



**HON CRAIG EMERSON MP**

MINISTER FOR SMALL BUSINESS, INDEPENDENT CONTRACTORS AND  
THE SERVICE ECONOMY  
MINISTER ASSISTING THE MINISTER FOR FINANCE ON  
DEREGULATION

**INSIDE CANBERRA**

Madonna King and Seven Ciobo

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**SUBJECTS:** UK court decision on terminally ill teenager; DNA testing for child support; teenage drinking; changes to Parliamentary procedures.

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**KING:** You know there's few things we talk about that are not decided by the politicians. Just think of the big issues of the past couple of days. The Family Law system, recycled water, the alcohol intake of our children, Brisbane's property prices. So let's put them on the spot again this week, *Inside Canberra*, with Steven Ciobo, the Opposition Small Business spokesman. Good morning.

**CIOBO:** Good morning Madonna.

**KING:** And Labor's Small Business Minister, Dr Craig Emerson. Good morning Doctor.

**EMERSON:** You can call me Craig. Hi how are you?

**KING:** I'm well thank you. Now, in fact, I have a policy of not calling politicians by their first name. Don't take any offence. I'm not sure why. So you'll stay Dr Emerson.

**EMERSON:** No problem. Just Emmo will do. Emmo will do.

**KING:** I certainly wouldn't go to you for a medical diagnosis.

**EMERSON:** No, no, I do cut price consultations, but you know, just a little job on the side.

**KING:** Let me put you both on the spot here. It's a story that was on AM and you may not have heard it, so I just want to tell you what it is because it's just gripped my heart. It's a terminally ill teenager and she's won the right to die after she was taken to court by a hospital that wanted to force her to have a heart transplant. The 13 year old British girl has been in and out of

hospital for most of the past 10 years but now she's refused any more operations to prolong her life and her parents say, well you know, it's broken our heart, the decision, but given how sick she's been, her heart can only pump 10 per cent of its capacity, they've allowed her to take that decision. What a difficult decision and I guess I'm asking you as much as politicians as, you know, men. I mean how would something like that be dealt with in Australia?

EMERSON: Gee I don't know the laws. It's not, on the face of it, euthanasia. She's not being asked to be euthanased, but just to die naturally and I would say, as a person, that she has the right to do that and that seems to have been upheld by the court based on your report just now Madonna.

KING: But I guess, does a 13 year old have the, have the mind, the capability to decide that they do want to die?

EMERSON: Again, you're talking about a guy who's, to a fellow, who's not done one unit of law in his life, Steve might now, but just on the basis...

KING: I guess I don't want law...

EMERSON: Yeah I know. I accept that. On the basis of just, sort of, human decency, I would say, as a person, that she does have that right. If she's exhausted and just can't see any improvement then, you know, society insisting that she must stay alive so that society feels better about it doesn't really strike a chord with me. I've got enormous sympathy for the poor little girl.

KING: Yes, Steven Ciobo?

CIOBO: Well Madonna, I had the, I did get to see a news item about that situation, an extended interview with her and, look, she appeared to me to be exceptionally rational given the circumstances about her predicament. You know, there was a high chance, she indicated, that the operation for a heart transplant would not be successful and in fact could reduce her chance of, you know, quality of life and so on balance she's obviously taken the decision that she'd rather stick with the pathway that she's currently on and it would appear that her parents are supportive of that. I imagine that if they thought she was making a gross error of judgement that they would perhaps be more, you know, less supportive and so, look, some people are just dealt such extraordinary, extraordinarily difficult circumstances with their lives.

KING: Yes, and to hear a 13 year old, you know, just saying well you know I want to be surrounded by my loved ones, but I tell you what, you know, if your 13 year old, that was their view, it would break your heart wouldn't it.

EMERSON: It would be heart-wrenching.

CIOBO: Very tough.

KING: All right, well let's move on to a family issue, but a Family Law issue. A case yesterday involving a man owed \$70,000 from a woman who claimed to be the mother of his child and he wasn't, he wasn't, but it took more than a decade to prove it by a DNA test. That led to a big discussion yesterday and whether a DNA test should have to be done before Child Support is paid. What do you think of that idea?

EMERSON: Instinctively, Madonna, I see some merit in it. I'm not putting a Government position here but it certainly has the capacity to resolve the issue one way or another and very decisively so.

KING: Because this is not an isolated case Steven Ciobo. Would you support a DNA test before Child Support is paid?

CIOBO: I don't believe it should be mandatory Madonna. That's for certain. But I certainly understand that there'd be a number of people who would feel that where there's doubt there should be an opportunity to confirm one way or another. I think we've got to make sure that we're motivated by what's in the best interests of the child always.

KING: Yes.

