

## **POST-CABINET PRESS CONFERENCE: MONDAY, 25 MAY 2020**

**PM:** Kia ora koutou katoa. Good afternoon. Look, I'll do a brief introduction, just headline a few announcements for the week, and then I'll open up for questions, but what we'll do this time is just make sure that we're fronting the COVID questions, if we can, for Dr Bloomfield, and then we'll just move into more general if we can.

The House sits again this week, meaning select committees are also once again in full swing. I'll be in the house on Tuesday and Wednesday, as usual. As you would expect, our economic recovery from COVID-19 continues to be my focus this week. On Wednesday, I will be holding a virtual summit with Prime Minister Lee of Singapore to mark the one-year anniversary of the New Zealand - Singapore Enhanced Partnership. That partnership underpins cooperation in a range of areas. New Zealand's relationship with Singapore has been critical in recent months as we have worked closely to secure critical supply such as COVID testing kits and PPE, and to ensure trade links remain open to the benefit of our exporters.

On Wednesday evening, I will participate in a conference call of world leaders in the so-called early movers initiative. It's a grouping of nations that, by and large, went hard and early to beat COVID-19 and are exchanging information on the best approaches to take as many, such as New Zealand, begin to de-escalate restrictions. The call is hosted by the Austrian Chancellor and includes leaders from Australia, Norway, Denmark, and Israel, just to name a few.

On Thursday, I will attend virtually the local and central government forum and undertake COVID recovery visits in the Wellington region. On Friday, I'll be in the Hawke's Bay for further economic recovery - related visits.

Tourism New Zealand has just launched the "Do Something New, New Zealand!" campaign, encouraging Kiwis to see parts of the country they haven't been to before to help get our economy and tourism sector moving again. I urge anyone who is in a position to do so to help our recovery and support our local tourism operators by booking a visit to our own incredible backyard. I'm still in the process of locking down my plans for the weekend, but I do intend as much as I'm able to get out and about and support our local economies as well.

As signalled last week, Cabinet today discussed the alert level 2 settings and the pathway to move to level 1 as soon as safely possible. Last week, I said we would regularly adjust our settings at level 2 to allow more activity to take place when the advice and data says it's safe. We want to get our economy moving quickly without losing the gains we have made to date. It takes about two weeks for changes in levels to start showing up in our cases, as we're all now familiar. So we can now be highly confident, more than three weeks after the shift to level 3, that there are no new cases attributable to the more relaxed restrictions which we had as we stepped down into level 3 and started moving beyond that. That is very good news and is counter to what many countries overseas have experienced as they loosen their restrictions, with many having seen spikes in cases. This is in large part to New Zealanders sticking to the rules at 3, maintaining physical distancing, ensuring we limited the activities most likely to spread the virus, and, of course, the ongoing role of our border controls and the quarantine at our border.

On the basis of this good news, though, Cabinet has decided we can now increase the size of all gatherings to 100 from 12 noon this Friday, 29 May. This means gatherings such as church services, weddings, and funerals can now have 100 people present. There also no longer will be a need for funerals or tangihanga to pre-register via the Ministry of Health, as they had been previously doing to date. The move to 100 also allows community sport to operate more easily, and I understand sporting codes have been working on operational guidance with Sport New Zealand. Large-scale events like concerts will, obviously, still

have those restrictions applied in terms of size, but the shift to a 100 person maximum means many more gatherings will be able to occur from now on. These changes are good news for business and for those looking to plan larger gatherings. It's another next step in re-normalising of life as we continue to stamp out the virus.

It is the Government's view that we should also move as quickly as we safely can to alert level 1. On that basis, Cabinet will check in again on our settings on 8 June, and we've agreed that no later than 22 June, four weeks from today, we will consider then the move to alert level 1. The fact that we are even—and I should add: this is based on the advice of the Director-General of Health, who supported these recommendations and made these recommendations.

The fact that we are even making these decisions shows the success we've had to date as a country in fighting the virus, and highlights we can now make choices many others can't. In fact, the increase in gathering size means we now have some of the most permissive settings of any of the countries we compare ourselves to, including Australia. Going hard and early has paid off for the economy, and now we need to just continue the level of vigilance that has got us here. We are still in a global pandemic. Cases continue to grow overseas, and we do still have people coming home, but for the most part, many aspects of life can and should feel much more normal. Let's not lose that advantage.

