



THE HON DR CRAIG EMERSON MP
MINISTER FOR TRADE

Transcript
Sky News AM Agenda with Kieran Gilbert

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Subjects: Uranium sales to India, same-sex marriage, US alliance, China, Prime Minister's rapport with world leaders.

KIERAN GILBERT: With me on the program this morning, the Trade Minister Craig Emerson here in the Canberra studio. Good morning.

CRAIG EMERSON: Morning, Kieran.

GILBERT: And from Sydney we have the Deputy Opposition Leader in the Senate, Senator George Brandis. Senator Brandis, good morning to you.

I'll start with Craig Emerson here. And no doubt you'll be backing the Prime Minister's push for uranium sales to India. In your view, how much has the ban hurt? For example - you're the Trade Minister - on trade, on investment? How much has it hampered the bilateral relationship?

EMERSON: Well this is a policy change whose time has come. The relationship with India is good, but we can make it better. And we should. It's the biggest democracy on Earth. It's been growing at around 7 per cent per annum. They have more than a billion people. Four hundred million of those are below the poverty line. And many, many of those have electricity for no more than 12 hours a day. So, this is not only good for Australian jobs, which is very important, it's good for the Indian people. It's good for liberating people from poverty.

GILBERT: Do you believe the policy is an anachronism now?

EMERSON: It is outdated. There have been changes in the world, and the ALP always is conscious of leading the world on policy development. In this case we need to recognise that India is committed to using uranium, our uranium, for civilian purposes.

GILBERT: The ban has angered Indian authorities, hasn't it?

EMERSON: Well in my discussions with the Trade Minister he hasn't made anything of this. But I'm sure that there would be other discussions that have taken place. We know that India would rather that we sold uranium to them. They can get uranium from other sources, but it's an indication of the maturity of the relationship that Australia is prepared to trust India, to sell uranium to India for civilian purposes.

GILBERT: Okay. Senator Brandis, you would welcome this move, no doubt. The Coalition has supported overturning this ban for a number of years. In fact, Mr Howard did authorise the export of uranium to India.

GEORGE BRANDIS: Well, we do. And as you say Kieran, though what Dr Emerson was very careful to avoid conceding is that this was done by the last Coalition government, in the face of much criticism from Kevin Rudd. And it was a decision rescinded by the Rudd Government in 2008. And now it's being reinstated. So, far from leading the world, the Labor Party are at least five years behind the pace. They made a policy mistake in 2008 by rescinding the Howard Government's decision to sell uranium to India. Now, very late in the game they've realised they made a policy mistake and are reinstating the previous Coalition policy. So, of course we're glad that they are doing that, but they shouldn't have got it wrong in the first place. The other point I'd make to you, Kieran, so far as I'm aware, we're yet to see what Mr Rudd the Foreign Minister has to say about this. It is, after all, his Government's policy that they're throwing in the rubbish tin.

GILBERT: Isn't it appropriate, though, Senator Brandis for Labor to have ensured that the appropriate safeguard is in place - that they are in place - that they've certainly happened in a greater measure in the last couple of years through the nuclear watchdog, through the Atomic Energy Agency and elsewhere, with India signing up to various safeguards in relationship deals with the United States and others?

BRANDIS: No, that's nonsense. That's just political cover that the Government is trying to conceal the fact that the Government's done a policy reversal. Howard had those safeguards in place. The safeguards that Howard had in place five or six years ago were just as strong and secure as the safeguards that the

Government points to today. The fact is that this is a policy somersault, simple as that.

GILBERT: Okay, on this “policy somersault”, some ministers will be angry in your party: those on the Left. There’s going to be quite a stink. We’ve already seen Doug Cameron out there this morning very strongly saying he’s opposed to any overturning of the ban.

EMERSON: Well, the annual ALP conferences are a clearing house for ideas. They are a contest of ideas, and the Labor Party has always benefitted from being the party of ideas, and being willing to debate those ideas - especially at National Conference. I remember, Kieran, all the way back to 1984: there was a debate about whether we would allow Roxby Downs - Olympic Dam - to go ahead. There’ve been debates ever since: no harm done to the Labor Party; plenty of good because internally, and to the outside world, they see a party that is interested in ideas, that’s interested in policy.

GILBERT: On the contest of ideas, I’ll put one of them to you that the Left will argue and that The Greens argue and others: that if you export uranium to India then you simply, regardless of the safeguard you have in place on that specific uranium, that that does free up other uranium to be used for nuclear weapon purposes.

