

**POST-CABINET PRESS CONFERENCE: MONDAY, 12 APRIL 2021
HANSARD TRANSCRIPT**

PM: Kia ora koutou katoa. Good afternoon, everyone. I want to start by acknowledging the passing of His Royal Highness Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh. Our thoughts continue to be with Her Majesty the Queen and the Royal Family at this time. Prince Philip's links with New Zealand were many and varied. The Duke of Edinburgh's Hillary Award has helped thousands of young Kiwis with self-development over the last five decades, in some cases helping to transform lives, including in prisons, refugee centres, and teen-parent units. He was patron of the Royal New Zealand Yacht Squadron and a life member of the Aviation Industry Association of New Zealand. He was an honorary Fellow of the New Zealand institute of professional engineers, the royal navy volunteer reserve veterans association of New Zealand, and the Royal New Zealand College of General Practitioners. He held ranks of Field Marshall of the New Zealand Army, Admiral of the Fleet of the Royal New Zealand Navy, and Marshall of the Royal New Zealand Air Force.

There are three condolence books for His Royal Highness at Parliament and one at the National Library. Visits and Ceremonial Events are also providing advice to local councils on setting up books in other centres. People are also able to email messages to condolences@dia.govt.nz. I can confirm that a State memorial service will be held for Prince Philip in New Zealand at 3 p.m. on Wednesday, 21 April, and we'll be basing that physically here in Wellington. The Governor-General and I will participate in the service, and we will put out further details shortly. Tomorrow, flags will fly at half-mast while the House sits for statements from party leaders acknowledging the life of His Royal Highness. It will then adjourn for the day. Flags will also be flown at half-mast on the day of the funeral in the United Kingdom and on Wednesday, 21 April, the day of New Zealand's State memorial.

A look now to the rest of the week: tomorrow, I am in Wellington for the notice of motion in the House, but I will also be presenting the Prime Minister's Science Prize at the National War Memorial. Wednesday is the House and Cabinet committees. On Thursday, we will make an announcement on boosting mental health support in schools. Friday, I will be speaking at the opening of the Comvita Wellness Lab in Auckland and also attending Polyfest.

Last Friday marked one year since the establishment of New Zealand's managed isolation and quarantine system, and I'd like to take this opportunity to once again thank all those who have worked so hard over the past 12 months to keep New Zealand and New Zealanders safe. When we set out our COVID vaccination programme earlier this year, we prioritised workers at these facilities along with those working at the border. I can confirm that as of this afternoon 86 percent of managed isolation and quarantine facility workers have been vaccinated. On Wednesday, we will provide an additional update on progress. But our position has always been that, from a certain date, those not vaccinated will need to be moved from the front line. That date was previously set as 12 April through to 30 April. That's why we've had a very deliberate strategy around ensuring every person working at the border or in an MIQ facility has had the opportunity to be vaccinated before we start working through the process of those workers being redeployed.

As part of that strategy, we set up vaccination sites at work places. We worked with employers to make sure workers were given time and support to go and get vaccinated. We communicated directly with workers via letters and emails. We ran online health question and answer sessions for workers. We set up a dedicated email address for employers to contact us with vaccine-related questions. And we rolled out a social media campaign to encourage uptake. On 23 March, efforts were stepped up, requiring employers to have individual conversations with workers to identify and record their vaccination status and provide support for those not yet vaccinated. On 31 March, and then again on Tuesday last week, employers were asked to provide up-to-date information about the vaccination status of their workers.

On Wednesday last week, we issued guidance and next steps for workers who remained unable or unwilling to be vaccinated. As Brigadier Bliss said at 1 p.m. today, the safety of our border workforce is paramount. They have sacrificed so much to do what they do for us, which is why we feel obligated to make sure that they are vaccinated and that we keep them safe. And that is why, as I said, from today onwards, if a border or MIQ worker is not vaccinated, their employers will need to consider alternative options for them. By the end of April, those not vaccinated will not be permitted to work in those high-risk workplaces and will be moved to other roles. And, as I've said, that's a time line that has been set out for some time.

Some people have legitimate questions around the vaccine—for instance, if they have pre-existing health conditions—and we are working with people to allay concerns and provide support. But, ultimately, we also need to make sure we fulfil our obligations as employers and as contractors and make sure we keep them safe.

