



Aula em áudio 08

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MARK COLVIN: The Federal Government's ended the parliamentary week with more confused messages about key elements of its budget.

This morning the Prime Minister ruled out collecting unpaid student loans from deceased estates.

But the Treasurer and the Education Minister had both appeared in favour of the idea.

Tony Abbott continues to insist that he won't squib the hard decisions but he's made no headway in overcoming the opposition to those measures.

Political correspondent Louise Yaxley reports.

LOUISE YAXLEY: Backbenchers continue to speak out fairly openly about their concerns that the budget hasn't been sold well, but Mr Abbott is holding the line.

TONY ABBOTT: This government will take the hard decisions necessary to put our country back on track. We won't squib them. That's what people elected us to do.

(Hear, hear)

LOUISE YAXLEY: But those backbenchers with some quibbles about the budget would not have been pleased with senior Cabinet ministers and the way they handled the issue of dead students having their higher education debt taken out of their estate.

The Education Minister Christopher Pyne floated it yesterday. The Treasurer Joe Hockey appeared to back that idea on Channel Nine this morning.

JOE HOCKEY: It shouldn't be different to any other loan. It's only against the estate of the individual. That's the same as any other loan, any other mortgage that we have in our lives.

LOUISE YAXLEY: The Prime Minister quashed it on morning radio and again in Question Time.

CHRIS BOWEN: Does the Prime Minister stand by his Treasurer who just this morning said that student loans should be collected after death and that they, and I quote, "shouldn't be treated any differently to any other loan".

TONY ABBOTT: I don't assume for a second that the shadow treasurer has accurately characterised the comments of the Treasurer, but let me... but let me, but let me answer the question.

The Government has no plans, no plans whatsoever to collect student debts from dead people. What we do certainly intend to do...

SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE: The Member for Watson will desist.

TONY ABBOTT: What we do certainly intend to do is to make stronger efforts to collect student debts from living people because that is what the taxpayers of this country have a right to expect.

LOUISE YAXLEY: One of the other most contentious issues in the budget is the new Medicare co-payment, which looks set to fail in the Senate.

But callers to the Human Services Department's Medicare line are already being played a recorded message about the \$7 charge.

EXCERPT FROM RECORDED MEDICARE MESSAGE: A patient contribution of \$7 will be introduced and this may be charged by the provider.

LOUISE YAXLEY: The Opposition Leader, Bill Shorten, pounced on that fact.

BILL SHORTEN: Is this Prime Minister so arrogant that his Government is telling people that they will have to pay his GP tax when it hasn't even passed the Parliament? When will the Prime Minister finally wake up to himself and realise that Australians don't want your rotten GP tax? (Hear, hear)

TONY ABBOTT: Well Madam Speaker it is the Government's intention that there will be a GP co-payment from the middle of 2015. This is the Government's intention and it's also the Government's intention that we will put the legislation into the Parliament and we expect that after appropriate consideration the Parliament will understand that Labor's debt and deficit disaster has to be brought under control.

LOUISE YAXLEY: Labor's Tony Burke pointed out that that answer is at odds with the Government's plan to spend the co-payment money on a health research fund rather than on paying off debt.

On the recording itself, while Labor says its premature, Mr Abbott noted the previous government had done the same thing to ensure the public had warning about changes to payments such as childcare.

And shortly after Mr Abbott asserting that Parliament would eventually pass the co-payment, the Palmer United Party's Clive Palmer again said there's no debt problem and attacked the co-payment.

CLIVE PALMER: As the world knows the average debt in the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) for advanced economies is 73 per cent of GDP (gross domestic product). According to the OECD and the Parliamentary Library Australia's debt is 12.1 per cent of GDP.

How can the Government justify repressive measures that is introduced in the budget, including the co-payment for doctor visits that pensioners, young people and single mothers can't afford to pay, and the abandonment of young people under 30 years of age, why doesn't the Australian Government tell the people the truth?

LOUISE YAXLEY: Mr Abbott's standing his ground, repeatedly pointing out that the former PM Bob Hawke introduced a co-payment and that veteran Labor frontbencher Jenny Macklin was an adviser on health at the time.

But he doesn't point out that that co-payment lasted only a short time before the then Labor government dropped it.

MARK COLVIN: Louise Yaxley.