However, no matter how fast we reopen our economy, there will continue to be tough times to come for many. Protecting New Zealanders from the economic hit of the virus is our priority, and we are investing in jobs and support to business to keep Kiwis in work. We're also investing in training to help people shift jobs too. But we know that there will be job losses, and for many, losing their job will be incredibly hard on them and their family financially. That is why today, as you're aware, we have announced enhanced financial support for New Zealanders who lose their jobs due to the virus. A full-time worker will receive \$490 tax free a week for 12 weeks, to help cushion them through the initial period in which they lose their job. This will also add much-needed stimulus to the economy. Our team of 5 million stuck together to defeat the virus, and now we need to stick together to support those bearing the brunt of the virus' economic impact.

I urged New Zealanders to be kind to each other in lockdown, and we now need to continue that support to one another during our economic response to the virus also. We're now happy to take your questions.

**Media:** Was Cabinet's decision to go from 10 to 100—was that on advice from the Ministry of Health that it should go to 100, or did you have to reach some sort of compromise where they said 150 and you're going down to 100?

**PM:** Oh, I might as well let the Director-General speak to his own advice.

**Dr Ashley Bloomfield:** Thanks, Prime Minister. Kia ora koutou and talofa lava. So the full group size in alert level 2 was always 100. We started off with 10 and we felt we were in a position to advise that we could go right to the full extent of alert level 2, which is a group size of 100, and that's the advice we gave.

**Media:** Does this change the restrictions on hospitality outlets that you can only have groups of 10 and one server, and that sort of thing?

**PM:** Yeah, so obviously the groups of 10 was always based around the social gatherings, and so now that limit has gone, but what we are still asking hospitality to do is continue to seat people—continue with all of that social distancing within their venues, but they can have larger group sizes now, because otherwise it would be inconsistent that you could have a large social gathering at home but you can't take that social gathering into a hospitality space.

**Media:** So still no dance floor?

**PM:** At this stage, of course, we are still keeping the seating in those venues, and that is, of course, because with organised events like weddings and so on, it's much easier for

us to keep a track of who's together. When you have a large number of strangers coming and going in those hospitality spaces, that becomes more difficult.

**Media:** Isn't that what's the app's for, though—to help us kind of keep track of who and where they've been and when?

**PM:** Yes. Of course, it's not just about tracking; it's about risk mitigation as well. And I think that's one of the things just for us to continue to be mindful of: New Zealand is in a good space, but we still have to be mindful that when we look abroad, we are seeing countries that are still surging in their cases. We do still have New Zealanders coming home, they are being quarantined, but we also know that COVID's showing up in some tests for people four weeks after having had it. So we do still need to just keep managing that risk. But we are doing it in such a way that we're opening up as much of our economy as we can, at the same time.

**Media:** You can have nightclub owners and venue owners really upset with this—another apparent inconsistency.

**PM:** Um, how so?

**Media:** Because people will be able to go and dance and have parties at a wedding or in a bar or in a restaurant, but they can't do it at a nightclub or a—

**PM:** Keeping in mind, the health advice and guidance still remains the same, for even those who are having a wedding event, as they are for those who might be going out for a night out in Courtenay Place. All of that health guidance remains exactly the same. What I think we should also keep in mind is we are opening, and have already opened, our bars. Across the Ditch, that's not even on the horizon, and, in fact, we're saying that we will be reviewing in four weeks' time. That is a very, very distant prospect for many other countries. So we're moving faster than many, but doing so in a way that means that we keep these good results.

**Media:** Can Kiwis use the COVID-19 app to kind of register themselves as businesses if they're going to have 99-person party?

**PM:** We expect that people, when they're running their own events, are most likely to know who's attending them. What we are doing though is working with MBIE to make sure that people who don't have business numbers—for instance, churches, electorate offices, other venues—are able to access QR codes. So that's something that MBIE has been working on.

**Media:** What would your advice be to people who were planning to, basically, hold a party on Friday? Do you have any—

**PM:** Yeah. Keep a list of who you've invited. And you may send out an invite list via Facebook. There's lots of ways that you can keep track of that. So it is still really important that people keep those digital diaries, and, for a wedding, that's, obviously, quite straightforward because you're sending out your invitations. But do just keep a log of who it is that's participating in your events. We still need to be able to contact trace. I'll come to David in front, and then to you.

