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Transcript

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LEIGH SALES, PRESENTER: Deal or no deal? While the Oceanic Viking's asylum seekers finally accepted the Government's non-extraordinary resettlement offer this week, will the Coalition party room agree to any ETS deal Ian McFarlane strikes with Penny Wong?

Joining me to discuss the week in politics are the Minister for Small Business, Dr Craig Emerson in Canberra, and in Brisbane, shadow health minister Peter Dutton.

Thanks to both of you for being with us.

PETER DUTTON, OPPOSITION HEALTH SPOKESMAN: Pleasure, Leigh.

CRAIG EMERSON, MINISTER FOR SMALL BUSINESS: My pleasure.

LEIGH SALES: Peter Dutton, who's leading the Liberal Party: Nick Minchin or Malcolm Turnbull?

PETER DUTTON: Well Malcolm Turnbull's leading the Liberal Party, Leigh, and he's taking the fight up to the Prime Minister. It's amazing when you think about the Prime Minister and the way in which he's conducted himself over the last fortnight. I actually think there's been a real turning point in Australian politics in the last fortnight. People are starting now to see the Prime Minister who is a fake and a fraud and a phony, and people are starting to call him for that. And I think it's been a fairly significant development. It's at the two-year mark, so the Prime Minister's had a fair honeymoon, but I think Australians now are starting to question why does this Prime Minister say one thing to one audience and something very different to the next audience that he talks to?

LEIGH SALES: Well, I think people are also starting to question what's going on in the Coalition around climate change. Why is Nick Minchin backed by a group of MPs staking out a position that's at odds with the leaders?

PETER DUTTON: Well, we're in a democracy, Leigh, and people have their say. There are people in the Labor Party who are sceptics and there are people who don't believe in the ETS in the Labor Party. I suspect Craig Emerson is one of those people. But they are having a debate, as we are, and people have the right to express their views. Now we're going to have a party room discussion next Tuesday. We'll look at the deal that the Labor Party is putting on the table. We'll consider it when all of the detail is available. But we live in a democracy and people are able to have their say and it's only proper, and we are in Opposition. We are there to question the Government - we're there to put up alternate policy. But in the end people shouldn't be afraid to express their opinions and people shouldn't be afraid to question what it is the Government's putting forward. We don't just accept as fact everything that Kevin Rudd says. I don't think the Australian people should either, and that's what we're doing at the moment. We're in Opposition and we're questioning what it is the Government's proposing.

LEIGH SALES: Craig Emerson, let's clear this up once and for all, because I've heard other people suggest that you could be a climate change sceptic. Do you believe the majority scientific opinion on man-made global warming?

CRAIG EMERSON: I do, and this is a crucial time in Australian politics, in the Federal Parliament, indeed, for Australia and the world. There is an opportunity, indeed an obligation, in the coming week to get this legislation through and the Coalition must vote on this legislation in the coming week. It's the last week of the parliamentary sitting year. It is also the last opportunity to get this legislation through before the Copenhagen meeting. And what we are seeing from the Coalition is division; is hatred; is rivalry; is positioning for leadership. As Bruce Baird, a former Liberal member of Parliament, someone we all know very well, has said today, he sees this as the positioning by Tony Abbott for the leadership. This is the killing season. We call this the killing season in Australian politics, and that is the last fortnight before going into an election year. And it'll be really interesting to see what happens, because a lot of what's going on appears to be more about the leadership. I do hope there is a deal. We believe that Ian McFarlane and even Malcolm Turnbull are committed to and have undertaken good faith negotiations. But it will be a really interesting and important issue as to whether they can carry the day in a party room full of divisions and rivalries.

LEIGH SALES: Well Peter Dutton, is it as Craig Emerson says, about something bigger than just climate change? Is it about the leadership? What's actually going on behind the scenes in the Coalition?

