

MEET THE PRESS

18 AUGUST 2013

INTERVIEW WITH TONY ABBOTT

KATHRYN ROBINSON, PRESENTER: Hello, I'm Kathryn Robinson. Welcome to Meet the Press. Today – Tony Abbott's big-budget pitch to win over Australian families. The Coalition has released details of its paid parental leave scheme, that would pay women earning under \$150,000 a year their full salary for six months. New figures suggest the plan is on the money with voters. Opposition Leader Tony Abbott is our guest today. Also meeting the press – Professor Ian Frazer. He gave us the cervical cancer vaccine, now skin cancer prevention is firmly in his sights. We talk to Kenrick Monk, as the former swimmer prepares to chase Olympic gold in another sport. And Steve Waugh joins us on the couch – the cricket legend on how Australia can avoid Ashes annihilation. First this morning – every working woman will be entitled to six months leave on full pay, if the Coalition wins power next month. Under the scheme, to be offset by taxpayers and big business, super contributions will be made during the period, and fathers will also receive two weeks paid leave. An exclusive Galaxy poll reveals the plan is a winner, with 44% of voters backing it, compare would 36% who prefer Labor's existing policy. Opposition Leader Tony Abbott joins us from Melbourne. And joining me today is Network Ten's Paul Bongiorno, Malcolm Farr from news.com.au, and News Corp Australia's national opinion editor, Tory Maguire. Good morning to all of you.

PAUL BONGIORNO: Morning.

TORY MAGUIRE: Morning, Kath.

KATHRYN ROBINSON: Mr Abbott, I'll begin with you. \$6 billion – where's the money going to come from?

TONY ABBOTT: This scheme has been fully costed by the Parliamentary Budget Office, and it is fully funded, both by the levy on big business, and by offsetting savings, such as discontinuing the Government's existing, inadequate scheme.

KATHRYN ROBINSON: Are we in a position to be paying this sort of money, with the fiscal situation that we're in?

TONY ABBOTT: But this doesn't make the fiscal situation worse. It's fully funded. It's fully funded.

TORY MAGUIRE: Mr Abbott, what are the return-to-work requirements, so that we can prevent women who want to be stay-at-home mothers, who were working, effectively being able to take this money and run, at the end of their maternity leave?

TONY ABBOTT: The eligibility for our scheme is exactly the same as the eligibility for the Government's scheme. Yes, women aren't being forced to return to work, but that's the same as with the Government's scheme.

TORY MAGUIRE: It's been touted as a scheme to raise the fertility rate, and also increase productivity, and women's participation in the workforce. What are your expectations? You've said that you hope that there will be an increase in the fertility rate, and that, you know, you hope that women – it will encourage more women to return to the workforce. What does your modelling say about the exact impact of this \$6 billion scheme?

TONY ABBOTT: Well there are lots of things which can be modelled by governments, but they can't really be modelled in the same way by oppositions, because we don't have the same access to modelling that governments do have. But it has been fully costed by the Parliamentary Budget Office, and it is fully funded by offsets and by the levy on big business. Essentially, what we are trying to do is put in place a policy which is good for families, which is good for our economy, and is good for families, because the reality is that the modern Australian family invariably needs more than one income to get by. And this means that you can have more kids and keep paying the mortgage.

MALCOLM FARR: Mr Abbott, the acknowledged generosity of your scheme is largely benefiting your own people, isn't it? Can I just run through some figures? In North Sydney, the Federal seat of North Sydney, the median income for families with two full-time workers is \$2,614 a week. But if you go to Hume, let's say, which is a Liberal seat at the moment, that same figure is just \$1,335. Go to Greenway – it's \$1,739. These figures indicate that the women in, say Hume – sorry, in North Sydney, Warringah, are earning a lot more money than their sisters in Hume and in Greenway. So isn't most of the money, or most of the generosity, going to end up back in your seats?

TONY ABBOTT: Malcolm, two points – first of all, this isn't a generous scheme, it's a fair scheme. It's a fair scheme. Why should public servants get their wage, when they're on paid parental leave, and not shop assistants and factory workers? So we are providing the same wage justice for everyone. That's what we're doing. The other point I want to make is that every working mum will be better off under our scheme. If you're on the minimum award wage, you'll be \$5,000 better off. If you're on average wages for women, you'll be \$21,000 better off. But it's better for everyone.

MALCOLM FARR: What is your ultimate classification of this? Because you've said it's an equity issue. You've said that it's a social-engineering issue, to encourage successful women to have families. You've said it's a workplace law issue. What exactly is it?

TONY ABBOTT: Well, I'm not sure that I've used the term "social engineering", but it's good for families, and it's good for our economy. It's not just good social policy. It's not just good family policy. It's good economic policy as well, Malcolm, because if you want a stronger economy – as all the economists will say – you've got to address the "three Ps" – population, participation, and productivity. This is good for population, it certainly keeps people in the workforce, and it keeps people in the prime of life in the workforce. So it's good for all three.

