

## **POST-CABINET PRESS CONFERENCE: MONDAY, 17 SEPTEMBER 2018**

**PM:** Kia ora. Good afternoon, everyone. Today, Cabinet signed off on five international military deployments, which I want to take the time to run you through now. You will recall that in June, just before I went on maternity leave, Cabinet deferred our decision on these deployments until 30 September. We did so in order to make a number of related decisions over deployments in the Middle East at one time. We've now considered all of that advice and made the following decisions.

First, we will extend our military training deployment in Iraq until June 2019. That aligns with the end of the current programme of training. The number will reduce from 143 to 121 personnel, however, from November of this year. New Zealand is firmly committed to international efforts to fight ISIS. While there have been significant gains on the ground in recent years, it is still clear that ISIS remains a threat and further support is required to help the Iraqi security forces ensure ISIS cannot reassert itself, and building capacity of the Iraqi forces is one way in which we can do that.

I do want to note, though: we have also decided that the Government will review the deployment again in early 2019. That's to assess New Zealand's options for contributing to stability in Iraq beyond June 2019. Iraq's training needs will likely have evolved further by June, and the Government will evaluate our ongoing commitment again at that point.

Secondly, we will extend the deployment of the New Zealand Defence Force personnel to the Afghanistan National Army Officer Academy through to September 2019. However, we will conduct a strategic reassessment of that contribution in 2019. The New Zealand Defence Force has made a significant contribution to peace and stability in Afghanistan since 2001. After nearly 20 years, this Government thinks it's time to assess the question of New Zealand's longer-term presence there, including alternative military and civilian contributions.

In addition to these deployments, the Government has decided to renew deployments to three peacekeeping missions in the Middle East and Africa: the United Nations mission in South Sudan, the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization in the Golan Heights and Lebanon, and the Multinational Force and Observers mission in the Sinai Peninsula, Egypt.

New Zealand has up to 28 New Zealand Defence Force personnel to the Multinational Force and Observers mission in the Sinai Peninsula, Egypt for two years, until 30 September 2020. We first joined this mission as a founding member in 1982, and we have had around 2,000 NZDF personnel who have served there since its inception, including the Minister of Defence, I believe.

We'll extend the deployment of up to eight unarmed military observers to the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization by two years, until September 2020. UNTSO was established in 1948 as the first ever UN peacekeeping mission, and New Zealand has contributed since 1954, making it our longest standing peacekeeping deployment.

And, finally, we'll extend the mandate for three NZDF personnel deploying to leadership roles in the United Nations mission in South Sudan for 20 months until July 2020, and you'll remember, of course, that that is the mission that David Shearer has a leadership role in. These three roles comprise two military liaison officers based in regional centres and an officer in mission headquarters.

I want to note that the Government takes very seriously any decisions to send Defence Force personnel into situations where there are risks to their safety and security—very, very seriously. Cabinet gave a huge amount of consideration to these decisions. We've also signalled to partners the decisions that we have made.

In the cases of Iraq and Afghanistan, the Government will be using the coming year to consider all of our options, and that does include withdrawal.

This is both a busy and historic week, in which our country will celebrate 125 years of women's suffrage. Today, as well, the last two charter schools were given approval to integrate with the State sector. This means all 12 charter schools have been approved as either integrated or special character schools.

Tonight, I'll be speaking at the launch of *Stardust and Substance*, Stephen Levine's book looking back on the 2017 election. Tomorrow, I'm speaking briefly at an event in the Grand Hall celebrating women's suffrage, and in particular the role of Pasifika women, including those who are honoured in the Queen's Birthday awards.

Minister Iain Lees-Galloway will be introducing the Remuneration Authority (Members of Parliament) Remuneration Amendment Bill tomorrow. That, of course, as you'll remember is the legislation to freeze MPs' pay for a year. Then tomorrow night, I'll be editing the *New Zealand Herald* suffrage edition. My theme for that edition is that within the ordinary or seemingly ordinary achievements of New Zealand women sits the extraordinary. I, of course, will not be editing any political stories for that edition, sadly.

Wednesday is Suffrage Day. I'm attending a celebration event in Auckland in the morning and will be participating in events during the day at Parliament, including a special debate, which will be co-hosted with the acting women's Minister, Eugenie Sage.

On Thursday, I'll be releasing the full itinerary for my trip to the United Nations General Assembly. My focus while in New York will be supporting the multilateral systems that are incredibly important for New Zealand; also issues around climate change, which I note features prominently in some of the side events and agenda within the UN leaders' week; also the rights of women and children, advancing our trade agenda, and, of course, as always, strengthening relationships with our partners. I've set aside much of the day on Friday for pre-UNGA media interviews, as you will all know.

