



THE HON DR CRAIG EMERSON MP
MINISTER FOR TRADE

Transcript
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E&OE

Subjects: Peter Slipper.

STEVE PRICE: We were still on air at nine yesterday morning when the Speaker, Labor's Harry Jenkins, stood up in Parliament. And the first time that anyone in the Parliament - certainly on the Coalition side - knew that the day was going to be one of spectacular developments was when Harry Jenkins' voice started quivering as he read out the country ... the welcome to country, at the beginning of the session of Parliament.

He quickly then revealed that he was stepping down as the Speaker, and he was going to go to see the Governor General. And it was not long after that that the former Liberal National MP Peter Slipper was named as the chosen one. He's the new Speaker of the Parliament. And it wasn't much longer after that people started talking about a potential dirt file on Peter Slipper. And today the News Limited papers, particularly *The Telegraph* in Sydney, has run a series of incidents that they say deserve greater examination. This includes investigations on his travel expenses; mystery long-term taxi trips at taxpayers' expense; thousands of dollars on overseas

trips with his wife to places like Spain and Germany and the UK.

So, has the Labor Party installed as the Speaker someone who's going to cause them more trouble than it's going to be worth? Craig Emerson, senior frontbencher, Federal Trade Minister, is on the line. Minister, good morning. Thanks for your time again.

CRAIG EMERSON: My pleasure, Steve.

PRICE: Are you worried about this dirt file?

EMERSON: It's fascinating that these allegations have just come to light. But if there are allegations, or any information, of course the Department of Finance would investigate it in the normal way. But the reality is - you indicated in your introduction - that Harry Jenkins has love of family; he loves his own family and he loves the Labor family. And he just wanted to get back and contest the big debates that go on within the Labor Party on policy ideas.

PRICE: When did you first find out?

EMERSON: Personally, I found out at the same time that you did. I was in the Chamber and, like you, I heard Harry's voice quavering, and he made his announcement that he wanted to come back and join the policy discussion within the Labor Party. And so it's transpired that Harry had indicated to the PM earlier that morning that this was his decision. And then, of course, it was well known that Peter Slipper was interested in the position of Speaker. And so he was contacted, and the rest as they say is history.

PRICE: Such an honourable man, Harry Jenkins. I've admired the way he's done the job as Speaker. He's kept that House under control. And I think in difficult circumstances with the minority Government, he's done a remarkable job. Why, then, beyond his own desire, why wouldn't Labor try and convince him to stay, given how good he was?

EMERSON: I had dinner with Harry last night, and it was clear that he was very content with his decision. So, whether he had been considering it for some time or not, I don't know. I would imagine that with a decision like that you would have been. He has been missing the discussions that go on in our Party room. I would put it to you that we are a Party of ideas; we have the National Conference coming up, which is all about contesting ideas. So, Harry missed that. But I must say that, on the other side, Mr Abbott's negativity for the year - just saying "no, no, no, no and no" - is causing a great deal of disillusionment, and he's lost an MP over that.

PRICE: Politics, as you know Minister, is a business of numbers. This number now helps you, obviously. You no longer need to rely as heavily on the Independents, in particular Andrew Wilkie. Do you expect, then, there to be a change in the Government's attitude towards those MPs, or will the promises you made to those Independents stick?

EMERSON: The PM's indicated to them that commitments made will be honoured. So, I think what it does is dash the hope, frankly, of Tony Abbott, who over the period since the election has been screaming for a new election, because he thinks that by being negative and trying to wreck the place - trying to block every bit of legislation - that

he would in some way force an election. What this does is impart greater stability on the Parliament and destroys that strategy. His own backbench - including a very up-and-coming MP in Kelly O'Dwyer, who replaced Peter Costello - seems very, very frustrated by a lack of consultation, by Mr Abbott's constant negativity. And I think, far be it for me to give him advice, but he's going to have to start trying to change his ways and become more positive. Because if doesn't, there's going to be more and more dissent within the Coalition about their careers being blocked by the likes of Bronwyn Bishop, and their ideas being crushed through a simple strategy that hasn't worked: the strategy of saying "no, no, no, no and no".