The vaccination programme is the biggest and most ambitious in New Zealand's history. We've always been open that two periods in time—the targeted element at the beginning of the programme, but also the massive ramp up as we head into the general population—will present challenges. The rest of the world is seeing that too. But we are making progress and moving overall towards a safer environment here in New Zealand.

I have Minister Hipkins here as well. We are happy to provide further information and to take your questions now.

Media: Why haven't we half-masted the flags for the whole week of mourning?

PM: Yeah, we have different legislation around our flags than the likes of the UK and Canada. And so our flags, you will have seen half-masted straightaway. They will be during the House, they will on the day of the funeral, and they will also at the time that we hold the State memorial here. And that's just simply the legislative framework we have. There was a discussion around the fact that we could rescind that and set it all the way through, but it's just the nature of our framework.

Media: Why did you pick 21 April? It's also the Queen's birthday?

PM: Look, ultimately, what we also had to take into account was not wanting to wait too long after the official funeral. And so we did have conversations around that as well. We're also having to juggle investitures here in New Zealand, so there were some challenges. But, ultimately, that was the closest proximity to the funeral that we were able to hold that event.

Media: Is it appropriate to have it on her birthday?

PM: Oh, look, no one wants anyone to be in a state of grief at a time of their birthday—no one—but, equally, of course, New Zealand has an obligation to make sure that we respectfully do not hold the memorial before the funeral but do it as close proximity thereafter as we could.

Media: If you don't specifically know how many front-line border workers there are, how can you say that 86 percent have been vaccinated?

PM: Because we do know. You'll have heard us at the end of last week. We gave the update of over 80 percent. Over the course of today, we've been reaching out to managed isolation facilities to get their latest numbers, and that's brought back that figure of 86 percent.

Media: So how many are there?

PM: So of the total figure that we're working at, as of today, working in our managed isolation facilities, we've had 3,472 have been vaccinated.

Media: Of the total—

PM: Of the total of 4,010.

Media: Do we know why the security guard basically didn't turn up to vaccinations?

Hon Chris Hipkins: My understanding of the second—you're talking about case C, the second security guard?

Media: No, the one last week.

Hon Chris Hipkins: Oh, the one last week—no, I don't have more information about why they didn't arrive. They had several appointments. They simply didn't present for those appointments. The second person—my understanding is that they had one appointment which they missed; people do miss appointments. And that their second appointment that had been booked for them, they were already isolating as a close contact of case B, when that rolled around. So they didn't come out of isolation to go to the vaccination appointment.

Media: So why don't we know this by now, about the one last week?

PM: Obviously, health officials have the rationale. They know enough to tell us it wasn't vaccine hesitancy. But they know the individual details of that case, and we've left it up to them as to whether or not they provide the details as to why, the personal reason that that person did not attend.

Overall, we know that First Security, as of the end of last week, has 79 percent of their workforce had been vaccinated. They of course know the urgency we place on them ensuring that 100 percent of their workforce are vaccinated, otherwise they will need to withdraw those workers who are currently in our MIQ facilities.

Media: From my understanding—and please correct me if I'm wrong—you had said that they had until the end of April, but you've changed it today till, basically, from saying tomorrow, that employers—

PM: No, we've always had a period. So you will have heard me say on Friday that that process of sitting down with those who have not been vaccinated starts today and runs through till the end of April, so that from 1 May, essentially, no one who has not been vaccinated should be working in our facilities.

Media: And what exactly do you mean by "their employers will need to consider their options"?

PM: Basically either they're redeployed, if there is not an option to redeploy them then it will be up to the employer to work through what then happens with that individual, but they cannot work in MIQ.

Media: Does it worry you what sort of a message it sends when you're able to stand up and here and say that those two appointments were missed, but not provide the reason for that, and what message that might send to people around the vaccines and to those that perhaps do have hesitancy, and realise that there's no accountability for those people?

PM: Well, firstly, I'd say that there is. If this individual is not vaccinated, they will not be able to work in these facilities. So here the bar is very high. There is, essentially, no reason that we consider acceptable. Because it is a facility that individuals are at risk, we feel an obligation to make sure that they are looked after. The whole point of the vaccine is to ensure that they do not become seriously unwell, and so regardless of whatever the rationale was, from May none of them will be acceptable.

