



THE HON DR CRAIG EMERSON MP
MINISTER FOR TRADE

Transcript
Sky News AM Agenda with Ashleigh Gillon

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E&OE

Subjects: polls, asylum-seekers, HSU, President Obama in Darwin.

ASHLEIGH GILLON: Let's go now to our panel of politicians: the Trade Minister, Craig Emerson, and the Shadow Environment Minister, Greg Hunt. Good morning to both of you.

CRAIG EMERSON: Morning.

GREG HUNT: Morning, Ashleigh.

GILLON: The primary vote down to 26 per cent, Craig Emerson. That can't be good for morale. Do you think we'll see leadership speculation stirred up today ahead of the Caucus meeting this morning?

EMERSON: There's really good discipline in our Caucus, because the Caucus knows that we are doing what we should do as a government, and that is governing in the national interest, not worrying about weekly or daily or fortnightly polls. That's what governments are elected to do. It's not a day-by-day popularity contest.

What we're doing through the carbon pricing mechanism, through our economic management, and through the issue of asylum seekers - which I suspect we may get onto - is governing in the national interest.

Sometimes that, in the short term, is not popular. But people understand that. They understand that governments need to make decisions that, notwithstanding their unpopularity in the short term, are good for the nation in the long term.

GILLON:

Greg Hunt, why isn't Tony Abbott doing better personally? Fifty-four per cent of people are dissatisfied with the way he's doing his job. Considering the Coalition numbers - as we pointed out there, a huge majority in support of the Coalition at the moment - why isn't Tony Abbott personally doing a whole lot better?

HUNT:

Well, I think he's probably been the most effective Opposition Leader Australia has seen in decades.

GILLON:

But 54 per cent of people are dissatisfied.

HUNT:

I think that, when you look at the situation for the Government, these polls reflect massive public disillusion and massive public concern about incompetence. There is a sense that this is a government that is in chaos.

Clearly, the Caucus is divided and is itself disillusioned. But the public is saying, 'we don't trust the Government in terms of its competence, and we are disillusioned that they ruled out a carbon tax and also ruled out sending people to non-signatory countries to the International Refugee Convention'. So there's no...

GILLON: And we are going to get to that.

HUNT: ...honesty on those fundamental issues.

GILLON: [Interrupts] But don't you think voters are disillusioned with both of the leaders? Isn't that what this poll is telling us?

HUNT: Look, it's a tough profession, and what we're doing is holding the Government to account and progressively building this sense of the alternative government. That is the next phase of what we're doing.

And so I think there's enormous upside for the Coalition. And we are very proud, very proud of our leader. And I think nobody has been a more effective Opposition Leader in the last three, four, five decades that Australia's had. And what that shows is an incredible self-discipline, and capacity to run an effective government.

EMERSON: Greg's right in a sense, and that is the Opposition Leader is very good at saying 'no'; he's very good at opposing. That's all he does. And with this border protection measure, through opposing this legislation, Mr Abbott is handing over the control of Australia's borders to people-smugglers.

HUNT: All right, let's take that on.

GILLON: But you're in government, you're in government, Craig Emerson. It's your responsibility to get your policy up. Why do you keep slamming the Opposition, slamming Tony Abbott when this is your problem?

EMERSON: It needs - I think the statistics would bear this out - you need a majority of votes in the House of Representatives; you need a majority of votes in the Senate...

GILLON: [Interrupts] But why put pressure on Tony Abbott?

EMERSON: ...in order for legislation ...

GALLON: You're in power with, you know, the Greens...

EMERSON: Because we seek...

GILLON: ...are supporting you as being government.

EMERSON: ... we seek a majority of votes in the House of Representatives and a majority of votes in the Senate. The Greens in the Senate have said that they will not support anything other than onshore processing. But Mr Abbott is terrified, terrified that the Malaysia arrangement will work.

And what he says, his three-word slogan is 'stop the boats, stop the boats'. He doesn't want the boats to stop, because he thinks he can profit politically by boats continuing to arrive. And that's why he's taking this position.

There is no new-found compassion on the part of Mr Abbott. In fact, he confirmed last night that part of the policy is to tow boats back to Indonesia. Indonesia is not a signatory to the Refugee Convention.

GILLON: Right, okay. There are a few things out there. Let's first deal with that last point that Craig Emerson raised. We

keep hearing about the hypocrisy of the Coalition when it comes to the need under your changes to the Migration Act to have a country sign up to the UN Refugee Convention.

Firstly, is Indonesia [where], as Craig Emerson points out, asylum seekers will end with ... in, if you turn boats around. And secondly, when John Howard was Prime Minister, you didn't seem to mind that Nauru hadn't signed up to the convention then.