PETER DUTTON: Well Craig's known also not just as a sceptic, but a bit of a drama queen from time to time as well, Leigh, and he might try and throw up all of these suggestions. Look, the reality is that the Government has, over the last week, been desperate to get people's attention away from their bungling of the asylum-seeker issue.

LEIGH SALES: You've certainly given them a helping hand there.

PETER DUTTON: Well, such is the ward of Oppositions on occasion. But we've been taking the fight up to the Government in relation to the issue of asylum seekers

and the Australian people demand questions from a Prime Minister that has bungled badly this issue. See, what we know about Kevin Rudd is that he can't make a tough decision.

LEIGH SALES: OK, I will come to - I will come - sorry, if I can just interrupt you there. I definitely will come to asylum seekers shortly. But if we could stick for the time being to climate change. Tony Abbott's had a change of heart on whether or not the Coalition should pass the ETS. He says he thinks that the politics is changing. You're a member of a very marginal seat in south-east Queensland. Do you see evidence that the public's attitude towards climate change is changing, as Tony Abbott suggests?

PETER DUTTON: Oh, Leigh, I think the views in my electorate are very similar to those which are being expressed by members right across both sides of the Parliament at the moment. This is an issue where people have very strong beliefs and views one way or the other. People believe strongly in an ETS and some are critical of the Government not doing enough and others believe that there should be no ETS at all. And, that's what I say: I'm not critical of views that are taken within our Coalition, either for or against what it is the Government's proposing, because it is healthy to have a properly informed debate. Just like in the science community, there are people with differing views, so is the case in the Australian community - so is the case in my electorate. And that is, I think, reflected right across the whole country, and so we need to, as elected representatives, have a mature debate, which I might say is the most disappointing element of this whole debate in the lead-up to a decision being taken on this vote. The most disappointing aspect is the fact that the Prime Minister is almost at a point of shrillness and contempt for anybody that has a sliver of difference with his own opinion. And I think that is what has frustrated Australians.

LEIGH SALES: Well let me bring in - can I bring in Craig - can I bring in Craig Emerson there? The Prime Minister said this week, "You can either choose to embrace what the science says or simply deny what it says and therefore take no action." Just because somebody doesn't support Kevin Rudd's policy doesn't mean they advocate taking no action or that they're a sceptic.

CRAIG EMERSON: Well, Kevin Rudd just didn't make up the policy out of thin air. He's made it up and developed it out of science. And it was interesting - your comment about Tony Abbott saying the politics is changing. Well that's very typical of the Coalition. They don't approach policy issues from the perspective of the national interest, but whether they may be able to eke out a few more votes here or there; whether they can jump onto or create some extra fear associated with the carbon pollution reduction scheme. What's in it for them is the first and most important criterion for them, rather than what's in it for the nation, and what's in it for the globe. That's the problem. I mean, if it just meant, Leigh, that they were squabbling and carrying on, well that's one thing. But we need to get this legislation through the Parliament and it is the Coalition who haven't now committed. And I'd like to hear Peter's view. Will they actually go to a vote in the coming week in the Parliament and support the good-faith negotiations that have been going on with Ian McFarlane and Penny Wong and Malcolm Turnbull and Greg Combet and the others or not?

LEIGH SALES: Well, I doubt at this stage that he can answer that.

PETER DUTTON: Well, it'd be funny (inaudible) to answer it now when we haven't seen the deal. I mean, the Prime Minister has not put the deal on the table. There are still issues, as I understand them ...

CRAIG EMERSON: I am advised that the negotiations have been proceeding in good faith. They have been constructive ...

PETER DUTTON: Sure, sure.

CRAIG EMERSON: ... and I pay tribute to Ian McFarlane for the work that he's done there. The question is: will the opportunists seize the day, use this as a leadership tilt in the killing season, or will common sense and the national interest prevail? And that's what's going to be very important in this critical week.

LEIGH SALES: Alright. Let's move on and turn to the issue of the Oceanic Viking. Craig Emerson, not the Government's finest hour?

