PETER VAN ONSELEN:

We are joined now by the Opposition Leader, Mr Tony Abbott. Thanks for your company.

TONY ABBOTT:

Nice to be with you Peter.

PETER VAN ONSELEN:

Mr Abbott, can I ask you before we get to the particulars of the week and so forth, the idea of a mining tax, a carbon tax and a pokies reform, if it does get instituted, you’ve made it clear, pledges in blood at least as far as the carbon tax goes, that you will repeal these particular policies. I believe you. Labor however is trying to argue that it will be too hard and you may not do it. I want this to be the interview that gets replayed if you don’t do it. Do you guarantee beyond any doubt under no matter what the circumstances, even if Labor is obstructionist in the Senate, you will find a way to repeal the carbon tax?

TONY ABBOTT:

Yes I do Peter. This is a bad tax based on a lie. We will oppose it in opposition. We will rescind it in government. I don’t expect that the Labor Party will maintain its support for a carbon tax in opposition but if they do, we will take the appropriate steps under the Constitution to make sure this tax is gone.

PETER VAN ONSELEN:

Same goes for the mining tax?

TONY ABBOTT:

Same goes for the mining tax.
PETER VAN ONSELEN:

And pokies reforms, if they get instituted along the lines being discussed?

TONY ABBOTT:

Well, what I’ve said on that is that we haven’t seen their proposal but our strong instinct is against the nanny state. Our strong instinct is that oppositions have a duty to oppose bad law and governments have a duty to rescind bad law.

PETER VAN ONSELEN:

I don’t think the opposition, if they become the opposition, the Labor Party would block in the Senate your carbon tax changes or your mining tax changes either. But if they do, you’d be prepared to go to an election – whatever it takes to get rid of them?

TONY ABBOTT:

Look, I think the public are sick of dithering government. I think they are sick of governments which are all spin and no substance. I think they are sick of governments that say one thing before an election and do the opposite after an election. Now, I want to be the strongest possible contrast to the current government and if we are obstructed in the parliament we will take the steps available under the Constitution to remove that obstruction.

PAUL KELLY:

If we look at the recent polls, they show that your personal ratings have taken a hit. Do you accept that there is a political problem in the sense that many people see you as being too negative? Will you put a strong emphasis next year on positives?

TONY ABBOTT:

Well, Paul let’s never forget that I am called the Opposition Leader for a reason. It is the duty of oppositions to oppose bad government policy and there’s been an abundance of bad government policy over the last four years but particularly over the last 12 months. Now, I have essentially two tasks. The first is to hold a bad government to account. The second is to develop a positive alternative. Now at different points in the electoral cycle the relative rating changes and I think, you know, you can be pretty confident, Paul, that as we move further through this term, yes, being a credible alternative obviously starts to bulk just as large as holding the government to account.

PETER VAN ONSELEN:

But you’ve been wanting an election immediately for a long time. Surely if you want an election as soon as possible you have to have your policies ready to go as soon as possible too.

TONY ABBOTT:

And I believe that if an election were called tomorrow, not that I expect one to be called tomorrow, we would be in a very strong position to start releasing policies from day one of the campaign.

PAUL KELLY:

I think what you are telling us is that next year there will be more emphasis on the positive side?
TONY ABBOTT:

Well, I think what I’m telling you Paul is that there has always been considerable emphasis on the policy side and on the positive side, but…

PAUL KELLY:

Will it be more visible next year?

TONY ABBOTT:

Well, I think it’s been much more visible this year than many people credit. For instance, we made positive announcements on mental health and…

PAUL KELLY:

I can appreciate that but we are just talking here about political perceptions. Do you think it’s important to be more positive next year?