**Media:** With this decision to go on Friday, was that specifically to cater to the church groups that have been feeling a bit hard done by.

**PM:** Well, two things. We need to give enough time for orders to be drafted and then notice around those orders. So, you know, the option for Friday really was the earliest that we could do that. But we were mindful that, actually, there are services for those who come together for prayer—for our Muslim community, our Jewish community, Seventh Day Adventists. So we were mindful of the different times at which our religious communities begin their congregation on Fridays. So that was in our thinking as well.

**Media:** In terms of the time line, you've said Cabinet would consider no later than 22 June for that shift. What's the soonest you might consider it?

**PM:** Sorry, as I've flagged, 8 June we're just checking in on settings. Because, of course, there are a range of settings that we have at level 2—just checking that we feel like those are working consistently and there's no adjustments that need to be made there. Of course, we need to keep in mind what's happening with cases. The recommendation from the Ministry of Health is that then we would look on 22 June to a move then to level 1. But we are keeping our ability to keep a watch on how we're tracking in the meantime.

**Media:** Just a follow up to that: does that mean that on 22 June, you need to have provided a date for moving to level 1—by 22 June? So on June 22, you could say by 5 July we'd go to level 1.

**PM:** No, no—I'd be a bit more optimistic than that. Perhaps I could hand over to Dr Bloomfield to give his thinking. But, of course, what we've said is we want to really clearly signpost the expectation of movement around alert levels, and we've done that so far—and that's what we're continuing to do here—around the most likely time that we would see movement around alert level 1.

**Dr Ashley Bloomfield:** Thank you. So two comments: first of all, the reason why we felt able to advise to go from 10 to 100 to the full alert level 2 group size was because, obviously, we've just had the very low or zero cases over this last weekend and if you go back three weeks. So, in effect, the outcome of our lockdown and the way that people supported that through alert levels 4 and 3 has paid huge dividends here. So we felt not only should we move to 100 but that we should spend then two 2-week periods in the full alert level 2 and then actively consider a possible move to alert level 1.

**PM:** So that's us signalling that if we continue on this track, we continue to see these low number of cases or no cases, then we'll be in a position to look to move from that point. So that's what we're signalling today, and I hope that does give that level of certainty for planning as much as we're able to for those who are currently living with the restrictions that come with level 2.

**Media:** Just a question on the bubble—can you be clear about this: is the bubble conditional on Australia eliminating the state border restrictions?

**PM:** No. It's contingent on Australia signalling that they're ready. And so that will come with their own—I'm sure their own—conditions on what they think needs to be in place. Ultimately, it's a matter for them. They may choose to open up while they still have some internal border restrictions. They may choose to wait. I see that as a matter for Australia.

**Media:** Do Australians who've lived and worked in New Zealand have to wait on that bubble before they can return, or are they allowed to return?

**PM:** They can return. They're just subject to our quarantine. And so I imagine many will be waiting for a period where they wouldn't have to have a quarantine apply to them, which is the benefit of the trans-Tasman bubble: once we're in a position to apply that, then the quarantine wouldn't be part of that travel mix.

**Media:** What do I—because we know, I know of someone, there are has many times tried to come back to New Zealand but has not been allowed. Are there certain—are their appeal processes or anything they can do to get back?

**PM:** That sounds curious to me. Happy to try and pick up any case that feels like it might be inconsistent. But what we do know—obviously, we have the situation where citizens and permanent residents are, obviously, allowed to come home. There have been some who have been living here but don't hold that status who have been caught out offshore. That's a group that we're now working through how we look at having those individuals being able to reconnect with their family, their loved ones, their work, their home. So we do recognise there have been a group caught out there and that we do need to make sure that we're focused on how some exemptions would apply for them. They would still need to quarantine, though, until we're in a position where a bubble exists.

**Media:** Dr Bloomfield, do you consider with the low number of cases recently that eradication is now possible, and is there any work being done at the Ministry of Health around a precise definition of elimination that some public health experts have [*Inaudible*]

**Dr Ashley Bloomfield:** Well, on the latter question, yes. We've got a really clear description of what elimination is, and, in fact, we've elaborated this into a nice description. If it's not on our website already, we will make sure it's up there. But the thing about elimination is, again, it's—there's still a pandemic out there, and we still have a very strong set of limitations and measures at the border that are part of an elimination strategy. So even if we're confident there's no transmission of disease inside the country, the possibility of it coming in—which is what we're very clear we're trying to avoid—means that we need to maintain an elimination approach, because if we do get a case, we need to be able to do the—we need to test; we need to be able to isolate and contact trace. So it's an ongoing elimination rather than a one-off eradication process.