CRAIG EMERSON: Well, as I said in an earlier interview, this is not a typical situation, in that it was a rescue at sea in Indonesian waters, not in Australian territorial waters. We have an obligation to assist when a boat is in trouble, as it was here. It was a rescue at sea and they were then taken to an Indonesian port. And, they were dealt with ...

LEIGH SALES: Sure, we all know what happened, but in hindsight, wouldn't it have perhaps been better policy to take them to Christmas Island rather than having this four weeks of uncertainty, embroiling Indonesia in it and then promising that they'll be resettled in Australia within 12 weeks anyway?

CRAIG EMERSON: Well, the commitment to the asylum seekers on board the Oceanic Viking was a similar treatment time, that is, a processing time, to that which applies on Christmas Island. That is, if they were not yet assessed then the time that it would take is estimated at 12 weeks. What is the processing time on Christmas Island? Twelve weeks. For those who had already been processed, it will be a shorter period. What would be the point of reprocessing people who'd already been processed and been assessed by the UNHCR?

LEIGH SALES: Craig Emerson, do you think that anyone believes that this wasn't a special deal?

CRAIG EMERSON: Well, I don't think people can have it both ways. We've got on the news tonight and all through the day that women and children are being accommodated behind bars and so on. We've seen the photographs of that. Is that the special deal? I mean, how can you say that it's a special deal and then say, "Oh, but look, the women and children aren't being accommodated in satisfactory accommodation." You can't have it both ways. Attack the Government from one perspective or from the other, but not both. And that's what's going on, people are saying, "Oh, well, it was a special deal, but isn't it terrible that the women and children are being treated in this fashion?" Well what's special about that?

LEIGH SALES: Well, Peter Dutton, let's put that to you. Do you think that the treatment of the women and children, which Simon Crean today described as unfortunate, indicates that it's not a special deal?

PETER DUTTON: I think what it shows is that Kevin Rudd is a hypocrite and a fraud and it demonstrates it on a couple of fronts, Leigh, because Craig Emerson has become a denier of what is so obvious to every Australian, that a special deal was done.

CRAIG EMERSON: Well, they're in luxury up there, Peter.

PETER DUTTON: And for him to sit there and parrot out the Prime Minister's line is really a farce. And that's what has made Australians angry because, as we tipped a couple of weeks ago on Lateline, Leigh, the Prime Minister has one message for the 7.30 Report listeners and a very different message for those listening to A Current Affair. And this is a Prime Minister who was supposed to show leadership, and as Craig said in his opening remarks, this is an unusual circumstance. Well at the time of unusual circumstances, that's when leaders need to demonstrate their capacity to lead and this Prime Minister has not done that. He's been all over the shop on this issue and he's tried to walk both sides of the street and that's why people are starting to question now, not just on this issue, but on a number of issues: who is the real Kevin Rudd? And that's the difficulty out of this. Of course there was a special deal, and Leigh, if I was one of those 78 in a terrible situation - everybody acknowledges that - when I got to the first phone, I would be ringing my friends and family back in Sri Lanka and saying, "Sell everything you've got, get to Indonesia, get onto a boat because you will be processed within 12 weeks and living in Australia." These people will ...

CRAIG EMERSON: If your boat capsizes in Indonesian territorial waters. Yeah, that's a great plan.

PETER DUTTON: But there's no special deal, Craig. There's no special deal. So, don't carry on that this was a special deal ...

CRAIG EMERSON: Do you describe the accommodation up there as luxury accommodation, Peter? Is that it?

PETER DUTTON: We're not talking about the accommodation, Craig.

CRAIG EMERSON: Are you saying the special deal has led to this luxurious accommodation for men in the detention centre and women and children in another place where they'll actually be behind bars?

PETER DUTTON: You talk about accommodating as a red herring.

