

POST-CABINET PRESS CONFERENCE: MONDAY, 18 NOVEMBER 2019

FTR 16:02:09

PM: Good afternoon, everyone. This week, the Prince of Wales and the Duchess of Cornwall are visiting New Zealand from Tuesday to Saturday. It's been four years since we last welcomed them both. I will meet with Prince Charles on Tuesday in Auckland and will join both the Duchess and Prince on a series of visits in Christchurch on Friday. Wednesday is Universal Children's Day. I will host an event on the Parliament lawn, weather permitting, by the new playground, which was instigated by Speaker Trevor Mallard. I will then be in the House in the afternoon. On Thursday, I will be in Auckland in the morning to give a speech at the Trans-Tasman Business Circle breakfast on the future of work and will attend a police graduation at the Royal New Zealand Police College in Porirua in the afternoon.

I also want to let you know that, unfortunately, there will be no post-Cab next Monday, 25 November, as I will be recovering from having an impacted wisdom tooth extracted over the weekend, and I apologise: I know that's more detail than any of you would have liked and more than I'd like to share, but I didn't want to start any speculation.

It's been a couple of big weeks for education. The deadline for decile 1 to 7 schools to opt in to the Government's donation policy, which gives \$150 per student to save families from that expense, closed last week. The policy is an opportunity for schools to get additional Government funding in lieu of requesting parental donations. I'm pleased to announce that almost 90 percent of all eligible schools have opted in. That means, I understand, that families of more than 416,000 students are better off next year, with schools receiving a boost in funding and no longer relying on whether families will pay donations or not.

The donation solution is part of the Government's plan to make education more affordable for students and families. It follows on from making the first year of post-secondary education free, the first two years of industry training free, and scrapping fees for NCEA and scholarship exams.

I'll now hand over to the Minister of Education to give you more details, and we'll be happy to take questions after.

Hon Chris Hipkins: As you will be aware, this year's Budget allocated additional funding so that schools could receive an extra \$150 per student if they agreed not to ask parents for donations. We know that it can be very difficult for some parents to afford to pay those donations and we know that they often feel under a lot of pressure to make a financial contribution towards their kids' schooling, despite the fact that the law says that their schooling should be free. So I'm very pleased that of the 1,745 decile 1 to 7 schools that are eligible, 1,563 of those schools have opted in to the scheme. There are a few schools, a handful of schools, who have asked for a little bit of extra time, for good reason, to consider that, and I expect those numbers may go up a little bit more in the next couple of days.

A breakdown by region and by decile has been circulated. The total cost is estimated to be \$62,500,000; that's the extra funding that's going to be going into schools nationwide next year as a result of this. Schools, of course, will have the freedom and flexibility to choose how they spend that extra money—whether it be sporting equipment, technology, school trips, something that's specific to their local school community, they'll have the opportunity to decide how they use that funding. Very, very positive feedback from schools and parents, in particular, means that it's another step towards making sure that cost is not a barrier to participation in schooling.

Just a couple of quick things, it is an annual opt-in process, so for the schools who did not opt in this year they'll have the opportunity to reconsider that next year if they wish to. We are also putting aside a little bit of extra funding for more financial advisers for schools. We

understand that there have been a lot of queries and questions about financial matters, and that's put a lot of pressure on the ministry, so we've allocated a little bit of additional funding to provide schools with better advice.

I've had a few questions already on what the \$150 per student was based on. It was based on the fact that, on average, decile 1 to 7 schools receive less than \$150 per student in donations, and, in fact, the lower down the decile you go, the lower it gets; some schools receiving maybe \$30 or \$40 per student on average, recognising that a lot of parents, even if the school's been asking for a donation—a lot of parents have not been able to make that.

Media: Given the high number of sign-ups, has this helped your thinking on whether to extend the scheme to be high decile schools?

Hipkins: Oh, look, that's something we were really clear about. We would, you know, consider that in future years, so this is decile 1 to 7 because we know, on average, decile 1 to 7 schools received less than \$150 per student, on average. For decile 8, 9, and 10 schools, they tend to receive, on average, more than \$150 per student in parental donations. But we've always been clear: it's part of an ongoing work programme of work around reviewing school funding. We're also doing work, as you'll be aware, in the equity funding space and changing the decile funding system, so we will be keeping it under continual review, and we've certainly never said that we won't do something in the future for decile 8, 9, and 10 schools.

