



HON CRAIG EMERSON MP
MINISTER FOR SMALL BUSINESS, INDEPENDENT CONTRACTORS AND THE
SERVICE ECONOMY
MINISTER FOR COMPETITION POLICY AND CONSUMER AFFAIRS
MINISTER ASSISTING THE MINISTER FOR FINANCE ON DEREGULATION

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Interview by Madonna King

Subjects: John Della Bosca, celebrity politicians, politicians' mobile phone bills,
obesity.

KING: Our daily dilemma coming up after 9.32, I'll remind you of it shortly. But let's walk down the corridors of power now and it should be an interesting walk too. John Della Bosca quits his job over an affair with someone half his age, politicians' mobile telephone bills topping \$15,000 for last year in some cases. How much did Dr Craig Emerson and Senator George Brandis spend? Gentlemen good morning.

BRANDIS: Morning Madonna.

EMERSON: And hello to you Madonna and George.

BRANDIS: Morning Craig.

KING: Now you're not wearing a tie Craig Emerson.

EMERSON: No, no it's a beautiful spring day. I could put it on if I need to but I've got a good head for radio so I guess it doesn't matter.

KING: Well just wave to the web cam up there. Big video stream across the nation.

EMERSON: The latest technological breakthrough.

BRANDIS: Is that new Madonna is it, the web cam?

KING: George Brandis always wear a tie to work?

BRANDIS: No not always. If I go into the office and have just paperwork to do for the day I often don't but today I have some appointments. I'm off to Adelaide later in the day so I'm ...

EMERSON: To be honest with you the reason I don't have a tie is I grabbed two on the way out and the one that I left behind is the one that I should've worn because the two that I bought out don't match.

KING: Are they here?

EMERSON: They are.

KING: Can I just have a look at them and we might decide that George Brandis do you think? Which of these ties? Oh put it back. Put that away.

EMERSON: That is way out there isn't it?

BRANDIS: That's much better. At least that's check on check, not check on...

KING: No tie do you think? No tie might be better.

EMERSON: See I made a good decision here George.

KING: Talking about decisions that brings me to my first topic this morning. John Della Bosca, did he do the right thing and resign Dr Emerson?

EMERSON: Look I have to say, and you'll say you're not answering the question, but I have to say it is a personal matter. There have been extra-marital affairs by politicians and they haven't resigned. I think the key consideration as far as the public is concerned is the word hypocrisy. If people go around pretending they are something that they aren't, I remember Jimmy Swaggart in the United States, the preacher and then you know, he was actually having an extra-marital affair, will be treated very, very harshly but I don't think that people imagine that politicians are in any way fundamentally different from the rest of the population when it comes to having extra-marital affairs.

KING: Is that the issue George Brandis or is it only an issue for the public if he used his public office in some way? For example, if it was proved he didn't go to the opening of a hospital as health minister because he was spending time with a 26 year old? When does it become an issue that the public have a right to talk about? And when is it a private matter?

BRANDIS: Well I think that's a very hard line to draw. I think there is a distinction between matters which are entirely in the private sphere and matters which are entirely a matter of legitimate public concern but the problem in drawing the line is it always depends on the circumstances. Now in this particular case you have a situation in which you have a state government that has become, in the Premier's own words, a soap opera and since the Premier said there'll be no more soap opera three ministers have gone. Now I think that Mr Della Bosca did the right thing

by his own party because when he said, well I didn't want this to become a distraction for the NSW Labor Government, I think that was right. I think that inevitably it would've become a distraction, would've reinforced the perception that the Labor Government had become a soap opera so because of the particular political circumstances in which this arose I think he had no choice.

KING: Do you think, either of you think, he actually earned the respect of some people yesterday? He actually went into caucus and immediately apologised. He never offered any excuse. He never hid from the cameras. He walked in the front door of Parliament House. He actually held a press conference to answer questions relating to it. Is that quite surprising given he was in the position he was?

