

POST-CABINET PRESS CONFERENCE: MONDAY, 8 AUGUST 2022
HANSARD TRANSCRIPT

PM: Ki a koutou katoa. Good afternoon. I'm joined by the Minister for sport, Grant Robertson, to celebrate New Zealand's incredible success at the Commonwealth Games. First, to the week ahead. This week, I am in Wellington on Tuesday and Wednesday for the House. On Tuesday, we welcome the United States Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman. I'll have the opportunity to meet with Ms Sherman, and Ministers Nash and McAnulty will sign memorandums of understanding in the areas of space cooperation and emergency management. On Thursday, I'll make a regional visit with a focus on infrastructure and economic recovery. On Friday, I'm in Auckland for a series of meetings and visits.

Today, I want to acknowledge our 233 New Zealand athletes as they take part in their final day of competition at the Commonwealth Games in Birmingham. We are undoubtedly a country that sources an enormous amount of pride from the performance and conduct of our sportspeople, and these games have been no different. What also makes me proud is the diversity of the team. It includes the highest female representation to date: 53 percent. Twenty percent of the team is Māori, and we have strong Pacific numbers too. Para-athletes and non-disabled athletes are once again competing side by side at the games, with the largest ever para programme. In Birmingham 2022, with 4,500 athletes, from 72 nations and territories, for 11 days of spectacular sport, is this year making global sport history by becoming the first ever major multi-sport event to award more medals to women than men.

As you'll know, overnight the Birmingham Commonwealth Games became our most successful yet, taking into account our gold tally. Our record number of gold medals at a Commonwealth Games was broken with another gold for Aaron Gate, after a spectacular sprint finish in the men's road race. With our recent performance here, and at the summer and winter Olympics, we are in a golden era of high-performance sport in New Zealand, and it has been truly remarkable to witness. I've been fortunate enough to have been kept well up to date from our Minister on the ground, Deputy Prime Minister and sports Minister, Grant Robertson. So I'm going to hand over to the Minister now, who, I understand, was able to indulge his inner sports reporter while at the Games.

Hon Grant Robertson: Always good to have options! Thank you, Prime Minister. Can I start by saying it was an absolute privilege to be able to be at the Commonwealth Games in Birmingham to support our athletes and para-athletes and to see them perform so well. I want to thank and acknowledge the whole New Zealand team for their achievements and in particular Chef de Mission Nigel Avery, New Zealand Olympic Committee President Mike Stanley, CE Nicki Nicol, and their whole team, and High Performance Sport NZ and their teams for their leadership. They've focused on athlete wellbeing both before and during the event.

It has been a truly exceptional games for New Zealand: as the Prime Minister has said, 48 medals so far, and a 49th—it'll either be gold or silver—to come overnight. These medals come from a wide range of sports. The 19 golds so far coming in mountain biking, track cycling, road cycling, swimming, athletics, and squash, and other medals coming in sports as diverse as judo, bowls, boxing, triathlon, wrestling, weightlifting—I'm sure Ellen will be loving this!—rugby, cricket, and netball. At an individual level, as the Prime Minister just said, Aaron Gates' performance in the road race last night was exceptional, taking his fourth gold medal and becoming the first New Zealander to win four golds at a games. Ellesse Andrews and Lewis Clareburt both earned three medals, equalling the previous record in a single games. We can be proud of all our medallists, but also our whole team. There were some who, while they didn't make the podium, did break their own or New Zealand records, and I do want to mention in particular Sam Tanner. Sam had a massive personal best of 3 minutes 31 in the 1,500 metres—the second-fastest 1,500 metres run by a New Zealander ever. He came sixth in a world-class field and, at 21 years of age, represents a new generation of athletes who have emerged at this games, giving us huge optimism for the future.

Our team also represented, as well, when they were competing but also in their sportsmanship and values. A great example of this that I witnessed was shot-putter Jacko Gill, who, before he celebrated his silver medal, went up to every official who had worked on the event and shook their hand and thanked them. I am told he has done this at every event he has competed in for many years, and it was a moment of true humility and sportsmanship. There was a change in the Commonwealth Games Federation guidelines for these games which allowed athletes to advocate for causes, and I want to highlight our gold medal winning mountain biker Sam Gaze and his advocacy for mental health.

