

**POST-CABINET PRESS CONFERENCE: MONDAY, 3 MAY 2021
HANSARD TRANSCRIPT**

PM: [Audio missing] I look to the week ahead. Tomorrow and Wednesday, I'm in Wellington for meetings and the House. Thursday, I'm in Whanganui visiting Te Oranganui, an iwi organisation delivering a range of health and social services, including COVID vaccines, to around 55,000 people. I'll also be visiting E Tū Tāngata, a PDU-funded pilot programme delivering integrated employment and trades training. On Friday, I have meetings in the electorate before speaking at the Trans-Tasman Business Circle and SportsConnect and Women in Sport Captains Lunch.

Today, I have an announcement to make about the next step in New Zealand's COVID recovery, and am therefore joined with the Minister for COVID-19. In late March, Cook Islands Prime Minister Mark Brown visited New Zealand. During the visit, he and I agreed we'd work in earnest towards a May commencement of two-way quarantine-free travel between our two countries. So it gives me great pleasure today to be able to announce that on 17 May, on the basis that a clear set of criteria is met, this arrangement will come into effect.

Long-term residents and critical workers have, of course, been able to travel quarantine-free from the Cook Islands to New Zealand since January 21, but it has not been until now that we have been satisfied that it is safe for New Zealand to be sending people in the other direction.

The health and safety of the people of the Cooks has at all times been paramount for both the leadership in the Cook Islands and here in New Zealand, and a huge amount of work has been going on behind the scenes to ensure the readiness on both sides, should we have a set of circumstances that leads to a case being picked up in the Cook Islands. The Cook Islands are in a stronger position to prevent, detect, and manage any potential COVID-19 outbreak, which means a two-way travel bubble can now proceed.

A green travel zone between the Cooks and New Zealand will allow families to reconnect, commercial arrangements to resume, and tourism in the Cooks to kick off once again. This will all provide a boost to the Cook Islands economy and help in the country's recovery from the impacts of COVID-19.

Commencement of the bubble will be subject to the normal final checks, including airline and airport readiness, all necessary protocols and frameworks in place, and the final sign-off from the Director-General of Health. In many ways, these conditions and the overall arrangement are similar to what we have in place with Australia. And as in the case of Australia, the bubble comes with a "flyer beware" caveat. If there is an outbreak in New Zealand, flights are likely to be paused, but in addition to that, our plan if there is an outbreak in the Cooks is more explicit. Given the size and social settings of the Cooks, a highly precautionary approach would be taken to any outbreak.

As outlined in the second of the criteria listed above, we've put in place plans for humanitarian support and, if required, the return of travellers to New Zealand. So rather than just asking everyone to shelter in place, like we would in Australia, we would be more likely to get our people home. We view this as necessary to reduce pressure on the Cook Islands and minimise further spread of the virus.

I would note, the vaccination of the Cook Islands population was not considered a precondition for the two-way travel bubble. But in terms of vaccines, New Zealand will be supplying the Cooks with enough Pfizer doses to immunise their entire population, and we do expect the vaccine roll-out to commence this month, but there is a bit more work that needs to be done before that's able to be finalised.

A travel bubble with the Cooks signifies another milestone in New Zealand's reconnection with the world. Both countries' strong response to COVID has allowed this arrangement, which is unique or hugely significant for many people, and I'd like to once more take the

chance to thank every New Zealander for helping make it possible and, of course, everyone in the Cook Islands. We will over time look to incrementally extend quarantine-free travel to other countries as it is safe to do so. But for now we look forward to the 17th and to those first quarantine-free flights taking off from New Zealand across the Pacific. We're now happy to take questions.

Media: If we exported COVID-19 to the Cook Islands, what kind of support would we offer them to curb the outbreak?

PM: Well, of course, a lot of the work that's been done to date has all been about preparedness—if we had that worst-case scenario: making sure that PCR testing, the ability to undertake a large number of tests in the Cook Islands, is in place, and that training has been undertaken; that there's good contact tracing support and public health support. We consider it very likely that if there were an outbreak, we would likely send some of our health people to the Cook Islands to help manage any outbreak, and we would look to try and reduce its impact, and that may mean bringing people back.

