

Independents: preparing for the pitches

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Independent MPs Tony Windsor, Rob Oakeshott and Bob Katter discuss the federal election outcome and possibility of making a deal with either the ALP or the Coalition in order to form a majority government.

Transcript

KERRY O'BRIEN, PRESENTER: Now to the three independents who may be about to decide Australia's next government. There's Tony Windsor, who's represented the seat of New England in New South Wales centred in Tamworth since 2001, there's Bob Katter, who entered the federal parliament for the north-west Queensland seat of Kennedy as a National Party member in 1993 turning independent in 2001 and, finally, there's Rob Oakeshott, who entered the federal parliament for the seat of Lyne, based in Port Macquarie in New South Wales in a bi-election in 2008. All have previously served in their state parliaments and they all join me now by satellite.

Can we start with an update on how things will proceed from here? We know you've had preliminary conversations with the leaders, we know you're all going to meet, that is the three of you are going to meet in Canberra sometime tomorrow, what then? Tony Windsor?

TONY WINDSOR, MEMBER FOR NEW ENGLAND, NSW: Well, Kerry we've spoken on the phone but nothing has been decided in any definitive way. We have had calls from the Leader of the Opposition and the Prime Minister but nothing definitive discussed there.

I've said to both of them that I'm quite happy to sit down and talk if in fact there is a hung parliament and we need to resolve the situation. The three of us will be engaged in some talks by phone a bit later on tonight and we'll make a decision then as to whether we should get face to face in Canberra which may happen tomorrow.

KERRY O'BRIEN: Okay, but will you ultimately conduct your negotiations with Julia Gillard and Tony Abbott together as a block of three, or separately?

TONY WINDSOR: Well I can't speak for the others but I think that would depend on our conversations as to how we handle this. But we'll both, we'll all be independent of each other in a sense but there may be an easier way of handling it if we, if we speak together. But the others are able to speak for themselves.

KERRY O'BRIEN: Bob Katter and Rob Oakeshott have you got anything to add on that in a kind of procedural sense before we move on to the meat of this discussion?

ROB OAKESHOTT, MEMBER FOR LYNE, NSW: Look I would say from a process point of view there's a lot of sense in the three of us certainly staying shoulder to shoulder as much as possible for the interests of the parliament and the nation so that leaders don't have to talk individually to all of us, we don't get picked off by political interests and vested interests and

that we can keep the focus genuinely on the outcome of a parliament that can work for the next three years.

So we will all be independent when the parliament's up and running and when it, legislation comes through a parliament there is no question about that. We are all independently minded and might draw our own conclusions about who and where we want to support or don't support a majority government.

But I think there's a lot of sense in these early days, as the dust settles, that we do stand shoulder to shoulder to try and drive some stability outcomes for the next three year term.

KERRY O'BRIEN: Bob Katter, does that make sense to you?

BOB KATTER, MEMBER FOR KENNEDY, QLD: I feel very strongly that we should act, as far as humanly possible, collectively. We don't agree on everything and that's the nature of being an independent but on basic, central philosophy I find myself in step all of the time with Rob and with Tony and I think we will be able to deliver a different paradigm for Australia if we act collectively and I'm very, very strong that we do act collectively.

KERRY O'BRIEN: You've all had history with the National Party one way all another, although I know Tony Windsor that you've never been, you've never sat in the parliament, unlike the other two, as a member of the National Party. But what were the forces that decided each of you to take the independent route in politics? Tony Windsor first.

TONY WINDSOR: Well I've never been there as a member of the National Party. I stood for pre-selection back in 1991 and I won't get into the antics that went on then but I was unsuccessful and I was encouraged to stand as an independent because of the branch stacking and other things that occurred and subsequently won the state seat of Tamworth.

But the legacy of that, I guess, was some years previously I had, as a card carrying member of the National Party, been quite critical of the way in which it was performing back then and many of the things that I was talking about back then in terms of representation have come to fruition and I think, well quite obviously, the National Party is a dying party and they'll amalgamate to save some of their skins within a couple of years.

KERRY O'BRIEN: And Bob Katter, what was it that ultimately decided you to go independent?

BOB KATTER: You got about two hours Kerry?

KERRY O'BRIEN (laughs): How about 45 seconds?

BOB KATTER: Let me, let me just say to you that I represent about a third of Australia's, more than a third of Australia's sugar industry. They cold bloodedly went ahead and removed the tariffs that halved the amount of money we got for sugar on the home market, about a quarter of our production.

That was a savage blow to us. Why would you do that? What was the benefit? The price went up for the consumers. But I got out, I think it was some months after dairy de-regulation and we fought like tigers to stave that off and get our front bench to oppose that. Almost all of the

back benchers did that. But it was just a joke. I mean they were going to facilitate and precipitate that dairy de-regulation.

