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Transcript
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E&OE

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KING: What do you think a \$3000 chair looks like? You might be curious to know since you've just helped pay for 45 of them to go into a special war room in Parliament House. And why are we having a parliamentary debate on Afghanistan when both major parties seemed to agree on keeping our troops there for the next decade? Let's go inside Canberra. Dr Emerson is the Minister for Trade. Hello.

EMERSON: Hello Madonna.

KING: And Senator Brandis, the Opposition's Attorney-General among other portfolios. Good morning Senator.

BRANDIS: Good morning Madonna. Good morning Craig.

EMERSON: And to you George.

KING: And before we get to the chairs and Afghanistan, I just overheard you Senator Brandis say: 'It could only happen in Canada.' Are you talking about the particular dress of anyone?

EMERSON: Look that was just a private conversation between, in the studio.

KING: He's a manager of an army or something isn't he and he's dressed in...

EMERSON: I see what George is on to.

BRANDIS: Well I don't want to offend any Canadians. I love all Canadians.

KING: I wasn't taking it from that but it's pretty...

EMERSON: Did he have a maple leaf as an excuse?

KING: I think we might move on. A \$35 million war room is being built at Parliament House and it's modelled on the White House Situation Room. It can be used in times of national crisis and will have a special computer and communication systems built into tables and these German-made chairs worth \$3000 each. Dr Emerson, do you ever expect to sit into one of those chairs?

EMERSON: It's possible but extremely unlikely, I think; certainly with my current portfolio responsibilities which I love dearly as Trade minister.

KING: Do you think any politician needs to sit in a \$3000 chair?

EMERSON: I'd love to enlighten you about this Madonna but I can't. I don't know the details. I do know that it came up in Senate Estimates and I obviously understand that the Australian public would say why do you need a \$3000 chair? There may well be a very good reason for a \$3000 chair but I can't enlighten you.

KING: All 45 of them. Senator George Brandis, can you enlighten us further?

EMERSON: Put it this way. I don't think that if you're going to do it that you'd say: 'Well we won't have 45 of them, well we'll have a fewer number of \$3000 chairs'. But whether there is a particular purpose for that I really can't enlighten you.

BRANDIS: Look Madonna, this did come up in Senate Estimates. It was revealed under questioning from Liberal senators. It is appalling. I think this is one of the Labor Government's West Wing fantasies. They just want to create a room in Parliament House, as they say themselves is modelled on the Situation Room in the White House. It was a fantasy. It was a complete waste of taxpayers' money because the Cabinet, this room is adjacent to the Cabinet Room. Now the Cabinet Room is secure. It was from the Cabinet Room that, among other things, the Howard Government conducted the East Timor deployment, conducted the Iraq intervention. The Howard and then the Rudd Government has conducted the Afghanistan intervention. It is a completely secure room as Craig well knows. Now I can't begin to imagine why. What possessed - I think this happened on Mr Rudd's watch - what possessed him to think that he needed to sort of, perhaps in his dreams he imagined himself as the antipodean Barack Obama or something.

KING: Well.

BRANDIS: Why you would need a facsimile of the White House Situation Room in Canberra next door to a secure Cabinet Room and buy 45 \$3000 chairs? It just beggars belief.

KING: So you mentioned The West Wing and you can understand someone wanting to be in West Wing. George Brandis, who would you fancy being, who would you play? Obviously Craig Emerson liked that question, I can hear him chuckling.

EMERSON: No, that's actually George's press secretary.

BRANDIS: Yes, that's Travis, my very mischievous press secretary.

EMERSON: George's ex-press secretary. Ex-Travis.

BRANDIS: Yes Travis, go away. I'd probably be that guy who Alan Alder played, the Republican Presidential candidate who got beaten in the last episode.

KING: What about you Craig Emerson? Who would you be?

EMERSON: Madonna I can't. Oh it's so long since I've watched West Wing. I'm not a political groupie. I am not a political groupie.

