

POST-CABINET PRESS CONFERENCE: MONDAY, 28 FEBRUARY 2022**HANSARD TRANSCRIPT**

PM: Kia ora koutou katoa, and good afternoon. Today I am joined by Professor David Skegg, the chair of our COVID-19 public health advisory group, to update on decisions made by Cabinet on isolation requirements for people entering New Zealand.

Over the past week of the pandemic, we've seen a rapid change, going from 2,365 cases a day, to over 14,000 today. As the pandemic is evolving, so too is our response. We are now in phase 3 of our Omicron plan, and that means we have changed how people are tested, with widespread rapid antigen testing now our main form of test; we've narrowed isolation requirements to only those sharing households; we've altered our contact tracing system to focus on high-risk exposures; and focus care in the community to those most in need of support through their isolation period.

We've also changed the way we are doing things at the border. At the beginning of February, we set out our plans for reopening. We said two important things at the time. We said that as case numbers increased, the impact of new cases at the border would be less pronounced. You'll remember that when we shared our reopening plans, we had less than 150 COVID cases a day. Allowing people to enter New Zealand with no self-isolation at that time would have had a dramatic impact.

And so to my second point. We set out that we would actively monitor the need for and value of self-isolation. The strong advice from our public officials at that time was that we still needed it to manage our way through Omicron but that they expected there was a not-too-distant future where that would no longer be the case. And so now, a few short weeks later, we've asked our experts to take another look, and received that advice back at 4 p.m. yesterday. That advice has been released this afternoon, and, rather than repeat it myself, I'll take the opportunity to hand over to Professor David Skegg, who will now speak directly to the advice that he has provided to Cabinet.

Professor Skegg, welcome.

Professor David Skegg: Thank you, Prime Minister. The committee I'm chairing is an independent group of scientists and doctors, and we were asked, as you say, to advise on the continuing need for self-isolation of travellers arriving from overseas. Of course, we've been studying the course of this pandemic, both globally and within New Zealand, very carefully.

The MIQ system has been a crucial factor in New Zealand's remarkable success so far in responding to COVID-19, but in a very short period of weeks, the pattern of risk in New Zealand has shifted dramatically. The proportion of arriving travellers who are infected has declined, and the incidence of COVID-19 infections in our community has massively increased, as we had to expect. So, given the rapid change in risks posed, we believe it's now appropriate to drop the requirement for self-isolation of fully vaccinated travellers after they arrive in New Zealand. This could apply both to returning New Zealanders, and to tourists when borders are open more generally.

We do recommend that arriving travellers should be tested, either at the airport or within 24 hours of arrival. Those who return a positive test should be managed in the same way as people in New Zealand who become infected with this virus. We recommend that whole genome sequencing should be carried out in those cases as a surveillance tool to detect the arrival of new variants of the virus.

I think it's important for us all to remember that this pandemic is not over, or nearly over. The virus continues to mutate, and, personally, I'll be surprised if we're still talking about the Omicron variant by the end of the year.

Prime Minister, I think people have a copy of our report, and I'll be happy to answer any questions later.

PM: Thank you, Professor Skegg. As the result of the advice that Professor Skegg has spoken to briefly this afternoon, I can announce today Cabinet has agreed that from 11.59 p.m., Wednesday, 2 March, vaccinated travellers entering New Zealand will no longer need to self-isolate. That means from this Wednesday, Kiwis and eligible travellers arriving from Australia will no longer need to self-isolate for seven days.

In making this decision, we have carefully balanced other factors. The first is that our borders are still gradually opening. Our staged reopening remains, which will help stagger the impact on our current outbreak, and I'll speak to that in a moment. The second is that testing will remain critical, as Professor Skegg has set out, and so we will still require every traveller to undertake a rapid antigen test on the day they arrive and on day 5/6.

All positive RATs must be registered and followed up with a PCR test. This is different to the advice for those currently in the community who test positive with a rapid antigen test, who don't need a PCR follow-up. That's because our border will be the first place we'll see any new variants, and so we need to keep whole genome - sequencing these results so that we know what strains of the virus are entering the country.

All incoming travellers, of course, will also still be required to undertake a pre-departure test before they get on a plane.