PAUL BONGIORNO: But Mr Abbott, to bring this policy in, haven't you had to junk basic Liberal political principles? You're raising a tax – I thought only Labor

governments did that – and you're doing what private enterprise is already doing, and you're getting the taxpayers to fund it.

TONY ABBOTT: But at the moment, only about 50% of working women get access to paid parental leave. Under our scheme, 100% of women in the workforce will get access to paid parental leave. That's why it is an important question of workplace justice. So if you want to do the right thing by women in the workforce, if you want to do the right thing by the modern Australian family, this is plainly the way to go. And the overall tax burden will not be increased on any business. 199 out of 200 companies will have their taxes cut, and they'll have a paid parental leave scheme for all of their staff.

PAUL BONGIORNO: But that's a pea-and-thimble trick, isn't it? I mean, the fact is, the ones that have to pay, the 3,000 companies that have to pay – by the way, Coles and Woolworths, two of the biggest – there's fears that this may even feed into grocery prices – they're obviously, in money terms, worse off than the companies that are getting your tax cut.

TONY ABBOTT: Well, let's take Coles and Woolies.

PAUL BONGIORNO: Mm hm.

TONY ABBOTT: Coles and Woolies will have a – will not have a greater tax burden in the future than now. At the moment, they're paying 30% company tax, and that's Labor's proposal – to pay 30% company tax. Under us, they'll pay 28.5% company tax. Sure, there'll be the levy, but their overall tax burden won't increase. And in the case of Coles and Woolies, they will no longer need to pay their own in-house paid parental leave schemes, because it'll be looked after by the Family Assistance Office. So Coles and Woolies will be better off under our scheme.

TORY MAGUIRE: Mr Abbott, this is certainly at the very centre of your appeal to women voters, and you talked about looking after women, and you mentioned specifically, before, women in manufacturing and retail. There is – figures show that there are more women working – a higher percentage of women are in casual and insecure work than men in Australia. And there is evidence that women in insecure and casual work are more susceptible to, and more at risk of, sexual harassment and exploitation. This particular policy will affect women who want to have children, but there's a very large sector of women out there who are not looked after at the moment. What are you going to do to protect them?

TONY ABBOTT: Well, that's exactly right. And this means that women who are working only a day a week will get paid parental leave. Women who are self-employed or contractors will get paid parental leave. So that's why this is a policy which is designed to address all of those income insecurity issues.

KATHRYN ROBINSON: So this PPL of yours covers part-time workers, covers casual workers?

TONY ABBOTT: Absolutely.

KATHRYN ROBINSON: Okay.

TONY ABBOTT: Absolutely right.

KATHRYN ROBINSON: Okay.

TONY ABBOTT: Absolutely right.

KATHRYN ROBINSON: Okay. Alright. Well, we need to take a break right now. Do stay with us. We'll have more with Opposition Leader Tony Abbott after the break.

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KATHRYN ROBINSON, PRESENTER: Welcome back to Meet the Press. You can share your thoughts with us on our Facebook page, or by using the Twitter hashtag #mtp10. More now with Opposition Leader Tony Abbott, coming to us from Melbourne. Mr Abbott, will there be a GST under a government that you lead?

TONY ABBOTT: Ah, the GST does not change. Full stop. End of story.

KATHRYN ROBINSON: But it's in your tax review.

TONY ABBOTT: Look, I can't stop people from putting things forward to a comprehensive tax review, but the GST is not going to change. Full stop. End of story. For it to change, all the states and territories would have to agree – including the Labor states. So every time Mr Rudd starts to hyperventilate about the GST going up, presumably he knows something about what the Labor states would like.

KATHRYN ROBINSON: But it's not entirely right to say it would only change if the states agreed, because it's a Federal Parliament act, you could make an amendment. It's not a constitutional issue, so you could change it on the House.

TONY ABBOTT: It's also subject to intergovernmental agreements between the Commonwealth and the states, and those intergovernmental agreements would have a very significant impact, and that's why it is impossible to change the GST without all the states and territories agreeing.

PAUL BONGIORNO: Mr Abbott, going to the issue of marriage equality, or same-sex marriage – the states of NSW and Tasmania have got advice that they can legalise same-sex marriage. The ACT Attorney-General says that they intend to act on that advice. Now, would an Abbott government do what a Howard government did on another matter, and override the Australian Capital Territory if it attempted to legalise same-sex marriage?

TONY ABBOTT: Paul, I'm not going to go into hypotheticals. Look, we dealt with this whole question of same-sex marriage, of so-called "gay marriage", in the

Parliament that we've just lived through. And it was a fairly decisive vote against any change.