HUNT:

They broke it; we'll fix it. Under them, what we've seen is 12,000 arrivals, 240 boats; the end of offshore processing. We are offering Craig Emerson, Chris Bowen and the Prime Minister today a return to offshore processing - 148 countries. All they have to do is accept their own pre-election policy of states which are signatories to the UN Refugee Convention.

I think the Prime Minister said on 8 July last year, 'I would rule out anywhere that is not a signatory to the convention', the same language she used when she ruled out a carbon tax.

We offer a solution: 148 countries - offshore processing can recommence on Nauru or Manus Island or ... at any time if the Government wants to take it. The only people standing in the way of offshore processing are the Labor Party. And the only reason they're doing that is out of a breathtaking arrogance that they don't want to be seen to be accepting the option that's been effective, proven and workable.

GILLON:

But why ... aren't you being hypocritical? That's my question. How do you answer those claims of hypocrisy when you consider that issue of turning boats around and ending up with asylum-seekers back

in Indonesia, which hasn't signed up to the convention?

HUNT: Look, we make no apologies for the fact that there are three parts...

EMERSON: That's a complete contradiction.

HUNT: ... three parts to our policy. First, there is a very tough, up-front deterrent before people become part of the Australian orbit. Secondly, we have offshore processing: 148 countries available today. And thirdly, temporary protection visas. It's proven; it's effective; it works; it stopped the boats. Two hundred and forty boats, 12,000 people: that's what happened when they destroyed the solution.

GILLON: We do just have a little bit of the Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, speaking about this very issue on ABC Radio this morning. Have a listen to the latest from the Prime Minister.

[Excerpt from ABC Radio]

JULIA GILLARD: I am not asking him, and I have never asked him, to endorse the Government's plan for Malaysia. What I am asking him to do is to put this government and future governments in the same position that the Howard Government was, with the same degree of options and powers.

Now, why would Mr Abbott say no to that, other than hypocrisy, opportunism, and a deep, deep fear that the Malaysia arrangement will work?

[End of excerpt]

GILLON:

Craig Emerson, isn't Labor saying, in rejecting the Coalition's amendments to the Migration Act, that you would rather no offshore processing than go to Nauru?

EMERSON:

No, what we're saying is that the government of the day should have the right to protect Australia's borders and protect asylum-seekers who otherwise arrive by boats and lose their lives at sea or at Christmas Island, as we saw before Christmas.

We are not being prescriptive to Mr Abbott. Despite the advice that he has received, that Nauru will not work - and he has received that advice from the experts in the field - he says he wants to go with Nauru. If he becomes the Prime Minister, he can go with Nauru under this legislation.

What we're saying is that the advice that we've received - and it's very clear, unequivocal - and that is, the Malaysia arrangement is the only one that would successfully break the people-smugglers' model.

And Mr Abbott does not want the people smugglers' model broken. He wants to hand over our border security to people who trade in people-smuggling. That's what he wants to do: to hand that over to people-smugglers. What he's saying is, Mr Abbott is saying to people-smugglers with the decision last night, 'start your engines; start your engines and bring the boats'. Because why? He can profit politically from that.

And Greg Hunt just twice refused to answer a very simple question. And that is that you put to him: if he

says a country must be a signatory to the Refugee Convention, how could he reaffirm last night that he would turn boats back to Indonesia, which is not a signatory to the Refugee Convention? There is no logical answer to that.

The only answer to this from Mr Abbott's point of view is a political one. And that is he wants to hand over Australia's borders to people-smugglers, and he's saying to them, 'start your engines'.

GILLON:

Politically, the Left faction of the Labor Party is probably going to be very pleased if onshore processing does eventuate as a result of this stalemate. The Greens are also going to be very pleased.

Politically, how do you think that will affect Labor's standing: if you're seen to be going along with yet another Green policy?

EMERSON:

We want to do the right thing by Australia, by border security, and by asylum-seekers who take these risky journeys. Mr Abbott wants to do neither. And so we are doing the right thing by the country and we are showing plenty of flexibility. We're saying to Mr Abbott, 'even if you don't agree with this, we are not seeking your endorsement for the Malaysia arrangement, even though that is what the experts say we should implement'. If he believes in Nauru, he can - as Prime Minister if he were elected - can exercise that option.

There could not be a more reasonable proposition than this. But it's been rejected because Mr Abbott wants the boats to keep coming because he believes he will profit politically.

GILLON:

Okay.

HUNT:

Honestly, Craig. Honestly, Craig, that is absolutely ridiculous.

EMERSON:

Absolutely true; absolutely true.

HUNT:

What's the history here? We fixed it; they broke it; we'll fix it again and...

EMERSON:

How?

HUNT:

...we could fix it today. We could have offshore processing today.

EMERSON:

In Iran.

HUNT:

We're happy to bring the Parliament debate forward; we're happy to debate this in the Parliament today; we're happy to approve 148 countries for offshore processing, all against the standard that the Prime Minister set prior to the election.