Our managed isolation facilities will remain in place for some. All unvaccinated travellers will still need to enter MIQ. We have, though, asked for advice on whether this requirement needs to remain going forward in the future. And while we still face a global pandemic, MIQ is a useful tool for us to have available, even if it is not used at the scale we have seen in the past.

And, finally, to the question of phasing of our border reopening. You'll remember that we set out five steps for travellers coming to New Zealand between the end of February and October. The first group is New Zealanders coming from Australia, which started today. The second group—step 2—is made up of returning Kiwis and eligible critical workers from the rest of the world, and was scheduled to start from 13 March. Today, I can confirm that New Zealanders in step 2 will now be able to arrive from 11.59 p.m. this Friday, 4 March, and, in line with today's decision, will not need to self-isolate.

Due to immigration processes, other non-New Zealanders who were part of step 2, such as working holiday visa holders and RSE workers, will still be eligible to arrive from 13th, but will not, as I say, have to isolate.

Now, as for the remaining steps, which include other visa holders in April, Australians and visitors from visa waiver countries by July, and all others from October, Cabinet will shortly consider bringing these steps forward. The advice from our experts is that getting over the peak of Omicron should be factored into this timing and those decisions. But as a result of the decision taken today, I can assure you now that as we open, all vaccinated travellers who test negative on arrival with a rapid antigen test will be able to immediately enjoy New Zealand and all it has to offer, and not have to self-isolate. I know this will be welcome news to the members of our team overseas eager to travel home to see loved ones as soon as possible—we can't wait to see you. It's also a huge milestone for our tourism sector and regional economies.

New Zealand has achieved so much over the last few years. Our successful elimination of COVID saved lives, our economy is delivering record-low unemployment and growth higher than many, and our high rate of vaccination means we can make decisions like today's knowing we have a strong blanket of protection against the virus. And, as I've said many times through this pandemic, New Zealand has and will continue to forge our path and strategy, but caution has served us well. As we continue to move through the Omicron outbreak and peak, we will continue to remove restrictions when advised it is safe to do so, and today, that is what we have been told, and so that is what we are doing.

We're now both happy to take questions. I will just take, upfront, COVID-related questions, and then for other items, we'll take them after so that we can release Professor Skegg from the podium, as it were.

Yeah, Jason.

Media: Could you give us even some sort of indication as to when the changes around the tourism phase might come in? Can we expect an announcement before the summer period in the Northern Hemisphere, for example?

PM: Yeah, look, we'll be looking to make sure that we give those—make those decisions in a timely way so that planning can be undertaken. We know that's critical for our tourism sector; it's critical for our airlines. But the early feedback—and, again, we want this to be more formal, but the early feedback from our experts is that we are still in the middle of this peak. We are still waiting to reach the peak. At the moment, welcoming home New Zealanders will have a minimal impact, but we do want to be careful about tens of thousands of travellers in a week right when we are managing this part of the outbreak.

But, Professor Skegg, I'm aware that you've not formally met to discuss this advice, but perhaps you might have some views on that as well.

Professor David Skegg: Thank you, Prime Minister. Yes, I think it is sensible for us to be quite cautious at the moment, because we haven't reached the peak. The next few weeks are going to be very challenging for New Zealand. We don't know exactly how things will pan out, so we certainly wouldn't want tens of thousands of people coming in at the moment. But, obviously, I think later in the year there will be the opportunity to welcome tourists, hopefully more quickly than we envisaged, and that will partly be a matter of safeguarding health and also, of course, there are all sorts of economic issues as well.

Media: And just a quick follow-up for Dr Skegg: you said that it would be unlikely at that at the end of this year we would be talking about the Omicron variant. Is that because you think that there is another variant that could become more prevalent?

Professor David Skegg: Yes. Of course, there are already several variants of Omicron and the virus is replicating massively around the world, so we must expect that more variants will arise. They'll only displace Omicron if they're more transmissible than Omicron is, and Omicron is pretty infectious. But I mean the view of most experts in evolutionary virology—and that's not my field—do expect that new variants will arise this year, and any one that displaces Omicron could be more or less virulent, so we just need to maintain that caution. It could be that we're facing later in the year a new threat. We hope not. We hope that any new variant will be less virulent than Omicron and we'll be able to consign this to history.