Media: Would we be sending mercy flights, repatriation flights, to the Cooks, kind of thing? How would it work if there was an outbreak?

PM: I'll have the Minister expand on that, but it would very much depend on the scenario. If it were isolated individuals, involving, say, one facility, that might mean a very different approach to if you had something that was a wider outbreak affecting the rest of the island. What we'd be looking to do is try and reduce down as much as possible the impact on the Cook Islands' health system. Ultimately, in many cases, if we had severe cases of COVID-19, they're likely to need to be managed in New Zealand anyway, so the key goal for us would be to reduce the incidence and try and manage that within our facilities.

Hon Chris Hipkins: So one of the things we've been working through with the Cook Islands is that, in responding to any outbreak up there, we are likely to be responding to something here as well. So we couldn't necessarily just send everybody up to the Cook Islands, because there's likely to be work required back here in New Zealand as well. So just making sure that we've got the right understandings of who would do what, who would go to the Cook Islands, who would stay here—again, mapping out all those different scenarios, and, effectively, gaming them out, so that they know what to expect and we know what to expect. A lot of that's happened already, and obviously we've now got a couple of weeks just to finalise all of that and make sure everybody understands who's going to be doing what.

Media: In terms of getting those Pfizer vaccines over to the Cooks, how will that work? How do we get them over there and do we provide vaccinators, etc., to help roll it out over there?

PM: So I'll have the Minister expand on some of the conversations that we've been having with our counterparts in the Pacific. The really important point to note is that currently there is no vaccination under way in the Cooks, unlike in New Zealand, where we have, of course, started. But the population in, for instance, Rarotonga is equivalent to one day's worth of vaccine delivery here in New Zealand at the moment. So it will be a case of us considering, when we start, does it logistically make more sense for us to work that through to completion? We have been working with the Cooks on training vaccinators that they already have, so that is something we've been working on and supporting the Cook Islands with, but it would be a matter of us supporting them to be in the cool chain that is required from New Zealand up into the Cooks. Some of that's been finalised. We need to, of course, make sure that we have agreement from the pharmaceutical company to deliver into an alternate country, and that's part of why we need a bit more time to work through those final details.

Hon Chris Hipkins: I think you've covered it, largely. One of the things that we are working through is when the best timing to do this is, recognising that from July onwards, our vaccination workforce is going to be flat out here in New Zealand. So there is a small window of opportunity where we may be able to send more people up to help in the near future, in order to get them back for when we need them here in New Zealand.

Media: The arrangement doesn't create a triangular bubble between Australia and New Zealand—

PM: No.

Media: Can I ask why it is that Australian travellers need to spend 14 days in New Zealand before—

PM: Ultimately, that's a call for the Cook Islands. We would have no objection, of course, for the movement between the three. We're already open quarantine-free to Australia. We'll now be open quarantine-free to the Cook Islands. So having that triangular movement, of course, is something that we are very open to. However, this is, ultimately, a call for the Cook Islands. At this stage, their preference is that anyone coming through Australia would come via New Zealand and that they spend some time there first. It's their prerogative as to whether or not that remains the case.

Media: How can you justify potentially vaccinating another nation's people before your own people?

PM: The first point that I'd make is we have not finalised the vaccine roll-out plans with the Cook Islands at this stage, nor have we with Niue, and nor have we with Tokelau. But what we need to keep in mind is that for each of these countries, they are Realm countries, so the idea of treating them as though they are not connected to us—we consider that they very much are. They hold New Zealand passports. The second point I'd make is that—for instance, let's take Niue, a population of less than 1,500 people. Now, we've been running a tiered roll-out in New Zealand. We've been prioritising certain groups. But if you're taking the effort and transporting Pfizer vaccine up into the country, keeping it cool at -70 degrees, then, actually, the effort of vaccinating a small portion of their front-line workers would be the equivalent of actually just vaccinating everyone. It's a matter of pure logistics. None of these countries, however, have had any vaccine. We have. We're well over 200,000 now at this point, and so for us it's about making sure that we get it right. Yes, we're trying to act equitably, but we've also got to do what makes good logistical sense when we do make the effort to get up into the country.

