



THE HON DR CRAIG EMERSON MP

MINISTER FOR TRADE

Transcript

SKY NEWS LUNCHTIME AGENDA,

ALP NATIONAL CONFERENCE

3 DECEMBER 2011

E&OE

Subjects: Same-sex marriage, uranium sales to India, asylum-seekers, ALP reform.

ASHLEIGH GILLON: Joining me here at the Conference now is Federal Trade Minister Craig Emerson. You can see from these shots outside that there are thousands of people turning out to this rally. We can see a lot of same-sex couples there. If it does come to this point in the Parliament where we see a Private Member's Bill, would you support their right to get married?

CRAIG EMERSON: I'll actually support the retention of the Marriage Act as a union between a man

and a woman. There are deeply-held views, and they are being expressed here today by those who want to see a change. There are deeply-held views by those who do not want to see change who aren't here today, but nevertheless hold those views just as legitimately as those who are here have their view. And I think we need to respect that. The diversity of views within the Labor Party reflects the diversity of views within the broader community. And we saw that occur on the floor of the Conference today. Certainly, the Prime Minister had indicated that we should have robust but respectful debate. I think it passed both those tests.

GILLON:

If we did see it get to that point - if there were a vote on the Parliament floor - would you suggest that the Marriage Act wouldn't be changed, because there would be enough people like you who would go against the Labor Party's platform, to not support any changes to the Marriage Act?

EMERSON:

Well, I think that's right. We'd see what the Coalition does. It is interesting that they pride themselves on allowing people to vote according to their conscience - to cross the

floor. They say that the Labor Party is too strait-jacketed; that people tell people how to vote. But on this one, Mr Abbott is saying that he would tell his Members how to vote. If they comply with Mr Abbott's demands, then that would mean all of the Coalition would vote to retain the Marriage Act. And a significant proportion of the Labor Caucus would also do that, so therefore the status quo would be retained.

GILLON:

We did see senior figures from the Right warning that the decision to support gay marriage, in terms of the Labor Party platform, that that decision would be politically damaging; that you would feel the electoral pain at the next election. Do you think that's the case?

EMERSON:

Well, it may be; it may not be. Let's see how it plays out. What I do is respect the right of Party members to have debates at conferences like this. I respect the majority view of a conference. And the majority view is to change the platform, but at the same time to enable a conscience vote to occur. I respect the alternative view. And I think that is one of the strengths of the Labor Party: that we do represent a broad church. And there is a diversity of

views, which reflects the diversity of views in the community. And it's important that people have the right to express their views here today. But there are also people from other perspectives and other communities who have different views, and we should respect those as well.

GILLON:

Just to let our viewers know that we are going to be taking you live to that rally shortly. We are expecting Labor MP Stephen Jones to be addressing the gathered crowd, which is numbering I would say at least over 10,000. It is very difficult to tell from this vantage point, but as I say the numbers of people walking from Hyde Park just continuing to stream in, and walking around Darling Harbour here, as you can see from those live pictures.

Craig Emerson, just moving on to a couple of the big issues at this Conference: we are going to see a debate over uranium sales to India. We have the Queensland representatives here, WA ... they're actually against uranium mining, full stop, the Labor Party in those states. As Trade Minister, how damaging do you think that view is in terms of not

wanting uranium mining at all? Is there sovereign risk there?

EMERSON:

No, not at all. I mean it is a question of the position of Australia on these matters; the position of the Government of the day, rather than the fact that people in a political party have a view. The Government of the day is a Labor Government, and it is likely that the Labor Government will allow uranium sales to India under, obviously, strict safeguards to ensure that it is used for peaceful purposes – which is, by the way, good for lifting 10s of millions, if not 100s of millions, of Indians from poverty. Because so many poor Indians have access to electricity for less than half the day. So it is good for poverty alleviation; it's good for job-creation here in Australia; and for all of those people who are very concerned about climate change, this is a technology that emits no carbon into the atmosphere.

GILLON:

Another issue: just after the lunch break we are going to see the focus return to the immigration debate. Chris Bowen is going to be pushing for the refugee intake to be supported. He's also going to

call on the Conference to support the Malaysia solution. What do you expect the outcome to be of those debates?

EMERSON:

Brendan [O'Connor] is one of the relevant Ministers here, along with Chris Bowen, who is the Immigration Minister. If we do spend a little time at this Conference talking about Left and Right, I think that's legitimate because it is relevant to these considerations. Ordinarily, in an interview like this I wouldn't be talking about Left, Right and Left Right Out, the Extreme Centre Faction and all that sort of stuff. But Brendan's from the Left, and that's significant because he will actually be supporting offshore processing on compassionate grounds; that is, to minimise the risk of people dying at sea. That is a compassionate action. And that's what he'll be supporting, along with Chris Bowen, representing the Right. And so I would think that that view - enabling offshore processing - would prevail. And, again, I'm a very strong supporter of increasing the intake for refugees - because we are a big country; we can handle refugees. It's just an argument about an orderly refugee program, and

ensuring that we're not encouraging people to take those risky journeys and lose their lives at sea.

GILLON: Another debate we're going to see is about Labor Party reform, and in particular the election of delegates to this Conference. Are you expecting that we will see the rank and file have more of a say?

EMERSON: There are specific proposals that have been developed by Sam Dastyari from New South Wales, and they will be put to the Conference. Again, there is a diversity of views here. And that's why I think it is good that we have these sorts of conferences, that are not anaesthetised. I've been following or involved in Labor Party Conferences since when I was a staffer for Peter Walsh way back in 1984. And I cannot recall one robust conference that caused the Labor Party any damage. I think what people see there is passion, and an interest in ideas for the country's future. That's a good thing; you don't really see a lot of that in the Liberal Party. They all say 'we're all for the one thing'. We do have a diversity of views, and we settle those in the contest of ideas at the National Conference.

GILLON:

Craig Emerson, thank you for
your time.