

**POST-CABINET PRESS CONFERENCE: TUESDAY, 1 FEBRUARY 2022**  
**HANSARD TRANSCRIPT**

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Kia ora, ngā mihi nui, ki a koutou katoa. Welcome to today's post-Cabinet press conference. As you know, I am subbing in for the Prime Minister today. Looking to the week ahead, tomorrow morning I will be releasing the New Zealand income insurance scheme discussion document—this is the social unemployment insurance work that we've been undertaking alongside Business NZ and the Council of Trade Unions, and that discussion document will be released tomorrow morning. David Clark will be making an announcement around spectrum allocation in the afternoon, and tomorrow the Government will also provide a vaccine update. On Thursday, the Prime Minister will give a speech outlining our plans to reconnect New Zealand with the world.

Today, Cabinet met to discuss our ongoing response to slowing the spread of Omicron. While we remain in the early stages of an Omicron outbreak—and we know from global experience that cases will continue to grow—we have proven twice now that New Zealand has the right plan to get us through. We've been in the red setting of the COVID-19 Protection Framework now for just over a week, and we're making good progress in increasing our vaccine protection. In the last week, we have seen a 24 percent increase in people getting boosted; 67 percent of those who are eligible are now boosted. As we move forward, we must be prepared for further spread, many more cases, and in a quicker time frame over the next few weeks.

The Government is preparing for a move to phase 2 of our Omicron plan, as we announced last week, where we start integrating rapid antigen tests into testing to ensure a return to work programme for critical businesses. To that end, today I can announce that the Government has secured the delivery of enough rapid antigen tests to help New Zealand deal with a widespread outbreak in the coming months. Last week and over the weekend, the Government has been in contact with a variety of rapid antigen test manufacturers. Those efforts have resulted in securing an additional 36 million tests for delivery over the next two months, which corresponds with a predicted rise in Omicron cases. These additional 36 million tests are on top of the 12.9 million orders already confirmed for delivery in February.

Along with the 5.1 million tests already in stock, New Zealanders will have access to over 50 million rapid antigen tests in the coming two months. An additional 87 million rapid antigen tests have been ordered through to June, which will allow for regular and widespread testing to occur. In total, 123 million rapid antigen tests are on order, and work continues to bring these orders forward. Modelling on the use of rapid antigen tests through the outbreak suggests that during the peak, we will likely be using 9 million rapid antigen tests a week, which is the equivalent to testing a quarter of New Zealand every day, or all of New Zealand twice a week. That scale of testing will go a long way to reducing the risk of an infected person going to work and infecting others, and will help with keeping critical services and supply chains open and moving.

In the past week, two more types of rapid antigen tests have been approved for use in New Zealand, bringing the total number to 11, with several more going through the approval process. It must be noted here that the Ministry of Health and ESR continue to only approve tests that meet a very high threshold of quality. There is significant global supply constraint at the moment, so the Government is working alongside businesses to assist with ensuring that orders are met. To be clear, business bringing in their own rapid antigen tests can continue to do so and use them how they like. We're doing all we can; working alongside business to ensure that as much of the economy as possible can stay open, while continuing to reduce the spread of Omicron that has placed enormous pressure on health systems overseas. Our plan aims to avoid this in New Zealand. I'm happy to take your questions.

**Media:** Minister, why is it so difficult for a pregnant woman in Afghanistan to come back to New Zealand?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Well, as Minister Hipkins said yesterday, there is a place in MIQ for the type of situation that Charlotte Bellis is facing and, in fact, there is a secured place for her with a flight arrangement alongside it that has been communicated to her today.

**Media:** So you have offered her a spot today?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** That's correct. The Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment have offered her a voucher today and they have a flight arrangement which obviously I won't give out today, that they have set up with her.

**Media:** Is it appropriate for the Government to have told publically that she had been offered consular assistance without asking for her permission to do so?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** I note that Ms Bellis and her lawyer say that they are considering legal action on that matter, so I am not going to get myself involved in that. The important point here is there is a place in MIQ for Ms Bellis and I urge her to take it up.

