

**POST-CABINET PRESS CONFERENCE: MONDAY, 25 JULY 2022
HANSARD TRANSCRIPT**

PM: Kia ora koutou katoa. Good afternoon. Today, I am joined by biosecurity and agriculture Minister Damien O'Connor to talk about the action the Government is taking to protect New Zealand's economy from foot-and-mouth disease and what we need New Zealanders to do to keep our agricultural sector safe.

But first to the week ahead. I'm in Wellington on Tuesday and Wednesday, attending question time in the House. On Tuesday evening, I will attend and speak at Business New Zealand's Backing Business event. On Thursday I have events in Ōtaki and Levin. On Friday, I have events in Auckland. On that weekend, we will look to highlight the next steps in our work on HIV.

In May, foot-and-mouth disease was detected in Indonesia, and a few weeks ago in its tourist capital of Bali. It has been a priority of our Government to strengthen our biosecurity system, investing a further \$110 million in Budget 2022 to ensure we have one of if not the strongest system in the world to protect us from diseases like this to preserve both our unique biodiversity and our agricultural sector, worth over \$52 billion to our economy. While the World Organisation for Animal Health estimates the virus is present in 77 percent of the world's livestock population, New Zealand has never had an outbreak, and we want to do all we can to keep it that way. This is a new outbreak in Indonesia, which they are still working to manage, so it's important that we adjust for this new risk.

Foot-and-mouth has been present in other countries for some time, and our tough biosecurity settings have so far kept it out. While not a threat to humans, it would devastate our national herd. Essentially, all animals who are cloven-hooved are at risk: cows, sheep, pigs, goats, deer, and llama. In the event of foot-and-mouth reaching New Zealand, all trade in animal products would be stopped and rural businesses such as farms, farm contractors, and all processors and transporters would be affected. Animals would be slaughtered and more than 100,000 jobs in the primary sector would be at risk.

Early detection of the disease would be vital to respond quickly and eradicate as soon as possible, if possible, and resume trade in animal products. And while no system is foolproof, we can and will increase measures where there is even the lowest risk of foot-and-mouth entering New Zealand, and part of that is ensuring every New Zealander plays their part too. So while there are no direct flights from Indonesia to New Zealand, even the slightest potential for increased risk means we escalate our defences quickly.

Biosecurity New Zealand has stopped travellers from bringing any personal consignments of any meat products from Indonesia and has installed disinfectant foot mats for all arrivals from Indonesia. They also undertook an audit last month of Indonesia's palm kernel supply chain, which found it is meeting New Zealand's strict biosecurity requirements for foot-and-mouth disease. New Zealand has also provided Indonesia with PPE, disinfectant sprayers, and other tools, as well as technical expertise to help them manage their outbreak.

We've also been in continual contact with Australia too, where last week some traced viral fragments—not transmissible—were found on processed pork product there. I want in particular today to also acknowledge the primary sector groups who have been running awareness campaigns, and I want to echo what they have been saying to try and help spread that message to as many New Zealanders as possible.

This is the prime time to promote further awareness about the threat of foot-and-mouth, what you can do to follow good biosecurity practice, and what to look out for. And so to all New Zealanders and travellers here, please be responsible: please be honest and thorough in your biosecurity declarations as you return from overseas travel. Crucially, if you've interacted with animals in a country known to have foot-and-mouth, then you must stay away from farms for a week, and that includes lifestyle blocks.

For further messaging that we are sharing, particularly with our primary sector, I'm going to hand over to Minister O'Connor.

Hon Damien O'Connor: Kia ora. Thank you, Prime Minister. Foot-and-mouth disease has been always considered the doomsday disease for the New Zealand farming sector. We've been aware of its threat for decades, and some of us may remember the horrific scenes from the UK some time ago where hundreds of thousands of animals had to be slaughtered. We have, thankfully, strong and multi-layered biosecurity systems—arguably some of the strongest in the world—but we must have an approach of continually improving them. We have made significant investments in biosecurity: \$110 million more, \$21 million of which has gone into critical diagnostic surveillance and investigative capability, and heightened readiness for diseases like foot-and-mouth disease should they ever arrive in our country.

