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Transcript
14 October 2009
ABC 612 with Madonna King and Senator George Brandis

Subjects: Asylum seekers, Obama's Nobel Peace Prize, media bias, dilemma of the day.

- KING:** A quarter past nine. Now 32 boats carrying asylum seekers have now arrived here, 32. What is our policy here? Is there a plan to deal with this issue? That's where we'll start Inside Canberra this morning. Opposition Attorney-General George Brandis good morning.
- BRANDIS:** Good morning Madonna.
- KING:** And Rudd Government Minister Craig Emerson good morning to you too Dr Emerson.
- EMERSON:** And good morning to you and George.
- BRANDIS:** How are you Craig?
- EMERSON:** I'm fit as a fiddle.
- KING:** Fit as a fiddle. Thirty two boats carrying asylum seekers have arrived this year Dr Emerson. This is always an emotional issue and a political issue. Do you have the right policy levers set in this area?
- EMERSON:** We do. The Christmas Island Detention Centre is the place where unauthorised boat arrivals are taken. If you don't mind it might be worth me taking you through the processes there Madonna?
- KING:** Very briefly because I think most people will probably know them.
- EMERSON:** It takes about three to four months where there are identity checks, health checks and people are then assessed as to whether they are genuine refugees or not using the same processes by the way as the previous Coalition Government. After that period, if they are assessed as genuine refugees, then they are given a permanent protection visa and after a time of about four years usually they could become Australian citizens. If they are not genuine refugees, that is under the

Refugee Convention, and again the same test as the previous Government, then they are not allowed to stay.

KING: How many people on Christmas Island this morning?

EMERSON: Just over 1000.

KING: If Christmas Island is where they go, why did the Prime Minister Kevin Rudd personally intervene, talk to the Indonesian President this week and have the Indonesian Navy turn back a boat carrying 260 asylum seekers?

EMERSON: Well I will qualify my answer by saying I'm not privy to the content of the discussion between Kevin Rudd and the Indonesian President, but the purpose of interdiction in Indonesia – that's a funny word I guess – but it basically is to try to stop the flow of people coming by sea. It's a perilous journey we've seen some terrible, terrible incidents of boats sinking, like the SIEV X, the so called children overboard incident.

KING: So that was for their safety not for political reasons?

EMERSON: Well for their safety and to stop illicit and inhumane trade in people.

KING: All right, let's go to George Brandis here. George Brandis, Dr Craig Emerson says Christmas Island is the place, there's only 1000 people there at the moment, what is wrong with the policy?

BRANDIS: What's wrong with the policy is that when the Government changed the policy in September last year, gave a green light to people smugglers, the policy was consciously and deliberately weakened. I remember being in the Senate and watching the Minister for Immigration, Senator Evans, stand up and announce the weakening of the policy and say how proud he was that the Rudd Government was putting behind it the inhumane policies of the Howard Government, and from that moment on, the moment that green light went on to the people smugglers. We have now had 41 vessels, 32 this year, 41 since September last year and what's particularly worrying is the pace is accelerating. The people smugglers are back in business and now in the last six weeks we've had 12 vessels.

KING: I'll come back to you and this idea of the inhumane, previous Government or their treatment in just a moment. But Craig Emerson, could I ask you to describe, use the adjective you would use to describe Labor's stance. Do you consider yourself soft on immigration, sympathetic, hard-line, what is the adjective you would use?

EMERSON: Tough but fair. Tough but fair and the changes that were made that George referred to is that we did get rid of temporary protection visas and we did get rid of the Pacific Solution. They are not attributed by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees as the causes of

people smuggling and unauthorised arrival. It is the push factors. There is a lot of instability in the region, a brutal civil war that's just finished in Sri Lanka. We know the situation in Afghanistan. Italy has just in the last year received 30,000 refugees. That is not because of the easing, so-called or alleged easing of the refugee policy in Australia.