Now the outcome of that was that the price went up by about 40 cents to the consumer. My blokes just got a letter in the mail saying you're getting fifty eight cents, sorry about that, you've been de-regulated now, you're getting only 39 cents.

So they had a third of their income taken away from them and within two years of dairy de-regulation there was a farmer committing suicide every four days in Australia. Now how could you possibly stay in a political institution that closed down the tobacco industry, the fishing industry, half the sugar industry, half the dairying industry and didn't reinstate the timber industry in north Queensland? And that's just a few things.

KERRY O'BRIEN: Okay, well that gives us an idea.

BOB KATTER: They sold off, they sold, no, no, no one of the things that's vital importance, they sold off the development banks. You know that was the most mortal blow for rural Australia and they sold them off so they'd get enough money in the till to buy their way through the next election.

KERRY O'BRIEN: Okay, Rob Oakeshott what was it that determined your course into independence?

ROB OAKESHOTT: Well it was four elections ago, so nearly ten years. So it's hard to remember the detail but essentially my focus, when I first entered parliament and has always been, is community first and working with a local community.

I bought the product that the particular party in question represents regional Australia. When I got in the inside I quickly saw otherwise and had to make some decisions of sticking with community or sticking with party. I chose community and have been very happy with that decision and hopefully, as you can see from election results, so has the community.

Realistically, I was a square peg in a round hole from day one and I think it was best for all involved that we chose different directions and, you know, there's no animosity at my end. I'm happy to work with the National Party, if that's the implied question, if they are serious about trying to drive outcomes in the next parliament.

But in the end, I'm an independent member, very happy to be so, so is the electorate and hopefully the country gets to see a bit of a taste of independent representation

KERRY O'BRIEN: Okay and in fact you got me right, that was going to be the follow up question and I'll put it to Tony Windsor and Bob Katter very quickly and that is whether that National Party relationship is a help or hindrance in forging a workable relationship with the Coalition and I notice, in particular, Tony Windsor and Bob Katter that it doesn't seem to me that there's a very close relationship between you two and Barnaby Joyce and possibly even Warren Truss, given what he had to say.

TONY WINDSOR: Well I have a view that Barnaby Joyce is a fool and actually an embarrassment to country Australia. So I don't have a lot of time for him. I think he's done a lot of damage and to give advice on hung parliaments is nonsense.

Barnaby Joyce was actually in a hung senate when the sale of Telstra went through and had certain guarantees that were going to be enshrined in legislation in relation to equity of access to broadband and telephone services, for instance. That legislation never incorporated any enshrinement of those rights. There was supposed to be a letter from the Prime Minister that would guarantee them, that was never sighted and we're still arguing about the telecommunications services.

So, but having said that, there's, you know, I've been a great admirer of Kay Hull, for instance. I think she stood up on the Snowy Hydro Scheme and a number of other issues. So there are some good members of all parties and the National Party's not bereft of good members it's just that it doesn't have many.

KERRY O'BRIEN: Now Bob Katter, anything to add?

BOB KATTER: I just thought for an act of incredible stupidity I watch Barnaby have a cheap shot at, at Tony Windsor. I could have thought of no more foolish action than that and then Warren Truss carried a personal attack upon me. I mean quite extraordinary stuff. (Laughs) Tony, Tony Abbott must have been grinding his teeth watching it.

But no look we'll, I believe that you've got to work, I've worked with people that I loathe and detest. I've had to work with them in the past. Whatever can get a good outcome for our areas. But I emphasise continuously, the collapse of agriculture in Australia. And you know this is the thing that must be addressed.

We need a different paradigm. Tony Windsor said that it's like a giant lot feeder, we just keep putting cattle into, referring to Sydney and south-east Queensland, and then we just can't fit anymore cattle into that lot feeder. You could turn some of them back into the paddock but if you look after rural Australia, you'll move the people back and that will relieve the incredible pressure on infrastructure in Sydney and in south-east Queensland.

And water, you know, is very relevant to my area, water development. But we none of it under the LNP and we had a different and more aggressive approach, I've got to say in fairness to the ALP quite incredibly.

KERRY O'BRIEN: I'm very mindful of the fact that you do all represent electorates that in the past have been more likely to vote conservative than not. I know in Kennedy, Bob Katter, it has had a Labor member in the past but broadly speaking, I think what I've said...

BOB KATTER: That's not true. That's not true. No, no that's not true of Kennedy.

KERRY O'BRIEN: In Kennedy?

BOB KATTER: Except for my family it's always been Labor.

