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MINISTER FOR TRADE

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GILLON: Joining me this morning from Canberra is the Trade Minister, Craig Emerson. Good morning to you.

EMERSON: Hello Ashleigh.

GILLON: Minister how confident are you that the current resources we have in Afghanistan is suitable and appropriate?

EMERSON: Very confident, and the reason that we say that is we take advice from the Chief of the Defence Force and the deployment reflects the advice from the Chief of the Defence Force. So that's our position. We'll continue to take that advice. I hope, of course, that the Coalition does take account of the advice of the Chief of the Defence Force. We had Senator Brandis just last week saying the Coalition's position is the one that was being articulated by the Shadow Defence spokesperson – and that is for the deployment of an extra 360 troops plus tanks. That's Senator Johnston. Mr Abbott as we've just seen is saying that he's not sure and he'll ponder it, which is fair enough. But then his Defence Science Shadow Minister who accompanied him to Afghanistan said he spoke to the military there, to the commanders, and they have assured him, and he therefore is assured, that our presence in Afghanistan is right and that we don't need extra defence personnel in Afghanistan. So, we've got three positions: one saying we need more, another saying we don't need any more, and Mr Abbott in the middle saying he's not quite sure and he's going to work it out.

GILLON: Well, the Shadow Attorney-General, Senator George Brandis is joining us now from Brisbane. George Brandis, what did David Johnston know that Tony Abbott didn't when he made that call for more troops to be sent to Afghanistan? Were his comments premature do you think, considering that his position doesn't appear to be concrete Coalition policy at this stage?

BRANDIS: Well, I don't think that's right at all, with respect Ashleigh. Let ... let me just state what the position is. This deployment, which was initiated by the Coalition and continued after the Labor Party won office, has and always

has had, strong bipartisan support. Now, what we've seen in a rather devious way in the last week is the Labor Party trying to insinuate that there is a lack of bipartisan ... full-throated bipartisan commitment for this deployment. Nothing could be further from the truth. First they did it by suggesting that some comments about ... by Senator Johnston that suggested that perhaps we should have some more troops on the ground, somehow reflected a lack of bipartisanship when in fact all Senator Johnston was doing was initiating a debate at the margins. Then we had the Prime Minister's despicable ...

GILLON: But is that really initiating a debate at the margins, Senator, when he is the Defence spokesman? Shouldn't that have come from Tony Abbott? Do you think Mr Abbott will be the one to embrace that call for more resources to go to Afghanistan?

BRANDIS: Well ... well Mr Abbott has, as we know, just come back from visiting the troops in Afghanistan. He's had discussions with the leaders on the ground, and no doubt he will be bringing to Shadow Cabinet a view informed by the discussions he has lately had within the last 48 hours. But that's not really the point I'm trying to make, Ashleigh. The point I'm trying to make is that for an Opposition spokesman to raise issues about the profile of a deployment at the margins is absolutely not a breakdown of bipartisanship. And the other point I was going to go on to make was in an equally devious way the Prime Minister last week put it about, or let it be thought, that the Leader of the Opposition was not visiting Afghanistan at a time when she well knew, the time she gave that dishonest press conference, that he was four days away from making a more extensive visit to Afghanistan than she had done. Now, I'm sick of the Labor Party trying to play short-term 24 hour news cycle politics with what is not an issue of political controversy.

GILLON: Can I just clarify this Senator; do you expect that we'll see a new Opposition policy on Afghanistan within the coming days as Tony Abbott decides whether or not to officially call for more troops to go to that country?

BRANDIS: There's only ever been one Opposition policy on Afghanistan, and it's, as far as I can tell from the Government's position, the same. That is strong, bipartisan commitment to this deployment, and a belief that the troops on the ground should have all the material support that they need. Now you can have a discussion at the margins about troop numbers, or force protection measures. That is not ... to have a discussion like that is not for one moment to suggest that there is not bipartisanship on this, and the Labor Party is being mischievous in implying otherwise.

GILLON: Craig Emerson, is that what the Labor Party is doing? Trying to create a gap here that doesn't exist?

EMERSON: Look, it's true that the Coalition initiated the deployment to Afghanistan. The Coalition has provided bipartisanship about the overall commitment to Afghanistan. But the Coalition is now utterly confused about its position on troop numbers in Afghanistan. As confirmed just now by George Brandis, who I asked on radio last Wednesday whether Senator Johnston's position of 360 more troops plus tanks was Coalition policy and Senator

George Brandis said twice, 'yes that is Coalition policy, that is Tony Abbott's policy'. Now, less than a week later, we don't know what Tony Abbott's policy is.

GILLON: Is that right? Let's just get George Brandis. He is with us here, so we might as well ask. George Brandis, is that what you said last week, George Brandis?

BRANDIS: Certainly Senator Johnston as the Opposition spokesman expresses the views of the Opposition in this area of policy, of course that's right ...

EMERSON: 360 more troops!

BRANDIS: That in a sense goes without saying. He is the spokesman. Having said that ...

GILLON: That isn't something that Tony Abbott has expressed.