Hon Grant Robertson: He said before the games that he would be racing for mental health awareness, and he wore the green ribbon at his podium event. It is great for athletes to have the ability to advocate for causes that are important to them, and I want to applaud Sam for doing so at these games.

There are still a few hours to go in the games, so the best of luck to all our athletes who will be performing overnight, and to all of the New Zealand team: well done. Every one of you has made New Zealand proud. Prime Minister.

PM: Thank you Minister. We've, as the Minister has said, seen exceptional performances across the board, and there have been many memorable moments—I'm sure these will be shared in October when New Zealand team athletes from the Tokyo Olympic Games, Beijing Olympic Games, and Birmingham Commonwealth Games will join together for a celebration. This will be led by the New Zealand Olympic Committee, and I understand they'll release more details tomorrow morning.

Ahead of that, I can share today that some of our athletes will be warmly welcomed home, this Thursday, 11 August, at Auckland Airport. The New Zealand Olympic Committee tells me the public is welcome to meet our returning athletes at the Auckland Airport international arrivals hall, as they come off their 11.20 am at 12.20 pm flights, and that again is this Thursday at the Auckland International arrivals hall.

Team New Zealand, you've made us proud, and we can't wait to welcome you home. We're happy to take questions.

Media: Mr Robertson, as sports minister—

PM: Barry, welcome.

Media: Thank you. I don't want to be a "dippy-downer", but—

Hon Grant Robertson: Go for your life, though, Barry.

PM: Welcome.

Media: —there were complaints in Birmingham that if you look at the comparison between the Australia swim team and the New Zealand swim team, they get about \$30 million, whereas we're lucky to scratch up a million. Will that sort of thing be looked at?

Hon Grant Robertson: Yeah, so recently, Barry, we have re-looked at the funding for High Performance Sport New Zealand, and actually that's partly what led to an increase in funding for swimming, so swimming was being funded, I think, around about three quarters of a million dollars, and now is over just over a million dollars for this part of its high-performance programme. What we've done is looked—not just at the previous criteria we've had, which has largely been based on previous medal-winning performance—we've added in what's called an Aspirational Fund now for sports that perhaps haven't won so many medals, but we think there are good prospects for the future; and swimming has been a recipient of that additional funding.

We made a decision—or High Performance Sport New Zealand made a decision—to give certainty through to the Paris games in 2024, so we've now set that funding. But we always continue to look for opportunities to support individual athletes who are on a particular programme or their coaches, and I'm sure, after the performances at this games, some of that will be reviewed heading into Paris.

Media: Prime Minister, under the Government, have young people on the jobseeker benefit been given a free ride?

PM: Absolutely not. And I think any suggestion of that does a disservice to our young people. You know, we have seen that, yes, when we have hard economic times, it is often those areas where our young people are employed that bear the brunt of that. But we've also seen record exits into work, and our young people have been, for instance, in large numbers, coming through programmes like Mana in Mahi, have come through He Poutama Rangatahi, programmes designed to support our young people into work. If I may, just last week, I was visiting a worksite where there were a number of young people who, through Mana in Mahi, had been placed in employment. And we see roughly 90 percent of those who are part of Mana in Mahi generally, staying in work. This, to me, is an example of young people taking up those opportunities, and that extra support making a difference.

Media: How would you describe National's proposed policy changes to jobseeker benefits for young people?

PM: Look, a number of the things that we've seen the Opposition propose already exist. And so that then leads me to the question of: what is truly behind the proposals that they're making? A lot of it you see in the language. We take a very different approach; we need to make sure that we're removing barriers to work. For a large number of our young people it may be, for instance, access to skills and training, basic things like driver licensing—those are all things that we have put in place alongside more case management, to support young people into work. I'd rather focus on tangible things that make a difference on the ground, rather than the rhetoric and the politicking.

