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Transcript

Sky Agenda AM with Kieran Gilbert

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Subjects: CPRS negotiations, asylum seekers, Costello/Nelson resignations.

GILBERT: Welcome back to AM Agenda. With me now Liberal frontbencher Mitch Fifield and Small Business Minister Craig Emerson. Gentlemen good morning to you both.

EMERSON: G'day Kieran.

FIFIELD: Hello Kieran.

GILBERT: Mitch first to you. Malcolm Turnbull won the support of the party room. How strong was that support?

FIFIELD: We had a terrific discussion last night. The room was pretty united in the fact that it's important to sit down, it's important to negotiate with the Government. One of the heartening things I found from last was that we had a four and a half hour discussion. I can't remember the last time the ALP had a four and a half hour discussion on anything.

EMERSON: Well you wouldn't know.

FIFIELD: But it's important to have these discussions. It's important to air views and when you've got colleagues representing diverse electorates it's important they have a chance to have their say and that happened last night.

GILBERT: You're one of the finance area ministers, the small business minister. Ian McFarlane says it's cost neutral – that's a good start?

EMERSON: Well we want to see the costings. We welcome the outcome of the party room meeting yesterday. The negotiations can now commence. We haven't seen the amendments. We've got a press release. I understand there will be a meeting later on this afternoon but we need to see both the costings Kieran and also the impact on emissions because the argument the Coalition is putting is that it won't cost anything but we do need to understand that a scheme that doesn't affect anyone won't affect emissions either. Let's have a look at what they've come up with. We think the Coalition has at least been constructive to this point and we want to engage constructively with the Coalition.

GILBERT: Mitch you've said you don't want a vote before Copenhagen. Are you happy for this for the basis of talks and secondly I guess the real test comes in a couple of weeks when you have to decide whether you do support any agreement if it's reached?

FIFIELD: No one in the Coalition thinks there should be a vote before Copenhagen.

EMERSON: That's not right.

FIFIELD: The Government has yet to advance a reason as to why it's essential to have a vote before Copenhagen. It looks like it will insist on a vote before Copenhagen so we're taking the responsible and reasonable approach of sitting down with the Government to put forward amendments and to negotiate.

GILBERT: Ian McFarlane says he's got a small book of dissenters that won't back any compromise - that won't support any vote on an ETS before or after for that matter. Are you one of those in the black book?

FIFIELD: Well I think to be fair to all of my colleagues the Coalition party room as a collective has reserved its position until we see the results of the negotiations. Now we can't make a call on what we'll do in the future because we don't know how these negotiations will pan out.

GILBERT: What would you be leaning towards? I mean if there is an agreement, they agree to most of your amendments, would you be willing and open to a vote before?

FIFIELD: Look I'm not going to pre-judge the outcome of the negotiations. The Coalition is entering the negotiations in good faith and I'm sure Craig would agree that it's not helpful to the negotiation process if there is a running commentary from Coalition colleagues on what may or may not be the outcome of any given range of scenarios. We're not going to know until the negotiations have been concluded. What we're aiming to do is some very practical things. We want to see agriculture excluded. We want to see fugitive coalmine emissions excluded and we want to see if we can reduce the cost of electricity, the impact on electricity prices which is, from the Government's own work, a 40 per cent increase in wholesale prices, an 18 per cent increase in retail prices. We're putting forward a proposal which we think can see those increases cut in half and that's important for small business.

GILBERT: Craig I put a similar question to Greg Combet and it sounds like the language from the Government is very conciliatory. You want to show you're being constructive but on the one hand you're being constructive but on the other you're going let's ram this through before December?

EMERSON: It's been our program, our timetable all along to get it through before Copenhagen. Mitch just said no one in the Coalition has argued for a vote before Copenhagen. Tony Abbott just this morning, Tony Abbott is a very senior Coalition member and he said: "It could indeed help the outcome of the Copenhagen climate change talks if Australia agreed in advance not only to a carbon emissions target but also on a mechanism to deliver it". Now there are people in the Coalition who are arguing for a vote before Copenhagen on the same basis that the Government is but there was more confusion this morning unfortunately because I heard Ian McFarlane say that they wouldn't be adopting any delaying tactics to try and get it past Copenhagen. Then Malcolm Turnbull, earlier has said that it may well go into the new year, that if there is no agreement they're going to keep talking. Now going into the new year takes us into February, the resumption of Parliament and Greg Combet made the point that business itself is seeking an outcome before Copenhagen so it can start doing its planning. Again we've got Ian McFarlane, Tony Abbott and Malcolm Turnbull and now Mitch all with different positions on whether there should or shouldn't be a vote before Copenhagen.

GILBERT: What's your response to the Tony Abbott statement in an opinion piece today in the The Australian newspaper?

FIFIELD: Well Tony agrees with all of us. He recognises that this is the biggest structural change ever put forward by the Government on the Australian economy. Tony agrees that it's important to get this right. It's important to take the time to get this right and the point that Malcolm was making this morning was if that means going into the new year then so be it. We're not going to seek to unnecessarily delay or obstruct but it's important that something of this magnitude that we get it right.

GILBERT: You don't agree with the Abbott point? You missed the last point and that is that he's saying there should be a vote before Copenhagen?

FIFIELD: No, no, no, no. Tony wasn't saying there should be a vote....

EMERSON: I just read it out.

FIFIELD: No, no, no he wasn't saying there should be a vote before Copenhagen. He was saying that he could see a benefit. That's not to say that the overwhelming weight of argument is in favour of a vote before Copenhagen. That's not Tony's view or the view of anyone in the Coalition.