CIOBO: And so it's important that we look very closely at any measures that we take or steps we take down this pathway. As I understand it the Attorney General, Robert McClelland, will be looking at a law to prohibit unauthorised DNA tests. Really we'll have a close look at what the actual architecture of that law will be and ensure that there are adequate safeguards in place but always primarily focused on the best interests of the child.

KING: Because there's various changes to Family Law coming in from next January including the ability of mistresses to be able to claim spousal maintenance. I read this morning where 121 children were abducted and taken out Australia just this year. Yesterday on the program there was a feeling from men and women that maybe the Family Law Court system and the Child Support system wasn't transparent enough. Is there an argument? Do you get complaints to your offices about this issue?

EMERSON: Never ending complaints in fact but I don't think that's necessarily evidence that the system is broken. As Steve says, you know, the rights of the child are very important here. There's an enormous amount of emotion and trauma associated with couples breaking up and, yes, we get lots of complaints, we do, but I don't know how to design an ideal system that makes everyone happy. It just can't be done.

KING: Before I go to Steven Ciobo on that, you say you're inundated with complaints on this issue Craig Emerson. What types of things top that? What would be the number one complaint in this area that you get?

EMERSON: Oh, basically blokes saying that they pay too much and that they're former partners or wives have hooked up with someone else who's,

you know, got a lot of money and it's just driving the blokes into bankruptcy. Now there were reforms recently which have had what seems to be a desired effect in this regard and so I would say that more recently we've had less inquiries and less complaints but they are still a constant feature of our electorate office.

KING: Steven Ciobo. Do you get similar complaints?

CIOBO: I do Madonna. Look, this is one of those areas where there's not a black and white and in my experience more often than not what you have are two or more aggrieved parties all of whom have a degree of truth and of merit in their arguments and they are often what are conflicting and that's what makes it such a difficult area. The reforms that the former Government put through, which were done on a bipartisan basis, off the back of a Parliamentary Committee Report, I do believe have made significant improvements in the Family Law system. Really, I guess Madonna, and I think it would be fair to say both sides of the Parliament would take the view that the Family Law Court structure should be the last resort, not the first.

KING: Yes.

CIOBO: And as much as possible we need to have the, you know, the parents, the husbands and wives sitting down and resolving this ideally in a conflict-free situation but where that's not possible that of course you're always going to have ongoing conflict through the court system.

EMERSON: Madonna, if I could commend the previous Government for the reforms that it made in this area but also brought in Family Relationship Centres I think and we're continuing in that vein. So, again, Steve's point is right and if we can, you know, deal with the problem before it gets into a highly legalistic system we can make some progress in this very difficult area.

KING: *Inside Canberra* this morning with Steven Ciobo, Opposition Small Business spokesman and Labor's Small Business Minister, Dr Craig Emerson. Let's move on to a topic that you might not agree on: alcohol. A study of the nation's underage drinkers found that more than half a million of them, half a million, and we're talking about kids aged 12-17 drank 175 million drinks in one year. This is an epidemic and I'm wondering what you think the problem is here. Is it parents? Is it easily accessible alcohol? Is it peer group pressure?

EMERSON: Madonna, there's always been a lot of drinking by teenagers and by that I mean, you know, kids 17-18 and so on. What disturbs me is that that seems to be on the increase but even more worryingly the incidence of drinking amongst very young people, you know, 12 and onwards and even younger than that...

KING: We know that.

EMERSON: I think that's a big social problem.

KING: Yeah, you say it's a social problem but where is the problem? Is it with parents? Is it with how easy it is to buy it? Is it peer group pressure? What do you think is the problem here?

EMERSON: Look, I think that, I'm a bit old fashioned in this regard, that society's got more lax, there's less discipline, there's less a sense of discipline and obligation in our society and I think in some cases parents probably are too accommodating, you know, of drinking by very young kids. As I said when we were leaving school and going to Uni let's not pretend that there wasn't a lot of drinking going on...

KING: No, but you weren't drinking at 12.

EMERSON: No, absolutely not. I remember the first drink I had was about 16 and it was a scotch whisky and I nearly threw up. I started late but...

KING: I mean, starting late at 16, that's not late is it?

EMERSON: Well in the country town I grew up in it was. I've got to tell you, in the country town I grew up in, it was quite late.

KING: So are you saying the situation may be no worse than it was when we were young?

EMERSON: Look, I think it is worse Madonna. Obviously in a lot of these areas the reporting of the incidences is greater and more effective but having said that I just get a sense that it is worse. I, as you do and your listeners do, see lots of footage of young people just rolling around drunk in streets and I don't recall that so much in the olden days so to speak.

KING: Ok, Steven Ciobo, how do you see this?

CIOBO: Madonna it's, without a doubt, a cultural problem in this country although I don't believe it's purely confined to this country. There are, I believe, many examples globally where alcohol abuse is rampant among teenagers so...

