



THE HON DR CRAIG EMERSON MP
MINISTER FOR TRADE

Transcript
ABC 612 Mornings with Madonna King
29 September 2010

E&OE

Subjects: Operation of the 43rd Parliament; election of the Speaker; Wild Rivers legislation.

KING: Let's go inside Canberra. Senator George Brandis is the Opposition Legal Affairs Spokesman. Good morning.

BRANDIS: Good morning, Madonna.

KING: And new Trade Minister Dr Craig Emerson, good morning.

EMERSON: Good morning Madonna, and a civil good morning to you, George.

BRANDIS: Craig, good morning.

KING: And let's hope it's civil for the next 25 minutes or so. Can I start on the issue of pairing though: George Brandis is what the Opposition doing here on pairing in the spirit of how Parliament operates?

BRANDIS: It's absolutely in the spirit of how Parliament operates. Parliament operates, Madonna, if I might make the obvious point, by people being here. People are elected to come to Parliament. They're not elected to absent themselves from Parliament. Now, Parliament does not sit most weeks of the year. In fact, it sits about a third of the weeks of the year. And I think that people who elected representatives to the Parliament expect them to actually show up.

KING: But you didn't, you didn't during the last term when the numbers weren't so close.

BRANDIS: Well, you know it was the Australian people who decided to take away the Labor Government's majority. And the numbers are close and we're saying to the Labor Party, 'you asked the Governor-General's permission to form a government. You assured her that you could get by with the arrangements you'd made with cross-benchers and Independents'. If it's

good enough for the Opposition members to show up for Parliament, it's good enough for Government members.

KING: Alright, so can I ask you here then, before going to Craig Emerson, what type of things will you prevent the Government from attending? Charity events have been talked about. School functions have been talked about. Will Government MPs be able to go to functions like that while Parliament is sitting?

BRANDIS: Well, look first of all, Madonna, I want to take issue with the way in which you've put this question. We're not preventing Government members from attending things. We're saying that when Parliament is sitting, your first obligation is to be present at Parliament. That should be where you are. So, we are saying you've got to do your job. Now, there are some occasions when, for example, let me give you one example, one of the Ministers in the Government, Ms Plibersek, is going to have a baby soon. Obviously, in circumstances like that, it's not practically possible for the Member concerned to attend Parliament and needs leave. Then we would make a pairing arrangement. If there were...

KING: Yeah, but I asked you for an example of the other. What a Government...

BRANDIS: Well, let us say, for example, if the Prime Minister needed to go to a big international meeting like the G8, or the Treasurer had to go to a big international Finance Ministers' meeting and it was totally in the national interest that, notwithstanding a clash between that meeting and a Parliamentary sitting day, then the Opposition would provide a pair. But we're not going ... we're not going to make the Government's life easier by saying, 'whenever you want to absent yourself from Parliament and go and do something else that you could schedule in a non-Parliamentary sitting week, then that's fine by us'.

KING: Alright, Dr Craig Emerson can I come to you here. What type of events will politicians no longer go to, and is this what voters wanted when they decided to make this vote so close?

EMERSON: We seek only that common sense prevails here. Obviously there are occasions which could readily be organised for a non-Parliamentary sitting week that are important. We would understand that we should not be paired in those circumstances. But if it is a matter of national interest, or as George said, in relation to Tanya Plibersek – she's going to be a mum again soon – or if there was a genuine sickness, I think that that would be an application of the common sense rule. Labor's quite happy to fulfil its obligations, indeed the privilege, of attending Parliament. That's what we...

KING: And one example though, given this morning, was attending, I think, a cancer fund breakfast or morning tea that traditionally politicians go to. Is that something that would still be on the agenda or not?

EMERSON: Well, I would think so, because if that morning tea was in Parliament House, and the bells rang for a division, then we would all go to the House of Representatives. Or if the bells were in the Senate, the Senators would go to the Senate. And so I think you can still have...

BRANDIS: Yeah, that's right, and there are functions in Parliament House all the time.

EMERSON: In Parliament House I remember attending with George a number of business dinners. Same thing happens: the bells ring, and we tail off and we vote. So I don't think those things will be disrupted.

KING: So am I right Craig Emerson ... so, you seem less worried about this than some of your colleagues.

EMERSON: Well, I'm just not going to forecast what Tony Abbott's going to do. He said he's going to take a tough line on it. I don't mind him taking a tough line of those sorts of gatherings that could just as easily occur outside of Parliamentary sittings periods. But let's see the application of some common decency and some common sense.

