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MINISTER FOR TRADE

Transcript
Sky News Agenda with Kieran Gilbert
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E&OE

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GILBERT: Welcome back to AM Agenda. With me now the Trade Minister, Craig Emerson, and the Shadow Minister for Health, Peter Dutton. Gentlemen, good morning to you both.

DUTTON: Good morning.

GILBERT: Peter, we heard from Stephen Smith there and indeed the Liberal position, the Coalition position is, you know, in the broad is pretty much similar. But we've heard concerns from Mal Washer MP, who says that it's a lost cause, Afghanistan. Do you think that other Liberals, other individual MPs, will agree with that assertion?

DUTTON: Well look, there'll be people across the political spectrum who'll have the same view as Mal. My sense is that the overwhelming position of the Parliamentary Wing of the Liberal Party is to strongly support the campaign. And we supported it at the time of its commencement. We provide unqualified support, of course, to our troops. And it's important now to have a debate, if for nothing else to, I think, make the public more aware of the reasons that we're there; that we are doing good work; that we are creating a positive future. And I think that's a good thing. Now people will have dissenting views and that's part of our democracy. And that should be celebrated.

GILBERT: What Peter says there is, you know, we're getting signals of that already. The newspaper today, quoting The Herald, is quoting one Labor MP suggesting this is a chance to raise questions. And concerns as to just when this deployment is going to end. So you

wouldn't be too surprised Craig Emerson, if Labor MPs expressed similar sentiments to what we've heard from Dr Washer?

EMERSON: It's entirely possible and it's up to them. I think it is a healthy opportunity for people, as Peter says, from both sides of the parliamentary debate - and the Independents and the Green member - to express their views on this. I think it's valuable not only from their point of view, but to help inform the Australian community of the issues. I'm reasonably confident that we'll have a display of bipartisanship at the end of this process. But, you know, this is the new Parliament. These sorts of debates can happen - could have happened before - but I think it's a good thing that...

GILBERT: Do you think that the hung Parliament has, sort of, engendered the atmosphere for MPs to speak a bit more independently?

EMERSON: Well maybe it has. Maybe it has and that's not a bad thing - that people can express their views as local members. I do think that it's highly likely that there'll be a display of bipartisanship here. Peter's absolutely right that the Coalition initiated the engagement in Afghanistan. We've had a period over the last two or three weeks, maybe a little longer, where the Coalition Defence spokesperson was talking about the possibility of more troops, more equipment. Now the leader, Mr Abbott, is saying, well he's been there and he's content with the deployment and the equipment that's available there.

GILBERT: There's nothing wrong with that though, is there?

EMERSON: No, no. I'm just saying that...

GILBERT: There's nothing wrong with Senator Johnson saying, listen to these noises.

EMERSON: Well, I don't want to tread the path again. But that's okay, just so long as it isn't sort of an implied criticism that Labor is not doing enough. We're taking our advice front the Chief of the Defence Force. We have always. I think the Coalition did in Government. So it's refreshing to hear Mr Abbott say that he's now come to the view that the deployment is right. The equipment is right. So that would put an end to that.

GILBERT: Okay, on another issue: asylum seekers. I'll just get you to respond to this, Craig, before I get Peter's thoughts on it. The children moving into community housing - this is something that was promised three years ago and finally delivered. So it is a belated promise being honoured? The Opposition says it's not about welfare for children; that this is about capacity constraints. That you've - it's taken three years - a long, long time. And it's because, not because you're worried about these children, but because the centres are full.

EMERSON: Well we are concerned about the welfare of the children.

GILBERT: Why not do it two years ago?

EMERSON: We've never had, as a Government, children behind razor wire. But there have been children and there are children in what we regard as unsuitable accommodation, such as tents on Christmas Island. And we are very concerned that children get a good education, that their mental health is preserved. And if you're in inappropriate accommodation, that can put real strains on it. So I think, again, there would be broad community support - I certainly hope so, for the notion that children should be in suitable accommodation. Yes, there is an issue of the number of people arriving by boat. We're not pretending otherwise. But, fundamentally, we need to ensure that the welfare of those children is preserved.

