

POST-CABINET PRESS CONFERENCE: MONDAY, 15 AUGUST 2022
HANSARD TRANSCRIPT

PM: Kia ora and good afternoon. Today, I'm joined by the Minister of Defence, Peeni Henare, and the Chief of Defence, Air Marshal Kevin Short, to announce a significant expansion of our Defence Force deployment to support Ukraine against Russia's ongoing brutal invasion.

But first, I'll run through the week ahead. I have meetings here in Wellington tomorrow and on Thursday. On Wednesday, I will travel to Auckland for a number of events.

I want to acknowledge that, also on Wednesday, the Government will reach the milestone of two years of free and healthy lunches in schools. This is a Government initiative that I am extremely proud of, as it supports our families across the country and is especially important as we seek to support New Zealanders through a period of global inflationary pressure and the cost of living increases that have come with it. In the past two years, 63 million lunches have been served and they now reach 220,000 students—saving families with two children at school, for example, up to \$62 a week and over \$2,000 a year. The programme has also created or retained more than 2,300 jobs. It's not a silver bullet to the tough times we're facing, nor is any policy, but when it comes in tandem with our income increases, fuel excise cuts, half-price public transport, and the cost of living payment, it can and does make a difference.

On Friday, I travel to Tokoroa, for the Ngāti Raukawa Accord hui. And on Saturday, at the invitation of Kiingi Tūheitia, I'll join the celebrations of the 16th Koroneihana in Ngāruawāhia—the first time celebrations will be held in person in over two years.

Today's announcement: the international response to support Ukraine continues to increase in direct response to Russia's ongoing aggression. We have been clear that a blatant attack on a country's sovereignty, and the subsequent loss of innocent lives, is wrong and intolerable. Our condemnation will continue to extend beyond words and include practical support.

Since February, New Zealand has taken action to make a meaningful and effective contribution. We've contributed more than \$40 million in assistance, sanctioned over 840 Russian and Belarusian individuals and entities, sent equipment, and, from March, we began to make deployments of New Zealand Defence Force personnel across a range of areas—including logistics, intelligence, and, most recently, in artillery training, working with our partners in the UK; a deployment that is now complete.

However, we've been told that among one of the highest priorities for Ukraine right now to further strengthen its self-defence of country and people is that of training its soldiers. And so today, I can announce a further significant deployment of up to 120 New Zealand Defence Force personnel to the United Kingdom until the end of November. It will be similar to the previous artillery training deployment from May, although at a much-larger scale. And this deployment will be focused on infantry training—in particular, front-line combat, including weapons handling, combat first aid, operational, law, and soldier skills. To be clear: our people will continue to play a role in training of Ukrainian forces but have not and will not engage in combat in Ukraine's territory. This decision brings the total number of NZDF personnel deployed to support Ukraine in this war to 224, with our latest deployment comparable to that of partner nations, including Denmark at 130, and Sweden at 120. Already, the British Army is training Ukrainian soldiers and has asked for help, a call which several countries have answered, including Canada, Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and the Netherlands.

I'll now hand to the Minister for further details on the mission.

Hon Peeni Henare: Kia ora. Thank you, Prime Minister. Greetings, everybody. Today, as the Prime Minister has said, the Government is announcing the deployment of up to 120 New

Zealand Defence Force personnel to the United Kingdom to help train Ukrainian armed forces infantry recruits, as Ukraine continues to defend itself against Russia's unjustified and illegal invasion.

Cabinet today considered and approved the infantry training contingent, which will be split into two teams and will train approximately 800 Ukrainian armed forces personnel. The decision we have made responds to an invitation from the UK armed forces for the New Zealand Defence Force to contribute to their infantry training programme.

The deployment drawn from the New Zealand Army will travel via commercial flights to the UK in tranches over the next three weeks and will be deployed until 30 November. They will join other partner nations, as the Prime Minister has already described. This deployment complements and builds upon the military and other support already provided by Aotearoa New Zealand to Ukraine since Russia's unjustified and illegal invasion began in February

The two infantry training teams will equip Ukrainian personnel with the core skills to be effective in front-line combat. The training is based on the UK's basic soldier course, which includes weapon handling, combat, first aid, operational law, and other soldier skills.

The deployment supports this Government's priority on people in the Defence Force, and a deployment of this nature with the New Zealand army personnel conducting core soldier skills, training in a foreign environment alongside key partners, represents a significant retention opportunity for the army. The ability to engage in overseas activities following a long period of support to Aotearoa New Zealand's COVID-19 response will improve morale and job satisfaction. The training will be conducted exclusively at one of four locations in the UK.