**Media:** Prime Minister, over the weekend we've been hearing reports of continuing confusion with the apps, and some businesses have actually, in hospitality, gotten rid of their contact tracing sheets because they think the Government app replaces it. Is that part of the contact tracing system still up to standard, in your view?

**PM:** Yeah, so what we signalled when the contact tracing app that was developed by the Ministry of Health came in is that there would just be that period of transition, because what the ministry is building in is the functionality that if you go into a hospitality venue, you scan in. We want the ability, if you are found to have COVID, to then contact everyone else through an automated process, to let them know that they need to take certain precautions. That functionality has been built in, and that's where there's that little bit of overlap at the moment around recording for hospitality. So you still see that. Some are still continuing to use other apps, like Rippl and so on, but we do see a situation, in the not too distant future, where we'll be able to consolidate right down. At the moment, we've had over 360,000 who have downloaded the app, and one of the key things that it does do is make sure that the Ministry of Health then has their updated details. Even that is a huge improvement on what we've had in the past, and we've had, I think, from memory, something like 13,000 businesses as well. But we continue to expect that to grow.

**Media:** Prime Minister, just back on trans-Tasman travel. Just to be clear, you're saying that state border bans in Australia aren't a barrier to the resumption of travel between the two countries? Because this morning, you suggested that that was the case, that it was your belief that Australians would be able to travel internally across Australia first.

**PM:** So let me be really clear: it's not a barrier for us. It's got nothing to do with us in terms of that decision making; it's ultimately a matter for Australia. So there's nothing on our end that means that would be problematic; it's ultimately over to Australia. I would anticipate that they'd probably want to resolve that movement issue first, but, still, as I say, that's absolutely a matter for Australia.

**Media:** But there have been no discussions between New Zealand and Australian officials, or New Zealand officials and some state officials, about trans-Tasman travel on a state-by-state basis?

**PM:** There's been a readying of our borders, and that will, to a certain degree, take—at a state level, there's a role there at a state level, because of, as I understand, the way that they'll be working there through their airports and so on, and so there will have been conversations, but, again, that's not down to timetabling; it's just down to readiness. But I'll continue to stay in touch with Prime Minister Morrison. I anticipate catching up with, again, him this week, just as we regularly do, but from our perspective it's ultimately down to when both sides of the Tasman feel ready.

**Media:** Prime Minister, have you had a chance to see Todd Muller's new—

**PM:** Can I just continue to check that we've got COVID questions, and then I'm happy to come to you. I just want to make sure that I don't have Dr Bloomfield standing here unnecessarily.

**Media:** Why release an app if it doesn't have the functionality to replace the existing contact tracing systems?

**PM:** Yeah, again, just coming back to that: one of those very simple—so there are multiple benefits that the app provides the Ministry of Health. Updated contact information is one of them. We will continue to see rolling updates—one around that additional ability to contact other people who check into a similar venue; also around further work on Bluetooth. So there will continue to be improvements as we go.

**Media:** So just to come back to dance floors: so if you're in a private venue—whether you're having or something like that, private venue—you can have a dance floor, or no dance floor at all. And then a public setting—so bars can't have any dance floors.

**PM:** So, again, we're still continuing in those hospitality settings to have the requirements around "seated", keeping in mind, on any given evening, the number of people who can be coming through a single venue can be significant. Whereas, of course, private venues we continue to also have health guidelines for them around the way they behave in these singular events. But they are singular events, so that's the distinctions that have been drawn there.

**Media:** But if bars have been hired out for a private event, which then could have an—

**PM:** But has a single gathering of a hundred people as opposed to the fact that you could have a thousand people coming through a bar at any given night that isn't for an event such as that.

**Media:** So why is someone who lost their job because of COVID-19 paid so much—

**PM:** Yup, happy—do you mind, Henry, if I just check there's any more for Dr Bloomfield, and then I'm happy to come to that and come to support payments.

**Media:** So you've been pushing for Kiwis to stay home if there's even the slightest hint of sickness, and there's a lot of lack of job security around at the moment. Are you worried that they're not going to take that advice, or what's your advice to people?