Vigilance is absolutely crucial, and the public awareness campaign that we have been running over the last few weeks now is to raise the awareness across the whole of the population. We've been doing risk assessments, including on all arrivals in cargo, 100 percent of which is all checked in. Cabin baggage and cargo—100 percent of it is checked coming in. We've got detector dogs and we've got very high, strong import health standards, and, as the Prime Minister said, we have stopped any importation of food from people from Indonesia.

Look, the speed of any response, of course, in a preparedness situation will rely on traceability and records. We have learnt much from the *Mycoplasma bovis* campaign, and farmers generally now are adhering to a very high standard of NAIT record-keeping, and that is great. But we will be saying to them, "If you see any of your cattle, sheep, deer, pigs, goats, alpacas, or llamas with any symptoms of high fever, mouth and feet blisters, or erosions and lameness, then please call your vet." It's important that farmers remind all their staff and anyone working around farms of this possibility.

I've been having regular discussions, of course, with my staff but also with Beef + Lamb and with other industry organisations. I can say that in the event of foot-and-mouth ever reaching here, we have access to a vaccine bank in the UK that can be called upon within days of notice, but we hope that with vigilance, with improved systems, and with all the efforts that we've put in so far, we won't have to face foot-and-mouth in New Zealand. Kia ora.

PM: OK—happy to take questions.

Media: Prime Minister, parents are telling us that unless there is a mask mandate, children simply won't—

PM: Do you mind, Amelia, if I just cast around. I try not to hold Ministers for longer than is necessary. If I just cast around, then I'll come straight back to you once we go through. Any foot-and-mouth - related questions from the gallery today?

Media: How would you describe the risk given, I suppose, the proximity now to New Zealand despite these controls, and what else could you do? Is there a step out that you could take if the risk increases?

Hon Damien O'Connor: Look, I couldn't put a figure on that, other than to say the risk has increased, and, obviously, we know many Australians go to Bali, many Australians come to New Zealand, and while we don't have direct flights, the possibility of it coming through Australia is there. We're working with Australian authorities to make sure that they have the most robust border systems in place, and we're sharing the best knowledge and best practice across the Tasman.

Media: But are there other steps that you could do in terms of Australian transactions or comings and goings, if that's going to be a risk?

Hon Damien O'Connor: Look, you know, yes, Australians, obviously, in growing numbers will be going to Bali. Their borders are open. That does heighten the risk into that country, and then across here. One of the things we have to be mindful of, of course, is through third countries, such as the Pacific. So we'll be watching all borders and testing any

of the incoming baggage, of course, that may be at risk; asking questions of anyone who may have been connected in primary or secondary ways with Indonesia.

PM: I think that's one of the reasons why it's so important that we're working closely with Australia and their biosecurity teams, because it's of course not only the direct risk of importation of products—and particularly, obviously, you've heard we've taken a close look at PKE for that reason. We're also of course concerned about the major migratory routes for people to travel into New Zealand from Indonesia, and that, obviously, would usually, or often be via Australia. But that's where we're working closely together in a trans-Tasman way to make sure that we reduce down that risk for both of us.

Media: Minister, what about the ports, though—is that of concern as well?

Hon Damien O'Connor: Every container is being inspected—any from Indonesia. We're very mindful of the risks from other countries of foot-and-mouth disease, and we'll continue to do those assessments and upgrade the systems where necessary.

PM: I'll just come to Bernard, and then come over to you, Luke.

Media: Minister, are you considering blocking any food imports—in particular, pork—given that it was pork products into Australia that were found to have foot-and-mouth?

Hon Damien O'Connor: We're conducting the same survey as Australia has of some supermarkets where a product has come in perhaps from Indonesia or other countries that have foot-and-mouth disease to see whether there are any DNA remnants or any other risks. It's a low-risk pathway, but we are still investigating.

PM: Yeah—Luke.

Media: When it comes to—you say every container from Indonesia is being inspected. What does an inspection mean?

Hon Damien O'Connor: Infection means, basically, you know, there's an outbreak of—

PM: Inspection.

Media: No, inspection—sorry.

Hon Damien O'Connor: Oh, inspection?

PM: Yeah.

Hon Damien O'Connor: All containers coming in will have someone there on site to ensure that when it's opened, we can look for any risk products into that—so just for all the containers from Indonesia at the moment. We don't do that for all containers, but we do up the management systems and the checks whenever we see a heightened risk from anywhere.

Media: So risk products might be any sort of beef or beef product or something—

Hon Damien O'Connor: Absolutely, and—

Media: And then how's that inspected? How is it scanned, or what happens?