The decisions Cabinet has taken today come on top of a number of previous decisions by this Government since the invasion began. This announcement and the previous decisions taken are all a demonstration of our values and support of our independent foreign policy. Providing additional support to Ukraine enables Aotearoa New Zealand to support our strategic interests in the defence of the international rules-based system, and our ongoing role contributing to the international response supports Ukraine in protecting its territorial integrity and sovereignty from this unjustified and illegal invasion. Thank you, Prime Minister.

PM: Thank you. We're now happy to take questions, and we have, obviously, the Chief of Defence Force here as well.

Media: [Speaks te reo Māori]

Hon Peeni Henare: [Speaks te reo Māori]

Media: [Speaks te reo Māori]

Hon Peeni Henare: [Speaks te reo Māori]

PM: Imogen?

Media: I just realised my questions aren't about the deployment.

PM: No, absolutely fine. I'll take questions on deployment first if I may.

Media: How did you decide this was the most suitable assistance to give Ukraine? Is it through working with them? Can you just detail that?

PM: Very much our decisions around New Zealand's contribution are weighted on (a) where the need is—and, obviously, Ukraine, alongside some of those support partners who are contributing in the region are able to share with us where we can have the greatest value-add. And the second factor, of course, is where our strengths are. Of course, New Zealand, by default—a small population, a defence force that is in keeping with our size. That doesn't mean there isn't a contribution that we can make, and I know that the decisions we are making are making a difference.

Media: Is there a call for more financial aid?

PM: What we've seen is that the calls for support have been consistent, and they've been varied, but what Ukraine is often seeking is very much what we're responding to: support for training, because they have a real mixture, as I understand, Minister, of those who have some basic training to those who have none. So being able to support training—and, really important, it includes first aid and international law around combat—is incredibly important. But then there's also what will be artillery vehicles. Some of the on-the-ground combat equipment—there is a delay in what is able to be procured. So, often they're seeking from those defence forces that may have surplus supply or in stock.

Media: Dr Sharma has just posted on Facebook—

PM: If I may, I'll stick with that, because I will then relieve the CDF and Minister of Defence. So I'll just canvass again on—Shaun, you had one on the deployment?

Media: Yeah, two parts. First, the Ukrainians have said that they wouldn't mind some of our spare LAVs. Has that request been made officially to the Government? Is it under active consideration, or has it been rejected? And, also, will it be Ukrainian nationals trained by this training deployment or will people from other countries perhaps be trained for combat in Ukraine.

PM: Yep, I'll let the Minister pick up on specifically the LAVs, in particular.

Hon Peeni Henare: There was an initial request towards New Zealand sending the LAVs. We've made it clear, though that that isn't an option for the following reasons: one, it's inefficient and ineffective to send these particular vehicles north to the conflict; the other part to that is there are no spare parts to these LAVs, and there is also required training for this. I'm of the opinion, and so too are my officials, that sending the LAVs will be giving them a problem instead of supporting, which is why I support the Prime Minister's assessment across five donor conferences which I've sat on. What we're offering here in today's deployment is in line with all of the requests that we're getting.

PM: Yeah, anything specific on the mixture of those that we are training—certainly, my awareness is—

Media: Will the UK—the Ukraine—

PM: Ukraine—Ukraine nationals.

Media: Yeah, OK.

PM: Yep—yep. Thank you. Jo, and then I'll come to Thomas.

Media: Prime Minister, there's been reports from Today FM—an interview with President Zelensky—that he is saying that leaders need to go and see for themselves to get a real understanding of what's happening on the ground. That, obviously, was an invite that was extended to you that hasn't been taken yet. What do you anticipate in terms of your movements about going to Ukraine or not?

PM: Yeah, so look, we haven't taken that option off the table, but it is fair to say I have no current travel plans into the region or, indeed, into Europe at this stage. You know, one thing I absolutely—without a doubt, I'm sure your comprehension of the scale of the conflict, of its impact on the Ukrainian people, I have no doubt, is only enhanced by a visit on the ground, but it would not change the level of commitment that I think New Zealand has already demonstrated and will continue to demonstrate.

Media: I guess, seeing that call has come from Zelensky himself, though, is it a little bit dismissive of what he's asking for, for you to not take up that invitation?