KING: All right but if what you say is true, and I don't doubt it, why did the Prime Minister then turn back those 260 asylum seekers without knowing how genuine their case might be?

EMERSON: Because we don't, we don't like people arriving unauthorised by boat across a perilous stretch of water.

KING: But isn't this the problem here that people are paying enormous amounts of money in Afghanistan and in other third world countries, to people smugglers but they believe that this is the only way they can do it. They've saved, they're trying to get a new start for their families, that they are being punished as much as the people smugglers?

EMERSON: Well indeed and we have a tough policy. Already 48 people smugglers have been charged with offences under this Government. We make no apology for the toughness of our policy.

KING: Now George Brandis, you don't think it's tough at all, you think they're being soft on people smugglers?

BRANDIS: Look, this is the difference Craig. When the Liberal Party was in power we stopped them coming. The Labor Party gets elected, the softening the policy to appeal to all the small 'i' liberal doctors' wives...

EMERSON: ... sort of people like you George.

BRANDIS: May I finish? You weaken the policy, you soften the policy to appeal to the doctors' wives elements of the community and guess what happens, the people smugglers are back in business. You can't dispute the fact that Howard stopped them. The Liberal Party stopped them. Under the Labor Party, with its weakening of the policy, they're in business again. The difference between Howard's approach and Rudd's approach is this, Rudd's rhetoric is just as tough as Howard's rhetoric. Rudd virtually channelled Howard when he says "we'll decide who comes into this country and the circumstances in which they come". The big difference is that with the Labor Party, it stops with the rhetoric. You don't have the policy courage to take the tough actions to back the tough words.

KING: Is there fact behind what you say in terms of how many asylum, boats of asylum seekers came in the year last year of your Government, compared to the first year of the Rudd government?

BRANDIS: It went like this Madonna, in the last six months of 2001, when the people smugglers really got into business, there were 12 boats that came to Australia. That's when Howard toughened up the policy. For the next three years, there wasn't a single one, and then in the following couple of years there were two or three a year. So Rudd, the Howard Government, the Liberal Government actually stopped this flat and it's only since the weakening of the policy by the Labor Party in September last year that they are coming back in large numbers.

KING: Just before I got to you Dr Craig Emerson, George Brandis don't you think voters wanted a softening of that policy?

BRANDIS: No I don't think they did. I think there were elements, you know particularly certain upper middle class voters in the capital cities were uncomfortable with the policy but, on balance, I think most Australians wanted there to be a tough policy and that's the figure that was shown up recently in the Lowy Institute survey.

KING: Craig Emerson do you think voters would like you to be a little bit tougher given there are 32 boats that have arrived here this year so far?

EMERSON: We are tough and the change in the policy ...

KING: But I'm saying tougher.

EMERSON: Well I don't know, I think that people don't like to see hundreds of asylum seekers drown in the ocean. I think they don't want to see a repeat of the SIEV X, they don't want to see a repeat of the Tampa over which in an inquiry, or in the context of an inquiry, George is alleged to have described John Howard as a lying rodent and had to defend him.

BRANDIS: Now Craig we know you're losing the argument when you're dragging out those old lines. The fact is the SIEV X happened because the people smugglers thought the people smuggling boats would get through and that was a terrible tragedy. It was a tragedy because at the time the tough policies weren't in place. We put them in place and you abandoned them. You get more tragedies and more SIEV Xs with your policies Craig than with the Liberal Party's policies.

EMERSON: The question for George, Madonna, is: will you bring back temporary protection visas? That's the change that you're referring to. Will you bring back temporary protection visas?

BRANDIS: It's not the only change we're talking about as a matter of fact and that is a matter that the Opposition is considering as part of a review of our immigration policy and that will be announced before the next election. But one thing you can be certain of – it will be a lot tougher than yours and it will stop the boats coming.

KING: Final say Craig Emerson.

EMERSON: Will George and the Liberals bring back the Pacific Solution, yes or no?

