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E&OE

***Subjects: asylum seekers and binge drinking.***

BEGLEY: To federal politics and the Opposition is saying that the Government's deal with Indonesia to house asylum seekers is in tatters this morning. Seventy eight Sri Lankans are sitting on an Australian Customs boat The Oceanic Viking refusing to have identity and medical checks and say they won't go ashore voluntarily. It's the latest setback the Government is facing over its so called Indonesian solution. The Opposition has certainly had a lot to say on this in recent days. To hear more we're going to go Inside Canberra and say good morning to Dr Craig Emerson, the Rudd Government Small Business Minister and Senator George Brandis, the Shadow Attorney General. Good morning to you two.

BRANDIS: Morning Terri, morning Craig.

EMERSON: G'day George.

BEGLEY: Well let's get into this asylum seeker issue. It's bubbling along. In fact some would say it's throwing up many problems like mushrooms. Whose responsibility is it with this latest boat of asylum seekers, to get them to shore and processed?

EMERSON: Well we're working with the Indonesian authorities. It's an operational matter and we'll just continue to do that. I think we need to put this whole issue in its proper context. There's 78 people on the Oceanic Viking. In the two years since the Rudd Government was elected less than 2000 asylum seekers have sought asylum in Australia via boat. Compare that with figures for other countries like 65,000 for Canada, more than 75,000 for France, 60,000 for the UK, 60,000 for Italy and us less than 2000. So let's have a public debate about that. That's perfectly legitimate but when terms like crisis are raised and some backbenchers on the Coalition side link this to terrorism

that brings in a hysteria that I don't think is really edifying or in the interests of an informed debate.

BEGLEY: Sure but isn't it confusing to the public that some boats are allowed to continue on to be processed on Christmas Island and yet others are turned back as in this case and you've got 78 people who've been detained for the last 10 days sitting on a boat. Where does it go from there? How does Australia deal with this? How does Indonesia deal with this? It appears confusing to the public looking in on this.

EMERSON: The route of passage if you like from Sri Lanka is to Malaysia, through the Indonesian waters seeking asylum by making it to Christmas Island and the fact is that some boats have been intercepted before they get into Australian waters. This particular one was a boat in distress and it was picked up through an agreement with the Indonesians by an Australian Customs vessel The Armidale and transferred to the Oceanic Viking. Now my understanding is that asylum seekers do not want to leave that vessel and we're saying with the Indonesian authorities that they should be accommodated within Indonesia at a particular port. There is a bit of a stand off. That's the truth of it but I wouldn't describe this, as some members of the Opposition have, as some sort of crisis or deluge of asylum seekers when we're less than 2000 and other countries over a comparable period are 65,000 to 75,000.

BEGLEY: But what about what's happening between Indonesia and Australia? Getting back to this boat and where it's anchored off, local leaders there on the island are quoted as saying yesterday that they didn't want to become a dumping ground for asylum seekers. They said the facilities there, that are Australian funded, aren't even adequate to house the people that are there. Electricity is sporadic. There isn't running water. This hardly sounds like an ideal place to house asylum seekers. It hardly sounds like this Indonesian solution is going smoothly for you?

EMERSON: Well the Indonesian President Dr Yudhoyono said in relation to the provincial governor's remarks that that had been limited to the detention centre's capabilities, not to whether the asylum seekers would be allowed to come ashore. The position of Indonesia is that they will be allowed to come ashore, that they will be accommodated. There will be an option for women and children to be housed in separate nearby housing rather than in a detention facility which we think is humane policy and we'll continue to work with the Indonesian authorities on this issue.

BEGLEY: How humane is it that they are still refusing to leave the boat? There are women and children on board and they've been on that boat for 10 days now?

EMERSON: Well I guess it's a matter of choice. You said they were refusing to leave the boat so I'm not sure what the proposition is.....

BEGLEY: Well if they are Australia's responsibility...

EMERSON: They have a choice as to whether they leave the boat or not. I don't think that's inhumane Terri.