BRANDIS: I don't think it's surprising. I think he did the right thing. I think nothing so became his political life as the manner of his leaving it. Nobody thinks politicians are perfect. In fact everybody thinks politicians are extremely imperfect but I think that any politician who is seen to do the wrong thing and is very frank about it and apologetic and faces the consequences unhesitatingly will naturally earn respect for the way they handle themselves.

KING: Do you think this mars his record for life Craig Emerson? Or the way he's handled it actually everyone makes mistakes in life and many voters will think its how he handled it as how he will be judged?

EMERSON: I think the latter Madonna, that it probably did take some courage. Especially to make that long walk as you pointed out. He could've slipped into the basement in a car, got up, made a brief statement, read out a statement and walked out. He didn't do that. I did notice this morning on a television program a *Courier Mail* journalist, I think it was Di Butler, said this is the sort of behaviour we've come to expect from politicians. Well I think that's a bit rough actually because I'm not aware of evidence that this is more or less prevalent and let she who has not sinned cast the first stone.

KING: And that leads into my next question, are we getting to a point where the public almost expect too much of their politicians? We're having this accountability debate. I'm going to talk to you about your phone bills shortly. That I haven't had one email yet supporting Anna Bligh going on *Celebrity Chef*. That people are trying to find things wrong with their politicians?

EMERSON: In my view politicians do make errors and do the wrong thing, but not all politicians or even a majority of politicians do so. Therefore when people say this is what we expect of politicians, the sort of behaviour, this blanket statement can be quite offensive to the people who put their heads down, they work hard for their local communities, they're honest people and they get tarred with this very broad brush that is applied by people in professions that are no better or no worse.

BRANDIS: And I agree with that but I'd go on to say that I think this is one of the consequences of the attempt by the media in which some but not all politicians encourage, to turn politicians into celebrities. Now I think we need to have a fairly strict view about what are the boundaries of the vocation of politics. In my view the vocation of politics is about public service and about representing the community as Craig said, but also going into Parliament and advocating for policies in accordance with your particular philosophical viewpoint. You try and turn yourself into a celebrity and sooner or later all bets are off.

KING: Are voters expecting our politicians to act a little bit like celebrities?

BRANDIS: Well I think that, I don't know that it's possible to generalise about that. But I think that more and more politicians are allowing themselves to be treated like celebrities and I think that's very dangerous. And the wise ones don't of course. I mean you wouldn't catch Kevin Rudd or Malcolm Turnbull behaving like Anna Bligh for example.

KING: Well, I mean I want to ask you about Anna Bligh but we've seen Kevin Rudd on *Rove* for example.

BRANDIS: Well I think that's pretty close to the boundary but you know, that's a medium of communication in which he is asked serious as well as non serious questions.

KING: But we saw Peter Costello doing the dance with Kerri-Anne Kennerly, I mean they all do it.

BRANDIS: I think that's true and I think these are very much borderline cases. I mean you go on one of these shows like the *Sunrise* program I suppose and it's a way of getting your message out and communicating with the public. But also because of the infotainment style of those programs it's sometimes quite difficult to avoid the entertainment side as opposed to the more serious side.

KING: So Anna Bligh, should she be going on *Celebrity Chef*? She's twittered this morning that she's going to do that.

BRANDIS: I think that's well over the line and frankly I think that's embarrassing. It's the sort of stunt that you'd expect flaky people like Pauline Hanson or Jackie Kelly to engage in, not a serious person like Anna Bligh.

EMERSON: That's a very big blight on your former Parliamentary colleague, Jackie Kelly.

BRANDIS: I always found Jackie Kelly very embarrassing I must say.

EMERSON: Okay, well there we go, I think it's reasonable for Anna to do this.

KING: But you're going to say that because you're from the same party aren't you?

EMERSON: I probably would've said it anyway but I actually, this is my view, I think it is reasonable for Anna to do it and who knows, I mean one suggestion is that she might show off some of our state produce here in Queensland, cook up a nice old mango chutney or something like that George. It's quite possible.

BRANDIS: You're struggling mate, you're struggling here.

EMERSON: It's quite possible for her to promote Queensland produce. I think that would be a good thing. I don't know if she's going to do that.