PM: And that's why—just to close it off—yes, the evidence suggests now we can safely make these alterations to our border, but we are also looking to enhance the surveillance we have at our border as well. So that's where that whole genome sequencing of all positive cases—we are exploring our ability to have closer proximity of testing that allows PCR at our border. We are looking at that, and we will continue to maintain an MIQ network of sorts. These are measures that sensibly need to be in place as we continue our journey through this pandemic.

Jessica, then Jenna, and then I'll come into the front with Thomas.

Media: Omicron is set to peak in New Zealand in mid-March under the updated modelling, so how long after we've peaked—let's say that the next five weeks are bumpy. How long after that would you be prepared to open our border to non - New Zealanders?

PM: What we are expecting is it's likely that Auckland will peak first and give us a signal as to what we can expect for the rest of the country. But things are tracking more rapidly than modellers first anticipated, so we're looking at perhaps as early as mid-March, as you say; possibly even a touch earlier for that peak to be reached. Looking then as to what that then allows us to do in terms of other decision making, we've already said that once we have come through the peak, we're coming down the other side. We're seeing our hospitalisations

become more regular; we've seen that our health system is on a more stable footing. That will enable us to make further changes to our restrictions but also continue to consider the opening up of our border.

Media: Should you have done this a couple of days ago—if you'd asked for Professor Skegg's advice, should we have had this in place already?

PM: So you will have seen that we've moved very quickly, considering of course that we always said when we reach a point where our cases are at a point where incoming cases from New Zealanders arriving will have less material impact, that's when we'll be ready to move. We moved to that place within the space of, essentially, six or seven days. In that space, we receive the advice that the timing was right. It came through on Sunday, Cabinet considered it on Monday, and it will be enacted on Wednesday.

Media: Should you have asked for that advice earlier, though?

PM: We would have then had to therefore anticipate. We would have been asking our experts to project forward without actually having the situation in front of us. So, you know, I think what this demonstrates is every time we have seen a significant change in the pandemic, we're very moving very rapidly to safely adjust what we do at the same time.

Media: A couple of plane-loads of Kiwis have landed in New Zealand from Australia already—

PM: And I welcome them.

Media: Do they have to do the full week?

PM: No—no they don't. So they will not. You're right: we expect several thousand over the course of this week. There will be at best, potentially, a few thousand who may need to isolate for 48 hours. But, no, beyond 11.59 on Wednesday, no one will be required to self-isolate any further.

Media: And did you actually need expert advice to tell you that the risk at the border is not as high as it once was, now that we have tens of thousands of cases in the community?

PM: The thing that has gotten us through this pandemic has been our desire to integrate the best possible advice from our public health experts, our infectious disease specialist, and our epidemiologist. Yes, we're experiencing Omicron now, but that will not be the last variant we experience. We want to make sure that as we change our settings at the border, we do it in a really careful and well-managed way, so it was important to us to get the most up-to-date advice before making that decision.

Professor, is there anything you wanted to add on that?

Professor David Skegg: Well, I would just add—

PM: I mean, they're essentially asking whether or not your advice was necessary. You might have a view on that.

Professor David Skegg: Well, no, I shouldn't give an opinion on that, but all I can say is if you'd asked for our advice two or three weeks ago, we would probably have given a different answer. So this has developed very rapidly—

Media: What about two or three days ago, though?

Professor David Skegg: —and you will see in the report that one of our members was actually thinking we should wait a little bit longer. So I don't think this is something that could have been entertained a month ago.

PM: Jessica, the conversation to commission the advice was Wednesday, so, actually, we did ask. We've just got to give the group time to then give the advice.

Media: I guess the numbers went up, though, on that Monday, so if it had been commissioned straight away—you know, I'm just thinking before the weekend and before this first lot of Aussies came through.

PM: Well, I guess the point that Professor Skegg is making is if you'd asked us too early, we would have got different advice.

Media: The possibility of MIQ [*Inaudible*] for a future variant—is that still on the table?

PM: Sorry, what was that?