Media: But there were some schools who said that accepting this would actually mean that they were going to have less cash to spend. What do you say to those schools? And obviously some of them have signed up because of pressure, presumably, from parents. But not everyone's happy, are they, with the level of funding.

Hipkins: What I have seen is evidence that schools have had good, honest conversations with their local communities about whether to opt into the scheme or not, and particularly up around that decile 6 and 7 bracket, some schools have chosen not to opt into the scheme after their parent community made it clear to them that they were happy for them not to opt into the scheme. So that's one of the reasons we made it voluntary. What it has, of course, highlighted, though, is that some of the things that schools have been charging fees for, they should not have been charging fees for. So I think it's made schools a bit more aware of what the rules are now.

Media: Are there schools that will have less to spend on extras as a result of opting into this system?

Hipkins: Look, I'm not convinced that that's going to be the case. As I said, we did a pretty careful analysis of what schools are getting, on average, in terms of donations under the old scheme, before we introduced this. I'm pretty confident that certainly those lower decile schools will all be significantly better off. When you get into the decile 6 and 7 schools—that's at the top of the range of schools that are eligible at the moment—it is more of a line call for some of those schools.

Media: What are the rules now, then, for schools—what can they say to parents about what money they can expect or not expect in terms of fund-raising or doing things outside, you know, the themes, as it were?

Hipkins: Look, schools have always been allowed to fund-raise, and, of course, we encourage them to go out there and fund-raise and they'll continue to do that and they'll continue to be allowed to do that. This is about basically going out to parents and asking for direct cash contributions in a way that many parents have felt is not necessarily voluntary, even though technically it is voluntary. But they can still ask for a donation towards the cost of a school camp, because that was an area where I think—you know, it's clear that, actually, parents expect to make a contribution towards the cost of an overnight, away-from-home stay. There are still some areas where schools can ask for a charge—for example, if you're doing a technology-related subject where you have a take-home product at the end, the school can recoup the cost of the materials for that.

Media: Doesn't it still leave the potential, though, for schools to still solicit money, just putting a different name on it in, you know, whatever guise it might have, and as has happened under the old system, you know, that parents will continue to be asked for cash alongside the Government-funded donations?

Hipkins: I think what this has done is it's made schools a lot more aware, and parent communities a lot more aware, of what schools can and can't charge for, and, as a result, I think there'll be significant parental pressure if schools opt into the scheme and then continue to ask them for, you know, fees or donations where parents have become a lot more aware they don't actually have to pay those.

Media: What's the enforcement mechanism—if the school pledges this, but then it does ask for a donation, what happens to them?

Hipkins: Look, I think in the early part of this we will be working on the basis that there is good will on both sides to comply with the rules. Obviously, we'll become a little stricter as we go along if schools are wilfully, you know, taking the money and then not following the rules that they basically signed up for, and ultimately we can recoup the money back from them if they are wilfully not following the rules.

Media: Prime Minister, is it appropriate for the Deputy Prime Minister to call journalists psychos?

PM: Look, I'll just see whether or not—any more questions on that. I believe there was one more related education question that I was willing to subject the Minister to. No, that's no longer the case?

Media: Can we just quickly ask about the med students scam—

PM: Yeah, feel free to go ahead, and then I'll relieve the Minister of Education.

Media: —going on. What do you make of that?

Hipkins: Look, obviously I expect all the universities to have very high standards when it comes to ensuring that their academic criteria are being met and that their students are behaving in a way that's academically rigorous and ethical. I am very concerned about what's happened at Otago. I've made it very clear several weeks ago when this first came to light that I expect them to take a very strict stance in investigating the matter and getting to the bottom of it. Ultimately it's a matter for the university and for the Medical Council as to whether or not, you know, all of the rules have been followed and whether or not their standards have been met. But I've been in regular communication, through my office and through the Tertiary Education Commission, with the University of Otago. I'm satisfied that they're taking a very rigorous approach to dealing with the matter.

Media: A lot of students say this was a widespread practice and that the university was, effectively, turning a blind eye. Is that your understanding, and if it is, how serious would that be?