PM: No, I don't believe so, because—yes, the invitation has been extended, but at the same time requests have been made of New Zealand that we have consistently responded to, and continue to do so, and I think that's the most meaningful thing that we can do. I understand that part of the reason for the invitations, of course, is to give us a deeper appreciation of what's happening on the ground and to continue to highlight what is

happening in Ukraine. We will continue to do our part in demonstrating that regardless of where the international community's attention may be drawn at any given time, we are there, we are playing our part, we are making a contribution, and we will continue to do so. In my conversation with him, I sensed that he absolutely understood our situation, but the invitation remained on the table for me. And, likewise, at a time and a place when we hope this conflict will be over, I reiterated to him that the invitation exists for him to one day visit us too.

Media: So, and just lastly, if you are unable to, would it be, I guess, something that Minister Henare might do in your place instead?

PM: Yeah, again, you know, that's—that is an option. Whilst there's no planning under way, that is absolutely an option.

Media: And you haven't spoken to him on the phone since that initial call, back when you were in the UK, I think it was?

PM: No, not since then—no. OK, I'll come to Thomas, if I may.

Media: These successive rounds of military assistance—are they putting pressure on the budget of the defence force, or can you manage this within baselines? And just your response on the LAVs: if there are no spare parts to them, is that no spare parts for them anywhere, or are there spare parts for them here so that we can use the LAVs—or are they kind of useless for us as well?

Hon Peeni Henare: The first part of the question is: yes, this is met within baselines, and I'm fine with that and well aware of those expenses and am happy to sign that particular decision off. The second part with respect of our LAVs: I, for example, was in Waiōuru over the weekend and got to see our soldiers training and regenerating by using the LAVs as part of their training regime. So I think they're put to good use in our regeneration planning, and certainly the ones that we have and are using with our New Zealand Defence Force are what we actually require right now. But I will reiterate the point: there is a limited shelf life for all of these particular platforms and we know too that the LAV is a bit of an older piece of kit, and getting parts is particularly difficult. Just as there is—as the Prime Minister mentioned—procuring weapons is really difficult internationally at the moment. Getting parts for LAVs and for other pieces of equipment is also proving difficult.

PM: So this deployment is in the order of \$4.3 million and is coming from baselines. The issue of funding our response to date has not been an issue. We've had the ability to do that, but, obviously, we take it case by case. Anything on this generally that you wish to add?

Hon Peeni Henare: No, no—no.

PM: No—sure? OK, can I just canvass whether or not there's any further questions on deployment. No? Thank you—thank you, both. Yeah, Maiki, Imogen, and then I'll come to you, Jason.

Media: Prime Minister, Dr Sharma has just posted messages on his Facebook saying, "I fear that I will have serious mental health related issues staying here bro." Another post, which could be from another MP, says, "I feel the same. Every day I wake up wondering if I'm going to be in trouble." What's your response when you hear those messages?

PM: Look, sorry, I didn't hear all of what you just read out to me. But if I can, I'll just make a general statement. All the way through this issue and any issues that we've faced where suddenly our MPs have been in this spotlight, regardless of the substance that's brought them there, we have always been concerned about ensuring that the wellbeing of our MPs sits first and foremost. And you will have heard that in the original statements that I made. We will look to try and seek resolution to these issues this week in order to give a pathway forward. But front and centre will always be the wellbeing of our staff, but also the wellbeing of our MPs.

Media: Do you agree there are serious mental health issues within your caucus?

PM: Look, our job is to always make sure that we have wraparound support for our caucus members.

Media: Do you agree those issues are there though, Prime Minister?

PM: Sorry?

Media: Do you agree those mental health issues are present in your caucus?

PM: I am very clear that the support we provide for our caucus has to be consistent and has to meet what is a very high-pressured environment. I believe we do that. Is this a tough place to be? Yes, and that's why we have, for instance, ensured that in this new intake we have professional supervision on offer, we have management coaching on offer, professional development on offer. I can tell you that is a vast improvement on what I've seen in this place over the last 10 years.

Media: Were those original complaints against Gaurav Sharma ever substantiated, or were the staffers' words just taken and that was that?

PM: And so, look, I do want to be careful here because here we get into the details of employment relationships. But we have a duty within this place now, as a result of the Francis review and in trying to ensure that in our employment relationships we're looking after all parties. There are processes now that we use to either—if it's escalated to a formal intervention to do that, but otherwise there are other options that are available to simply ensure that the working environment for a staff member is safe, and that MPs have the support they need to be the best possible managers. I'm confident from what I've seen that those tools were being used appropriately.