BEGLEY: Is it not your responsibility though that they do get processed and into a detention centre? This can't go on forever?

EMERSON: We're working through that with the Indonesian authorities but I'm not sure how it could be asserted that it's inhumane that 78 asylum seekers refuse to leave a vessel. There's water, there are sleeping facilities, their health is being looked after. So I'm not sure what the proposition is that it's inhumane that they leave the boat. I don't quite get that I'm sorry.

BEGLEY: George Brandis you've been quite patient there. I'll allow you an opportunity to speak. The overall view of what the Government is doing with asylum seekers at the moment. You're Opposition. You say the policy is in tatters, that it's not working. It's easy to criticise though?

BRANDIS: Well it's particularly easy to criticise when we had good policies in place that were working and this Government dismantled and now we have the complete policy catastrophe...

EMERSON: Crisis. Catastrophe?

BRANDIS: Can I note that I think your listeners would be very disappointed to hear the Rudd Government doesn't regard this as a crisis. It is a very serious matter. It is at the very least a policy crisis because you have a situation in which the Rudd Government last August weakening the policies, softened the border protection policies and I remember Senator Evans, the Minister for Immigration, standing up in the Senate when he made these announcements last year and saying how proud he was that the Government had adopted these new policies and abandoned what he called the harsh policies of the Howard Government and he said the same thing.....

EMERSON: Supported by the Coalition.

BRANDIS: ...in Senate estimates last week. Now the fact is, and Craig draws comparison between Australia and other countries, the relevant comparison is between Australia today and Australia under the previous Government. All your listeners know that the big difference is that the Howard Government stopped the boats coming. The Liberal Party stopped the boats because we did have tough policies. We didn't just have tough rhetoric but we had the policy courage to back the tough rhetoric with tough policies and you'll recall that Mr Howard and Mr Ruddock were criticised for being too tough but their policies worked. The Rudd Government softened the policies in this last year and since that time there have been now 45 unlawful entry vessels...

EMERSON: Less than 40.

BRANDIS: ....with 2069 people on board as a direct result of the softening of the policies. There is a cause and affect relationship between saying you'll soften the policies thereby sending a signal to the people smugglers that it's time to get back in business and this spike in the number of people trying to enter Australia unlawfully. The Government's got to take responsibility for it.

EMERSON: Okay, let's make the comparison. Under the previous government nearly 15,000 asylum seekers arrived by boat on 250 vessels. Under the Rudd Government less than 2000 on around 40 vessels. The fact is that there is an ebb and flow in people seeking asylum around the world.

BRANDIS: It's been all flow on your watch Craig.

EMERSON: All of the other countries I cited, where they have had, over a comparable period, 65-75,000 arrivals have experienced in that two-year-period a surge. Now the proposition from the Coalition must therefore be that the Rudd Government's policies have led to a massive surge in asylum seekers in Canada, France, the UK, Italy and other countries. It's absolutely absurd. There are more people seeking asylum because of conflicts around the world and when more people seek asylum it goes up in Australia and in other countries and when fewer people seek asylum it goes down. Now George is saying that they are opposed to the Government's policies on asylum seekers and when we ask them what they would do they say we would have an inquiry. They need to say whether they would get rid of temporary protection visas, mandatory detention....

BRANDIS: Can I have a go?

EMERSON: Of course George.

BEGLEY: Criticism is one thing but you've got to come up with something else for people to ponder. What would you do?

BRANDIS: Our policy is our record.

EMERSON: Oh come on.

BRANDIS: Everybody knows that during the last period of Liberal Government we stopped the boats and all those crazy statistics Craig....

EMERSON: They're correct. They're accurate.

BRANDIS: What they disregard is the policy tightening occurred in the Howard Government in the middle to later part of 2001 and from the time that that policy tightening occurred the number of boats arriving went down to zero. For three consecutive years, 2002, 2003, 2004, the number of boats arriving went to zero and then in the last couple of years, including by the way, the first year of the Rudd Government before the softening of the policy there were dribs and drabs of two or three boats a year. So those policies worked. When the Rudd Government softened the policies in August last year

it sent a green light to the people smugglers to get back into business and that's the reality Terri. There's no escaping it.

