



**SENATOR THE HON PENNY WONG
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LEADER OF THE GOVERNMENT IN THE SENATE**

TRANSCRIPT

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TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW – RN DRIVE WITH JONATHAN GREEN

SUBJECT: ECONOMY, ED HUSIC

E & O E – PROOF ONLY

GREEN: Senator Penny Wong joins you now. Senator, good evening.

WONG: Good evening, good to be with you.

GREEN: Have you set the reset button on your relationship with business?

WONG: That's an interesting way to put it. My view is any government has to have a strong dialogue with business. Sometimes it's robust, sometimes we agree, sometimes we don't. But ultimately, the economic challenges the nation faces over the years ahead is one that will only be met if we work together – the Government, business, trade unions and the community. That's the approach we're taking.

GREEN: That's eminently sensible, though Wayne Swan lashing out at mining magnates – that can't have helped the relationship in the past?

WONG: I'm not going to get into commentary about the past. My focus is on the future and my focus is on what I've got to do today and tomorrow and in the days and weeks and years ahead to ensure we can make the right decisions as a Government and have the relationships across the community that enable Australia to meet these challenges.

GREEN: Sure. Did you get the sense today or have you had the sense in recent times that the Government under whichever prime minister has put business offside?

WONG: There are always robust discussions and, as I said, on some things we agree and on some things we don't. But I can only really speak for myself personally – I've always sought to have a dialogue with the business community and I will always continue to do so.

GREEN: What were the key points today? I presume the carbon tax raised its head?

WONG: Well I don't know that it's helpful to go through chapter and verse everything that was discussed.

GREEN: Well, give us a couple of chapters.

WONG: A couple of chapters... how about a blurb, does that work?

GREEN: That'll be fine.

WONG: I think that the key issue that we're all focused on is productivity and improving Australia's competitiveness. And I think that's an issue that the Business Council in particular have been pressing. Certainly an issue that the Government's been very focused on and our investments in infrastructure and the National Broadband Network and also our investment in schools; in education and in universities are all about making sure we can compete better in this, the Asian Century. So we certainly discussed those challenges and how we can work together.

GREEN: Productivity is a really interesting one because the figures – and people have made this argument for a couple of years now – the figures suggest that Australian productivity is in fact pretty good and yet it's a point of political contention and Kevin Rudd has raised that very quickly as something he wants to focus on. What's your view, are we underachieving?

WONG: You can always do better. And my view is whilst we've seen some improvement recently. And whilst it's true we have a productive economy, it's also true that that terms of trade will fall over time to come. It's also true that we've had the largest investment boom in Australia's history and we will shift from that to a different phase in terms of where our economy is going. And if we're going to make sure that we can have our children be as prosperous and competitive in tomorrow's world as Australia has been today than we're going to have to lift our competitiveness.

GREEN: That rhetoric has shifted interestingly, I think, with Kevin Rudd as PM. Wayne Swan was full of 'we're the envy of the world' but Kevin Rudd is now saying 'China – done, we've got to readjust'.

WONG: The Treasurer Chris Bowen stood up today after the Reserve Bank decision and he made the comment that Tony Abbott says we've got a budget emergency and if this is an emergency it's one most other developed economies would like to have. So the point is Australia comparatively – and compared to the rest of the world is doing very well.

That doesn't mean that you just sit back and hope. What you've got to do is say: well what are the things that we need to do today to ensure that the next generation of Australians has at least the same but better opportunities than we've had.

GREEN: Would an early election offer business some certainty?

WONG: I think that the issue with confidence to date has been far less about when an election is held and far more about the extraordinary irresponsibility of Tony Abbott in talking down the Australian economy. I've never seen a national leader be so willing to trash talk the economy as we've seen from Tony Abbott and Joe Hockey over the recent years.

GREEN: On another issue, just quickly, Senator. Your colleague Ed Husic – he’s faced a fair bit of abuse today online for swearing his ministerial oath of allegiance on the Koran. Now he’s been very generous in his response; he understands people have their concerns but it’s a natural part of democracy, he says. What’s your feeling on it?

WONG: Well that is very generous and I might go a little further. I think we are better than these comments from some of the fringe dwellers and others they represent. We are a more inclusive nation and we are a more respectful nation. And that’s where the majority of Australians are. We understand diversity is a part of who we are and we can be both strong and united in that. I thought it was actually very moving to see Ed sworn in and as the Governor-General said to him, it’s a great day for multiculturalism and that’s certainly how we felt.

GREEN: She spoke well, did the Governor-General at that time.

WONG: She did.

GREEN: Senator Wong, thanks for your time.

WONG: Good to speak with you Jonathan.

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