Media: Who are you looking to or talking to for our next travel bubble?

PM: Obviously, for us, the ones that make the most sense, of course, are the Realm countries, given that relationship we have, and given, of course, the movement between our people. Really, though, the decision there is very much in the hands of those countries. I don't anticipate for Tokelau it will be high on their agenda, and access for Tokelau, of course, is very difficult and via Samoa. But for Niue, when they're ready, we're ready. But it's very much up to them when they'd choose to do that.

Media: [*Inaudible*] Commonwealth countries—is that, like, way, way, way off in the distant future, or are you already starting to look at how that might look?

PM: Well, one of the criteria, of course, that we've been looking to is, you know, simply the question of who has the same strategy as us, and who's been able to roll that out effectively. Because our goal, of course, is let's progressively re-open to the world where it is safe to do so and where we can maintain our strategy of keeping COVID out of New Zealand. So on that basis, that's the conditions under which—while we do not have complete vaccination, those are the conditions under which we consider re-opening with others.

Media: On the situation in India—the New Zealand High Commission—MFAT confirmed today that several locally engaged staff have contracted COVID-19—

PM: Yes.

Media: Obviously, travelling itself can be quite dangerous, and getting to New Zealand could be quite hard. But have you sought assurances that the head of mission has discretion, if they wish to, to vacate the post?

PM: Well, look, as I understand, all the way through the COVID-19 outbreak, we've had staff who have been coming back to New Zealand—posts that have had reduced numbers. It is certainly my understanding that staff do have that ability to come home from post if they need to. But I think here is where it would be only right to acknowledge that throughout the pandemic, we have had people in country, in often COVID hot spots, who are there to support New Zealanders who are there. And that has meant that, essentially, they've been our front-line workers. Some of them have worked from home for months and months, in some cases upwards of a year. These particular workers have been in a form of lockdown within a compound for the better part of a year. So they've worked in extraordinary circumstances, but all in support of New Zealanders abroad.

Media: Do you know if they have permission to vacate the post if they—

PM: I've never at any point been advised that people do not have the flexibility to return home, and in fact I've been told that people have actively returned home. So I've certainly not been advised that we've required people to stay in post.

Media: Why were not oxygen tanks within the post—

PM: Why were there not—sorry?

Media: Why were there not oxygen tanks or urgent medical supplies within the compound?

PM: Oh, look, I cannot, as a matter of course, tell you what the protocol is for health and safety or first aid equipment from within a compound, under general circumstances. But that would be a question I'm sure if you put to MFAT, they could answer. But, ultimately, I think it is—obviously, you can see in the circumstances within India, there have been shortages of medical equipment. Obviously, the New Zealand High Commission themselves have acknowledged that they had channels that they could have accessed in order to resolve that—that would have meant doing something other than what they did via that Twitter call. So that's what they've acknowledged and that's why they've apologised.

Media: Are you aware of any disciplinary action that's been taken against whoever—

PM: No, not at all, and nor would I, frankly, consider that necessarily that would take place. I don't think any of us can imagine the high-pressure situation that staff are in at the moment, and when you consider that the circumstances that led to that tweet, albeit, you know, the wrong decision, the circumstance was a locally engaged employee, a staff member, who probably was known to the person who put the message out, who was critically unwell. And so I can only imagine that would have felt like a desperate situation. What happened there was not right. There were alternative methods to try and resolve the situation, but I do not expect that anything further happens as a result.

Media: Shouldn't we be sending oxygen tanks and ensuring that the Kiwis on the ground, on the front line there, have enough supplies to get through this?

PM: Of course our job is to make sure we're looking after the health and wellbeing of our staff, and I know MFAT puts a huge amount of work into that. Of course, they are amongst the group that now, if they are having to go and work in posts for New Zealand, we are looking to vaccinate them before they're departing and going into post. But we do have staff members who are locally engaged, who will be part of their local community, who might live on compound—that's the case with this individual who's unwell currently. But we still consider ourselves obliged to look after everyone we employ within our high commission. And that is why, of course, steps were taken to try and provide the medical care that they needed on compound.