KING: But it's not in places like Italy and France is it?

CIOBO: Well to be honest with you I don't know. Certainly popular culture would say that no it's not, but I'd be more inclined to look at what the international research actually says. But that notwithstanding Madonna, I represent, as you know, the Gold Coast and, as everyone knows, the Gold Coast is often reputed as this rite of passage Schoolies Week that we have where there's that culture of drinking to excess. I've got some concerns because what we need to focus on is, of course, doing as much education as possible to reduce the incidence of teen drinking. The other key concern I have with this year's Schoolies, Madonna, is that, as you know, the Government recently hiked up the excess of taxation, I should say, the excise

of taxation on pre-mixed drinks arguing that this was going to combat the effects of teen drinking. We now have a situation where, as a result of this massive tax hike by the Rudd Government, we now have, in relative terms, bottled spirits being much, much cheaper than actually pre-measured drinks. Now I predict that this will be the worst Schoolies ever as schoolies are mixing their own drinks, mixing their own spirits with soft drink instead of the situation that existed before where they would get a regulated, measured amount of alcohol per drink.

EMERSON: Madonna, the Coalition can't have it both ways. It said this was a big revenue grab and then more recently says the revenue's not there and if there's any accuracy to that it's because people are drinking less.

KING: Let me say no. Can I but in there because the independent report and this is by the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre suggests that is not true Dr Craig Emerson. They're saying the Government generates something like \$107 million in taxes for the Government. The Government's making about \$200 in tax from every underage drinker each year. It actually disagrees with the Government increasing it in one area, that is the alcopops tax, but not in other areas.

EMERSON: Well I'm just saying, stories the other day saying the revenue is nothing like was being projected...now it cannot be the situation.

KING: This is an independent report.

EMERSON: Well it can't be the situation, Madonna, that the revenue is below expectations and the incidence of drinking of alcopops is up. It can't arithmetically be the case.

CIOBO: Well Madonna, the problem is that this was a tax grab by the Government dressed up as being a health exercise.

EMERSON: See Steve is trying to have it both ways.

CIOBO: No, I'm not trying to have it both ways. The reality is, and this is straightforward common sense, if you make ready to drink alcopops much more expensive then of course people simply substitute their pre-measured alcopop with a bottle of spirits, a bottle of soft drink and that's what we're seeing.

EMERSON: And there's tax on those too.

KING: All right but the tax isn't as high. But let me just come back, let's forget the politics for a moment, I mean the question is do we really need to fix this issue of binge drinking among teenagers or are we beating it up and it's a bit like when we were at school and we're all getting a little bit hypersensitive to it?

CIOBO: Education is the key Madonna. That cannot be missed. If we keep educating young teenagers through programs such as the Life Centres then we are going to ensure that we reduce the incidence of drinking to excess.

EMERSON: I think also Madonna if there can be less status, related to Steve's point, less status associated with getting blind drunk. It's actually not the most attractive vision to see, you know, young blokes and young girls falling down in shopping malls.

CIOBO: We see it with our sporting heroes too, of course, Madonna. I mean, there's barely a week goes by that there's not, you know, an AFL player or a rugby league player or a rugby union player who, in the headlines, for some kind of, you know, incident that's occurred because they've been out drinking and I think that's unfortunate too.

KING: All right *Inside Canberra* this morning with Dr Craig Emerson and Steven Ciobo. Just a last question before I let you go. We're going to talk more about this tomorrow but an inquiry is underway in Canberra by the House Standing Committee on Procedure into the conduct of Parliament and I guess this is how Question Time works, sitting hours, debates. What's the one thing that you both think needs urgent reform in how your workplace operates? Steven Ciobo?

CIOBO: Madonna the Opposition would desperately love for Kevin Rudd to actually give an answer relevant to the question we ask. So, if there was one area that we'd focus on it would be the accountability of the Government to actually have to provide a relevant answer to the question asked.

KING: Craig Emerson? The last word today?

EMERSON: Question Time is robust. It will always be robust. I don't think any changes to Standing Orders will change that and, frankly, I think a lot of people quite enjoy, you know, the contest of Question Time. Obviously improvements can be made and that's why this inquiry is being held.

KING: But you're not saying what you want. What needs improvement?

EMERSON: Let's not pretend that Question Time is suddenly going to settle down into some sort of gentlemanly, ladies and gentlemen...

KING: Answer my question. What is the improvement, in ten words or less, that you would want?

EMERSON: I think, on some issues where there is a genuine position where neither Government nor the Opposition feels that it's got it exactly right, some sort of free debate. The sort of thing we're doing right here and now, I think that would be a bit of a reform that's well worth having.

KING:  
week.

Dr Craig Emerson, Steven Ciobo, thank you. Talk to you next

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