Thursday: I can also confirm that the independent Tax Working Group's interim report will be published by the group. Today was the first opportunity for Cabinet to discuss the interim report, and I'm advised that the group's secretariat will be sending around the details later today, inviting you to a media briefing on Thursday. That actually brings our busy week to a close. Happy to take questions.

**Media:** When National extended deployment in Iraq for 18 months, Labour called it mission creep. Is this mission creep?

**PM:** No, this is fulfilling our obligations. We already have a commitment to a current training programme that extends out into the middle of 2019. We're fulfilling that commitment. But we're also signalling that we anticipate New Zealand's contribution changing in the future.

**Media:** Why is it mission creep when National does it but it's not mission creep when a Labour-led Government does it?

**PM:** Since that time, a commitment has been made. We serve alongside Australian forces. If we were to withdraw now, that would be seen as not completing the commitment that has been made by that existing deployment. We'll see it through to June 2019, but we will be looking at New Zealand's contribution in the future. My expectation is that it will change.

**Media:** What's the mandate for that extended period? Will those troops be based at Taji, strictly behind the wire?

**PM:** Yes, indeed. It stays exactly as it is now, because, as I've said, as it is now it's a joint deployment with Australia where we are training and it is strictly non-combat and it will remain that way.

**Media:** And do some of those troops extend beyond the wire to go to Besmaya? Is that still the case?

**PM:** At the moment, what we're talking about here is the Taji deployment. That is the 143, and, as I say, that is also reducing down to 121.

**Media:** Why are you reducing it to 121?

**PM:** What we've been advised by Defence is that that is the current capacity that's required. We no longer require the full 143.

**Media:** Will you be considering civilian assistance to help the rebuild?

**PM:** Yes. We're considering all options, but my expectation is that needs are changing and will change. We've played different roles in Iraq before, but I wouldn't expect it to remain exactly as it is today.

**Media:** Has the SAS got a role in Iraq?

**PM:** Sorry?

**Media:** Has the SAS got a role in Iraq?

**PM:** Today, I'm only talking about this deployment.

**Media:** You said you'd briefed our partners. What was their response to the decision made by the Government?

**PM:** Ah, my understanding is that they appreciated being advised of our decision. I personally communicated the decision to Prime Minister Morrison. That was because, of course, in Australia it is a partnership, that capacity-building programme in Iraq, so it was important that I communicate that directly.

**Media:** Had they made any submissions on what they would like to have seen you do, prior to the decision?

**PM:** No. No. Certainly not directly to me. With that arrangement, it's simply important that we communicate our decisions to one another, given it is a joint deployment.

**Media:** Can you elaborate further on what the change of role in the future might look like?

**PM:** Yeah, well of course, you know, in Iraq we have trained a significant number of security forces. My estimates that I've been given are up to 37,000, but now it's a question of whether or not in the future it might move to, instead of training cadets, to actually training trainers. And, of course, that would require a much smaller deployment. It might be a reconstruction role; it may be a humanitarian role. But it is a dynamic environment. Our view is, though, that it's unlikely that it will stay exactly as it is now, but Cabinet is allowing itself the space to reconsider that next year.

**Media:** Is it going to be a reduction, do you think—

**PM:** If you were moving to a training of trainers, then I would expect that it likely would be. But, again, I do want to give Cabinet the ability early in 2019, before June arrives on our doorstep, to consider all of those options.

**Media:** In Afghanistan, it sounds like—would it be a total withdrawal from Afghanistan?

**PM:** All options are on the table for Afghanistan. We'll look at all options. We'll have been there 20 years, by that time. Again, the NATO-endorsed Afghan security force roadmap takes us out to 2020. And, of course, we're contributing. We have this current deployment—11 personnel in that role. What we need to consider is making sure that we fulfil our commitments whilst also acknowledging that we have been there for some time. The contribution by New Zealand has been significant. So we will be looking at all options at that point.

**Media:** When would you like to see all New Zealand troops out of Iraq?

**PM:** Again, I'm not pre-empting the decision that Cabinet will make, but we do see ourselves potentially playing a different role beyond June 2019.

**Media:** Have the Green Party advised that they support these decisions?

**PM:** The Greens have been really consistent in their view on both of these conflicts. My understanding is that they would prefer us not to have had a presence there in the first place in an ongoing presence. We've certainly kept them abreast of these discussions and talked with them about these decisions, but they maintain their party position.