Hipkins: Look, my understanding is that the university are having a very good look at whether or not this sort of thing has been going on in the past. My understanding also is that the University of Auckland, who are the other medical school in the country, have also been having a good close look to make sure that this isn't a systemic issue. I'll reserve judgment until I see the results of those.

Media: The punishment for these students seems to be delayed graduations. Is that strict enough, do you think, or severe enough?

Hipkins: Look, as I said, ultimately it's a matter for the university and for the Medical Council. They set their own standards, in both respects, so it's important that they are confident that their standards are being met. Obviously, that raises some ethical questions, which I'm sure that they'll be looking very closely at.

PM: OK? All right, then.

Media: Is it appropriate for the Deputy Prime Minister to call journalists psychos?

PM: Look, my preference before commenting on a statement being made by another member of Parliament or indeed a Minister would be to see the transcript for myself before I pass comment on claims that have been made.

Media: It has been online for most of the day.

PM: I've been in Cabinet for a good chunk of the day, but feel free to ask me tomorrow when I've had a chance to look at the context in which those statements were made, or if indeed they were made.

Media: Have you sought any assurances that any conflicts of interest with New Zealand Future Forest Products have been managed appropriately?

PM: It's, of course, a requirement as part of the PGF that all applications go through a rigorous process, and of course it is an expectation both of the Cabinet guidelines but, of course, processes relating to applications that if anyone has a conflict, then decision making sits with other Ministers, and those are rigorously applied.

Media: Are you happy with a company that has such close links to New Zealand First applying for Government funding?

PM: Again, protocols are in place for funding decisions made by the Provincial Growth Fund to manage any potential conflicts of interest.

Media: Did Mr Peters declare any conflict to you?

PM: I'm advised that this been managed appropriately within the guidelines that are set for the Provincial Growth Fund, and they exist, of course, to manage any conflict of interest that may exist with a funding application.

Media: Winston Peters specifically—did he declare any conflict with you?

PM: It has been dealt with appropriately, and that is the advice I've received.

Media: Were you aware of the company before last week?

PM: Of course, if a decision has been made that implicates anyone that has a close relationship with someone making an application, then that decision making should be made by someone else, and, again, as I say, I'm advised that this has been dealt with appropriately.

Media: So were you aware of the company before last week?

PM: In terms of managing the conflict of interest, yes.

Media: So have you talked to Winston Peters about this company?

PM: Again, as I've said, this has been dealt with appropriately. Of course, if anyone has a relationship or is closely involved with anyone who makes an application, they should not and are not involved with the decision-making process. That applies for all PGF applications. That is the expectation that has been set.

Media: Just back on Winston Peters calling journalists psychos, is there any context under which that's OK?

PM: It's not language I would use.

Media: When did you become aware of the issues around New Zealand firing ranges in Afghanistan?

PM: I became aware of it—I'd need to check for an approximate date, but it would have been from, my recollection, about mid last year, but this has been an ongoing situation that certainly pre-dates this Government. My expectation, which I have made clear, again, to the Defence Force today, is that we need to expedite the process of clearing these firing ranges. You'll already be aware a standard was set for those who have been in the theatre

of war in Afghanistan to clear their firing ranges. The New Zealand Defence Force did that up to the standard that applied at the time. Since then, those standards changed. That predated this Government. My expectation is that we speed up the clearance of those firing ranges. In fact, today I've set my expectation again with the Defence Force that as soon as the snow and the weather permits, which I'm told will be roughly in April of next year, the work to clear those firing ranges should begin in earnest.

Media: Why hadn't that happened already—I mean, you were aware in the middle of last year?

PM: And from that point, from last year, NZDF worked with the Afghanistan directorate of mine action clearance to establish a memorandum of arrangement to set out the actions and who would partake in the different clearance roles that needed to take place. So they are now close to signing that arrangement. They then need to go into a tender process. They've already identified a project manager. A project charter is in its final stages. A request for tender then goes out, because there are certain accredited groups who are able to do mine clearance in Afghanistan. Then, we've already established then through an MOA, which has to be signed off, that the Afghanistan directorate comes in and ticks off that the work is being done.