Media: Is this the end of isolation for incoming travellers, or could you—

PM: We will retain MIQ, and we will have to work through how we do that and in such a way that it allows us to scale it up should we need to, but have some capacity available, and, look, there's a range of reasons why immediately it is still useful to us. But in the future as well, as Professor Skegg has said, we can't make an assumption that any future variant will be less severe than this one, and if there is a variant that is to overtake Omicron, it would need to be more transmissible and it may well be more severe. But we'll let Professor Skegg speak to that.

Professor David Skegg: Yes, well, that summarises it well, Prime Minister.

Media: How are you measuring keeping the MIQ—I mean, will you just keep some hotels on the Government books, like how are you going to either kind of—

PM: Yeah, we're working through some of the advice on the nature of that network, but what we've considered to date is the possibility of having some facilities which we may have used already which may become part of our permanent network, versus whether or not we have lease arrangements as well. So we're working to finalise what that will look like, keeping in mind, of course, we are moving our MIQ systems quite quickly here.

Media: Will those that are in MIQ at the moment be let out early?

PM: Yes, they will—yep. So today, there are 150 people that are immediately eligible for self-isolation, of course, and they'll only need to do that through till midnight Wednesday. So, yes, those individuals are released from today.

Media: And the ones that will come in over the course of the week will be let free on Friday?

PM: Yes, correct—absolutely correct.

Media: Does this mark the end of self-isolation? Like are you not going back to—the way you've moved on from lockdowns, have you now moved on from border restrictions?

PM: Usual caveats: here we are making these decisions in light of the experience we're having and the evidence we have, but I think every expert would want us to just remind people that this pandemic isn't over yet. So we need to make sure that we still have in our back pocket all of the tools that have got us through so far; that doesn't mean we shouldn't celebrate this milestone today.

Media: Can I also ask—across the road there's, obviously, the protest. It's entering its fourth week tomorrow. It's an international beacon for the anti-vaccine movement. Do you have a plan to stop people coming from Australia and further abroad to protest outside Parliament?

PM: Well, of course, those individuals—we of course do not predetermine where people will go after they arrive in the country, keeping in mind, though, of course, if you're unvaccinated, you're still required to go into MIQ.

Media: The report talks about the possibility of requiring three doses of an approved vaccine to be qualified as fully vaccinated. Has the Government given any thought to that and when it might consider it? And, Professor Skegg, do you have a view on when New Zealand might need to take that approach of recording three doses as fully vaccinated?

PM: So we have given—we haven't made any final decisions on that. I think one of the things that we've been considering is we have to operationalise any decision that we take in this area, and of course we have to factor in the availability of boosters at the point of departure and, of course, making sure that we are fair and reasonable in assessing whether

or not someone's had the opportunity to be boosted from the second dose that they've had. It's quite difficult to operationalise, but we have given it consideration, or we haven't taken a final view.

Professor Skegg?

Professor David Skegg: Thank you, and, Prime Minister, we didn't recommend that. We just noted that it's something that needs to be considered in the future, and I guess today all I'd be saying is I would really encourage all New Zealanders over 18 to get their booster, if they haven't had it already.

PM: Yep, absolutely, and we are seeing the impact of boosters right now. You know, when you look at our hospitalisations: five in ICU. There is no question boosters are making a difference in New Zealand—no question at all.

Claire.

Media: On the court decision on the mandates, has the Government given—

PM: Do you mind if I just wrap up with questions, and then I'm happy to come back to you on mandates? Other questions that involve Professor Skegg—yeah, Justin. Sorry, Claire, we won't be long on that.

Media: [*Inaudible*] what he thinks about the mandates.

PM: Oh, do you? Oh, forgive me, I thought you just wanted a thought on a High Court decision on what we'll do with it. Professor Skegg, do you—on mandates generally?

Media: Yeah—whether they're still like necessary or useful.

Professor David Skegg: Oh well, that's something we've been asked to look at in the next few weeks, and we haven't finished that discussion yet, but we will be reporting to the Government in a few weeks' time.

PM: So we commissioned from Professor Skegg's group a range of issues that we'd like consideration of. This one we asked them to prioritise; we also asked them to consider all of the other settings that we have in place and the role that they'll play in the future of our pandemic management, because you'll remember we talked about the fact that as we come down the peak, we'll look to remove some of those measures. So we've asked for the view of our advisory group on those.

