



**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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*Subjects: Death of Kim Jong-Il, asylum-seeker tragedy.*

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KIERAN GILBERT: Let's get to our panel now: the Trade Minister Craig Emerson with me here in the Canberra studio, and also the Deputy Opposition Leader Senator George Brandis. I want to start with you, Craig: first of all in relation to the uncertainties; not just in Korea though, is it? It's right across the region, the implications of this.

CRAIG EMERSON: Well, North Korea is very heavily armed: it's got a standing army of more than a million, and lots and lots of military hardware. But I join our Foreign Minister in urging calm; not to overreact. There is obviously going to be a transition in North Korea, and these are not inevitably smooth transitions. So, I think it's important that we don't over-interpret or overreact to any signals coming out of the place. Hopefully, there'll be time to let things settle down. And then the sorts of engagement that were just described there from the United States: that would be a very good start to a new relationship. So, maybe the right approach is to see this possibly as an opportunity to start a new relationship. But at the same time, we've got to be realistic: that North Korea has behaved erratically in the past and we hope that doesn't continue into the future.

GILBERT: And that uncertainty, Senator Brandis, really hangs over the transition as well - the succession - because there is a lot of doubt as to whether this succession will stick and therefore possibly create a vacuum. We don't know what it's going to be filled by.

GEORGE BRANDIS: Well that's true, Kieran, and I think all we can say is that there is a great deal of uncertainty here. We know that the President-designate Kim Jong-Un was the youngest of the sons of Kim Jong-II. Now, whether that means that there is going to be rivalry within the ruling elite in relation to the succession is an unknown fact. But the other point I think that deserves to be made, Kieran, is that this was not entirely unanticipated. Although in the end it appears that Kim Jong-II died suddenly, he had been ailing for some years. And the military rulers of North Korea - in particular, the senior military chiefs who are the strongmen of the regime - knew that this succession had been coming for quite a long time. Now, understandably, there'll be tremendous anxiety and concern in South Korea and in Japan in particular, especially over whether the new leadership engages in any acts of military self-assertion to, as it were, stamp their authority on the transition. We'll just have to wait and see. And I agree with what Craig Emerson has said: that one shouldn't overreact in these circumstances.

GILBERT: All right. Let's look at the issue of the ongoing asylum-seeker debate. We've seen the tragic events of the last couple of days. Mr Emerson, you heard what Scott Morrison had to say there. Is there any hope that we will see a compromise ... that there... Is the government hopeful of that; confident of that?

EMERSON: Well, let's do a quick stock take here. Mr Morrison, for political reasons, is seeking to appear conciliatory. But they're not at all. He has said that the Government should put a concrete proposal on the table. There *is* a concrete proposal on the table of the House of Representatives. And it is a proposal in the form of legislation that would allow the government of the day to engage in offshore processing at a location of its choosing. We are not prescribing Malaysia. We are saying it is the prerogative of the government of the day to identify the processing location that it considers to be the most effective in smashing the people-smugglers' model. That's what we're trying to do. Now, Mr Morrison says 'well, give us a proposal'. There is one. You just asked him, 'well, what is the Coalition's position, in the spirit of compromise', and he said 'we are insisting on the restoration of temporary protection visas, we are insisting on the right to tow boats back to sea'. And he says 'where it is safe to do so'. Have they learned nothing about towing boats back to sea and engaging in these sorts of dangerous activities? Mr Abbott said some time ago that there will be an armada of vessels under this Government. From this day forward it's Abbott's armada. It's Abbott's armada. Because they are not taking responsibility for protecting the lives of asylum-seekers who are losing their lives at sea.

GILBERT: But you say that, but the fact is the electorate will blame the Government.

EMERSON: I don't care about the politics of the situation. I don't care. What I care about is the lives of little children, and reports that 16 more - maybe many more - are dead, Kieran. That's what I care about.

GILBERT: But I'm not talking about the politics; I'm talking about accountability. About the Government ...

EMERSON: You're saying who's getting blamed.

GILBERT: ... coming up with something.

EMERSON: We have come up with something.

GILBERT: The status quo isn't working. Why not say 'okay we'll use the Coalition approach, and just see if something works', because the current approach is a disaster.

EMERSON: I'll tell you the answer to that. I'll tell you the answer to that: because the current approach is a result of the Greens and the Coalition together blocking a piece of legislation that is on the table that would allow for offshore processing at a place determined by the government of the day. That is the best advice to us: that Malaysia, as it happens, is the best location. But if the Coalition were in government and wanted to pursue Nauru, they could. But they say 'oh, we're only doing this to protect asylum-seekers; we're blocking the legislation to protect asylum-seekers who are dying at sea'. And they say it must be a signatory to the Refugee Convention - then they're okay. Somalia is, to all intents and purposes, a lawless state. It is a signatory to the Refugee Convention. The Coalition says it would be fine - would be fine - for a processing centre to be located in Somalia, as just confirmed when Mr Morrison said 148 countries; they're fine about that. One of those is Somalia. So this is a farce that they say 'we care about refugees and their safety at sea', but they would be all right with Somalia but not with Malaysia. It's absurd.

GILBERT: I want to ask Senator Brandis your thoughts on this. You've heard Scott Morrison. You've heard Mr Emerson. Is it time for the Ministers to sit around the table, have a crisis summit or do something? Because as we know ... we've seen - and it's a year on from the Christmas Island tragedy this week - more than 200 people lost their lives off Java.

BRANDIS: Well, I heard your interview with Scott Morrison. And I'm bound to say, Kieran, I thought what he had to say was

extremely sensible. There are few realities here that need to be faced. And sadly, Dr Emerson and other Ministers in his Government just can't face them. And the fundamental reality is that the Government's policies are not working. When the Labor Party came in to power there wasn't a problem. The average annual flow of boats in the last six years of the Howard Government was three a year. Today it's four a week. And the source of the problem goes back to a very stupid decision that was made in 2008 to dismantle offshore processing. And at the time we warned what the consequences would be, but the Government wouldn't listen to us. And now they are repenting, and they're saying 'we want to bring offshore processing back'. But, bizarrely, they say 'we will not bring offshore processing back' in the one location where it worked - that is, Nauru - because frankly I fear the Prime Minister is just too full of stubbornness and pride to admit that the Coalition got this problem fixed. And when I hear Craig go on about how terrible the Opposition is because we say there should be elementary human rights protections, by ensuring that countries are parties to the UN Refugee Convention ...

EMERSON: Like Somalia, yeah.

BRANDIS: That was the policy the Labor Party took to the 2010 election. And this is the problem, Kieran. This Government has been in power for four years, and in four years they have had four different policies. First they wanted to dismantle offshore processing; then they wanted to restore offshore processing, but only to countries which were parties to the UN Refugee Convention. Then they wanted the Malaysia solution, to a country that wasn't a part of the UN Refugee Convention. And now they've abandoned even any notion of processing, so that we have a policy essentially of onshore release, which has provided all the incentive in the world to the people-smugglers, who are laughing at the Australian Government.

GILBERT: Well, unfortunately, the impasse continues. I think you've both articulated your view on this. Unfortunately, we don't have much more time to explore it, so we'll have to wrap things up. Senator Brandis and Trade Minister Craig Emerson - appreciate your time.

EMERSON: Thank you, Kieran.

GILBERT: Thank you for your contribution throughout the year as well. It's much appreciated.

EMERSON: Thanks Kieran. All the best.

GILBERT: Thank you Senator Brandis - appreciate it.

BRANDIS: Thank you.