Hon Chris Hipkins: It's really important to clarify, and we've been through this before. Through the contact tracing process, which is how we understand that the person had two appointments and missed them, we interview; the public health officials will know the answers to those questions. We share that information, or they share that information with us and we share it with you, where there is a public health reason to do so. People share huge amounts of their personal information about who they've seen, when they've seen them, why they've seen them, and so on. We share that, and they share that with us, when there's a public health risk or some other reason to share it. The fact that someone missed a vaccine appointment, yes, public health people will know that. They have told us it's not because the person was vaccine-hesitant, and I accept that as an explanation, but that doesn't mean that

somebody who happens to have contracted COVID-19 has to share every detail of their life with the New Zealand public.

Media: At 1 p.m. the director-general said he didn't know as yet how many border workers haven't been vaccinated. How's it now that you're able to provide that figure?

PM: It's MBIE that are ultimately responsible for the gathering of that information, so that doesn't surprise me that the director-general may not have had that before him at that time. We sought an update, of course, before we came down so we could provide it to you. You'll recall that on Friday we indicated that it was over 80 percent; we're now at 86 percent. On Wednesday we'll provide another update again on the progress that's been made, and that'll be provided by MBIE who has responsibility for MIQ.

Media: Are you thinking of the MIQ workers or border workers, though, because we're talking about how many border workers there are—

PM: No, MIQ workers.

Media: Sorry, we want to know how many border workers there are and how many—

PM: Well, actually for the border workers my understanding is that, actually, as a proportion, it's relatively high for our border workers, but MIQ is what I'm speaking to today.

Hon Chris Hipkins: The issue with border workers is, obviously, there's quite a big data exercise here because the size of that workforce very much depends on who you count. So are you counting everybody who works for an airline, for example, and is it all of the airlines, and so on. So we can provide a bit more information on that on Wednesday, but one of the exercises that's been going through at the moment is comparing to the testing information, because some of the people who have been tested, for example, may no longer be working in those roles and may not be vaccinated because they may not have worked there for several months, but they'll still be on the testing register.

PM: The overall border numbers that we've been provided are relatively high, but we've now broken it down into specifically MIQ. MBIE even have insights into individual facilities and how they are tracking. They're in relatively similar positions, as individual facilities, where on average we're looking at about 14 percent still yet to be vaccinated.

Media: So, specifically, how many people are in your only group 1?

PM: In tier 1, it's upward of 20,000, from memory.

Hon Chris Hipkins: Yeah, around about 20,000, plus their household contacts, and in the household contacts we don't have a firm number on that. Very much depends on the border workers telling us how many of their household contacts there are.

Media: So how many of that 20,000 haven't been vaccinated?

PM: So, look, today we're focused on giving you the explicit breakdown, the latest on our managed isolation facility workers. We have individual numbers for different agencies—Customs, the proportion is very high, MPI very high, Immigration, again, on average my recollection is over 80 percent for those agencies. But we'll provide that breakdown of the latest on Wednesday as well.

Media: How many of the 20,000 haven't been—

PM: It is, as I'm saying, Tova, it is the vast majority. We have the individuals for the agencies. In most cases it's upward of 80 percent, but we'll look to provide that on Wednesday as well.

Media: [*Inaudible*] And the number of workers [*Inaudible*]. Why not release that data? Why can't we see that?

PM: We've said that we've provided you the overall numbers. I've given you that, on average, for each facility it's roughly 14 percent. For the facility in question that we've been dealing with, they were at 81 percent as of Friday, but again I'm happy to provide that data

on Wednesday. I think, look, the question here you're asking is: do we have an insight of the trajectory of managed isolation facilities generally? The answer is yes. Of course, that will change daily, so we've got a snapshot for you today; we'll provide another one in the next 72 hours?

Media: We've been asking for daily snapshots for some time, because—

PM: Sorry, Derek?

Media: We've been asking for daily snapshots on vaccination roll-out for some time, and we haven't really—we haven't been given one. Why not?

PM: I would refute that. We have. We started reporting on Wednesday with a dashboard.

Media: Yeah, the dashboard shows daily numbers the week—

PM: Yeah, absolutely. But keeping in mind, I mean, this is a very—as you've just seen, we've provided this data with you from today. It is changed even from what we had on Friday, because, of course, every day, we're expecting that people are being vaccinated, and so we're having to make sure that we're updating and have the most accurate picture possible, which is why we're providing information today, and we'll do so again on Wednesday.

Media: On February 15, you said that it would take two or three weeks to get through the whole of the border workforce, but clearly that hasn't occurred. Why is that?