Media: Do you plan at all in investigating Duncan Webb and Kieran McAnulty in terms of their actions in all of this as well?

PM: Sorry, the first part of your question?

Media: Do you plan on investigating Kieran McAnulty's and Duncan Webb's actions, and their part to play here?

PM: As I've said, from what I've seen of the engagements, I have seen interventions that were used because concerns were raised by staff members around Gaurav's management of his team. It's clear that there wasn't always agreement that that was necessary by Gaurav, but that doesn't necessarily constitute what he has characterised as bullying. I've looked at those processes, I've looked at those interventions—whilst I don't believe that they have substantiated his claims of bullying, we'll always look to improve our processes because some of them are new and they're there to look after our staff, but ultimately to also look after our MPs.

Media: Prime Minister, you said that you'd be looking to resolve this issue this week. What, specifically, will you be doing?

PM: Look, all I'm referring to there is that when you have an issue of this nature, our caucus rules set out that it's actually for our caucus to resolve because, of course, our team relies on just that—on our ability to work as a team and for us to use the caucus environment as a way to resolve issues of this nature. We haven't formally set down a meeting for this week because it is a recess. There isn't a standard caucus during this time, but we'll look to convene across the course of this week.

Media: But what does that mean? What is caucus going to do? Are they going to be deciding, is there—

PM: Again, I can't pre-empt that. That will ultimately—

Media: Yeah, but just tell me roughly what's actually going to be happening.

PM: Well, actually, I can't. So what will occur is that caucus will convene over the course of this week. I cannot predetermine what they will decide as a team in terms of their response,

but I do think it's in the best interests of all parties if they are able to do that this week so that we can bring some resolution to the situation.

Media: There's not a usual caucus meeting this weekend, so you're going to have to convene essentially a special caucus meeting for the rest of caucus to decide the fate? It's just very confusing, there's—what's the process here?

PM: No, it's not. In a recess, caucus doesn't meet, but I've just said caucus will meet this week. So it's quite simple, and it's also not unusual. There will, time to time, be decision makings out of cycle that will cause us to meet, so I don't think it's unfair to call it anything other than simply responding to the fact that we've got something that gives rise for us to meet outside of what would usually be a sitting week.

Media: When was the last time it happened?

PM: Oh, over the course of COVID, we touched base regularly in order to make sure caucus members had input into some of the things that were going on during COVID.

Media: In his post, Dr Sharma said—

PM: Yeah, Jane, and then I'll come to you, Claire.

Media: In his post just put up in the last, sort of, 10 minutes or so, he said that he sent the screenshots of MPs' texts to your chief of staff some time ago—

PM: Did he what? Sorry, could you repeat that for me?

Media: He said that he sent the screenshots of texts from MPs that Mikey read out in terms of what he claims to be a number of MPs talking about their mental health concerns, about being in trouble here, effectively not wanting to come to work, and that he, Sharma, sent screenshots to your chief of staff. Have you, at any stage, been alerted and are you happy that the communication between the leader's office, PMO, the whips has been as it should have been?

PM: Yes, I am. And I've seen some of that myself. What I have identified is, I think, some of the processes which are newly established after the result of the Francis Review, which if we can come back to the source of why this has occurred in the first place, staff members have raised concerns and raised their own issues about coming to work. And so we have an obligation, when that occurs, to make sure that we look after their wellbeing and work with MPs to make sure that they're the best employers that they can be. So we have that obligation. That is what has started this issue in the first place.

So whilst, of course, I understand you're placing emphasis at this time on the MP in question, we have an obligation to look after the staff they employ as well. And so that has been the concern that's generated this issue in the first place. My view is that we can probably ensure that some of those processes could move more quickly. It is somewhat complicated by the fact that it has involved both Parliamentary Service, whips, and MPs, but it probably is understandable that, given that these are early days for these new processes, they could do with some refinement. And we should be open to that.

Media: Do you consider that he has breached the Labour constitution's rules of conduct? Is that something that the caucus will specifically be looking at? And what communication is there with him, I suppose, through the back channels, if any, with senior Labour Party members or other people brought in?

PM: So here—I mean one of the issues for me is that ultimately we have—and I'll speak to what is black and white and the rest will be judgments for caucus. So what's black and white in our rules is the expectation that when there are issues that they're raised with whips, the leader, or people nominated by the leader, and that then if those issues remain unresolved, of course caucus can be the ultimate place to raise concerns. So that's very clear. As I've already set out, those avenues have not always been used in this case. When it comes to what happens next, though, that's not something for me to predetermine here; that is something for caucus.

