

POST-CABINET PRESS CONFERENCE: MONDAY, 30 JULY 2018

Acting PM: Kia ora. Good afternoon. Today, Cabinet discussed the worrying spike in the number of people dying from synthetic cannabis. There have been 40 to 45 suspected synthetic cannabis - related deaths since June last year. Cabinet reviewed the actions that the agencies are currently taking, and the Ministers of Health, Justice, Police, and Customs will now be seeking coordinated advice from their various agencies on how to best urgently reduce the size and the supply of this drug, with the aim of turning this spike around and getting this dangerous drug out of our communities.

We also signed off on a recruitment process for the chief of the staff of the army, navy and air force, and this will be run by the State Services Commission. It's unusual to have the heads of each branch to be chosen all at the same time, or in the same year, over the last decade. Given the recent appointment of a new Chief of Defence Force, this represents something of a changing of the guard, so to speak, and a new era in our defence forces. By the end of the year, it will be an entirely new leadership across our defence forces to lead this Government's new defence strategy and manoeuvre us forward to an increasingly complex geopolitical defence environment.

This week, I'll attend Parliament's question time on Tuesday and Wednesday, and then on Wednesday evening depart for Singapore to attend the ASEAN regional forum and the East Asia Summit ministerial meeting as Minister of Foreign Affairs. While in Singapore, I'll attend a number of formal bilateral meetings and informal discussions as well, with counterparts. We are likely to discuss a wide range of Asia-Pacific security and prosperity topics, and I'll be stressing the importance of the rules-based international order in enhancing peace and prosperity in Asia-Pacific. I can also confirm that as a result of my travel to the ASEAN forum, the Prime Minister will resume her duties at the time the plane takes off, midnight, Wednesday night.

The Prime Minister will be based in Auckland this Thursday and Friday, as usual. She will travel to Wellington on Saturday with her partner and baby and set up her family in the Prime Minister's residence at Premier House. She will be based out of Wellington for the following two weeks of the House's sitting period and undertaking the bulk of her duties locally with day travel.

As such, today will be my last post-Cabinet press conference as Acting Prime Minister, and for that reason a number of you have asked for my observations about this tenure. First, the coalition Government has remained stable and fully functional in the last six weeks, and our poll information has the governing parties rising further in the polls. This demonstrates the successful operation of an MMP Government and proves that we are a stable and constructive group in Government, regardless of what some early naysayers may have rather unwisely said.

Second, this Government has continued to work in the interests of New Zealand, and in the last six weeks we have seen the Families Package and winter energy payments start, the purchase decision of the Defence Force P-8 maritime patrol planes made, the Reserve Bank monetary policy bill tabled, the start of an inquiry into the appointment of the police deputy commissioner, and the ongoing management of the industrial dispute with nurses. This is an impressive record of achievement for any Government in a six-week period, and highlights the breadth of issues we are dealing with and moving the country in the right direction on.

On that final point, regarding nurses, on behalf of Cabinet can I welcome the effective implementation accord, signed today, between the NZ Nurses Organisation and our DHBs. It's an important step for DHBs to deliver on commitments about staffing and resources so that nurses, midwives, and healthcare assistants can provide the care required in this country. It's also a further recognition from this Government of the importance and professionalism of our nursing force around New Zealand.

Any questions?

Media: This urgent action on synthetic cannabis; could the Government have acted sooner?

Acting PM: I don't think we can deny the fact that we've sought to address issues like this over a long period of time and not been nearly as successful as we'd like to have been, but, that being the case, it's no use looking back now and blaming anyone. We've got to get on, and, with the greatest unction and urgency, begin to provide some serious answers on this issue.

Media: In the past, the Government's maintained that the review into mental health and addiction would cover it off and be enough, but are you suggesting that the Government now needs to go further?

Acting PM: No, I'm suggesting that we have to look at what we've been talking about in the past and reviewing in the past, and, with a multiplicity of agencies, set out to provide some serious solutions, and as fast as possible.

Media: Does that include elements of Simeon Brown's private member's bill to have tougher enforcement for people who deal in synthetic cannabis?

Acting PM: Well, you know, it could, if you wanted to be inclusive, but being inclusive at the long-term damage of a wise policy, where the police say that that would not work, then maybe we should look at the big picture rather than taking a party-parochial position on these issues.

Media: Could there be a review specifically into synthetic cannabis use in New Zealand?