Media: On tourism, there's been this view that if you remove MIQ, the tourists will just come—as you've said it yourself, tens of thousands of people. Is there any evidence that there are tens of thousands of tourists that are just waiting to come to New Zealand?

PM: So it's very hard to estimate or to predict what will happen to the behaviour of tourists in the aftermath of a pandemic which has swept the globe, so the earliest indications or comparison we could make probably would be Australia. They're in the early days of their reopening, so we'll maybe want to give that a bit more time, but it is difficult to predict at this stage. What we do know is Tourism New Zealand has worked very hard to maintain New Zealand's brand and New Zealand's position as a destination in people's minds, even if people haven't been able to travel in that intervening period.

Media: Because the first evidence out of Australia seems to be that it's a bit slower than some of them had expected.

PM: Yes, that's right.

Media: Is there a message there for the tourism industry? It might be looking at this and saying, "Why are you waiting?"—perhaps this could be a rebuild that is measured not in weeks and months but in years?

PM: I think they'll be live to that, but we also shouldn't diminish the impact for a country of our size that tourism coming back in will have, because even the domestic tourism has made a difference domestically. But I think our industry knows it will be a rebuild and, at the

same time, we want to continue to encourage New Zealanders to enjoy domestic tourism, too.

Yeah, Jane, and then I'll come to Jo, and then Amelia.

Media: Professor Skegg, do you have any concerns about the uptake of booster shots in New Zealand compared to, you know, the first and second vaccine doses, and is that something your group's considering in any way?

Professor David Skegg: Well, obviously, I'd like 100 percent of eligible people to have the booster. Compared with other countries, we are actually very well prepared for this Omicron outbreak, because most countries were still getting under way with boosters when Omicron struck. So I wouldn't want to be too pessimistic about this. I think we are in a very good position, but there still are about 30 percent of people, or a bit less, I think, who are eligible who haven't taken up that opportunity, and I would strongly urge them to do it. It's no use doing it after you've got sick.

Media: Do you have any thoughts or have you discussed what might be behind the slightly slower booster uptake in terms of, for example, complacency or, you know, you can get your two vaccines and get your vaccine pass, but you don't need the booster—I mean, is it something that features in your discussions?

Professor David Skegg: We haven't sort of discussed the psychology of it in detail. I guess it is complacency. Also, I think the way things have evolved—we all understood there'd be two doses of this vaccination; we now know with Omicron, really, it should be three doses. Even the word "booster" somehow implies an optional extra, but it's not—you know, in order to be fully protected, you need three doses. So I just think it's quite understandable, but we've got to strive to get everyone protected, if we can.

PM: Jo.

Media: Prime Minister, with any border announcement, there are always people who will gasp at the idea of borders opening after they've been quite closed for some time. I'm just wondering if there is been any kind of modelling or sort of guesstimate-type stuff that has been done around the impact on the health system—how quickly we might get through the peak, or how sustained that peak might be, as a result of opening those borders?

PM: Yeah, so if we take into consideration the inclusion of step 2 as well, I have an assumption that we'd then—on top of step 1, which is 5,000 to 6,000 travellers a week, we'd then get to 10,000 to 13,000 additional travellers per—arrivals per week. The estimate now is because of the measures that we already have in place with—granted, this is with self-isolation—an estimate of up to 425 cases being added into the mix as a result of that. That was with self-isolation though, so it will be a bit—it'll be higher.

Media: So, sorry—425 cases?

PM: A hundred to 425 imported cases per week being introduced into the community. But, again, that was with self-isolation, so we'd estimate that it would be a bit higher again still. So what that demonstrates is that, relative to the case numbers that we have now, an impact that would be considered to be manageable within our health system. And I've seen some of the estimates around the impact on hospitalisations, and it is what I would describe as minimal.

Media: So that—I mean, how much could that 400—I mean, that's quite—if you've got self-isolation in play with that figure, no self-isolation is quite different. So how much—

PM: Except they actually assumed—they assumed that there would be quite a high rate into the community with even self-isolation. So they estimated that with self-isolation, they'd still get 65 percent of arriving cases still reaching the community.

Media: And do you anticipate that a lot of that would impact the Auckland health system in particular?