GILBERT: Let's move on. We've only got about seven or eight minutes left on the program. A couple of issues I want to touch on. Asylum seekers. Now another vessel was intercepted we were informed overnight off Ashmore Reef. Thirty nine people on that. Two boats yesterday off Indonesia, one off Malaysia in distress, needed help from HMAS Armidale. This is continuing and the Government says it's all about push factors. How can the Government not accept that some of your policy might have led to this?

EMERSON: Because it is about push factors. Italy has received 36,000 asylum seekers in a year. Now that is not because of the Rudd Government's policy on asylum seekers. It reflects the fact that there has been a brutal civil war in Sri Lanka. There is as we all know terrible trouble in Afghanistan...

GILBERT: It's been there since 2001...

EMERSON: No there are real problems in Sri Lanka right now and a lot of people....

GILBERT: Afghanistan since 2001.

EMERSON: ...and the Hazari people claiming that they have been persecuted and a number of them were approved as genuine asylum seekers just recently so these problems, they come in waves around the world, and there is at present a surge in displaced people around the world. Tens of millions of displaced people around the world. Now take the comparison with Italy – 36,000. Since this Government came in less than 2,000 people have arrived by boat here. They'll be assessed under the same procedures as under the Coalition, by the United Nations High Commission for Refugee processes and if they are found to genuine refugees they'll be able to stay. If they're found to not to be genuine refugees they will be turned around and sent back.

GILBERT: Mitch there's a dilemma in your party as well and I know that the focus needs to be on the Government, its policies because it's under its watch that we're seeing these dramas at the moment. Many in your side of politics do not want a return to the tough Howard era approach do they? Small "I" liberals. Petro Georgiou, Judi Moylan among others.

FIFIELD: Well I think an overwhelming majority of the Coalition party room are of the view that what this Government is doing isn't working and that something different needs to happen. Two things have changed since this Government came into office. The first was the rhetoric of the Labor Party, not just in Government but in Opposition. In Opposition Labor flagged very loudly and very clearly that they were going to take a different approach and that message was heard around the world. They continued that rhetoric when they came into Government and since August when the Government abolished the Temporary Protection Visas we've seen something in the order of more than 40 vessels come, more than 2000 asylum seekers. So the push factors have always been with us. There has always been turmoil. What's changed is the Government's rhetoric and the abolition of TPVs. And we shouldn't underestimate the significance of the language that the Government uses. That language sends a significant message to the people smugglers and the combination of the Government's language and the abolition of the TPVs has given people smugglers a good product to sell and that's what they're doing.

GILBERT: Isn't it simplistic for you and the Government to say it is all about the factors overseas? Surely the policy at home has to play some role?

EMERSON: Well let's have a quick discussion about Temporary Protection Visas. Ninety per cent of asylum seekers who were given Temporary Protection Visas under the Coalition stayed. They were allowed to stay, right. Now we have removed Temporary Protection Visas. When Temporary Protection Visas were first introduced in 1999 there was a surge – a massive surge – more than 5,000 people arriving in a year in boat arrivals. So it's logically impossible to argue that the removal of Temporary Protection Visas has been a contributing factor. But if the Coalition persists with that argument then it is incumbent upon them to say what they're going to do about Temporary Protection Visas. I predict when we go to Mitch he'll say we don't have a policy on that, you're the Government. Well we did have an alternative policy Kieran when we came to Government. The Coalition is trying to get through this without an alternative policy, without saying what they'll do about Temporary Protection Visas.

FIFIELD: We've said the Government should establish an inquiry. Now, when we say an inquiry we're essentially saying the Government needs to ask itself the hard questions. It needs to ask itself the questions we're posing. What has caused this increase in boats coming to Australia?

EMERSON: You're saying it's Temporary Protection Visas?

FIFIELD: If the Government did this inquiry, they'll probably find their language hasn't helped, they'll probably find that the abolition of TPVs hasn't helped which then leads you to what do you do? Now I think there are a number of people, a number of colleagues have disposition towards bringing back some form of Temporary Protection Visa. We're going through our own policy process and that will be one of the things we look at. It's incumbent on the Government to ask itself those questions.

GILBERT: Just one last thing and we've got about a minute to go. Mitch, the end of an era today. Peter Costello and Brendan Nelson to hand in their resignations from Parliament to the Speaker.

FIFIELD: Indeed it's a sad day for the Liberal Party but I also think it's a sad day for the Parliament and for Australian politics. They've both made tremendous contributions. Brendan Nelson putting the focus back on standards of education. Peter Costello the best economic manager we've ever had but I think also significant is Peter's one of the great parliamentary performers. He made question time interesting. It's hard to watch the house now without falling asleep. He put a bit of passion in there and a bit of humour. He used passion and humour to convey important messages to the community and I think we'll miss that.

GILBERT: Does the Prime Minister have a job in mind for Peter Costello? Brendan Nelson's already got one.

EMERSON: (laughs) I don't know. Look both Peter and Brendan are political rivals but they have made a very important contribution. I agree with the colour of the Costello question times...

FIFIELD: You're not bad Craig. You liven it up a bit.

EMERSON: Well thanks mate. I didn't know you watched it from the Senate. Mustn't be much happening in the Senate while they're watching question time in the house. But anyway I wish them both all the very best for the future.

GILBERT: Craig Emerson, Mitch Fifield, as always great to see you both. Of course we wish both men all the best for their futures as well. That's all for this edition of AM Agenda. I'm Kieran Gilbert, thanks for your company.

ENDS.