KING: Oh but hang on, can I say, if *Dancing with the Stars* came to you this afternoon and said Craig Emerson, we want you on *Dancing with the Stars* you know, great publicity, you start rehearsing on Sunday.

EMERSON: I wouldn't inflict it on the Australian people or on my dancing partner.

KING: But would you say no?

EMERSON: I would say no.

KING: For what reason?

EMERSON: Well I'm a bloody hopeless dancer for a start. But look I agree with George. The media is perfectly entitled to invite journalists to be celebrities and you and all other members of the media have a legitimate right to ask this question, are politicians normal people? Do they have the same emotions? The same relationships with their kids and love and tragedy and all of that sort of thing. The answer I think we should demonstrate that we are normal people, ordinary people, but if we go across the line to become celebrities, once you invite politicians into your life. Sorry, once you invite journalists into your life, you can't then close the door and say listen, you're getting into my personal life once you've invited them in.

KING: But isn't there a line?

EMERSON: Yes, I think there is and once they're across the doorstep into your personal life through your invitation you can't then kick them out of the house, kick the cameras out and say, hey you're getting personal.

BRANDIS: I think that's true but let me suggest a rule of thumb to test. Is the person asking the questions a journalist? Now you said to me before, well when Peter Costello went on Kerri Anne Kennerly and he had that snake or whatever it was.

EMERSON: Piranha wasn't it?

BRANDIS: You know, that was over the line, but the point is but that was basically an information program with an entertainment component. The person asking the question was a journalist. Now going on *Celebrity Chef* has nothing to do with public information. It has nothing to do with the profession of politics. It is purely a celebrity-based thing.

KING: But don't voters want to know who they're voting for, they want to know what they think. And not just on tax policy. They want to know sometimes whether they go to church, whether they believe in God, whether they support private or public education.

BRANDIS: Well private or public education is a policy issue. I think a person's religious beliefs are part of their overall value system so I think that's entirely a matter of legitimate public interest, but honestly and truly for the Premier of the state to be going on some lightweight cooking program - it's embarrassing.

KING: If we had a reality TV show set in Parliament House?

BRANDIS: You wouldn't need one.

EMERSON: You don't need one. What you see is what you get.

KING: Certainly Belinda Neal would have a starring role this week. Can I go to phone bills, the mobile phone bills of all 226 MPs and Senators were released yesterday. Ian Macfarlane, Member for Groom - \$18,800 in a year. Peter Slipper, second highest \$14,764. Four Queensland MPs beat Kevin Rudd the Prime Minister whose mobile telephone bill paid by the taxpayer was \$11,900. I want to know what yours were and also ask this question. People were divided yesterday in terms of, you want your politician out and about, therefore they must have access to a mobile phone but other people were calling in saying look, I'm on a deal where you can make as many phone calls as you like for \$120 a month, why aren't they on deals like that?

BRANDIS: Well can I say two things about that, first of all a comparison with Kevin Rudd is quite a misleading comparison because as Craig knows and as I remember when I was a Minister in the Howard Government, when you are a minister there is a departmental mobile phone that you invariably use and I'm sure that's the case with Craig too. So those who are ministers, Rudd, Swan, Ludwig, Senator Joe Ludwig and Craig, really should not have been included in that sample because there is really very little need for you to use your personal electorate mobile phone when you've got the ministerial one. Now and that's the reason by the way most of the highest users were Opposition politicians and senior Opposition politicians. Ian Macfarlane is the senior Liberal Shadow Minister from Queensland and I know very well

why his mobile phone use would've been so high because he travels to and from Toowoomba all the time, and I know it's his custom to work in the car.

KING: But it must be never out of his ear, \$18,800 in one year.

BRANDIS: Well I don't know how many hours a day that represents but my point is, that one of the main things you do in your daily life as a member of Parliament is to talk to members of Parliament and it's a reasonable rule of thumb that the more time you spend on the phone the more you are working.

KING: What was your bill?

BRANDIS: Mine was about \$7,000.

KING: And where did that rate, down or up the list do you know?

