



THE HON DR CRAIG EMERSON MP
MINISTER FOR TRADE

Transcript
Sky News AM Agenda with Kieran Gilbert

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E&OE

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KIERAN GILBERT: Good morning and welcome to the program. Liberal frontbencher Malcolm Turnbull has this morning backed calls for a conscience vote on gay marriage. Mr Turnbull says it is a matter for the Coalition party room and the Shadow Cabinet, but he's made it clear he believes his Coalition colleagues should be given a conscience vote on this issue. This will start our discussion this morning. With me, the Trade Minister Craig Emerson here in the Canberra studio. Good morning.

CRAIG EMERSON: G'day Kieran.

GILBERT: And from Brisbane we've got the Deputy Opposition Leader in the Senate and the Shadow Attorney General, Senator George Brandis. Good morning, Senator.

GEORGE BRANDIS: Good morning, Kieran.

GILBERT: Can I start with this comment by Mr Turnbull this morning? Barry O'Farrell, the NSW Premier, has also backed the notion of a conscience vote on this issue. What do you make of that?

BRANDIS: Well I note what Mr O'Farrell has said. I haven't actually seen Mr Turnbull's comments. But, look, this is obviously an issue on which we in the Liberal Party will have a discussion in the coming days and

weeks. And I will participate in that discussion. And for that reason I don't want to pre-empt that discussion.

GILBERT: Okay, well that's fair enough, isn't it Craig Emerson?

EMERSON: Well, George has pre-empted the discussion on this program about three weeks ago. And he was critical of the ALP for having contemplated a conscience vote, which has now been agreed at the National Conference. George said that the Coalition is united on this, that marriage is a union between a man and a woman. I actually happen to agree with that proposition, but we were getting lectured by George three weeks ago as to what a bad idea a conscience vote was. And now he says he's going to participate in discussions. He's changed his position obviously.

GILBERT: Senator Brandis?

BRANDIS: I think, Craig, you're reaching for the bottom of the barrel with your debating points. The fact is that this is a great ...

EMERSON: Direct quote, George.

BRANDIS: ... source of conflict; of conflict and division and disunity within the Labor Party for some years now, culminating in a national conference which didn't spend one iota of time addressing the great issues of concern to middle Australia: the cost of living; the impact on the cost of living of your carbon tax and all your other new taxes. We in the Liberal Party have stayed out of this debate. You will put it on the agenda. It's appropriate that we consider the imminent Private Member's Bill that I understand a Labor backbencher will be bringing. And we'll have a conversation about it - that's all I'm saying.

GILBERT: Yeah. Craig Emerson, you've only changed your policy at the weekend. So it's not...

EMERSON: That's true. That's absolutely true.

GILBERT: Politicians and political parties can change their position.

EMERSON: Of course they can. Of course they can.

GILBERT: So, it's a bit hypocritical to have a crack at Senator Brandis?

EMERSON: No, George did say that his position and the Coalition's position at that time was that there'd be no conscience vote; that the Coalition had a single united position. And he used that to contrast with the Labor Party and say how organised the Coalition is and how disorganised the Labor Party is; how wrong it was to have a conscience vote. And now he turns up and says 'well, I've got an open mind about this; we'll have a discussion'.

BRANDIS: No, well, for a start ...

EMERSON: That's just the point; he's changed his position.

BRANDIS: Just a moment, Craig. Don't misquote me. I actually didn't say I've got an open mind about the matter. The Liberal Party and the Coalition haven't changed their position. But the terms of this debate have been changed by a decision of the Labor Party Conference to allow its Members a conscience vote and foreshadowing the introduction of a Private Member's Bill by a Labor backbencher. Now, in view of that, what I said in answer to Kieran's question is that the Liberal Party or the Shadow Cabinet will have a conversation about your proposal. That's all I'm saying.

GILBERT: Can I ask you about your position on the issue of gay marriage? There are ... some of your colleagues ... Senator Birmingham yesterday said that he supports the idea of legalising gay marriage. Are you willing to go beyond the strictures of your Party line and give us a view one way or the other?