TONY ABBOTT:

Well, I think it’s important to do your best to ensure that people see you in the best possible light but every time people accuse me of being negative Paul, I’m going to talk about some of the positive things that we’ve been talking about. Take our mental health announcements earlier in the year. They shamed the Government into substantially emulating it. Take our anti-dumping announcement a few weeks ago. The Government has substantially emulated that. Our infrastructure announcement that there would be published cost benefit analyses before major spending. These are all positive announcements that we have committed to in the course of the year. They haven’t always had the attention they deserve, but that’s life in opposition.

PAUL KELLY:

Sure. I mean you’ve wanted to get an election as soon as possible, you’ve made this clear both in public and in private. That hasn’t happened. We’ve now seen a change of numbers on the floor of the house. Do you accept that it’s likely that the parliament will now run full term?

TONY ABBOTT:

None of us have a crystal ball on this Paul. It is a very fragile, unstable government and they are now dependent on another fragile, unstable parliamentary number – Peter Slipper. Kevin Rudd, as you said earlier, is feral towards the Prime Minister. I don’t think any of us ought to predict that this government is likely to last two years. It may. It may not. We have to be ready for whatever happens.

PAUL KELLY:

But if it does last two years, have you got a game plan to be Opposition Leader for that two years, to be able to manage the job for that two years? I mean, what many people say about you is that you are approach is short term.

TONY ABBOTT:

Well, every day brings a new challenge but every year you’ve got to plan, and the plan is always to take each day as it comes in terms of critiquing the Government, to develop your own thinking and your own policies appropriately over that period of time…
PAUL KELLY:
What’s your plan for next year?

TONY ABBOTT:
Well, my plan for next year is to hold the government to account. I know I am going to sound like a cracked record on this Paul. It’s to hold a bad government to account and, at the same time, to be more and more acknowledged as a credible alternative.

PETER VAN ONSELEN:
We’ve got Peter Reith sitting in the green room. He was the person who, as I understand it, you encouraged to run…

TONY ABBOTT:
Surely in the blue room?

PETER VAN ONSELEN:
Yeah, well, maybe it’s not quite green, but that’s the terminology. But he is sitting there. He’s the person you reportedly encouraged to run for Liberal president before throwing your vote behind Alan Stockdale. He is very keen to see the Liberal Party step up on industrial relations. Is that something that we might see some policy announcements on next year?

TONY ABBOTT:
Well, I think it’s pretty clear that we have a problem in workplace relations. Australia has a problem in workplace relations, a problem that we didn’t have a couple of years ago and it’s interesting that over the last few months in particularly business is increasingly coming forward with practical examples of just how difficult things are under the current workplace regime. Now, this is a good thing because our policy, when we announce it, will be a response to problems. It won’t be an exercise in ideology. We do have a flexibility problem. We do have a productivity problem. Increasingly we have a militancy problem and our policy will address all of those things. But it will be cautious and careful because where people’s livelihoods are at stake, where people’s futures are at risk, we want to proceed in a very responsible and careful way.

PETER VAN ONSELEN:
Why won’t ideology come into it though? This has been an ideological matter of faith for the Liberal Party for decades, including by John Howard most famously, who you’ve often described as your main mentor in politics.

TONY ABBOTT:
Look, I am not an ideological person. I have values, sure. Values are very important in politics. But I don’t think Australians want or need ideological governments.

PETER VAN ONSELEN:
Quite a different space to IR but the issue of gay marriage was something that was obviously centre stage during Labor’s national conference. Will you allow a free vote amongst Liberal MPs on this?
TONY ABBOTT:

Well, Peter, I’ve obviously been thinking quite a lot about this. I think many people have been thinking a lot about this and the last thing any of us would want to be is unsympathetic to gay Australians. We all have gay friends. Many of us have gay relatives. We’ve got to be decent. Above all else, we’ve got to have government which is decent. But – and this is very, very important – I went to the election saying that the Coalition had a clear policy on this. It wasn’t just a personal position, although it is and will be a personal position. It was the clear policy of the Coalition at the election that marriage was between a man and a woman. Five times at least during the election campaign I stated this. A quick check of the transcripts shows that Julia Gillard eight times during the election campaign said that it was Labor policy that marriage was between a man and a woman and that that would not change in the life of the current parliament. Now, you know, I don’t believe that credible politicians can say one thing during an election campaign and do the opposite in the ensuing term of parliament.