Hon Damien O'Connor: Look, there'll be people on site who'll be looking for any risks. Clearly, some of those containers may have come from rural areas, so it's not just their contents, but it is actually at the outside of the containers as well and where they've been sourced from.

Media: Prime Minister, just two questions, if I may, on this?

PM: On this? Yeah, go ahead then.

Media: In Australia, the debate is around whether the border should be shut to Indonesia. Would you ever consider a radical measure like that? And secondarily—I mean, people have a lot of choice in where they might choose to holiday. Would you encourage them just not to holiday in Bali at the moment?

PM: Well, obviously, not having those direct flights means that we have intermediary steps in order to try and ensure that we've got those protective mechanisms in place. We're of course scanning more luggage from those who may have been in the area. We have footbaths for those who may have been in the area, and very clear guidance and expectations on anyone who has been in certain parts or engaged in certain practices like visiting rural areas. I think, again, when it comes to the idea of border closures, there's no question that this poses a significant biosecurity risk to New Zealand, but, at the same time, when you have estimates of up to 77 percent of the population who might be susceptible to foot-and-mouth being potentially in contact with it around the world, it just demonstrates that that risk is a general one as well. We are heightening here our response because this is an emerging disease in a country that has not previously recorded it, and therefore we want to make sure that we've got all our settings in place to protect ourselves against that new, emerging threat in that part of the world.

Media: Prime Minister, there used to be direct flights to Indonesia from New Zealand. Are you aware of any plans to bring those back, and would this, obviously, affect that?

PM: Not at this stage, but you're right that there's obviously a scaling up of accessibility for different parts of the world, and what we'd need to make sure—if that were the case—is that we have those adequate biosecurity checks in place. Again, I'd to point out that there are parts of the world where we do have direct connections that already have foot-and-mouth present, where we have of course had to establish protocols to ensure, again, that we have those mechanisms in place. And we need to think not just about travel but the movement of goods, and, as the Minister has said, it's not just an agricultural product but it's anything that might be derived from those areas which could be seen as potentially a point of transmission.

Media: The Minister has talked about it being a doomsday scenario, potentially, for agriculture. Can you put any sort of figure on the percentage that GDP in New Zealand might drop as a result of an outbreak, and just talk about the economic impacts a little bit?

Hon Damien O'Connor: Look, there has been a figure. It's reasonably significant, and I can't quote that now—you can probably go investigate that. One of the big challenges, if it was to come into New Zealand, is the wildlife. We have cloven wildlife that would make it difficult. The UK—of course, most of the animals were in a farm situation. That's why it's more important that we keep this out so that it not only is prevented from infecting farm animals but then getting into the wildlife and coming—

PM: Wild deer, wild pigs, wild goats—yep. I can share someone was picturing wild cows.

Hon Damien O'Connor: Sorry—yes. There are a few on the West Coast.

PM: Yeah. So that is a significant additional threat for New Zealand. Of course, *Mycoplasma bovis*—there's an example where New Zealand is on track to do something that no one else has done, by eradicating that disease. I say "on track" because it takes a number of years for us to fully determine and us to enable the testing over certain times in the calendar where the animals are stressed and it's more likely to manifest. But with foot-and-mouth there's extra challenges there, and so that makes it additionally risky.

Media: Would you take a similar eradication approach if it's infective?

PM: Oh look, you know, my view would be, you know, do as much as you can to protect the herd, and so we've got to do what we can from protect it from coming in, and I would want to fully—you know, if it was in early detection, do everything that we could to try and get rid of it.

Hon Damien O'Connor: Action would have to be swifter and more dramatic.

PM: Yeah.

Media: Biosecurity New Zealand has estimated a \$10 billion reduction in export revenue if there was a foot-and-mouth outbreak. Is that in line with what you've been advised?

Hon Damien O'Connor: Yeah, it's a figure I have seen, and, again, people make estimates. But it is a significant hit to our economy.

PM: OK, that's everything, thank you, Minister O'Connor.

Amelia.

Media: Parents are telling us today that unless there is a mask mandate, children simply won't wear masks, even if the school strongly encourages it. So is there any room for you changing your mind on issuing a mandate to schools?