**PM:** Yeah, my hope would be—and you've seen some of the announcements we've made today that we're continuing to support people and allow them, if they need to take time to be well, they will be able to do that, because we actually do want all New Zealanders, regardless of their circumstances, to be able to look after themselves and their community by staying home if they're sick.

**Media:** Do you need to more permanently, then, look at increasing sick leave? We're pretty behind—

**PM:** That's not something that's been raised as an issue to date. We'll continue to stay in touch with those representatives who might have a closer ear to the ground on whether that's becoming a limitation. Anything else for Dr Bloomfield? OK. Thank you, Dr Bloomfield.

**Media:** Thank you. Have you had a chance to see Todd Muller's new front bench—

**PM:** Yep.

**Media:** —that he outlined today? Do you consider it a more or less formidable front bench?

**PM:** Oh, I can't say I'll express an opinion either way, actually. Yes, I did see it briefly in the aftermath of Cabinet. And, again, you know, I'll just repeat what I said this morning: it is no easy thing to rebuild a team after a coup. It is tough work, and I wish them well.

**Media:** And does it become self-fulfilling—from your experience of Opposition, does it become self-fulfilling after one successful coup to kind of turn off that revolving leadership contest that kicked off with the Labour Party?

**PM:** Oh, that's ultimately—again, as someone, of course, who's had experience on both sides, I think one thing I've learnt is not to dispense too much advice, particularly when my job is to get on with focusing with our economic recovery, and that's what I'm doing. I wish them well in their recovery as an Opposition. Obviously they're not the party of Key and English now. They are having to rebuild, and I wish them all the best.

**Media:** Prime Minister, why does someone who loses their job because of COVID-19 deserve more money than someone who lost their job for some other reason?

**PM:** I don't think that's how I would characterise it. I think what we need to acknowledge here is that when we have large-scale job loss, and we've had the same with the GFC and we had the same with the Christchurch earthquake, there's acknowledgment that you have a large number of people who suddenly find themselves in an economic environment that is incredibly tough. What we're acknowledging is this has actually been an issue that's been raised in the future of work. Rather than continuing just to have this ongoing response in this way, I'd like us to think about what in the future will stop us having to put in these ad hoc responses. But this is the third time now that we've had to do something like this, when there's been a large-scale shock to our system, and I think it's time we consider the longer term framework.

**Media:** At this point many are saying that overall benefit levels are too low, as your own Welfare Expert Advisory Group told you.

**PM:** Well, obviously, this is short term, and so acknowledging that this is short term firstly; acknowledging also that we've got a much larger group of people who are coming in at one time because it's an extraordinary event; and also that there are limitations for the eligibility. So it's not just income level; it's whether or not there are whole groups of people who will sit outside the system but, equally, will experience a significant shock and possibly lose their homes and so on. And what I'm arguing is, it actually is time for us to look at the longer term settings, when we have previously plugged this gap three times before now.

**Media:** What would you say to someone who lost their job in January because of some other reason—nothing to do with COVID—and has been struggling financially ever since on regular unemployment benefit? If they see this coming for someone, they might say “Why can't I get that money?”

**PM:** Yeah, and we had acknowledged, again, that this is a period that is a one-in-100-year event, but it is going to trigger us to do work outside of this one-in-100-year event, because I think it does highlight a gap that we have in our system.

**Media:** Wouldn't a more long-term solution just be to raise benefits to a level that is liveable—

**PM:** Yeah, and when you look globally, we are one of the few countries that doesn't have any form of social insurance, and that points to, I think, a gap in our system that we have sporadically plugged—in the GFC, in the Christchurch earthquakes, and now. So that does make our system different to others. It has been looked at from time to time, but I think, you know—the fact that we're back here again I think does mean there's something to look to in the longer term. *[Interruption]* Sorry?

**Media:** Sorry, just in terms of the redundancy limit of \$30,000, why is that fair, if someone's worked in their job for 16 years, and getting a pay-out of that much—you know, how do you gauge—

**PM:** Because I think, equally, if we'd not had that, you would ask whether or not it was fair for there to be a support for someone who had received a significant pay-out or, indeed, had access to an income at a certain amount. So I do think, of course, there's always that balance between cushioning the blow for people who are in that situation but also doing it in

such a way that acknowledges that some will have a cushioning that they've had provided by their employer as well.