PM: Logistically, our view is absolutely that was the time it would take to get those first doses out, and we had the capacity to do so. We've a position, though, where there are some individuals who, within that time frame, have not been. They now know that, of course, a window for them to be vaccinated and remain in their roles is closing.

Media: So it's down to the individuals for why that hasn't—

PM: Oh, look, we also have to make sure that it's accessible, that they are able to have the time, that our nightshift workers are given the opportunity to be vaccinated in a time that's meaningful as well for them. And there are—Minister Hipkins, perhaps, can expand on this—there are some workers who are not consistently in our managed isolation facilities; there are some who are there consistently, but there are some who will be more sporadically involved.

Hon Chris Hipkins: Yeah, so, I mean, if you look at the overall total number who might fall within that 20,000, you'll have some people who, for example, might have worked a couple of shifts—they might work for a contracted security firm, they may predominantly work doing security somewhere else, and they may have worked a few shifts. When they've worked a shift in MIQ, they therefore need to be tested, but they may no longer be working there. If you think about airline staff, for example, someone may have crewed a couple of international flights several months ago, not done any international flying since then—they would still be included, potentially, in that number.

So one of the things that we've got to do, and we're talking about hundreds of employers, because you've got everything from, you know, Air New Zealand and our big Government agencies, who employ a lot of people, through to, you know, the small retail outlets that are working air side of the border, where they may only have a handful of employees who are working in them. So we've got to go through and identify each individual person, what their NHI number is so we can link it to their vaccination record, and make sure that if someone hasn't been vaccinated, we understand the reason for that. Now, that's a process that does require a bit of manual reconciliation.

Media: On the surveillance testing, Brigadier Jim Bliss today was basically saying, "Look, this worker—they weren't tested within the 14-day cycle and we can't tell when they were last tested. We have some information but mostly all we get is a high-level—'This percentage has been tested.'" What confidence can you have that your legal order that these workers be tested every fortnight is actually occurring if he can't be confident it is?

Hon Chris Hipkins: So we do have a register—about 12,000 active border workers are on the register, which means we're monitoring those 12,000 people, they are being tested, their test results are automatically linked back into the register—we can tell when they have been tested and when they haven't. There are an additional group of workers where the employers are not using the register; they have been keeping their own records. I am making the use of the register compulsory, so this will ultimately address this particular data issue, and it is predominantly a data issue rather than an issue of people being tested. But that will mean that we will then have the complete register so we'll be able to have all of that information in a format that's easier to report.

Media: When is that happening and how are you doing that?

Hon Chris Hipkins: We've just gone through the legal process of getting the order in place. I haven't yet signed the order. I'm expecting that final order to come in the next sort of 24 hours or so, then it'll be signed, and that notification will go out.

PM: Keep in mind, in the meantime there is a legal requirement on those employers to ensure that their employees are tested. So that is where the obligation currently sits. We've taken that extra step of then obliging them to share those records as well.

Media: What happens if they don't—

PM: Fines and reputational damage.

Media: You don't know, currently, if they are or aren't, right?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Sorry, what's—

PM: By law they are obliged to—

Hon Chris Hipkins: Are or aren't what? What's your particular question?

Media: You don't know, currently, if they are doing the 14—

Hon Chris Hipkins: So employers—and if you take MIQ, the contractors—who are supplying labour to MIQ, they are reporting to MIQ their testing results regularly.

Media: Sorry, just on the fines and reputational damage, you did say—on the reputational damage, are you suggesting that if they don't comply, you're going to name and shame employers—

PM: Not at all, but you've got an example right now that we're speaking to, where obviously there's a discussion over whether or not obligations have been met.

Media: The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade have been issuing permits for companies to export weapons and military equipment to countries while they've been on a United Nations blacklist for killing children in the war in Yemen. Does that concern you?

PM: Yeah, and what I've already said is that we absolutely have an expectation that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, who are the ones that administer this regime, are upholding our law. So that means they need to follow any UN sanctions that are in place and any UN resolutions that are in place. Secondly, they also need to make sure that they're operating under our regulations as well. What's been brought into question is whether or not that regime is fit for purpose. We've asked the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade to undertake a piece of work since recently we had the debate over, for instance, Air New Zealand export orders.

Media: Do you think that it's appropriate for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade to be involved in the review, though?