BRANDIS: Labor politicians are addicted to West Wing because they all see themselves like...

EMERSON: Well I'm just explaining and confessing to you George that I'm not only not addicted to it...

BRANDIS: Yeah but you're a...

EMERSON: But it's so long since I saw it that I couldn't actually give a rat's...
...

BRANDIS: That's true Craig. Craig, Craig that's true. But you're a cut above the typical Labor politician I must say.

EMERSON: Thank you George, I knew you'd say that.

KING: All right let's go onto something serious. In that Afghanistan debate yesterday, historic debate on our military commitment in Afghanistan. It began yesterday and the Prime Minister told Parliament we can expect to keep our troops there at least 10 years. Craig Emerson, do you think you've made a convincing case to the public for that?

EMERSON: What Julia actually said - I don't believe that Tony Abbott has a different view on this particular point or more generally - is that the

task of training the Afghan security forces which involves the deployment of up to 1550 combat troops and other personnel should be completed within two to four years.

BRANDIS: Yes.

EMERSON: But thereafter, it is likely that there would be some form of ongoing involvement. Now I think that's an important point. That is, Julia Gillard did not say the current deployment of 1550 personnel, which is mainly combat troops, would continue for a decade but that there'd be training and support required beyond that period.

KING: All right and...

EMERSON: As for the details of that support, well that will be developed over this period.

KING: Yeah and that wasn't the question I was asking. It was just about that 10-year thing. How important was the backing of Tony Abbott on this do you believe, to have that bipartisan approach?

EMERSON: It would surprise me if Tony hadn't supported that. The tone of his speech and the content was not fundamentally different to that of Julia's. The reason I picked up that point Madonna is that I didn't want your listeners to have the impression that we were keeping the 1550 deployment for 10 years. The nature of the task would change after the Afghan security forces are trained up.

KING: All right. Senator Brandis, not everyone in your party is towing the line on this. I think your colleague Mal Washer says there's been irresponsible military engagement and he wants an immediate withdrawal. Are you expecting more Liberal MPs to speak out?

BRANDIS: Well I think Dr Washer's view, which is a view that he holds very firmly, is a view that's pretty scarce in the Coalition. There may be one or two other people who hold that view. If there are, I don't know who they may be, but I just want to say Madonna that there has been strong bipartisanship about the Afghan deployment. There always has been. I think there was a little bit of mischief-making in the last couple of weeks and a bit of political point scoring about it.

EMERSON: We could go over that if you want George.

BRANDIS: But I think that that hasn't deflected the Australian public from its understanding that both sides of politics strongly support our troops.

KING: All right. I'm going to just intervene there. You say both sides of politics strongly support our troops and it is interesting where the Greens sit in this debate. Both major parties seem to be on the same

page. Are the Greens being alienated in this debate given their viewpoint? I might go to George Brandis first there.

BRANDIS: Well I think the Greens do represent a different view of this issue and...

KING: Well that's without doubt.

BRANDIS: Without any doubt at all and that's one of the reasons of course why we in the Coalition are very concerned about the Green-Labor alliance because although the Labor Party is a...

EMERSON: This is straight out of central casting.

BRANDIS: Although - no, it's not true, just settle down - the Labor Party's...

EMERSON: I'm calm.

BRANDIS: Although the Labor Party's commitment to the Afghanistan deployment is undoubted, the fact is that there is going to be - on a range of issues, not necessarily this one, but on a range of issues - pressure on the Labor Government to drag them to the left as an inevitable consequence of the Green-Labor alliance.

KING: Yeah but what's that got to do with the question I asked?

EMERSON: Exactly. It's just George's rhetoric.

KING: But what has that got...?

BRANDIS: No, no, it's not.

KING: But George Brandis, my question was whether this, given that you're both on the same page, alienates the Greens? That's my question.