Acting PM: Look, we've got a group of people and Ministers working on this seriously urgently. As I said last week, we'd go to Cabinet today and we'd put in the serious yards to, hopefully as fast as possible, find tangible, meaningful policies that do work.

Media: Who's going to be answering questions on Thursday in the House, on behalf of the Prime Minister?

Acting PM: Well, not Jacinda, because she's not usually there on a Thursday. Not me; I'm sorry, you'll have to go without me on Thursday. I can't answer that question, because I don't know what the full Cabinet attendance list looks like.

Media: Will it likely be Kelvin Davis?

Acting PM: I just said I didn't know what the full Cabinet attendance list looked like, so why would you hear a question that you know I can't answer?

Media: How quickly will Cabinet be getting advice back on the synthetic cannabis issue?

Acting PM: I can't answer with exactitude that, but it'll be as fast as we possibly and credibly can.

Media: Would you look at animal testing as part of that?

Acting PM: I can't answer that question at the moment either, because we haven't got around to saying how we're going to do that. You've got to bear in mind that there are places where responsibility might fall, and it may be others who are on the market with these products who'll have to themselves provide a certificate of safety to the community.

Media: Has this issue around synthetic cannabis made you rethink your stance on real cannabis—whether it should be, perhaps, legalised or access to other—

Acting PM: You haven't been listening. For a long period of time, I've campaigned personally on putting this issue to the public of this country. And we're going to have a referendum on that issue before too long. I'm not being critical of you; you might have been overseas, but I've been saying that for decades.

Media: But you personally—

Acting PM: Well, I don't think any of us should contaminate the public's free and open debate on this issue by stating our position, and then having people line up on a critical issue like this on the basis of party politics. That would be a serious mistake.

Media: Well, would you campaign on either side if the facts swayed you a certain way?

Acting PM: No, I'm going to be campaigning to ensure the public gets all the facts so that they can make up their minds, but I'd say, again: it would not be wise if we turned this issue into a party positioning debate without any regards to where we go in the future.

Media: Will you making any representations to the Israeli Government over the arrest of trade unionist Mike Treen, who was on the peace flotilla in the Gaza, going towards the Gaza?

Acting PM: We just got that information today and we're in consultation with our people in Ankara as to what we can next best do.

Media: Did Cabinet get any advice today on what might be behind the cause of this recent synthetic cannabis spike in deaths?

Acting PM: Well, we're getting some mixed information, of course, because we were told by experts that out of the previous five years there'd only been two, yet we've got reports of—media instances of reporting that there were more. But whatever it is, 40 to 45 is a serious spike.

Media: With respect to your international meetings, who will you be meeting from the US and China, particularly?

Acting PM: Well, their Foreign Ministers, because it's a Foreign Ministers' meeting at the East Asia Summit, but also the ASEAN meeting will have 32 countries there, five of whom are special guests—Norway; Turkey; Switzerland; the G20 chair this year, Argentina; and one other that just temporarily has passed my mind—oh, Iran will also be there.

Media: Police reported that—around this time last year, they reported that 20 people may have died from synthetic drug use. Why is the Government only realising this is a problem now?

Acting PM: No, it's not only realising it. If you look back, there has been a lot of work on this in the past, but I think we have to be honest—we haven't come up with the kind of solutions which have seen a turn around and a victory against the people who are peddling this stuff and the number of deaths that are involved.

Media: This Government seems to have failed in terms of a targeted response to synthetic drug use, though.

Acting PM: Look, we're inheriting a situation—and I'm going over the last year, and we haven't even been in Government for 10 months, so I'm not trying to say that we as a group of parliamentarians are all blameless. All I'm saying is we should be focusing on getting a solution rather than the politics.

Media: Would you be open to tougher penalties for synthetic cannabis dealers?

Acting PM: Well, the Simeon Brown bill has that in it, but the reports I've seen from the police says that that won't work. What we've got to do is ensure, first of all, that users know what they're taking, that they're not taking these awful risks on the basis of a product that's dangerous to them. So it has many aspects.

Media: Do you think the focus needs to be on cutting off supply or—

Acting PM: I think TV3's had enough questions. We've got to be balanced and fair here. You asked a question at the back there.

Media: Yeah, do you have any other thoughts on, you know, on possible solutions to synthetic cannabis?

