



THE HON DR CRAIG EMERSON MP
MINISTER FOR TRADE

Transcript
ABC 612 Mornings with Madonna King

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E&OE

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MADONNA KING: Is Canberra politics looking a little grey beside the colour of the Queensland Parliament? Perhaps the way you like it, but certainly Kevin Rudd has put a cat among the pigeons over his revelations on Q&A the other night. You heard Julia Gillard respond before nine. Senator George Brandis, good morning

GEORGE BRANDIS: Good morning, Madonna.

KING: And Dr Craig Emerson, good morning to you too.

CRAIG EMERSON: Hello to you, Madonna, and to George.

BRANDIS: Morning, Craig.

KING: What do you do about Kevin Rudd, Craig Emerson?

EMERSON: I think there's an irony here. Kevin was asked a straight question on a program that runs for an hour and he gave a straight answer. On your program, quite reasonably, you say to George and me, 'answer the question'. Here, you have Kevin Rudd answering the question and then the media saying, 'oh my God, oh my God, oh my God! He answered the question!'

KING: But isn't it he answered the question and what he said revealed something? Can I ask you: do you think he

breached Cabinet confidentiality, by answering that question?

EMERSON: I can't directly answer that question because I wasn't in Cabinet. But what Kevin said on that program, I have seen written in books, newspaper articles and so on. And therefore, none of it was news to me.

KING: Can I just go back because there will be some people who say, 'what is Cabinet solidarity?'. Just explain what that means.

EMERSON: It's a practice of both sides of politics that when you go into the Cabinet room and discuss matters, then that remains confidential amongst the people who had that discussion in the Cabinet room. It is a convention that is very important for Australia, because if you can't have a discussion in Cabinet, which you later are obliged to tell to the media or others, then you can't have these sorts of confidential discussions.

KING: Okay, it's 19 minutes to 10, and you're listening to Dr Craig Emerson and Senator George Brandis. Do you, hand-on-heart, believe Kevin Rudd is doing everything in his power to support Julia Gillard?

EMERSON: I do; I think...

BRANDIS: You haven't got your hand on your heart there, Craig.

EMERSON: This is a radio interview.

BRANDIS: That's why I was pointing it out.

EMERSON: All right, here we go. There it is.

KING: He's put his hand on his heart.

EMERSON: Yeah, I put my hand on my heart. I do. Kevin and I speak frequently. I heard the interview with Julia that she speaks with Kevin, I think, once a week on foreign affairs matters. He's working hard here in Queensland, right now, not only for the Gillard Government but, importantly, for the people of Queensland...

KING: But do you agree that...

EMERSON: ... in getting 70 ambassadors from around the world - from countries around the world - to support the Queensland recovery and reconstruction effort.

KING: But is there a perception that they are at loggerheads? Julia Gillard certainly hasn't picked up the phone since Monday

night, given the acres of newsprint that have been given to this topic.

EMERSON: And she gave what I thought was a completely human and reasonable answer. Whenever someone gives an interview, it's not her ... she doesn't have the time to ring them up and talk, chat about the interview and so on. My own view, honestly, I heard Kevin on Q&A. I did a television interview yesterday morning and the media was a lot more excited about it than I was. Now, I'm not criticising the media; the media likes this sort of stuff. But I thought it was rather unremarkable.

KING: Rather unremarkable. Senator George Brandis?

BRANDIS: Well, allow me to begin by saying of course Craig has to say that but it's my...

EMERSON: It's my view, George.

BRANDIS: Well, you have to say that, Craig but I hope it's not your view because that's not the way Cabinet Government is capable of working.

KING: How do you mean?

BRANDIS: You cannot have a Cabinet system of government when senior ministers publically reveal and openly question decisions of the Cabinet in which they themselves participate.

KING: Isn't it just openness? Transparency?