Media: A thousand dollar bonus, though—that's tangible.

PM: And again, in Mana in Mahi, we already have incentive payments for those who are accessing the programme and staying in work, to support their long-term connection to work. Again, as I've said, a number of the things that have been proposed are already in place, what is different is the way that we choose to talk about our young people, their potential, and the motivation I see to get into long-term work.

Media: And what do the Mana in Mahi incentive payments—what do they add up to?

PM: My recollection is that they are actually higher than that rate, depending on the length of time that you've been in the roles. I'm happy to go and double-check.

Media: Just on the Mana in Mahi programme, the most up-to-date MSD figures that we have show just 14 percent of Mana in Mahi participants were on a benefit longer than 12 months, so can you really say that that programme is getting people off welfare and into meaningful work?

PM: Sixty percent of those who are placed through Mana in Mahi are young people; 90 percent of them are staying—overall, of those who are coming through Mana in Mahi are staying off benefits. Keep in mind the majority of our young people who are currently on jobseeker have been for less than 12 months, so it would naturally follow that you see a higher proportion of them coming through those programmes. But just to give you an example, a while ago I used to receive regular case studies when we first started Mana in Mahi because I wanted to see how it was performing in the real world, and I remember seeing the case of a young person who had been on Government support for a longer period of time because of mental health issues. Mana in Mahi had helped support them into a work opportunity that was accompanied by training, and the extra support that was wrapped around that young person had meant that they had stayed in work and, for the first time, felt like that was going to be a job placement that would stick. You know, I've seen meaningful outcomes from these programmes because they are intensive and they are making a difference.

Media: So there's been some success in the programmes you have running, but is there anything more you could do in terms of targeted support for young people who've been on a benefit for more than a year—like job coaches?

PM: You know, so we already have, for instance, in our youth services those kinds of initiatives already—things like driver licensing for, roughly, 70 percent of entrant-level jobs often requiring driver licensing. And many of our young people will not, for a range of reasons, have accessed driver licensing, often because of the barrier financially to do so and the extra support of, for instance, driver training. So in the last Budget, we put additional funding in to support access to driver's licensing, and we know that is making a difference as well. I think probably one of the things that we need to keep doing is making sure that employers know that there are strong incentives in place through Mana in Mahi, which financially supports the employer, and through Flexi-wage, where, roughly, a third of our participants are young people. Those financial incentives, I think, help encourage our employers to come through MSD to work with us to place young people and get a bit of extra support while they do. Those are the kinds of, I think, initiatives that will continue to make a difference.

Media: Prime Minister, with all this talk of the golden era of New Zealand sport, what in your opinion is the matter with the All Blacks?

PM: Minister?

Hon Grant Robertson: Yes, I thought that might come to me. As you know, Ben, one of the things about—

PM: You took joy in asking that question—I heard it in your tone.

Hon Grant Robertson: Yeah, I was going to say, as you know Ben, there's swings and roundabouts when it comes to performance of international rugby teams. No, look the Minister of sport, or the Prime Minister, for that matter, doesn't get into the business of commenting specifically. I think all All Black fans would be wishing that the All Blacks would be performing better than they are now, and we'll be hoping for a better result next weekend.

Media: Can I ask then, instead, with my Jason Walls waste-watch hat on, would you ensure that no public money goes to paying out sacked coaches?

Hon Grant Robertson: Oh look, the All Blacks—the funding model for the All Blacks is that very little Government money goes to the All Blacks per se. The funding that does go from Government to New Zealand Rugby is largely aimed at grassroots rugby, also supporting the development of women's rugby, so that's simply not the financial model that applies.

Media: Prime Minister, what's your view of China's live firing in the Taiwan Strait, and in various other measures to protest at Nancy Pelosi's [*Inaudible*]?

PM: You will have seen that the conclusion of a number of international engagements that the Minister of Foreign Affairs has recently engaged in the release of her statement, which I'll restate again here: New Zealand continues to stand by our longstanding One China policy, but we have of course expressed—as have many others—a concern around the escalation that we've seen, the use of ballistics, and the increasing tension around the Taiwan Strait. We, again—as others have done so—call for diplomacy and dialogue, and a complete focus on de-escalation. It is in no one's interests to see that escalation continue.

