

POST-CABINET PRESS CONFERENCE: MONDAY, 4 MAY 2020

PM: Kia ora koutou katoa. We're in day seven of alert level 3. While we can take heart in recording no new cases today, the result reflects the situation that ultimately reflects the end of lockdown in alert level 4; not the effect of greater activity at level 3. So, despite this result, my message remains the same, as I note does the message of Dr Ashley Bloomfield: stay the course. We cannot afford to squander the good work to date when our end goal is so close and within reach.

Next Monday, we will make the decision on whether or not we will move to alert level 2. That day represents the end of a two-week life-cycle, as it were—a period of transmission of the virus. We need every day between now and next Monday to know for sure that we succeeded in locking in the gains of level 4, recovered effectively in our waiting room of level 3, and are in the position to move down again and give New Zealanders back greater freedoms.

In making our decision, we will be assessing if there have been low to no cases for several days preceding. It will mean knowing where every new case over the past two weeks has come from. It will mean ongoing evidence and confidence of no widespread community transmission. So we need to not get ahead of ourselves, stick to our bubble, and to finish the job that we've started.

Related to this, the latest Google tracking data for the last weekend of our level 4 lockdown came out over the weekend. Overall, it shows we did exceptionally well and that, for the duration of lockdown, we maintained very consistent levels of low amounts of movement. Trips to parks and places of recreation did experience an uptick in the last week, and that is something we need to keep an eye on at level 3—just in terms of, when we are out and about, maintaining physical distancing. However, we did better than many other countries we compare ourselves to, and the ongoing commitment to physical distancing and staying at home has no doubt been the biggest contributor to our rapid drop in cases at level 4. Your efforts, New Zealand, have put us at the front of the pack, and everyone should feel very proud of that.

Cabinet today discussed what alert level 2 would look like in the event that we move there and when we're ready to move there. I'll share those details with you on Thursday, once the guidance has been fully written up and we can clearly communicate that to the public and to businesses. This will provide clarity and certainty and give people time to prepare. Please note, though, as with our previous process, no decision has been made on moving out of alert level 3 at this stage. As we've done previously, you will receive clear guidance and clear signalling before any such move.

In the meantime, the Government is well advanced in our plans to get New Zealand moving and grow in the wake of COVID-19. Central to those plans is the Budget in 10 days' time. Our hard and early health response to fight COVID-19 has opened up economic opportunities. Now, as we get the economy moving again, we look to both domestic and international opportunities to make the most of the head start New Zealand has with its recovery. But I need to warn you: the Budget will continue the Government's careful and balanced approach to running the books. With decreased revenue and the Government taking on extra debt, we are being very careful to ensure that every dollar spent helps create jobs and sets us on a path to our country rebuilding better. The finance Minister will have more to say on this in his pre-Budget speech this Thursday.

One key aspect of our plan to get New Zealand moving is the work on the trans-Tasman bubble. Today, I can confirm that I've accepted Prime Minister Morrison's invitation to participate via video link in the Australian National Cabinet meeting scheduled for tomorrow. The meeting will discuss a range of matters in relation to the COVID response on both sides of the Tasman, including the creation of a trans-Tasman travel bubble. I will update

media on the meeting tomorrow—in fact, just after the meeting—but it is fair to say such a meeting is without precedent and highlights both what’s happened with the cooperation at a state level in Australia and then also the mutual importance of our two countries and economies to each other. Both our countries’ strong record on fighting the virus has placed us in the enviable position of being able to plan the next stage in our economic rebuild and to include trans-Tasman travel and engagement in our strategy.

On to the segment loosely called “Kiwi ingenuity”, I know that the biggest agricultural event in the Southern Hemisphere, our national Fieldays, is still hoping to go ahead later this year. And this is an incredibly welcome plan that they maintain, considering the economic shot in the arm it gives our rural services sector: more than half a billion dollars in sales last year, and the flow-on that has for our regional communities, \$183 million for the Waikato alone. But, like many events across the country, they’re planning to host these again only when it is safe to do so, and so that work continues. But, in the meantime, that mid-June gap in the calendar will be filled with Fieldays online—a virtual event I know the Fieldays Society has been working on for some time, and one that can bring hundreds of exhibitors together, helping connect New Zealand and international companies at a time when our borders are closed. The world wants our quality food and fibre and, perhaps now more than ever, our high quality ideas as well.