PM: Keep in mind a school can also require it. So I think here I would say Ministers came at this issue with a very open mind—you know, we want to do everything that we can to, of course, protect our kids and protect our health system. So we asked our experts in Health and Education to provide us with their best advice on whether or not we should move back to Government mandating masks. The response we clearly got was that Education wanted the flexibility to implement a policy. That, of course, does not preclude—and we are strongly encouraging—schools to utilise masks. We're providing them, and they can require their use, but this at least allows schools to implement it in a way that works for their school community.

Media: And with secondary principals calling for the Government to make it easier to hire teachers from overseas if COVID bites because relievers are in such short supply, what are you doing to get teachers here quickly?

PM: Yeah. We have had recruitment campaigns. You would forgive me; I'd want to go back and check about this on the status of those and even, indeed, on some of the numbers we've had, because we have had specific campaigns particularly in those areas where we have had shortages in the past. There are particular subjects where we've often had a large number of vacancies or difficulties in some harder to staff parts of the country. But I wouldn't mind going away and then checking what some of those vacancies are looking like.

Amelia—last one, Amelia.

Media: The one thing that schools have asked for, which they say would significantly speed up the process and make it cheaper for them, is for rubber-stamping every State school so they don't have to apply to be accredited employers. Is there going to be any wriggle room on you changing that?

PM: Yeah, again, so here, if you'd allow me to go and—because the accredited employer scheme does allow—at least, for instance, in Health, we'll have Health New Zealand working in that capacity. So you've got the ability to really centralise the system, which makes it a lot smoother and a lot easier. But, again, I'd like to go back and just have a quick look at the way that Education are implementing that new scheme.

Media: Will you look at the political donations regime again—especially with legislation before the House at the moment—in terms of the definition of political donation, because at the moment, as the judgment would suggest, you could funnel that money through a shadow entity at the moment.

PM: So here—if I can just separate out my comments from that particular case, because there is the potential there for potentially appeals to occur—I think if we have an illustration of where the intent or the principle of any of our electoral laws is not necessarily being upheld in the spirit in which it was potentially intended by Parliament, you would want an avenue to go and look at that. The opportunity that we have is that we have two bills going through—well, two processes. One is that we're already trying to increase the transparency around donations, but the other is the independent review around electoral laws generally. That has the scoping capacity to pick up any issues that might come out from court cases around electoral donations. Ultimately, I think all parties—it's in our best interests to have laws and systems in place that people have faith and trust in, and so if we see anything that demonstrates that we could strengthen that, I would like to use that opportunity as a Parliament, and try and build consensus too.

Media: So does that mean that you would use this legislation? The review's not due until after the next election, so that would be too late, and this would suggest a very, very big loophole, and public trust and in terms of the ability for foreign interference. Will you use the legislation now, before the next election, to have another look at it, potentially?

PM: So the two pieces we have, we—obviously, you will have seen in June we've already announced some changes around the electoral laws that relate to political donations and loans. So that requires the disclosure of donor identities for any donations over \$5,000, the number in total value of party donations under \$1,500 that are not made anonymously, the proportion of total party donations that are in kind, and loans to candidates from unregistered lenders. If we have as a consequence of any of the court cases that we see currently—and I speak generally here because some of them may not have been completed—anything that demonstrates that this law as it was intended has issues, then I would want to see us respond to that, the issue likely there being that the drafting of that, I imagine, may be somewhat more complex. Even if you introduced something tomorrow or intended to introduce something tomorrow, I would say the amount of time required may make it tight for 2023.

Media: But taking all of that into account, is there something now in the regime that should be given greater attention than this time last week?

PM: Perhaps if you could ask me that question again once we see this court case fully completed—because my concern at the moment is I'm loath to go too far down the track in determining what needs to change in the law before we've had an appeal, if there is one.

Media: So if there was a significant problem with the definition of political donations, then—

PM: Oh, as I say—I think you will have heard me say it's the spirit of the law, and you would assume that the spirit of the law as its intended—if we see examples of where that has been found to be not having held in practice, then you would expect Parliament to want to respond to that.

Media: But are you still saying that the legislative process might be too quick and not considered enough to make such a substantial change, even if that had come to attention as a problem and it would have to be dealt with by the review?

PM: I think that would still be the most timely way to deal with this, because at the moment we have one piece of legislation that's already quite well advanced, and of course, as you know, the process of working through the complexity of electoral laws—and we have seen examples where it's been done quickly and badly.

