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Inside Canberra ABC Brisbane 612 radio
with
Terri Begley

Subjects: Question Time behaviour, double dissolution election, Brendan Nelson's
valedictory speech, book competition.

BEGLEY: You're listening to mornings on 612 ABC Brisbane and questions over Question Time in Federal Parliament this week. Are our politicians treating it with the respect it deserves or has the name calling and avoiding answers gotten out of hand? We're going to find out now as we travel the corridors of power and go inside Canberra with Dr Craig Emerson who's the Small Business Minister in the Rudd Government and Opposition Attorney General Senator George Brandis. Good morning to you both.

EMERSON: Hello Terri.

BRANDIS: Morning Terri, morning Craig.

EMERSON: Hello George.

BEGLEY: Starting off pleasant as usual, well let's get into it.

EMERSON: We always start off pleasantly then we get into it.

BEGLEY: We can't guarantee how it goes. Now Liberal frontbencher Tony Abbott this week was accused of being on a crusade to overhaul Question Time. It's been a rather testy week. So far we're only at Wednesday; he was also dealt a 24 hour suspension. Has Question Time become unworkable George Brandis?

BRANDIS: Well I think the way in which the Rudd Government treats Parliament in general and in Question Time in particular is a scandal and the Opposition is doing what we can to highlight that. Question Time, people allow a lot of tolerance in Question Time, we understand that Ministers when asked hostile questions by the Opposition will want to respond with political points, that's fair enough, both sides do that. But the particular abuse we've

seen in the Rudd Government is the using up of the time available for these exchanges between Government and Opposition by long-winded endless answers completely irrelevant to the question by Ministers led by Kevin Rudd whose record for an answer in Question Time, as I understand, 23 minutes. That's just a scandal, that's a gratuitous abuse of the process. John Howard use to have a rule of thumb when he was Prime Minister, that his Ministers should confine their answers to a couple of minutes and that the swifter the answer the more back and forth there is, the better a parliamentary occasion Question Time can be and people like the sharp exchanges, but the Rudd Government has traduced and debased Question Time and the Opposition is very, very concerned about it.

BEGLEY: Craig Emerson is Labor dragging out answers and upsetting us the voters that Parliament gets slowed down by perhaps some of these game playings. Is this what's happening?

EMERSON: Well Terri if there is an absolutely designated finishing time for Question Time and answers were long such that very few questions were asked and answered that would be an argument, but that's not how it operates. Question Time starts at 2pm ordinarily. There might be some ministerial statement about Afghanistan or whatever beforehand but normally it starts at 2 o'clock. It can go on to 3.30 – 3.45. Now is it the end of world that instead of finishing at some pre-designated time it goes a little longer? I'm not sure that that's going to the heart of the problem for our democracy.

BEGLEY: I guess what is discussed and what information comes out is the key point here.

EMERSON: Well Kevin Rudd was asked a question, for example, earlier in the week, one year on from the collapse of Lehman Brothers and the onset of the global crisis and he did give a comprehensive answer. It was an answer that was warranted. You can't answer a question like that with a couple of 15 second grabs on television. And Tony Abbott, you started your remarks with Tony Abbott, he's the Liberal Party's Gordon Ramsey. Tony Abbott engaged in foul-mouthed abuse late last week. That's no substitute for good policy. I don't see that that raises the standards in Question Time. Tony obviously thinks he's going to go back to the old days of muscling up and all this sort of stuff. It might make him feel good but I don't think the Australian public appreciates it.

BRANDIS: Craig that's got nothing to do with Question Time and Tony Abbott used a rather vulgar expression outside the Chamber, outside the Chamber, that's what you're referring to. It's got nothing to do with Question Time and you know yourself ...

EMERSON: Why was he ejected for 24 hours?

BRANDIS: You know yourself the whole tone of Question Time has changed and it's no answer to say it can go on a little longer because what that does is chew up other parliamentary time which should be used to debating

legislation. Parliament, the House of Representatives, sits for fixed periods each sitting day and if Question Time goes longer than it should because of long-winded and irrelevant answers by the Prime Minister and by Ministers that means there is less time in the day to debate legislation or to do the other important things that Parliament has done. It's a scandal what the Rudd Government's doing to Question Time and your listeners should be aware of it.

EMERSON: If Tony Abbott had done nothing wrong why was he excluded from the Parliament for 24 hours?

BRANDIS: By a Labor speaker.

EMERSON: Now that's a very big allegation George. Are you suggesting that the Speaker is biased?

BRANDIS: Yes.

EMERSON: Well there you go, I don't believe the Speaker is biased and I think that's a huge statement and does not contribute to the orderly conduct of Question Time in the Parliament.