EMERSON: Well, you indicated the International Atomic Energy Agency standards - they’d be applied. Our own safeguards would be applied ...

GILBERT: For the Australian uranium.

EMERSON: Yeah. We sell ...

GILBERT: That would free up other uranium.

EMERSON: We sell uranium to China. We sell uranium, or are willing to sell uranium, to Russia and to other countries. And these safeguards have been in place for a very, very long period of time. And I think it’s reasonable to accept that India wants to use this uranium for peaceful purposes. And that means liberating people from poverty. Do you know that in India’s case at present 3 per cent of their electricity is generated by nuclear? By 2050 it will be 40 per cent. So there’s a big market, and a big market means more Australian jobs, while at the same time contributing a great humanitarian effort to people in India.

GILBERT: All right. I want to ask Senator Brandis about another issue today: on gay marriage. The Prime Minister is going to argue for a conscience vote at the ALP conference. That's going a step further than what the Coalition is going to do, or is willing to do on this. An opinion poll out today, Senator, says 62 per cent of Australians back same-sex marriage. Is the Coalition out of step? Is the Prime Minister moving in the right direction on this?

BRANDIS: Well, I haven't seen that particular opinion poll this morning, Kieran, but I can tell you the Coalition's position is very simple on this. We support the traditional definition of marriage. We amended the Marriage Act during the Howard Government to instate it in law, or to make it clear beyond doubt in law. We had the support of the Labor Party at the time to do that. The Prime Minister went to the last election insisting that she supported the traditional definition of marriage, and that the Labor Party wouldn't be moving to amend the Marriage Act. She now is trying to create a *modus vivendi* so she can amend the Marriage Act without herself being seen to change her position. So it's very simple, Kieran. The Coalition supports the tradition of marriage. The Labor Party is split on the issue.

GILBERT: Which way will you vote on the issue, because Labor is split on the issue?

EMERSON: I'll vote the same way the Prime Minister will, and that is that marriage is a union between a man and a woman. But the Prime Minister understands that there's a diversity of views on this issue within the Labor Party, which reflects the diversity of views within the broader community. These are personally-held beliefs, and it's therefore appropriate there be a conscience vote.

GILBERT: It's not a cop-out, as Senator Brandis is suggesting?

EMERSON: We've had conscience votes on euthanasia. Is that a cop-out?

GILBERT: No, but that's a life and death issue.

EMERSON: Well, we've had conscience votes on ...

GILBERT: This has always been a party political issue that you've made decisions on.

EMERSON: We've had conscience votes on stem cell research. We've had conscience votes on a whole range of issues where there are deeply-held personal beliefs. And on this there are deeply-held personal beliefs, and that's why we consider a conscience vote is appropriate.

GILBERT: Well, Senator Brandis there might be deeply-held beliefs on the Liberal side as well. Some of your colleagues believe in same-sex marriage.

BRANDIS: I don't think there are very many at all. There might be one or two, but I think there is overwhelmingly strong support in the Coalition for the traditional definition of marriage. I'm amused, by the way Kieran, to hear Craig explain to you all the reasons why...

EMERSON: I'm glad I amuse you, George.

BRANDIS: ... why this should be a conscience vote. Because none of those reasons seemed to apply in 2010, when the Prime Minister insisted there wouldn't be a conscience vote; nor when the Howard Government amended the Marriage Act in, I think 2005, when there wasn't a conscience vote. And the Labor Party seems to be making it up as it goes along.

EMERSON: I don't think Julia Gillard was Leader of the Opposition in 2005.

BRANDIS: Be that as it may ... yeah, but she was the Prime Minister in 2010 and she said the same thing. Be that as it may, this is one of the several very clear differences between the Labor Party and the Coalition. The Labor Party is wobbly on the traditional definition of marriage. It's split on the issue, as Craig has effectively conceded. So you can see a variety of views.

EMERSON: I don't want to shock you, but people have different opinions.

BRANDIS: Craig, people often have different opinions, but it should be within the wit of mature political parties to arrive at a common position. That is, after all, what Cabinet solidarity means. But you've thrown this issue ...

EMERSON: Hold on George, the Liberal Party has been saying for years that ...

BRANDIS: Let me finish, Craig.

EMERSON: The Liberal Party has been saying for years...

GILBERT: Craig, we'll let Senator Brandis finish ...

EMERSON: I'll let Senator Brandis respond, but I want to respond to that.