PM: Well, of course, it's—not everyone who arrives in New Zealand stops directly in Auckland, and, of course, people are able to take onward travel to their final destination. But we could assume just as a proportion of population that, yes, there'd be a number in Auckland. But, again, the impact on the health system—I'm happy to pull out the figures we've had. But it was a small percentage that they considered would then impact our wider health system—keeping in mind that these are vaccinated travellers who have also had a pre-departure test, as well.

Amelia.

Media: It's Just on Russia—is that all right?

PM: Yes. Do you mind if I do one quick glance to see whether or not we have anything further for Professor Skegg? Professor Skegg, thank you so much not only for your very timely advice but joining us today and taking questions from media. It's much appreciated.

Professor David Skegg: Thank you very much. Kia ora tātou.

PM: Yes, go ahead.

Media: Yeah, just on whether there's been any further consideration to the Autonomous Sanctions Bill—National said it would support it this week if you were to put through—and whether you are now looking at bringing that bill in so you can go ahead and sort of freeze Russian oligarchs' assets in New Zealand?

PM: That would not be the only way that we could do that. So at Cabinet today, we discussed further advice on how we could ensure that as a result of action in other countries—we don't see any, for instance, onward investment flows into New Zealand, and we are really targeting those actors in particular who we'd want to put pressure on as a result of this invasion in Ukraine. So we've got a couple of streams of advice going on at the moment relating to the Overseas Investment Act but also whether or not whether we could design something specifically targeted at Russia. Our view at the moment is changing the law on autonomous sanctions may not be as timely as some of the options that we otherwise might have, and we want to make sure that we're impactful, that we act quickly, and we continue to send a strong message.

Media: So will you put in a law change?

PM: Yeah—depending on what—depending on what you do. For the OIO, no, which is why we're looking really closely at what our ability might be there, because, of course, we have a national interest test within that regime. So seeking advice on that as quickly as we can.

Media: So it could be that sort of this week even, we could see some of those assets in New Zealand frozen?

PM: I hope to—well, sorry, no. This would be about incoming investment. But we are seeking further advice on whether or not there are other things that could be done in this space. It's fair to say we're looking to those options which enable us to move as quickly as possible. Changing the entire autonomous sanctions regime for every future scenario would not be as quick as some of these other options.

Media: And just—Australia has just recently provided some military hardware to the Ukraine in support. Is that something that we would consider doing—be it lethal or non-lethal hardware?

PM: Yeah, so look, you would have seen there are some countries who are providing military hardware as a contribution to Ukraine as they continue to fight the invasion from Russia. The scale of our armed forces means that the kind of equipment that is immediately being offered to Ukraine is just not something that we currently have available, nor at the scale that Ukraine necessarily would require. Instead, of course, you'll see that we've put our effort in stopping any potential export into the Russian military and also—critically—being

amongst the first to be committing to humanitarian aid to support the efforts to look after those from the Ukraine who are moving into the surrounding area.

Media: So it's just that we don't have enough helmets or vests to spare to send them?

PM: Look, I think it's not surprising that the likes of the UK, Germany, and Australia, with the size of their armed forces, have in their reserves the kind of equipment that Ukraine is seeking very quickly. What New Zealand can do is make sure that we are making a contribution to other parts of the effort. There is need within Ukraine to ensure that people receive humanitarian aid and assistance. We've always been very quick to provide that. We've done that today, before most, and that's going to the Red Cross, who can already get in on the ground to support.

Yeah, sorry, I just thought I'd come—oh, yes.

Media: Just back to that asset [*Inaudible*] that you were talking about—just for clarification. So the New Zealand Government would consider possibly freezing New Zealand's assets of non-residents or non-citizen Russians, or permanently confiscate them in light of this invasion?

PM: When it comes to the action that we can take as a nation to reinforce our strong condemnation of what Russia is doing to Ukraine, we haven't taken any options off the table at this point. We are continuing to seek advice on other actions beyond what we've already done now. But to reinforce: much of what we have done is very much in keeping with the rest of the world, and our statements against Russia have been strong, which is what New Zealanders would expect.

Media: Have you had any advice about how many assets are held in New Zealand by Russians?