**Media:** Just following up on that, does that send a message, though, that if you make a fuss and go public you will get preferential treatment?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** No, it doesn't. What it sends a message is that the staff of the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment—who have to deal with emergency applications—are dealing with very difficult and challenging cases on a daily basis. They always try to make contact with people, and try to make arrangements that work. That has been consistently what they have been doing over the last couple of weeks to support Ms Bellis through the application process. And in each circumstances the specific set of circumstances that a person faces is taken into account, so in that regard Ms Bellis is no different.

**Media:** Did the Government ask for her permission before discussing details—putting details of her case into the public arena?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** As I say, I've noted in the media that Ms Bellis and her lawyers say they are considering legal action on that matter. I think you'll understand that I'm not going to involve myself in that. The situation we have today is that the case is being assessed; there is a place for her to be able to return to New Zealand, and I urge her to take it up.

**Media:** Minister, the privacy commission says a Minister should only release personal information that an individual has not already made public or if the individual has clearly authorised such a disclosure. Ms Bellis has said she didn't authorise such a disclosure, so this is a clear-cut case, isn't it? You breached her privacy?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** As I said, I'm repeating my answer again, Jason, but I will do it for the third time: Ms Bellis and her lawyers say that they are considering legal action around these matters, and therefore it's not appropriate for me to involve myself in them. If you want to seek further comment from Minister Hipkins you are welcome to do that, but I suspect his answer will be very similar to mine.

**Media:** Will you write her an apology for how she has been treated in this instance?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** What I know is that officials at the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment have worked very hard to support an outcome here where Ms Bellis can return home. There are rules and criteria. There are many, many people who are trying to find their way back to New Zealand, and I have enormous sympathy for people in a number of different situations. One of the hardest things during COVID-19 has been the fact that people have not been able to come back for funerals, for weddings, for situations like the birth of children. That's incredibly tough. We've had our MIQ process in place for a very good reason. It has supported our public health response, it has avoided a number of deaths, but that doesn't make it easy for people who are at the other end, wanting to come back to New Zealand. MBIE works hard to make good decisions here; they continually communicate with people who apply, that's what's happened in Ms Bellis' case, and there is now a place for her.

**Media:** Minister, Ms Bellis' lawyers, representing about up to 30 women, pregnant women in the same situation—are they now going to be given MIQ vouchers as well?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Well, I don't think I'd accept the fact that people are necessarily in the same situation. There are specific circumstances for Ms Bellis that have been taken into account by the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment. I can't possibly comment on the circumstances of 30 other people. I do know that they work hard to be able to make sure that people who have emergency situations return to New Zealand.

**Media:** Do you feel that it's a women's right to come back to New Zealand if she's a legal Kiwi citizen, to give birth to a child in this country?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Well, it's a similar situation for everybody with MIQ. We all want people to be able to come back to New Zealand when they choose to, when it suits their circumstances. Unfortunately, during COVID-19 that's not been possible. The Government's taken the view, and I think most New Zealanders have endorsed the view, that we should do all we can to keep COVID-19 out of New Zealand while we get ourselves vaccinated, while we get ourselves boosted. That means really difficult decisions have to be made on a daily basis, and these cut across a huge number of circumstances. Because we have an understanding that there are medical situations, there are personal situations that need exemptions, we have emergency allocations. Then there is a process to go through those. I appreciate for people that it can feel bureaucratic or it can feel frustrating, but that's because MBIE's dealing with so many different applications. In the case of Ms Bellis, there is now a place for her in MIQ.

**Media:** On rapid antigen testing, can you categorically say that absolutely no private orders will be affected by the Government's actions?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Well, as you'll note in the press release that Minister Verrall has put out today, you've got the assurance there from one supplier with Abbott that that did not occur; that orders have been dealt with as they've been put in. And that is the process that we're working through. You'd have to give me a specific example, but, from the information we've been given, orders are being processed in the order in which they were made.

**Media:** And has Cabinet made decisions about reopening the border today?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** So Cabinet has had discussions about reconnecting New Zealand and, as I noted in my introductory remarks, the Prime Minister will be speaking about that on Thursday.