**Media:** Have you talked to National, as well, about it?

**PM:** No, I have not. If they would like, I'm happy for them to receive a briefing.

**Media:** How much thought, if any, was given to diverting troops perhaps into more of a peacekeeping role, or even into the Pacific—?

**PM:** Yeah, it's a good question, and that's something that we have discussed, because, as you'll see, from the fact that we've put these out together, we have tried to have a bit more of a strategic oversight of our contribution generally, and beyond the Middle East. One of the issues that we have, of course, is that with some of these—the UN-mandated peacekeeping missions—there is a significant number in French-speaking Africa. We don't always have the personnel trained in the language skills required, for instance, for those deployments. I think it is fair to say that we have always taken a quality approach, sometimes over quantity. But we also get requests for individual skillsets, which we often consider favourably. But at the moment, I think we're using our skills where they're best suited.

**Media:** Prime Minister, why is the investigation, or the inquiry, into Thompson and Clark not looking at the Police—

**PM:** Yeah, it's a good question. I've actually raised that question directly, via my office, with SSC. It's simply a mandate question. The State Services Commission, because of the independence of the Police, just don't have the ability to extend their inquiry into the Police. What I'd like to see, though, is whatever findings the SSC make—for those to be shared directly with the Police.

**Media:** What do you think of the State Services Commission's abilities to do due diligence, given the Derek Handley case? I mean, it's clear that most of the industry didn't think he'd be appropriate for the role.

**PM:** Look, actually, ultimately, that decision was a decision made by the Minister. Yes, a process was handed over to Minister Chris Hipkins to ensure that the process hadn't been inappropriately handled as a result of Minister Curran having met with him at some point, but, ultimately, the decision over the role was one for Minister Woods. She made the determination that she wanted to take a second look at the role itself. So that, in the end, was a separate decision.

**Media:** Why were there not findings delivered by Minister Hipkins?

**PM:** Sorry, what was that?

**Media:** Why was there not findings delivered by Minister Hipkins? It kind of skipped straight to Megan Woods' office.

**PM:** Minister Woods made the decision about the future of the role.

**Media:** When do you expect the decision on—

**PM:** I'll let—sorry, Barry. I'll let Henry finish his Thompson Clark questions.

**Media:** Given the allegation about Thompson and Clark acting on behalf of police and placed tracking devices on cars, used paid informants, who developed relationships with animal rights activists who were quite young, who posed no real major threat to New Zealand—doesn't that tell you that the inquiry needs to be extended?

**PM:** Yeah, and I do understand police are looking into the use of Thompson Clark themselves, and that SSC is liaising with them on the work that they're doing. But I've been advised that they, again, don't have the ability to take that direct role because of the independence of the police. But I would hope that whatever findings SSC makes will be shared across the public service.

**Media:** When do you expect a decision on Meka Whaitiri?

**PM:** Originally, Ministerial Services gave me an indication of two to three weeks, so I would hope that would be soon. I haven't been given a precise date.

**Media:** Who requested that we extend our deployment in Iraq?

**PM:** Who requested? Oh, we don't act on requests. Iraq—again, I don't see that, necessarily, as an extension of the deployment, given the expectation of that training and capacity-building programme out to June 2019; I see it as a fulfilment of a joint commitment.

**Media:** How much of a threat is the Islamic State to New Zealand?

**PM:** Some of the work that's being done to counter Islamic State, of course, is well beyond New Zealand's soil, but an acknowledgement, I think, of the international community that the destabilization that they cause affects all of us, and that there is potential for New Zealanders, wherever they are in the globe, to be caught in the crossfire of some of the activity by Islamic State. But we all have a responsibility to contribute to countering terrorism and countering any forces which act to destabilize the international order.

**Media:** When you came into this role, did you agree with your predecessor Andrew Little when he said we will—you know, if Labour gets into power, we will pull out troops from Iraq?

**PM:** My view is we always needed to take a critical eye, and that our position on any of these deployments always needed to come from a point of New Zealand's values and our independent foreign policy. My view is that here we've struck a balance of making sure we're fulfilling our international obligations and commitments whilst also taking the opportunity to review, in the future, what our contribution looks like, and doing it independently.