BRANDIS: You've thrown this issue to the winds now by saying 'we'll have a conscience vote'. We in the Coalition have a strong, firm and united position of support for the traditional definition of

marriage. And the public will, when we go to the next election - whenever it is - will note the difference between the two sides. One is united; the other is split.

GILBERT: That's the reality, isn't it?

EMERSON: My point is that the Liberal Party, in attacking the Labor Party - saying 'no, no, no, no and no' - for years has said 'the Labor Party locks people in; they're not allowed to have any individual ideas or any individual values; it's this sort of machine that locks them in.' And when we say that there's going to be a conscience vote, the Liberal Party says 'what a shocking thing, that people are allowed to express their individual views!'. George you're all over the place on this.

BRANDIS: That's not what I'm saying.

EMERSON: What we know, George, is that you'll oppose everything that the Labor Government, the Labor Party, ever does. And that's why Tony Abbott is getting into increasing trouble.

GILBERT: I've got to interrupt there: just quickly Senator.

BRANDIS: Actually, that's not what I'm saying. What I am saying is that you are being inconsistent. It wasn't an issue for a conscience vote last year. You're now saying it is an issue for a conscience vote.

EMERSON: So there's no scope for new policy development? Your approach is that we have to stay where we were in ...

BRANDIS: This isn't new policy development; this is a political fix, and we both know it.

EMERSON: The '30s, '40s, '50s or '60s, which is where George would rather be - in the 1950s.

GILBERT: We'll be right back. Stay with us.

[Commercial break]

GILBERT: Welcome back to AM Agenda. With me this morning on the program, the Trade Minister Craig Emerson and, in Sydney, the Deputy Opposition Leader in the Senate, Senator George Brandis. Senator Brandis, on the issue of ... I want to turn now to the US alliance - President Obama's visit. Now, 71 per cent of Australians in this Nielsen poll today think that the balance is about right with the US alliance. Now, it looks like we're going to engage further with the marine presence at the Robertson

Barracks near Darwin. By locking in further military engagement - more and more close to the United States - Senator, do you think that we risk antagonising China and our biggest trading partner?

BRANDIS: I think that the American alliance is an unequivocally good thing for Australia. It has always been strongly and unanimously supported by the Coalition. It has always been supported as well by the mainstream of the Australian Labor Party, although those on the Labor Left and their Green alliance partners have been the principal critics of the American alliance. But, nevertheless, the sensible people in the Labor Party usually have the crazies under control. And as a result of that we've had bipartisanship on this important alliance for 60 years.

GILBERT: I asked a similar question of Stephen Smith this morning, the Defence Minister. I want to play a little bit of his response to you.

STEPHEN SMITH
(VIDEO GRAB): What we do strategically is not about any one country. And certainly, to use your phrase, I don't believe that it is sensible for anyone to contemplate the so-called containment of China. It's not possible; it won't occur; it's not Australian policy. China is emerging as a world power, but India is as well. The United States' importance is ongoing and we seek the rise of the ASEAN economies combined, and the ongoing economic importance of Japan. So, all of those factors lead to changing circumstances in our part of the world, which is what the international community and our region needs to grapple with.

GILBERT: Okay, so that's the Defence Minister's view on the defence presence. You're an economist; you're the Trade Minister, Craig Emerson. I want to get your view on President Obama's comments when it comes to the Chinese currency. He's very strong yesterday. He's said "enough's enough". That they're keeping it artificially low; they should allow it to rise faster in value. Do you agree with those comments?

EMERSON: Well, we would like to see the Chinese currency appreciate. We yearn for ...

GILBERT: They have done in recent years, haven't they?

EMERSON: I was going to make that point. We yearn for and seek continued peace and prosperity in this, the Asian region in the Asian century. To have the United States reaffirm its commitment to this part of the world is a good thing and ...

GILBERT: And on the currency? Do you agree with that sentiment?

EMERSON: Obviously, if there were further appreciations of the currency of China, that would assist in making some of our industries more competitive, and certainly that reflects US view.

GILBERT: Would you use the same language as President Obama?

EMERSON: Well, I certainly wouldn't be the President's speech-writer or scriptwriter. He can use whatever language he chooses.

GILBERT: Would you adopt that same strong message.

