

POST-CABINET PRESS CONFERENCE: MONDAY, 5 DECEMBER 2022
HANSARD TRANSCRIPT

PM: Kia ora koutou katoa. Good afternoon, everyone. This week, I am in the House on Tuesday and Wednesday. On Thursday, I have the privilege of presenting the 2022 Ryman Prize here in Wellington, a healthcare award for the world's best development, advance, or achievement that enhances quality of life for older people. On Friday, I will attend the New Zealand China Council AGM to mark our 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations.

On the Government agenda this week, we have the final Commerce Commission market study report on building products. This began in November last year as we pulled all levels to ramp up New Zealand's house building programme, and we've already instigated improvements in supply, including the broader availability of plasterboard. We also have the introduction of the sale and supply of alcohol amendment bill, which gives communities greater powers to reduce alcohol harm locally. We have an event to mark 100,000 retrofits to make Kiwi homes warmer and, of course, the result of the Hamilton West by-election will be announced on Saturday.

Today, I can confirm that Cabinet has agreed to hold a royal commission of inquiry into the COVID-19 pandemic response, to better prepare New Zealand for future pandemics. It will be chaired by Australian-based epidemiologist Professor Tony Blakely, alongside two members: former Cabinet Minister Hon Hekia Parata and former Treasury Secretary John Whitehead. Each brings a unique set of skills and, importantly, are independent of the Government and its response. Professor Blakely's understanding of public health is extensive, and he has the knowledge and experience necessary to lead this work. Hon Hekia Parata and John Whitehead have expertise and bring useful perspectives on the economic response, the response for Māori, and also a useful education lens.

The terms of reference are being approved, and the royal commission has been asked to look at the response, identify what we can learn from it, and how that can be applied to any future pandemic. The scope of the inquiry is wide-ranging and will cover specific aspects of our health response, such as our border, community care, isolation, quarantine, as well as the economic response—and that does include, broadly, monetary policy. We will not consider individual decisions such as how policies applied to an individual case or circumstance. We'll also look into the effectiveness of our strategies, including elimination, minimisation, and protection; and it will cover the period of the response from February 2020 to October 2022. The royal commission will begin considering evidence from 1 February next year and conclude in mid-2024. A report will then be prepared which will help inform any future Government's pandemic response.

A royal commission of inquiry is the highest form of public inquiry—and it's the right thing to do, given the COVID emergency was the most significant threat to the health of New Zealanders and our economy since World War II. It's fair to say that New Zealand's COVID-19 response has already been heavily examined, both internationally and nationally. So far, 75 reviews have been carried out within New Zealand since 2020. Internationally, New Zealand has been named as having the lowest cases and deaths in the OECD for two years in a row—the result of our decision, as a Government and as a country, to go hard and early, and the commitment of many New Zealanders to protect lives and livelihoods.

However, we've said from the outset that there would be an appropriate time to review our response—to learn from it—and with the emergency over and our primary focus on our strong economic recovery, that time is now. We had no playbook by which to manage COVID, but as a country we united in an extraordinary way and we did save lives and livelihoods. But ultimately, the royal commission is an exercise in ensuring we have the strongest possible playbook in the event of a future pandemic. I have Minister Dr Verrall here, who is the Minister for COVID-19 Response, to also assist with any questions that you may now have.

Media: Prime Minister, why is the Reserve Bank excluded from this inquiry?

PM: Monetary policy is included. What is excluded—in the same way for individual decisions around cases for health—is the Reserve Bank’s independent Monetary Policy Committee and those individual decisions that would have been made by that committee. But the issue of monetary policy, broadly, is included.

Media: Those decisions are probably quite important given the weight that they had in terms of the monetary policy itself. Why is that specifically excluded?

PM: Again, so if I just draw upon—and then I’ll have the Minister just quote you the exact reference within what is now the gazetted detail—what you have is a summary and then we have the gazetted detail that’s been released as soon as it’s signed off by the Governor-General.

