ABBOTT INTERVIEW WITH FRAN KELLY (ABC RADIO) - DIRECT ACTION ON CLIMATE CHANGE, COPENHAGEN, ELECTION, JAPANESE WHALING

The Hon Tony Abbott MP
Leader of the Opposition
E&OE

TONY ABBOTT

Thanks for having me, Fran.

FRAN KELLY:

Tony Abbott you say in your speech that when it comes to climate change you prefer hope to fear, incentives to taxes. Professor Ross Garnaut confirmed on this program yesterday that the direct action that you are proposing – things like incentives for green carbon, clean energy, energy efficient buildings – won't be cost effective unless a price is also put on carbon; direction action without a carbon price would end up with a lower standard of living for Australians?

TONY ABBOTT:

Well I think Professor Garnaut should wait until he sees what we propose and we will have a detailed proposal out there by the time Parliament comes back in February. But it is also worth noting that Professor Garnaut has been absolutely hyper-critical of the Government’s emissions trading scheme. He says it is just about the worst imaginable scheme given all the exemptions and cave-ins to special interests.

FRAN KELLY:

But he still said yesterday on this program that it is better than nothing and it is a place to start. I mean the point is, yes, sure no one knows the details of your direct action yet, but if you keep criticising the Government’s plan as a great big tax, your direct action won’t be cost free will it?

TONY ABBOTT:

I never said it would be, Fran. What I said was that there were better ways of tackling this issue than putting a huge price on everything. Now the trouble with the Government’s emissions trading scheme is that it just raises the cost of living, it doesn’t of itself actually reduce any emissions. Now it stands to reason that if what you want to do is reduce emissions, go directly for that.

FRAN KELLY:

What would your direct action cost?

TONY ABBOTT:

Well let’s wait and see Fran. I mean I know you are very eager to pin me down but what I am trying to do today is make it crystal clear that the Liberal Party is the party of low tax, small government and economic freedom and if
you want to combine low tax, small government and economic freedom with a better environment, direct action is the way to go rather than a great big new tax on everything.

FRAN KELLY:

Look I understand you don’t want to be pinned down ‘til you have got your policy out there but on the one hand you are saying that the Government’s ETS will basically be like adding the equivalent of two and a half per cent to the GST – that’s according to your figures – isn’t it reasonable that you come clean with the notion of who is going to end up paying for your direct action? Presumably we are all going to be paying extra for that too?

TONY ABBOTT:

Well as I said it won’t be cost free but I have been the Leader of the Opposition for 15 days now, the Government has been in power for 25 months. Now I don’t think it is reasonable to expect me to have the same level of specificity in my policy that the Government has in its. But the fact is Fran we will have a strong and effective climate change policy and people will know what it is before the Parliament goes back in February.

FRAN KELLY:

What would you see as a successful outcome at Copenhagen?

TONY ABBOTT:

I think a good outcome would be binding commitments from all the big emitters to get their emissions down substantially by 2020 and beyond. That would be a good outcome. Let’s wait and see what happens. Prime Minister Rudd has invested an enormous amount of personal capital in this. He has often seemed more like the Prime Minister of the world than the Prime Minister of Australia and I hope it doesn’t all turn out to be a horrible waste of time and effort.

FRAN KELLY:

Do you stand by your commitment to the Rudd Government’s stated targets, even if they end up as high as 25 per cent if the rest of the world at Copenhagen vows to go that way?

TONY ABBOTT:

Yeah look, our previous commitments stand, but you have got to understand Fran that it would be absolute folly of Australia to take unilateral action, and this has always been one of the problems with the Rudd Government’s approach – Mr Rudd seems to think that Australia can save the world on its own.

Now we have about one per cent, or a little over, of global emissions. We could reduce our emissions to zero and China would make up the difference in less than a year given its increasing rate of emissions.

So look, we have got to be a good international citizen but this idea that we can do it all on our own and that we have some kind of unique moral sway over the world because of Prime Minister Rudd’s extraordinary personal charisma I just think it is a foolish idea.

FRAN KELLY:

Well the Prime Minister has said just before he jumped on the plane to Copenhagen that Australia will do no more and no less than the rest of the world. But the question is how we do it perhaps? On this program we revealed this week that Australia is trying to negotiate a land use agreement at Copenhagen that would allow us to claim all our soil carbon measures. Now if we can meet our emissions reduction targets just through soil
carbon, would you support that, even if it means that industry doesn’t have to reduce its emissions at the smoke stack?