BRANDIS: Well look the Greens have a different perspective from the mainstream parties. But there's a broader point here Madonna and the broader point is that this government is in government because it's in alliance with the Greens.

EMERSON: And you're still sulking.

BRANDIS: And the Greens are way to the left of mainstream Australian politics and that is going to affect the Government.

KING: All right. Can I ask Craig Emerson the same question? Given your view is very different from the Greens here, where does it, where do you think this sits them or puts them?

EMERSON: Well it puts them in their own position. There might be for all I know a similar view held by one or more Independents, I suspect not. But the Greens have a position, as you're pointing out, that's very different to that of the Coalition and the Labor Party. And George has just used the opportunity to ignore your question and go on with something which is out of Coalition central casting. This so-called Labor-Green alliance causing Labor to adopt Green policies and you've just pointed out Madonna, quite clearly, that here is yet another difference and we will pursue Labor policies.

BRANDIS: Well you are adopting Green politics.

KING: Oh all right, okay. I think I'd rather you both answer my question than, you know, just got off on press release, you know, track, whatever. Can we move onto the asylum debate and just briefly here because we covered this in quite a lot of detail yesterday? But we've got two more detention centres being built to house asylum seekers and many families will be allowed to live in the community as long as they don't present a security risk. George Brandis, we did speak to Scott Morrison yesterday, but what is your main concern about this plan?

BRANDIS: Well, the point we make about all these issues in relation to asylum seekers is that this is a problem that the Labor Party created. It was fixed when the Coalition was last in power. The Labor Party relaxed the tough policies that John Howard introduced and now we have this problem. And it's a problem that is not going to be solved until the tough policies of the Coalition are reintroduced.

EMERSON: I would have thought Madonna that the Coalition would support children not being held in inappropriate accommodation, such as in tents on Christmas Island or in motels. And it's certainly been the case that we've received criticism from that before when I have, nevertheless, pointed out that even as late as 2005 John Howard was accommodating families in motels.

KING: Yeah but I want to move forward. I want to know now.

EMERSON: Well I am and I'm saying that this is a policy which is humane towards children. And I hope and expect that the Coalition would support that.

BRANDIS: Well hang on, hang on Craig. Let's just get our facts straight here. During the period of the Coalition Government, a decision was made as a result of a lot of discussion within the then-government, led by people like Petro Georgiou for instance, as a result of which all children who were in detention at the time, this is going back several years now, were released from detention. So it is the Liberal Party that released children from detention. At the time we lost the 2007 election, there were no children in detention. In fact there was hardly anybody in detention because the asylum seeker, the flotilla of boats, had dried up.

KING: Yes, but we've talked about this week in, week out George Brandis. My question was, now, the Government has made this decision, what are your concerns now about this policy being enacted?

BRANDIS: Well, I mean, I'm sorry Madonna not to oblige you, but we are going to - we are going - our position is that we would return to the tough policies of the Howard Government.

EMERSON: They can't support anything Labor does.

KING: Yes, and that's what we talked about yesterday with Scott Morrison. I was just wondering with families in the community, were there considerations that the Coalition would put forward to the Government or vice versa? But let's move on to insulation and almost nine in 10 householders who had foil insulation fitted under the Federal Government's disastrous home insulation program have taken action following safety inspections. And to you here Craig Emerson, why won't the Government detail the outcome of the inspections conducted in homes fitted with both pink batts and the other non-foil products? Why won't the Government release that information?

EMERSON: That information is the result of a targeted program. That is not a random, not a result of a random audit and that information is being made available, if the Coalition so wants it. But...

KING: How do you mean? So the Coalition can ask for that information and get it?

EMERSON: It was offered actually yesterday in Question Time in Parliament by Greg Combet to Greg Hunt.

KING: And will you give it to George Brandis this morning?

EMERSON: Ah, well...

KING: And George Brandis will you then give it to me?

EMERSON: Well I don't think I could trust George with very much the way he's going on this morning. It is not a random audit.