What we’ve made sure is that when we come to individual decision-making—so, for instance quarantine is included but the individual decision on whether or not Joe Bloggs on December 12 should have been granted access to that quarantine facility or not is not included. That’s because we do need to make sure we learn broadly from the tools that were used for our response so that we make sure we have the most useful methods possible going forward. Individual decisions don’t necessarily teach us that.

Media: But Adrian Orr’s not Joe Bloggs, and you’re saying you’re specifically excluding the Monetary Policy Committee.

PM: Let me have the Minister read out for you the—

Hon Ayesha Verrall: The inclusion reads, “the legislative, regulatory, and operational settings required to support New Zealand’s immediate economic response to a future pandemic, relating to—first bullet point—fiscal and monetary policy responses, including coordination and preparedness and for large-scale changes quickly and monitor their impacts.

PM: So monetary policy is included.

Media: Prime Minister, on the monetary policy decision, the issue might be that the Government might not have been able to issue as much debt as it did for all the different support programmes if the Reserve Bank wasn’t there to buy the debt. So the Reserve Bank’s decision to, you know, have a large-scale asset purchase programme to buy the debt helped the Government issue as much debt as it did. So I’m just wondering how you can—

PM: And monetary policy is included.

Media: But the Reserve Bank didn’t need to decide to buy the debt, right? That’s a decision that was made.

PM: I think the point I’m making here is that the issue you’re covering is, I believe, included by the review. What we want to be careful about is just making sure that we draw a distinction between individual decisions on any given day made by officials within MBIE, or the independent Monetary Policy Committee, given the role that they have, and the independence of that committee—but, broadly speaking, monetary policy is included.

Media: You spent a lot of money during that response, and those were decisions made by the committee, so are the decisions to print that money in the first place, then to expand that amount of money printed, and then to expand again the amount of money printed—are those decisions covered by this?

PM: Broadly, my interpretation here that I’m sharing with you is monetary policy is included. What is specifically excluded are the individual decisions made by the Monetary Policy Committee, in part because of the independence of that committee. We do have to make sure that whilst we’re keeping parameters relatively broad, we are also very aware of the distinction that we hold and the independence that exists for that committee, and we do have to be mindful of that in this review.

Media: How will the parliamentary protests be viewed by the royal commission?

PM: In what sense?

Media: Well, we had the IPCA investigation. We don't know much about how people organised, how people got there. You know, this was an ugly, lawless—it brought the fringes of society to the house of democracy and we probably need to know more about that, don't we?

PM: Of course, the IPCA is looking at some of the issues around the level of preparedness, the response, so that is covered. What we're looking at here is what we can learn from the decisions that were taken for future pandemics. And so probably two very separate issues here. One may have been a consequence of decision making and the way that people responded to that, and one is just ultimately whether or not those decisions were the right ones in terms of effective management of the pandemic.

Media: What about more broadly, then, the issue—you talk about misinformation and disinformation a lot. The way that this pandemic affected a certain fringe of society—that did have a major impact. How will that be looked at by the royal commission?

Hon Ayesha Verrall: So the vaccine mandates are in scope for the public health aspects of the inquiry, and in addition enabling communication with communities. So I think that captures the ability to see whether mandates were an appropriate tool on those issues of social licence.

Media: Would it be your hope that the royal commission in some ways takes some of the heat out of what seems to be a shrinking anti-vax movement, but I must admit it seems more vehement, the smaller it gets. Are you hoping that by saying we are having an inquiry and a royal commission, you will have swayed some of those who for whatever reasons find those groups or those ideas appealing?

PM: Our ultimate reason for having this inquiry is because undeniably it had a huge impact on people's lives—the pandemic. We had to make decisions often with very limited information. We want to make sure that regardless, going forward, given we're likely to experience one again in the future, we don't lose the lessons of that period. You ask a good question: will it build further trust and confidence in the future? Look, our job is to maintain trust and confidence in Government. Whether you agree with any individual policy, our job is to make sure people can see that we're being transparent, open, and accountable. This is one way that can ensure that we're doing that.