TONY ABBOTT:

Well that is a very interesting point you make Fran and I think that that position which you revealed on the program, which is apparently the position of the Rudd Government’s negotiators – the hitherto secret position of the Rudd Government’s negotiators – vindicates what I have been saying that you can achieve very deep cuts in emissions without a great big new tax on everything.

So I think that is an interesting development. I wish Mr Rudd had been more upfront with us about it before his team got to Copenhagen. But I think it is a very interesting, very prospective and it shows that there are smarter ways of doing this than Mr Rudd’s scheme, which is to tax first and then innovate later.

FRAN KELLY:

But is it smarter if we end up meeting our emissions cuts targets without industry changing its emitting behaviour?

TONY ABBOTT:

Surely, Fran, the important thing is to get our emissions down. If carbon dioxide is the international climate villain that the majority of scientists think it is, that’s what matters, getting our emissions down, and if we can do it through better land use, if we can do it through more efficient buildings, if we can do it through smart technology like what I saw at James Cook University last week and Mr Rudd wanted to avoid, well that’s all to the good.

FRAN KELLY:

Tony Abbott you say in this speech ‘bring it on, bring on an election on climate change’. Given that the Howard Government’s refusal to sign Kyoto, given now your decision to dump any emissions trading scheme, what credentials do you think you have on this key environmental issue? You are not even completely convinced of global warming yourself, why can you convince the voters that you have the plan?

TONY ABBOTT:

Well dumping Mr Rudd’s great big tax doesn’t mean that I am dumping climate change action, far from it. I think there are more effective and intelligent ways of tackling climate change. But what I do in that speech is try to set out some of my own environmental credentials and I think they are quite strong.

There’s the Green Corps that I set up in government. There’s the early work I did in my electorate and inside the government to try to bring about practical environmental improvements. And the point I make Fran is that a conservative political movement and the conservation movement have this at least in common – we appreciate that which has stood the test of time and we know that we only have one earth, only have one planet and we tamper with it at our peril.

FRAN KELLY:

In short, is your climate challenge to the Prime Minister an election?

TONY ABBOTT:

I am not scared of an election. Oppositions should live for elections Fran because an election is an opposition’s one opportunity to become a government and I think the Prime Minister would be making a huge mistake to try to
make the next election a referendum on his emissions trading scheme, his great big tax on everything – but if that is what he wants, he can have that election and I’m confident that we will give him a damn good fight.

FRAN KELLY:

If it is more than that, the 2010 election when it comes, what do you think will be the big policy battles between you and the Government?

TONY ABBOTT:

I think that we can tell that economic management is going to be a key battleground. We have had three interest rate rises in just three months. ‘Who do you trust to manage the economy’ is always a very important question at election time. I know the Howard Government wasn’t perfect but its economic management record stacks up very well against that of the Rudd Government. I think people understand that we have got through the global financial crisis relatively unscathed much more because of the previous 25 years of reform than from the last 25 months of economic fiddling.

FRAN KELLY:

You note in your speech that oppositions don’t win elections though, governments lose them, and this Government you’d have to say is riding high in the polls, showing little sign of losing the electorate so far. How can it be beaten?

TONY ABBOTT:

Well we have had three interest rate rises in just three months. There will be more interest rate rises I imagine in the New Year. I think that we are going to have a constant stream of boats coming through to remind people of the failures of Mr Rudd on border protection. I think that the Government’s new workplace relations policies which come into play on the 1st of January will be a very unhappy New Year for small business. I think millions of workers earning $100,000 a year will get caught up in a whole lot of red tape that they have been free of, not just since 1996 but since the 1980s and the reforms that the Hawke and Keating Governments brought in. I think a lot of people are going to be questioning whether Mr Rudd is the real deal in about August-September of next year.

FRAN KELLY:

And Tony Abbott just finally on some news from overnight, the Prime Minister has met with his Japanese counterpart in Tokyo and according to news reports has told him that Australia may take legal action to stop Japanese whaling if a diplomatic solution can’t be found. What should the Government be doing, what is your reaction to that?

TONY ABBOTT:

Well I think this is the third year running that Prime Minister Rudd has made this threat and I think if he is going to be taken seriously he should either stop making threats or actually implement them. So I think he will be a lot more believable on this issue when the writs are issued.

FRAN KELLY:

Tony Abbott thanks very much for joining us on Breakfast.

TONY ABBOTT:

Thanks Fran.