PM: I've had advice on what you might anticipate would be incoming investment into New Zealand from Russia. That has been fairly minimal in recent times, but it's one of the things we're interested in looking at, because what we wouldn't want to see is that as a result of action from other countries, any attempts for onward investment into New Zealand. So making sure we're covering that off is part of the advice we're asking for.

I'll just let you finish, and then I'll come to Jane.

Media: Just on New Zealand Crown entities and KiwiSaver, are you comfortable with them having any investments in State-backed Russian companies?

PM: I think the first thing to say is that, legally, we are unable to direct those investment funds on how they make their investments, but I have been advised that, for instance, the guardians of the super fund are going through their own process at the moment when it comes to any investments that may be linked directly into Russia and those responsible.

Media: Isn't it realistic that even if you do take other measures, New Zealand's still going to be, I suppose, well short of actions that countries like Australia, UK, US are taking?

PM: Not necessarily. No, let's make that assessment at the time that we have completed the raft of measures that we're likely to take. Many countries have put out a first blush, continue to look at the measures they can take; New Zealand is no different. I spoke with Minister Mahuta who is in Europe as we speak. What she reiterated to me is that our partners consider our actions and measures to have been very much in keeping with theirs; the strength of our statements to be in keeping with theirs. We are taking the stand that the rest of the world expects and, in fact, when it comes to humanitarian assistance, moving very quickly to play a role as soon as we can.

Media: What do you make of the position that China is, I suppose, positioning itself between Russia and the rest of the world?

PM: I think it's going to be in the whole world's interests to ensure that we don't see any positions here that might further entrench difficult regional issues that we continue to

navigate. We've made no assumption about the positioning of China on these issues. Our officials have remained engaged with China, expressing our views and concerns around Russian activity and this invasion and continuing to encourage all Security Council members to take a very strong position.

Media: Do you think there's going to be an expectation from other countries that China could use its relationship with Russia to mediate or intervene at all in the situation?

PM: Why not encourage? Why not encourage other Security Council members—why not encourage China to play the role that the world is looking for right now? Let's not make an assumption on particular positioning. We don't want to further entrench diplomatic hostility when, actually, what we all need are diplomatic solutions.

Media: Have you moved any closer to expelling the Russian ambassador?

PM: We haven't taken any final decisions in that regard, and one of the things that we continue to consider is, of course, we have to think about the knock-on impact for those in the region as well. It means that you wipe out your ability to provide consular assistance on the ground to New Zealanders.

Media: Are you making any provisions for if New Zealand's consulate staff over there do need to be taken out?

PM: Yes, we always make sure that we're well prepared, because, of course, at any time you could have a unilateral move from within country as well.

Media: So what would it take to expel an ambassador? I mean, you've got a—

PM: As I say, everything is still—every option is still on the table.

Media: Is there a threshold you're looking to hit for that?

PM: No. Every day, we're considering all of the options that are on the table for us.

Media: And one of the discussions overseas at the moment is that a lot of Prime Ministers and the like are sort of saying, "We would support our citizens to go over there and fight in the Ukraine." Has that come up at all, and—

PM: No—no, it hasn't.

Media: —[*Inaudible*] legislation?

PM: No, it hasn't, and I'd expect that at this stage, New Zealanders want us to be taking a strong position. They'd want us to be early movers on interventions and play a role to not only support the diplomatic efforts but also those in Ukraine who are affected in their day-to-day lives, and we are doing all of that.

Yeah—Ben, Justin, and then I might finish with Sam.

Media: Prime Minister, we've seen some extraordinary scenes in Ukraine—you know, people carrying landmines, tractors towing tanks, Ukrainian citizens—

PM: Preparing Molotov cocktails.

Media: Well, sure. Its citizens are telling Russians to, you know, go eff themselves on the way out—

PM: Yeah.

Media: Are you, like lots of us, in awe of the spirit and the actions of everyday Ukrainians to try and repel the Russians?

PM: I cannot imagine what it would be like to have your homeland invaded in that way, and so I think what we are seeing is all of the human emotions that you would expect people would feel to have such a brazen and inhumane invasion, and that's what I think we see on display. But also it is extraordinary, because you can only imagine what it is to be faced with

the full force of the Russian military, and I've even heard reports of civilians standing in a line in front of tanks as they move through their towns. And that is extraordinary.