Media: But in terms of bringing the party into disrepute, which is another rule, surely there must be a strong case at this point for that element of the rules as well for caucus to consider?

PM: So that will be what caucus will be considering, but I am going to allow them to consider it. It is for the caucus to determine. And one of the things that I continue to be mindful of—yes, in the traversing of this issue in the public domain, which has ultimately begun with the article last Thursday, that gives me cause for the concern of the wellbeing of the MPs in question but also of their team, of their staff members. That's why we have other processes to deal with these issues.

Media: So caucus will be getting together this recess in person, and can you give us a day that that will happen?

PM: At this stage, again, I've got no further details on that to share other than the fact that I think it's in everyone's interest if we try and resolve it as soon as possible.

Media: Is there any communication with Dr Sharma, between the Labour Party and him, at the moment?

PM: I don't actually believe it's in anyone's best interest to get into the detail of those communications, again, because actually I do have in my mind the wellbeing of all parties in this question. Claire.

Media: Have you become aware of any other MPs who have similar concerns to those of Dr Sharma?

PM: Around?

Media: Around the way that they've been treated by the whip's office and the treatment of them basically.

PM: If you're asking about whether or not other staff feel they have been bullied, I have not had that raised with me, and I'll allow MPs who did comment when asked—that they did not agree that this was a widespread issue.

Media: Prime Minister, you used the phrase—

PM: Yeah, I will—do you mind, Jason? If I may, I am going to canvass around, Jason, just because you had a few. Luke?

Media: Just following up on Claire's bit, have any MPs come to you and said that they agree with Dr Sharma—they experienced something similar themselves at the hands of Mr Webb and McAnulty?

PM: I have had no one claim that they feel they have been bullied by our whips. Keep in mind, everyone in this place will know the role of whips. They determine people's leave, when they need to fill in on select committees, when they need House duty—there will be times when there won't necessarily be agreement over their decisions. We do always need to make sure that they have avenues to raise those disputes when they arise. I see that as very different to whether or not people believe they've been bullied.

Media: Prime Minister—

PM: Luke, I'll let you finish there, and then I'll—

Media: Just to go back to the kind of guts of the issue, is the thing at stake here that Dr Sharma was basically, as a boss, told to pull his socks up, and in being told to do so, he has basically said, "Well, that's bullying."? Is that a fair summation?

PM: Essentially, yes, there've been issues that have been raised. There have been interventions by the whips and Parliamentary Service on those issues. He hasn't agreed with their perspective. But, again, our duty of care has to be both to the staff and also to MPs.

Media: Prime Minister, do you think that there is a place, though, for an independent entity or organisation for MPs to go to if they feel that communication with the whips has broken

down, because you're speaking with your uplink manager, and if that communication breaks down, there's no other avenue for an MP to go to?

PM: The first thing I'd say is you're right, there does need to be alternatives, as there is in any workplace, because in any workplace, from time to time, you will have issues that need to be resolved. Firstly, though, the next rung up would be probably the deputy leader of the Labour Party and the leader of the Labour Party, Kelvin Davis and myself. Whilst a member of my staff was approached about six months ago, I never have been, and so that is one of the options, yes. But you raise a good point: the conduct commissioner is something that Parliament as a whole has been working on. Now, ultimately, one of the drivers for that has been a recognition of the power imbalance that sits between MPs and others. That was one of the issues we were seeking to work on and intervene around. But, yes, I do believe there is such a role, but there are actually a couple of other steps in between as well, and we support the creation of that role.

Media: If it broke down, though, that communication, there is, effectively—

PM: Yeah, so if it's unable to be—

Media: —nowhere, no union, for the MP to go to.

PM: So there is—well, some of our MPs do actually belong to unions, but there is the ability: after the whip, there's the deputy leader, there's the leader, and there's caucus. So there are avenues that each team will have that should be utilised. But I do agree: having that extra person will only benefit this environment, and it's one of the reasons why we support it. Yeah, Ben.

Media: Prime Minister, have you actually spoken to Dr Sharma since Friday?

PM: Ah, we have exchanged some communication, but, again, I don't think it's any one's best interests to traverse that in great detail.