**Media:** Will you give any consideration to campaigning for just the party vote in the Northland seat?

**PM:** Sorry, will we give any—

**Media:** Will you give any consideration to campaigning for just the party vote in the Northland seat?

**PM:** I've answered many times before that we haven't done that in the past and I see no reason why we would in the future, and it's not a request I've had either.

**Media:** Just a supp on that—does it concern you at all to see the National Party, under its new leadership, leaving the door open to New Zealand First?

**PM:** Oh, look, these, ultimately, are decisions that other parties will make, but we've always been a party that has run in electorates because, of course, we see that representation being really important for our Labour voters in different areas. And that's something we've had for, obviously, a number of elections.

**Media:** If National open the door in terms of, I guess, just campaigning for the party vote in the Northland seat, would you match that?

**PM:** I think one of the things here is that, you know, I accept that we are moving into a phase where people will be quite focused on the election, but as I've said, that's not something we've done before, and my focus—yes, there will come a time when I will switch into that election mode; right now, I need to run a Government and an economic response to COVID. Ben, and then I'll come to [*Inaudible*].

**Media:** Have you received any reports—

**PM:** Oh, you've given up on yours? That's fine, yeah. Ben?

**Media:** Have you received any advice of damage from this morning's earthquake? And one indulgence: I wonder, since you're based in Wellington at the moment, if it was Neve's first earthquake and how she fared?

**PM:** I don't believe it was the first. I think we've had tremors before—well, certainly, Premier House tends to feel them quite acutely. As for damage, I had a report in from NEMA quite soon after. So sometimes it takes a little bit of time for us to get reports of damage. We have quite an automated service where people can tell us whether or not they felt it and the strength of it, so a large number, obviously, reported it. But I haven't as yet had reports of damage, but I'd expect that will take a little bit more time to come through.

**Media:** You've been quite widely memed for your response this morning as it hit when you were live on TV. What was going through your head in that moment when you felt the room shaking and you had to still be on camera?

**PM:** “Are you serious?” That's was what was going through my head—that's not me responding to your question.

**Media:** Did you think about drop, cover, and holding?

**PM:** There, obviously—you can see right here where I was standing. I was standing on that second stair. There's not a lot to drop, cover, and hold under in that precise spot—in fact, in this room. But what I was also mindful of is that it's not always easy to get a real sense of the magnitude of an earthquake in here because of the base isolators. You can tend to move a little bit more than the quake implies in terms of strength.

**Media:** The Natural Disaster Fund is, essentially, the first time in decades—the second there's another large earthquake, the Crown guarantee will automatically be called on. Does that concern you? That would be a massive shock to the Government's books, which are already under pressure.

**PM:** And, again, we always look at our economic management, our financial position, with an eye to being in the “Shaky Isles”, and that’s why, I think, even going into this global pandemic, you see that our debt levels relative to GDP, when you compare us to the rest of the world, were very, very low—because we always manage our books with that in the back of our minds, and that has served us well. And I think you see from the ratings agency that that has served us well.

**Media:** Did New Zealand consider joining the call from its Five Eyes partners—Canada, the UK, and Australia—to condemn China’s actions with regard to Hong Kong? I know we issued a statement this weekend, but it was a separate statement.

**PM:** Yeah, and look, ultimately—you said the Five Eyes. Obviously, my recollection was it was Canada, Australia, and the UK. The US made a statement. We made a statement. Not everything is always done under that Five Eyes banner. Sometimes it will merely be a matter of sequencing different working hours. But the Deputy Prime Minister, our Minister of foreign affairs, did put out a statement. He acknowledged the concerns that New Zealand had, and very similar to some of the statements you’ve seen from other partners.

**Media:** The wording of that statement was much more critical of China and much more sort of on the nose. Our one was somewhat more circumspect. Do you still endorse the spirit of their statement?

**PM:** I wouldn’t have considered it circumspect at all. I thought it was very plain speaking. I think the Deputy Prime Minister rightly set out, on behalf of New Zealand, that there were concerns around amendments based on national security that weren’t involving those from within Hong Kong. So that doesn’t undermine our position, which is in support of a two-systems policy, but we were concerned about whether or not this policy is challenging to that.

**Media:** Prime Minister, earlier on you compared our restrictions, or New Zealand’s restrictions, to Australia’s, suggesting that New Zealand is now better placed than Australia in terms of having fewer restrictions in place. Do you believe that is the case, and is it because of how harsh the initial lockdown restrictions were as opposed to in Australia?