Media: The Hon Hekia Parata—and, very importantly, congratulations on that. Māori are going to be very, very pleased with her appointment. But what are the terms of reference for looking at how it impacted Te Ao Māori and hapori Māori?

PM: So, of course, you've seen in the general summary of the terms of reference consideration specifically of the interests of Māori in the context of a pandemic consistent with Te Tiriti o Waitangi relationships. So we have specifically asked the review team to look at our response and the impact on Māori.

Media: Prime Minister, the Ombudsman is looking into transparency of the Government and OIA time frames again. Are you happy with your Government's transparency record?

PM: Yes, I am, particularly when you look at the scale of Official Information Act requests that we're now dealing with. The number of requests that are received by agencies has doubled in the past six years. In a six-month period, we're talking 26,000-odd requests, and they come from a range of individuals, not just, for instance, journalists. Ninety-seven percent of that large number is still responded to within those time frames that are set out in the law, so I have no issue, though, with the Ombudsman looking in more detail.

Media: We've seen an example today of an OIA that was filed by a member of the public to the police. It was then delayed because it was not just signed off by the Minister of Police but also another Minister—it was sitting in another Minister's office and was delayed because of that. Is that right?

PM: Oh look, I can't speak to an individual case, but what I can say is that, as I've said, 97 percent of the thousands of official information requests are within time, and the average time is 12½ days. So that's across, again, a six-month period—over 26,000 requests. I can't speak to an individual request or whether or not that was appropriate without knowing more detail.

Media: In general, should a Minister ever be able to delay a response to an OIA?

PM: Oh look, I can't speak to an individual's circumstance—

Media: No, that's a general question: should a Minister be able to delay a response—

PM: Again, I can't give you a response without understanding the circumstances, because sometimes it may be the Minister's information, just in the same way that if we have a request that spans across different parties, there is obligation to make sure that those parties are engaged. Also some departments, of course, still have no-surprises policies with their Ministers, so I can't give a specific response.

Media: So you can't give—no-surprises doesn't exist within legislation.

PM: My expectation is that despite the doubling of the Official Information Act requests that agencies have, despite them now numbering over 20,000 in six months, that everyone makes sure that they do what they can to fulfil their obligation in terms of the time lines.

Media: Are you saying that—*[Interruption]*

PM: Yeah—sorry, I'll let you finish, Jenna.

Media: Are you confident that your Ministers aren't engaging in political interference with the OIA?

PM: My expectation is that we manage the OIA as we're expected to—that we fulfil our legal obligations. But again, despite the huge increase, we're working very hard to make sure they're getting out in a timely way and that we're sharing the information that of course we're required to. It gets—it does—the larger the number that you're dealing with—and keep in mind I do see the number of OIAs we have coming through our department, and they're not just from journalists. They're from a wide range of individuals for a wide range of reasons, and one piece of context that I think is useful: 6.4 percent of requests were refused, but 18 percent of those were refused because the information doesn't actually exist. So we do get quite a number of those, where people ask for information that doesn't even exist. Sometimes they are, frankly, conspiracy theories that we get quite a few requests over.

Yeah, Barry.

Media: Prime Minister, on the three-waters entrenchment, can you tell me, did you know that the amendment was going to be before the House?

PM: As I've already said, Barry, I was aware that there was a debate on entrenchment. I'd shared—

Media: No, I'm asking you: did you know it was going to be before the House?

PM: I'm answering your question. I knew there would be a debate on entrenchment—that the Greens had proposals on entrenchment. I'd shared that we had a discussion around the general principle of entrenchment, which is commonly understood to be 75 percent. But the most important point here, Barry: a mistake has been made—we're absolutely acknowledging that. Regardless of where the SOP came from, it was a mistake to have it voted for and go into law, so we will fix it.

Media: But did you personally know that this amendment was going to be before the House?