So that is what has happened in the intervening period since becoming aware of this issue. Again, in my view, it has taken too long. This is an issue that the last Government was aware of as well. It has taken too long, and I've set a very clear expectation: as soon as the Defence Force are able to contract and tender someone to be in there, undertaking this clearance, that should happen.

Media: Who did you speak to about that—defence?

PM: I spoke with representatives from the Defence Force. My expectation is also that they'll be speaking to media in a bit more detail around the activity and their plan for clearance of the site over the next few hours, so I understand that they'll be making themselves available.

Media: Was it the Chief of Defence?

PM: Yes.

Media: The UN says it would be right to compensate the families. Do you think so?

PM: It wasn't the head of defence forces; it was chief of army. Sorry?

Media: The UN says that families affected should be compensated. What do you think?

PM: Again, these are lines of questions that, because of the technical detail in which I was given my briefing today, I would have some preference that you're also able to put those directly to Defence Force. But their explanation to me, of course, is that across a range of firing ranges, the unexploded munitions that are still found there are from a range of different defence forces. Now, my very clear view is that, of course, any loss of life for any unexploded ordnance is an absolute tragedy—it is—regardless of who is responsible for those ordnance. What we need to make sure is that New Zealand takes responsibility for the clearance of our firing ranges, and that is something that I've sought from Defence Force—that we expedite the clearance of those ranges.

Media: So New Zealand takes responsibility for the clearance of the ranges but not necessarily the deaths that were linked to the ranges?

PM: Again, it cannot be concluded. I'm told that we just simply cannot conclude the munitions that were directly responsible for those deaths, which, again, are—regardless of who does bear responsibility for the unexploded ordnance, any loss of life due to the remnants of war is tragic, and we do need to take responsibility for clearing our firing ranges, and I would, again, highlight that 200-plus tonnes worth of unexploded munitions have been cleared by our Defence Force, and a number of those will date back as far as the 1980s for what has been a war that has been ongoing for decades.

Media: It's not uncommon for ISAF forces to provide compensation for families when there's not truly true proof of civilian death and attribution though. Do you not—

PM: Again, I feel like I've answered that question, but you're free to ask that of the Defence Force also.

Media: Why are we hearing about this only now, if it's been known about for so long?

PM: Hearing?

Media: About these ranges—about the issues around them.

PM: As I've said, as soon as I became aware of these issues, work has been under way, and my expectation is that it be sped up. Of course, some of the deaths that have been reported—the tragic deaths, of course—dated back over a range of time. That does not diminish New Zealand's responsibility to clear its own firing ranges, regardless of the fact that the standards have changed since that first clearance occurred.

Media: Is there any issue of transparency here? I mean, Human Rights Watch has brought this up with the Defence Force earlier. Should they have fronted to the public and talked about this?

PM: A question for the New Zealand Defence Force.

Media: In a fiscal policy document, the Greens called the Budget Responsibility Rules arbitrary and indicated that they would bring up to scrap any support of them before next year's election. Where is the Labour Party at when it comes to the Budget Responsibility Rules?

PM: Our position has not changed.

Media: So you're still going to commit to them?

PM: Of course, you've already seen finance Minister Grant Robertson move towards a range on the recommendation—of course, on Treasury—that for the debt target, that that was advisable that we move towards a debt range. But, again, I'm loathe to comment on a document from the Green Party which (a) I haven't seen and (b) I don't have responsibility for.

Media: Will it be disappointing if you didn't have the support of the Green Party ahead of next—

PM: Oh, look, individual parties, it's up to them to take their own policy positions.

Media: There's some speculation that in Northland a deal might be struck between Labour and New Zealand First to give Shane Jones a clean run at the electorate. Can you rule that out?

PM: I've had absolutely no conversations of that nature or in that regard, so I'd just call that purely speculative?

Media: Would Labour ever do a deal like that

PM: Again, as I say, that's purely speculative. I've had no such conversations.

Media: Just on Shane Jones, he called farmers rednecks the other day outside Parliament. Do you think that was appropriate language?