PRICE: You're a high-profile frontbench Labor Minister in a Labor Government. You're a career Labor person; Labor is in your blood. Doesn't it gall you just a bit to be sitting there as only the second Government in history to have in the Speaker's Chair not a member of your Party?

EMERSON: No, not at all.

PRICE: It doesn't worry you at all?

EMERSON: No, it doesn't. Bob Hawke actually, for a very, very long period - as you know I did work for Bob for many years - argued the merits of an independent Speaker. Now, that hasn't happened in the Australian Federal Parliament. It has happened in state parliaments, where the government of the day has elected someone from the opposition parties - but Bob argued for, effectively, an independent Speaker. This has happened in the UK, as I understand it. Mr Abbott was saying that this somehow

trashes the Westminster system. Well, of course it doesn't. This precedent has been set in other parliaments in Australia and overseas.

PRICE: So if you're happy with an independent Speaker, why didn't you try and convince one of the Independents to become the Speaker, as opposed to go to the other side and extract a number from their ranks and pop into the Speaker's Chair?

EMERSON: Well, the truth is Mr Slipper is now an independent Speaker, because he announced his resignation from the LNP yesterday...

PRICE: Moments before he got sacked.

EMERSON: Well, that's a matter for the LNP.

PRICE: But you could have gone to Wilkie; you could have gone to Oakeshott; you could have gone to Windsor.

EMERSON: You ask a fair question, and the fair answer is that Mr Slipper is an independent. And I will say this: and that is I have been involved in some pretty tough debates in the Parliament, as you may know, with Peter Slipper in the chair. And he has at all times discharged responsibility in the Chair as Deputy Speaker in a very impartial way. Whatever the LNP might think about Mr Slipper, he has proven himself to be an experienced Deputy Speaker. That would qualify him pretty well for the job of Speaker.

PRICE: Do you think - and you keep your ear to the ground - do you think the electorate out there listening to us just accepts this as part of the parliamentary process? Do you think

you're going to be able to convince people that there's not some deal being done; that this is Harry Jenkins just sick of being in the Chair and wanting to get back and participate? Or do you think the public have a suspicion that some sort of deal's being done to sure up the numbers?

EMERSON: Well, I can only indicate again that Harry has said to us that he really did want to move into this position of being able to be a contributor to the Labor Party. Could you hold on for one second, Steve?

PRICE: Of course I can. We're speaking with Craig Emerson there, the Federal Trade Minister, about the deals from yesterday. Tony Abbott was ... I'll just play this while Craig's sorting that out...

EMERSON: You're right.

PRICE: Tony Abbott was on the *Today* show this morning. I might get your reaction to that. Here's him talking to Karl.

TONY ABBOTT
(AUDIO): This kind of Machiavellian ruthlessness, this deployment of the Sussex Street death squads - it's not me. And for all the ups and downs of politics on our side Karl, I don't think it's the sort of thing that happens.

PRICE: Sussex Street death squads? It's a bit over the top.

EMERSON: I think that's again very typical of the characteristics that Tony Abbott has displayed, which has left him losing MPs. He's completely negative; he just wants to trash everything. And what the Australian people want in an alternative Prime Minister is someone with ideas; someone with a

positive outlook for Australia, a positive outlook on life. Mr Abbott doesn't have it. And I will make one prediction: and that is that more and more Coalition MPs will begin to speak out against Mr Abbott, because his simple strategy of saying "no, no, no, no and no" hasn't worked. And they are now. When you go into politics, Steve, the truth is that people are interested in joining political parties because they're interested in ideas. But this whole contest of ideas is being surrendered by Mr Abbott because he thought he could find a very easy way to The Lodge by trying to force an early election. But it hasn't happened. We had an election; we're getting on with government. We've put more than 200 Bills through the Parliament, despite Mr Abbott, because we have managed to get the support of the Independents. Mr Abbott through his negativity failed to get the support of the Independents. And now, in terms of the situation in Parliament, he's going backwards. I think there'll be a lot of Liberal and National Party MPs questioning his leadership, and questioning his very negative strategies.

PRICE: Good to catch up, as usual. Thanks a lot.

EMERSON: Okay, thanks Steve.

PRICE: Craig Emerson there, Federal Trade Minister.