PM: Well, ultimately, we are—and I've said to the ministry and so has the Minister of Foreign Affairs, people have to have faith in that review work, so let's make sure that in doing it we're appointing individuals and creating a process where people at the end of it can say, yep, they agree that it was done in a way that they can see credibility in the outcome.

Media: You don't think being on a blacklist for killing children—the United Nations should—

PM: No. Whilst I haven't commented on individual exporters, of course we expect our values to be maintained in this process. That's the whole point of it.

Media: When you say border workers who haven't been vaccinated by the end of April cannot work for MIQ, how exactly are you going to enforce that? Are you going to put a health order in place, or how—

PM: So at the moment, we're looking at whether or not that will require a section 11, if I've got that—

Hon Chris Hipkins: Yes.

PM: That is correct, but ultimately MBIE will be making sure that no individuals at that point who haven't been will be able work there.

Hon Chris Hipkins: And it is being built into the contracts.

PM: Contracts in particular provide us a nice easy way to deal with that.

Media: Prime Minister, the Ministry of Health—you announced in Budget 2019 that you would spend a lot of money creating a new front-line mental health service. It was due to spend \$145 million by July. It's only spent \$67 million at the end of March—less than half of that. They say COVID was part of the problem there but is that really good enough? Are you disappointed with how slow the roll-out's been?

PM: Yeah, and if we look at what we've been able to see delivered in that period, so this primary mental health service, which is essentially allowing people that when we go and visit their GPs, that if their GP has concern that they are in distress, that they're able to see someone straight away who can provide support. So that service now, I'm told, is reaching potentially up to 900,000 enrolled individuals who might be enrolled in a GP's service where that service is provided. It's provided over 9,000 cases of interaction to support people who need it when they need it most. We do want to keep that roll-out going and we do want to pick up the pace of that, but, unfortunately, the Ministry of Health has identified that in some cases COVID has delayed that roll-out.

Media: Has it actually had any effect on the overall demand for mental health services? The point of it, if I'm not wrong, was to kind of take off some of the strain off the acute end, so [*Inaudible*] kind of stayed with the actual acute cases, but we're still seeing wait times—

PM: Two things I'd say on that. I think it's definitely too early to say that we would see the impacts of this primary mental health roll-out as a point of intervention for our acute services. I think it's far too early to say that. But that is the ultimate goal of that programme, is to support people earlier, or to support people who previously would've received no help and not even manifest in our acute programmes, because keep in mind, for instance, a number of people who attempt to take their own lives, the proportion of which have no contact with mental health services before that point, is relatively high.

Media: Given you would've expected to have to have an effect on acute services right now—if that's fair—

PM: Not necessarily.

Media: —why not give more help to acute services, then, which are clearly under some serious underfunding.

PM: And I would argue—

Media: You only had the help you had to legally give under—

PM: —that, of course, we see that as well. I mean, look, I was only on Friday at the new improved services that have been built at the Mason Clinic. We purchased extra property there to support those services. We are redoing acute mental health services in Palmerston North, in the Hamilton region as well. We absolutely agree and know that we need to prioritise continuing to work on those services too.

Media: Just on the tomorrow's motion for Prince Philip in the House, what will that include and what is the significance of that, particularly with the House sitting for a motion and then rising straight away for the rest of the day?

PM: Yeah, and look in these cases which, you know, are infrequent, it's about making sure that we demonstrate the respect and regard for which we hold the Duke of Edinburgh and just demonstrate, of course, that we acknowledge the impact that this will have on the royal household and our situation, of course, with our head of State. It gives every leader of the House—leader of the parties—a chance to reflect also on their perspective of the contribution that His Royal Highness had within New Zealand as well. And that connection was significant, particularly for our armed forces. That is being acknowledged, and has been acknowledged, in the fact that our Defence Attaché is one of a few members who have been invited to be a part of the memorial service—and that's an acknowledgement, I think, of the connection that the Duke of Edinburgh had to New Zealand and our Defence Force.

Media: There are now three cases linked to the Grand Millennium Hotel but Australia hasn't changed border settings. Now, obviously back in January it only took one case for Australia to close its border to New Zealand. Why do you think the change has happened? Has there been some sort of shift? Is there better communication? Is there an agreed trans-Tasman bubble protocol?