Media: Just finally: doesn't the fact, though, that there's an election between then and now actually give greater urgency to not leaving it with that review?

PM: Yeah, but you're assuming that if we did it separately, we would still get it done before the election. I'm casting some doubt on that. If you look at every cycle where we've made changes to electoral law—when I say “we”, a Government of the day—usually it's as a consequence of a select committee review after the election: the Ministry of Justice picking up those responses, drafting via PCO, and then bringing it back before the House, and it has almost always taken a full three-year cycle, if not more. I think even if you were to identify an issue and your intention was to try and introduce it before the next election, you would have to do it with a reduced process, and that is an area where I would worry that we would make some mistakes.

So is there will? Yes—absolutely. You can already see, as a Government, we are moving to try and improve these laws, improve transparency, improve public confidence. Where court cases demonstrate that there are issues, we will respond to them, but we also want to do it in a way that we get it right.

Yes, I'll come to Jessica, then Jason.

Media: Chlöe Swarbrick has just ruled herself out of any leadership contest with the Greens. How damaging is it that your political partner is having to go through this?

PM: Look, you know, ultimately, the political rules of any party—that's always a matter for them. The question, of course, that is relevant for us as a Government, is does it change any of the ministerial portfolios or the jobs of any of our ministers, and the answer is it doesn't. And so that means, in my mind, that this is an issue squarely for the Greens.

Media: They are a partner of yours, though, so it does impact you in the sense that if they're not doing so well, that doesn't do so well for you in that you start adding up the maths to get to that 61 needed to form a Government. So the fact that they're talking about this—is that frustrating for you?

PM: Well, there's nothing to suggest in their polling that they are, and, in fact, as I recall, they might be doing better now than they even did at the election. So look, ultimately, hypotheticals about an election right now—we're getting on with governing. The most important thing for us is that we continue on with what is a significant agenda on climate work and, as I've said, I have full confidence in Minister Shaw in that area, and I have no intention of changing.

Media: What's he like to work with—James Shaw?

PM: You would've heard me talk probably a reasonable degree on the work of Minister Shaw, and that's because he has a portfolio that is really significant to us as a Government. My decision to put him into that portfolio when we formed Government wasn't because we needed a relationship to be able to form Government with the Greens, strictly, although I do think it's important to keep that going; it was because I actually believed he was the right person for the job. He has an incredible understanding of a very complex area, he works hard to build relationships in the area where we need this policy to stick for the generations to come and not change because of election cycles, and, in my mind, he has helped us as a Government to make the most significant changes in climate action that any Government has made.

Media: Former Green MP Catherine Delahunty described him as a Labour lap dog. How would you react to that characterisation?

PM: Oh look, and, again, I don't want to get into the discussion that might be happening amongst members of the Green Party; all I can do is reflect on the Minister that I've worked alongside in a professional capacity as the person that presides over a Cabinet and a wider ministry. And my reflection would simply be that as you would expect, as a Minister who is a member of the Green Party, he advocates for climate action that is in keeping with his values and principles, and you would expect that. But I'd push back very hard on any suggestion that as a Government we have not been ambitious.

Media: Has the Government climate action and policy been more ambitious as a result of James Shaw being the climate change Minister than if a Labour Minister were in that role?

PM: Well, here I would like to point out that I believe that Labour came in with a significant agenda ourselves around climate action. Where I think we've had definitely value-add is this is a highly complex area, and we had a Minister who had been in this portfolio for three years building his knowledge, understanding, and plan for the future, and it enabled a continuity that's been really important to use. Do we have climate-minded Ministers in the Labour Party and people who feel passionate about climate action? Absolutely. But I believe that, yes, I do believe that Minister Shaw has value-add. Is he from another party and is that clear in the work we do with him? Yes. But I also believe that there is the benefit to New Zealand of him also holding such a position.

Ah, yeah—I might just bounce around, Jason, and come back to you. Bernard, and who else did I have? OK, Bernard.

Media: Prime Minister, can the Greens actually change a Labour Government policy when it can only ever be a partner for a Labour Government, as James Shaw said—i.e., he doesn't have any leverage, so why would you do anything extra for the Greens?

PM: Well, actually, here I would argue that you've got examples in the past where votes haven't necessarily been needed from the Green Party, but it hasn't changed the fact that there have been policies adopted as a result of them being in Parliament. But in my mind, do they effect greater change by being a part of Government? Yes, they do—but that's my perspective. Obviously, others may hold different perspectives.