**Media:** Has Cabinet noted the Housing New Zealand report into their meth standards—has that gone through Cabinet yet?

**PM:** Yes—yes, it has noted it.

**Media:** Do you have an expectation around a public release of that?

**PM:** Imminently.

**Media:** Your speech yesterday—did it deliver everything that you hoped for?

**PM:** Yes—well, I would hope it would, given I wrote it. Yes. Keeping in mind, I saw yesterday as much more of a presentation than a speech. You know, that's why it wasn't full of anecdote. It was very much verbalising what we have discussed as a Government. A bit unusual, of course, for a speech, in that sense, to release machinery of government decisions in the form of Cabinet papers, but I wanted to demonstrate that, actually, we are working quite differently in the way we use our Cabinet committees. That won't be of interest to anyone. I'm sure Colin James, if he was sitting here, would be quite excited by that revelation, but that, to me, was an opportunity to showcase both the way that we're working but also that we are working to a plan. Detail sits within that. Some of it's policy announcements we might make in the future; some of it's still to be worked through, particularly the measures.

**Media:** Did you consider making a significant policy announcement as part of that yesterday?

**PM:** No, no. I think that, ultimately, then, would have been an event just around a single policy announcement. What I wanted to give a sense of is that we are actually trying to change the way that we operate as a Government. The structure when I came in—it struck me as very demand-driven; silo Cabinet committees considering individual papers. If you've got a challenge like child poverty, how is it that you're really making sure that every single Minister who's involved in improving outcomes for kids carries some responsibility for that? This way of restructuring the way that we work means that I'm not the only one driving initiatives, and that we're all keeping a check on the work that we're doing and whether or not we're hitting those targets.

**Media:** Have you asked your Ministers to stop using the term "Labour-led Government"?

**PM:** I've never used that phrase—I don't believe I've used that phrase. I tend not to, and I'd expect them to refer to us as a coalition Government or a Government with a coalition partner and a confidence and supply partner. That's the truth of our arrangement.

**Media:** Why did it change on your website? It used to say "Labour-led Government" on the Labour website. Now it says "coalition".

**PM:** I can't say that I've noticed it or that it's ever been raised with me. I don't see that as being significant.

**Media:** Even though you're a Labour Prime Minister you don't consider—

**PM:** Oh, I am a Labour Prime Minister.

**Media:** But you don't consider this Government a Labour-led Government.

**PM:** I am a Labour Prime Minister, I'm leader of the Labour Party, and I'm in a coalition Government.

**Media:** But you don't consider this Government led by Labour—

**PM:** If you're questioning whether or not because there was a change on a website I'm ceding power, the answer is no.

**Media:** I'm wondering why you don't think the vastly bigger party in this Government isn't the leader of—

**PM:** No, the point that I'm making is I don't see that as of particular importance or relevant. It's a word on a website. There's no doubt, I don't think, that I'm the Prime Minister and leading this Government.

**Media:** What's the difference between Cabinet and the Cabinet priorities committee in terms of resolving the issues that are going to come through?

**PM:** I knew there'd be someone who'd be interested. Thank you for your question. The Cabinet priorities committee has the same standing as other Cabinet committees, and therefore nothing in the Cabinet priorities committee is done and dusted until it's gone through Cabinet.

**Media:** But they look as though they're going to duplicate each other. I mean, why can't the Cabinet committees just refer all of their decisions straight through to Cabinet?

**PM:** Because there is an ongoing monitoring role that occurs. Actually, some of the facilitation of what you saw yesterday happened through that committee. It's a subset. It means that at every single Cabinet we're not having to go over some of that documentation, the work that was being done on the individual work plans. We operate like that in a number of areas. We might give sight to Cabinet if we want to make sure that they've had a full discussion as a Cabinet, but ultimately, in terms of machinery, CPC keeps things rolling over.

**Media:** You said yesterday that you wanted to have a transformational Government and you talked about changing Cabinet committees, getting rid of demand-led silo stuff. How can you really change things when you adopt the same debt target as the previous Government?

**PM:** You're nothing if not consistent, Bernard. I would say that that's only one element. It's what we do with the difference that we've made in our Government spending. We have a different debt track than the last Government, and we've been criticised for that. We've pushed out our debt track because we've wanted to invest in KiwiBuild, because we wanted to restart our superannuation contribution, because, for instance, we didn't believe that we could run the debt track the last Government had while still having people who are homeless. So we did make a different decision. So in that sense, I don't think we're comparable to the last Government at all.

**Media:** Just on the Victoria University name change. Would you be comfortable with the Minister of Education signing off on a name change considering the amount of public disapproval that's going around?

**PM:** Yeah, and I have indeed had this issue raised with me. I think it's been a hot topic—something people care about quite deeply, particularly those who have attended. I was there for a year. I don't know that that gives me any more right than anyone else to have an opinion. Ultimately, that's a decision for the Minister, but I know that what he'll be factoring in will include the perspective of those who are past and present members or students or faculty members. He'll be considering everything.