PM: I think it's just a demonstration of the fact that every case will have its own circumstances. So what we were dealing with in Northland was a situation of a released person who had come through our border system, was found to have contracted COVID late in their stay, and then had a number of, obviously, locations of interest. However, this case—someone's been picked up in our surveillance. They're linked to a known case. Their locations of interest are small. Very good communication between our officials. So that doesn't surprise me. I think each circumstance won't necessarily be about the number of cases but the circumstances around those cases. Would you agree with me?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Yeah.

Media: Can I also ask about—on Prince Philip. Obviously, his death has been given the reverence it deserves, but there's a sort of unmentioned tension around his record of making racist statements, his links in New Zealand to his family as colonisers. So my question is: will the memorial service, will that attempt to square the circle of his legacy or to deal with that challenge or would you advise people that feel outraged just to tune out to this day?

PM: I'd just say that, you know, that through our history, of course, we will have challenging elements to the foundation of our history as a nation, but now also offers an opportunity for us to acknowledge the contribution of someone who, ultimately—no matter what anyone's opinion will be—who, ultimately, gave his entire life, almost, to the service of others. And I said this at some other point today. You know, when we come into politics I think we very knowingly do so for a particular period of time. We often don't know how long that will be, but we for the most part know it will not be the majority of our working life. But for Prince Philip it was, and he knew that and I think there's something very significant about that.

Media: Prime Minister, you were sent an open letter from health and social services today regarding drug reform. What is your response to that letter and what consideration will your Government give to change it?

PM: Yeah, I want to absolutely acknowledge the purpose and the point of why they are raising the issues that they are. In fact, as a Government in the last term, we saw some of those issues around: how do we reduce the harm that's been done amongst those, particularly, who are not the suppliers, who we still believe we need to go hard against, but those who are found to be in personal possession? We changed the Misuse of Drugs Act to oblige the police now to make sure that they take a health-based approach for those individuals regardless of the drug they're found in possession of, unless it is not in the public interest to do so.

We've seen as a result of that a real decline in the number of people who are going before the courts. It's sitting now at about 40 percent for certain drugs; 20 percent for cannabis, which has remained about static. What I'd like to do now is dig into that in more detail. Is it achieving the goal we set, which was a health-based approach, or are we seeing a bit more of a subjective approach being taken, and that's a conversation I'd like to have with some of those organisations.

Media: In terms of the memorial service—

PM: Can I add one more thing. I do think on an issue like this, you know, it would be helpful if Parliament took more of a bipartisan approach. We have already made significant moves to make this a health-based issue, but I really would challenge, for instance, the National Party, to consider their position on this issue because they criticised us when we did that, and I would like to see whether or not Parliament can reach some consensus on these issues.

Media: In terms of the Duke's memorial service, have you had any guidance from the palace.

Media: In terms of the Duke's memorial service, have you had any guidance from the palace? Our memorial service is likely to be larger than his actual funeral. Have you had any communication with the palace about that?

PM: Yes. Our Cabinet Office is in frequent contact with the palace, as will be a number of Commonwealth nations, and they'll be made aware of our arrangements. I think that there is an understanding, of course, that different countries will be in different circumstances, and their rules will allow them to do different things. We happen to be in the very lucky position where we can openly gather together, and I think there's an appreciation of that. But at the same time, there is of course the opportunity for close family and friends to be gathering for the Duke in the United Kingdom itself.

Media: It's rather unusual, isn't it?

PM: It is a very unusual set of circumstances, but I think that just speaks to the hard work everyone has done here. We, however, have experienced times where we've not been able to have large numbers gather for funerals, and I think that gives an added appreciation for New Zealanders, who understand how sad it is when that's not a possibility.

Media: The final count in the Samoa election is under way. It's very much still in the balance. How do you think the sort of competitive result, whichever way it goes, will affect Samoa - New Zealand relations, and do you have any concerns about the potential for, you know, instability in the Pacific, given the possibility of a deadlock? There have been allegations of electoral fraud made by Prime Minister Tuilaepa against FAST. Does that concern you?

PM: You know, when it comes to some of the exchanges between political parties, I won't venture into that space particularly. Those are issues, of course, that their judicial system will be able to resolve. It has been involved in previous elections. I think what we accept is that there's a bit of water yet to go under the bridge in terms of process, and I don't think that's a surprise given the outcome that that election has produced. When it comes to the future, whatever the final outcome is, New Zealand's relationship with both candidates, including the incumbent and challenger, is very, very strong. Those ties with both—of course, Prime Minister Tuilaepa but also what was his Deputy Prime Minister—are close, and, I am very confident that regardless of the outcome, will remain so.