BRANDIS: Well as I said to you a moment ago, we are reviewing our policy and we will announce it at the appropriate time before the election, but one thing you can be sure of, it will be tougher than yours and it will stop the boats coming.

KING: You be the verdict at home 1300 222 612. You've heard what Senator George Brandis said. You've heard what Dr Craig Emerson said. You tell me. What do you think we should do with our immigration policy in Australia. Inside Canberra this morning, a couple of other issues I want to get through. Craig Emerson, does Barack Obama deserve the Nobel Peace Prize? Sorry Dr Emerson.

EMERSON: I'm saying that Barack Obama himself was surprised. I'd see it more as an award of encouragement and hope. He's made a very good early start with a number of nations.

KING: But that's waffle words. The question is does he deserve it? Does he deserve it?

EMERSON: Well I don't know who the other candidates were and he is the leader of a very important country. If by getting this peace prize it encourages him further in the direction of peace, better relations with Russia, better relations with other countries in the world ... turning America around from a country that had become quite feared around the world and quite despised for a country that plays a very constructive role in world affairs then I think that's a good thing.

BRANDIS: Quite despised? That's the first time I've heard a Labor Minister describe the United States as quite despised.

EMERSON: There is, in fact, there is research showing international attitudes of people of other countries to the United States and it's shifted dramatically.

KING: All right, let me....

BRANDIS: I'm just surprised that a Minister in an Australian Labor Government would describe the United States as being quite despised.

EMERSON: I am not saying that now, I'm saying that there has been a change for the better and if you think there hasn't been a change for the better George that's fine.

KING: All right, let's go back to my question though. To you Senator Brandis, former Foreign Minister Alexander Downer is outraged, he says it was a farce, he says it was a pity Mr Obama had not refused the award. He said it was given really decided 11 days into his

presidency and it should be for actual achievement not so much for potential. Did Alexander Downer get it right?

BRANDIS: I wouldn't use those words. I mean a couple of things, first of all, it's not President Obama's fault that he got awarded the Nobel Peace Prize so I don't think anyone should blame him. And although it seems absurd that he was nominated 11 days after he was sworn in, that's, you know who knows who nominated him, but the decision was made obviously nearly a year after he was sworn in so he had a bit of a track record. I think the problem here though is that this might be seen to be an attempt by the Norwegian, by Norway, which is a very small power in world affairs but carries the great prestige of the Nobel Peace Prize, to try and influence American foreign policy and to, as it were, to convey a message to President Obama well we're putting our hopes in you, don't let us down we want a more Scandinavian America. Well I don't want a more Scandinavian America.

KING: Senator George Brandis there. Dr Craig Emerson also as we go Inside Canberra this morning. A couple of issues I'd like to touch on and the first is this. Kevin Rudd the Prime Minister last night attacked *The Australian* newspaper. He said it was right-wing. I'm just wondering whether you politicians see different media outlets as having a specific overall bias as opposed to individual journalists. Is the ABC left-wing, right-wing? Do you see particular journalists in a particular way? If you see me as unfair, tell me either of you whether you see my questioning as unfair? How do you deal with that issue of, do you perceive a media bias and how do you deal with that? Senator George Brandis?

BRANDIS: Ah, I think it's fair enough to say that *The Australian* proudly has a libertarian centre right political focus.

KING: In the news columns or in its editorial?

BRANDIS: No in its editorial and in its op-ed page but you know it also endorsed Kevin Rudd don't forget at the 2007 elections so one doesn't want to over-generalise. I think it's also fair to say that Fairfax press has a more of a centre left bias or that could be more readily said about the Melbourne Age than about the other Fairfax mastheads.

KING: And the ABC?

BRANDIS: Well I think that the ABC does have, in some of its reportage, more sympathy for the Labor side of politics than for my side of politics but I wouldn't, again, I wouldn't take that too far. I mean I've been a guest on a lot of ABC programs over the years as you know Madonna and I personally have never felt badly treated.