PM: One thing I would say is that, actually, I think that as a Government we have been working constructively with our primary sector leaders and made huge progress in what are enormous challenges that New Zealand faces alongside our rural communities. Yes, we had a group that shared a view on a particular issue around forestry and dairy farming. In my view, we actually share the goal of making sure that productive soil remains for food production and that we're planting the right tree in the right place, and we're already doing work to ensure that that is the case, led by David Parker. I wasn't at the protest, so, of course, I didn't see some of, personally, the taunts and signs that were

presented to Minister Jones. I've had them reported to me, and some of them do sound offensive. Having said that, that's not language I would have used. I don't think it's language that accurately even portrays Minister Jones' relationship with the primary sector, but he has relayed to me that at that time, he found some of the things they were saying pretty hard to take.

Media: So you told him that that's not the sort of language that a Minister of the Crown should be using?

PM: He knows that's my expectation, that we wouldn't use such language. Of course it's not language I would use. It's not language I would expect to be used. Again, though, I also would just relay that there were some pretty borderline statements and signs brought to that protest as well.

Media: Almost every single week at post-Cab, we're having a conversation about what Shane Jones has said, and you consistently say that's not the sort of language I should expect to be using. Is the message just not getting through to him?

PM: We are an MMP Government. Ultimately, I set expectations around adherence with the Cabinet guidelines. Things like use of language at a protest—you won't find a specific line in the *Cabinet Manual* over how someone responds to taunts in a protest. That ultimately comes down to a matter of an MP's own conduct. I express a personal view and Minister Jones will express his. We won't always agree. That is the nature of MMP politics and governance.

Media: But are you getting tired of having to distance yourself from the language used by New Zealand First almost weekly—

PM: We're a coalition. We'll take different positions.

Media: How confident are you about the situation in Xinjiang province in light of the documents leaked to *The New York Times* and published over the weekend?

PM: Yeah, and, look, if indeed the documents are authentic, I think what was reported is deeply concerning. As I've consistently responded to here and raised here, the issue of the Uighurs in Xinjiang is an issue that we have raised consistently in bilaterals at the highest level, including in my latest bilateral with Premier Lee. We've also, as a nation, taken the step of using multilateral forums, including the Human Rights Council, the United Nations, to sign on with other countries to express our concerns over the situation of the Uighur people in China.

Media: Do we need to start looking, though, at greater actions, travel bans—actions we can take outside of the UN framework?

PM: Well, I think, you know, one of the strongest things we can do is still within the UN framework, joined indeed by other nations who share our view and concerns. But regardless of whether they join us or not, I still think the most powerful thing that we can do is use our face-to-face interactions at the highest level to raise these concerns, and New Zealand consistently has. That has been our practice with human rights issues, and, indeed, our practice with China is to raise those issues directly.

Media: There have been a number of companies, universities, in Australia and other countries that have seen their technology, their services, inadvertently or deliberately used in Xinjiang Hong Kong—those sort of dual-use technology, military, police, applications. How confident are you that the same thing isn't happening here with New Zealand universities with New Zealand businesses?

PM: Look, I haven't received advice setting that out directly, so I'd be loath to speculate on that. But, again, my job is to make sure that where we have concerns we express them, and we have.

Media: Are you concerned that Chinese officials within New Zealand have been distributing propaganda publications saying that none of this is happening in Xinjiang.

PM: Again, you know, this is—ultimately, we have to determine our own position as New Zealand, and that is manifest by the fact that we have both at leader level but in statements directly placed our concerns on record. If individuals from within China use their freedom of expression to express their own view, that is a matter for them. We have put on record ours, and ours include concerns.

Media: Were you disappointed that the immigration Minister didn't give you a heads-up that Behrouz Boochani was coming to New Zealand.

PM: Yes. Having said that, of course, it is still a matter that, ultimately, would not have changed as a result of me knowing, but, yes, I would've preferred to have had a heads-up. It was an operational decision, though, made by Immigration New Zealand, as you would expect for a visa decision.

Media: What do you make of his statements that he'd quite like to stay in New Zealand longer than his visa?

PM: At the moment, look, I see all of that as being totally hypothetical. He has the legal ability to be here for a month. It demonstrates, I think, that the system where he's been identified already as a refugee—he has travel documents and he's had the ability to apply and legally be here in New Zealand for the purposes of speaking at a conference. He also, of course, is in the process of gaining approval to be able to reside in the United States. Anything beyond that really is, you know, speculative. I would note that when it comes to asylum claims in New Zealand, those are dealt with totally independently of politicians, and so that would never be a matter for us to determine. It would be a matter for the tribunal to determine. But for now he is, of course, legally here.