BRANDIS: It's extraordinary to describe this fiasco as a targeted program.

EMERSON: It is a targeted inspection program George. Will you listen for a moment? It's a targeted inspection program. It is targeted at those areas where it is more likely than not that there are problems. And that information, therefore, would not represent the rate of problems across the board.

BRANDIS: Well aren't there problems Craig?

KING: Well you know, George Brandis, I'm asking the questions here, if that's okay? Craig Emerson, when you say it was a targeted program, those homes you checked, why were they targeted?

EMERSON: Well obviously foil was targeted because there are real problems with that and anyone who has foil in their ceiling can have it removed or safety...

KING: No I understand that, just can you answer the question for me?

EMERSON: Well I'm seeking to answer the question.

KING: So you targeted those because they had this foil.

EMERSON: Yes.

KING: Why then isn't it relevant for us to know of those with the foil that you targeted, what the inspections found?

EMERSON: Well the inspections find that there is foil obviously and we are saying that anyone with foil is able to have that removed or safety switches installed.

KING: But that's not my question. My question is why not...

EMERSON: So I'm not sure what the particular point of the question is.

BRANDIS: It's a mess, Craig. It's a mess.

KING: Well, why not release the details of that audit, of those inspections?

EMERSON: I'm saying that if we're looking for foil in ceilings, then the foil comes out or safety switches are installed.

KING: Yes so why not release...

EMERSON: What do you mean? I don't understand the question. I'd love to answer it but you're saying: 'Why won't you release the results of the inspection on foil?' The results of the inspections on foil are that if there is foil in the ceilings that it will be removed or that safety switches will be installed.

BRANDIS: Do you think it's a mess, Craig?

EMERSON: Actually Julia Gillard has described this as a mess on many occasions.

KING: Well what's happening to the foil that comes out of those homes? Where's that being dumped?

EMERSON: Well foil of itself is not a dangerous product. The danger of the product, the danger of foil insulation, is the possibility of an electrical problem. And that judgment has been made that foil is not a suitable product for insulation.

KING: No, I understand that, but we've had several calls just asking, or several emails over the last couple of weeks asking, where the foil is going. Once it has been removed, is it just going to local dumps or where?

EMERSON: Well I'll get back to you. It probably won't surprise you that I don't have the answer at the top of my head as to what people are doing with the foil when it's, what the inspectors are doing with the foil when it's removed.

KING: All right. The Auditor-General's report into the scheme has shown installers rorted the program to the tune of at least \$82 million. George Brandis, is there any way a Coalition Government could recover any of that money? Or is it gone?

BRANDIS: I think it's gone. I mean, you know as Craig concedes, even Julia Gillard, who was one of the authors of this scheme, one of the gang of four that made all the key decisions during the Rudd Government has described this as just a mess. Those are her words. Not mine. Four and a half billion dollars of taxpayers' money was spent on a scheme that was just a mess. Another one and a half billion dollars is now being spent to unwind the scheme. So that's \$6 billion waste. I wonder where that could have been spent.

EMERSON: Are you're suggesting George that no ceiling insulation in any house is of any value to the household?

BRANDIS: I'm saying ... No, no and you know that's not the issue, Craig.

EMERSON: Well you just said that four and a half billion, plus more, has been wasted.

BRANDIS: You know Craig, that's not the issue.

EMERSON: I reckon there'll be plenty of households that are glad they have ceiling insulation.

KING: But, I'm interfering here. Dr Craig Emerson, you could settle this by releasing how many homes were inspected. How much foil was removed? How many safety switches were put in and where problems were found? You've got that information.

EMERSON: I don't have that information.

KING: Your government has that information.

EMERSON: Yes. And I'm saying that Greg Combet, in response to a question yesterday from the Opposition, said he was, at this point, quite happy to brief the Coalition on this matter.

BRANDIS: Well why don't you just release it to the public?

EMERSON: But at this point in time it would not be appropriate to release it because it's not the result of a random audit.