Media: Can I just ask how—you have dismissed the allegations made against Kieran McNulty, which are quite—

PM: I've said that I haven't seen anything to substantiate them, because I have looked through and examined some of what has occurred.

Media: OK, so you have done some sort of investigation. You're happy to stand by—

PM: I wouldn't call it that, but, again, here I would say that I can see that there has been a disagreement, but I haven't seen evidence that suggests or substantiates those allegations. I've given an example: there's been accusations made around the use of resources, which has clearly been dismissed.

Media: Yeah, that's not really at the heart of the question about Kieran McNulty, though—

PM: No, well it's at the heart of the question as to whether we were doing enough to support his staff. That sits at the heart of the question.

Media: No, but he's obviously earned a promotion, so you've obviously been quite pleased with Mr McNulty's conduct. Do you think at stages he's strayed towards being sort of being an old-school whip or—

PM: I've seen no evidence of that, but I've also described the job of the whips and also the, you know, the job that they have within caucus, and that's always been my experience. There will from time to time be disagreements, but we have mechanisms for that too. OK, I'll come back: Maike, Imogen—Jason, I know that there's great enthusiasm there, but we've still got time.

Media: The caucus meeting later this week—is it a foregone conclusion that Gaurav Sharma is gone, or do you believe the relationship is salvageable.

PM: I will absolutely leave that to our caucus. That is what our rules set out; that is the best place for us to discuss and determine the next steps together.

Media: Just those—again, going back to those complaints. The original complaints made from his staff about his conduct, were those ever substantiated or backed up in way, or did you just take the complaints and then move in to give management training before finding out what had actually taken place?

PM: Well, keep in mind that the whole point of the Francis Review was to create steps for early intervention. Now, our whole goal as a team is to make sure that we support all MPs, some of which will not have had experience managing staff before, support them as early as possible when issues arise so that you don't then enter a situation where things escalate and you end up in a formal process. So it was about early intervention—supporting our MP as early as possible when issues arose. Unfortunately, that wasn't always taken on board as being constructive, and there have been repeat issues.

Media: But were the issues investigated?

PM: As I've already set out, some of the interventions that existed here were based on early intervention—stopping the escalation of what were issues that were being raised.

Media: Prime Minister, are you able to just—like, you used the phrase “Judgment for caucus”, and I'm just really wanting for you to paint a picture of what's going to, without breaching manuals and rules and stuff, what's actually going to be happening in that room: is Dr Sharma going to be invited to defend himself, what sort of decisions will caucus be making in this judgment?

PM: When I—of course, it does not have the formality of a court room, it is a caucus. So we will, essentially, have the opportunity to come together as a team. It's not—it does not constitute a full caucus unless everyone is invited, so, of course, for natural justice, of course Gaurav Sharma would be a part of that meeting. But, essentially, it's an opportunity then for the team to discuss what the next steps would be.

Media: Yeah, but what does that mean in practise, is he going to stand up and say “This is what I think”, and then Mr McAnulty is going to be invited to speak as well?

PM: If you don't mind, I will keep the process that we choose to use as a team to within the room.

Media: Is expelling him from the Labour Party an option?

PM: Well, again, I'm not going to predetermine any of the outcomes when it is, ultimately, a call for his team. We've been very focused—since, of course, we were privileged enough to be elected in 2020 with this enlarged team—to make sure that our focus is to be unified, to work collectively and collaboratively, and, to date, we've done a pretty good job of doing that. I want to ensure that we continue to take that team approach into resolving this issue. Yeah, Joe, and then Luke, and then I'll come back to you Shaun, and then—

Media: It's a very simple question.

PM: —Connor. Oh, everyone thinks their question—

Media: Anna Lorck. Have you had any questions with Anna Lorck?

PM: If I may, I am going to stick with the order I set out.

Media: Just following on from Jason's question there, is this—will the caucus meeting effectively finish with a vote on Dr Sharma's future, is that how that will play out?

PM: Again, I'm not going to predetermine the process because it might not require that. So it very much depends on what the options are on the table as to whether or not it constitutes a vote.

Media: You said earlier on that there were elements of the processes that needed to be looked at, what exactly are—

PM: Very simple for me, whether or not things—decisions—could have been made in a more timely way. In each set of circumstances, though, you can see why the delays were

there in finding resolution, because next steps were often contingent on some of the interventions to deal with some of those management issues being accepted. And so if they weren't, there were delays. But I do think that trying to find ways to make sure there's quicker resolution will be better for staff and better for MPs.

