



THE HON DR CRAIG EMERSON MP
MINISTER FOR TRADE

Transcript
ABC Lateline with Ali Moore
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E&OE

Subjects: asylum seekers, carbon pricing, pokies reform.

ALI MOORE:

Well at the end of a very eventful week in Federal politics, we were joined just a short time ago for our Friday night forum by the Minister for Trade Craig Emerson in Canberra, and the Opposition Spokesman on Climate Action and Environment Greg Hunt, who was in Melbourne.

Gentlemen, thank you very much for joining Lateline this Friday night.

GREG HUNT:

Pleasure.

CRAIG EMERSON:

It's a pleasure Ali.

MOORE:

Craig Emerson, you first. It's been a real red letter week for the Government: a win on carbon; a humiliating backdown on asylum seekers. How did it come to the spectacle that we had yesterday of the Prime Minister calling a media conference to announce it was now clear that the Migration Act amendments would not pass the Parliament? You'd in fact known that for weeks, hadn't you?

EMERSON:

Hope springs eternal, and there was just a slight hope that Mr Abbott would come to his senses and actually vote for offshore processing, because he has declared time and time again that he supports offshore processing as a deterrent to people smugglers. And, in fact, in government they supported offshore processing, but in fact he confirmed that he was voting for onshore processing and that's what we've got. So that's the reality.

Don't listen to what Mr Abbott says; just watch what he does. And he says, for example, that he's the steelworkers' friend, and voted the day before against a steelworkers' assistance package. The next day of course he indicates that while he actually supports offshore processing, he confirmed he would vote for onshore processing.

MOORE:

But just to go back to this announcement yesterday: I mean it did seem very much as if it was all a new revelation, when in fact - you say

hope springs eternal - but you are in government, not Tony Abbott. You had carriage of this, not Tony Abbott.

EMERSON:

Well on that argument Ali, there is no obligation on any Opposition in any Australian Parliament to behave in the national interest, or to have any regard for the national interest.

Now, what you make is a political point, which is 'oh well, Oppositions don't have to vote for government legislation'. Very often that's true. We might disagree on industrial relations or on tax, but when it comes to matters of national interest, even former Prime Minister John Howard used to exhort Labor, in Opposition, to support legislation, for example, on national security, in the national interest. He did that time and time again, and time and time again, Ali, we supported that legislation.

MOORE:

Well Greg Hunt, the Prime Minister says more boats will now come. Have you helped to put out the welcome mat for asylum seekers?

HUNT:

Well, no we haven't, and I think it's important to remember the history here. We had a very effective offshore processing system. The ALP campaigned against offshore processing. In 2008 they abolished offshore processing. And since then twelve and a half thousand people have come to Australia.

The ALP said that was all by chance; there was no pull factor that resulted from abolishing offshore processing. And then they decided, 'well, in fact, offshore processing is the only solution'. It is the principal solution, along with other tough measures. But we could work with them. And if the Prime Minister recalls Parliament, as she should, on Monday or Tuesday, it would take 15 minutes to move an amendment that would give the Prime Minister 146 countries through which she could carry out offshore processing, including Papua New Guinea, and including Nauru.

MOORE:

Now, let me ask you both this question, because there was some suggestion this morning that there was a potential compromise discussed: and that is that the Coalition would agree to allow the amendments through in return for the Government agreeing to reopen Nauru. Can either of you knock that out of the park or confirm it?

EMERSON:

Well, I can, and what the legislation actually does is it talks about offshore processing generally and leaves it to the government of the day to nominate the processing centre which it thinks is the right way to go. So this ...

MOORE:

But there was no compromise along these lines?

EMERSON: None was put to Mr Abbott, and why would you put any further compromise with Mr Abbott? You couldn't be any more reasonable. And I think maybe your viewers don't have this information yet, so I'm happy to share it.

We did not prescribe Malaysia. We simply prescribed offshore processing in such a way that the government of the day, if it happened to be an Abbott government, could choose Nauru. We didn't ask Mr Abbott to support Malaysia; we said 'let's just have legislation that deals with the High Court decision'. Now Mr Abbott's got this huge dose of compassion and he says 'well it's all right to have offshore processing, but only in countries that are signatories to the Refugee Convention'. All through the period of the Howard Government Nauru wasn't, and here's a country ...

MOORE: All right.

EMERSON: ... that is a signatory to the Refugee Convention ...

HUNT: I think I should say something here Ali.

MOORE: So Greg Hunt, from now on can we...

EMERSON: ... and that's Somalia.

MOORE: ... can we assume that from now on...

EMERSON: That's Somalia.

MOORE: ... all Coalition offshore processing will be done in countries that are signatories to the UN Convention? As Craig Emerson points out, that wasn't the case when you were using Nauru under the Howard Government.