Media: But clearly they're our responsibility, so they shouldn't have had to take to Twitter—

PM: What I've already said is I cannot necessarily give you an outline of all of the health and medical equipment that, as a matter of course, we would expect to be within an MFAT facility or a compound. That question is just simply better directed to MFAT; I don't hold that knowledge.

Media: At the weekend, Judith Collins held up a Te Puni Kōkiri report saying that it was evidence of the Labour Government's, basically, separatist agenda. That report—what does it mean to your Government? Have you received it at Cabinet level? What's your response?

PM: So the answer to your last question is no, and we have not received it at Cabinet level. My response would be that I consider it hugely disappointing that we have debates of this nature whenever it seems that the National Party are in Opposition and at a particular point in the polls, because that's, frankly, how I see the debate that the Opposition leader is trying to start here, and I see it as nothing more than pure politics. Ultimately, the very issue that the Leader of the Opposition is trying to attack is a declaration that her Government, and a Cabinet she belonged to, signed up to. To now try to politicise it, to me, unfortunately looks like nothing more than pure politics.

Media: Don Brash's Ōrewa speech—do you think that Judith Collins went as far, and do you think that her speech was—

PM: Look, simply in terms of a strategy, and I think it's disappointing. I'd like to think that New Zealand is in a place in our politics where we've moved beyond that, and yet you don't see these kinds of debates start when, for instance, National are in Government, and yet you see a pattern when they're in Opposition. I think it is disappointing, and it feels like a big step away from past National Governments, where, actually, in this case, the very thing that's being attacked was the very thing that a past National Government signed up to.

Media: Do you think that Judith Collins was dog-whistling to racists?

PM: I think it was a political strategy—that's what I'd call it—and a really disappointing one, and, as I say, one that we only see at a particular point in a cycle with the National Party. I don't know, to be fair, whether it's something that their whole caucus is united behind as a strategy, but it's certainly not one I would support.

Media: Can you explain what work the Government is doing in response to the report? We spoke to the author today, who said that she worked with officials quite recently on progressing it further.

PM: Yeah, well, because, ultimately, we, of course, have an obligation after the fact that New Zealand was signed up to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2010. In 2014 there was an agreement that there'd then be concrete action around implementation. So for the past six years there's been that obligation and not a lot of work has gone on. So next step for us is: what is the public engagement going to look like around that forward plan for us upholding our obligations now that the National Party as Government did sign us up to it? But, look, the report that has been put forward and mentioned by the Leader of the Opposition has been received by the Minister. It has not gone before Cabinet and does not necessarily represent the views of Cabinet. But we do have an obligation to look at what does implementing this declaration mean for New Zealand, and we'll undertake that process and very openly.

Media: On the Māori Health Authority, Judith Collins says that your Government's intention is to allow it to have veto over decisions that are important to everyone's health.

PM: Yeah, and on that, I think what's kind of interesting there is that is the position of the Leader of the Opposition but it doesn't appear to be the position of her deputy leader of the Opposition, and, again, that's where it seems to me—and I'll come to that—but that's again where it seems to me to be a particular political strategy but not one necessarily the whole party is behind.

When it comes to national health plans, our view, of course, is that if we are going to see step change in health outcomes in New Zealand—where Māori, frankly, die younger in this country—we do have to make sure that our services work for every New Zealander, be they European, be they Asian, be they Pacific, be they Māori. We need to make sure those services work. So the Māori Health Authority will have the ability to work in conjunction with Health New Zealand to agree plans that nationally will affect both Māori and non-Māori.

Media: [*Inaudible*]

PM: They will have the ability to have a voice that has to be heard, and we will put in place mechanisms where if there is a difference in opinion, that we have a way to resolve those.

Media: Are there elements of things in that report that you can rule out happening, such as a separate Māori Parliament or justice system?

PM: Look, I don't want to be in a position of a report that hasn't even come before Cabinet—going through individual items within it. I was already asked about that in Parliament, I believe, two or three weeks ago, and I did rule out the separate Parliament at that point. But, ultimately, I don't think it's that helpful for a report that hasn't gone before Cabinet to go through that individual process, and, again, I make the point: this is a document that's available online, hasn't been received by Cabinet, and I think has been used as a political tool.