BRANDIS: No, it's not. It's not because, as Craig explained, when ministers make decisions in Cabinet, those discussions have to be discussions in which they can take each other into their confidence. That they can speak with a candour and frankness that just isn't possible if they're going to see it repeated in the newspaper, let alone broadcast on Q&A. Now, I have been following politics all my adult life. And I have honestly never seen an occasion before when a senior Cabinet minister publically revealed deep splits between himself and the Prime Minister and other senior ministers on a very important current public policy push.

EMERSON: And, of course, you would say that, George...

BRANDIS: Well, I've never seen it before.

EMERSON: ...and you were talking about Kevin Rudd talking about a Cabinet decision. He was actually remonstrating against himself. He was saying that 'I should've batted on'.

KING: But he was also saying that he was trying to stop...

EMERSON: To steer a course.

KING: ...an element who wanted...

EMERSON: To steer a course, that's right, and he...

KING: Yeah, an element...

EMERSON: ...said 'I shouldn't' ... he said, 'I misjudged that'. His criticism was of himself.

KING: All right, do you think that he has the baton in the pack? That he does want to be Prime Minister again, the leader of the party?

EMERSON: No, I don't.

KING: Do you ever see a situation where he could be the leader of the party again?

EMERSON: No, I believe that Julia is doing a very fine job in rather challenging circumstances; of putting the price on carbon. I'm not going to make a political point here, Madonna, but just hear me out. This has been a difficult issue for both sides of politics. Leaders have actually changed on the Coalition side of politics on putting the price on carbon. It is a very difficult issue and yet it's an important environmental, economic reform and Julia Gillard's pressing ahead with it.

KING: All right, let's move on to another issue and I ask that...

BRANDIS: Can I just have a moment to respond to that?

KING: Well, you've had a say. What do you...

BRANDIS: Well, what I wanted to say is we shouldn't be putting a tax on carbon because this Government was re-elected on the basis of the Prime Minister's promise not to do so.

KING: All right, let's move on and...

EMERSON: We're putting it on the top 1000 polluters.

KING: From Canberra to Queensland and the LNP, Senator George Brandis. How do you think Jeff Seeney is going as the LNP's Opposition Leader?

BRANDIS: Well, I've only seen what I saw on the TV news last night. He seemed to be doing fine to me.

KING: Are dollars starting to flow into the LNP over this? Certainly, some people were saying this would help Campbell Newman's election to leader of the election team.

BRANDIS: I don't know because I don't know what the party finances or fundraising situation is. But I can tell you this: having myself, in fact, been at pre-selection last night for the seat of Mount Ommaney, that there is a great deal of...

EMERSON: Bit of intrigue.

BRANDIS: ...a great deal of ... a tremendous morale booster in the LNP. I think people are energised. I think that the public opinion reflects the fact ... public opinion polls reflect the fact that Campbell Newman is seen as a person who is very likely to beat Anna Bligh next year.

KING: So, are you seeing different people put up their hand for pre-selection, or wanting to join the party?

BRANDIS: Well, there are very competitive pre-selections going on for marginal Labor seats. I'm told that for the seat of Burleigh, which has been ... for which a candidate's being chosen tonight, there are 10 or 12 candidates for pre-selection. Whenever you get very competitive pre-selections, with a lot of candidates putting up their hands, that is a sign that the party has its tail up.

KING: Rumours John Brent - who will run for the seat of Beaudesert - could be a deputy. Would you support an idea...

EMERSON: Oh my God, here we go ahead.

KING: ...where there was a leader and a deputy outside of parliament?

BRANDIS: Well I just think that's conjecture. I know John Brent.

KING: It is conjecture.

BRANDIS: And I think John Brent is a very considerable figure, particularly as the Mayor of the Scenic Rim Council. And I think he'd be a great asset to the team.

KING: Would he be a great deputy?

BRANDIS: Well, I think, as I say, that's conjecture and I don't even know what the source of the conjecture is. But I think John Brent would be a very good member for Beaudesert.

KING: Anna Bligh is nervous about Campbell Newman, is she not, Craig Emerson? You're fairly close to her.