PETER VAN ONSELEN:

So no free vote?

TONY ABBOTT:

Well, as I said, our clear party position, marriage is between a man and a woman. Now, every single member of my Coalition was elected on that position and I don’t think we can break faith with the electorate.

PAUL KELLY:

How much pressure are you under from some of your colleagues to give a free vote?

TONY ABBOTT:

Well, Paul, they’ll be a lot of talking, as you’d expect. I have Shadow Cabinet tomorrow. There will be some discussion of this issue there. We won’t finalise a position until it goes before the party room in the new year but I think that the decisive consideration here is the position that we took to the election. We can’t be a political party which says one thing before an election and does differently after an election because our…

PAUL KELLY:

So this is an issue of trust and commitment and promise, is it?

TONY ABBOTT:

Well, as I said Paul, Julia Gillard has a problem in this area. She said before the election there will be no carbon tax under the government I lead. She’s done the opposite. Now, she said before the election there will be no gay marriage under the government I lead, and plainly she is permitting or she is planning to permit the parliament to debate this issue and many in her party… I mean, her party has done a 180 degree about-face on this.

PAUL KELLY:

So do you tend to make a political issue of the claim you’ve just made that Gillard has broken her promise on this question of gay marriage? Would you make that an issue?
TONY ABBOTT:

Well, I don’t think that this is going to be a political battleground in the same way that the carbon tax is for instance. I accept that this is quite a personal thing for many people including many members of parliament. But I think the Australian public will be very conscious of the fact that this is a Prime Minister who can’t be trusted to keep her word.

PAUL KELLY:

Now, in relation to some of your own colleagues such as Malcolm Turnbull who want a conscience vote, will you make specific arrangements for any members in that sense or not?

TONY ABBOTT:

Well, we’ve got a process to go through Paul, an internal process to go through and as I said it won’t be finalised until our party room considers this in the new year but every single member of my Coalition went to the last election saying that marriage was between a man and a woman and that this was our party’s position – every single member. Now, I know that in their heart of hearts that there would probably be a few of my members who would prefer it to be otherwise but that was the commitment that every single one of us took to the election and look, its all very well talking about conscience. Conscience is important. We’ve always respected the rights of conscience inside the Coalition. But in the end, the fundamental duty of a politician is to keep his or her commitments and I don’t see any dramatic change in circumstances. I don’t see any fundamental differences in objective reality today that would justify any change of a fundamental commitment like that.

PETER VAN ONSELEN:

But Mr Abbott, that being the case, it sounds like not only will it be a party position, but you’ll look pretty sternly on anyone who chooses to cross the floor because you are saying that such an article of faith of what the Liberal Party took to the last election, presumably if individual Liberal MPs crossed the floor on this issue, then they are breaking with that article of faith that you’ve just talked about.

TONY ABBOTT:

Well, we have always in our party, we have always respected the rights of members of parliament to take a conscientious position. But, again Peter, I just remind you that every single member of our Coalition went to the election with a particular position and it wasn’t a personal position, it was a party position. All of us, I did, my frontbench did, my backbench did, we all went to the election with that position and, as I said, sure, you can always say, ‘well, the times, they are a changing’ but if you are going to keep faith with the electorate, you seek a new mandate. You don’t just say, ‘oh well, I’m sorry, I’ve changed my mind’.

PETER VAN ONSELEN:

Let’s call a spade a spade here. What you are basically doing is you are making it clear to your MPs that whilst the Liberal Party normally has a tradition of crossing the floor as being an open option, on this issue, you would consider that individual MP breaking faith with what the Liberal Party promised at the last election.