GILBERT: Patrick McGorry, the Australian of the Year, Peter Dutton, you know him well. He's a mental health expert...

DUTTON: He endorsed our mental health policy during the election. I know him very well.

GILBERT: He did indeed. Yes he did. But what he also says is that these detention facilities are factories of mental illness. You would have heard him describe them as such. So surely it's more, even more acute for children?

DUTTON: Look, I'm aware of Pat's comments. And obviously he has a deep feeling when it comes to issues of mental health. And I respect him very much. But as you point out Kieran - and if you can deal with the facts as opposed to the Government's spin - the fact that 106 boats have come this year, over 5500 people. This is an amazing situation, at the moment, when you see thousands of people in detention centres. This is not about some compassionate offering. This is about a Government that has mishandled the policy. They are clearly anticipating many more boats on the horizon. And I think most Australians would say that this is a Government that clearly has lost control of the agenda. If they were sincere about what it is they're doing at the moment, they would have made the announcement before the election, instead of a couple of weeks after the election. This is a Government that does not have control of its borders. And this is a Government that really is desperate, I think, at the moment, to try and take out some of the heat, which obviously exists within some of the centres, at the moment, because of the overcrowding. And clearly this is not about anything else other than an admission of the Government's policy failing. And I think, as the boats continue to arrive, people now have greater incentive to arrive under this Government's failure and I think that'll be underscored in the months to come.

GILBERT: So why didn't the Government make the announcement prior to the election? If it was that obvious that things were under pressure, as Peter says, you could have done it before. And there was no indication beforehand - in fact the focus was all about East Timor. And there's nothing secured there.

EMERSON: And that is still the case. And we're still working - you know very well, Kieran, and so does Peter - that Chris Bowen has been in East Timor last week for encouraging talks about a regional solution to a regional problem, rather than a mid-Pacific solution to a regional problem. But I'd ask this question: who said that the push factors, the push factors are 'enormous'? It wasn't Julia Gillard. It wasn't our immigration minister. It was Malcolm Turnbull. And he's right, the push factors are strong. And we are dealing with those push factors. Mr Abbott's response to this is a slogan: 'I'll stop the boats'. How's he going to stop the boats? Sitting there at Kirribilli on the boat phone, deciding which boats he's going to turn around and send back into the ocean?

GILBERT: But you've conceded there are pull factors as well, in the sense that you want this offshore centre built. So obviously you believe that that would work as a deterrent to some degree.

EMERSON: We are looking, obviously, for a regional solution to a regional issue. And a mid-Pacific solution to a regional issue in our own area is not the right way to go, in our view. That's our view. The Coalition has a different view. It thinks Nauru is the way to go. We're not going to have kids behind razor wire. We're going to ensure that kids are in decent and reasonable accommodation.

GILBERT: But the Coalition didn't either. They had the children removed in 2005.

EMERSON: They actually did. But they removed - they did remove them after a time. I'm saying - and I think there would be bipartisan support on that; that is, that we believe - and I hope the Coalition believes - that kids should be in reasonable accommodation, because they ...

DUTTON: Kieran, I just want to say a couple of points. The push, the so-called push factors have always been there.

EMERSON: That's not right.

DUTTON: Absolutely they have, in different parts of the world, where conflicts have existed...

EMERSON: Yeah, they're further away.

DUTTON: ...there have always been pushes. What's changed and why we've seen 106 boats arrive this year alone, is the fact that this Government has sent a very clear message that they're weak on border protection.

EMERSON: So Malcolm Turnbull's wrong?

DUTTON: So this Labor-Greens alliance now is in full swing. And this is a Government that isn't going to harden. This is a Government that isn't going to harden up on policies that they need to. Because Julia Gillard is looking over one shoulder making sure that Bob Brown's standing there behind her. And the Australian public has to realise now, that this is a very different Government.

EMERSON: This is straight out of central casting.

DUTTON: What I was happy about you before, Craig, was that you were able to talk about East Timor without actually a smile on your face. Because that is a big joke of a policy and Chris Bowen obviously must be completely humiliated.

EMERSON: Go the mid-Pacific solution, it's a real winner!

DUTTON: Every time he goes to East Timor or raises that ridiculous suggestion, he just completely undermines his own credibility.