Media: Can you give us an example where actually having the Greens—

PM: Oh, just when—I mean, in the past, when they were partnered with the National Party on things like insulation schemes and the like. So there was an example of where they necessarily weren't required for votes, but they still advocated for positions and policy changes that were then implemented.

Media: But to be able to do something different and—

PM: Well, to do something—yeah, and again, this is—I think this is much more nuanced here. When you are a member of a Cabinet, of course your job is to advocate strongly for the policy areas that you hold responsibility for, to bring an evidence base to the table, to work with your stakeholders to effect change, and so all Ministers of course do that as part of a Government, and of course you would expect the Minister for Climate Change to do the same. If you're asking me to differentiate, therefore, whether or not as a result the policies are markedly different than they might otherwise be for a Labour Minister, it's very hard for me to make that differentiation. But in my view Minister Shaw does make a significant contribution to this Government, even though he is not a member of the governing party.

Media: Prime Minister, you've guaranteed James Shaw's job as climate change Minister even if he's not co-leader—

PM: Yes, I was very explicit when we set out the agreement in the very beginning of the term of office that I didn't want an arrangement that meant forgoing the role that any Prime Minister has to determine who holds ministerial warrants. So if you had an agreement that said "Whoever the co-leaders are are the Ministers.", in my mind that took away what has always been the prerogative of a Prime Minister. And so that's why we were very clear that they were named as individuals.

Media: Actually, my question was—

PM: Oh, sorry.

Media: —do you offer the same guarantees to Marama Davidson, and how do you think she's performing in her role?

PM: Yeah, again, it's the same principle, and I stand by that. And I equally believe that Marama Davidson brings a lot to the table in the role that she plays in an area that has traditionally been very, very difficult.

I'll come over here to Sam, and then come back—sorry, I did say I'd come back to you, but Sam hasn't—

Media: If it's Greens-related, I'll let it go to somebody different.

PM: OK. Jason?

Media: Oh, it is greens-related, but it's about the green level settings, so it—

PM: Oh, that's nice—I like what you did there. We'll go then to Jessica, Sam, and then Jason.

Media: Is that because you're not keen to work with Chlöe Swarbrick?

PM: No—no. As I say, this was a decision I made at the time that the agreement was constructed. It was not about any individual, but—really importantly—preserving that principle

that of course Prime Ministers of the day across different parties have always preserved, and that is that it's the PM who determines who the Ministers are. And so that's what we've worked to preserve. That's not about personalities; that's about always having that ability to make those decisions.

Media: There's been some pretty shocking political violence in Papua New Guinea around the elections. Are you looking at, or is the Government looking at offering any sort of support—peacekeeping, police, or stability—and how concerned are you about the situation?

PM: So we have plans to observe counting—actually, today and tomorrow—in a certain province, and we also have the New Zealand observer team, which is made up of one, two three four five—five different individuals plus the high commission and MFAT staff, and that includes a couple of sitting members of Parliament. And we have also provided electoral support to PNG—the current five-year programme has a budget of \$6.9 million. So I think it is fair to say we've been very open around the role that we can play there. It's in our interests to support our Pacific neighbours with crucial points in their democracy such as this one. We've also positively responded to a request to fund flying hours to support the movement of electoral materials, and I believe Australia has, similarly, provided ADF assets as well.

Media: But what about curtailing violence? There have been a number of deaths, I think, and hundreds or thousands of injuries. Do we need to do something in that space beyond sort of just election transparency?

PM: And here, of course, you'll see that we often, you know, very much leave ourselves available to requests that are made and security concerns when they are raised—often, as you would expect in that part of the world, alongside Australia. I'm not aware of specific requests, so if you don't mind, I might just check with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to see if they've been received.

Did you have something on that, Luke?

Media: Ah, no.

PM: OK. So I'll come to Jason.

Media: That's all right—you can go, Luke.

Media: The LGNZ has suggested that the three waters transition be phased and stormwater integration possibly be delayed further till after the bespoke arrangement with councils. What's your view on that—are you open to a delay?

PM: So I've read some of the statements made by LGNZ, and what's certainly clear from my takeaway is that there wasn't a suggestion that this suddenly move to a two waters regime. I think that there's an acknowledgment of the interaction between stormwater and waste water in many parts of the system, and so on. Here, again, they've made a submission. Let's allow that to be prosecuted at select committee and teased out at select committee, but obviously there's not a suggestion here that it be carved off in its entirety and for the long term, but a transition. I haven't seen enough of the detail around that proposal, though.