TONY ABBOTT:

We’ve all got to make difficult choices in this life, Peter. And sometimes we are torn. We might want to do something and yet we have a commitment that takes us in another direction and the point I’m making is that a very, very important consideration here, I would suggest a decisive consideration here, is the fact that every single one of us went to the last election saying that it is the policy of the Coalition that marriage is
between a man and a woman. Now, you can argue the history, you can say, ‘well, maybe in 2004 we could’ve done things differently’, ‘maybe if we’d thought about this, we might have said differently’. But that is the commitment that we made and I think that has got to be an extremely powerful factor with every single member of my Coalition.

**PETER VAN ONSELEN:**

What about going into the next election? Is it the same commitment for the Coalition which basically would then rule it out over the following three years?

**TONY ABBOTT:**

Well, again, look, you know, we are a liberal party, sure, but we are also the custodian of the conservative political tradition in this country as well. John Howard famously observed that there is a dual tradition in our party. It’s liberal but it’s conservative as well. The vast majority of my party room in my judgment strongly holds to the traditional position that marriage is between a man and a woman. Now, because we are a liberal party, we are not Stalinists, we are open to consider these things but my instinct is that we are going to remain of a view that marriage is between a man and a woman.

It’s interesting. The Prime Minister asserts this but she never defends it, she never explains it. Now, I think there is a good case for saying that marriage is not just between the two individuals who make a commitment to each other. It also involves children. We have the institution of marriage not just for the fulfillment of the partners but for the protection of the family. Now, we all know that in the modern world, families come in all sorts of shapes and sizes and I would be the last person to make qualitative judgments about individual families. Still, for good reason, our society from time immemorial has respected this concept that marriage is between a man and a woman not just because men and women want to be fulfilled and happy in their personal life but because we have obligations to the children that come with families.

**PAUL KELLY:**

Julia Gillard is about to have a reshuffle. Would you do the same? Do you think it’s appropriate to reshuffle and reassess your own frontbench?

**TONY ABBOTT:**

Paul, I think the government has a policy problem. They don’t just have a personnel problem. She can change the faces but unless she changes the policy, this is going to be a very bad government. In the end, it’s the policy betrayal, the policy failures that are causing this government its political problems.

**PAUL KELLY:**

But I’ve asked about the Liberal Party, not the government.

**TONY ABBOTT:**

Ok. I don’t believe we have a policy problem…

**PAUL KELLY:**

You’re in good shape?
TONY ABBOTT:

…and I don’t think we have a personnel problem. The other point I make is that unless she addresses the Kevin Rudd poison at the heart of her government, it will continue to be dysfunctional. Julia Gillard and Kevin Rudd cannot be in the same cabinet for cabinet government to function.

PETER VAN ONSELEN:

But on your side, no Coalition reshuffle even if there’s one on the Labor side?

TONY ABBOTT:

Look, I have no plans for a reshuffle. Now, I don’t know, there might be some retirements. Who knows? But I am very happy with my existing team. I think the senior members of my team are performing extremely well. I think that that’s the team I am going to take to the election.

PAUL KELLY:

We’ve just seen…

TONY ABBOTT:

The other point I should make Paul, on the reshuffle, the government’s reshuffle, is if Shorten and Combet end up in more senior positions, rest assured it’s the faceless men who remain in charge.

PAUL KELLY:

We’ve just seen a major European summit with the British Prime Minister David Cameron indicating that he won’t agree to the terms and Britain is staying out. Do you think Cameron has done the right thing?

TONY ABBOTT:

Well, I think that the eurozone crisis does have lessons for the wider world and the fundamental lesson is that countries which keep spending and borrowing and taxing eventually get themselves into diabolical trouble. Now, I think there are enormous questions over Europe’s economic prospects. As an observer from afar I see fundamental difficulties with the euro. I know that this is not an easy issue to resolve. I think that in the short term at least, regardless of what happens in Europe, Europe’s economic prospects are pretty dire, but I think it’s very important that you don’t make a bad situation worse by continuing the policies that got you into trouble in the first place. So I think Cameron has done the right thing, not the wrong thing.