**Media:** Will there be priority for Māori providers for the RAT trial now? And, secondly, will there be additional support for Māori whānau to isolate with Omicron so they don't have to isolate in cars and sheds?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Well, we certainly wouldn't want that occurring, and, as we announced in October last year, \$120 million has been set aside both for the vaccination campaign but also to work alongside Māori health providers, Māori social service providers to be able to support whānau if they do need to isolate. So part of that funding was allocated for that reason, and I know that Ministers are working through with agencies at the moment how we can best provide that support. On the matter of rapid antigen testing, we're working through that process at the moment. Obviously, our first priority continues to remain keeping utilities going, emergency services, the food supply chain, but we are also conscious of the need of supporting social service providers to be able to support those communities who are vulnerable.

**Media:** But it's the Māori providers that go into those deep, dark areas—into Tai Rāwhiti, as an example. They're the ones that will reach those whānau. So will they be prioritised—those Māori providers?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** So we continue to work with Māori providers, who have done a superb job through COVID-19. The role of rapid antigen testing—we have to be careful about what it's for. And, for us, at this stage in the process, it is about making sure that we can

manage the situation where contacts need to go to work and, therefore, we use rapid antigen testing to satisfy ourselves that those contacts do not have COVID. As we move through the process, there will be a wider distribution around the rapid antigen tests, and equity issues will very much be part of that.

**Media:** At what point are you hoping the general public will be able to get access to these tests?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Well, that will come with time. Our priority at the moment is making sure that utilities—keeping the lights on, keeping water services running, the food supply chain—those continue to work. I think everyone will understand that should be a priority. We've looked at what happened in other countries where that didn't occur, and it caused major disruption. Over time, as supplies increase, no doubt there will be a wider availability.

**Media:** Because you did say in your opening remarks you're expecting, I think, another 87 million tests coming in later in the year. Is that the point where you start to widen it out, or would that still just be enough to cover those critical industries?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** I think, as we move on through this, you will see a wider range of people having access to rapid antigen tests, but bear in mind this is not about a business being able to operate per se; it's not about people being able to go about their business. This is about dealing with a specific set of circumstances around contacts and making sure that those contacts can continue to go to work. We will, in due course, make further announcements about the way that we see that, but equally people themselves, as we move through this process, will be able to purchase them. I'm not going to put a time on that today, though.

**Media:** Will you be supplying schools with rapid antigen tests?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Well, again, similar—it's in the same category. At the moment, the particular focus that we've got is around the contact issue, making sure that we have critical services provided, emergency services provided. We're not in a position right now, today, where that is needed. So we do have the space and time to be able to work through where schools fit alongside what I would suggest might be some other high-risk settings that we might need to work through, such as aged care facilities.

**Media:** And they're going to be free for everyone, right?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** We made that commitment.

**Media:** Minister Robertson, we've spoken to a number of teachers who got a visa to come to New Zealand from overseas as part of that 300-teacher announcement made last year. He can't get an MIQ spot even though term has already begun. Principals are desperate to get them in—using relievers. Looking back, would it have been smarter to link those visas to MIQ spaces so you couldn't get one without an MIQ space?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Yeah, I understand, Henry, that you're going to be getting a response directly from Minister Hipkins' office on this question. What I can say more generally is that visas don't usually have a particular time limit attached to them. So, therefore, an MIQ spot won't necessarily be attached to a visa spot. What we have tried to do is make sure that, where critical workers are needed, we prioritise them, but I will leave Minister Hipkins to give you the detail on that.

**Media:** And, sorry, Minister, on the traffic light system, currently there is no real distinction between indoor events and outdoor events despite the fact that you're much safer in an outdoor event even with a lot more people than, say, an indoor event with 99 people, which is allowed under the current rule. Has the Government considered at all trying to split those up so you incentivise people to do things outside, especially while the weather's still nice?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** That isn't the advice that we've received from the Ministry of Health. The red traffic light settings were put together with the ministry's advice, and they didn't, at

that time, advise us to do that. I think the really important thing is, whatever setting you're in, that you continue to do the basic public health measures that underpin the framework, that is: wear a mask, keep social distance from people that you don't know, make sure you practise good hygiene. Those are the things that, you know, will fundamentally support and protect us, but we simply haven't had the advice along the lines that you're suggesting.