Media: Have you or any of your staff discussed that matter with Australia?

PM: I can't speak for officials, but, certainly, I haven't, and nor would I expect to. An application was made for an individual who carries travel documents, who was resident in PNG, and who is recognised to be a refugee to come and speak at a conference in New Zealand, and that visa has been approved. I see no need for me to engage personally with Australia on that matter.

Media: If you'd known he was coming, would you have gone and met him at the airport?

PM: No, I see this as a simple matter of someone who's come to speak at a conference and has been given the legal right to do so by Immigration New Zealand.

Media: Prime Minister, do you have any concerns around an AUT study which identified a continued lack of representation of Māori women on New Zealand's largest listed companies?

PM: Yeah, look we as Government have tried to lead the way when it comes to diversity on our boards, including women and Māori representation on our boards, and so we've tried to be examples and made really good progress. My hope, of course, is that we would see that reflected in the private sector as well.

Media: It may be a bit of a dumb question, but how does it work when it comes to the Prime Minister and getting dental operations? Do you have a special clinic that you go to or do you just go to, like, Lumino or something?

PM: No, there is no special dental clinic for Prime Ministers in New Zealand, and, look, despite the fact that I've had plenty of commentary, more than others probably, about my dentistry over the years, I just go to a dentist like anyone else.

Media: How long have you had an issue with your wisdom teeth? Often this is something people put off for many years.

PM: Yeah. Three years.

Media: Do you think it's too expensive for New Zealanders to get their wisdom teeth out?

PM: I think accessing dental work in general in New Zealand is an issue—I do, yep. And every time I go to the dentist, I reflect on that. But, as we've said, we actually have a number of areas where we know we need to make the health system—and that includes, of course, public health—more accessible. It's all a matter of how we're able to prioritise making those parts of our system more accessible.

Media: Do you know how much you're spending on your oral surgery, or is that too private to share?

PM: It is probably fairly private. I haven't had a final quote, but I know it will be reasonable.

Media: How long will you be off work?

PM: I've been told that for the kind that I'm having, which is impacted, so involves a bit of bone, too much—or you shouldn't ask! Yeah, I should leave several days before it would be comfortable to be out in public again.

Media: Israel Folau has said that same-sex marriage and abortion are to blame for the bush fires in Australia? Do you have any response?

PM: There'll be a range of people's views who I disagree with. I just generally wouldn't necessarily expect to have to refute them all individually. Last question.

Media: Samoa's declared a state of emergency due to the measles outbreak. How much of a sense of responsibility should New Zealand feel for starting that?

PM: Look, ultimately, actually, we—of course, as you would expect—are working closely with Samoa. In fact, I can announce that we will be sending additional supplies. We've already sent refrigeration in order to keep vaccines chilled, medical gowns, medical equipment to support their work around the measles outbreak. We are now also, I can confirm, sending additional 3,000 vaccinations to Samoa, and we will also be sending 12, I believe, vaccinators to assist with the vaccination programme in Samoa.

We, of course, have outbreaks in Samoa and Tonga. In Tonga's case, it was a returning Tongan sports team; in Samoa's case, they report that it originated from one traveller from New Zealand. Regardless, we, of course, have an open flow of people, but we see our responsibility as supporting Samoa as they deal with the outbreak, and we are doing that actively.

Media: Just really quickly, too, what do you plan to say to Charles tomorrow?

PM: Oh, I imagine we'll pick up the last conversation we had, which was his interest in young people, particularly, who had disengaged in work and training and how we can support them to fulfil their potential. He was very interested in our tree planting programmes in New Zealand. He has a very accurate knowledge and interest of New Zealand's challenges and environmental work, so I imagine we'll pick up on some of those discussions.

Media: Will you be discussing the future of the monarchy and its place in New Zealand at all?

PM: I've never discussed that with any members of the royal family. We've discussed, primarily, issues of the day.

Media: Will you talk about Prince Andrew—being an issue of the day—

PM: I doubt that very much. All right.

Media: What about the feud between Harry and William?

PM: I think you'll find that, actually, we have really substantial conversations rather than ones based on gossip. OK. Thanks, everyone.

conclusion of press conference