Media: And are those processes tied up with the Labour Party, or are they a by-product of the Debbie Francis review, in which case, who gets to make decisions about what needs to be changed about—

PM: Good question. And that's one of the issues is that now, of course, it is very much often Parliamentary Service working alongside the whips, and that is a result of the Francis Review. Many of these interventions are a result of that. But those triangular relationships, whilst ultimately, I think, being the right move, does bring some extra layers of complexity.

Media: Lastly, can I just ask: this morning you were asked whether there were any other employment disputes under way within MPs' offices, and you said you couldn't say because you often wouldn't be told about them—

PM: No, I may not necessarily.

Media: Have you sought any clarification about whether any other MPs in your caucus do have ongoing disputes in play with any of their employees?

PM: When things—if things are repetitive issues, then I may be, or more than likely would be, advised because it may require an intervention that involves us, or me as Labour leader. But if it is a singular issue, I may not. Again, here though, I do want to make sure that we're always very careful to make sure that we manage all of those issues in an appropriate way so as not to cause issues for our staff, as well. Keep in mind that, across our MPs, we employ roughly 230 people. So that's one of the reasons I might not know—

Media: But hand on heart, you do not know of any other disputes of this sort of manner, of any other employees, staff who have been concerned—

PM: I've been asked for numbers, and I simply cannot provide that.

Media: Is there, as Dr Sharma alleges, rampant bullying in Parliament, in the Labour Party, or is he a deluded individual?

PM: I'm not going to make a judgment in the way that you've framed it to me. But what I can share is that I have not had raised with me and nor have I observed anything that would portray what he has described as rampant bullying, no. We always must, though, keep an environment where people can raise concerns if they have them, and that is what I will continue to work very hard as leader to create that environment.

Media: Anna Lorck. Have you talked to Anna Lorck? Is there anything going on with her after the claims made against her by former staff in the media over the weekend?

PM: I have not had a chance to speak with Anna Lorck since, I believe, Wednesday, when I was last in the Hawke's Bay. I have not spoken to her specifically on this issue. I am aware of the issue. And I am aware, also, that it may yet or is currently part of a more formal process, and therefore, that's why haven't—

Media: So there is an employment dispute or employment matters around those claims made?

PM: I believe there is a process and that's why we haven't been giving any further comment.

Media: OK, so when you said you didn't know of any other issues around this—

PM: No, as I said, I've been asked to give numbers and I haven't been able to give numbers because I will not necessarily know.

Media: OK, but you do know about that one?

PM: I do know about that issue, yes. Of course I do; it's been in the media for several days.

Media: What about others, though?

PM: Again, as I've said, you've asked me for numbers on employment issues—

Media: Just in general?

PM: —across the other. But equally, keep in mind here that we have to also make sure that we are protecting the staff involved, given some staff may be only the singular staff for an MP. You've asked me if this is a widespread issue: no.

Media: Do you believe that it's the job of a loyal staffer, in the pressure of working for an MP and travelling with them, to be a sober driver for them if needed?

PM: As I've said, and as has already been stated, given that this is, I believe, currently part of a formal investigation, it would not be appropriate for me to comment. OK, I'm going to look to wrap up shortly.

Media: Thanks, Prime Minister. Just a couple of questions on other matters—I don't know if people will want to return to this later. The Oranga Tamariki oversight bill: survivors have told the royal commission into abuse in State care that the bill doesn't go far enough in terms of independent oversight. And one said the commission is a complete waste of time if this bill goes ahead. What is your response to that?

PM: My belief is that our current system doesn't provide all of the oversight we need. But I have heard those concerns that have been raised, and my view is let's get these provisions in place. It provides greater oversight than what we have now, but we've left open the door that, should there be a continued belief that they should be further refined or changed, we have the opportunity to do that. But the status quo isn't what it should be.

Media: But you've got criticism from all across the House, support agencies, and survivors. Why are you flying in the face of that?

PM: And, again, here in some cases, some of the concerns that have been raised, we've addressed, there were changes made, and in some cases, the claims, like for instance that we're getting rid of the Children's Commissioner, haven't been correct. I understand that with those who have had experience with State care that there will be cynicism and scepticism. Our goal here, though, is to provide more, not less, oversight. If people still believe, once it's in place, that we could further refine that, improve it, change it again, let's have that conversation, and we've left the door open for that.