Media: The former Prime Minister John Key said that Nancy Pelosi had been provocative. What's your view on whether this was something that could have been avoided by her not going?

PM: Yeah, and here I see no added value in entering into a space where we commentate on the diplomacy of others. Don't think New Zealand would particularly appreciate that if that occurred for us in our decision making and our execution of our independent foreign policy. But, again, where we are very firm is that dialogue in diplomacy

at this point in time, in our minds, is key. We have not changed our longstanding One China policy, but within that, of course, we are calling on all parties for a de-escalation.

Media: So what would you think of David Seymour going to Taiwan, and does anyone in the Government plan on visiting?

PM: I think it's where we're traversing last week. It's been since the late 1990s since you will have seen what I would describe as what may be considered a senior Government member on a visit. New Zealand, of course, engages with Taiwan economically through, for instance, existing fora, like APEC and so on, and will continue to do so. But it's been a number of decades since you will have seen a high-level visit of that nature. My recollection is it was what was then called, I believe, international trade Minister, and I believe it may have been Lockwood Smith. So quite some time ago.

Media: So you would advise other party leaders and Parliament—

PM: Keep in mind there have been over the years members of Parliament and parliamentary delegations that have made visits and exchanges, so that wouldn't be new. But, of course, what is of interest to us is the way that we engage diplomatically at a senior Government level. It's not for me to give instruction to other party members of Parliament, because, of course, there've been regular exchanges in that regard for some time.

Media: Prime Minister, one for you and Grant Robertson. National's newest MP—*Stuff* reported this afternoon—Sam Uffindell got asked to leave King's College when he was there, because him and some other boys beat up a younger boy, including with a bed leg. He says that the National Party knew about this during the selection process. Do you have a comment?

PM: I'll jump in on that one. I imagine that, as Labour leader, that's where you might be directing that one. I take the same position I always have when it comes to the conduct of other MPs in other parties. Ultimately, the conduct of candidates who are indeed members of Parliament will be for the party's leader—and in this case, obviously, Christopher Luxon.

Hon Grant Robertson: Yeah. No, I don't have anything to add to that, other than perhaps to make a very general comment that, of course, violence and attacks on young people are things that we should all be very concerned about.

Media: Isn't there a hypocrisy charge, though, if he's campaigning on anti-violence and anti-gang [*Inaudible*]?

PM: Look, again, obviously we're each responsible for our relative position on policies, those things that we campaign on, and equally the conduct of our MPs. But I have always maintained a clear distinction that, yes, as leaders we need to be accountable for our members, our members' conduct, and what we know of our members' conduct. But, again, it is for each party leader to hold that responsibility.

Media: Should these sorts of things get picked up, though, in the selection process?

PM: Oh, look, I can only speak to the way that we operate. Certainly, you know, our goal as a party is to make sure that we have members of Parliament that are representative of our communities, that have standing within their communities, and that fuller range of skill sets that we believe are necessary to do a good job representing all New Zealanders in this place. Of course, you also want to make sure that, where there are issues, that to the best of our ability, we do draw those out so that we can be aware. And that may mean that someone is not selected or it may mean that we work to ensure that there is a level of transparency around those issues. That is for us. Again, it is up to the National Party and, ultimately, Chris Luxon and the party leadership how they conduct their own affairs.

Media: Prime Minister, what do you say to the people of Rotorua who are fed up with motels being used in that city for the homeless? Twelve motels are asking for an extension of five years for that sort of use. More than 3,500 submissions have been made opposing it. Do you feel for the people of Rotorua?