PM: As I've already said, Barry, I was aware of an entrenchment proposal, but entrenchment is commonly understood to be 75 percent and therefore requires 75 percent of

the support of the House in order for it to succeed. A mistake has been made here, Barry; we're fixing it.

Media: But did you know that that mistake was about to be made?

PM: I've answered the question.

Media: Well, no, you haven't answered the question—

PM: I have. And if you don't believe I have, that's a matter for you.

Media: Did you personally know—

Media: Prime Minister, to clarify, did you—

PM: Again, as I've said, entrenchment as a general principle is believed to be 75 percent. What we had come—

Media: We know that.

PM: Well, actually, this has actually generated—

Media: Well, most of us know that. Most of us know that.

PM: Can I finish? Yeah, most do. What came before the House was novel in that regard; it wasn't 75 percent. Ultimately, though, I think what people want to know is whether or not we're going to fix it—we are.

Media: Was 60 percent ever raised with you before it got to the House—that one specific question?

PM: Again, as I've said, I'm not going to get into the individual discussions in caucus. What I've shared is that the general principle of entrenchment was discussed and, as I've said, commonly understood to be a much higher threshold than what came through in the debate and was voted on. It was a mistake and it has been fixed.

Media: Prime Minister, just on the Trikafta funding for cystic fibrosis, Pharmac have now issued a ban and it won't speak to MediaWorks radio station about any range of topics. Is that appropriate for a Government agency to decide something like that?

PM: What wouldn't be appropriate is for me to come in over the top of what is a position that Pharmac has taken, and it is absolutely for them. I think that what's probably important just to highlight in terms of context for Pharmac and why things like embargos when they do release information are so important is because they are obviously a negotiating body. They enter into commercial negotiations; it's incredibly sensitive when they do that. They may, for instance—they may; and I can't speak to the specific circumstances—share embargoed information whilst there is still negotiations under way, so it would undermine their ability to conclude those, I would assume, if there was any breach in an embargo. So, look, it's a matter for them, but that's just a bit of context as to what I believe is probably at play here.

Media: Just more generally on those big public health funding announcements: is it appropriate for those kinds of announcements that people have to tune into the six o'clock news to find out potentially whether they will or won't receive a life-saving—

PM: Actually, that's a good question. My understanding is that Pharmac have a process which means that in some cases, individual interest groups may also be notified. So that's my understanding of how they operate. So in those cases where there has been engagement by different representative groups, that they may have direct engagement with them as well, not just the media. Again, though, that's very much for Pharmac. We are the ones that fund Pharmac, and I'm very pleased that that over 40 percent increase that we've had in Pharmac's budget has meant that they're able to fund Trikafta and either increase or expand the range of 200 medicines now as a result of that extra funding. It's having an important—it's making a difference, and I was delighted to see the decision that they've made on Trikafta, I really was.

Media: What's going on with the partner work visa changes?

PM: Ultimately, I'll leave any detail on that for Minister Wood. I have nothing to share on the podium here today, so I'll just leave that for him.

Media: Just back on the review, you say it's broad, but it kind of seems relatively narrow in the sense that it seems to be asking: "How could we do essentially the same thing we did last time but better next time?", rather than stepping back and asking the broader question: was the juice worth the squeeze?

PM: Well, I disagree with that. I mean, one of the very broad parameters in which the—sorry, the objective statement really clearly sets out what we're trying to learn here. Our next pandemic will not be, for instance, necessarily just a new iteration of COVID-19. Key for me when we were talking to officials about this inquiry, one of the shortcomings we had coming into COVID-19 was that our pandemic plan was based on influenza. And because it was so specific to the illness, there wasn't enough in that framework that could help us with the very particular issues of this respiratory disease that was COVID-19. So we want to make sure that regardless of whether or not it's a respiratory illness or some other illness, we have a broad set of parameters that we can learn from this that will help us in the future.

Anything further?