KING: Alright, let's go to Question Time now, and the first Question Time is expected to be held, I presume much later today. How will it change under the reforms?

EMERSON: Questions themselves are limited in time, I think to 30 seconds generally, and answers to four minutes. In fact, the majority of answers given in the previous Parliament were less than four minutes. But that doesn't mean that there weren't exceptions to the rule...

BRANDIS: There were exceptions, Craig, you know it.

EMERSON: ...and some answers were considerably longer than four minutes.

KING: Alright, so that's the main reform?

EMERSON: No, there's another which I think that is important. And that is, there's a rule about relevance, and that rule means that the answer must be directly relevant to the question that has been asked. There's a modification there as well.

KING: Alright, and that is determined by the Speaker?

EMERSON: By the Speaker. The Speaker did say in the last Parliament and no doubt in previous Parliaments, George, that he was actually seeking a tightening of the rule in relation to relevance. I imagine this is what ... and I think I recall previous Coalition Speakers saying the same thing. That's happened.

KING: Let's go then to the issue of the Speaker and the Deputy Speaker. Harry Jenkins has been chosen from Labor, with Liberals' Peter

Slipper as the Deputy. Now, Harry Jenkins was the Government nomination ... sorry, Peter Slipper as well as Harry Jenkins, were Government nominations not a Coalition nomination. Are you happy with the choice, George Brandis?

BRANDIS: Well, I'm happy with the fact that the Coalition supplied ... there are three main roles here: there's the Speaker, there's the Deputy Speaker and there's another office we call the Second Deputy Speaker...

KING: Deputy Speaker, yes.

BRANDIS: The Coalition supplied two of those three: the Deputy Speaker and the Second Deputy Speaker. But as well, I've got to say, and I say this in the spirit of limited bipartisanship, I'm pleased with the choice of Mr Jenkins as well, who was elected unanimously by the House of Representatives after the Labor Party, it's an open secret, spent two weeks or more trying to entice a Coalition member to become the Speaker.

KING: But they did, Labor did, didn't they? Did Labor entice Peter Slipper...?

BRANDIS: I don't know about that but not to become the Speaker...

KING: Alright, but I'm speaking...

BRANDIS: The point is ... the point I want to make, though, Madonna, is the Labor Party doesn't have clean hands here because, for more than two weeks, they hung Harry Jenkins out to dry. And all the honeyed words that were uttered by the Prime Minister in the House of Representatives chamber yesterday can't conceal the fact that for two weeks or more she was trying to stab her own Speaker in the back.

KING: Okay, but I just want to come back to this issue of Peter Slipper here. He was the Government's nomination not the Coalition's nomination. Craig Emerson, is that in the spirit of how Parliament works, that you didn't allow the Coalition's nomination to get up?

EMERSON: Indeed it is. The agreement that was signed with that hug-in and love-in did indicate that if the Speaker was from one side of the Parliament, the Deputy Speaker would be from the other side of Parliament.

KING: But isn't it up to the Coalition to nominate that person? They did have someone in mind.

EMERSON: We all get a vote, and Bruce Scott ran second in that ballot, in that two-horse race.

KING: But he wasn't the Coalition's ... Peter Slipper wasn't the Coalition's nomination.

EMERSON: No he was nominated by our side of politics. And while it was a secret ballot, it doesn't take too much arithmetic to work out that when the vote was 78 votes to 71...

KING: That five of the six cross benchers...

EMERSON: ... at least some of the Independents would have voted for Mr Slipper and those Independents are committed to the parliamentary reform document that we've signed...

KING: And had Mr. Slipper done...

EMERSON: And we implemented that.

KING: Did Mr Slipper do a deal with the Government on this, Craig Emerson?

EMERSON: No, he didn't. And you'll see statements by Mr Slipper to that effect. And indeed Mr Abbott reiterated those statements yesterday when he was congratulating Mr Slipper on his election.

KING: And George Brandis, just before we leave this issue, do you think Peter Slipper will make a good Deputy Speaker of Federal Parliament?

BRANDIS: Look, that's a House of Representatives matter, and I don't really have a view about it.

KING: It's easy to say that...

EMERSON: Well, you just said Harry would be a great Speaker.

BRANDIS: Well, I think Mr Jenkins was the Speaker in the last Parliament and he enjoyed a good reputation...

KING: Yes, but...

BRANDIS: I'm merely reiterating a view that I have heard from my colleagues in the Coalition that Mr Jenkins...