HUNT: Well, that is the very amendment which we have proposed. It is, by the way, the election pledge and promise which the Prime Minister made in July of last year. She said there would be no offshore processing in any country which was other than a signatory to the UN Convention on Refugees. Now we have moved one simple amendment: and that is firstly to ensure that we have unequivocal compliance with the High Court, and secondly to ensure that the conditions and safety and standards of processing are fully acceptable. Now ...

EMERSON: Well that's not true.

HUNT: Now, what we have said ...

EMERSON: That's just not true.

HUNT: Enough Craig, enough. What we have said is that we will help this Government. We want to solve this problem, but the Prime Minister will not solve the problem. And she could solve it by recalling Parliament. And in 15 minutes on

Monday or Tuesday, if she accepts her own amendment - the very condition which she laid down - we would have a solution. And we would have finally, under this Government, offshore processing, because they have never processed a single person overseas.

MOORE: All right Craig Emerson, which bit's not true?

EMERSON: Well, Greg just said that there would be acceptable standards under their legislation, under their amendment. What they're saying is that if you are a signatory to the UN Refugee Convention, it's okay. Well, Iran is a signatory to the UN Refugee Convention. And so is Somalia. So Somalia's fine, but Malaysia's not. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees says that the arrangements we put in place with Malaysia are acceptable; that Nauru would be unacceptable. And I reckon I can guess what the UNHCR, the High Commission for Refugees, would say about Tony Abbott's option of Somalia.

MOORE: Well let Craig...

EMERSON: It's absurd.

MOORE: Let Greg Hunt respond to that.

HUNT: The answer is very simple. We could have Nauru or Papua New Guinea. Papua New

Guinea was specifically set down by this Government as an option. They've announced...

EMERSON: That's right.

HUNT: ... East Timor; they've announced PNG; they've announced Manus; they've announced Malaysia. They haven't delivered on any of them, and surely that's a test of competency. But with our amendment, and the Prime Minister has it within her gift to accept or reject, they could commence processing ...

MOORE: Yeah you've made that point Greg Hunt...

HUNT: ... processing on PNG or Nauru...

MOORE: Let me ask you...

HUNT: ... immediately.

MOORE: ... how comfortable do you think Australians are with the fact that it now appears a fact that very shortly we will have more asylum seekers on bridging visas living and working in the community as they wait to be processed? Do you think that Australians are very comfortable with that?

HUNT: Well, my view is that people want to see a safe border control system; safe in terms of we have control over our borders. At the moment we have just lost control over our borders. And, secondly, they want to see that people smugglers are put out of business so there is no risk of drownings at sea. That's what people want.

EMERSON: Well, why won't you let Labor enable that to happen?

MOORE: So you don't think that Australians will be comfortable with this?

HUNT: Individuals will make up their own mind. And we want to give the Government the opportunity, but they will not take the opportunity because they simply don't want to be seen to be processing in Nauru or even PNG. And that is something the Prime Minister has within her own gift, but for whatever reason she's standing in the way of a solution.

MOORE: Craig Emerson, do you think that Australians are going to be comfortable? And if you do, then obviously that begs a question of why onshore processing was not your preferred policy option.

EMERSON: Well, I don't disagree with the assessment that Greg has just made as to the aspirations of

Australians. They do want an orderly immigration program. And they don't want to see people dying at sea, such as the 45 people who lost their lives at Christmas Island before Christmas. Now what the ...

HUNT: Why did you abolish...

EMERSON: ... Leader of the Opposition...

HUNT: Why did you abolish...

EMERSON: What the Leader of the Opposition...

HUNT: Why did you abolish offshore processing?

MOORE: Let Craig Emerson ...

EMERSON: What the Leader of the Opposition has done has ensured that there will be more risky voyages, and he seeks to profit politically from it.

MOORE: All right, we need to...

EMERSON: He values his own career more highly than he values human life, and that's the truth of the matter.

MOORE: Ok, we need to move on. Greg Hunt, if you win government, Greg Hunt, at the next election Tony Abbott has given a commitment, written in blood, that the Coalition will repeal the carbon tax legislation. How are you going to get that through the Senate?

HUNT: Well, we will, and we can. The reason why is really very simply. Firstly, the election will be a referendum on the carbon tax. The last election could have been a referendum, but the Government of course, through the Prime Minister and the Treasurer famously made it clear there would be no carbon tax at any time under any government that they led. The next election, however, will be absolutely a referendum on this issue. On day one, we will give instructions to the public service to commence the task.

MOORE: Yes, but referendum or no referendum, your Senate is still going to stay the same, isn't it?