Acting PM: Well, yes I have. But I can't foreclose on a report and an inquiry or research that's going on now, with great urgency, by giving my views. I'd rather make those views known to the various multi-Government agencies that are dealing with it.

Media: With regards to this safe staffing accord with the nurses, as far as you're concerned does this stop any chance of further strikes?

Acting PM: That's the responsibility of the nurses, to be gleaned by a vote that they're taking at this very time, so I can't say what the outcome will be other than to say we've done the best we possibly could in the circumstances, and I hope that they understand that.

Media: Would you expect them to realise that and not strike again?

Acting PM: Well, again, I'm not going to help the process by interfering with it. So it's over to them. We've not been unmindful. The thing they've had frozen for almost a decade has been addressed by us in our first Budget, and don't forget, that was after only six months. So I hope that reasonableness will prevail.

Media: What lessons do you think the teachers should take from the course of the nurses' industrial action and its resolution?

Acting PM: The lesson should be that we're in a partnership together, building a new compact between Government and the social services of this country—that we can be enormously successful if everybody's responsible, but if we take the narrow point of view that we will somehow prevail upon a Government thinking that we come from a position of weakness, that would be a terrible mistake. We are resolved to help every group fairly, within the limit of the availability of money, with a Government that's fiscally prudent and careful.

Media: Could the teachers conclude fairly that industrial action may be what enabled the nurses to get the Government's and the DHBs' attention, and proceed likewise?

Acting PM: That would be a mistake.

Media: John Howard, over the weekend, seemed to question the legitimacy of New Zealand's election outcomes, calling it unjust and unfair. What do you make of those comments?

Acting PM: Well, he used to be called "Honest John"—he had a departure from his character when he said that. And, second, I mean, we don't really get very enthusiastic when people come over from overseas and start telling us how to run our country and how to run our democracy, which, I might add, has some very fine features to it: superior to that of Australia, with greater transparency to that of Australia. And making those sorts of comments begs the question: why are you blaming the Russians for the American campaign in 2016, if foreign interference is not a matter of importance? We're a sovereign nation, and to say that's unjust and unfair without being able to particularise and itemise that is rather a lazy, idle comment.

Media: Mr Peters, can you just clarify: did you link or compare Australia's involvement, interfering in New Zealand politics, and John Howard, with alleged Russian interference with the US?

Acting PM: No, I'm saying everybody's dancing up and down about that, and yet someone who is a four-time Prime Minister from Australia is here criticising the make-up of this Government, without being able to itemise, particularise with any exactitude, what on earth he's talking about. I mean, the idea is if you can't do the maths, that's maybe why you're there.

Media: Did you perhaps over-step when you spoke on the Australian flag last week; was that not interfering in another Government's—

Acting PM: No, look very carefully: in 1954 they interfered with our flag—get it? We had the flag in 2001/2002, and five decades later they adopt almost the same flag. I'm not

making a big issue of it; all I'm saying is what's obvious. And it's obvious to a whole lot of Australians and New Zealanders and the rest of the world, as well.

Media: It's not just this flag issue, though, Mr Peters. I mean, you say that you don't like it when people come here to criticise the Government, but you've been criticising the Australian Government for some time.

Acting PM: No, the flag doesn't belong to the Australian Government; it belongs to the Australian people. We are mature enough as a population—sometimes we rib each other and sometimes we tease each other; that's part of our great relationship. But a bit of plain talk—it's what the Aussies are famous for; they like it.

Media: Did you say, "Just a little bit of teasing"?

Acting PM: Pardon?

Media: Was what you were saying about the flag just a little bit of teasing?

Acting PM: No, it was candour.

Media: On the subject of Australia, do you have a view on the implications of the 9-Fairfax merger for the New Zealand media?

Acting PM: Well, I've got to be ultra-careful, but I did hear Paul Keating's comment, and I was rather alarmed as to what it meant for New Zealand if that was to happen. Did you hear his comments?

Media: I did—I can't recall—

Acting PM: Well, then, if I'm to believe Mr Keating, we should be slightly worried.

Media: So do you agree with Mr Keating about Channel 9?

Acting PM: No, I'm just saying—see, this is a case of having respect for Australian politicians.

Media: A respect for Keating, but not Howard?

Acting PM: No, no. I've got a lot of respect for John Howard. I know John Howard. I've been to rugby with him and his wife. All I'm saying is this is 2018 and somehow—I mean, it's clear to me, with John Howard and John Key, that the National Party's favourite film is *Back to the Future*.

