coalition's been complaining that not enough time has been put aside to allow the Coalition to go through these complex

pieces of legislation. But the Government's put in an extra week for the Senate to sit and is saying that there'll be extra hours on Mondays and Tuesdays; have already scheduled sitting weeks. What more are you asking for?

ABETZ:

Well, first of all, this legislation was the legislation the Australian people were promised we would not have. The parliamentary timetable, as it was scheduled, was all in order, but for this imposition of the carbon tax which was specifically promised to the Australian people would not occur.

If we accept what Labor says – that this is the biggest package of change ever in Australian history - then I would invite Labor to wind back and ask what happened with the GST.

With the GST legislation, it was in the Senate for five months with four different Senate committees.

Now, if carbon tax is a bigger change than the GST, Labor has got to answer to the Australian people.

Having promised no carbon tax, why on earth would you not allow at least five months of Senate investigation for this bigger-than-Ben-Hur change to Australia's economy. And that is the issue that has got Labor in great difficulty.

The deception, and now trying to rush it through.

GILLON:

The Climate Change Minister, Greg Combet, pointed out this morning, there have already been, apparently, 35 inquiries into carbon pricing and what to do to tackle climate change

Surely, the time for delay is over. The Government has the numbers in the Parliament to get this through.

ABETZ:

It is not time for us to accept. Because remember, Labor said the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme - and when they were promoting that, Senator Penny Wong, the Climate Change Minister, absolutely bagged out, quite rightly so, might I add, the concept of a carbon tax; that it wasn't a silver bullet; that it wouldn't work. And so we have a situation where Labor had a Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme, condemned the carbon tax, then dumped the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme altogether, then promised no carbon tax.

Now they're going to have a carbon tax and we still have not seen one word of the legislation. And we know with this Government, they're always big on the headlines; big on the promise: like the East Timor solution, like the Malaysian solution, for border protection. Cash

for clunkers: you name it; always big on the headlines. When you ask for the detail, it all collapses and implodes.

So we want to see the legislation word-for-word; inquire into it and see what's actually going to be served up.

GILLON: We'll get to that asylum-seeker issue shortly.

Craig Emerson, why not give the Coalition more time on this? Greg Hunt has done the maths. He's worked out it's less than one minute per MP per piece of legislation.

EMERSON: Well, I think you've summarised the...

GILLON: If this is something so crucial - transforming the economy - why not have more time to debate it?

EMERSON: I think you've summarised it in your question: and that is, 30-odd inquiries; the Coalition's view is well known; it's expressed in a 34-page document, most of which are just completely false statements.

I heard Greg Hunt on radio this morning saying that the carbon price is forcing the steel industry into great difficulty. This is not a view that is shared by the steel industry.

So you see, the Liberal mantra is 'why put off till tomorrow what you can put off forever'. And they simply do not want any price on carbon. And I'm glad that Eric mentioned the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme, because the fundamental difference between this scheme and the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme is the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme had a one-year fixed price permit; this has a three-year fixed price permit.

Everyone said the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme was an emissions trading scheme, but this one's not? What? It's a difference of two years. I mean, it is a market-based mechanism; it's the sort of policy that John Howard took to the 2007 election. We've been debating this for ages. We know the Coalition's answer. The Coalition's answer is 'no'. It prefers a direction action plan that would cost every household in Australia \$1,300 in extra tax.

ABETZ:

Well, that is just nonsense, Ashleigh. But what we're seeing yet again is Labor repeating its own mistakes again. The rush for the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme was so that Kevin Rudd could wave a document at Copenhagen. He wanted us to be the clowns of Copenhagen; the only country in the world with a scheme that was fully legislated.

This time round the rush is so that we can be the dunces of Durban by having some legislation in place when no other country in the world will have as extensive a scheme, as expensive a scheme, and as job-destroying a scheme as Australia's going to have.

EMERSON: You've just described Malcolm Turnbull as a dunce. Because, of course, he supported the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme and lost the leadership over it.

GILLON: Okay, well look, Tim Flannery is going to be...

ABETZ: Well, the Coalition...

GILLON: ...Tim Flannery today - we do need to move on. Tim Flannery today is going to be addressing the National Press Club. He's going to be arguing against that position you just put forward, Eric Abetz. He'll be with some international experts from the US and China today at the National Press Club at 12.30 arguing that the world is in fact acting on climate change. So tune in for that one at 12.30 today. It'll be live on Sky News. We do need to get through...

ABETZ: Well, actually, can I take issue with that because the world is not moving in this direction. New Zealand is winding back; the European Union is winding back...

GILLON: Okay.

EMERSON: The United Kingdom?

ABETZ: New Hampshire is winding back, etcetera.

EMERSON: David Cameron? Conservative Prime Minister, David Cameron?

GILLON: All right, we've heard, we've heard that point and I'm just pointing out that we'll hear another view on that a bit later today.

I do want to move onto the asylum-seeker issue, though, because that is of course one that's been dominating discussion here in Parliament over the last couple of days.

We know, of course, that yesterday Julia Gillard won support from the Caucus to try to amend the Migration Act. That's so the Government can get around that High Court ruling and continue on with its Malaysian solution. But it needs the Coalition onside in order for those changes to the Migration Act to go ahead. We've seen the Government pressuring Tony Abbott over this.