BEGLEY: Okay. Craig Emerson a final quick response.

EMERSON: George says that their policies are their record. Their policies are the temporary protection visas and the Pacific Solution and for long periods kids behind razor wire. So George needs to explain to the Australian people whether they are their policies. If their policies are their record then they are saying they will bring back those policies.

BRANDIS: Look mate, it's this simple. As Tony Abbott said on Lateline last night, John Howard found a problem and created a solution. When you came into power you found a solution and you created a problem.

EMERSON: So there go temporary protection visas and back to the Pacific Solution for the Coalition. You'll have an inquiry....

BRANDIS: Terri your listeners can be very reassured based on a long track record that the Coalition will be much much tougher than the Labor Party is and we will announce our policies in advance of the next election but our policy is our record. We stopped the boats and a future Liberal Government will stop the boats again because we have the policy courage to back the tough rhetoric with tough policies.

BEGLEY: All right, I think we're going around in circles, which tends to happen when I sit in the chair. I'm a bit too kind to you guys I think. We will get back to some other topics of discussion. If you don't mind pausing for a moment gentlemen, we're just going to get a quick update from the news room.

#### *NEWS UPDATE*

BEGLEY: We're Inside Canberra at the moment which means we're talking to Senator George Brandis, the Shadow Attorney General and Dr Craig Emerson, Rudd Government Minister. Both live in Canberra today. Another issue that's really in the middle of our sights at the moment is teenage binge drinking. We've had varying opinions on how to overcome this as a community. Yesterday on air gentlemen we heard from a father, a desperate Brisbane father who says his 17-year-old son is drinking so much that he is scared for him, he says he is scared that he might not come back from schoolies. He doesn't know where it's going to take him. He says his son's not listening to him on this message. We also heard from his son Mitchell this morning, bravely coming on this morning to tell us what it's like to be 17 and face the pressures and I guess lie down to them and drink to excess. He's seen 12-year-olds, 14-year-olds, younger than him drinking to excess. Many, many nightmares for parents of teenage children these days, and this is just one of the biggest ones, teenage binge drinking. You're both fathers. Is this an issue that you've had to sit down with your kids and talk to them about and in some way try and avoid this train coming down the track? George Brandis?

BRANDIS: Well I think as you rightly say Terri, it's an issue that is on every parent's mind. I mean you do talk to your kids about issues like that and other issues, but I think it's also a question of example and the example I think you have to give is an example of moderation. I don't think that one should be hectoring or puritanical about this. I think that the message that certainly I convey is that there is nothing wrong with drinking in moderation and the younger, you know, it's an adult activity, so that when you have say 17-year-olds its something, it's a habit that if they are going to take it up they need to take it up in careful steps and moderately.

BEGLEY: Even as a 17-year-old though, the way Mitchell was talking, it's common place, it's considered almost socially acceptable. He says some kids have parents supplying them with alcohol, you know that whole excuse is that I'd rather give it to them than they go out and find it for themselves. It's more about just talking to your kids, isn't it more a cultural change that we all need to think about?

*Break in transmission.*

BEGLEY: We do have our politicians back from Canberra. George Brandis you we're just about to answer that question and we do apologise for losing you there. Do you not think that more needs to be done culturally here in Australia? We hear of people saying that it's a trickle down effect these days, teenagers are now acting far above their age, their bodies can't handle it but culturally it's acceptable for them to do so and binge drinking is a part of that?

BRANDIS: Well I think that, and this goes to the issue of education, and it also goes to the issue of parenting, I'm of the view that at the end of the day the standards that kids adopt and copy are the standards they see in their own homes.

BEGLEY: But David, the father yesterday – sorry to interrupt – but he said that he rarely imbibes. He might have one drink every two months and yet his sons going to excess.