LEIGH SALES: So, Craig Emerson, are you saying that an endorsement of your policy is the fact that people are held behind bars, so therefore it's a good policy - it's not a special deal?

CRAIG EMERSON: No, I'm not saying that. I'm saying that either argue that it's a special deal and that somehow the processing times have been accelerated and they're being accommodated in very, you know, fabulous accommodation. OK, argue that, but if you do then you have to confront the facts that they are not being housed in luxury accommodation. I'm not saying that's a good idea; all I'm asking is a little bit of consistency, and as Peter and the Liberal Party know, consistency is the sign of a small mind - they never have it.

LEIGH SALES: OK. As Peter Dutton acknowledged earlier, in a few days it's the second anniversary of the Rudd Government's election. Craig Emerson, do you concede any wrongdoing on the Rudd team's part? Any areas where there's room for improvement?

CRAIG EMERSON: Well, of course. How much time have you got in the sense that I know Peter will be start - you know, rattling off all the terrible, terrible sins.

LEIGH SALES: I'm asking you as a member of the team.

CRAIG EMERSON: I'm saying that no government is perfect.

LEIGH SALES: And where are the areas where's there's room for improvement?

CRAIG EMERSON: Well, I think we handled the economic stimulus, that whole problem very, very well. I think that's been endorsed internationally.

LEIGH SALES: But where's there room for improvement?

CRAIG EMERSON: Yeah, OK. There was criticism in the first 12 months that we had a whole lot of reviews. I don't hear that - and no action, and then there's all this action to stimulate the economy and protect jobs and then the Coalition says there's been too much action. I mean, that's a democracy. They're entitled to say that. They're entitled to say that. But I think it's been a pretty good government. It's a new government. I think we hit the ground running, but always there's room for improvement, and that's why I'm not going to say here tonight and spend a lot of time saying all of the different areas where we can improve. As we become more experienced, we'll become even stronger.

LEIGH SALES: Alright. Peter Dutton, the two-party preferred figures at the time of the last election were Labor: 52.7, the Coalition: 47.3. This week, they're Labor: 56, the Coalition: 44. You're going backwards. What does that say about your team's performance?

PETER DUTTON: I thought you were going to allow me to have a critique of the Rudd Government's first two years, Leigh.

LEIGH SALES: I'd like you to critique your own. Well I asked Craig Emerson to critique his own team's performance, I'd like you to critique your own team's.

PETER DUTTON: Well, the difficulty of Opposition is known not just to the Liberal Party, but to the Labor Party as well, and we've suffered because the Prime Minister

has been a populist Prime Minister. He's not had to take a tough decision and he's been a Prime Minister that basically has, with a lot of assistance from a compliant media, I might say, been able to walk on water for two years.

CRAIG EMERSON: Oh, the usual whinge.

PETER DUTTON: But they're - no, no, Craig, I'm just calling it how I see it.

CRAIG EMERSON: It is! Oh, the biased media - the resort of the scoundrel.

PETER DUTTON: For argument's sake, there's been very little - there's been very little critique of the Government in relation to their hospitals promise, for argument's sake, Leigh. A key election promise: to take over hospitals by mid-2009 if they hadn't fixed the hospitals. Well hospitals have gone backwards, cost of living, all of those things the Government hasn't performed on, and so the fact is that they are now starting to be held to account for some of these measures, and after a long period in government, it's always difficult for an Opposition. But I think when we concentrate our efforts on highlighting the deficiencies of the Government, as opposed to talking about ourselves, then the Australian people engage most and I think the Australian people now are starting to look at alternatives in the run-up to the next election. And they want to see a strong, cohesive alternative in the Coalition and that's what's incumbent on us to provide them in the run-up to the next election.

LEIGH SALES: Gentlemen, our time has flown and we're now out of it. Craig Emerson and Peter Dutton, good to have you both with us. Thank you.

CRAIG EMERSON: Thanks, Leigh.

PETER DUTTON: Thanks, Leigh.