BRANDIS: Well, I support the Party's position. The Party's position always is and always has been to support the existing terms of the Marriage Act.

EMERSON: So why are you having a conscience vote? Or why are you contemplating a conscience vote?

BRANDIS: Well, again, Craig, please don't misquote me. We're not having a conscience vote. We're not contemplating having a conscience vote. But I was asked whether, in view of the decision the Labor Party made last weekend, the Liberal Party would consider the matter. And I said that we will no doubt have a conversation about it.

EMERSON: Well hold on, he said...

GILBERT: I'll come back to you in a moment, sorry Minister. I just wanted to ask Senator Brandis about a comment that Julie Bishop made to me yesterday on PM Agenda: that she believes that the vast majority of your colleagues do back the status quo. Is that your view as well?

BRANDIS: Yes, I do. My understanding is that there are a number of individual members of the Liberal Party who privately favour gay marriage. But my own sense of the mood of the Party, the Coalition, is that that would be a relatively small proportion of the aggregate of the party room.

GILBERT: What sort of number do you think?

BRANDIS: No idea.

GILBERT: Okay. Incidentally, the number in the Fairfax press this morning is about 15 or 20, whereas the Labor Party is about 50 out of 72 Members. That's the early number being floated. Do you think that sounds about right?

EMERSON: Look, I really couldn't say that. And that's my genuine answer.

BRANDIS: But you would vote for the status quo?

EMERSON: I would vote for the status quo. That's right. But George then said - and this is the point I want to come back to - he said the Coalition is not contemplating a conscience vote. They're going to have a discussion. It sounds like this sort of discussion: 'Listen, there's going to be no conscience vote - so Malcolm, back in your box; Simon Birmingham, back in your box; Russell Broadbent, back in your box. We're going to have a discussion, but we're not going to even contemplate a conscience vote.'

BRANDIS: Craig, you're doing your very best. And I know it's your job ...

EMERSON: I'm just quoting you, George. I'm just quoting you.

BRANDIS: ... to sow seeds for something that doesn't exist. The fact is the Labor Party has been in a mess on this issue for years now. You continue to be in a mess because one thing we do know happened last weekend is that the Labor Party National Conference adopted a platform directly at variance from the Prime Minister's own position, and evidently

directly at variance from your position. The Liberal Party has been sitting on the sidelines. We have a settled position. In view of the decision you have now made and the fact that we can anticipate Private Members legislation, all I'm saying is we will no doubt have a conversation about it.

GILBERT: Let's move on. I want to ask you about the Australia Network contract. It has been awarded to the ABC on a permanent basis. Trade Minister, any thoughts on that?

EMERSON: I suppose an advantage of that is it can be used to, if you like, transmit our diplomatic position around the world - very similar to Radio Australia. I will volunteer that the process hasn't been in any way the sort of process that you'd want to happen. Leaks undermining the process: I'm not going to be here on television and defend the process. When there are leaks like that that destroy the capacity to make decisions on an objective basis, then of course that is a problem. But we have made this decision, and I think that the ABC will now need to show that it can perform and project a very good presence into those other countries.

GILBERT: Senator Brandis, your thoughts on this development and the way it was managed?

BRANDIS: Well, I think that on the Richter scale of political scandals, this is towards the top. I mean, what has happened here is quite extraordinary. You've had a tender process that has been produced on two occasions; we're told, recommendations that the contract ...this is a contract worth hundreds of millions of dollars over a decade or more ... be awarded to one bidder; that tender process has, in the Minister's own words, been "corrupted". And now ...

EMERSON: I didn't say that word at all!

BRANDIS: No, you didn't say it; but Stephen Conroy did in the Senate. So get your facts right.

EMERSON: Oh, alright. Sorry. I apologise.

BRANDIS: Stephen Conroy said the tender process was corrupted.

EMERSON: I have been seriously reprimanded.