**PM:** We’ve always had—and look, really, that’s just an acknowledgment of this place in time, the relative comparison to where we are. But we have had a policy of go hard, go early, and the benefit of that is that now we see ourselves in a position to be able to come out—yes, with factoring in risk, but actually coming out in a way that opens up our economy more quickly than we otherwise might be able to.

**Media:** What do you make of the management buyout of Stuff Ltd today? Does that make it more politically palatable to Government [*Inaudible*]

**PM:** It’s always been important to us to make sure that we have a strong media sector. It’s in the interests of democracy. So from our perspective, I think what we’ve seen today, both with MediaWorks and with Stuff, underscores why we need to continue the work that we’re doing on supporting the sector and supporting local journalism.

**Media:** Labour’s confidence and supply agreement with the Greens commits to overhauling the welfare system. Do you believe that you’ve adequately delivered on that?

**PM:** We have made significant changes, and, you know, I think it’s only right that in the context of that question, I reflect on the fact that in our first 100 days, we saw a \$5.5 billion investment in things like the family tax credit, establishing the winter energy payment. Since then, changes like indexing benefits to wages, over time, will have a considerable impact on income adequacy for those who are on Government support. Couple that with the doubling of the winter energy payment to cushion the blow of COVID and the fact that we have continued to signal that we will keep moving, but we’ll do it in such a way that is sustainable, that we don’t see a loss of those changes, and that will make a big difference, and already is, to those who have been on Government support.

**Media:** Prime Minister, if a decision is made on finding a delivery partner for the light rail Auckland system before the election, will Labour campaign on delivering the light rail in its next term?

**PM:** Yeah. Our focus on getting Auckland moving has not changed. Our focus on transport from the city to the airport has not changed, but, of course, I'll wait until I have Cabinet decisions to speak in any more detail on that.

**Media:** Just on the \$3 billion infrastructure fund, what kind of assurances can you give that it's not just going to all be grey infrastructure, I guess—roads, asphalt? Because there is some concern that green infrastructure is going to be bypassed in the rush to get shovel-ready projects in the ground.

**PM:** First of all, I would look to the Budget, which had an absolute focus on jobs, jobs, jobs. And, with that focus, we were looking at ways that we could solve challenges we already had. We already had challenges in housing, so we're funding 8,000 new public houses. We already had challenges with the issue of income adequacy and food security, so we expanded food in schools, which creates 2,000 jobs. We had issues with the cleanliness and ongoing degradation of our waterways, so we're funding fencing and restoration of wetlands, and also predator control. You know, this is where we have used COVID as an opportunity to boost funding for areas that will make a material difference to our environment going forward.

On infrastructure, I'd say that, actually, when it comes to the way that we will focus on infrastructure, you already saw in the upgrade programme the way that we've balanced finding those shovel-ready projects but also futureproofing them, and a number of those projects, which improve our public transport offering and, for instance, double-laning and bringing in the ability for cycle and walkways, we actually already identified. So that's been a big part of what we already had in the \$12 billion upgrade.

**Media:** Prime Minister, now that Parliament's back and select committees are back, have the Epidemic Response Committees finished?

**PM:** What I have signalled previously is that that was the committee for a period where we weren't able to sit, when we didn't have select committees, when there wasn't a question time. Now we have business as usual, but, ultimately, I leave that to the Leader of the House to deal with that side of business.

**Media:** None this week, or are they done now?

**PM:** Look, I don't see the role that it needs to play now that Parliament is back to normal, and we do want to make sure that other Opposition members on other select committees are having a voice on the COVID response and they will have the chance to question through the Estimates process through other select committee. But, ultimately, that is for the Leader of the House to deal with what happens with the Epidemic Response committee from here. Ben.

**Media:** Prime Minister, the Opposition leader has been criticised by some minority groups, including some vital partners in the post - March 15 community strengthening for displaying a "Make America Great Again" hat in his office. So my question is do you consider a MAGA hat to be a symbol of oppression?

**PM:** Do you know: it's not for me to determine how other people feel around different symbols or memorabilia. I can't determine how those things make other people feel. I think, ultimately, though, as politicians, we're judged on our record. And that's what we campaign on. It's what people look to when they make a determination of whether they support us or not. And I'm very happy to stand on the record that we have as a Government over this past three years. OK. Thank you, everyone.

### **conclusion of press conference**