HUNT: And if it goes to the Parliament, which it will if we are fortunate to win, then the result is this: the ALP will have a choice - they either stand in the way of the legislation, or they don't. If they thumb their nose at the Australian people for a second consecutive election, then we will go to a double dissolution. My belief is that they will move aside; that they will hear what the people have said. There will be a different leader if they lose the election ...

MOORE: Let's ask Craig Emerson. Will you stand aside? Will you capitulate if there is an election?

EMERSON: No, we won't. But we won't be the issue, because Mr Abbott himself will not remove the carbon pricing regime. And the reason he won't is that he will need to increase taxes, to cut the age pension, to remove the trebling of the tax-free threshold. And remember he said this week 'oh, this one's in blood'. Well, the last time he made a rock-solid, iron-clad promise it was to not tamper with the Medicare safety net before the 2004 election. And as soon as they got re-elected, what did he do? He tampered with the Medicare safety net. He won't remove it.

MOORE: Well, I think both sides of politics can make the argument about changing your promises. So, let's move on. Craig Emerson, after the carbon tax battles and the backdown on asylum seekers, is there really any appetite, particularly among Labor backbenchers, for pokies reform? The Financial Review claims today that there's a \$40 million war chest which will target Labor MPs in marginal seats. Is there much appetite?

EMERSON: Well, there is a need for reform in this area. The Productivity Commission report was initiated and it has reported that the average loss for problem gamblers is \$21,000 a year. That means, in many cases, broken homes; it

can mean domestic violence; it can be a terrible tragedy. And ...

MOORE: But this reform could be political suicide, couldn't it?

EMERSON: Well, we don't just get up out of bed every morning and check the opinion polls. If we did that, we wouldn't have pressed ahead with the reform on carbon pricing; we know that's not popular. We know that in relation to poker machines that reform is needed. I notice that the clubs say 'it won't work; will hurt'. We've offered to trial mandatory pre-commitment. We've offered to trial that. My understanding is that there may be a positive response to that. But rather than saying it won't work, join with us in the trials.

MOORE: So would the trial start before you deadline from Andrew Wilkie?

EMERSON: I don't know; I haven't got for you the date on which a trial would start, because it hasn't been agreed. But I think that there are positive indications. And I would think that any organisation that says a measure won't work should in all honesty then say 'let's have a look and see whether it will work or not'. But I have to say this in relation to the \$40 million for the campaign against marginal seats: that might not be pleasant. But we are not going to be in a

position where as soon as an organisation says 'we've got 10s of millions of dollars and we're going to throw you out of office' that we then capitulate and walk away from what we consider to be in the national interest.

MOORE:

Greg Hunt, the Greens have put forward a compromise today. They've abandoned the mandatory pre-commitment call – though I have to say they have also said they will back the legislation as is stands – but this is another option: abandon the pre-commitment, and calling instead for pokies to be limited to \$1 bets. Of course, that does side-step the whole clubs campaign against a licence to punt. Do you support that?

HUNT:

Well the Greens obviously wanted the carbon tax; they wanted onshore processing ...

EMERSON:

Well you gave them that; you gave them onshore processing.

HUNT:

...so I have a suspicion that they will get what they want from the Government on this one. Quite clearly, quite clearly there is a genuine issue here about deep concern, deep issues of problem gambling. The risk is that you simply move people from clubs and pubs into online gambling, into circumstances where they have the home, they have the internet. They have all of the tools available to them, but none of the

controls. So what is the solution in our view? It is two things. Firstly, a real focus on individuals: focus and find the individuals who have the problems. Secondly, put in place tough conditions around the country on those that foster problem gamblers. So, they are the two things: focus on the problem gambler.

MOORE: Would you support a trial, though?

HUNT: I haven't looked at the details, so I'm not going to give you a false answer on that. What I do say ...

EMERSON: You don't have to: it's a concept.

MOORE: Yes, as a concept Greg Hunt; as a principle?

HUNT: is that the principles ... The two principles that I want to pursue and we want to pursue are problem gamblers themselves ...

EMERSON: We just heard that.

MOORE: We did, we did. But would you support in principle the idea of a trial?

EMERSON: He won't answer the question. He won't answer the question.

HUNT: I am cautious about anything which is mandatory across the country which is simply going to move people from pubs and clubs to online situations.

EMERSON: A trial!

HUNT: As for trials, people can engage in trials willingly. I don't have a problem with that. I do have a problem with a system which simply shifts the problem from being in the public gaze to in the privacy of the home.

MOORE: Alright. We're out of time, so I have to put one very last question to Craig Emerson. There is a suggestion that in fact that Greens compromise came from the Government. Can you knock that on the head?

EMERSON: Yes I can. We don't support that proposal, on the \$1 limits.

MOORE: Alright. Greg Hunt, Craig Emerson, many thanks for joining Lateline tonight.

EMERSON: Thanks Ali.

HUNT: Thanks a lot.