KING: Do you think that Peter Slipper will make a good Deputy Speaker of Parliament?

BRANDIS: Look, that's a House of Representatives matter, I think Madonna, and I don't really have a view about that.

KING: Well, it's easy to say that isn't it?

EMERSON: Yeah, well, you said that Harry would be a good Speaker.

BRANDIS: I think that Mr Jenkins was the Speaker of the last Parliament and he enjoyed a good reputation. I'm not making a judgement, I'm merely reiterating a view that I have heard from my colleagues and members of the Coalition that Mr Jenkins was a good Speaker.

EMERSON: You made a positive judgement about Harry Jenkins, that's fair enough. Now you say you're not equipped to make a judgement about Mr Slipper. If you can make a judgement for one, you can make it about another.

BRANDIS: I hope he does well. I hope he does well.

KING: George Brandis, in fairness you comment on issues related to the House of Representatives all the time on *Inside Canberra*, why is this any different? Is it because you don't want to answer that question?

BRANDIS: No, I hope Mr Slipper does well.

EMERSON: That's hardly an accolade.

KING: We'll leave that one there. This climate change committee and the discussion about the price on carbon, Dr Craig Emerson, does this amount to a broken promise?

EMERSON: We said that we'd establish a committee. We said that we would seek to build a community consensus about putting a price on carbon. That's what we're doing. It's a cross-party committee; it's not a Labor-only committee. It's not even only a Labor-Greens committee. It's Labor, Greens Independents, and if we can find anyone on the Coalition side that believes that humans do contribute to climate change, then they would be welcome on the committee.

KING: George Brandis, why not join the committee and have a say, be inside the tent?

BRANDIS: Madonna, can I just warn you, and warn your listeners that the weaseliest word that will come out of the mouths of Labor politicians in the next few years is the word 'consensus'. Now, that this Government has been put together in the manner in which was ... all of a sudden we're expected to have a consensus about everything, which denies the reality that we actually have a hung Parliament and we have just come out of an election in which both sides got almost 50 percent of the two party preferred vote.

EMERSON: You used to claim that you had a majority.

BRANDIS: ... so we've come out of an election where in which the country is even more split down the middle in all these big issues than it has been in recent memory. So the one word we should watch out for is consensus. There shouldn't be a consensus, there should be a debate. And any politician who says let's have a consensus, what he's really saying is, 'let's avoid having a Parliamentary debate.'

KING: Let's spend a little bit of time on this issue, because we were discussing it in depth yesterday, whether the role of the Opposition is to win Government, or whether, given the closeness of the vote, is there an obligation on the Opposition to try and make this Parliament work so that we're not running back to the polls in the short term. George Brandis, just be

specific, is your job to win Government and oust Julia Gillard? Or is it to attempt to make Parliament work and stop a premature election?

BRANDIS: All members of Parliament have an obligation to make the Parliament function effectively; Government, Opposition, cross-benchers ... all of them do, and all of them will. But again, watch out Madonna, for this insinuation that has come from the Prime Minister and Labor politicians that by an Opposition doing its job, holding the Government to account, having a debate about issues in which the community opinion is divided, we are somehow making the Parliament unworkable. Only a half-hearted democrat is afraid of a vigorous Parliament.

KING: I wanted you to explain to me how you saw it. Dr Emerson, do you see the role of an Opposition here to fight for the things it believes in, that it went to the election on – whether that be on the issue of climate change or the mining tax? Or do you think it, given the closeness of the vote, Tony Abbott, and people like George Brandis, senior members of the Coalition, is to work a little bit harder to make the Parliament work?

EMERSON: Well I expect and hope that Mr Abbott and his colleagues will work to make the Parliament operate effectively. No one on our side of politics is saying anything other than the role of the Opposition is to hold the Government to account for errors that are made. There is obviously ample room for robust Parliamentary debate. On the issue of consensus and climate change: we went to that pre-election, not after the election. We were talking about the need to build community consensus about putting a price on carbon. But the early indications from Mr Abbott are that he's still sulking, that he's angry with the Australian people for not electing him to Prime Minister, and he's going to be a wrecker.

BRANDIS: Oh look, this is coming from a script. Craig is metaphorically speaking and is reading from a script here.

EMERSON: I'm reading from my own mind.

BRANDIS: The fact is, and again let's have a reality check here Madonna, the definition of a well-functioning Parliament is not a Parliament in which the Government always gets its own way.

EMERSON: We never said it was.