Media: So there's a possibility there could be a bit of movement around it, but not changing the overall thrust of the report?

PM: But nor have I heard them necessarily suggest an overall thrust, it seems to me, with transition arrangements. So here I think it's best that I just leave it to select committee.

Yeah, Jason.

Media: Prime Minister, on the green alert level setting, can you just run us through if anything has changed as to what Cabinet needs to see before you put New Zealand back into that setting, or whether that setting still actually exists, and then when we'll be moving to lower restrictions, we'll just be going back to what has been described as business as usual, or will we have another set of alerts?

PM: Yeah, good question. We've made no changes, and nor have we made any decisions around changing the COVID protection framework in the future. What we will want to do in the future, though, is just do a general check, as we have all the way through, to say, "OK, this was established at the beginning of an Omicron outbreak, but, actually, some time ago"—pre, actually—"and so let's just check in the future that it's fit for purpose." We're not at that point yet. Our focus at the moment is getting through winter.

Media: So do you think there will be a specific BA.5 set of restrictions?

PM: No, not necessarily. I think what we need to do is just make sure our systems constantly evolve, but that's actually been the approach we've taken all the way through COVID—just make sure the system's fit for purpose. But at the moment, as I'd say, a big focus is continuing to support the health system to get through what is a very difficult period as a result of multiple seasonal illnesses, and I don't think now is the time to change that underlying system.

Media: But what would you need to see, or what would Cabinet need to see to lower either the current settings that we have or move us back to what was business as usual?

PM: Yeah, you'll remember that one of the major considerations for us was pressure on the health system, so obviously we're not in that place at the moment.

Media: Dr Bloomfield has been asking for advice around the red setting—changes to the red setting. Has he given you any advice or reports on that—

PM: I'll leave that to Minister Verrall, but it is fair to say that we constantly kind of look at all of those settings. You'll know that there's no intention to move up those settings—we've been asked that a number of times—because the view is that the settings that we have with the transmissibility of the illness that we have actually will make a marked difference, and even then set us apart from a number of other countries. It's a matter of people using them—so vaccines, masks, and isolation when you're sick.

We do have another check-in coming up this, was it just at the beginning of August—we've got another review of where the settings are at, and you'll know that we'll look at isolation periods for that as well. So that's coming up soon.

Media: So Cabinet is looking at [*Inaudible*]

PM: Oh, we constantly—Jason, that's not new. We've built it into the cycle, so every time we look at our settings, we look at the isolation periods.

Media: And there was another jump in hospitalisations today.

PM: Yeah. So I have asked officials about that, just for a little bit more information, because—two things to say, I think. One is hospitalisations lag by about two weeks from case numbers, so even when case numbers come away, it takes us about two weeks to see that really shift in our hospital numbers. We're keeping a very close eye on what we see happen to our hospitalisations over the next two weeks, particularly because there is a view that it may well be that school holidays have changed, potentially, the level of reporting on COVID case numbers. We have, however, at the same time seen a positive change in waste-water prevalence. So early days yet, and we do want to keep an eye on numbers, but the suggestion is may be—may be—we're seeing a decline in cases. On the hospitalisations, though, I do want to take another look over the next three days, because we do often see discharges change slightly over the weekend. So it will be really important to see what happens over the next couple of days.

Yeah, Marc, then Jo.

Media: Do you expect that the CPF will be in place, you know, with some changes perhaps, but for the long term [*Inaudible*]

PM: Look, I don't want to predetermine that. You know, I think one of the important things for us has been that we need to be agile. We need to make sure that our system works

for whatever version of COVID that we have, and we've had a number of variants now since the CPF was put in place, so I don't want to predetermine that. But I think what's really important is the message now is that there aren't changes. We're sticking to what we have, and when I look at, for instance, some of the hospitalisations in other countries, I think you can see that these measures do make a difference.

Media: A couple of months ago, when he was still COVID Minister, Chris Hipkins said the COVID legislation would probably be repealed near the end of the year. Is that still on the cards, or would you expect to have some sort of new—something to, you know, provide the basis for the traffic light system or whatever we—

PM: So if the decision, of course, is made that we need to continue these on, you need the legislative footing to do that, and so I think one of the pieces of work we're having to look at is to make sure that we are using the right tools in the right way. But perhaps a question for Dr Verrall when we do the general routine update on settings.