EMERSON: And you heard straight out of central casting, this Labor-Green ...

GILBERT: Well the Labor-Green alliance is...

DUTTON: It's a reality...

EMERSON: This is a Labor policy, announced by a Labor Government, following a set of decisions made by a Labor Government...

GILBERT: Let's move on.

EMERSON: ... and your viewers will hear this time and time again from Peter Dutton and others.

GILBERT: Okay, well let's move on because this...

EMERSON: All this cosy secret Labor-Green deal. It's Labor policy. It's Labor policy.

GILBERT: But the Labor-Green deal is under pressure isn't it? Well on another issue. They disagree with you when it comes to occupational health and safety.

EMERSON: And that will not be the first time. Nor will it be the last time.

GILBERT: All right, well so tell me, will you rely then on Coalition support to get the changes to the occupational health and safety legislation through? Because the Greens are going to block it.

EMERSON: I wouldn't be confident of it. I hope that Mr Abbott will have a change of heart. He had 12 years to implement a national occupational health and safety system, including as industrial relations minister. Never went near it. Never went near it. Now okay, Mr Abbott might have found that just too hard, too challenging for him. So then they go into Opposition. We seek to set up Safe Work Australia, a body to oversee this national scheme. What does Mr Abbott, what does the Coalition do to that legislation in the Senate? Knock it back. How many times? Twice!

GILBERT: Okay, well let's get Peter Dutton's thoughts.

EMERSON: Twice, knocked it back. It finally went through. So I'm going to be fair. It finally went through when the business community said, 'shame on you' to the Coalition to try to thwart this reform.

GILBERT: I want to get Peter's response because I don't want to run out of time.

DUTTON: Craig, you should be writing fairy tales, honestly.

EMERSON: It's true. It's absolutely factually true. Tell me which part if that's wrong.

DUTTON: I'll tell you the facts of this modern day discussion, which you've completely glossed over. It is the case that Julia Gillard now, was yesterday, I guess, the last remaining Australian that was to endorse the O'Farrell Government in New South Wales. At last she's come to her, you know, a latter day conversion.

EMERSON: We've got our own policies. We're implementing our policies.

DUTTON: She is now endorsing the O'Farrell Government. What this shows is...

EMERSON: You have missed the 27 areas of regulatory reform. The Labor reforms, some of which you're opposing. Most of ...

GILBERT: Okay let's just get Peter's response.

DUTTON: Hang on Craig. Now what this shows that Julia Gillard even believes that this is a basket case of a Government in New South Wales. Just like in the hospitals. The New South Wales Government across the board is completely dictated to and run by the union movement. And what has got you nervous at the moment is they seem to be a little cosier with your partners, the Greens, than they do with you. And so I don't know what happens with your donations and the way in which your pre-selections will be run. But I'd be worried about Bob Brown stealing some of your ground, mate. Here's your opportunity.

GILBERT: Just tell me will you back the Government's uniform OH&S laws to circumvent the Greens?

DUTTON: The point that I'm making, look at our history when we were in Government and when we were in Opposition. Before that was that we drove reforms that made this country economically...

EMERSON: On occupational health and safety?

DUTTON: ...what it is today. The regulatory system in this country...

EMERSON: You didn't answer the question.

DUTTON: ...and the workplace relations system in this country, productivity in this country, the stability of our economy, is as a direct result of changes that we made when we were in Government. We won't be lectured to by the likes of the Labor-Green alliance and the Trade Minister who should be opening...

EMERSON: One more chance. One more chance. Will you back Labor's national occupational health and safety reforms?

DUTTON: Craig, we did when we were in Government...

EMERSON: No you didn't. No you didn't.

DUTTON: We backed sensible reforms...

EMERSON: You opposed it in Opposition.

DUTTON: ...and what we're worried about at the moment and the current debate is whether or not you can get Keneally across the line. Don't throw out these red herrings.

GILBERT: Okay, gentlemen.

EMERSON: I think the answer is no.

GILBERT: Time for a coffee. I'll let you go and grab a coffee.

EMERSON: Right. Thanks a lot.

GILBERT: Appreciate your time this morning, Craig and Peter. Appreciate it.

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