Media: You talked about digging down into that drug data since November last year following the referendum result. Has any digging started?

PM: Yeah. So I've received just recently a bit more on that, and that's why I was able to provide that difference in, for instance, drug charges. But what I want to go back to and look in a little bit more detail—at the moment, what I have been provided with is where that was the most significant charge that was laid, whereas what I hear continues to be an issue is if you have someone who has received multiple charges, where those possession charges

are still featuring more prominently. So I just want to get into a bit more detail around that. It is something that I do want to provide more publicly, because I think this would be helpful for us, to be able to see the effects of those law changes, whether or not we think it's having the desired effect, which ultimately is, for individuals and individual possession, let's take that health approach.

Media: The data in January for where drug possession was the most serious charge still showed a third of those people going to court and still showed about 114 people—

PM: The most recent I have—is that for overall or broken down?

Media: The most serious charge, drug possession.

PM: But for cannabis or for—

Media: For all.

PM: For all. Yep. So as I say, the data that I've seen—and if my memory is serving me correctly—is that for cannabis, it looks a little more static against previous years and is sitting at around the 20 percent mark. Methamphetamine—it's come off a very high percentage, where almost always there's a charge, close down to about 40 percent.

Media: And where would you like that to be for cannabis?

PM: Well, I think ultimately the goal was that for possession, we were moving people to a health-based approach where we're treating the cause of the issue. So unless there was a public interest reason not to do so—I'd like to hear through, perhaps, case studies: what are the public interest tests that are being applied here; where are the police making those decisions where they believe a charge is still appropriate?

Media: On electricity, there are some manufacturers that are curtailing production of their goods because wholesale prices are really high. Is the Government looking at changing any of the rules around the way the market's regulated or anything like that to try to correct a situation where manufacturers are having to cut back?

PM: I do believe that Minister Woods is looking a little bit at our current situation. Best to get a quick update from her as to what she's commissioned from officials, but it is fair to say we're keeping a very close eye on what's happening in the market at the moment, and there's a range of contributing factors to why we're seeing what we are right now.

Media: Do you have any response to the letter from the National Party last week, seeking an extension to the consideration of the Climate Change Commission report?

PM: I don't know that—I personally can't give you an update on that, Richard, I'm afraid, so I'll need to come back to you on that.

Media: On festival drug testing, you said the Government indicated last week that you'd make a new law permanent. The operators were actually aiming to be at most of the largest festivals in the country, but lacked enough funding to buy the very expensive equipment that's needed. Are you looking at all in maybe possibly funding drug testing at all, or is that a red line you wouldn't cross?

PM: No, look, I wouldn't say that it's something that's been ruled out; it's just not something that we've considered. You know, our focus was just getting the regulatory regime in place that would allow the testing to occur in the first place. So that's not a question that's been put to me; it's not an issue that's been raised with me directly, around the abilities. I would like to see—I mean, for the most part, you do see festivals held at different points in time. What would be useful is if we could see a little bit of rotation moving across the country to enable wider use as possible.

Media: Minister Hipkins, does it sit comfortably with you, the increase in money being spent on contractors? Obviously, in Health, you would accept that, given the COVID situation, but the likes of the Ministry of Transport, for example—does that sit comfortably with you, given your own motivation to actually see a reduction there?

Hon Chris Hipkins: The Government's expectations are really clear, and we are seeing the percentage of, you know, overall expenditure on consultants and contractors going down, relative to the spend on people who are employed by the Public Service. But, yes, COVID-19 has resulted in an increase in some areas. Some of the big change proposals have resulted in an increase. And in places like Transport, where it is largely a contractor-led industry, then you will see increases, because we're doing a lot more in that space.

Media: Like?

Hon Chris Hipkins: What's that?

Media: What are you doing in the Ministry of Transport space that's requiring—

Hon Chris Hipkins: Well, we're building more roads.

Media: You're building more roads?

Hon Chris Hipkins: Yeah.

PM: Including for public transport. I mean, the spend that we have got across transport is significant. It is one of the most significant contributing factors to our climate profile, so we also have a considerable programme there to try and transition away from the ongoing contribution of transport to our carbon emissions. So I think if you talked to Minister Wood in particular, there is a significant work programme that's going on in Transport. You've been critiquing us on things like light rail as well—you'd know. Thanks, everyone.

conclusion of press conference