KING: Dr Craig Emerson, do you see media organisations as falling into a right-wing camp or a left-wing camp? The ABC, do you see it as having a left-wing bias?

EMERSON: I think what George said is broadly correct from my perspective. *The Australian* newspaper itself would describe itself editorially as being a bit to the right. It's a tradition since it was first established in the mid-1960s. That doesn't mean that they don't run stories that are against the interest of a Coalition Government or vice versa but that's their editorial and opinion pages. I think they are pretty fair in their overall news reporting but sometimes we get upset about that but I'm sure that the previous Government got upset too. In relation to the Fairfax press again, as a generalisation it's probably more to the centre-left. Again I'd agree with George about *The Age* newspaper - a bit more to the left. In regard to the ABC, I think that the interviewers on the ABC are very tough and I actually like that. Leigh Sales, Tony Jones, Kerry O'Brien and frankly yourself, but I like that Madonna, you tell us to answer the question directly. I don't think at all that you're unfair but I think that politicians need to be brought to account and not just waffle on so I'll finish there.

KING: All right, agreement there and there was a bit of waffle but your last issue is today's dilemma and I was going to ask you whether we should give back the America's Cup given the story on AM. But I am going to stick with the dilemma that we're doing and leave America's Cup for our listeners this morning. This is the dilemma and it's been sent in by a listener. We'll call him Dan and he was at the airport, and I'm asking you because both of you changed many of our listeners views last week in the case of Arthur Rex Crane. Several people called in saying look after listening to the two politicians we think this and actually agreed with you. Some others disagreed but I think it was quite a majority that agreed with you. Dan was in a book shop at the airport browsing before he caught a plane. There was a book he really liked, he spent some time looking at it. He went to get on the plane or to the holding area and realised he still had the book. He decided he had three choices, he'd already got the book, it wasn't long before the plane leaves, he could get on the plane, who would know he had the book? It was just a book. He could take it back, hand it over the counter and say I'm sorry, I accidentally took this book and see if they believed him or not or he could go back and sneak it back onto the shelf, walk back, no-one's any the wiser. If you were in that situation George Brandis what would you do?

BRANDIS: I don't think that's a very hard dilemma. He took the book, it wasn't his property, it was an innocent mistake but nevertheless it wasn't his property. He should have put the book back.

KING: Surreptitiously or hand it back?

BRANDIS: I don't think it matters whether he put it back surreptitiously or handed it over to save himself from embarrassment, but he should absolutely return it because it wasn't his.

KING: Just, say, the plane was boarding?

BRANDIS: Well, you know, if it was not possible for him physically to return the book, he could have given it to one of the counter staff and explained the situation, and asked them if they wouldn't mind taking it back to the newsagent.

KING: Now Dr Emerson, have you answered that phone, told the Prime Minister you'll be with him in a minute and how would you deal with the dilemma?

BRANDIS: He's probably being reprimanded for saying how much the Labor Party regards America as despicable.

EMERSON: Don't put words in my mouth. That was the attitude of other countries, under the previous period.

KING: What's your answer to the dilemma Craig Emerson?

EMERSON: My answer is I would take the book back, I would take the book back and I would tell them I was taking the book back. One, I think it's the right thing to do. Two, there would be closed circuit TV cameras all over the place, and I don't think it's a good look for anyone including a politician, to nick off with a book and then not take it back. And so that's what I'd be doing.

KING: Be a good story if you did.

EMERSON: It certainly would.

KING: I tell you what, if I had it I'd certainly be leading the program with it. Dr Craig Emerson, Senator George Brandis, thank you.

BRANDIS: Thank you Madonna, thank you Craig.

EMERSON: Okay. Bye bye George.

KING: ... and that's Inside Canberra for another week, Senator George Brandis and Dr Craig Emerson back at the same time next week.

Ends