OK, everyone, I’m happy to take your questions.

Media: Prime Minister, with the trans-Tasman bubble, what’s the likely timing on that? You’ve always said it was quite long term. Can you give us some idea of whether it’s weeks or months away?

PM: I wouldn’t say that it would be in the very, very near short term. But, look, that’s something I’m happy to update you on once I’ve had that chance to speak directly with premiers and PM Morrison, but it’s fair to say, from the conversations we’ve had to date, we have a very similar perspective of the kind of time line that both countries will want to run to. In our minds, the health of our people is incredibly important. In New Zealand, we don’t want to give away the gains we’ve made, and nor does Australia want to see any risks either, but we also see a lot of opportunity.

Media: Isn’t it fair to say that there are more advantages for us than there are for them?

PM: It’s fair to say there are significant advantages for New Zealand in terms of a trans-Tasman bubble—not only, of course, domestic tourism, but equally we have a flow of people travelling between both countries for business purposes, trade, and so on. So it is to our advantage. But, equally, I will say that PM Morrison has equally articulated huge advantage for New Zealand—from Australia from our travel opening up to them as well.

Media: Prime Minister, what does “not the very, very near short term” mean?

PM: Don’t expect this to happen in a couple of weeks’ time. As you can imagine, we need to make sure that we’re locking in the gains that all New Zealanders have helped us achieve and make sure that we have health precautions in place to make sure we do this safely and well.

Media: The beaming into the Cabinet meeting tomorrow—has that ever been done before? How unprecedented is that?

PM: No, I don’t believe that has been done before. We have had occasion where, I believe, Australian Prime Ministers have attended New Zealand’s Cabinet with Ministers, but, as far as I understand, we haven’t had something quite like this. In part, that’s because of the unprecedented gathering together that’s been happening within Australia as well.

Media: Have you had any specific advice drawn up on this trans-Tasman bubble? Is there a draft Cabinet paper that you’ve looked at?

PM: At this stage, we are working through a number of decisions around the border, relating to both the ongoing quarantine and the way that will continue to work—you will

have already heard me talk about the need to resolve issues around the ongoing funding of the quarantine mechanism. We'll need to, of course, then assess the ongoing movement of New Zealanders, and then, within that, we're also looking at the trans-Tasman bubble. This is not an issue Cabinet has formally considered to date, but it's really at a point at the moment where Ministers, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and myself are discussing it with our counterparts.

Media: Just to confirm, the idea of it, it wouldn't just be that they could travel here; it would actually mean they could travel here and not have 14 days' quarantine? Because it wouldn't make much sense if they still had to wait 14 days, would it?

PM: Yeah, so it is about really considering ourselves within a bubble where we feel secure that the relative response on both sides of the Tasman gives the assurance that that won't be required. So you can see why it is going to take us a bit of time to make sure we can do that safely.

Media: Is there any hope for the winter ski season that—

PM: Again, I'll give you further updates tomorrow. At this point, I do want to just moderate expectations. But the fact that we're even in a position as countries to have this conversation is a huge advantage to both of us.

Media: [*Inaudible*] other Pacific nations in the trans-Tasman bubble?

PM: Yeah, at the moment, we are focused on Australia, but it is fair to say that there would be, obviously, particularly advantage for our Pacific Island neighbours, but that's a conversation we'd need to have directly with them. There is huge risk if COVID finds its way currently into the Pacific Island nations that have been untouched by COVID. So I would want us to act cautiously and in unison with the leaders of those countries.

Media: How concerned are you that the actions of a minority have potentially derailed our chances if going to level 2?

PM: Yeah, we are a team of five million and that means no one wants to see people let the side down. I would still note that this is not the majority, but there are a small number of people who are forgetting that any gains you're seeing at the moment are actually from the lockdown period. We need to stay here a while longer, feel assured that we actually have this under control, and then move. People are jeopardising that at the moment by acting in the way some people did over the weekend.