BRANDIS: Then why Craig ...

EMERSON: Tony Abbott was warned three times about standing in front of the camera while a Minister was giving an answer. He ignored the warnings of the Speaker of the Parliament. When you continue to ignore the advice or warnings of the Speaker of the Parliament no matter whether you're Liberal, Labor or Callithumpian you will get ejected.

BRANDIS: Craig if the Speaker were doing his job why doesn't he bring the Prime Minister to order when the Prime Minister goes for minutes and minutes and sometimes 15, 20 minutes on end, not responding to questions but making long-winded platitudinous speeches. That's not answering questions and you know it's not.

EMERSON: Under the standing orders there is not a designated duration for Question Time.

BRANDIS: Why doesn't the Government introduce one?

BEGLEY: I think we've covered that one.

EMERSON: This is a matter for the relevant committee.

BRANDIS: I'm sure if the Government were to commit to putting a limit on the time for answers in the House of Representatives as there is, by the way in the Senate, the Opposition would support it.

BEGLEY: Let's go on with other business in the House. George Brandis I read in the papers this morning of a party room rebellion over your leader's willingness to talk with the Government on the emissions trading legislation. Does Malcolm Turnbull have the full support of the party on this?

BRANDIS: Absolutely he does and I read those reports as well but unlike the journalist who wrote those reports Terri, I was there. We had a vigorous discussion about the emissions trading system. The Rudd Government emissions trading system is a very, very badly designed system.

BEGLEY: But do you support Malcolm Turnbull talking with the Government on making amendments to it? So it will get the support?

BRANDIS: Of course he should.

EMERSON: Waiting, waiting, waiting.

BRANDIS: Of course he should because this system that is the Government's plan is a very, very bad plan. So what do Oppositions do? What they do is they try and persuade the Government and use out the numbers we have in the Senate to try and improve the system and if it can't be improved, it will have to be voted down. But that's really the Government's call.

EMERSON: We're waiting for Godot here Terri. The Coalition has been talking about amendments to the emissions trading legislation for many months. It started around July saying that it had nine principles and I remember the Opposition environment spokesman saying you can't get more specific than principles. Well how about a few amendments? We have invited that. There have been no amendments. The reason there are no amendments is that the Coalition is very, very badly divided on this. Malcolm Turnbull would not be able to get, under current circumstances, any amendments through his party room, certainly not the joint party room where the National Party's described the emissions trading system as an employment termination scheme.

BRANDIS: Well I'm very amused to hear Craig Emerson who of course sits in the Labor Party caucus where differences of view aren't allowed. To hear Craig Emerson, who sits in the Labor Party caucus telling me about what happened at a meeting of the Coalition party room which I attended so I can tell you and your listeners we did have a very good solid constructive discussion on this yesterday and the attempt to spin that into some sort of division is fanciful.

EMERSON: I'm not seeking to interpret what happened in that party room.

BRANDIS: You told us what happened and you're wrong.

EMERSON: No I did not. I said the joint party room would not pass amendments to the emissions trading scheme on behalf of the Coalition.

Why? Because the National Party is implacably opposed to any emissions trading scheme. Kevin Rudd was speaking on climate change just the day before yesterday and Dennis Jansen the Member for Tangney from Western Australia, when Kevin Rudd said there are some on the other side of politics who believe that humans had nothing to do with climate change, Dennis Jansen was interjecting saying *'c'mon Kev baby I'll debate you on that anytime'*. In other words I'm one of those who believe fervently that human activity has nothing to do with climate change.

BRANDIS: You know one of the great things about the Liberal Party is that it does allow individual Members of Parliament to express individual opinions and sometimes dissent from the party position. Of course if Dr Jensen were in the Labor Party he would have been expelled within 24 hours.

EMERSON: No...

BEGLEY: All right we'll move on from this one. There are now two potential triggers for a double dissolution election. The emissions trading legislation that's already been rejected once by the Senate and the Medicare budget measures also rejected once by the Senate. George Brandis surely you don't want to go to an early poll?

BRANDIS: Whether there is an early poll or not is entirely a matter for the Government.

BEGLEY: Craig Emerson voters don't take kindly to being forced to go to the vote early?

EMERSON: And Kevin Rudd has said repeatedly it is not his intention to go to an early poll. The purpose of our pressing the Coalition on important legislation is try to get it through the Senate.

BRANDIS: You know the great thing ...

EMERSON: To try to get the Coalition to move away from its opportunistic position. They are out-of-touch on key issues such as climate change, such as the economic stimulus, a whole range of legislative measures where the Coalition is saying well what needs to happen is that spending needs to be cut and when we seek to make savings to the budget the Coalition opposes them in the Senate. Of course we get upset about that. Of course we want the Coalition and the independents and the minor parties to support our legislation.