BRANDIS: Let me ... let me finish if I may. Since he said that, something very important has happened. And that is, Mr Abbott has himself visited Afghanistan; he spent ten hours on the ground at Tarin Kowt with the troops and with the Commanders, and no doubt he will be informed by the discussions he has lately had with the Commanders on the ground.

GILLON: Which again, brings us to the point that perhaps those comments by the Senator were, perhaps, a bit premature. But I do want to look at the verbal stoush that you mentioned earlier, Senator. We saw that erupt over the past week between Julia Gillard and Tony Abbott. Of course, we heard about the jet lag, the Afghanistan tour saga, who was invited when, who knew about what travel arrangements. Of course Tony Abbott accused the Prime Minister of Machiavellian bastardry prompting this response yesterday from the PM:

[grabs from Julia Gillard and Tony Abbott]

GILLARD: I think Tony's colourful phrase, not warranted. And probably best, before you use such harsh language, to find out what the facts are.

ABBOTT: What I want to make crystal clear is that I just won't cop any suggestion that I am indifferent to the fate of our troops or uninterested in the success of their mission. I just won't cop that.

JOURNALIST: Did Julia Gillard commit and act of bastardry?

ABBOTT: Well, look, she said what she said. Ah, I've said what I said. Ah, I think it was important to say what I said.

GILLON: Craig Emerson, Julia Gillard was playing cheap politics wasn't she, when she jumped on those jetlag comments, knowing full well that Tony Abbott couldn't respond with the truth about his travel plans to Afghanistan for security reasons?

EMERSON: Well, it's not as if the Labor Party put into Tony Abbott's mouth the words that he didn't want to be jetlagged for his visit to the Conservative Party Convention in the United Kingdom. Tony Abbott is responsible for those words. And the Australian people will make a judgement one way or another about that. They'll care, they won't care, they'll be indifferent. But to suggest that this is all the Labor Party's fault for Tony Abbott making that statement is absolutely ridiculous. These are Tony Abbott's words.

BRANDIS: You're still playing politics with this, Craig, aren't you?

GILLON: George Brandis, do you believe the Prime Minister when she says that neither she, nor her office, leaked that story in the first place?

BRANDIS: No, I don't. This Prime Minister has a credibility problem. Let's remember, Ashleigh, precisely what happened last week. The Prime Minister in Brussels did a press conference. She knew that within four days – before the week was out – Tony Abbott was going to make a visit to Afghanistan, which in fact was going to be longer than the visit she made to Afghanistan. She knew in fact that Mr Abbott had wanted to be embedded with the troops and to go out on an operational mission – but for reasons of security that proposal that came from Mr Abbott was not allowed to happen. Well-knowing that, well-knowing that he was about to visit Afghanistan, Julia Gillard looked down the barrel of a television camera and mocked Mr Abbott for making an excuse that she knew, for security reasons, he had to make in order to maintain the confidentiality of his visit.

EMERSON: What? He had to say he was jetlagged?

BRANDIS: It was manipulative, it was dishonest, it was Machiavellian, it was utterly not a decent thing for her to do, and it was – in my view – sub-prime ministerial behaviour.

EMERSON: How absurd.

BRANDIS: But Senator, the journalist who wrote that story in the first place says that his information didn't come from the Prime Minister, or her office.

EMERSON: That's right.

GILLON: But you're still accusing the Prime Minister of lying about that point, that her office did leak this?

BRANDIS: You asked me whether I believed the Prime Minister, and my answer is no. This was an attempt by Labor Party spin-merchants, who are notorious for this – who ran a Government for three years on spinning stories in order to win the 24 hour news cycle – fostered this impression that Mr Abbott was indifferent to what was going on in Afghanistan, well-knowing, well-knowing that before the week was out he was making a longer visit to Afghanistan than the Prime Minister in fact made, but couldn't say so at the time. If she were honest she could simply have said 'well no doubt Mr Abbott

will be making his own visit to Afghanistan in due course.' That's what she should have said, if she was honest.

GILLON: Craig Emerson, where could this have come from if it didn't come from the Prime Minister's office?

EMERSON: Well, you've referred to Phil Coorey saying that he didn't get this information from the Prime Minister's office. What was the information – the alleged information? That is that Mr Abbott was not accompanying the Prime Minister on the visit to Afghanistan. That was the alleged information. And this alleged information has forced – as George asserts – in a Machiavellian way, words to come out of Tony Abbott's mouth? The only thing that he could possibly say in those circumstances is that he didn't want to arrive in England for the Conservative Party Convention jetlagged? Those were the words of Tony Abbott, not Julia Gillard. She didn't force them out of his mouth.

GILLON: The latest Newspoll is suggesting that Mr Abbott's popularity has been dented by the Afghanistan saga. The Newspoll CEO Martin O'Shannessy joins me now.

[Interview with Newspoll CEO]

GILLON: And just before we do go to a break, George Brandis, what's your reaction to those poll results? Do you blame the Afghanistan stoush for Tony Abbott's drop in the polls?