BRANDIS: Yeah, well, that is the message. Whenever the Opposition puts out an alternative position, you say...

EMERSON: Tony Abbott said in a speech last night words to the effect that he would support Labor implementing our election promises. Let's see if that happens. Let's see if we are able to get legislation through this Parliament that implements our election policies. I'd welcome a commitment from you George that says you would, in the Senate, pass legislation that implements Labor election promises.

KING: Let's move on to the next topic. Dr Craig Emerson, am I right? Is it your boss' birthday today?

EMERSON: It is indeed.

KING: Well, what did you get her?

EMERSON: Ah, nothing. I turned up at 9 o'clock and made sure that there weren't any difficulties on the floor of the Parliament. Nothing happened anyway. So, I'll wish her a happy birthday, along with a large number of other Caucus members, perhaps a little later in the day.

KING: George Brandis, do you have a birthday present in mind for Julia Gillard?

BRANDIS: Well, I must confess that I wasn't aware that today was Ms Gillard's birthday.

KING: And you're such a student of history.

BRANDIS: Well...

EMERSON: It was announced in Parliament yesterday – in the House of Reps admittedly...

BRANDIS: I was probably too busy watching things that were going on in the Senate. I'd like to wish the Prime Minister a happy birthday, just as...

EMERSON: And many happy returns.

BRANDIS: And if it was Tony Abbott's birthday, I'm sure you'd be wishing him a happy birthday.

EMERSON: Give me the date and I'll put it in the diary.

BRANDIS: I'm afraid I can't help you there either.

EMERSON: I'd give him a call at 5 o'clock in the morning and he'll probably be running up Mt Ainslie or something.

KING: A quick quiz, how old is Ms Gillard today, George Brandis?

BRANDIS: Um, gee, I don't know. Is she 49?

EMERSON: I'll say 39; but I think it is 49 [laughs].

KING: Forty-nine is the correct answer. Alright, let's go to the Wild Rivers legislation. This is Queensland legislation, and it's my understanding that Indigenous leaders are in Canberra to lobby Independent MPs over this. So is the Queensland Government via Stephen Robertson, the Energy Minister. Tony Abbott wants to introduce a private members bill to overturn

the Queensland Government's Wild Rivers law. George Brandis, how hard is the Opposition going to push this issue?

BRANDIS: We believe very strongly in this. We think that what the Bligh Government did to the Aboriginal people on Cape York – basically locked up the entirety of Cape York like it was some sort of environmental theme park, and made it an economic asset of zero value to the Aboriginal people – it destroyed their livelihood effectively. It was a wicked thing to do. Do we know why it was done? It was done as a result of a deal struck at a west-end coffee shop before the last State election for Green preferences. So you have all the inner-city dwellers doing a deal to deprive people in faraway Cape York Peninsula of their livelihood, because of their conceit and their cynicism. We do not agree with it and we are going to stick up for them.

KING: Let me put this on your radar: lobbying by who?

BRANDIS: Well, we ... the Opposition's thinking on these issues is very powerfully influenced by Noel Pearson, who I think speaks with more common sense on Aboriginal issues than almost anyone I can think of. It's also an issue – if I may say so – that Tony Abbott has been deeply and sincerely concerned with for a long time. In January for example, he spend a fortnight living in an Aboriginal community on Cape York. Not in the eyes of the media, it wasn't a sort of made-for-television event. It was because he has a genuine, almost pastoral interest in the wellbeing of the Aboriginal people. And he has become very close to those communities on Cape York.

KING: And Dr Craig Emerson, your view here? Why are you strongly supporting the Queensland legislation?

EMERSON: Well, speaking of wild, that was wild exaggeration on George's part – that the entirety of Cape York has been locked up. This would be news to the people of Cooktown, Coen, Weipa and other settlements on Cape York.

BRANDIS: You talk to the people of Coen, Craig, as I have.

EMERSON: What, are they not allowed to leave their towns? It's all been locked up and made a national park? I mean this is the sort of contribution that doesn't help sensible discussions about this.

BRANDIS: Have you seen a map of the definition of the river land that is covered by this legislation?

EMERSON: George had a pretty good go, so if I could just finish by saying I understand, from media reports, that there are Indigenous groups here today supporting the Wild Rivers legislation. Noel Pearson is a friend of mine and highly respected – he opposes it. Look, I'm not going to state a position here on your program, Madonna. I think there are some real constitutional issues in what the Coalition has proposed.

BRANDIS: No there aren't. It's well supported by the race power.