**Media:** Air New Zealand is reportedly cancelling flights because so many of their staff are now in isolation; they can't keep up their usual schedule—are you looking at bringing companies like that into the RAT scheme earlier than phase 2 if it gets too bad for them?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** My understanding is that Air New Zealand is already operating a rapid antigen test system, using the stocks that they have in order to deal with exactly the issue you've raised.

**Media:** But can they truncate isolation periods because of it?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** No, we haven't had that request come through to us—we've been in pretty close contact with Air New Zealand. I haven't heard that they believe they're in a situation where they need that. Were they to ask us about that, we would obviously take the advice from the Ministry of Health about it.

**Media:** Will vaccine passes be upgraded to show the booster status of the person holding them?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Yeah, this is an issue that the Ministry of Health is working through. Clearly, when they were established, it was designed to deal with the two doses. There is some specific changes that need to be made to them in order for them to show a third shot, but I do know that the ministry is working on that.

**Media:** Minister Robertson, can I ask you about Sir Ian Taylor, who wrote a column last Friday—it would seem that these 20 million rapid antigen tests were facilitated by him. He said that the Government, if they'd moved eight weeks ago, when the offer was first made—all the supplies, that 20 million, would be here already.

**Hon Grant Robertson:** I'm not sure, I'd have to go back and see whether we're talking about the same 20 million or not, Barry.

**Media:** Well, he's talking about the company that you contracted today.

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Yeah, as I say, I'd need to make sure whether we are talking about exactly the same thing there. Look, I've been in correspondence with Sir Ian and met with him as well, he's a person who wants to make sure that New Zealand emerges through COVID strongly. And we've been working very closely with him in recent times. I think the Government has moved quickly and rapidly, as we've altered our own strategy, to where rapid antigen tests now fit. If you think about it, in the elimination strategy that we were operating, PCR testing remains—and remained—the most important way that we could deal with COVID-19. As our strategy shifted, the Ministry of Health began ordering rapid antigen tests. So I don't think I'd accept that part of what Sir Ian is saying.

**Media:** The OECD has again said that New Zealand needs to raise the age of super, and National leader Christopher Luxon has said that he supports the policy of raising it to 67. Will a Labour Government ever increase the age of super?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** No. No we won't, and we've made that commitment. There are a lot of reasons for that, but first and foremost is that for many New Zealanders, even reaching the age of 65, when you're in manual labour in particular, it's tough. And we think that there's a commitment that we've made—a social contract if you will—with New Zealanders, to make sure that they have dignity in retirement, and support in retirement. I recognise that there is a cost associated with that, but that's the priority decision that we make. As an economy, I believe we can afford that. If you're asking me in ten years' time or 20 years' time, I'm not going to answer for that—but for the Labour Government that stands here today, our commitment has not changed.

**Media:** And would you consider sort of changing the structure of super, so for example the idea of using it as a universal basic income and then taxing other incomes above it, is that something you would consider?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** No, that's not something we'd put any focus on at all.

**Media:** Minister, the OECD said they were worried about a possible sharp drop in the housing market. Would the Government act to ensure that didn't happen if it was threatened?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Yeah, I mean, there's a lot of forecasting, speculation, and comment in the OECD report, and so I tend to, you know, listen to that, but also listen to what we see from the forecasters here in New Zealand: the Reserve Bank, Treasury, and others. They are not forecasting the kind of sharp drop that you're talking about; they are forecasting a drop over the course of the next year or so. As I've often said, our position is we do want housing to be more affordable, and that we will take action to do that but I haven't seen anything in the forecasts that we rely on here in New Zealand that would cause me to intervene in that situation.

**Media:** Do you agree with the 47 percent of people in the 1News Kantar poll who said they wanted to see house prices fall a lot?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Yeah, I think what's important there is that the message I get from that poll is that New Zealanders want housing to be more affordable. They want people to be able to buy their own home and live in their own home, and they want to make sure that the price of housing reflects that value. That doesn't necessarily translate to people wanting the value of their own home to drop, and so I do think we've got to be a little bit careful about polling questions like that. Regardless, we share the aspiration of New Zealanders that we want more people to own their own home. It is a long journey to come back from around 30 years of the way in which our housing market has gone in the direction it has, but we believe we're undertaking the things that need to be done in that space.