BRANDIS: Well I think that is the reason, yes. Because if you look at when the poll was taken, it was taken from the 8th to the 10th of October. That is on Friday, Saturday and Sunday. Mr Abbott's visit to Afghanistan was first reported on the radio and the TV news shows on Sunday morning. So the vast majority of people who were polled, at the time they were polled, would be unaware of the fact that Mr Abbott in fact was going to Afghanistan all along, and would be unaware of the Prime Minister's dishonesty about this. So the Labor Party did have a short term tactical win in trying to make political capital out of what they knew to be a dishonest position – that is the insinuation that Mr Abbott wasn't going to visit Afghanistan.

GILLON: What about you, Craig Emerson, do you think that? Because they're saying the polls, when it comes to that two-party preferred number, it's still neck and neck. Does that show that Labor hasn't managed to convince voters yet that the Independents made the right call in installing your Government back, and the Prime Minister into the Lodge?

EMERSON: Ashleigh, there will be 75-plus Newspolls between now and the scheduled end of this term of Parliament. And I think it's probably best that I leave the commentary to experts such as Martin O'Shanessy, yourself, George Brandis and others. We'll just keep on making the decisions – as Julia Gillard is – in the national interest. Hard decisions for our country. That's what we're focused on, and not a week-to-week discussion and analysis of Newspoll and other polls.

GILLON: Craig Emerson, George Brandis, stay with us. Coming up after the break we'll look at the chances of an offshore processing centre ever being built in East Timor. Stay with us.

[commercial break]

GILLON: Welcome back to AM Agenda. Today the Immigration Minister, Chris Bowen, is meeting with East Timorese officials in Dili about potentially building a regional processing centre for asylum seekers. Craig Emerson and George Brandis are joining me this morning on our panel of politicians. Craig Emerson, the estimates are that this centre would cost more than \$30 million to build and more than \$30 million a year to run. Would that be primarily funded by Australia if this does go ahead?

EMERSON: Well, as you say, Minister Bowen is in discussions in Dili today. I won't set out the costing sources – sources of funds – for the any such centre. I think that's a little premature. But there are some positive indications coming out of the Government in East Timor about the possibility of a processing centre in East Timor. I do well remember, again George Brandis with whom I had many discussions in the election campaign, saying that this had been completely ruled out by the Government of East Timor. And a parliamentary debate had voted against it, therefore it wasn't going to happen. Well, something is happening in East Timor. I don't think we should get ahead of ourselves, Ashleigh, about how much it would cost and who is going to fund it. Let the discussions take their course. And Mr Bowen will no doubt make a statement about that at some stage.

GILLON: Minister, Jose Ramos Horta says that any centre built there should be temporary – is that the Government's position too?

EMERSON: Well, let's just see how the discussions go there today. And this won't be the end of the discussions. I'm sure that they don't intend – in fact Chris Bowen has said that when he goes there he's not going to come back with a final decision. It's an engagement, which is a very good thing, now that we're in a position to do that full engagement. We're out of the caretaker mode. Let Mr Bowen make those statements, which I understand may well happen today. There will be some sort of statement. But I think we shouldn't expect more than the sorts of reporting that is coming through today. This will be a bit of a process. But what we absolutely believe in, Ashleigh, is that this a regional issue, it's a regional challenge, and it therefore warrants a regional solution. That is, in the region where people are departing and arriving by boat rather than out in the Pacific – the Pacific solution with Nauru, which is obviously the one that George Brandis and Tony Abbott and Scott Morrison think is the way to go. There is a fundamental difference here on policy, there's no doubt about that.

GILLON: Well, George Brandis, things do seem to look a little bit more promising in terms of the reception that Chris Bowen is getting at the moment. More so, indeed, than a couple of months ago. When it comes to those cost estimates though, they're actually pretty reasonable, aren't they, compared

with other options in Australia? Christmas Island cost over \$300 million to build.

BRANDIS: Well, I ... look Ashleigh, I'm not going to talk about costings of something that I don't think is ever, ever going to happen. But let me just make this point. You saw once again from Craig trying to put over the idea that this is a regional problem needing a regional solution.

EMERSON: It is.

BRANDIS: That's the latest script from Hawker Britton and the spin doctors.

EMERSON: I've been saying it consistently.

BRANDIS: And you've been sticking to the script very loyally. You're a very good party slave, Craig, well done.

EMERSON: Thank you for that high accolade, George.

BRANDIS: The fact is ... the fact is that this is a problem of the Labor Party's creation. When the Labor Party won the 2007 election there wasn't a problem. The flow of refugee boats had virtually stopped. It was down to a negligible three per year over the last six years as a result of the tough policies of the Coalition. After the Labor Party weakened those tough policies in 2008 the flow started again. When the Labor Party came into power there was a negligible number of people in immigration detention. Today, today on the latest figures reported in the press this morning, there are 4,863 people in immigration detention onshore or on Christmas Island. This is a problem of the Labor Party's creation because it does not believe in a strong border protection policy.

GILLON: Well, we all look forward to seeing how the Immigration Minister, Chris Bowen, goes with those talks today. And of course we'll bring you anything he has to say a bit later in the day. Craig Emerson, George Brandis, thank you for joining us as always.

BRANDIS: Thank you Ashleigh.

EMERSON: Ok, thank you Ashleigh. Bye bye George.