



THE HON DR CRAIG EMERSON MP
MINISTER FOR TRADE

Transcript

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Subjects: Asylum-seeker vote, leadership speculation, same-sex marriage.

GLEN BARTHOLOMEW: The Gillard Labor Government is facing crucial votes in Parliament this week on two key pieces of legislation. On Wednesday, the Government's carbon-pricing scheme will be voted on, and the Government's expected to have the numbers to win that battle. But a vote on Thursday, on the Government's Malaysia Solution, is likely to depend on the decision of the Independent National from Western Australia, Tony Crook; and he says he is yet to make up his mind. For a Government view on the critical parliamentary week ahead, and just what might happen on those crucial days, Marius Benson has spoken to Trade Minister Craig Emerson.

MARIUS BENSON: Craig Emerson, on the vote on the Malaysian people-swap deal, Tony Crook is in the pivotal vote – the National from WA. You must be working hard on winning him over.

CRAIG EMERSON: Well, we do need support for the proposition to avoid people losing their lives at sea. And all the best advice to us is that in order to smash the people-smugglers' model, and their activities, we need to engage in offshore processing. Now, Mr Crook and others have supported offshore processing; most particularly, Mr Abbott has.

BENSON: How confident are you that you will have Tony Crook's vote?

EMERSON: I'm sure both sides of the political divide are talking to Mr Crook. Mr Crook's vote is important. And the reason it is important is that Mr Abbott again is displaying rank political opportunism; playing with human lives; seemingly at this point putting his own career ahead of the lives of asylum-seekers, many of whom have lost their lives.

BENSON: If you lose the vote on Thursday on the Malaysian deal, it will be the first time, reportedly since Federation, a government has been defeated on a final vote on the floor of the House in that way. Is that grounds for believing you have lost the confidence of the House and should be calling an election?

EMERSON: No it isn't. As I have indicated, we would win that vote easily if Mr Abbott and his Coalition partners would come to their senses and value human life more highly than their own political ambitions.

BENSON: How worried are you by the renewed talk of a Rudd leadership move?

EMERSON: Well, I see lots of newspaper coverage of these matters, much of it by outsiders - not all, but much of it by outsiders. I'm an insider and no-one has been talking to me about these issues. So, it's just one of those things: these things come and go, and we will get on with the job of governing in what you have already outlined is an important week in respect of a vote on offshore processing; a vote on carbon pricing. These are the big issues.

BENSON: Sorry, can I just ask you about Kevin Rudd, though? Has he, in your view, overstepped the mark with the level of activity he's been engaged in in recent days?

EMERSON: Mr Rudd obviously is a very active member of our Cabinet. And I'm sure he is getting around the community talking with people about the various issues that confront Australians.

BENSON: But has he overstepped the mark?

EMERSON: No, I think what he is doing is indicating - and I share this view and so does the Prime Minister - that there are very grave risks associated with the prospect of Mr Abbott ever becoming the Prime Minister of Australia. Mr Rudd is working to ensure that that doesn't happen, as is Julia Gillard; as I am; as is Tony Burke over the weekend; as is Greg Combet. You need to do that.

BENSON: But when Kevin Rudd identifies his task as battling Tony Abbott, that's a pretty wide reading of the brief for a foreign minister, isn't it?

EMERSON: I think the task of each and every Caucus member - from Cabinet Minister to outer Minister to all Labor parliamentarians - is to ensure that Labor is re-elected, and that Mr Abbott never, ever takes on the position of Prime Minister of Australia. Because he has shown at every opportunity when there is a choice between the national interest and his own political interests, he's chosen his political interests. There is a lot at stake here, and Mr Rudd is working to ensure that Mr Abbott never becomes Prime Minister; as is Julia Gillard; as am I; and as is the entire Labor team.

BENSON: Mike Rann, the South Australian Premier, is the latest voice to call for the legalisation of same-sex marriage, along with the Victorian ALP - they're all backing it. You're against it; the official Labor line is against same-sex marriage. But would the Government be comfortable - would you be comfortable - with a conscience vote on the issue?

EMERSON: Well I think these things need to be determined through the National Conference processes. You are right: I support the existing position that marriage is a union between a man and a woman, as does the Prime Minister. But the point is this: these are the sorts of issues that are debated in the community, reflecting a great diversity of view within the community. That

diversity of view within the community is reflected within the Labor Party, and I see absolutely nothing wrong with having a debate about these issues. But my position won't change, and that is that marriage is a union between a man and a woman.

BENSON: Craig Emerson, thanks again

EMERSON: Thank you. Thanks very much, Marius.

BARTHOLOMEW: Trade Minister, Craig Emerson, with Marius Benson.