**Media:** Māori leaders have been calling for a reduction in the age of superannuation because of our lifespan—has that been a point of discussion for the Government?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** We haven't done investigation specifically into that during this turn of Government. Previously, when the Labour Party has been putting its policies together, we have looked at a variety of equity issues built around superannuation. In the end, we came to the decision to leave the settings as they are—not, as we've heard today, the National Party and others would prefer to see that rise—so we've made the decision not to alter those settings.

**Media:** Minister, did Cabinet today make a decision around the borders?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** A paper was discussed at Cabinet today. As is often the case when it comes to Cabinet decisions, there are things that need to be followed up from that, and that will be done.

**Media:** OK, because on Thursday you said that there is a speech about opening up New Zealand. Cabinet has met today, so can we read into that that Cabinet has made a decision and it's going to be announced on Thursday?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** You can read into whatever you'd like, Jason, that's not what I'm saying. What I'm saying is that there will be a speech on Thursday on reconnecting New Zealand, and, as you would expect, we discussed all aspects of the Omicron response.

**Media:** And has the Government, or Chris Hipkins, sought Crown Law advice over the privacy of Charlotte Bellis?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** You'd need to ask Mr Hipkins that.

**Media:** Are you aware of it though? I wouldn't be—

**Hon Grant Robertson:** No, I'm, not.

**Media:** Is the average asking price a million dollars for a house affordable, and if not, should then house prices go down?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** As I've said, we don't believe that the price inflation we've seen in the housing market in recent years is affordable, and so we have been taking actions both in terms of the supply side—building more houses, we've got record consents—and on the demand side to be able to dampen particularly investor and speculative demand. I've often said, "I don't sit here saying 'I want house prices to go down by X percent.'" We set the criteria, we set the rules so that we can have a more affordable housing market, and that's what we're working towards.

**Media:** Would you be worried about a drop, though—a single digit drop?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** As I've said, you know, there's drops forecast by both the Treasury and by some economists at the moment. That is the nature of the housing market, and some of the changes we've made, some of the changes that the Reserve Bank has made. I'm not expressing a view either way on that. What I am—and I answered Bernard's question before about not intervening. We're trying to set up a stable housing market in New Zealand and we've put the rules in place that I believe will both help do that and make housing more affordable, but it doesn't happen quickly.

**Media:** The OECD today also pushed back against KiwiSaver, saying it was being used for housing deposits—that's probably driven up house prices a lot. Would you ever pull that away from people as an option, or is that a step too far?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** No, we have no intention of doing that. And I genuinely respect the reports that the OECD does when they do their country investigations. They're very thorough, but they are also quite consistent in their advocacy for a number of policies that the Government has committed that we're not going to do, and we certainly aren't going to be taking that one up.

**Media:** Minister, Ministry of Health tamariki Māori vaccination rates has Māori at 18 percent and 33 percent for non-Māori, but Māori statisticians have it at 16 percent for tamariki Māori and 40 percent non-Māori. Why's there such a big discrepancy?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** I really don't know the answer to that question. I'm very happy to go to the Ministry of Health and find out for you what they would have as an answer to that. Those percentages, while there is a discrepancy there, it's not wild but it is significant, and so I think it is a fair question for you to ask which I will follow up. One thing—

**Media:** Is this one of the reasons why the Ministry of Health won't release data to Whānau Ora because there is these discrepancies?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** No, that's not the reasoning that the ministry has expressed previously, and as you know they are working with Whānau Ora providers. What I was going to say is that one of the things I am extremely proud about is the way in which the tamariki Māori vaccination campaign has been a co-design process. And I'm really pleased with the way the Ministry of Health has worked with Māori providers, worked with Iwi Chairs Forum, worked with the national Māori health coalition to design the way in which that programme is rolling out. And so I think that over time, we will see those vaccination rates rise considerably for tamariki Māori and I think they've actually learnt a lot of lessons from the way that we've gone about the whole vaccination campaign. It's now informing what I think is a really good co-design process.