PM: So two things that we, of course, have responsibility anywhere in the country, to ensure that we are trying to achieve for local communities—the first is ensuring that our families in our communities are housed. And we know that in Rotorua, that's an example of where we've had a region where there's been a significant surge in demand for housing and there hasn't been the level of social and public housing to meet that need. And so that's why the response has been rather than see family members and children, in particular, without housing or with completely inappropriate housing—why there has been, particularly through COVID, the utilisation of things like motels. I know there's been concern locally over whether or not there have been people coming in to Rotorua in order to access that. I know some work was done to try and understand if that was case, and my recollection is that the vast majority, roughly 85 percent, either hail from Rotorua or have connection to the area and region.

When it comes to contracts in the future, there's a part to play and roles for a range of different players on that. So it's not just a question for central government over those contracts and so on. But what we do know is that we have to prepare ourselves for the fact that as tourism returns, there will be interest for some of those operators to go back to their primary purpose. So that's why you've seen things like our Housing Acceleration Fund, which is seeking in Rotorua to see about an extra 3,000 houses provided. That's why we're focusing on increasing the supply in regions like that.

Media: Prime Minister, just on dental care, why isn't dental care accessible to every Kiwi living here in New Zealand?

PM: We know that we have a large amount of demand in our health services. We've been working very hard, for instance, to increase things like Pharmac funding; we've done that by over 40 percent now. We know that we need to ensure that we have greater access to primary healthcare, mental health care. There is also need in dental. Where we made a pledge at the election that we would increase our support was, for instance, on dental grants through the Ministry of Social Development. We've done that. It's gone from \$300 to a thousand dollars kicking in, in December. But we know that it is one of the areas where there is high need, but there is a lot of demand in health that we equally need to meet.

Media: Will there be more investment for adults getting dental care under Te Whatu Ora?

PM: We've already set out where our focus is for dental healthcare. For those lowest-income New Zealanders, we wanted them to be able to access grants. We've done that; up to a thousand dollars kicking in from December. We also know that actually fluoridation makes the biggest difference for young people and teenagers, for instance, going into the future in their oral healthcare. We've made changes to ensure that there is a health-based approach through the director-general on that issue. And the final area is improving care and access for children, and we've got a number of programmes in place and over time we've seen filings reduce as a result of some of those programmes.

Media: Prime Minister, the Auditor-General's made a submission to the Finance and Expenditure Committee on the Water Services Entities Bill and raises very serious concerns around accountability, transparency, lack of local engagement, and concern that the office itself will not be able to audit those new entities as effectively as it can local authorities. I mean, is there still room for change to that model?

PM: The infrastructure Minister happens also to be present with me today.

Hon Grant Robertson: Yeah, Brent, I haven't had an opportunity to read the submission in full yet and, obviously, we always take seriously comments that the Auditor-General makes. The comments that he appears to be making based on the news story I read on it is around, effectively, accountability arrangements. Of course, we'll take a look at his suggestions there. Obviously, when we're moving from a situation where you have up to 70 local authorities involved in the provision of water services and you're bringing it down into four entities, that will mean significant change in the kind of accountability arrangements, but our goal is still that those entities are accountable to their communities. We will have that via

the representative groups that appoint members of their board, that also set their performance expectations documents, and no doubt all of those local authorities involved in that will have some considerable say and influence. So, you know, we'll look at a way of doing that, but the overall premise that this is taking away from communities, we obviously disagree with that because they still are the ultimate owners of these assets.

Media: Not wanting to take away of the achievements from our athletes; do you think it's appropriate to call or to say that we're in this golden era of high-performance sport, given the conversation we had about the quality of high-performance sport following Olivia Podmore's tragic passing?

Hon Grant Robertson: Yeah, look, I think the Prime Minister is reflecting what has been exceptional performances over the course of Tokyo, Beijing, and then here. That's not to say everything's perfect in the world of high-performance sport, and we have to continue to put a focus on athlete wellbeing. There are clear recommendations from the review that has been done—the independent review. Both Cycling New Zealand and High Performance Sport New Zealand have committed to implementing those recommendations and we take them very, very seriously. What we're celebrating today is the performance of the athletes, many of whom from that cycling programme; many of whom who were friends of Olivia Podmore. And I think today is a good day to celebrate that success, and then we'll build on that. And as I noted at the beginning of my comments, you know, one of the things I was really impressed about when I was in Birmingham was seeing the way that athlete wellbeing was absolutely at the centre of the way the team came together, and I think that's something really positive to take forward.

