

INSIDE CANBERRA
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HON CRAIG EMERSON MP
MINISTER FOR SMALL BUSINESS, INDEPENDENT CONTRACTORS AND
THE SERVICE ECONOMY
MINISTER ASSISTING THE MINISTER FOR FINANCE ON
DEREGULATION

SUBJECTS:

KING: A couple of years ago when Kevin Rudd was in Opposition, Labor wanted a four-minute limit on answers and power for the Speaker to force Ministers to give proper answers. The Liberals didn't like it then. Labor, now they're in power, don't seem to like it now. Today, what goes on in Parliament under the microscope. We go *Inside Canberra* with Dr Craig Emerson, Small Business Minister in the Rudd Government. Good morning Dr.

EMERSON: Hi Madonna.

KING: And Senator George Brandis, Opposition Eternity [sic] -General. Good morning Senator.

BRANDIS: Attorney-General not Eternity-General Madonna.

KING: Yes, all right, all right. Attorney-General. Now you'll both admit sometimes it could sound like a lawless grade four class with the teacher absent, doesn't it?

BRANDIS: Well it can, but you know, when I speak to schools I usually address this issue and I make the point that Australia is one of the most successful democracies the world has ever known because when we have disputes, Parliament is the cockpit where national disputes are argued out. We only ever exchange angry words. We never exchange blows.

KING: Well, I'm not sure whether we should be proud of this?

BRANDIS: Well, but I think that's important. I mean every parliamentary chamber in the world, you know, you go to the House of Commons for example or you go to other parliamentary chambers, you do have this kind of robust exchange in which there are interjections and which there is real engagement. The climax for that in the daily schedule is Question Time. Now, you know, I'm not saying that everything that is said and done in Parliament is appropriate but I think it's not a bad a thing that there be these robust exchanges.

KING: Are you saying our Parliament is one of the better behaved in the world?

BRANDIS: Look, I'm not in a position to judge that because I haven't, you know, seen all that many parliaments in session but I don't think it's any worse behaved than the House of Commons.

KING: Craig Emerson?

EMERSON: Madonna, I would make this point: Question Time itself is pretty robust and I'll explain why I think that is the case. What drives the heat in Question Time? It runs for about an hour and a half. Parliament then continues. It's already on before Question Time during which time mostly it's very civilised so I understand why television viewers would say 'God, these people must be at it from dawn to dusk and beyond, arguing the point'. Mostly we don't argue the point. So why is Question Time so robust? The answer is, in part and only in part, because the media expects a contest and I remember when I was...

KING: And what, you give it to them?

EMERSON: Yeah, yeah. In 1998 as a new backbencher I sat there mute with a lot of other mute backbenchers and immediately because a lot of us came in, 17, immediately within days the media was saying the Government, because we were in Opposition, the Government is dominant, the backbench are sitting there stunned at the fantastic performance of Prime Minister Howard and Treasurer Costello. You can't just sit there and allow that to happen. That is the way it's reported. I'm not blaming the media, I'm reinforcing the point that it is robust.

KING: But my mother used to say, Madonna, would you put your head in the fire if Mary Smith did. I've obviously changed the name of Mary Smith. Just because the media expect a bit of a dust-up, is that a reason to give it to them?

EMERSON: If you don't, and I'm not blaming the media, but if you don't they will say that the other side dominated Question Time.

BRANDIS: Madonna, can I make the point that a robust exchange of views in debate is not a dust-up in a belligerent sense.

EMERSON: No that's right.

BRANDIS: It's just the style of parliamentary exchanges.

KING: But is there an argument perhaps for the Speaker to be truly independent and by that I mean not to be attached to either of the big political parties?

BRANDIS: Well, that's a very old argument and again referring to the House of Commons practice, that's always been the case at Westminster. But well I think that there would be a stronger case for that if it could be said that the Speakers who have been provided by either side of politics have

been partisan and I don't think anybody has made that claim in the recent past.

EMERSON: And Opposition will always complain about the ref but in the end do Oppositions seriously contend that Question Time would be so much fairer if the ref were fairer? Not really. We've got a new Speaker, Harry Jenkins, he's pretty well respected. He actually brings a fair bit of humour into the Parliament and that's very disarming too.

BRANDIS: And we should note for the record that to add to the number of high jobs in the Commonwealth occupied by Queenslanders, there's just been elected a new President of Senate, another Queensland, Senator John Hogg.

KING: All right. Can I just, a question from a listener saying during *Inside Canberra* could you ask why in Parliament, polities constantly refer to the Speaker often in every sentence? It sounds absurd, causes me to switch off in frustration. Surely an acknowledgement when they start and finish is enough. That's because you can't speak to each other under the rules, you've got to speak through the Speaker isn't it?

EMERSON: That's right.

KING: All right. Can we move on to another issue of Parliament? A lot to get through in a fairly short time today, but conscience votes. A conscience vote is going to be allowed on this proposal that Medicare funding be removed for abortions carried out between 14 and 26 weeks. Who decides whether something will be voted by conscience or along party lines?

EMERSON: The political party, each political party will make that decision independently of the other. We have processes within the Labor Party for considering that. Usually with issues such as abortion and euthanasia there is a conscience vote. I think the Coalition ends up coming to the same conclusion but it's not inevitable that that be the case. Both parties make their decisions.

BRANDIS: I think what you said is right Craig, although I can't remember a time since I've been here when one Party had a conscience vote and the other didn't.

EMERSON: Yes.

KING: Some people would think well why not have a conscience vote all the time? The last conscience vote I think on the matter relating to abortion was held in 2006. Remember that's when the Senate voted on whether that abortion inducing drug, RU486, should face the same approval processes as other drugs. It got up. Are people more honest when they vote according to their conscience do you think?