KERRY O'BRIEN: Well but a conservative part of Australia. But how... you're going to disagree with that too? Okay, alright. But how will the nature of your own electorates influence the decision on which party to support in government and how do you balance the interests of your individual electorates with how you perceive the national interest? Rob Oakeshott first.

ROB OAKESHOTT: Yeah look I think everyone who's been elected today has a very simple job description. This isn't rocket science, the job of being a local member. We wear two hats; one is to represent strongly and advocate and lobby for issues in a local electorate and then through the parliament, as a collective of a 150 people, to work on national interest issues as a group through the parliament.

So I'm confident I'm going to do that. I continue to do that. I'm confident Tony and Bob are doing that. What is in question today which has been a bit of a concern from some of the media reports is people are choosing to put their political parties before that national interest; some of the comments that I've heard in relation to weighing up particular numbers, whether it's preferences, whether it's numbers of seats.

You can spin this one anyway you wanted to get a political outcome for your party either way. I would, my strong message to all involved is to, don't try and be Monday experts on this. Don't try and sell a political party message on this. There is a national issue at stake here and it is stable government. No-one wants to go back to the polls and we need to work together, believe it or not, a concept foreign, at times, to adversaries in the political process.

But this is a together exercise for all of us and we do need to be sensitive about other's interests and work through a negotiation process and a tricky set of numbers with clean hands and good faith. And if we can do it well we will impress Australia, I hope, and if we can't do it, my view is we go straight back to the ballot box as quickly as possible.

KERRY O'BRIEN: But just on that question of stability of government, I just wonder how you will judge the workability of either major party to form that kind of stable government and at what point you'd consider pulling the plug to force another election. I mean would you take into account which of them is more likely to be able to have a good working relationship with the Senate; the current one and then the new one next year? Tony Windsor?

TONY WINDSOR: Well I think there's a whole range of things we have to consider and that's why we want to sit down and work through these things. Rob's quite right. It is about stability and the way in which a parliament could in fact work over the next three years. And in my mind that would involve the relationships between the Lower House and the Senate. There may need to be some changes in relation to how people deal with one another between the Senate and the House of Representatives.

But stability is the key to this and I don't have a problem with it at all. It can work and I think the three of us and the Western Australia National and others and Andrew Wilkie etcetera and the Green from Melbourne, we can make this work. And I think if the major parties actually move away from this dog against dog attitude that they've had through the election campaign and look to the national interest on this, that we can come up with something that's quite successful. That may take a little time but it can work.

KERRY O'BRIEN: When you say maybe a different relationship with the Senate, what do you mean?

TONY WINDSOR: Well the way in which the Greens have been treated in the previous parliament for instance. You know, very hard to get communications from the Greens back to the Prime Minister, for instance, not the current prime minister, I don't know whether there's been discussions there, she hasn't been there very long. But there's been some breakdown in

communication between the two houses of parliament because of the political differences that are in those two houses.

Now I think we've got to look a bit past that and try and establish a relationship. The Senate is probably going to be a hung parliament for a long time now and I think the House of Representatives has got to start to work with the Senate rather than work as two separate houses and play two separate battles or war games in those two houses and if we can help in negotiating in those sorts of positions and get some decency in that relationship, I think the parliament will work a lot better.

KERRY O'BRIEN: Okay, we've got just a few minutes left but I'm going to come to you now, Bob. I just wanted to...

BOB KATTER: Can I just...?

KERRY O'BRIEN: Yeah, I just wanted to ask you, Bob Katter, to move onto the next point but what do you regard as the deal makers or the deal breakers in terms of policy? What are the fundamental core policy issues that will decide your position, Bob Katter?

BOB KATTER: I'm much stronger and I think because my electorate has suffered so dramatically, north Queensland has suffered so terribly as a result of these policies, there's a freedom issue here. You know we're not allowed to fish much at all, we're not allowed to go camping or shooting or even boiling the billy.

We've got a terribly problem with the deadly flying foxes. They're going to kill many more people than Taipan snakes do in Australia. But I mean I just, these are issues that there's just a different paradigm needed. Australia, rural Australia is closing down. 90 per cent of the continent is occupied by not many more people than were here when Captain Cook arrived and I sent out a great photograph of Jack McEwen and two quotes here are very relevant. They said did the Country Party tail wag the Liberal dog? And he said yes, it was no complications about it.

And, secondly, he said this great treasure which is our country, this great treasure which is our country. I fear unless we occupy it and develop its resources that it will be taken off us. And the great Ted Theodore said exactly the same thing. That's the paradigm that we must be available to sell to the Australian people and we've given a God given opportunity here to be able to do that. We've worked very well together. I've been very, very impressed with Tony Windsor and with Rob Oakeshott. They're people of great integrity and very, great intellectual capacity as well.

KERRY O'BRIEN: Okay.