BRANDIS: And now, yesterday, we have this extraordinary decision to abrogate the process and award the contract to one of the two bidders. Now, this is just not the way governments behave. Governments are meant to observe proper practice in their commercial dealings. This is the sort of thing you'd expect in Louisiana in the 1920s, or in some kleptocracy in darkest Africa; not from the Australian Government. And I must say, Kieran, if I were Mr Frangopolous I'd be sitting down with my lawyers this morning, because I can think of any one of a number of causes of action that Sky News would have against the Commonwealth of Australia.

GILBERT: The Shadow Foreign Minister said ... Minister Emerson, I'll just read you the quote and get your thoughts. She says: "The decision appears to have been made while the Minister for Foreign Affairs is out of the country and absent from Cabinet. This is further evidence in the breakdown of the relationship with the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, and the damage it's causing to Australia's national interest." Should we read anything into the fact that Mr Rudd wasn't there?

EMERSON: No, not at all. And, the typical melodramatic ...

BRANDIS: Sure, Craig.

EMERSON: Oh, look, I know it's a scandal George; I know it's a scandal that the Foreign Minister travels. No doubt under a Coalition government the Foreign Minister would not travel.

BRANDIS: It's a scandal that the Australian Government can't behave like a mature commercial party.

EMERSON: If the Foreign Minister is overseas, here it is, I'm going to announce it: Cabinet will still sit. And that's just the way it's been since about 1901. They didn't fly overseas in those days. There's been this innovation: they fly overseas; we still have Cabinet meetings.

GILBERT: Okay, Senator Brandis ...

BRANDIS: There are a lot more dimensions ...

EMERSON: I know that's extraordinary, George.

BRANDIS: This is not about the fact that Kevin Rudd was on a plane when the decision was made. It's about the fact that Sky News, which

was a tender part ... a bidder in a tender process ... a process which the Minister responsible conceded was corrupted. And now the Government has abridged the tender, brought the tender to an end ...

EMERSON: We've heard all that, George. We've heard all that.

BRANDIS: ... and awarded the prize to one of the two tender respondents ...

EMERSON: I was not responding to you, George. I was responding to Kieran asking me about Julia Bishop's comments and how significant it was that Mr Rudd was overseas. This fortress Australia approach - that it's extraordinary, it's exceptional that Cabinet meetings occur when the Foreign Minister goes overseas - is just unbelievable.

BRANDIS: Do your best to try and change the topic. Do your best to try and change the subject.

EMERSON: I have responded directly to a question and ...

BRANDIS: I can understand why you're embarrassed by this.

EMERSON: George, I responded directly to a question. I have not changed the topic.

BRANDIS: The fact is when you have the Prime Minister and a Foreign Minister who are not on speaking terms with one another ... [inaudible]

EMERSON: George. Hello George. Hello George. He's flat out; you'll not stop him. You'll not stop him.

BRANDIS: a multi-100s of millions of dollar tender process to give Australia a voice in the region going off the rails. This decision was not made in the Australian national interest.

GILBERT: Okay. All right.

BRANDIS: It was not made according to commercial law

GILBERT: Let's have the Trade Minister ...

BRANDIS: It was made as a reflection of fact there is a non-existent relationship between Rudd and Gillard.

GILBERT: Okay, Senator. Let's try and rein in the talking over each other if we can. Trade Minister, your comment now?

EMERSON: My comment was ... I've got nothing more to add. I simply said in response to a question about Julie Bishop ... I gave you a response to that. George says 'you're not answering the question' that you asked in relation to him. I responded to a question that you asked openly and then George just went on yet another rant.

GILBERT: Okay, I want to ask just one last question on this, Senator Brandis, before we go to a break. We do have some other issues we need to get to. I want to read you a comment in Senator Conroy's statement. He says that the "Australia Network is a major public diplomacy platform and, as is the case with comparable operators such as the UK's BBC World Service and Germany's Deutsche Welle, the Government believes the service should be provided by Australia's national broadcaster the ABC". What do you say to that, and the fact that it's being given on a permanent basis?