PAUL BONGIORNO: So that would indicate that the will is not there federally, as you point out. So that will would be there to override another jurisdiction doing it, like the ACT?

TONY ABBOTT: Well let's wait and see. I mean, you've put a hypothetical to me, and at the moment I've got an election to win, not hypotheticals to deal with.

PAUL BONGIORNO: Do you still think same-sex marriage is a fad?

TONY ABBOTT: Well that's not what I said, Paul. I was having a –

PAUL BONGIORNO: Well, you said fashion – you're not going to change on a fashion.

TONY ABBOTT: I was having a general chat about the conservative mindset with John Laws. I accept –

PAUL BONGIORNO: A meeting of minds there!

TONY ABBOTT: I accept that same-sex marriage, Paul, is a very important issue to many people. It's not the only issue, though, and the priorities of any incoming Coalition government will be to build a stronger economy, so everyone can get ahead, scrap the carbon tax, get the Budget back under control, build the roads of the 21st century, and stop the boats. They're our priorities.

MALCOLM FARR: Mr Abbott, a couple of questions, if I could, on industry and the future of Australian industry. Your 1.5% tax cut that you've proposed – you said that will create jobs, and help corporations survive. The logic would be that a 5% tax cut, corporate tax cut, would create more jobs, and help more industries survive. Are you thinking of something in that order – of a 25% rate as opposed to a 30% rate?

TONY ABBOTT: Well, I'd love to get all tax rates down. I'd love to get the company tax rate down further, I'd love to get the personal tax rate down further. The Coalition believes in lower, simpler, fairer taxes. It's in our DNA. But we've got to get the Budgetary position under control, and the trouble is that this government has got a Budget emergency on its hands. Just before the election was called, we had the economic statement confirmed by the pre-election fiscal outlook statement of Treasury, that since May, under this Government, the Budget has been haemorrhaging to the tune of \$3 billion every single week. So we've got to sort out all of these issues before we can then get into further reductions in tax.

MALCOLM FARR: Okay. Now, another issue – the Holden workers voted for a 3-year freeze on pay. Can you see that being repeated in other industry areas – not just the car-making area, but other industries which might be struggling to survive?

TONY ABBOTT: My understanding, Malcolm, is that the Holden workers voted to save their jobs. And where people's jobs are at risk – are under threat – it's a sensible thing to vote in favour of keeping your job.

MALCOLM FARR: So you can see it perhaps repeated in other industry areas, not just car-making?

TONY ABBOTT: It's obviously entirely a matter for the workers, under our rules. So there have always been provisions under Australia's workplace relations system for workers to vote, in a difficult situation, to change their pay and conditions.

TORY MAGUIRE: Mr Abbott, the Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, has told News Corp's Sunday papers that he will penalise families who don't vaccinate their children, Family Tax Benefits worth up to \$2,000 a year. Is that something that you would consider?

TONY ABBOTT: Well Tory, this was actually an initiative of the former Coalition government under Michael Wooldridge. You might remember in the mid-90s, under Labor governments, vaccination rates fell down to about 50%. Michael Wooldridge made certain family benefits conditional on families getting their kids vaccinated. Vaccination rates went back up over 90% – great achievement of a Coalition government. Now they're dropping back again. I think it's important to do what we reasonably can to get them up again. I support, in broad terms, doing what's necessary to get the rates up again. We'll look at the specific announcement today, but I'm not going to be too critical. I just wish that this government hadn't presided over a reduction in vaccination rate.

TORY MAGUIRE: So you'll look at it, but can't commit to it?

TONY ABBOTT: We are disposed to support reasonable measures that will get vaccination rates up, because it's very important for our public health that we get very high levels of vaccination.

KATHRYN ROBINSON: Mr Abbott, finally, come September you may be in government. Can you tell me how your frontbench might look, because according to the Ministers of State Act 1952, you're only allowed 47 frontbench ministers and parliamentary secretaries – sorry, 42. And you'll have 47, so unless the electorate does it for you, you may have to sack five of your ministers. Do you know who they might be?

TONY ABBOTT: Well, I'm not getting ahead of myself. I'm not getting ahead of myself, and –

PAUL BONGIORNO: That's a problem for another day.

TONY ABBOTT: I'm not taking anything for granted, exactly right. Look, I've got a very good frontbench. I've got a very, very good frontbench. There's one member of my frontbench, Senator Gary Humphries, who won't be in the next Parliament, I regret to say, but that's a bridge that I'll cross, depending upon the electors' will, on September the 7th.

KATHRYN ROBINSON: Okay. Some tough decisions ahead, nonetheless. Mr Abbott, we thank you very much for your time today on Meet the Press.

TONY ABBOTT: Thank you so much.

KATHRYN ROBINSON: Well after the break, our panel dissects the announcements, gaffes, highs and lows of the week's election campaign. Do stay with us.