



THE HON DR CRAIG EMERSON MP
MINISTER FOR TRADE

Transcript
ABC NEWS RADIO
19 SEPTEMBER 2011

E&OE

Subjects: Asylum-seeker legislation.

MARIUS BENSON: Right now, let's turn to politics because the Prime Minister will meet Tony Abbott in Canberra at midday today in an attempt to reach agreement on legislation to empower the Government to send asylum-seekers to other countries for processing. But there is no expectation the Opposition Leader will accept the Government's scheme, which would allow Labor to go ahead with its plan to send arrivals to Malaysia.

To look at the battle ahead for the Government I'm joined by the Trade Minister Craig Emerson. Craig Emerson, good morning.

CRAIG EMERSON: Good morning Marius.

BENSON: Would you agree with that assessment of the meeting today with Tony Abbott: no prospect of agreement? The Opposition is going to sink your Malaysia hopes?

EMERSON:

It would be the height of negativity if Mr Abbott had already made up his mind before meeting with the Prime Minister. I would hope that he hasn't done that, because there's a lot at stake here. Every elected government, on behalf of the Australian people, should have the right to be able to protect Australia's borders, whether that government be a Labor Government or a Coalition Government. That's what this legislation would enable the Government of the day to do.

BENSON:

And the Prime Minister has made up her mind there's no way she's going to agree to a deal which would exclude Malaysia?

EMERSON:

Well, the way the legislation is drafted is that it doesn't identify a particular offshore processing location. The Prime Minister has said repeatedly in Parliament that's a matter for the Government of the day. And, yes, we do have a difference there: we believe on the basis that Malaysia is the only offshore processing arrangement that would break the people-smugglers' model, and that Nauru wouldn't do that. However, Mr Abbott, despite the advice he's received, is persisting with the argument that Nauru would do it. He's entitled to form a view, but this legislation isn't prescriptive about the location of an offshore processing centre. What it does is enables the Government of the day to be able to protect its borders and in the process ensure that people don't get enticed

by people-smugglers who offer them passage across the high seas and the prospect of dying on the high seas or, as 45 people did before Christmas, getting smashed up against the rocks at Christmas Island.

BENSON:

Tony Abbott's also taken the moral high ground seemingly on this issue: he's pointing out that there are fewer guarantees of human rights in your proposal, your Malaysia proposal, than John Howard provided in his derided-by-Labor "Pacific Solution".

EMERSON:

This so-called "Pacific Solution" wasn't only criticised by Labor; the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, when the Nauru detention facility was closed, said that that had in fact closed a very unfortunate chapter in Australia's history. So I don't think we should be seeing Mr Abbott contesting the moral high ground here.

BENSON:

But he is aligned with the Greens; he's saying 'we're showing more concern for the human rights of these people than Labor, who is just going to bang them back into Malaysia where there's no way they can guarantee their rights'.

EMERSON:

As we all know the United Nations High Commission for Refugees will work on the Malaysian arrangement. It has said that it would do that, but it wouldn't do it in respect of

Nauru. And the difference between the Coalition and the Greens is that the Greens want only onshore processing. And it would be an irony if, through a rejection of this legislation, that the Coalition embraced the position of the Greens effectively by ruling out any offshore processing, and was at one with the Greens saying that onshore processing is the only way to go. The problem with that is that it would not break the people-smugglers' model. It would mean that people would be enticed to get on leaky boats and lose their lives on the high seas or at Christmas Island, and we see nothing compassionate about that. So if Mr Abbott wants to occupy the moral high ground, he can explain to the Australian people why he thinks it's all right for people to lose their lives at sea.

BENSON:

Your party platform, the Labor Party platform, calls for onshore processing. The party's notionally opposed to offshore processing. Does that worry you: that you're fighting to demolish your own party platform?

EMERSON:

We had this same debate, you and I, Marius, and, indeed, in the party room only last week. And there are provisions in the platform that do contemplate offshore processing as well. We resolved as a Caucus last week in favour of allowing for offshore processing. It was a good healthy debate conducted in the right spirit and that's the position on which we landed.

BENSON: So the Left at tomorrow's Caucus meeting will be rolled again on the issue?

EMERSON: I would rather Caucus meetings occur rather than pre-empting them, but I'm simply saying that that debate about whether we have offshore or onshore processing was held last week, and it was resolved in favour of continuing the Government's position, which is in favour of offshore processing. Why? Because that is the mechanism that breaks the people-smugglers' model. We don't want an attractive proposition being put to vulnerable people such that they can die on the high seas.

BENSON: And if it does end up being no agreement on offshore, which seems certain now, and onshore as the result, you presumably in the political debate will blame the Opposition for any arrivals.

EMERSON: I would rather allow Mr Abbott the room to be able to make up his own mind free of such statements. And, yes, we have seen media reports saying that in its current form the Coalition is unlikely to support this. Let's see what Mr Abbott has to say, and then we'll take it from there.

But I just trust that he hasn't already made up his mind, because if he had happened to have already made up his mind that would be surely

the height of negativity of saying 'no, no, no, no and no'. And we hope that he breaks out of that habit and actually approaches these discussions with the Prime Minister in good faith, with a common objective of ensuring that we can control our borders, that is Labor Governments and Coalition Governments, and we can protect the safety of people who want to come to this country so that they do come in an orderly way. We welcome refugees in this country. We have a very substantial refugee intake, but we should not encourage people-smugglers to entice vulnerable people onto leaky boats only to see them lose their lives at sea.

BENSON:

Craig Emerson, thank you very much.

EMERSON:

Thank you. Thanks a lot Marius.

BENSON:

That is Craig Emerson, the Trade Minister, speaking there on the issue which is likely to dominate Federal politics today.