EMERSON: I've already made the same sort of statements that Wayne Swan has made in relation to this, which are Australian statements. But let me add this. China is our biggest trading partner. The future with China is boundless. And that's why Prime Minister Gillard has launched the Asian Century White Paper project to deepen and widen our integration with China and the rest of the region. So, this has created untold jobs and prosperity in Australia. It's no accident that we've got unemployment down at 5.2 per cent - almost half that of Europe and the United States. And that is because of visionary leadership of integrating Australia into the Asian region in the Asian Century.

GILBERT: Okay. I want to look at the issue of rapport between the leaders. We've got some pictures of Prime Minister Gillard and President Obama in the school photo, exchanging grooming tips it seems or something. I'm not exactly sure what was going on, but both were - not that President Obama needs much with the short crop - but something's going on. They seem to get on quite well. I want to play a grab to you of the UK Prime Minister David Cameron this morning. He was at the Lord Mayor's Banquet speech, and he gave this particular comment. Let's hear it.

DAVID CAMERON
(VIDEO GRAB): I've had a year of interesting travel, myself. One of the highlights was going to Australia to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting and chairing a meeting of all the countries who have the Queen as their head of state, where we agreed, in a historic agreement, that if the Duke or Duchess of Cambridge have a little girl, that girl will be our Queen. At the end of this meeting I turned to the Australian Prime Minister and said "thank you very much, Julia, for allowing us to have this meeting in Australia", and she said - I can't quite do the accent but I'll try - "not a bit, David. This is good news for sheilas everywhere."

GILBERT: Not a bad effort at the accent, I thought. Senator Brandis, for all your criticisms of Prime Minister Gillard, she seems to be doing quite well on the international stage in the last few weeks.

BRANDIS: Well, look, I don't know the nature of the personal rapport between Julia Gillard and Barack Obama, or for that matter David Cameron. If they get on personally well, so much for the better. Usually Australian Prime Ministers have got on well with both Presidents and Prime Ministers. Bob Hawke got on well with George Bush the First. John Howard famously got on extremely well with George Bush the Second. And you could go all the way back to the '50s and '60s. So, this is no new thing. What we are more concerned about is policy issues rather than the personal relationships. One would hope that the relationship between the Prime Minister of Australia and the President of the United States or the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom would personally be in good shape.

GILBERT: And the thing is that, Minister, the alliance is much bigger than any personal ties. And, as Senator Brandis said, John Howard was the man of steel, according to George W. Bush.

EMERSON: Sure, and George referred to policy issues. And there's certainly a policy issue with the United Kingdom - a Conservative government there - that brings us close together: and that's putting a price on carbon. Going to President Obama, I was privileged to be in a meeting with the President and our Prime Minister. It's very clear that they get on very well. They have a very affable relationship. And I said to him "we look forward to seeing you in a few days in Australia", and he slapped me on the back and said "we'll see you then". So he's a very easy-going sort of guy, and you can see that rapport that the Prime Minister has established with him - whether it's about dress sense, wind through your hair, or whatever. But it does actually matter. It does actually matter if you can pick up the phone to someone who you regard as a friend on a big policy issue. That makes life a lot easier, and it makes the Prime Ministership of Australia that much more powerful. And that's what's happening under Prime Minister Gillard.

GILBERT: Senator Brandis, you can respond to that absolutely.

BRANDIS: Hang on! I can't let you get away with that shot, Craig. It's not happening under Prime Minister Gillard; it's a given. It's happened under virtually every Australian Prime Minister since Menzies, who negotiated the ANZUS Treaty. The only Australian Prime Minister under whom it didn't happen was a Labor Prime Minister, Gough Whitlam. But with that one exception, a good personal rapport between the President and the Prime Minister of Australia has been a given. It has never

been warmer than it was between John Howard and George W. Bush. So, to claim that this is something that is somehow happening because of Julia Gillard is ludicrous.

EMERSON: Oh, George. Just settle down a little bit.

BRANDIS: I don't like to see you getting away with ...

EMERSON: Can't you just chill out? I am just simply saying that ... can I finish now?

BRANDIS: I am not going to let you get away with making ludicrous statements.

EMERSON: Can I finish, now, George or would we have another little speech? You finished your speech? I'm simply saying it's a good thing that there is a personal rapport between the President of the United States and the Prime Minister of Australia. And good on Mr Howard for having a wonderful relationship with George Bush. Congratulations!

GILBERT: And there is obviously a personal rapport between you two as well?

EMERSON: Yeah, we get on like a house on fire.

GILBERT: Thanks for sharing that this morning with us. Craig Emerson, Senator Brandis, appreciate it. That's all for AM Agenda. I'm Kieran Gilbert. See you next time.