BRANDIS: Well I think, I don't necessarily think they're more honest. They are obviously honest if they are voting according to their conscience but in answer to your question, why not have a conscience vote on everything, is that that's just not the way the parliamentary system can work because unlike the American system in which the executive government has an existence independent of the legislature so in the Congress for example you have Republicans and Democrats voting every which way on every particular bill before the Congress. In Australia and in the Westminster Parliamentary system because the executive depends upon rather than has an existence independent of a majority in the legislature, that legislative majority has to be maintained to maintain the stability of the executive government.

EMERSON: And imagine Madonna if before the election both parties made a set of promises that if they were elected they would implement them and then one party does win the election, seeks to implement promises but finds that its members are all over the place and the promises are not implemented. I think your listeners would be pretty upset about breaking promises in those circumstances.

KING: Have you both voted in a way that you didn't want to but it was along party lines. Be honest?

EMERSON: Yes, sure have.

BRANDIS: Yes, absolutely. And I defend that by saying this: the debates that happen on the floor of the Parliament aren't the only debates that happen in Parliament House and often they're not the most important. Often the most important debates that happen are the debates that happen in the Party room and which are very free debates, and I'm sure it's the same in the Labor Caucus Craig. And there is an understanding, I think, which you have among one another, that you get every opportunity to have your say, to try and persuade your colleagues to a particular point of view and if you succeed in persuading them to that particular point of view, those who don't agree with you go along with it, but if you fail, you go along with that.

KING: No I understand that, I understand that. So then is a conscience vote really on issues that kind of impede on religious beliefs?

EMERSON: It doesn't have to be religious but it's probably a simple way of thinking about it. Usually that ends up being the case but people who are not religious have consciences too and they will exercise those consciences in a conscience vote.

BRANDIS: I think moral or ethical is probably a better way of capturing it.

KING: All right. Now onto perks and this is from one of the papers this morning. As if the salary wasn't enough of a drawcard, I'm quoting, there's another reason to become a politician – the perks. From wallet pens to crystal vases, opera tickets to cricket bats, this year the country's federal politicians have cleaned up receiving hundreds of weird and wonderful gifts.

It's in the *Daily Telegraph*. It says Maxine McKew, the Member for Bennelong, got a \$200 leather briefcase, two wooden llamas, \$200 pashmina – that's just one present from the Education Minister in Peru. How did you go? Also the Liberals, Greg Hunt, got a \$560 tandem parachute jump. Either of you match those?

EMERSON: Well, no, I must say I haven't received any parachute offers. I think they would probably urge that the parachute didn't open. Look, I don't get many perks, I don't seek them and sometimes if they're offered I would decline. I'm not saying I'd never go out and watch a game of football.

KING: So what have you got? What have you put in a pecuniary interest register as having?

EMERSON: I think I got a bottle of wine which was worth about \$40. That's about it I think.

BRANDIS: I've been very generously offered tickets to the opera by Opera Australia in whom I took a great interest when I was Arts Minister last year and they've wanted to continue the association. That's the one that I can immediately think of.

EMERSON: And the reason, by the way, that the *Daily Telegraph* knows this, and it's a very good thing, is that these gifts need to be declared.

BRANDIS: That's right.

EMERSON: It's very open and very transparent and I tell you this, if a politician received a gift over a particular value, I'm not sure of the number now, and didn't declare it, that polly would be in a lot of trouble. So that again is a good example of democracy at work and accountability here in Australia.

KING: Gentlemen sit there and we'll just cross to the news room and be back to talk about the US elections in just a moment.

KING: *Inside Canberra* this morning with Opposition Attorney General, Senator George Brandis, and Small Business Minister in the Rudd Government, Dr Craig Emerson, and you just heard Francine talking about the United States, the election there, and I know George Brandis you're very interested in the American election. I'm wondering what's important...

BRANDIS: I think, in fairness to my colleague Craig here, he has some very well educated views about this matter too.

EMERSON: I thought Joe Biden was a Texan last week...

BRANDIS: Yeah, that was bad, I've got to say Craig, that was very, very bad.

KING: So I want to know what's important and what's not. Does it matter that the person running for the Vice President's job for the Republicans has a 17 year old daughter who's pregnant? It seems to be the thing dominating the news in America today.

BRANDIS: Well, it matters in the sense, for that very reason, that it's become a matter of such interest to the media. Whether it should matter or not is a different question but what I think that reflects, particularly in this year, more so than most American elections, the choice of the running mates is all about symbolism and, you know, the choice of Sarah Palin, the Governor of Alaska, which nobody except one particular American commentator, Bill Chrystal, was predicting. I think it will prove to be a choice of genius for John McCain because it obviously speaks to the constituency that he needs to grab from Barack Obama; that is the people who voted for Hillary Clinton, and more specifically still, white, lower middle class women in the industrial north-east states like Pennsylvania, Ohio and Michigan where the election will be won or lost.

KING: But shouldn't the Republicans be considering someone who could be President in the event the 72 year old Presidential delegate for the Republican fell over rather than someone who will deliver a various constituency to him?

BRANDIS: Well, that's the other argument but obviously Sarah Palin, who I gather wasn't even on the short list and wasn't even vetted and it was one of Senator McCain is famous for his quixotic decisions. This was a quixotic decision he made on his own and without...there were two names, it came down to two names as I understand it...

KING: And we've just lost *Inside Canberra*. It seems that line has gone down so we'll have to leave it there for today. My apologies.

ENDS