Media: Can you give a bit more certainty to businesses like retail and hospitality and hairdressers—we've spoken to one today—about whether they'll be able to open under level 2?

PM: Yeah, and so, of course, you'll see in the alert level framework, then you do see that further opening up. That's the next step. What we'll be doing is giving further detail on that on Thursday, but, of course, top of our minds is that there are a part of the retail sector, in particular, who aren't operating as usual—or, in the case of hairdressers, at all. We want to make sure that, when we move there, we do so safely and that, hopefully, we can stay there.

Media: Prime Minister, are you expecting to be briefed on Australia's contact-tracing app during the National Cabinet meeting tomorrow, and what's the likelihood of New Zealand just adopting Australia's COVIDSafe app?

PM: They, of course, based their app on the TraceTogether app of Singapore, which already our officials have engaged directly with Singapore on as well. I understand Australia managed to weed out some of the specific technical issues, and so that's why it makes sense for our officials to keep talking to one another as well. I expect contact tracing will be a topic of conversation because it's also an opportunity for us not just to talk about trans-Tasman travel but also our experience with COVID and the work we're doing to manage it and the role that technology will play in that.

Media: Just on the contact-tracing app, do you still remain sceptical about what it's going to deliver, because the uptake, of course, has to be so high?

PM: Yeah, and look, you know, that does not rule out us continuing to pursue technological solutions, and just over the weekend I was talking to Dr Clark again about the different options that exist in terms of technological solutions to help prompt people's memories about their movements when we need to do so. And so we continue to do work in this space, but we're not relying on it to deliver everything to us, because there simply is no silver bullet here.

Media: On another vaguely trans-Tasman matter, the case of Behrouz Boochani, National's immigration spokesman, Stuart Smith, said this morning on RNZ, "deeply suspect there was interference further up the ladder or influence because of Boochani's political connections" and then referenced "political friends in New Zealand in the Green Party and the Labour Party". So what is your response on the attack of the integrity of the immigration system and your party?

PM: I think that's offensive. I think the claims that are being made here are an insult to New Zealand's immigration system and also to the integrity of parliamentarians. I won't comment on the specifics of the case in question, because, of course, politicians have no role to play in it. It's a very important distinction we have to make, and also, under the law, we're not permitted to even speak of someone in this particular set of circumstances potential immigration status. So I'm not going to act outside of the law, but I will call out a statement which I think questions the integrity of our immigration system, which is very robust in New Zealand, and indeed, the integrity of parliamentarians. It's wrong.

Media: Is the Government considering any additional oversight measures for big financial decisions after it's suspended the regulatory impact assessment process for COVID-19 - related decisions?

PM: Of course, we have had in place the COVID-19, the epidemic select committee, which of course puts us in the camp of very few parliaments that I think have even taken that step to create oversight and accountability, and I think that's been important, keeping in mind, of course, even with omnibus legislation we are having those referred to that select committee as well to have parliamentary oversight.

Media: But, for some of the legislation, for example—what was rushed through last week—it doesn't go to select committee; it also doesn't have a regulatory impact assessment. There's no modelling done on it. Is there is a case to be made, I suppose, for some oversight of some kind, however quick?

PM: Well, of course, Parliament does have a chance to debate that legislation, and that was shared, albeit on tight time frames because of the need to expeditiously support small businesses, and I think there was a good understanding in Parliament of why we needed to do that. There's also, of course, still the opportunity—as much as we're able—to model the fiscal impacts of these decisions as much as we are able, but, of course, there is a high level of uncertainty around take-up rates, default rates, on policies regardless of how much time would have applied to debating this piece of legislation.

Media: Is it acceptable that, on that small-business scheme, all we got was one press release, no supporting documentation, no financial projections, and we found out that the legislation was passed—even though it was always going to be passed, it was passed mistakenly? Is one press release enough information on something that could cost taxpayers billions of dollars?