On 8 July last year, she said she ruled out sending people to non-signatory countries. That is a pre-election promise. It's the same as the promise that she would rule out a carbon tax. So firstly there is a pattern of deceit.

But, please, Craig and the ALP, don't blame us for standing up for the right standards and standing up for what the ALP pledged to the Australian people in the lead-up to an election.

GILLON: Okay, we do need to take a break. Craig Emerson, Greg Hunt, stay with us.

[Ad and news headlines break]

GILLON: Let's return now to Craig Emerson and Greg Hunt.

I want to bring up this story about the latest on the HSU scandal, the Craig Thomson scandal. Today we've learnt that Mr Thomson's former union colleague, Michael Williamson, he stepped down from his position as the ALP's national vice-president; also his position as the New South Wales Labor senior vice-president.

Craig Emerson, why wasn't he stood aside by the party when these allegations were first raised? He's accused of ripping off the union, basically misusing funds.

EMERSON: Oh well, obviously there was a conversation with Mr George Wright, who's the national secretary of the Labor Party, and this decision has been taken.

But as soon as an allegation is raised against someone, that doesn't mean that they should stand aside. If that were the case, whether it be in the Parliament or outside, there would be people standing aside left, right and centre.

And I think that it's appropriate now that Mr Williamson concentrate on the allegations that have been made, which he needs to address. That's what's happening. And they can argue it out within the Health Services Union. They've disaffiliated from the Labor Party, and Mr Williamson has stepped aside from the couple of positions I think that he held in the Labor Party.

GILLON: Whatever happened to Craig Thomson saying he was going to give a full statement?

EMERSON: Well, as you know, as you well know, there is a strike-force or a taskforce that's been set up. I understand it's looking into the activities of the union again. I imagine, though I don't know this, that Craig Thomson would have legal advice that would say let that now take its course. He was indicating a disposition to make a statement. Now, since indicating that disposition this taskforce or strike-force has been set up: it's quite possible - I don't know - but his legal advisers might well have said, 'well, you know, make any statement after these processes take their course'.

GILLON: Is that fair enough, Greg Hunt: that Craig Thomson shouldn't be forced or lobbied to give a statement to the Parliament, considering that strike-force investigation?

HUNT: Well, what we see out of this is firstly that - without commenting on individuals, because I think we're now at that stage - there's clearly a culture of looting the poorest paid workers in this sector, those in the HSU. Some of the poorest paid people in Australia have effectively been looted, and there's a culture of silence at the top of the ALP.

There are no statements being demanded by the Prime Minister; there's no accountability being demanded by the Prime Minister; there's no real concern being shown by the Prime Minister. So if somebody says they're going to make a statement, perhaps they should go ahead and make that statement under Parliamentary Privilege. There's nothing stopping him.

EMERSON: Well, let's draw a comparison. Mr Abbott knew that a member of his team, a parliamentarian, had actually been charged - not just investigated but charged - and he kept that information to himself for two months and did not at any time demand that that particular Senator make a statement. Nor have we; nor have we.

GILLON: Is that hypocritical, Greg Hunt?

HUNT: Well, I think it's the difference between \$100 and \$100,000.

EMERSON: Oh, I see. So it's not serious?

HUNT: And more significantly...

EMERSON: Being charged is not serious?

HUNT: And more significantly, right now, there is a hearing going on, and that will play itself out and the courts will make their own decision.

GILLON: Okay, I do...

EMERSON: Well, that's what I'm saying, that...

GILLON: Okay.

EMERSON: ... play themselves out.

GALLON: We are running out of time. Before we go, I want to draw our viewers' attention to a front page story in the *NT News* this morning. It says that President Obama -

we know he's coming to Australia - *NT News* has an exclusive story today saying he's going to visit Darwin.

Craig Emerson, is that a bit of a surprise? Usually Darwin's not on the itinerary for a visiting US President.

EMERSON:

Well, it'd be one of the first places I'd visit. It's a very ... it's a lovely place, Darwin. It's the gateway to Kakadu. We've got a great affection for Darwin. I love going to Darwin, and obviously President Obama, by the sound of this newspaper - and of course if the *Northern Territory News* says it's true, well, it would be new, it would be news ...

HUNT:

[Laughs]

EMERSON:

...there's no doubt about that. And I don't know if he'll come with a knife and say, 'that's not a knife; that's a knife', and do the old Crocodile Dundee impersonation. But he's very welcome in Australia; we're greatly looking forward...

GILLON:

Let's not offend our Northern Territory viewers.

HUNT:

I have strong views on this: that if he can't visit the Mornington Peninsula, I'd be delighted if he visits Kakadu.

GILLON:

[Laughs] Greg Hunt and Craig Emerson, appreciate your time on the program, as always. Thank you for that this morning.

EMERSON:

Thank you.

HUNT:

Thank you.