



THE HON DR CRAIG EMERSON MP
MINISTER FOR TRADE

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ASHLEIGH GILLON: Joining us now is the Trade Minister Craig Emerson. Craig Emerson, thank you for your time. You have been advocating for this change. The arguments are that it's a good thing for the economy. We did hear, though, the Prime Minister and a number of speakers advocating your position were heckled. Someone yelled out, saying that Julia Gillard is a "sell-out". It is a debate that is very divisive within the Party. It is a back-flip for Labor, isn't it?

CRAIG EMERSON: It always has been a divisive debate within the Australian Labor Party. But I'm proud of this fact: that we have these big debates about the future of the country; the contest of ideas. It's a battle of ideas; some might say the battlefield of ideas, when you listen to the groups that assemble outside Labor Party Conferences. We've got the Socialist International group here; we've got those who are against a carbon price; two polar ends of an argument, and the Labor Party charting a course through, in accordance with our values. And that's what we've done today.

KIERAN GILBERT: Let's be frank, though: it's really in large part about trying to firm up a relationship with India that's been strained lately.

EMERSON: Well, I put to you these arguments for the change, and they've been put on the floor: it's good for poverty-alleviation in India; good for the 400 million poor people who have less than 12 hours of electricity a day. It is good for the environment, in that nuclear power is a zero carbon emissions technology. And it's good for Australian jobs. So, good for poverty-alleviation; good for Australian jobs; good for the environment.

GILBERT: Not good for the merits of international treaties, though, is it? Because it undermines that.

EMERSON: Well, there are a whole lot of treaties around the world - that is true. And we are multi-lateralists. But India has committed to a safe and civilian use of uranium. And let's respect this fact: that India is the world's largest democracy. It is not an aggressive power. And, if we can export uranium to countries like China and Russia, we are precluding India on what basis? I think that's the question that has been asked and answered here today by a majority on the floor of the Conference.

GILLON: Why is nuclear power good enough for India but not good enough for us here in Australia?

EMERSON: For Australia? Well, I think the reason, in part, is this: that we have large reserves of traditional fossil fuels. We're increasingly seeing the substitution of gas for coal. But we are moving to a low-carbon future. More and more renewable energy sources will come into play. So we are blessed with a range of energy sources. That means we don't need to rely on nuclear power. But if you've got countries that don't have these endowments, and they make the judgement that nuclear power is the way forward for them, why would we then deny them that capacity?

GILBERT: How much of this is about building up India as a counter-balance to China?

EMERSON: I don't think it's about that at all. But I do say this ...

GILBERT: It helps the United States; it fits in with the US policy.

EMERSON: Sure. But you do need to respect that this is a very large democracy. And I think some of the comments that were made there weren't all that flattering towards India. And I was a bit upset to see those sorts of comments made. India is a great friend of Australia and a great neighbour. And we will stand by them. And to suggest that India is just busily making nuclear weapons so that they can lob them into other countries I think is quite offensive. Nevertheless, they are the sorts of remarks that are made on the floor of a National Conference. Always has been; always will be.

GILLON: It's not just the nuclear weapons that seem to be dangerous: we've seen the Fukushima disaster recently; you heard Stephen Conroy, your colleague, speaking about the dangers ...

EMERSON: He's a dear friend of mine, and he spoke from his heart. And I absolutely and thoroughly respect it. We've known each other ... he got me in the Labor Party - he was 19 and I was a little bit older.

GILLON: Is it worth the risk?

EMERSON: Well, tell me an energy source that is risk-free. People used to make these arguments in 1984, when there was a very divisive debate on the floor of the ALP Conference at the Lakeside Hotel in Canberra. And people were saying nuclear power is not risk-free. That's true; that is true. But people die in coalmines every year, in large numbers. They are still dying in coalmines in China, every year, in large numbers.

Does that not matter? Is it the manner of the risk? There is no energy source that is completely risk-free. Now, of course, critics will say 'Emerson doesn't know what he's talking about: wave power and wind power are risk free'. Okay, they are definitely lower-risk, but they are very much higher-cost. And if we want to really make sure that people stay in poverty a long time; if we want to really make sure there is a global recession - if not a global depression - then go straight into renewable energy sources; abandon all fossil fuels. There are people who argue this, but I don't think that's consistent with the philosophy - the great Labor philosophy – of the brotherhood of man. We do need to care about poverty-alleviation.

GILBERT: You spoke about the history of this debate within the Labor Party. It is an old fault-line within Labor going back a number of decades. Is this the last vestige of this debate, do you think?

EMERSON: Well, I suppose you can never predict the future, but it does seem that those matters that had not yet been resolved have now been resolved. I don't expect for a moment that those people who hold the view that there should be no nuclear power whatsoever will change their view. No-one expects them to. But it seems that time after time, when these matters have been debated, it has meant that there has been a reaffirmation of Labor support for nuclear power for peaceful purposes.

GILLON: You are the Trade Minister. Talk us through the economic benefits. Just how much does Australia stand to gain by opening up this ...

EMERSON: Look, it's significant, but I've never presented the argument that this is going to create 100s of thousands of jobs in Australia, and untold wealth. That's really not been the basis of the argument. Yes, there'll be extra jobs: I think there's 4,250 jobs involved in uranium

production in this country. The Olympic Dam expansion will be very large; there will be more jobs associated with that. Those sales can go to other markets. So, I'm not going to sit here and say they are expanding the Olympic Dam mine and they have no idea where they are going to sell the uranium. I'm not going to be disingenuous about that. There are significant benefits; there will be more Australian jobs. But I actually fundamentally believe in - and I know it's an old phrase - the brotherhood of man. I actually believe that it matters that poor people in India will be able to get electric power and therefore lift themselves out of poverty. I think that's a great humanitarian effort. But I also respect those who argue that nuclear power's not completely safe. And we have seen Fukushima; we have seen Three Mile Island; we have seen these other accidents. But, equally, there are accidents in the production of fossil fuels.

GILBERT: Do you expect your Cabinet colleagues now - Anthony Albanese and Stephen Conroy - who argued so passionately against lifting the ban ... are they now .. Is it incumbent upon them to defend this?

EMERSON: I think you'll find that Anthony Albanese and Stephen Conroy are great Labor people who reserve the right to have their argument in the proper forums. And that's what they've done today. They will be bound by any Cabinet decision on this matter. And they understand and accept that.

GILBERT: Well, we appreciate your time. Thank you very much for that.

EMERSON: Okay.