PM: Of course, the detail of this scheme is in the public domain because people need to be able to apply for it—so the detail around the terms and conditions are being made publicly available. We, of course, proactively release Cabinet papers that underpin those decisions. And, as to the matter around the legislation, there were enabling powers in the bill that primarily related to tax provisions. There were enabling provisions within that that enabled the loan scheme. You will already know our views on the way that that went

through a parliamentary process. An error was made—we've been very open about what happened there. It is unusual. It would not usually occur were it not for the fact that Inland Revenue—unusually, relative to other departments—have an ability to draft their own legislation because of the technicalities of tax drafting. That meant that PCO, unfortunately, did table the wrong bill, and that had the enabling provisions within it. So, no, that was not acceptable, but I think that's well understood by everyone.

Media: Prime Minister, do you have an update on the amount of breaches under level 3?

PM: So I have a cumulative update, and I believe I have a breakdown as at—though this is still as at 6 p.m. Sunday, and it is for a 24-hour period. So that was 593 breaches of the Civil Defence Emergency Management or Health Act; 79 were in the past—in the previous—oh, forgive me; that's under alert level 3—79 were in the previous 24 hours, 154 prosecutions under alert level 3, and 400 warnings, 39 youth referrals. Happy to give them broken down to you—just to be assured that those are specific to alert level 3.

Media: And what was your first reaction today when that zero figure hit your desk?

PM: First I heard the zero, and then I heard the one “confirmed” and the fact that it was transferred from a “probable”. I'm a perfectionist; I want to see those numbers after we've been in alert level 3 long enough for it to be a reflection of alert level 3. And so, at the moment, what we're seeing is all of the good work New Zealand has put into the lockdown. This is the waiting room. This is where we check if we're recovering well and that we've got it right. We need a few more days to check we have.

Media: Can I just ask: is it possible to have a trans-Tasman bubble at level 2?

PM: Well, of course, some of those decisions come down to the finalisation of just how we interpret travel and so on. I'll be giving greater clarity on that on Thursday. And, of course, it also depends a lot on what our case load is looking like and what Australia's case load is looking like. So I wouldn't rule that out, but, again, it's actually going to be very much dependent on how relative to each other we're looking and what we're putting in at the border to give ourselves reassurance.

Media: Can you navigate, in terms of—you've talked about us going into sort of regional lockdowns on occasion, and Australia, obviously, has different things going on in different states. So, if we ended up in a situation with a trans-Tasman bubble, would there need to be allowances for, potentially, shutting some states, some parts of the country off? Is that a manageable thing?

PM: Well, actually, you'll see that that is how they have managed some COVID management within Australia, and, you know, travel between states has been a part of their response. So, look, I see, in part, that that will have to be part of our wider conversation: is it that we treat Australia in a blanket way, or is it that we take it state by state? And that will be one of the conversations that I'm sure we'll have.

Media: Can I just ask, as well, about the Oliver Christiansen case? I'm not sure if you're familiar with it—

PM: Yes, I am.

Media: —overturned by the High Court.

PM: Yeah.

Media: Does this legal decision change the approach that the Ministry of Health has actually been taking to these cases?

PM: I do think that we need to make sure that we learn from rulings and judgments such as this. And, of course, reading the judgment, there seems to be concern that it was an automated approach taken to requests on compassionate grounds. Information that I've received from the Ministry of Health, though, sets out that there were 283 requests for an exemption to the conditions of isolation having been received by 30 April; that 24

exemptions were sought in cases where a relative was dying or close to dying, of which 18 were granted. So that does suggest that there has been due consideration. That is advice I've received from the Ministry of Health, but I'm sure that they'll be reflecting on this judgment.

Media: But, given the High Court has overturned this one, does that call into question at all, I guess, the legal basis under which these decisions are being made?

PM: I think, reading the judgment, it suggests that actually it was the sense of whether or not the individual circumstances were taken into account rather than an automated process having been applied. Now, really, my expectation is that the Ministry of Health will look at that judgment and then assess the way that they'll been applying the policy in the future.

Media: Prime Minister, what's your view on public-private partnerships like the Transmission Gully one and whether they should be used for all the big projects that are planned in the years ahead, given what's happened with the Gully?