**Media:** Is it a good use of a million dollars, though?

**PM:** That's not my decision.

**Media:** Prime Minister, on the Crown Minerals Act, normally there would be a block offer under way by now. Has Cabinet yet considered advice on the legislative changes that are required?

**PM:** I believe the Minister will be making statements on that imminently.

**Media:** Did Cabinet discuss today anything further on the Crown/Māori relations portfolio?

**PM:** Statements on that and announcements on that are pretty imminent as well.

**Media:** As in this week?

**PM:** As in imminent.

**Media:** What's the view of Kevin Short and the other Defence Force chiefs on what we should be doing in Iraq and Afghanistan?

**PM:** If you're asking me to release the advice of officials, what we will be releasing is the Cabinet papers that led to this decision. They will, as you would expect, have some redaction around them for security reasons, but we will be releasing those Cabinet papers. But I won't go through the individual recommendations of individual departments. Ultimately, this was a Cabinet decision based on our view of New Zealand's independent foreign policy and our values.

**Media:** Prime Minister, you said the Cabinet noted the Tax Working Group's interim report today. Did Cabinet consider a response to its findings?

**PM:** We ultimately, you'll find, will simply welcome the debate that will follow. This is a report that will cause some discussion, but we are allowing that discussion to have before launching into a space of recommendations. In fact, the report, you'll find, isn't focused on recommendations; this is an interim report.

**Media:** So after the final report, will you use that to create—

**PM:** Yeah, I think you'll see that the time line suggests that it's after the final report that we then look at how we'll respond as a Government.

**Media:** And you reserve the right to create a tax policy that actually goes against some of the findings or recommendations in either of those two reports?

**PM:** Ultimately, we're waiting for this report to be publicly available, for the public to have their say, for a final report to be received, and then we'll be making our response.

**Media:** There's been a suggestion that they've stayed away from the capital gains tax; they see that as too political—

**PM:** You won't have to wait too long to see what they've suggested.

**Media:** Isn't the whole point of a working group to suggest things for politicians to do?

**PM:** I think—and you'll find that there are plenty of suggestions, or at least areas of investigation, that have been identified by this group. They, of course, have acknowledged that from the beginning, we said whatever you do, we're not interested in anything that looks at the family home or land, indeed, under the family home. So those were some of the parameters that we gave. Otherwise, we're letting the working group do their job.

**Media:** Do you see any significance in the comments from Michael Cullen yesterday in the *Sunday Star Times*, where he said that, generally speaking, a capital gains tax didn't affect house values?

**PM:** Look, again, I don't want to get too ahead of myself in any commentary by the chair of the working group. I want to allow him to speak for himself, as I'm sure he will on Thursday. I otherwise contextually found it a fascinating piece.

**Media:** What information do you have on the investigation into the burglary of Anne-Marie Brady's house?

**PM:** I haven't been briefed, other than the historic situation that's arisen with Anne-Marie Brady. I haven't been briefed on any more current situation. I'm sorry, Sam.

**Media:** You said—you just said earlier this year I would certainly—

**PM:** Oh, you're talking about the historic case? I thought perhaps you might be referring to something more recent.

**Media:** No, it's the historic case. You said you'd want to be informed if there was evidence of a targeted action—

**PM:** Yes, and I have not received any further advice on that—but, to be fair, nor have I sought it. But, as it were, nothing has since been raised with me to demonstrate that it perhaps was or wasn't.

**Media:** Did the Greens consult with you before releasing their own priorities on Saturday ahead of your speech on Sunday?

**PM:** Individual parties remain individual parties, and, of course, will undertake party activities. So they are absolutely free to do that.

**Media:** Was it an annoyance at all?

**PM:** No. No, not at all. As I said in the speech, we are still three parties who have a joint platform of work. Right, everyone, I'll make this the last one.

**Media:** Is the police investigation into the burglary of Anne-Marie Brady—is that something that is a factor in what you'd expect to discuss, or when you're going to go to China?

**PM:** Look, when it comes to issues—more generally, speaking more generally around the underlying suggestion here of foreign interference, I've been very, very cautious around always stipulating that New Zealand needs to be live to general issues of interference. And that's something that we keep a watching brief on—ensuring that our regulatory and our legislative environment is responsive to whatever issues may arise. Again, I haven't had any specific briefing to suggest anything untoward in that particular situation. That's not to say the police haven't found something themselves, but I have not been briefed on it.

**Media:** So you haven't been briefed by others apart from the police, including the SIS?

**PM:** No, no. Right, thank you.

**conclusion of press conference**