Media: Are you concerned that Pharmac's review of funding could mean fewer lifesaving drugs for children with cancer?

PM: I think for Pharmac, since we've been in Government, we've seen an increase that's taken that budget for Pharmac to over \$1 billion, so a 28 percent increase in the Pharmac budget. I think some of the discussion that's going on at the moment simply demonstrates that there will be a never-ending list of new drugs, drugs that come in at early stages that are being produced globally, and no country in the world necessarily will provide that never-ending list of new drugs for free for every citizen.

Media: And there's a really good principle behind this, isn't there, for blanket funding of cancer drugs and, actually, all drugs, for children with—

PM: So at the moment we have a set of circumstances, since Pharmac have picked up the funding of cancer-related drugs for children, where they've taken on the model that previously existed within DHBs—that because the number of children that were affected was small, there was like a blanket policy of funding those cancer drugs for children. That has now been challenged as being inequitable. Ultimately, what happens from here is not a decision for Government but rather for Pharmac. That's a really important principle that I'm not going to disrupt. We should never politicise the funding of drugs in New Zealand.

Media: [*Inaudible*] funded Pharmac better, then Pharmac could continue that blanket funding—

PM: And just as I've said, we've increased the funding of Pharmac by 28 percent. It now has a more than—[*Interruption*] It has now a more than \$1 billion budget. As a result of that increase in funding, they have gone through and continued to fund additional drugs that they see necessary—and to keep in mind, they have, within those parameters, funded those cancer drugs for children. What's being challenged here is the idea of whether they should fund all drugs for all children across a range of different issues, and that is not a decision for us as politicians and never should be.

Media: Are you somewhat worried that, kind of, perversely, increasing Pharmac's budget will actually give it somewhat less power when negotiating with drug companies, because the drug companies would know that it had more money to spend on various drugs? Is that part of the calculus—

PM: No, that is not part of our calculus. Ours has always been to try and ensure, of course, that we maintain a system that, by and large, has served New Zealand well. We have, of course, remember, taken the step of putting in place that review of Pharmac. In part, that's again just to make sure that we have that confidence in the system that it's working well to meet New Zealand's needs, and I think, by and large, it does, but just to give that further ability for us to open up a little bit and look at the way it's operating and assure ourselves that it's operating as it should.

Media: Just in terms of the Cook Islands bubble, have you seen or any work or modelling in terms of how much of the domestic tourism spend could be diverted to the Cook Islands economy?

PM: No, I haven't. One thing I would say is that, at least outbound, early on, the Cooks have indicated to us that they have worked with Air New Zealand and are expecting in the order of two to three flights a week for May. That will then scale up. So that is a lower starting point than usual. I think that enables everyone to gear up again, and I imagine over time we'll see an increase in travel. Keep in mind, the outbound from New Zealand has been perhaps not necessarily what was expected for the trans-Tasman, but, again, we expect that to build over time. Anything further you've seen on the modelling?

Hon Chris Hipkins: No.

Media: ACT has put a motion on the treatment of Uighur in China—to label it as genocide. Does Labour have a position on that motion?

PM: Yeah, so as I understand, of course, motions are taken to the Business Committee to be worked through, so I imagine that that will be the case for this motion. One thing I will say that will be important to us—and whilst as the Labour Party we've not had this discussion, certainly Minister Mahuta is working with the ministry of foreign affairs. Generally, on the issue of the way that references to genocide are made—and I'll just make this general statement, not specific to any particular case—there are a set of legal definitions that sit around the use of that word. In New Zealand, we've used it on three occasions: Nazi Germany, with Rwanda, and also with Cambodia.

Of course, in order to meet the international test, often that has required the ability of that verifiable additional international information. It's one of the reasons why New Zealand has repeatedly called for unfettered access in order to see—independent access to the region in order to assess potential human rights abuses for the Uighur people. That is not to say, of course, that there isn't credible evidence of human rights abuses already—there is—but for, for instance, issues around genocide, that is one of the things that you usually see precede the use of that definition in international law. Those are some of the factors that we'll be thinking about as we consider that motion.