BRANDIS: Well, what I say to that is that it's all very well, but it was this Government itself that decided that it was otherwise. It was this Government itself that decided that it shouldn't necessarily be given to the national broadcaster; that there ought to be a tender process. And because the Government screwed it up and presided over what Senator Conroy described as a corrupted process, it has now reversed its position and said 'well, rather than see the tender process through to an end, or have a new tender process that hopefully this time will not be corrupted, we'll just give it to one of the two competitors in the race'.

GILBERT: Okay. All right. Let's take a break. We'll be right back. Stay with us this morning on a lively *AM Agenda*.

[Advertisement break]

GILBERT: This is *AM Agenda*. Thank you for being with us this morning. In Brisbane, I've got the Deputy Opposition Leader in the Senate, Senator Brandis. And here in the Canberra studio, the Minister for Trade Craig Emerson. Minister, I want to ask you about the Labor review; the post-election review. There was a selective leak here with this in the Sydney Morning Herald yesterday. The party elders - Steve Bracks, Bob Carr, John Faulkner - issued a statement saying they want the whole thing released. Should it be?

EMERSON: Frankly, I don't mind; I don't care. And in that, I share the view held by probably 23 million Australians. This is an internal review; it's a post mortem of the last election and lead-up to the last election. It's frankly an insider story. I'm sure in this particular section that those three gentlemen have done a tremendous job, but the relevant people have read it. If people find it intriguing well I guess - and it is released - that's a matter for the National Executive. They can read it. Frankly, I probably won't.

GILBERT: But the point, I suppose, is that call is being made in the context of a leaking yesterday which was clearly designed to undermine Mr Rudd. And it seems that there's this tit-for-tat approach at the moment, where speculation around the leadership is diminishing from what had been a slight tick back to the Government - a bit of momentum towards the end of the year. That must be annoying?

EMERSON: Well, there is a bit of momentum for the Government. And there is a good reason for that: because we are positive, and we've got some ideas planned; some policies ...

GILBERT: How do you resolve this?

EMERSON: Well, I think if you get into this tit-for-tat stuff, you get into conspiracy theories. And it could well be that people have got their own motivations. Maybe not; maybe they have. I don't spend any time thinking about it. I really don't. I didn't come into politics for all the drama and the intrigue and the insider stories and all that. It doesn't really grab me. I don't read political books.

BRANDIS: Well, you joined the wrong party, Craig.

EMERSON: Well, George, you're always reading these political intrigue books. You love all this stuff.

BRANDIS: Am I?

EMERSON: Good on you, if that's what makes you jolly. I just don't get excited by it.

BRANDIS: Not particularly.

GILBERT: Would you urge your colleagues and senior colleagues to bury the hatchet?

EMERSON: Well, as I say, I don't know who's doing what.

GILBERT: Well, someone's doing something.

EMERSON: I know. But I don't know their names. I don't know their motivations. It's easy to construct this grand conspiracy.

GILBERT: So, you'd say bury the hatchet and be done with it?

EMERSON: I'd like people to move on; absolutely. I'd like people to move on. Let's move on and do what we're doing: and that is create three-quarters of a million jobs; hopefully create room for the Reserve Bank to move on interest rates at some point in the future; roll out the National Broadband Network; education reform; health reform; fundamental reform of the health system. These are the good things that we do - engage with Asia in the Asian Century.

GILBERT: It must frustrate you, then, that you see this talk; people going around saying that they're miffed one way or the other.

EMERSON: Well, in truth, it doesn't really grab me one way or the other. Because I came into politics to do the sorts of things that I've just described here.

GILBERT: We're going to talk about interest rates in a moment. But that's being delayed, because we're talking about this which is ... people say it's a construct of the media, but it's...

EMERSON: No, I didn't say that.

GILBERT: It's often said, but it comes from somewhere.

EMERSON: If it's on the front page of a newspaper, I can't say it's a construct of the media. And I'm not going to. I think the media does get really excited about all this point of drama and intrigue. And sometimes the media doesn't concentrate on the issues that do affect and do occupy the minds of the vast majority of Australians. That is my belief. But you asked me what I think about it. What I think about it is move on and continue doing the good policy work that we're doing.

