



THE HON DR CRAIG EMERSON MP
MINISTER FOR TRADE

Transcript
2CC with Mark Parton
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Subjects: asylum-seekers, Wayne Swan's award, opinion polls.

MARK PARTON: Thirteen to nine: this time on a Wednesday morning we tend to catch up with the Federal Trade Minister Dr Craig Emerson. He joins us right now. G'day, Craig.

CRAIG EMERSON: G'day Mark!

PARTON: I think we're going to find some common ground here, which is a rarity because ...

EMERSON: Oh, come on! You and I are like-minded, aren't we?

PARTON: I've been picking through trying to find a sensible reason that Tony Abbott's going to knock these Migration Act changes on the head. And I don't understand other than the basic politics of it.

EMERSON: Well, he *is* playing politics and he's playing politics with Australia's borders. He's indicating to people smugglers - he's saying "gentlemen, start your engines!" - because he thinks that his interests are more important than the national interest. He's handing over control of Australia's borders to people-smugglers. That's the truth of the matter.

PARTON: Having said that, it is having its desired effect as far as he's concerned - because your leader looks to be on the ropes.

EMERSON: Well, Mr Abbott will be responsible, if he goes ahead with his threats, for every boat arrival that occurs after this legislation is defeated. And he needs to accept that responsibility.

PARTON: I don't know if he can accept it solely, but perhaps he should be a little more constructive in finding a solution here. But it looks as though it's just going to be the wrecker all the way through to the poll, whenever that is.

EMERSON: I think the best summary of Tony Abbott is 'no, no, no, no and no'. And he's doing it on this occasion - you could argue about other occasions, if you like - simply because he thinks it will benefit him politically; that it will get him closer to The Lodge. But the fact is the Australian people expect the government of the day to have the power to protect our borders and also to protect asylum-seekers from losing their lives on the high seas or against the rocks on Christmas Island.

That's what they expect of governments. And all we are seeking from Mr Abbott is the authority of the elected government of the day to do exactly that. And he is saying that he would not give this Government the authority to do it, but that he would want it for himself. Now that is just playing politics. And by saying to people-smugglers "gentlemen, start your engines", he is putting up the big welcome flag to people-smugglers to come to ply their evil trade and bring people across the high seas to Australia.

PARTON: Aside from that aspect of it, if indeed the polls hold sway, and in a couple of years' time Tony Abbott finds himself in The Lodge, we're still going to have a situation for some period of time that The Greens hold the balance of power in the Senate, aren't we?

EMERSON: That's right. And there's only been twice since 1970 that the government of the day has held the majority in the Senate: there's always either been Greens or Independents or Democrats.

PARTON: I guess my point is: could this be the last chance that Tony Abbott actually has to lock down, for argument's sake, the Nauru solution?

EMERSON: Well this is the argument we're putting to him, Mark ...

PARTON: So why isn't he ... [laughs]. I don't understand ...

EMERSON: Because he's self-interested. He can't see beyond tomorrow; he can't see beyond his own ambition. And we aren't being prescriptive to him, Mark. What we're saying is our advice, strong advice from officials is that

the Malaysia arrangement would break the people-smugglers' model; Nauru wouldn't. He doesn't accept that advice, even though he's had that briefing. But we're saying 'look, this is our response to the issue'. We aren't asking him to endorse Malaysia; we are just saying 'allow a piece of legislation to pass which allows the government of the day to choose the set of measures that it considers most effective in breaking the people-smugglers model'. That's all we're saying to him.

PARTON: Craig, Wayne Swan is going to stand up and receive an award later on in the week as the best treasurer in the world, or finance minister as it's referred to in other countries. As a fair-minded individual, can you sit there and tell me that Wayne Swan is a better treasurer than Peter Costello was?

EMERSON: I don't know that it's a matter of Wayne Swan versus Peter Costello. This is an objective assessment that's been made in the Eurozone. And they've given this award to Wayne, which is terrific. But as Wayne has actually said, it's an award to the Australian people who tightened their belts during the global recession, who understood the need for restraint and exercised that restraint. And Wayne in fact has given credit to the Howard Government and to those governments, the Hawke and Keating Governments, who set Australia up to be in the right place at the right time, in the Asian region in the Asian Century. So a lot of pretty good economic management has occurred over a period of 25 years, and a lot of vision has been displayed by Hawke and Keating in particular to engage with Asia in the way that we have. But he has given more credit, just this morning, to the Howard Government and therefore to Peter Costello in terms of the surpluses that they ran.

PARTON: Craig Emerson is with me. I'm just going to mix it up a little bit if I could and I'm just going to briefly add Michael to the conversation. G'day Michael.

CALLER: G'day. How are you today?

PARTON: Not bad.

CALLER: I just ... Dr Emerson, I just can't believe how you can tell such straight-out lies like this. What's going to happen when the ...

EMERSON: That's great. Which particular lie ... ?

CALLER: Yeah, well that's right: which particular lie? What happens when the 800 people expire on Malaysia? What are you going to do then? Every policy you guys get into, all you think about is the moment. You have no long-term plan. You didn't even have a Plan B when you went into this. Now, what the Liberals are saying here is 'look, think about this. Say Nauru is an option'. Because if these people over there realise that as soon as Malaysia is full - 800 people for 4,000: what a dumb deal that is - and Nauru we could turn the situation around, as happened when John Howard was there. And the lies that you're perpetuating is that as soon as you got into power you changed that system. And we have all these boats arrive.

PARTON: Michael, Michael. I'm going to run out of time for Craig to actually answer the question, so I'm going to leave your question there. And you can listen to the response on the radio. Craig?

EMERSON: I thank Michael on behalf of the Liberal Party for his contribution to the debate. The fact is that Nauru, on the advice to us, won't work. It won't work, because what is now known is the vast majority of people who went to Nauru were actually resettled in Australia and New Zealand. We are accepting that advice, but we are not being prescriptive to Mr Abbott. If he were to become the Prime Minister, he would be able to exercise under this legislation Nauru. But he doesn't want the legislation to pass because he thinks this is an easy way to The Lodge. But, anyway, thanks very much for your Liberal Party advertisement.

PARTON: Craig, can I tell you when I have you on air in this segment we get quite a number of comments from people. And a number of people ring up and say, you know, 'get this bloke off', because, I don't know, there's some anger out there. And its evidenced by this guy has just sent me an SMS and says: 'I'm so angry. Look at the polls, Mr Emerson. That's what the people think.' What can you say to these people?

EMERSON: What I'd say is that we don't govern by polls. You don't get up out of bed every morning and say 'what do the opinion polls say, and we will now change our policy in accordance with the opinion polls'. There is a recent leader who adopted exactly the same approach, and that was John Howard. He said he wasn't going to be guided every day by opinion polls; he'll be guided by what he considers to be in the national interest. That's

what we're doing. That's what we're doing. And we'll continue to do it, because we think that's why governments are elected. Governments aren't elected to roll out of bed every morning, see which way the wind is blowing, like Tony Abbott. He has actually admitted to Malcolm Turnbull, he said 'I'm a weather vane; I put my finger into the air to see which way the wind is blowing and that's the way I respond'. And we've seen that writ large in terms of his position on this legislation that will be going into the Parliament today.

PARTON: Craig, thanks for your time this morning.

EMERSON: Okay, thanks Mark.

PARTON: Federal Trade Minister Dr Craig Emerson.