KING: Okay, we'll leave that there. This fight between Kristina Keneally over plans to renege on a deal to implement uniform national laws on occupational health and safety. That decision has put \$144 million in Commonwealth incentive payments on hold and led to this fairly public argument between Julia Gillard and Premier Keneally. Should the Prime Minister be withholding that money, Craig Emerson?

EMERSON: Well of course she should. It's the subject of an agreement, a written agreement. New South Wales is proposing to renege on that agreement. I'll take the opportunity to congratulate Anna Bligh for sticking to the deal that she did, as other premiers did.

KING: All right. And George Brandis on that same issue?

BRANDIS: This is yet another Labor Party fiasco. I mean, the New South Wales Government - let it not be forgotten - is a Labor Government. I mean even within their own side they can't stick to a deal.

KING: No, so you're saying that the Prime Minister should withhold that funding, given that the Premier Keneally already signed that agreement and is going back on it?

BRANDIS: Look. The point that I make is that it doesn't matter what you look at. Whether it's insulation, or whether it's occupational health and safety, or whether it's the BER or whether it's the Murray-Darling Basin, this government is a kind of Midas in reverse. Everything it touches turns to lead.

KING: All right, that wasn't the question I was asking. So I'm moving on again. And this one to both of you, speaking of workplace health and safety, the Opposition Senate Leader Eric Abetz says it is a waste of money that politicians are not allowed to change light bulbs in their offices. Senator Abetz says when a light blew in his electorate office recently he was told that the rules mean an electrician had to be called. Have you ever changed a light bulb in your parliamentary office Craig Emerson?

EMERSON: I haven't because none have blown. But I need to say very quickly on this previous matter, because I deserve to have a go, Tony Abbott...

BRANDIS: You have, you've had about 90 per cent of the program Craig.

EMERSON: Tony Abbott twice blocked enabling legislation on a national occupation health and safety system in the Senate. So George, don't say to us that it's a problem for us when you are blocking this sort of legislation in the Senate.

BRANDIS: How does that excuse the fact that when New South Wales, how does that...

KING: All right, I want an answer to whether either of you have ever changed a light bulb in your parliamentary office. Craig Emerson?

EMERSON: The answer is no. I gave that answer.

KING: Could you? Could you? Would you know how?

EMERSON: Well I certainly know how to change a light bulb and I wouldn't need George's help.

BRANDIS: Well I don't actually think they have light bulbs down here in Parliament House. I think they're all neon lights.

EMERSON: And I've changed them too.

KING: Is this ridiculous that you have to call on an electrician?

BRANDIS: It's completely ridiculous. What Eric Abetz said is dead right. I mean there are, you know, there are just too many pettifogging stupid regulations.

EMERSON: I'm happy to change my own light bulbs.

KING: Well good on you. And the last question before I let you go. Students in New South Wales will be offered an ethics class as an alternative to scripture classes by next year under a proposal the Government is expected to adopt. Should you be able to choose between ethics and religion in a state school in Australia?

EMERSON: George and I were having a very, very brief chat about this off air, and George made the point that he wasn't aware that religion is taught in government schools. I must confess that I wasn't either. But my own view as a Christian is, if religion is taught in government schools, I'd like to see that continued.

KING: You'd like to see it continued and George Brandis, just quickly. You?

BRANDIS: Well I think it's not an either/or thing by the way. I think that you know, if you take a broad view of education, then all education should

ultimately be about ethics and about ethical conduct, in one sense or another.

KING: All right.

BRANDIS: And I think there's absolutely nothing wrong with schools, private or public, teaching ethics in a, sort of, in a specific, dedicated subject.

KING: All right. We need to leave it there. Gentlemen, thank you. Look forward to talking to you and you answering my questions next week.

EMERSON: Thanks Madonna.

BRANDIS: Thanks Madonna.

KING: That's Inside Canberra for this week.

END