BRANDIS: It rated in the top third of the list and it rated as the highest of the 12 senators but leaving aside Senator Ludwig whose bill I am sure as a minister would've been much greater than that, but I think that indicates I've spent a lot of my time working.

KING: Now Senator George Brandis obviously knew his phone bill, Craig Emerson you were just tutored by a staff member on what yours might be.

EMERSON: You've found me out.

KING: I've found you out. What is yours?

EMERSON: Around \$9,000. Now the mobile phone that I use is not an indulgence. It's not something that, for want of doing something else like going for a swim or just get on the phone and have a yak. I do a lot of work on the mobile phone. I'm totally in support of public disclosure of this sort of information and I support the discussion that we're having now. Because you haven't said oh well, that's terrible that they're using mobile phones. George I think has given a pretty good argument of what we do.

KING: And our listeners are divided.

BRANDIS: I think though, with respect to listeners who have a contrary view to that, they mightn't appreciate what is involved in being a Member of Parliament, particularly a Member of Federal Parliament. I mean one of the things you're expected to do is to be in contact with a whole range of constituents, of stakeholders, of political colleagues, that's the way you spend your life and it's the biggest joke in the world for a politician to hear people say oh they're indulging themselves by being on the phone all the time. The phone is the bane of your life.

EMERSON: That's right and we're on the move all the time. I mean it would be pretty hard to have fixed-line phones placed all around Australia so you use the mobile.

KING: Couple of really quick questions and hopefully answers. A new alcohol pricing regime tobacco excise heights are now being looked at, obesity is back in the headlines. We talk about obesity year after year after year. What has to happen? What has to happen?

EMERSON: We have to allocate much more of federal health spending on preventative health Madonna, that's what we need to do and that debate is...

KING: What to tell us we're getting fat?

EMERSON: No to, and that's also a very good point, sticking something in a letterbox saying oh don't feed your kids too much junk food I don't think gets you very far.

KING: So you're saying a public education campaign.

EMERSON: I think a very intense public education campaign because the consequences are terrible for the kids by the time they hit 40 often they've got diabetes, they are starting to lose limbs. It's a huge problem.

KING: George Brandis?

BRANDIS: Well I think we would all agree that preventative health is a good thing and a very important part of preventative health is public education and awareness. But I've got to say that I'd like to see the Rudd Government actually doing something about this rather than merely receiving reports as Peter Dutton, the Shadow Health Minister said yesterday, this is the umpteenth report on various aspects of the health system that the Rudd Government has received but there hasn't been action taken yet.

EMERSON: Not quite right. Eight hundred million dollars, it's a big increase in the preventative health spending of the Commonwealth but I don't personally say that that's it, that's enough, I think there needs to be more.

BRANDIS: Well my point remains that we've had a legion of reports on health and very little action has been taken. Now that doesn't mean that any particular report was not worth looking into but one of the themes of this Government and it's very hard I think to dispute this. One of the themes of this Government is there's a great imbalance between the amount of studies and inquiries and reports being commissioned and the amount of public policy action we see resulting from them.

KING: That's George Brandis with Craig Emerson this morning, a final question, in the theme of *Celebrity Chef*, *Rove* and *Kerri-Anne Kennerly*. Tim Holding. Young Victorian Minister who was lost in alpine country Victoria. Great news, he was found after what, two days, freezing conditions. He comes out and says he dreamt of pizza while everyone was searching for him. What would be the thing you'd most want in that situation? Talking about food. I mean obviously a rescue would be high on the list.

BRANDIS: Well if you're trapped in the snow and you're lost I imagine any sort of filling hot meal would be the first thing on your mind.

EMERSON: Sticky date pudding.

KING: Well we might talk to Anna Bligh and see if she can whip one up.

EMERSON: Okay it's a deal.

KING: Dr Craig Emerson, Senator George Brandis thank you.

EMERSON & BRANDIS: Thank you.

KING: And that's *Inside Canberra* for this Dr Craig Emerson Senator George Brandis, back at the same time this week. You're on 612 ABC Brisbane.

Ends.