PAUL KELLY:

Do you think countries will have to leave the eurozone to solve the problem to regain their own competitiveness?

TONY ABBOTT:

Well Paul, again I don’t really feel comfortable as a commentator on Europe but I am very pleased…

PAUL KELLY:

I’m not asking you as a commentator…

TONY ABBOTT:
But I am very pleased that Australia is master of its own destiny in a way that the European countries by and large are not.

PAUL KELLY:

To what extent do you think we are likely to see huge pressures on the Australian economy next year as a result of a slow down in growth in the rich world both Europe and to a lesser extent the United States and what will be the consequences of this for Australia?

TONY ABBOTT:

I think Paul that the international economic situation is very difficult. I am basically confident about America because I think America is such a dynamic society. But I think the Obama government is having enormous trouble getting its fiscal house in order. I think that the problems in Europe are fundamental and I don’t see them being resolved anytime soon. So, if you’ve got a likely serious recession in Europe, likely continued very slow growth at best in the United States, I think that does have big risks for Australia. Now, we would like to think that that Chinese locomotive and the Indian locomotive will continue to drag us forward but, you know, it would be very unusual to find a country continuing to grow uninterruptedly at the rate China has forever. All booms eventually come to an end and that’s why I think it’s very important that we get our house in order as quickly as possible.

PAUL KELLY:

But don’t you think there’s a risk in your policy, you keep on talking about getting the house in order, getting back to surplus, having a bigger surplus than the Labor government, don’t you think there’s risk here that if you impose these sort of government restraints on the economy that you will undermine growth and activity?

TONY ABBOTT:

It’s never a good thing to waste money and my problem, Paul, with Labor’s spending programmes is that so many of them have been wasteful. Now, we can go through the litany of the pink batts and the overpriced school halls and so on, but the big daddy of them all is the National Broadband Network and that is continuing. That is continuing. That is a $50 billion plus white elephant. It is wasteful, it is unnecessary…

PAUL KELLY:

It’s still a plus for the Government. The Government talks about it and the polls show that the NBN is still a plus for the Labor Party.

TONY ABBOTT:

And every day your distinguished newspaper, Paul, has a story under the headline “how your billions are being spent”…

PETER VAN ONSELEN:

So is The Australian newspaper doing a better job at dissembling the NBN than Malcolm Turnbull, the Shadow Minister?
TONY ABBOTT:

Well, the fact that *The Australian* has stories to publish every other day on the NBN I think is a function of the good work that Malcolm is doing.

PAUL KELLY:

Are you satisfied with the performance of Malcolm Turnbull as Shadow Communications Minister?

TONY ABBOTT:

Absolutely. Absolutely. The fact that the NBN is now, with respect Paul, a negative for the Government is due to Malcolm’s excellent work in this area.

PETER VAN ONSELEN:

Can I ask in relation to economics, which we were talking about before, there was the report the other week about the organisation, the accountancy firm that did the Coalition’s costings at the last election has been fined by its peak industry body for that actual piece of work not being up to their standards, if you like. That’s embarrassing for the Coalition, you’d have to agree?

TONY ABBOTT:

Well, I’m not embarrassed Peter because I’m very confident…

PETER VAN ONSELEN:

But you’re not embarrassed that the peak body of accountancy for that particular firm, for that particular costings that they did for you has been fined for not being up to scratch?

TONY ABBOTT:

Well, the firm has been fined. The Coalition hasn’t. Now, if the firm…

PETER VAN ONSELEN:

The Coalition can’t be fined by the peak body but the peak body can fine the people that were responsible for giving the tick which was a lot of emphasis was really placed on it by Joe Hockey and yourself at the last election and now that peak industry body is saying that that piece of work was worthy of being fined, ie not up to scratch.