**Media:** What will you do about inflation in the months ahead? Last year's domestic inflation for non-tradables was 5.3 percent, which is higher than China, Australia, Japan, and South Korea.

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Yeah, and I mean, obviously, for all New Zealanders, the rising cost of living is a concern. But even when you dig into the tradables / non-tradables split, you still see things that have significant international factors within them. So one of the things with the non-tradables is around housing, and we know that the building supply issue is a global

supply chain issue. So I don't think it's as easy as to say we can control something within the non-tradables environment in a way that you might be alluding to. What I would say is that if we were to take—and bear in mind, more than 70 percent of the latest quarterly inflation increase comes from two things: one the broader housing area, which contains a number of different elements; and the other transport, which is clearly driven by oil prices—

**Media:** Stats New Zealand—

**Hon Grant Robertson:** I'll finish, John—is driven by oil prices. If we were to try and intervene in the housing side of that, what you would be asking us to do, potentially, is slow down the build of State and public housing. And I've stood here before and been questioned about why we're not doing more of that, so I don't think the answer lies here in the Government stopping doing really important projects for the future of New Zealand.

**Media:** So you're saying that New Zealanders should just continue to expect these, sort of, levels of inflation; if so, for how long?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Well, the Treasury's projection is that from the end of this first quarter that it will start to decline. You've already seen that, in the sense that in the December quarter we had 1.4 percent, down from 2.2 percent in the previous quarter. And the projections are that that will begin to improve. But I'm not diminishing the significance of people needing to deal with rising prices. That's why we continue to look out for the incomes of the lowest-income New Zealanders to make sure that they can afford what they need.

**Media:** Minister, on inflation. In other countries, some of the blame has gone to companies with a lot of pricing power. In America, they're looking to tighten up on monopolies. How much of a factor here do you think building materials, supermarkets, and other sectors have driven the inflation as they've used their power and all the other inflation around it to take advantage and put up prices and profit margins?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** You'll see from the actions that we've taken with the Commerce Commission inquiries that these are issues that have drawn our attention and are of concern. We did one of those with the fuel industry, and while the burgeoning oil price globally has seen fuel prices increase significantly, we have seen some control around the fuel margins as a result of the work that we did there. When it comes to supermarkets, that inquiry is under way and we do want to make sure that we do that properly and thoroughly. As it happens, I think building supplies would be another great topic for the Commerce Commission to dig into as well. So yes, there are concerns there. Do we have all of the evidence? Not right now, because that's what the inquiries themselves are about.

**Media:** Just finally, on housing affordability. How are you going to get to an affordable housing level—whatever that is—without a big drop in house prices?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** As I say, the forecasts that we're seeing now from the likes of the Treasury and a number of banks do see drops in house prices. What we've always said is that we will set the rules to try and make house prices more affordable, whether that involves a drop of the kind being forecast from the Treasury or not. How do we do it? We do it, unfortunately, over a long period of time. Because it takes a long time to build up the stock of houses that we need because we inherited such a large deficit in that stock. But we're making progress in that regard. We do it by—on the demand side—making sure that we, for example, remove foreign buyers from the existing home market, by making sure that we don't allow advantages to speculators. It has to build up. The Reserve Bank has its role as well, which obviously they're continuing to work on too.

**Media:** Is this market now too big to fail? We can't afford for it to drop quickly, so you're going to essentially sentence another generation of first-home buyers to having to wait decades and decades before it gets affordable?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** No, I don't accept that in terms of the overall premise of that. We've taken a number of actions to make the housing market more affordable. We will



continue to work on those, and we will continue to make sure we build more houses. This is a problem decades in the making that, unfortunately, is going to take some time to solve.

**Media:** Minister, have you got an update or further advice around shortening the gap for boosters?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** I don't have anything to update on that today, no.

**Media:** How much does that play into the decision around the opening of the border? I mean, you still have New Zealanders and some from vulnerable Pacific and Māori communities who can't get the booster as of yet. How much does that play into the [*Inaudible*] opening decision?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Yeah. Look, when we made the decision to push out the time in which we would move to people coming here with self-isolation, one of the big factors was to see an increase in the booster campaign. If we use the four-month figure, it's around 82 percent of New Zealanders will be able to have their booster by then, but it is something that we keep continually under review.

