



TRANSCRIPT

SENATOR THE HON NICK SHERRY

Minister for Small Business
Minister Assisting on Deregulation
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ABC Radio 666 Canberra Breakfast Program

Interviewer: Ross Solly

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PROOF ONLY

SUBJECTS: Business leaders speaking out on government policy

ROSS SOLLY: Are Australian business leaders too frightened to speak out against Government policy because of fears of retribution? Well, that seems to be the feeling at a business leaders' conference yesterday. Several high profile business leaders including Michael Chaney from Woodside and National Australia Bank, Catherine Livingstone from Telstra, ANZ's John Morschel and Bob Every from Wesfarmers were lamenting thin skinned politicians, who they said were hell bent on exacting retribution on their critics. Well Senator Nick Sherry is a Minister, he is the Small Business Minister and he joins us this morning. Senator Sherry, good to have you on the program.

SENATOR SHERRY: Good morning and good morning to your listeners.

ROSS SOLLY: Are you thin skinned?

SENATOR SHERRY: No certainly not, in fact I just spent two days in Sydney talking to business, mainly small business and I've obviously been a minister for some years and would have significant contact with the broader business community and I don't think I'm thin skinned and I don't think any of the business community are shrinking violets when it comes to putting their views, very robustly, firmly and clearly.

ROSS SOLLY: But these are senior business leaders, people like Michael Chaney, they are respected business leaders - they wouldn't make this up would they?

SHERRY: Look, what I can say is in terms of this Government and the meetings we have, where they are held behind closed doors you do accept confidentiality, a private discussion is a private discussion. They are in my experience good, strong, sometimes robust discussions about issues of the importance of the day. It's common and frankly it has always been the case under this Government and previous governments.

ROSS SOLLY: Would you be concerned if a business leader was to walk out of one of those meetings feeling they had been intimidated?

SENATOR SHERRY: Well, as I've said the business community, the meetings I've had in my various ministerial positions with my responsibilities you have frank discussion, open discussion and if it's behind closed doors, you preserve and accept confidentiality and sometimes the discussions are robust, but I don't believe and accept in any way that even robust discussions would be seen as in any sense intimidatory.

ROSS SOLLY: Michael Chaney is quoted as saying this morning "I'm amazed how thin skinned some politicians are. I've found that some politicians are particularly spiteful about it and have gone around threatening people who have spoken out, which is pretty unfortunate," Michael Chaney says.

SENATOR SHERRY: Well frankly I think politicians, again on both sides of the political fence and ministers in particular, are very thick skinned. Generally you have an enormous workload as a minister, an enormous workload of meetings, constant travel, so again overwhelmingly I think ministers on both sides of politics are very thick skinned about issues of the day.

ROSS SOLLY: But again, these aren't concerns raised by un-named sources, these are high profile business leaders who obviously feel concerned enough about it to put their names to these concerns.

SENATOR SHERRY: Well, I noticed reading the report the concerns they expressed were in the general, there weren't specific instances given. But all I can say is, from the reaction I get from business, with my interaction with them, they actually regard me as a person of great civility, but all ministers listen and sometimes there are tough discussions I mean many in the business community I mean you are not dealing with shrinking violets, they have strong views and sometimes ministers will have strong views, you respect confidentiality and you do engage in rigorous discussions sometimes, that is part of policy debate.

ROSS SOLLY: It certainly isn't good for a healthy democratic process if you do have business leaders who are worried or frightened about voicing their concerns because they are worried the minister or the government will seek retribution.

SENATOR SHERRY: Well, again I have not met a business leader who has been worried about expressing their views to me as a minister. I can speak from experience and I would have met thousands of business leaders in the last three years in various ministerial capacities and going back 20 years in politics and I've never met a business leader that has been afraid to express their views to me and I think we have a very strong and robust democracy in Australia and we do have good public policy exchange.

ROSS SOLLY: Graham Kraehe from Brambles BlueScope says in the article that he is one person who does come out and says directly that "I have experienced retribution" and he says there wouldn't be too many business leaders who haven't. Again a highly respected business leader saying that he has been there and felt it.

SENATOR SHERRY: Well as I say, I can speak from my experience, my exchanges, they are robust sometimes, the men in business they put their views firmly in an articulate way, that has been part of the Australian political exchange and it is no different under this Government than previous governments and it is certainly no different in my experience when I'm the minister or anyone else has been the minister.

ROSS SOLLY: But Senator if these were new players on the market and hadn't had much experience in dealing with government you could probably accept that and say well they are not experienced with dealing with the hurly burly of government every day. They are not though; they are quite experienced business people who have had negotiations with previous government who have had cause to go in over some pretty feisty issues and to stand their ground.

SENATOR SHERRY: Yes and that is well understood and that has been my experience with the business community overwhelmingly where they articulate their views firmly and clearly in the interests of the companies or the businesses they represent and as a minister I think there is strong mutual respect but I don't accept ...

ROSS SOLLY: But it doesn't look like it though does it reading the article today? There doesn't look like there is much respect, it seems like they are pretty peeved at the treatment they are getting from your government.

SENATOR SHERRY: All I can relate from my personal experience, I don't accept that that is the response of business I deal with and I deal with a lot of businesses and I don't believe that is the response of other ministers. There will always be robust exchanges, but you have got to read beyond the headline I have to say and the article in pretty general terms goes into very broad but not specific commentary about alleged experience with ministers

under this Government and the previous government I would have to say. There will always be a robust exchange and that is good for our democracy.

INTERVIEWER: Do you believe though that your Government may have a problem if these types of business leaders are breaking their silence and talking out about these issues, you may have an image problem there somewhere.

SENATOR SHERRY: No I don't accept that. I certainly don't accept that. I think this is a Government with ministers who listen, who consult, you won't always agree – you won't always agree – there will be robust exchange from time to time, you respect confidences where meetings are private behind closed doors and that is the way this Government interact with business, always will and I think the way the previous government interacted with business.

INTERVIEWER: Senator Nick Sherry good to speak to you and I bet you are looking forward to your next meeting with business leaders, I love to be a fly on the wall in fact.

SENATOR SHERRY: Well I've got a meeting with two or three business leaders later this morning and we will have a good exchange and I'm sure we will finish with mutual respect and not necessarily agreement on everything.

INTERVIEWER: Senator Sherry good to speak to you this morning.

SENATOR SHERRY: Good morning and good morning to your listeners.