Media: As a world leader that has a small but particularly significant part to play in this, does it make you reassess your world view or how you might deal with despotic regimes in other places?

PM: Unfortunately, it has confirmed—I think the reason that it is so confronting for so many is that it confirms that we are in unstable times; that the predictability that we thought we had in our international world order does not exist in the way we believed and hoped it might. Now, many of us may have already had the view that that was the case, but it is still none the less confronting to see it writ large.

Yeah, Justin.

Media: Prime Minister, the European Union and a number of other places have banned the Kremlin channel RT—Russia Today. The EU said it was toxic and harmful disinformation. Sky carries it here. They've temporarily pulled it. They've said they're looking at the content to see if it fits New Zealand's broadcasting standards. Have you considered banning it just as a sign to the Russians of what should be acceptable?

PM: Yeah, forgive me because I had—my recollection—and I'm reading twice-daily updates on the situation and being briefed regularly, and I want to go back and check some of the latest on that subject matter, if I may. My obsession in recent times has been SWIFT and the movements there and incoming asset movements, but I will take another look at that.

And I'll come back over here to Ben, and forgive me. I haven't given you a question, so I'll finish there.

Media: Are you aware of any concerns about prominent Russians with connections to the Putin regime not covered by the existing travel bans who may be heading to New Zealand? There's lots of speculation and people looking at the flight paths of oligarchs. Is that something you are keeping an eye on?

PM: We are keeping a constant eye on our travel ban list. It numbers 80 at present. We work closely with our international partners in an effort to make sure that we have up-to-date information, that information sharing is occurring, and that we have a list that reflects those who we need to be targeting. As I said, we're at the moment working on the inclusion of individuals from Belarus.

Yeah, I'll just finish over here. I see there's two, actually, I haven't—sorry, Emilia. If I may, I'll just come to—I don't have your name?

Media: Ethan.

PM: Ethan—sorry.

Media: On housing, what is your response to students who are having to drop out of university and move back home due to the unaffordability of housing in Wellington?

PM: I would point to the fact that we of course did make sure that we saw, through the changes that we made to Government support, that we did also see an increase in student support, and of course we expect the adjustments that will be made to Government support to have a positive impact for them. I absolutely understand that particularly in Wellington, the housing market is very, very difficult, and it was one of the reasons that we considered them alongside those benefit increases.

Media: Prime Minister, we're seeing a massive police presence still. Do you feel safe here and have you been told any advice around—you know, will Parliament continue to operate safely, given the protests?

PM: Yes, Parliament has continued all the way through. The police have continued to work hard to ensure the safety of people who work in the building. That is not to say that people haven't had, you know, difficult experiences coming and going from the building, as

many, I've heard, have been abused for wearing masks and the like, and it's another reason that those outside need to go home. When it comes to Parliament sitting, you'll see that we are moving to a hybrid model that allows a virtual sitting, but that is not because of the protest, but the outbreak. I would point out that they are a part of the outbreak. We know that there are COVID cases connected to that occupation—it is a COVID camp. I would encourage no one to venture down to that area, because it is well documented now that COVID cases have come from it.

OK, and I'll—

Media: Do you have any concerns—sorry, do you have any concerns, have you received any advice about potential Russian cyber-attacks in like a retaliation—

PM: Look, cyber-attacks have been something that we have anticipated throughout this conflict. In the lead up to, during, in the aftermath, it should absolutely be an expectation of the world that this will be part of the MO of Russia, because it has been in the past.

And, Claire, I'll finish with you.

Media: I have the answer to the first question I was trying to ask before, which was whether or not the Government is looking at appealing the—

PM: Haven't made any final decision at this stage.

Media: And also, in terms of the protest, whether or not you've had any reports on how stretched police in other regions are getting because of the deployments they're having to send to Parliament, day after day after day after day?

PM: Yep. Yeah, so I think the first point would be that this is—we now have the largest number of police officers that we've had, so we have made an effort throughout our time in office to increase the number of recruits that we have and the number of police officers. Of course, there's no question, though, that the staffing of this protest and ensuring that people are kept safe as a result of it will have an impact. You can see just the number of police officers required to ensure that people can safely go about their work, go to school, and operate their businesses. The sooner it is over the better.

Thanks everyone.

conclusion of press conference