**Media:** Did you consider price freezes, Minister?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** It's not something that we are considering. I think that kind of action is one that would have a very, very dramatic effect. It's the kind of control in the economy that we saw in New Zealand in the early 1980s, and it can have very, very significant and negative effects. What we are focused on is making sure that we lift the incomes of the lowest-income New Zealanders so that they can maintain their standard of living.

**Media:** Minister, when will you release the list of people who will be able to take a test to get out of isolation in phases 2 and 3 of the Omicron outbreak, and do you envision private and public media being included in that?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Asking for a friend, Henry? Look, that work's underway at the moment, and it's on the timetable that was outlined by Dr Verrall last week. In terms of your specific question about the media, while a decision hasn't been made on that, my own view is that—similar to what we did during level 4—we need a wide variety of media being able to undertake their work. Bearing in mind—and I think this is a really important point—what that regime is about is making sure that if you are a contact you can be tested and, then, still go to work. It's not about a business being able to operate; businesses will be able to operate. This, however, gives them assurance that, if people do become contacts, they will be able to use rapid antigen tests. My own view is we need a strong media presence throughout our time in COVID.

**Media:** How have you modelled that you need 9 million tests a week if you don't know how many workers will be needing them?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** That's the model, and it will be based on a predicted number of workers. I can get that for you.

**Media:** The Prime Minister's COVID scare might be emblematic of what is to come in terms of Cabinet; could you just let us know what sort of plan is either in development or has been formed if one of the members of Cabinet does go down with COVID and has to isolate? Will that mean that you all have, and if so, have you got the facilities to be able to still meet as a Cabinet if that happens?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** In answer to the last part of that question, yes. And as we did today and as we have done many times over the course of the last two years, Cabinet has used virtual forms to be able to meet and hybrids, where some people are in a room and some people are coming in on Zoom. We have the facility to do that. All Cabinet Ministers have the facilities to work from home and perform their jobs as, indeed, the Prime Minister has been doing in the last few days. Beyond that, to wider planning, there is thought going on at the moment to how we might manage that, and we will have more to say about that when any decision gets made. But it hasn't been made.

**Media:** So specifically Parliament itself?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Slightly different matter. Parliament itself—and I believe Parliament's Business Committee is probably meeting right about now, and I'm sure they will be going over the arrangements that the Speaker has in mind for that.

**Media:** Minister, you mentioned nine million RATs could be used at its peak; does that imply that at that time people in the public at home would be able to [*Inaudible*]—

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Obviously, it's a much wider group of people that would potentially be able to use that. The final decisions around how we allocate those, though, will depend on the way in which the outbreak emerges and evolves, but clearly it's a wider group of people than the more narrow critical-worker group we are talking about now.

**Media:** Can you say, at that 9 million, what sort of cases per day that represents?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** As I say, I'll actually go back and I'll get some more detail on that modelling for you so that I can give it to you rather than trying to recall all the numbers that were in the model today.

**Media:** That implies a peak sometime in the next couple of months; can we really expect the borders to open at the same time as we have that sort of peak?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Well, as I say, the Prime Minister will have more to say about the reconnecting New Zealand programme, but one of the things we are being clear all along is that vaccines and boosters give us far more options and choices than we've had previously. And, obviously, what we know about Omicron is that for a large number of people it will be a mild to moderate style illness; for some it will be more severe. We have to design our approach, bearing all of those factors in mind. I'll just finish with John.

**Media:** Just on Tonga—the humanitarian communication problems there. Have Ministers discussed the situation recently, and what, if any, updates can the Government provide this week on support for Tonga and also support for the Tongan expatriate community in New Zealand?

**Hon Grant Robertson:** Well, as you know, we continue to provide support both practically through the Defence Force's deployments up to Tonga, but also through the work we do Government to Government around the Tongan aid programme. If you've got a specific question about part of that, let me know. The relevant Ministers continue to talk very regularly with those in Tonga. Thanks, everyone.

### conclusion of press conference