PM: Well, look, we, of course, have seen a role for public-private partnerships in transport projects, but, again, we take each on case by case. You'll see that we haven't applied that same logic on some other projects, particularly within our Corrections system. So for us it really does depend on the form of infrastructure, the long-term arrangements, and governance arrangements. I'd also note, of course, that we're working through with Transmission Gully scaling back up their operation post level 4, and that's something that we're having to work through with the contractors at the moment.

Media: [*Inaudible*] allow it and dump the mess on the Government?

PM: Of course, we would certainly hope that would not be the case, but I'll leave the Ministry of Transport to continue to work through some of the issues on the ground.

Media: Prime Minister, last week when we asked you about universities and paying the full amount for accommodation, you said to act with compassion. We've had just one example of a student where they're paying the full amount for their room and also contributing to where they're staying at home with their mum; so they're having to—

PM: Double up.

Media: —pay twice. Are you looking to do anything? Or can you compel universities to act?

PM: The Ministry of Education has intervened here, and rightly so, and they're seeking to try and mediate a solution. One of the tricky issues is that universities often will have different arrangements for the delivery of their halls of residence. Some, for instance, are privately contracted. Some have access, for instance, to the wage subsidy, and we would have a very clear expectation in those cases of how they should be behaving. But there is a role for the Government to play to try and sort this issue out, because it will seem patently unfair to many people.

Media: Are you comfortable that nurses at Waitakere Hospital say their concerns were not listened to by management, they felt ignored and bullied, and as a result patients on a virus-free ward have been put at risk?

PM: I did see those reports, and it is never acceptable for anyone who is a public servant to feel bullied anywhere, and I especially would include at this time: if there are concerns, people need to feel they can freely raise them. I have seen the protocols that have been applied and questions that were raised over PPE, which they had access to but there were questions over whether it was the right PPE. The DHB have undertaken to look at that, and I'll certainly be asking the Director-General the outcome of that.

Media: Because something clearly went wrong, didn't it, if 57 front-line health workers have had to be stood down at this very critical time?

PM: So, as I understand, advice and the view of the DHB and their technical advisory team was that nurses could not move between wards if they were working on a shift with COVID patients, but that they could work on different wards on different shifts, but never at the same time. That was the view of the DHB, and that is what is being applied here. I believe the Director-General is working with the DHB to work through what has happened in this case and make sure that we are following the best advice possible.

Media: Prime Minister, on tourism, there's been a bit of a suggestion from some, including Cameron Bagrie, that school holidays could be massively shifted to kind of even out the peaks and troughs for the tourism industry—so, instead of the entire country having two weeks to go down to Queenstown, it's staggered over several months. Has the Government considered anything like that at this point? And could you see that working?

PM: Yeah, I mean, one of the things to consider is that that is a reasonable exercise for the Ministry of Education, but I don't want to be too quick to give a response, given that it's actually something for the Minister of Education, really, to respond to directly and to talk through all of the issues that that may come with.

Media: Prime Minister, some public health experts have said that they don't believe the Ministry of Health is listening to Māori health experts and, responding to that, associate health Minister Peeni Henare said, yes: "We've had this conversation with both John Whaanga ... Dr Bloomfield and my colleagues, including the Prime Minister, that this needs to change [and] it needs to change urgently". What is the Government changing, if anything, to include those Māori health experts more in the decision making?

PM: Yeah, well, one thing I would just add—and I don't think this has been in the conversation enough, and I know Minister Henare will agree with this—that, actually, we are, as you'll hear from my answers, really leaning on the DHBs to be delivering on the ground. They're the ones setting up the testing protocols within their rural and isolated communities. They're the ones that need to identify whether they have those connections into marae and with our more vulnerable Māori population. And, helpfully, they are DHBs now that have more Māori representation than they have ever had. Māori have a seat at the decision-making table at a local level for the way our COVID response is run and managed, and I really want to make sure those voices are being heard, not just in the Ministry of Health.

Media: Are there enough Māori voices and Māori people at the table, though? Minister Henare indicated that we're not even close to having enough Māori at that decision-making table across the board?