PM: I don't, for a moment, wish to diminish the experience of any athlete or their family members within any of the organisations and any of the process that's under way with those organisations. As the Minister has said, what we're seeking to do here today is acknowledge the individual sporting performances within the games and the outcomes that they have delivered. I don't think that, for a moment, takes away from where we know we need to continue to do work to support our athletes in all codes.

Hon Grant Robertson: One thing that might be of interest is when I was in Birmingham, I met with a number of people from sporting bodies around the world—including my UK ministerial counterpart, and they have just had a release of a high-performance sport review that happened to be into gymnastics in their case. And it did indicate that there are issues around the world around athlete wellbeing, around the way that high-performance programmes are run. And so New Zealand's not alone in this; we're taking the recommendations of that review and others very seriously and starting to see some positive change, but we've got to keep following through on it.

Media: Just on another matter; reading about Sam Uffindell's link to bullying, has that thrown up any memories of bullying that you two have endured in your youth?

PM: I certainly, over the years, witnessed bullying. I don't consider myself to have had the extreme circumstances that I've either witnessed, heard, or seen. I was a board of trustees representative at my school on my school board, where our school was a little bit different and I was on the suspension committee. And I saw some pretty—you know, some pretty difficult circumstances brought before that board. And there's no question some of our young people in school have a horrific experience. I think everyone through an education system will have either witnessed or potentially experienced that themselves. And we have, I think, as political leaders, a duty of care to try and ensure that our young people today, where we know, actually, there are some—particularly our rainbow community, who have a particularly difficult experience in their younger years; we see that in their self-harm statistics, we see it in the mental health statistics—to do everything we can to make sure that our education system is better than it was when they experienced it.

Hon Grant Robertson: Yeah, and from my perspective, I think I was probably the victim of some low-level bullying when I was a younger person. There is a spectrum here, isn't there, between low-level bullying and assault—and I certainly wasn't the victim of that.

Media: Prime Minister, can I ask you about Wendy Sherman's visit tomorrow?

PM: Yeah, absolutely.

Media: She's announced in Tonga that she's intending to invite Pacific nations to a summit at the White House—or maybe the President has given an invitation and she's just re-laid it—is New Zealand going to go to that in September, and what will your message to her be tomorrow when you meet?

PM: Yeah, so, look, some commentary I'll leave till tomorrow, if I may. But I think what will be useful for us tomorrow is—yes, undoubtedly we'll engage on the current circumstances we find in our region, current tensions and escalation in the wider region. But also it'll be a chance to reflect on some of the recent engagements that the United States has been having in the Pacific and our own reflections on our region. We've been really consistent, though: our view is that the United States—there has been a period where some of the engagement has fluctuated. We see a really clear commitment through the current administration. We'll be calling for that to be consistent, and that ongoing engagement, for the benefit of our wider region.

Media: Do you seen the response now—we've got a couple of tours coming around and now this summit—to have been commensurate with the charge that the United States has been neglectful in the Pacific?

PM: Our consistent message has been: the Pacific is really clear on its priorities, so that's a starting point for engagement. And those priorities include, for instance, climate adaptation and mitigation. It also includes issues that are considered of regional security, such as the protection of major income and protein sources—fishing. The Blue Pacific is a region where, you know, it's very difficult to ensure ongoing rigorous surveillance, and yet fishing presents one of the most significant income sources for many of our neighbours. And yet it is also the subject of illegal fishing. And so, here we've seen engagement on the likes of the Tuna Treaty, that's been really important to the region, but ongoing support around maritime surveillance and wider security there, I think, is another example of a priority.

I might just, just to finish—Mana in Mahi has a \$3,000 incentive payment that is able to be accessed over the course of 52 weeks, in up to as many as three payments.

All right, I think we'll finish there. Thanks, everyone.

conclusion of press conference