Here was the Immigration Minister, Chris Bowen, last night.

[Excerpt from earlier interview]

CHRIS BOWEN:

Well now, we've made that advice available to the Opposition. That's not just departmental advice; that's advice from all the experts: from the Department of Immigration, from the National Security Adviser, from the Ambassador for People Smuggling Issues.

The Government's top officials have been made available to the Opposition. So if they ignore that advice and if they, in an act of political bloody-mindedness, say, 'well, if you won't do Nauru we're not going to give you the options or the ability to implement your policy', well, that will be a matter for them to explain to the Australian people.

[End of excerpt]

GILLON:

Senator, is there a concern that the longer Tony Abbott delays his decision on whether or not to support the changes to the Migration Act, the more boats will come? Because there is effectively a policy vacuum and people smugglers could take advantage of that.

ABETZ:

Well, actually, the first question is: where is the expert advice that was offered to the Government when they deliberately changed from the proven Howard solution?

EMERSON: Oh, completely wrong ...

ABETZ: We have never been given that. We have never been given the expert advice...

EMERSON: You've been given advice a couple of days ago.

ABETZ: Excuse me, Craig. When we have been ... when we have asked for the advice on the East Timor solution, that came to nothing - we haven't been provided it. When we asked for the expert advice in relation to the Malaysian solution, we haven't been provided it.

EMERSON: You have been. That's untrue.

ABETZ: No, no, no. Now, you are giving us advice that the previous legal advice that you had, which said you were going to win the High Court challenge, is, of course, now shown to be completely and utterly flawed.

And so, when this Government says 'here's some expert advice', we want to have a very close look at it. And, above all, we want to have a look at the actual wording of the legislation. So, the Government won't get a pre-commitment out of this until we've seen the legislation.

GILLON: That's fair enough, isn't it, Craig Emerson? I mean, this legislation hasn't even been drafted yet, has it?

EMERSON: Well, attention is rightly focused on Mr Abbott now. And the question is, does Mr Abbott want to stop the boats or does he want to stop Labor? Now, he says he's been ... his mantra, his three-word mantra, the slogan is, "stop the boats". He has an opportunity now...

ABETZ: He did not. He didn't.

EMERSON: He has an opportunity now to join with Labor in stopping people making these terribly risky journeys across the sea.

We will see whether he regards his political interest as being more important than the interests of people who make those very risky journeys. I think the verdict is yet to be delivered. Let's see what Mr Abbott says about this. But the longer he delays - as you've pointed out - the more likelihood that more boats will come and people will be risking their lives.

GILLON: We understand, it's fair enough you want to see the legislation, moving forward and Tony Abbott wants to go through that with a fine-toothed comb. But on principle, do you think the Coalition will end up supporting this,

because it would end up ensuring that whatever party's in Government, the Executive would have the decision of where to send asylum-seekers offshore.

ABETZ:

Our policy has always been to stop the boats. We achieved that in Government. Labor deliberately unpicked that policy solution. We had a flood of boats come in. And, of course, Ms Gillard, when she was Shadow Immigration Minister at the time, said 'every boat is another indication of the failed policy'. That was in the Howard Government. We actually fixed the problem. She now has over 100 boats under her belt and she still claims that there hasn't been a policy failure on Labor's part.

What they've done is unpicked a workable, proven Coalition solution, and they're now trying to stick Band-aids all over it. First of all, it was East Timor, then Malaysia. They've both fallen apart, and we invite them yet again...

GILLON:

Craig Emerson...

ABETZ:

... to have a look at our policies.

GILLON:

... do you acknowledge that there have been mistakes in the border protection policy from Labor? We've seen the influx of boats; we saw the failed East Timor solution, as Eric Abetz

pointed out. There have been a lot of problems in ...

EMERSON:

Well, I think it's a vexed issue for both sides of politics. It's not only a vexed issue for both sides of politics in Australia. It's a vexed issue in Europe, if you look at the number of people who are arriving unauthorised in Europe.

And Eric says 'oh, we fixed the problem in the Nauru solution'. The same expert advice that is talking about the Malaysian solution has told Mr Abbott that Nauru does not work. Does not work!

ABETZ:

That's not right.

EMERSON:

And one of the key reasons ... it is right; it is absolutely what he was told. And one of the key reasons is that it is now well known that perhaps three-quarters, or more, of those who went to Nauru ended up in Australia.

The people smugglers know that; they can explain that to people who they seek to entice onto boats. And they say 'well, you just get to park in Nauru for a while, but you'll end up in Australia anyway'.

And that's why this is ... it moves. The whole issue moves as circumstances change. And

yes, circumstances have changed over the last decade.

ABETZ:

I am being told that Julia Gillard is about to take the stage at the Australian Steel Institute conference, so we are going to take you there in just a couple of minutes when that gets under way.

Just finally, yesterday, New South Wales Police announced that it will be investigating officials at the Health Services Union - Craig Thomson, of course, included. Does that vindicate the Opposition's line of attack against Mr Thomson?

EMERSON:

Not at all; not at all. And, in fact, the Opposition has been making deliberately false claims.

Both Senator Brandis and Mr Abbott have said that the police, in relation to Mr Brandis'...

GILLON:

Okay, I'm sorry, Senator, I didn't get to you on that issue. I do need to throw to Julia Gillard now speaking here in Canberra.