Media: And just a quick question on behalf of a colleague: the number of convicted child sex offenders on home detention has increased by 75 percent since 2017. Now, your Government has a goal to reduce the prison population; is that related to that, and is that appropriate when we're talking about convicted child sex offenders?

PM: Our goal around reducing the prison population is very much focused on doing so through preventing reoffending, stopping further victimisation by decreasing crime, and making sure that our interventions are more successful in stopping people coming back to prison. The question that you've asked me, sorry, without any notice, I'm unable to give you any further detail on any changes in trends. But to be clear, our reduction in the prison population is very squarely focused on things like preventing further reoffending.

Media: Would you personally like Dr Sharma to continue in your caucus beyond this week; so, coming to the next sitting block, for him to come back into your caucus?

PM: My personal preference would be to not have found ourselves in this situation in the first place. And I'll always look for ways that we can prevent things like this occurring again in the future. Ultimately, my goal as the Labour leader is to have the Labour team work as a team, but sometimes that means allowing the team to address where they feel like there's been a serious issue with one of our members.

Media: So going into this caucus meeting this week, you're not putting your endorsement behind his continuing in your caucus?

PM: Here, I genuinely want to hear what the view of his peers is, because that is my job.

Media: The haerenga to Ngāti Raukawa to [*Inaudible*], could you unpack what that is about, please?

PM: Yeah, so here we have, for some, fairly regular engagements as part of Crown accords or agreements. We're very much guided by those parties that we are meeting with, be it, in Parliament—you've seen me before taking these roles with Tainui, Ngāti Hauā, Ngāti Porou, always guided by the focus and priorities of iwi.

Media: So will this be part of their Oranga Tamariki strategy, similar to Waikato-Tainui and similar to Tūhoe, as an example?

PM: Yeah, you'll see, actually, though, the issues are determined by, and the focus is determined by, the iwi. And so that's where we're guided by and that's their prerogative.

Media: Prime Minister, is it not somewhat problematic and, I guess, also, a disservice to voters for you to not be able to say whether any other MPs in your caucus have got any disputes in play in terms of their employer-employee relationship? The employer, in this case, being the MP.

PM: No, I don't believe so, because, of course, where there are persistent issues, those will be raised with me. But there are 230-plus people employed across our 65 MPs. And from time to time, there may be a minor disagreement that may need resolution; I think people would understand if that may not be escalated to me. I want to be sure that I am not misleading you on whether or not there are any issues, minor or significant. If it is significant, of course I'd want to know, because we do need to make interventions in those cases.

Media: Given the events of last week and the lack of front-footedness on some issues that people should have known about—taking Sam Uffindell's background as an example—do you not think that if there is any disputes in play that it would be better for you to be open and up front about that?

PM: Well, here we have to take into account, as I've said, putting on public display where there is what could be minor, what could be significant. When it involves someone who could be easily identified, our job is to make sure that we act in the best interest of staff members, so it is unlikely to be in their best interests to put those into the public domain.

Media: So it's only if they come into the media, through other channels, that they deserve to be made public?

PM: No; I think that's actually an unfair portrayal. Here one of the concerns I have is that in raising these issues that we have at present, it is easy to identify some staff members who may not choose to come forward and be part of these discussions. My concern has to be staff, as much as my concern also has to be the behaviour of our MPs. Last question.

Media: On COVID, what's the hold-up in extending the eligibility of the second booster, which currently is only eligible to over-50s, to younger people? Because Australia's done it, public experts say it should happen, the Opposition said it should happen. Why isn't it happening?

PM: So here we take expert advice. And so those aren't decisions that are made by Cabinet; they are made on the advice of our expert advisers. And so once they make those decisions, they inform us and then we convey those decisions publicly. I think, here, for context, it would be worth remembering that, in my recollection, it's actually our setting for that second booster is actually relatively young compared to other countries. We've gone to 50; Australia is rare in that it's gone lower than that. But I'll ensure that as soon as those decisions are ready to be publicly communicated, that Dr Verrall does so. But they're not political decisions; they're clinical ones.

Media: Can I also ask, given the news out of Australia today, whether you've secretly sworn yourself into Minister of anything?

PM: No, I have not. I've got, still, the ongoing privilege of being Prime Minister.

Media: Did you meet with Lisa Kudrow? She was just in Wellington, the *Friends* star.

PM: Sorry?

Media: Lisa Kudrow from *Friends*.

PM: Oh—

Media: Phoebe.

PM: I know who she is; I have not met with Phoebe lately.

conclusion of press conference