EMERSON: I haven't spoken to Anna. I think anyone in the position of Premier of Queensland, or any other state, should rightly believe that there is a real contest on, no matter what state that premier leads. And if a premier didn't believe that, then they're probably in a fair bit of trouble for being smug and that's the last thing that Anna Bligh is. She's very competitive. And I'll point this out: I heard a bit of an interview, your interview with the Prime Minister earlier. And questions about, well, has the Government run its course. Look at all the road works, successful road works, in south-east Queensland. Personally, I've felt that Queensland traffic has been getting really quite congested. And a hell of a lot of work has been going on, in terms of road works and actually opening up south-east Queensland to improve the lifestyle - all under the Bligh Government.

KING: But would you say that the biggest thing working against the Bligh Government is the fact that Labor has been in power for almost 20 years? Certainly, some of your colleagues say that.

EMERSON: Of course it's a consideration, but I've always believed in these things: that it's a matter of whether the party and the Government is regenerating. Robert Menzies and his successors, Harold Holt and John Gorton and Billy McMahon, were in for 32 years.

BRANDIS: No, it's 23.

EMERSON: Twenty-three, was it? So it was 32...

BRANDIS: No.

EMERSON: ...here in Queensland for the Coalition: 32. Thirty-two straight - yeah, you're right, George - and 23 federally. Now, arguably, what happened is that those governments just kept regenerating. That's what's important; not actually the length of the term that they've served.

BRANDIS: Well look, you know, Craig, I think as...

EMERSON: I've made a very apolitical point here but I can hear a political one coming down the barrel.

BRANDIS: I'll respond with an equally apolitical point. I think most people - including people who don't follow politics at all - feel that as a matter of commonsense, the longer a government is - from one side - is in power, the tireder it becomes and the more desirable it is to refresh the system by giving the other side an opportunity.

KING: All right; now, that...

EMERSON: Well, I hope you're nice and complacent about that, George.

KING: All right, now, let me move on because there's so many things I want to get to. And one, George Brandis, you scoffed at the idea that people didn't know who the LNP President, Bruce McIver, was last week.

BRANDIS: I actually scoffed at the idea that he was a faceless man.

EMERSON: As articulated by John-Paul Langbroek.

BRANDIS: And Madonna, if I could anticipate your question, I heard ... I was listening in this morning and I heard the vox pop you did with the citizens of Ashgrove. By my count there were 15 people asked if they knew who Bruce McIver was.

KING: And one knew.

BRANDIS: And two knew. One said he was the president of the Liberal Party - that's the same thing - and another person said he was the president of the LNP.

EMERSON: Sounds like he is a faceless man.

BRANDIS: No, no, no I must say two out of 15 in a random sample to identify the president of a party organisation is pretty good. I bet not two out of 150 or even 1,500 could recognise Felix Dittmer, the president of the Labor Party.

KING: Andrew Dettmer.

EMERSON: And George loves calling him different names. It's Andrew Dettmer.

KING: But the accusation last week was made by your former leader John-Paul Langbroek...

EMERSON: That's right, yes.

KING: ...saying that the faceless men were behind...

EMERSON: Yes, George wasn't aware of that at the time when he was bagging out on people...

BRANDIS: The point I make is that compared with other leaders of political organisations, Mr McIver is a person who lives in the light and is a well-known figure.

KING: Was that your point?

BRANDIS: That is my point, yes.

EMERSON: And I reckon it doesn't matter very much whether the president of a party is well known or not. It's whether the Premier, the Opposition Leader, the frontbenchers are well-known or not. And George is obsessed in saying that this guy is a really great guy and he runs around in his truck in south-east Queensland.

KING: But isn't the issue, isn't the issue on both sides how much pull non-elected party people might have on both parties, in both parties.

EMERSON: I agree. I think that is a consideration. I think it is an issue and we saw that in New South Wales and we saw the consequence of it. And George is saying...

KING: On Labor.