TONY ABBOTT:

Well, look, we can argue the toss about this one Peter. I am very happy with our costings and while we are on the subject of costings, I mean, you know this is a government which three times got its mining tax costings wrong. This is a government which every few months has to revise upwards the deficit of this year from $12 billion to $23 billion to $37 billion. I mean, really. Let’s not get too precious about this Peter.

PETER VAN ONSELEN:

I’ve been very critical of them about that. I’ve written about it repeatedly, including yesterday but nonetheless, will you be using the same firm for your costings at the next election?
TONY ABBOTT:

Well, what Joe has said is that once the budget office is up and running we will use the budget office for costings until the election and then we will find a different way of validating our costings.

PAUL KELLY:

The Government has abandoned the tender process for the Australian Television Network and said it will now be part of the ABC forever. What’s your response to that and if you become Prime Minister, will you look at that decision to see if it can be unwound and a new tender process established down the track?

TONY ABBOTT:

Paul, this whole decision has been a shambles and it’s typical of the fact that it’s not just the policy outcomes but it’s the policy process which is deficient in this Government. I mean, this is a government which is rotten to its core and that process illustrates that rottenness. I think that there is an argument for saying that the national broadcaster ought to handle our soft power projection. For much of the life of the Howard Government, that was the position that we took. I don’t want to make policy on the run though Paul. At the moment, we’ve got a shoddy, shoddy process from a government which thought that we needed a tender and then scrapped it.

PETER VAN ONSELEN:

But it can’t be policy on the run. You must have thought about this since they did scrap the tender, if you came back into power, are you inclined to open it back up?

TONY ABBOTT:

I’d like to take advice on this and in good time before the next election we will tell you what our position is but, at the moment, you’ve got yet another example of a government which is utterly incompetent and untrustworthy and again, typically, it was the Rudd-Gillard poison that was at the heart of this decision.

PAUL KELLY:

When the President of the United States was here, you did have a brief meeting with President Obama. How did that meeting go and what was your impression of the President?

TONY ABBOTT:

Paul, one of the privileges of being a major party leader is that you do get this kind of opportunity. President Obama, as you’d expect of a US president is a man of extraordinary capability and really, a very, very impressive individual. I don’t know whether he’s been the world’s greatest president. But he is certainly a very impressive person of great capacity. The interesting this about the discussions that we had with President Obama is that when it comes to climate change, in practice, the American Government’s policy is the same as that proposed by the Opposition.

PAUL KELLY:

Is that what he said to you?

TONY ABBOTT:

Well, he is conscious of not wanting to get too deeply involved in partisan issues here in Australia.
PETER VAN ONSELEN:

It sounds like privately though he may have mentioned that to you.

TONY ABBOTT:

I’m not going to go into the ‘who said what to whom’ business. But it’s obvious that the American Government has no intention of moving to cap and trade or an emissions trading scheme anytime soon. It’s less likely now than it’s ever been that they will go down this path in the next…

PAUL KELLY:

So America’s on your side on climate change you think?

TONY ABBOTT:

Well, look at the policy. I mean, judge them by their practice and their practice is what I think should be our practice.

PETER VAN ONSELEN:

So you’re not expecting much out of Durban, I guess, is the final question?

TONY ABBOTT:

Well, again, the reports coming out of Durban are that it is highly unlikely to come up with a new binding agreement. I think that the longer this issue is before us, the more obvious it is that carbon taxes, emissions trading schemes are not going to be embraced. That’s why we should take sensible, constructive measures on a country by country basis along the lines of our direct action policy.

PETER VAN ONSELEN:

Alright, Tony Abbott. We will let you go. We appreciate you joining us on Australian Agenda. Have a good summer break if you get one.

TONY ABBOTT:

Thanks so much.

[ends]