GILBERT: Okay, let's talk about interest rates. Obviously, it would be a good thing if they went down this afternoon.

EMERSON: I'm no soothsayer, but I would make this point: that for almost a year, the media speculation was whether interest rates would rise or stay the same. Now the media speculation, and market speculation, is whether they will fall or stay the same. I think that has had a significant impact on consumer confidence. So you get economists now doing forward projections on retail sales for the Christmas period. I think people are feeling a little bit more confident. But then, of course, they're a bit unnerved by what's happening in Europe. But you wouldn't want to be in any other place than Australia in the right place at the right time, in the Asian region in the Asian Century.

GILBERT: Senator Brandis, the thing that differentiates Australia, I suppose, in more than just that the Government claiming credit on the fiscal side, is that there's still a fair bit of room to move there, isn't there, for the RBA?

BRANDIS: Well, you know, this Government was lucky enough to be in the only government in the OECD when it came into office to inherit no debt. So, for that reason it has more flexibility, but we have Peter Costello and John Howard to thank for that. Kieran, I wonder if I could respond to some of the remarks Craig made a few moments ago.

EMERSON: So predictable, George.

BRANDIS: And I can ...and I can ... well, the truth doesn't change from one day to the next, Craig. And that is the truth. I can understand Craig's exasperation ...

EMERSON: I'm not exasperated.

BRANDIS: ... at the shenanigans of his senior colleagues. But the fact is that this is a dysfunctional government. I have been saying that for a very long time now. Last year in these debates ...

EMERSON: You sure have!

BRANDIS: Last year in these debates when I said it, Craig would talk me down and say 'no it's not; it's a perfectly competent, functional government'. We now have the Labor Party itself saying that the Government in 2010 was dysfunctional. No less a figure than Senator

John Faulkner and Mr Bracks and Mr Carr - the so-called three wise men - have declared that one of the reasons Labor did so badly at the 2010 election was because the Government was dysfunctional. The problem is, Keiran, is that it hasn't changed. If anything it has got worse, as the leaking of portions of this report against Mr Rudd vividly demonstrate.

EMERSON: And Mr Abbott is doing so well with his strategy of saying "no, no, no, no and no". He's heading south; the Prime Minister is heading north.

BRANDIS: Give us a good policy, Craig. Please don't ...

EMERSON: If it comes out of the mouth of a Labor Minister, what we know is you will say "no, no, no, no and no".

BRANDIS: Craig, I don't think it gets you anywhere to be braying like a donkey. The fact is that on most issues we have agreed with the Government's policies. But because we've agreed with them they haven't been politically controversial - like, for example, the American troop deployment in Darwin, which we embraced enthusiastically; indeed, which was the fruition of process that began under the Coalition. The fact is, though, that what is remarkable about this Government is that it makes the wrong calls so often. It messes things up so often.

GILBERT: I want to ask the Minister...

BRANDIS: For example, the scandal about the tender process for the Australia Network is the most recent illustration.

GILBERT: Okay, there's just one last thing. We've only got a minute left. Minister, the uranium exports to India: how soon before we can expect those to be ... for the framework to be in place?

EMERSON: Well, that's a matter for both parties. This is subject to a negotiation of an agreement. And the negotiation takes as long as it takes, in this sense: that it should be something that can be done sensibly and readily. But we're not going to in any way jeopardise or weaken the agreement. We want, and I think the Coalition does agree with this, the export of uranium to India for civilian purposes, for peaceful purposes. So, let the negotiations continue without ...

GILBERT: Would you say within 12 months?

EMERSON: No, this is the problem: as a trade negotiator you have people saying 'well, when will the negotiations finish?'. I think 'let's not have a predetermined timetable on this'.

GILBERT: We've got to go. Trade Minister, thanks for your time.

EMERSON: Thank you, Kieran.

GILBERT: Senator Brandis, good to see you. Appreciate it.

BRANDIS: Thank you, Kieran.

GILBERT: That's all for *AM Agenda*. I'm Kieran Gilbert. See you next time.