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Transcript

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interrogation powers, CPRS.*

O'BRIEN: Craig Emerson is one of those that did well out of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's Cabinet reshuffle at the weekend. Mr Emerson now adds competition and consumer affairs policy to his existing portfolios of small business, independent contractors and the service economy. He joins us now from Canberra. Craig Emerson we're going to be calling it the super ministry pretty soon?

EMERSON: Well I'm really excited about the opportunities that Kevin Rudd has given me here. This is a really important area of economic reform – the whole area of competition policy. Labor is the party of both competition and compassion so a lot of good policy work to do here as part of the overall economic reform agenda of the Rudd Government and I'm very grateful for the opportunity.

O'BRIEN: What are going to be your priorities particularly in the competition policy area?

EMERSON: The Trade Practices Act came in in 1974. There has been some reforms done by my predecessor Chris Bowen. The previous government left it pretty much unchanged. We need to ensure that, wherever we possibly can, that we promote competition because it's through competition people become lean and mean in the market place and create wealth. They're able to compete not only here in Australia but against foreign competitors on the international market and at home and that's really key to the creation of prosperity in this country. The history of Australia has shown that where industries are closeted, protected by high tariff barriers, they tend to become inefficient. When they're open to competition it brings out the best in them. Really importantly those industries then become the great innovators.

You can't afford to sit back and watch the world go by when someone goes racing past them with some great idea. That's why competition is so important.

O'BRIEN: The community has particular concerns about the fuel industry and supermarket situation. What guarantees can you offer in those areas?

EMERSON: I can guarantee that we will ensure there is as much competition in those markets as is possible. The benefit of competition is not only in the area I just described Joe, that is businesses being efficient and trying to compete, but even more importantly in a sense is that competition is important for consumers because it helps keep prices down and that's what we want to do where ever we possible can.

O'BRIEN: So you will increase it in the fuel industry and supermarkets?

EMERSON: There are some reforms in the supermarket area that are already underway. We've sent to COAG the whole issue of planning and approval processes for supermarkets. We want to ensure that if a rival wants to enter into a local market there aren't artificial impediments to that rival coming into the market. Now that was an outcome of the ACCC's grocery inquiry. It's now being pursued through COAG and that's just one example of the sort of reform that I'm talking about; important in its own right but also part of the national economic reform program of the Rudd Government.

O'BRIEN: Labor's relationship with the union movement seems to be souring dramatically. Do you believe compulsory interrogation powers against building workers should be retained?

EMERSON: We've got a very clear policy on this Joe and we took it to the last election and the policy was to retain the Australian Building and Construction Commission until the beginning of 2010. We're keeping that promise just as we're keeping the promise to tear up WorkChoices and replace it with a fair and balanced system. Now some people say "well we want you to break that promise". We get lots of people saying that Kevin Rudd and the team should be breaking election promises. What we're doing is keeping our election promises. We went to the election with that commitment and we'll keep that commitment.

O'BRIEN: But building workers are saying that they're being singled out.

EMERSON: Well we'll have after 2010 a special division within Fair Work Australia because there are still problems in some parts of the building and construction industry. That's just the truth of the matter. As a responsible Government we need to deal with those issues while being fair in the way we go about it. That was the election commitment. We're going to keep the pre-election commitment. There's nothing novel about that. But I'm afraid in recent Australian political history the idea of going to an election, for example John Howard had core and non-core promises, not mentioning WorkChoices, not a word of WorkChoices before the 2004 election, then overturning the industrial relations system in this country. That's old style politics. Kevin Rudd made these commitments, we're going to keep them Joe.

O'BRIEN: Just on another issue Senator Fielding has returned from an overseas fact finding mission to the US and he's come back with fresh doubts about climate change. You can effectively write off his support now can't you?

EMERSON: Oh well that's a matter for Steve Fielding. I've just had an opportunity to hear a little bit of what he had to say on radio. What we really need through all of this for the ongoing stability of our policies is the support of the Coalition, Joe. That's what we need and the Coalition's policy position on climate change is pretty clear – why put off tomorrow what you can put off forever. They will never embrace a climate change policy. They will never embrace an emissions trading system. Why? Because it's split the Coalition right down the middle. Barnaby Joyce, the de facto leader of the National Party, is basically saying there is no way, under no circumstance that they will support any emissions trading system. Malcolm Turnbull knows this and therefore will not support an emissions trading system while Barnaby's got that position. I don't see Barnaby changing his position in a hurry.

O'BRIEN: Neither do I. Craig Emerson, Minister for Small Business and a string of other portfolios, thanks for joining us this morning.

EMERSON: Thanks very much Joe.

ENDS.