EMERSON: On Labor. And George is saying 'oh Mr Mclver, George Mclver, or whatever his name is. Everyone knows George. He runs around in his truck in south-east Queensland. Well, good on him...

KING: Can I just say...

EMERSON: On this issue...

KING: Can I say this, because I will spare you replaying that...

EMERSON: Bruce Mclver.

KING: ...because we're running out of time, but we've also put the picture of Bruce Mclver on Twitter this morning. Facebook guesses on the picture of Bruce Mclver: Tony Barber, Paul Keating's long lost brother, Lleyton Hewitt in 20 years time, that bloke from Sherbet and an older and slimmer Matt Lucas, the British comedian. Bruce Mclver would be pretty happy with that lot.

EMERSON: Daryl Braithwaite.

BRANDIS: Well, I imagine...

EMERSON: Bruce Braithwaite.

BRANDIS: I think that everybody in Queensland should feel very comfortable with Mr Mclver as the president of an Opposition that has got its act together.

KING: All right. Let's move on, because quickly I want to get through several other things. The Federal budget's coming up. Do

you need to prepare us for pain here, Craig Emerson? Are we going to have a fairly tough budget?

EMERSON: By definition we will and that is that we are committed to limiting spending growth to no more than 2 per cent real growth. So that's a very substantial cap on spending growth, and we will be returning the budget to surplus in 2012-13.

KING: So how do you go about working out priorities that really cut?

EMERSON: Well, that's a good question and it's tough. You have to look at programs, examine programs that are working well, those that are not working well. But understand that a very, very large part of any budget, Madonna, is what we call non-discretionary. It is the age pension; it is very substantial issues such as the defence of the nation. These are things that you simply have to do; family payments and so on. So there's not actually a lot of room when you take out these non-discretionary items to make cuts, but those decisions have to be made.

KING: George Brandis, is there an obvious place where you think the Gillard Government could make cuts? I mean, Tony Abbott seemed to be saying the other day in terms of some of the workplace reforms, the work for the dole reforms, disability pensions...

BRANDIS: Well, I think Tony Abbott made a very good point, which the Government seems now also to be going along with. But it's interesting Tony Abbott led the debate on this. Can I go back to what Craig said though, Madonna...

EMERSON: Read my book of 2006.

BRANDIS: He makes a very important point: that most of the Commonwealth Budget is non-discretionary. It's what are called standing appropriations. It's about 85 per cent, in fact, of the Commonwealth Budget that are large transfer payments to individuals that are fixed. There's very little discretion about it and that's why all the tweaking of the Budget happens in about 15 per cent of the total outlay. And that's why it is so important that that 15 per cent not be absorbed in paying interest on public debt. That's where this Government has really gone wrong.

KING: All right. So where would you cut, though, if you were Wayne Swan?

BRANDIS: We would cut in the ways that Tony Abbott has indicated. We announced \$50 billion of cutbacks in the last...

EMERSON: Shonky as all get-up.

BRANDIS: What else would a Labor politician say?

EMERSON: They were shonky.

BRANDIS: Independently verified by one of the biggest accountancy firms in Australia...

EMERSON: Who worked for the Liberal Party.

BRANDIS: ...are you challenging their integrity?

EMERSON: I'm saying that they work for the Liberal Party.

BRANDIS: Are you challenge ... are you saying because an accounting firm, one of the most respected firms in the country, was given a brief on a fee-for-service basis, to do an independent audit of the Liberal Party, that you would challenge their integrity?

EMERSON: They added up the total.

BRANDIS: That's a disgraceful thing to say.

EMERSON: Anyone can add up the totals.

BRANDIS: A very, if I may say...

KING: All right...

EMERSON: I reckon...

BRANDIS: A very stupid thing to say.

EMERSON: I reckon my 14-year-old daughter would add up those totals on her ear.

KING: Very, very briefly on a couple of other issues. The ASX: to Singapore's \$8.4 billion takeover of the ASX. That looks as though it won't go ahead. Is that a good idea, Senator George Brandis?