Media: A couple of weeks ago, you said that you were going to talk to Baron Waqa from Nauru about running a successful Pacific Islands Forum and what the country might need to do for that. Have you had that conversation?

Acting PM: Not yet.

Media: Speaking of dealing with numbers and exactitude, tell us more about this poll you were talking about at the beginning of your final post-Cabinet—

Acting PM: Well, we all have inside polls, and I've told you what your poll's worth and a few others over the years have demonstrated them, because a month out from the election, you've sometimes been out by four or five times. I'm just saying we like polling information somewhat more accurate than that—that dredges down and finds out what people will do when they go to the polling booth, and it's been enormously encouraging: the spread between the governing parties and the alternative is much higher than we recently thought it could be.

Media: Are these the UMR polls you're talking about?

Acting PM: I'm not telling you where these polls are. If you want to pay for them, then I'll tell you what they say, but you don't want to pay for them—

Media: Well, if you want us to report—

Acting PM: No, you want us to believe yours, which are a work in fiction, and some of those pollsters should be up on the fair trading legislation.

Media: Is the Labour Party above the National Party in those polls?

Acting PM: Most definitely, yes.

Media: Why do you trust those polls and no one else's?

Acting PM: Well, as someone who's got a political science degree and been in policy a long time, I know when polling's been done properly and when it's not.

Media: How are we meant to report you talking about these polls if you won't tell us exactly what the polls show?

Acting PM: Well, we'll see in time whether what you're saying now is right—where some people out there that you're actually commenting on saying that, for example, the Labour Party is below 29 percent—whether that sort of rubbish would get the currency of light in your medium.

Media: So you don't want us to report with exactitude on this issue, but you do on the other?

Acting PM: No, I didn't make that point; I just said that we were very encouraged, after six weeks of abiding stability, that the public are still going with us in greater numbers than before.

Media: You mentioned at the beginning of your remarks, when you were reflecting on your time as Acting Prime Minister, and I was wondering: have you got one moment or one area in particular that kind of stands out above the rest of your six weeks in power?

Acting PM: Well, the downside, if you're asking me about the hits and misses—the misses was when I had to read so much comment from journalists about the disaster that was about to befall them, and I suppose the hits are the things, for example, like the nurses strike, which I believe we've made a lot of progress on, and all the other items which we've announced, not the least of which, of course, is the first tranche of the Reserve Bank legislation changes, which are coming, which is a serious and huge issue for this country.

Media: Mr Peters, you've never discussed your succession plans publicly. At what point does that issue have to become live for the New Zealand First Party?

Acting PM: Ha! Well, I don't know why on earth that would be an issue today. Usually, we decide succession plans as we come towards an election, not as you're leaving one—unless, of course, you've lost.

Media: Towards the end of next year, perhaps?

Acting PM: Ah, I've never thought about it.

Media: Do you think that whiskey should be sipped or swilled?

Acting PM: Well, why would you ask that question?

Media: Um, because you are known as a connoisseur of sorts—someone has suggested that you are a whiskey swiller.

Acting PM: Who was that?

Media: Peter Goodfellow.

Acting PM: Yes, and I've made a challenge to him, last night, and some of you may have seen it, on Q+A—have you asked him whether he can repeat his comments again? Because I wish one of you would have the courage to do that, and we'll see whether he does or not.

Media: Why do you need him to repeat them?

Acting PM: One thing that's not going to happen here is somebody like him think he's going to have a free hit at Winston Peters.

Media: Do you think his comments were defamatory?

Acting PM: Pardon?

Media: Do you think his comments were defamatory?

Acting PM: No, I'm not talking about defamatory.

Media: Why do you want him to repeat them?

Acting PM: Because he did it the first time at a conference, probably emboldened by the fact that he's still there, and it's astonishing to me that he's still the president of the National Party, and if he opens his mouth I'll tell you why. Any other questions?

Media: You're a former National MP. Do you think he should be rolled as president?

Acting PM: No, no. If he wants to repeat his comment one more time, I'll tell you why he shouldn't be the president of the National Party. All right?

Media: What's so offensive about the comments that he made?

Acting PM: Well, I suggest that you go and look at them very carefully again.

Media: Are you threatening Peter Goodfellow.

conclusion of press conference