BRANDIS: Well I've got news for you Craig. The parties that have the numbers in the Senate were elected by the people to, in fact more people voted for non-Labor parties, the Opposition and the minor parties in the Senate than voted for the Labor Party. The Senate is part of the democratic process, to use a point you to make when you were in Opposition and you had the numbers in the Senate so don't give us that. I must say I find it comical that Craig would be pleading Kevin Rudd's integrity in relation to his

commitment not to have a double dissolution election when one of the bills that are being suggested as a trigger for a double dissolution election is a breach of an undertaking, an undertaking not to remove the Medicare safety net.

BEGLEY: Craig Emerson final answer on that?

EMERSON: It's got nothing to do with the Medicare safety net. What we're trying to do, it's the hypocrisy that takes my breath away Terri...

BEGLEY: A quick answer please?

EMERSON: The Coalition is saying we should withdraw the stimulus prematurely because we need to get spending reduced. When we seek to get spending reduced through legislation in the Senate what does the opportunistic Opposition do? Opposes it.

BRANDIS: We look at each measure on its merits and we support more than we oppose but we oppose some measures which are bad policy.

BEGLEY: All right let's move on from that. I think we've covered the double dissolution triggers. Brendan Nelson will be delivering his valedictory speech on his way out the door this week. What gentlemen do you think he'll be saying in that valedictory speech? Just a couple of points from you guys.

BRANDIS: I think Brendan will be, I don't know what he's going to say obviously, but I'm sure it will be a very gracious speech because Brendan Nelson is an extremely gracious man. I'm sure he'll be reflecting on some of the high policy themes in which he's been involved in nearly 15 years of service in the House of Representatives and I'm sure there will be a few thank yous too, to people who have supported him and whom he has relied upon in his very distinguished career as a Minister and as party leader.

BEGLEY: Ever any surprises that come out of these valedictory speeches? You know that you're leaving. Any parting shots you usually hear from members exiting the back door?

BRANDIS: Look there could be. I can't imagine there would be any parting shot from Brendan because Brendan is one of the most gracious men you would ever meet in public life, indeed one of the most gracious men you'd meet in any walk of life. He's the perfect gentleman and a very good guy.

EMERSON: And if I could say Terri that Brendan Nelson is highly regarded within the Australian Parliament. He's a very intelligent man. He's obviously a very hard working man. He did say, reportedly, in the party room yesterday that the Liberal Party needs to stand for something. He may say that or he may not in his valedictory speech. If he did I'd support that sentiment.

BRANDIS: This is the peril of commenting on a meeting you're not at. What in fact Dr Nelson said, I was sitting about two places from him when he said it,

he said not that the Liberal Party needs to stand for something but the Liberal Party does stand for something and that's its great strength, of course it is.

BEGLEY: All right.

EMERSON: There didn't sound like a lot of harmony in the Coalition party room according to media reports, but you're right George I wasn't there; the media must have got it completely wrong.

BEGLEY: Now we've reached a point of agreement on something gentlemen. As you know we're giving away 50 books this week to one of our lucky listeners if they compose the second sentence to this: 'She hopped on the 7.50 am train from Beenleigh and couldn't believe what she heard'. What's the next sentence? We thought we'd give both of you a go at this. George Brandis first?

BRANDIS: It wasn't Jemima's habit to eavesdrop but it seemed that the young woman in the diaphanous kaftan seemed only be talking about her lover.

BEGLEY: Oh I like that.

EMERSON: Only George could come up with a word like diaphanous. He's swallowed the dictionary again. Mine would be 'scientists on the AM program were predicting immortality in human beings by 2070'.

BEGLEY: Very scientific-based, not so much mystery behind that one but I like your bent as well. I don't know that either of you should give up your day jobs to become authors though, not just yet.

BRANDIS: I am a bit ...

EMERSON: I am an author!

BRANDIS: Yes so am I ...

BEGLEY: I was about to say some people might say your work is fiction, you might want to be careful on that Craig Emerson.

EMERSON: Yes mine was on government policy.

BRANDIS: I'm into romance novels at the moment I've just been reading Jane Austen.

BEGLEY: Have you really? We might look forward to getting you on the program to recite a little bit of Jane Austen one morning to liven things up. See how you go. Gentlemen thank you both for your time.

BRANDIS: Thanks Terri.

EMERSON: Goodbye from the odd couple.

BEGLEY: The odd couple ...we love them dearly don't we? That was Senator George Brandis and Small Business Minister Craig Emerson and that brings us to an end of Inside Canberra for this week. They'll be both back with Madonna next Wednesday.

Ends