Jo.

Media: What is your comfort level around indoor gatherings at the moment, because, just by way of example, you're obviously speaking at what will be a reasonably large event tomorrow night—the Business New Zealand function—but then, at the same time, later this week there was meant to be another business function here at Parliament which has been postponed because of COVID and the concerns around that. So you are seeing organisers reacting differently at the moment as to whether to go ahead with these sorts of things.

PM: Yeah, I think one of things they're also factoring is just absence as well—so whether or not people are available. So that's another thing that I think's factoring in.

Media: So your comfort level, then—I mean, do you expect that you will wear mask when you're at the Business New Zealand event, or how are you treating these indoor large gatherings?

PM: Look, you know, what we ask people to do is to follow the rules, and, of course, when it is an event where food and drink is available, then obviously we've never asked people to try and juggle the consumption of food and drink simultaneously. People will of course there, within those contexts, make those judgments around how to manage that. But one of the things that we're aware of though—and when we've asked to look at impacts of gathering limits—is that, actually, in order to have a marked effect on transmission for some of these new variants, basically, gathering limits would be, you know, vastly different than what they are now. The view continues to be that the settings that we have are the most appropriate settings for the circumstances we have now, and that is, of course, mask use and so on, as I've already set out. So, look, here you do see people using their discretion within those rules, and, again, people will act in a way where they're comfortable. But I think the guidance is still appropriate.

Media: Just in terms of the data that you've been looking at with cases, do you expect that school holidays will have been a bit of circuit-breaker for cases?

PM: Well, again, I'd prefer a modeller to make those judgments, because when you look at international examples, it does seem that the B.4, B.5 waves haven't been as long as the original waves of Omicron. But at the same time, there aren't, I believe, as many countries now who are perhaps recording as much as New Zealand continues to record, and this is a really interesting space, then, that we're in—and nor, obviously, are all of them in a winter. And so because of those differences, we're not necessarily comparing apples and apples anymore, so it's hard to know what different events' impacts are having on New Zealand numbers, or whether or not it's what you might have expected to happen anyway. But, again, I wouldn't mind just asking a modeller to say whether or not they think the school holidays have—time will tell. If we see another uptick, then it will suggest that school holidays did.

Media: So you didn't give any consideration to perhaps, given it is the middle of winter, extending the school holidays at all if you thought that it might be useful?

PM: No. No consideration of that; in fact, some of the clear advice given to us previously was that we need to always be careful to weigh up the social impacts on children in deferring their ability to attend school, and so the advice then, of course, was to implement the things that we have. So we're strongly encouraging mask use. We've distributed free masks to students, and they're available for teachers. We're also paying schools more to enable them to open up their windows in winter to encourage ventilation. All of those things make a difference.

Ben.

Media: Prime Minister, you're back in the House tomorrow after travelling a fair bit recently. Are you looking forward to cracking into the domestic political context, given you've just admitted—

PM: I think I only missed one sitting week, didn't I?

Media: Well, it's been a long stretch of travel and whatnot. Are you looking forward to cracking back into the domestic political context, given National have taken a bit of momentum in recent months?

PM: Well, without digging into some of the context of that question, I think what I'd say is that even when I am promoting New Zealand's trade interests offshore, I'm never far from domestic issues, even if I'm in a slightly different location for a short period of time.

OK, I might come to the last couple of questions.

Media: I'm not suggesting that; I'm just sort of suggesting—like are you looking forward to going head to head with Chris Luxon, who is gaining in popularity?

PM: Oh, again, a number of statements which don't seem to square with some of the polling I've seen, but—Jason.

Media: “No comment.”

PM: Ha, ha!

Media: Winston Peters came out with a press release last week about—and this is harking back a little bit—the coalition talks [*Inaudible*] There seems to be a bit of confusion as to whether you offered him deputy prime ministership on the first day or the last day. Are you able to tell us—just between the two of us—what actually happened?

PM: Well, look, I will reiterate what I have already said, which is whilst I've seen some different recollections of that period, when it comes to the finer detail, I'm going to stick to the confidentiality that I applied at the time, even after the fact.

All right. Thank you, everyone.

conclusion of press conference