BOB KATTER: And if people are drawing analogies with the Country Party I think they're very valid. Those people characterised by great conviction and great intellectual capacity.

KERRY O'BRIEN: Okay, Rob Oakeshott, key policy issues that will be make or break for you?

ROB OAKESHOTT: Oh look I'll continue to lobby and advocate for all the local issues but at a national level what is of significance locally in an area such as mine and other areas is the process of the parliament and the process of public policy.

We spend a lot of time focusing on the politics and the policies of the major parties and it might sound a bit boring but if we can get this process issue right and we've got a unique opportunity over the next week or two to get the processes right, get the committees of the parliament back in play, get reports actually dealt with with an outcome from them, such as The Henry Tax Review, such as the Garnaut Report.

There were a lot of them in the last parliament, lots of time and effort and money. We all got locked up in that process, you and I together and I think generally were underwhelmed at the end by the actual delivery and the outcomes that didn't come from it.

So the work's being done at the front end. I would hope in the next parliament if we can get that process of turning work from eminent people in Australia into realities in public policy, then we've got a good thing going with this hung parliament issues.

KERRY O'BRIEN: Okay, Tony Windsor, just key policy issues for you?

TONY WINDSOR: Well health is always the one we don't have to poll anybody to find that out, water, broadband and how it relates to the delivery of health and education and business services long term. Absolutely critical in my view in terms of infrastructure for this century and the water and renewable energy debates, they're debates we really do need to happen and they're critical for different parts of regional Australia.

KERRY O'BRIEN: What about climate change? I don't want to get into a long debate about this but very simply climate change where there is a clear difference between the two major parties? Just very quickly amongst the three of you: Tony Windsor?

TONY WINDSOR: Well I don't think there is. I think Kevin Rudd used climate change as a political differentiation rather than a real policy initiative and I think that's partly responsible for what's happened now. But climate change, regrettably, is seen as carbon tax or emissions trading. There are a lot of things that can happen in a practical sense in terms of renewable energy and other things that have an impact on what we now call climate change and we should be doing those things.

KERRY O'BRIEN: Okay, very quickly Bob Katter, climate change?

BOB KATTER: Well, I didn't get my chance to talk on the two issues previously but let me just say this, you know when you talk about carbon, Tony is right. All they've operated on is these carbon credits. I mean all that's going to happen is the big corporations in Sydney are going to sell more securities that's all and they're going to go out and plant millions of trees and they'll all die, and that was our experience in north Queensland when they planted all the trees.

Direct action is the term being used by Tony Abbott and God bless him for doing that but the ALP Government, I mean they moved, they actually moved on a national energy grid and north Australia clean energy corridor is all about utilising a tiny little bit of our water, seven

per cent of our water resource and two per cent of our land in north Queensland. And I know it sounds incredible, we can support a population of 60 million people.

The Murray-Darling supports a population now of 20 million people. We've got that seven per cent is three times more water than the Murray-Darling, two per cent of that land. I mean ethanol of course delivers cheap petrol, clean petrol, overcomes your carbon problem and also we don't have to buy from overseas.

KERRY O'BRIEN: Okay, now I did want to ask you about the personalities of the two leaders and whether that's going to matter for you?

TONY WINDSOR (laughs): Pretty good, pretty good. I can smell it a mile away.

KERRY O'BRIEN: Bob Katter?

TONY WINDSOR: I haven't, I haven't smelt any tonight though.

KERRY O'BRIEN (laughs): Bob Katter? Your bull dust metre?

BOB KATTER: I really think that the characteristics of my three independent colleagues, if there was one thing that differentiated them out is that my bull dust metre registers zero with both of them and sometimes they can be a bit harsh and blunt but they're very, very low on that BS scale.

KERRY O'BRIEN: Rob Oakeshott, your metre?

ROB OAKESHOTT: My metre? I think we're going to be okay through this process and hopefully there's not too much bulldust from anyone. It's a national interest issue.

KERRY O'BRIEN: Well good luck with what lies ahead but Rob Oakeshott, Bob Katter...

BOB KATTER: Kerry, can I just say...?

KERRY O'BRIEN: You've got ten seconds.

BOB KATTER: The stability issue, right, stability issue, we're not talking about instability, we're talking about democracy and it's a new concept and really we've been able to force that onto the national agenda. Other countries have multi party systems; we've got a sort of type of that happening now in Australia. We're moving out of the 19th century into the whatever we're in, the 21st century.

KERRY O'BRIEN: And thanks finally again for that; Tony Windsor, Bob Katter, Rob Oakeshott, thank you.

TONY WINDSOR: Thanks Kerry.

ROB OAKESHOTT: Thanks Kerry.

TONY WINDSOR: Thank you.