Media: Last week you said that the Government was keeping an eye on commercial flights out of India but you had not yet had a chance to discuss at Cabinet the possibility of repatriation flights. Have you had a chance to discuss that and, if so, what was the outcome?

Hon Chris Hipkins: We've had a brief conversation about that. We have not made decisions on that yet. At the moment, I do understand that most flights out of India have been suspended. That's something that we'll keep a close eye on, and I think our decisions around repatriation will very much depend on how long those kind of restrictions go on for.

Media: You say how long. Have you got any idea when, you know—is it a month that this goes on—how long? Because there are people wanting to get back.

Hon Chris Hipkins: Look, we'll review it each week, and then if it looks like it's going to go on for too long and will therefore mean that citizens can't get back, then we would consider our other options.

Media: The New Zealand Upgrade projects—can you give any idea or indication of which projects might be being dropped from that programme?

PM: In talking with Minister Robertson, who's certainly of the view that, kind of, some of the statements around them being dropped isn't necessarily a fair characterisation of some of the work that's going on—I will ask for him, though, to speak in a little bit more detail to that. In some areas, certain issues have meant that they've been reframed in certain ways but, ultimately, I would ask him to speak in more detail to you on that.

Media: So you're confident that all of those projects will be delivered but maybe at a later stage or in a smaller scope?

PM: Again, in some cases there may have been cause for re-scoping, but, again, I would just ask him to speak in a little more detail on those.

Media: It's been two years since the Welfare Expert Advisory Group report came out. How can you justify that none of those recommendations have been fully implemented?

PM: I would reject that. Of course, things like indexation, work on abatement, work on culture change within Work and Income have all been significant projects since the Welfare Expert Advisory Group. What I would say around—what most people, of course, seem to focus on are the main benefit increases, and right from the beginning we said that that would have to be something that would take time. There would just simply be almost no circumstance under which any Government would have been able to put those increases in place in one Budget. The size of them was just too great. But we have, regardless of that, increased main benefits in the last Budget, the first time that that's happened across the board in a number of decades.

Media: There's currently \$42 billion sitting in the Crown Settlement Account—that's the Government's account with the Reserve Bank. That's a sizable sum of money. Does that give the Government a little bit of leeway coming to this next Budget to possibly implement some of these changes?

PM: Of course, what I've consistently said in these post-Cabinet briefings: not only that I won't be making Budget announcements before the Budget but also the context that for anything like changes to, for instance, things like main benefit rates or changes, of course, where you would expect—any reasonable person would expect—that they would be ongoing, we have to factor in not just our position now but our position in out years on an ongoing basis. So that is a key consideration for us for any Budget initiative, benefit increases included. OK, I'm going to take last couple of questions before—who hasn't had—everyone's had one. Yeah, on the Cooks.

Media: Just on the Cook Islands, why was the decision made to open up the bubble before the nation was vaccinated?

PM: Same reason for Australia. We've opened up that arrangement before vaccination. You'll note, though, that we have still taken our time, and that was because we wanted to make sure that even if we didn't have vaccination in place—and we don't—that it would be as safe as possible, (a), and (b) that if there were a situation where an individual with COVID from New Zealand were to enter into the Cooks, that arrangements were in place to deal with that as effectively as possible. I know from many discussions with Ministers in our Cabinet the last thing we want is a situation where a case of COVID goes into the Cooks and we weren't ready to deal with that, in a way that prevents the population from being protected. We're confident now that if that were to occur, we do have those steps in place. We'll seek final confirmation from the director-general, though, before it opens.

Media: On the Xinjiang genocide statement, you talked about some of the factors, but will you be whipping your MPs? Will they be free to vote how they like in Parliament—

PM: Look, on notices—so we will have a caucus discussion, absolutely. But we never have individual votes on notices of motion, and I don't expect that we would on this. What I'll seek from caucus is for us to build a consensus over it. OK, I called time; I'm going to stick to it. Thanks everyone.

conclusion of press conference