PM: Well, when it comes to the expert advice, listening to epidemiologists, I do rely on the Ministry of Health to bring together that expertise. And they know our expectation that that will include a wide variety of voices. They know we have an expectation, for instance, that, within our testing, we have reached out into those Māori communities, and they know our expectation that we use, for instance, our Whānau Ora navigators and all of the resource we have on the ground. We will keep driving for that though. We will have a chance to review whether or not, in the future, we've done everything we could have done to work with Māori to the best of our ability.

Media: Prime Minister, would New Zealand add its name to the calls for Taiwan to join the WHO fully? And would we consider welcoming it to our trans-Tasman bubble if, indeed, we are successful in creating one?

PM: Look, we haven't given any consideration beyond working on the trans-Tasman bubble. We have to make sure that, whatever we do, we do it well, that we get it right, that we maintain the achievements that we've had to date. When it comes to wider matters relating to the WHO, I absolutely maintain that the most important thing is for us as a global community to reflect in its totality what happened, what happened domestically, what happened internationally, the WHO response, and our response collectively. There will be things to learn. This is a one-in-100-year event; it would be crazy to suggest we wouldn't

look back at those key learnings. When it comes to membership issues, though, that's just something I wouldn't want to comment on here and now.

Media: Have you sent a present to Boris Johnson and his new baby son?

PM: Not yet, but I will note that, actually, we did get from Theresa May a lovely No. 10 onesie for Neve when she arrived; so we'll be making sure that we reciprocate. We have had a small exchange, though, over the arrival of his baby boy, in which Nurse Jenny prompted another mention by the Prime Minister. So, obviously, she remains top of his mind.

Media: Prime Minister, can the tourism industry start preparing under level 2 to have domestic tourism?

PM: Look, I know that that is incredibly important to domestic tourism. I know that that's something that they're hoping to see. I'll be announcing on Thursday what that alert level framework looks like. You'll remember that, of course, we designed the framework, put that out for publication at the beginning of our COVID response. It's been our practice to then go back, look at our current situation, what we've learnt since that time, and make any adjustments based on the public health response. So that we'll put out on Thursday, but it is fair to say I have heard not only the tourism industry but also those who have been separated regionally from family and friends. So we will be weighing all of those issues up.

Media: Just a question about job losses, because we know there are going to be some. Obviously, we're trying to prevent them, but, for the people that do lose their jobs, what services, how are you gearing up to support these people with mental health support services or like arm-around-the-shoulder type Government stuff?

PM: Yep, and providing employment services, very active labour markets, will be a key part of our response. That is something you will have seen from the last Budget—we put an extra, from memory, 270 MSD staff into Work and Income because we felt we had lost that active approach to supporting people into employment. We've already put in place employment centre services which put employers and employees directly in contact with one another, and there are examples of where, for instance, the Ministry for Primary Industries have been working with MSD to place, for instance, people in the tourism sector into the horticultural sector. We need more of that, and that will be part of our plans going forward.

Media: Is two weeks, one incubation period of COVID-19—is that long enough to really figure out whether there's community transmission that may have been restarted by something like the parties on the weekend?

PM: Yeah, a good question, and it, essentially, does give us a minimum amount of time. It does give us data that should demonstrate what's happening with transmission when we've opened up and created more contact with people. So, not only does that need to sit alongside our proactive testing—you will have heard us talk about the results of that—it also then gives us a sense more generally of people's interaction and the impact of that. Essentially, epidemiologists, obviously, suggest it's a minimum, and many have argued for more.

Media: Prime Minister, can I just ask a supp' on—

PM: Jo—very, very last one.

Media: —on Pita's question, actually. In regards to Māori experts, isn't it a fair point to make that they want to be at the table and not just at a DHB level? Because we know that this is being treated with a more nationalised approach, and both yourself and Dr Ashley Bloomfield have talked again about the fact that Māori are the most vulnerable to this. So why not have a Māori expert there with you?

PM: I guess what I would dispute is that that voice hasn't been present. Thank you.

conclusion of press conference