BRANDIS: Well, I think these things are always subject to a national interest test. And we will wait and see what Mr Swan ultimately has to say, and the reasons he publishes.

KING: And Michael Kirby, the longest serving - I think - Australian judge when he retired will come by any moment for a chat. I know you are a student of the law. What kind of questions should I ask Michael Kirby? What would you like to know?

BRANDIS: Well, the sort of questions I'd be interested in are probably arcane questions about some of his judgements, but they mightn't be very exciting to your listeners.

EMERSON: We could do it late at night perhaps, when people are trying to go to sleep.

BRANDIS: I must say, I'm a great admirer of Michael Kirby's. I think he is a great Australian.

KING: Someone told me that. Why?

BRANDIS: Well, I just think he is what I would call a classical liberal. I think he has stood for the freedom of the individual and the rights of the individual throughout his life. He's been a wonderful contributor to public life in this country as a judge and as an opinion leader, and I think it's very good you've got him on your show.

EMERSON: I think George does mean a small 'l' liberal rather than a....

BRANDIS: There's no difference, Craig.

KING: Have you got any stories about him you can tell me about.

EMERSON: He's anything but a small 'l' liberal, Tony Abbott.

KING: He's also a paradox, isn't he though? He's a constitutional monarchist and intellectual republican.

BRANDIS: What do you mean an intellectual republican?

KING: I'll be asking him exactly that question after 10. He started with not much. He had a very public job in many ways, but very private in other ways. In so many ways when you go through his life, he is a bit of a paradox.

BRANDIS: Well, I think he's ...I would say an enigma rather than a paradox.

KING: Or an enigma.

EMERSON: An enigma wrapped within a paradox. Isn't there some sort of fancy saying like that, George? You're pretty good at these things.

BRANDIS: Look, I think Michael Kirby, if you had to identify somebody who has devoted a distinguished career serving Australia well, he'd be as good an example as that as you could imagine.

KING: All right. Can either of you finish this sentence for me? Just one in four Australians is aware that “something” cancer is the nation's second deadliest cancer. What is it?

BRANDIS: I think...

KING: The survey overnight and it quite surprised me: just one in four Australians is aware that this cancer is the nation's second deadliest cancer.

EMERSON: Well, I'll have a punt. Bowel cancer.

KING: Bowel cancer. What do you say Senator Brandis?

BRANDIS: I would say breast cancer.

KING: Yeah. It's bowel cancer. I'm not sure what is the number one one, either. But it means that we need more attention to that, too, doesn't it.

EMERSON: I'd say to all listeners, especially blokes, if you feel that there's something wrong inside go to the doctor.

KING: But blokes don't, do they?

EMERSON: They don't.

KING: Do either of you go to a GP?

EMERSON: I go to a GP pretty regularly, not because I'm paranoid and not because ... what's the other very big word for this?

KING: A...

EMERSON: ...a hypochondriac.

KING: A hypochondriac.

EMERSON: But I actually do know for a fact, and I think most blokes know for a fact that early detection means that most problems can be fixed and doctors lament when blokes, in particular, turn up and they say 'if you'd come here when the symptoms first appeared, you'd be fine'. Now, you're in trouble.

KING: I'm not playing politics, but good advice there. Don't you think George Brandis?

BRANDIS: Absolutely.

KING: When last did you go to a GP?

BRANDIS: Only about a month ago.

KING: Oh, there you go, there you go, bucking the trend yet again.

EMERSON: And so did I. Clean bill of health.

KING: Senator George Brandis...

EMERSON: Except I buggered my shoulder playing footy.

KING: You're too old!

BRANDIS: You're too old to play football, Craig.

EMERSON: I know that, I know that.

BRANDIS: Well get over it.

EMERSON: But then I can talk about my war stories.

KING: I look forward to talking to you again next week. Okay. That's Dr Craig Emerson and Senator George Brandis. *Inside Canberra* for this week.