EMERSON: Let's have a look at all of this when it comes for debate in the Parliament.

KING: Any idea when that might be?

EMERSON: I'm not privy to the scheduling of this. I understand, George, that it might come through the Senate, is that right?

BRANDIS: Look, I'm not privy to the scheduling of it either. But it will be soon.

EMERSON: We're agreeing that we don't know.

KING: You're agreeing that you don't know, and you're agreeing that it may be soon. I've done a really good job this morning.

BRANDIS: It will be quite soon.

KING: And Question Time, what time do we expect that today?

EMERSON: Well, I assumed it was two o'clock. But maybe it's a bit later, but it will certainly happen.

BRANDIS: Senate Question Time, which is always the more interesting Question Time, will be at two o'clock.

KING: Yes. In my experience it is.

EMERSON: I think ours are about to get a little more interesting.

BRANDIS: [laughs] That's true.

KING: I don't know if either of you saw that big blunder on live television last night when the wrong winner was announced on Australia's Next Top Model? I don't expect either of you to be appearing on that show in the short term...

EMERSON: George might appear as a judge.

BRANDIS: Well, we could both appear as judges, Craig. We might have consensus about that.

KING: I wouldn't wait by the phone waiting for that offer. But has there been a moment during a live interview that you've cursed what you've said or how you've answered a question, or you've just had a mental blank and been really embarrassed by your response?

EMERSON: I did have a little pause for a time. Not so long ago I was talking about the new Member for Fraser. And the reason that I paused was that I was doing the interview on the phone in the car and there was a guy behind me gesticulating and trying to get around me. And for about 30 seconds I couldn't remember his name, and the interviewer said, 'you can't

remember his name, can you?' and I said 'that's right ... but it is Andrew Leigh.' So I got there in the end.

KING: And George Brandis, can you top that?

BRANDIS: Ah, no [laughs]. I'm sure there have been occasions. I'm sure there have been many, but I can't immediately recall one.

EMERSON: He's never lost for a word, George, particularly a big word.

KING: I just got this one from Claire, and I bet neither of you, or not many of us, can top this. She says, 'A few years ago I was running a small polling booth in the State election when I walked a neighbour. Being very efficient I said 'Hi Ray' then proceeded to mark him off the roll. Then I realised he was not Ray, but John, whose wife had run off with Ray. Small communities can be hell when everyone knows everyone else's business.' She just knew a little bit too much.

BRANDIS: Well, that's true. I always feel sorry for those communities in big country electorates like Maranoa, where they have very small polling places and you look at the polling results and you find, you know, 92 people voted for the National Party and one person voted for the Labor Party.

EMERSON: And everyone knows who the one is. Apparently in the olden days the 92 people didn't have to turn up. They just rang in and the person staffing the booth filled out the ballot paper. It wouldn't happen nowadays.

KING: Something almost as big as an election on this weekend – we've got AFL and League. Which will be your priority, Senator George Brandis?

BRANDIS: I was rather captivated ... I don't generally follow AFL very closely, but I was rather captivated by the match last weekend, so I will be watching the AFL. I was rather hoping the West Tigers would win the League. So given that they lost, my enthusiasm for the League Grand Final has abated somewhat.

KING: So is West Tigers your team?

BRANDIS: Yes, it is.

EMERSON: They did very well. I thought they put everything on the track that day and they just couldn't quite get there.

BRANDIS: When I was a little boy growing up in Sydney I used to be a great fan of what were then called the Balmain Tigers.

EMERSON: The Balmain Tigers at Leichhardt Oval.

KING: And Craig Emerson, would you be – if you had a choice – AFL or League this weekend to go to, which would it be?

EMERSON: Well, I won't be going to either. If I were given the choice I would go to the League. I want St George to win because they have had two seasons as the best-performed team. They got cleaned up in the semi-finals last year. I think they deserve to win. And I'd like to see Collingwood win the rematch in the AFL Grand Final which will put me offside with every AFL supporter other than those who support Collingwood.

KING: Well...

BRANDIS: Your colleague Senator Conroy is absolutely crestfallen. He's the most loyal Collingwood man in the Parliament, and he was heartbroken yesterday.

EMERSON: Yeah, but I think it was pointed out to him by other senior members of the Government that if that game had gone any longer then St Kilda would have won.

KING: Look I think you two are happy to continue on this conversation without me, I think. I'll talk to you again next week.

BRANDIS: Thanks Madonna.

EMERSON: Thanks Madonna.

[ENDS]