BRANDIS: Sure well you know that's what has evidently happened in that particular case which is very alarming and as I said a little while ago, education is a very important part of this as well. I think it's the biggest thing, and I think any parent of teenage kids knows this; the biggest influence of all is peer group pressure. And therefore, there are limits; it's something that perplexes all parents of teenage kids because there is a limit to the extent to which you can control peer group pressure as we all know. So there is no perfect solution to this but I think that the expectation ought to be that drinking to excess is not something that teenagers want to do, that's it's a distasteful thing to do and its one of those things of gradually bringing about a changing expectation of what is acceptable behaviour.

BEGLEY: Craig Emerson, I mentioned that you're a father of teenagers, what are the words you use when you sit down? It's a difficult subject to even bring up. What do you say to your kids?

EMERSON: I don't find it difficult at all and I agree with George. I am just astonished at just how much boys and girls take a lead from their father in not only what you say but what you do. Once I'd really become acutely aware and you just become even more committed to not doing your nana, just being reasonably decent through all of your life and I think that that can have an effect on attitudes of kids to drinking. In the conversations that we've had, I've said you know, obviously don't get involved in binge drinking and absolutely and totally do not get into a car, do not get into a car when you have had anything to drink, or when your friend has had anything to drink. Do not under any circumstances. I really insist on that rather than saying, oh God if I see you with a beer in your hand you're dead meat. I mean that's ridiculous you know. Kids will have a beer or they'll have a bundy and coke or whatever and it would be absurd while I have a beer, to say that you better not do this. They will take your lead but I'll have two maybe three beers on a weekend at a barbecue and then I stop. And I think that if you can set that sort of example, that doesn't mean the end of binge drinking. Binge drinking was with us 20, 30 and 40 years ago. Now it's more visible, it's more prevalent. There's a bigger debate about it which is great because the debate that should have been had 20 and 30 years ago was about kids getting in cars and killing themselves, and we didn't have that proper debate and now it is and I think that's a good thing.

BRANDIS: I agree with that, and that last point is a very good point. I mean, I don't know the answers by the way but I wonder if the greater visibility of this issue and the greater attention paid to it in the media means that we are more conscious of a problem that was a pre-existing problem and I don't know if it's worse now than it used to be. Perhaps it's just that we're more aware of it than it used to be. I think it's probably right to say, not kids, but certainly adult males, you know 30 or 40 years ago used to drink more than they do now.

EMERSON: They did and they'd get in a car and kill themselves. I come from a country town and the number of my school friends and a little bit older just smashed into trees on an open road, just got drunk, fell asleep, smashed into trees, dead.

BEGLEY No second chances there. Have either of you been in a position though, have you had one of those nights where you have sat by the phone or not received a text message back. Have either of you had those thoughts in the back of your head, what's happened, where are they, how much have they had to drink and why haven't I heard from him?

EMERSON: All of that, except how much have they had to drink. I think anyone can have a car accident and you think of that and I have sat there waiting for a text message at one o'clock in the morning and I think that's just something that parents do. That's part of parenting. Yes, while it's annoying and you'd like to be asleep, if you bring kids into the world, you've got to worry

about them and you've got to look after them. But I've never actually worried that they're off getting absolutely plastered because frankly neither of them likes the taste of grog very much at all.

BEGLEY: Gentlemen, its been interesting to hear your view points as fathers on this because certainly a lot of parents listening to this and many of them not knowing how to deal with this and feeling that their messages of abstinence or perhaps moderation just aren't getting through. It's great to have you in on the discussion this week and we will catch you again for Inside Canberra this time next week with Madonna back in the chair.

EMERSON: Thank you.

BRANDIS: Thank you.

BEGLEY: Senator George Brandis, Shadow Attorney General and Dr Craig Emerson, Rudd Government Minister, both joining us there live from Canberra for a little bit late Inside Canberra today, it did go a little bit over time.

ENDS.