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: I think it's precisely what the inquiry is going to look at. It's got scope to look into elimination—which is a particular set of health approaches but had the implications for how the border was run, implications for the support we had to offer business—it's going to look into the protection framework as well. So I think those sorts of high-level assessments is exactly what we're going to get out of it.

Media: So can we be confident that, in the fullness of time when there's been delays and the final thing is delivered, that there will actually be—

PM: Don't jinx it.

Media: —there will be a high-level assessment of the trade-offs that were made in this quite extraordinary event that limited people's civil and economic liberties to a significant degree?

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: Precisely.

Media: Given the scope you say this has, will this put more pressure on Department of Internal Affairs? They're already struggling with the Earthquake Commission care inquiry; where are you going to find all these expert public servants and lawyers to get this inquiry done?

PM: Yeah, well, of course we have had, now, a group of individuals who've been involved in other inquiries that have now been completed. We've had the royal commission, we've had Burnham and others where we can look to draw from those who have had particular expertise. But I'm confident we'll be able to resource the inquiry appropriately. And just in case there's any further—hopefully I've cleared up the issue over here around, for instance, LSAPs being included, but, for instance, if you were to draw back and look at, "What's the equivalent of not looking at individual decisions on, for instance, MIQ use—what's the equivalent of that for the Reserve Bank?", it would be, for instance, a change in the OCR on a particular day. So we're not looking at the individual decision-making, but the tools, absolutely, are included.

Media: In terms of the tools, you are looking at the fact that the Reserve Bank decided to have an LSAP programme worth up to \$100 billion. That's its decision—

PM: The use of a generic tool like that, yes, could be included. And we've been very specific around including someone like John Whitehead—who is an economist—in order to make sure that we're able to cover off the economic response broadly.

Media: A lot of countries had plans and playbooks for a pandemic and they ended up throwing them out the window for the reasons that you said: because it's a unique type of virus. So what's the point in coming up with a plan for the future, which is the aim of the

inquiry, when you're going to get hit with a pandemic that has some unique twist that you're not accounting for and that you can't even consider?

PM: One little tidbit: you can already see in the monkeypox response the learnings from COVID crossing over, even though it's a very different set of circumstances.

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: Yeah, so I think the point is having a prescriptive plan probably will set you up to fail. But having an approach that's grounded in preparedness, in terms of knowing what the—broadly speaking—the systems and the capabilities that you need to maintain in order to respond to infectious disease threats is a good approach. That's the approach we took with the variant plan; that's the sort of information we want. In addition, I think when we look back at the pandemic preparedness plan, there was some quite narrow focusing on a particular pathogen, and I think the lesson—well, I imagine—has been learnt that just looking at the characteristics of one bug isn't going to cut it and you need to think much more broadly.

Media: Have you watched the Q+A interview with Minister Jackson yet?

PM: No, I have not. Obviously, as you can imagine, yesterday was a very busy day. I have heard some of the excerpts from it.

Media: Do you think that he was unprepared for the interview?

PM: Look, I don't agree with some of the comments that were made—I have spoken to the Minister about the interview. But, of course, the basis of the reforms—the reason that we're going through this exercise to strengthen public sector broadcasting—is the right one and that doesn't change regardless of an interview.

Media: Which comments did you not agree with?

PM: It was more the presentation, or the possible interpretation of anything other than our very strong, strong stance on editorial independence. Some have taken issue with some of the comments—I do not believe that that's what the Minister was trying to do or say, but I can see how people may have taken issue with some of them.

Media: Do you think that his behaviour was unbecoming of a Cabinet Minister?

PM: As I say, I've already spoken to the Minister about the interview. Ultimately, though, the interview does not undermine the focus of the reforms, which is to make sure that in a time where New Zealanders are accessing their information, their news, their content is rapidly changing, that we make sure that TVNZ and RNZ can keep pace with that, and that New Zealand stories are still being told.

Media: Did you advise him not to front today?

PM: Did I, sorry?

Media: He's not fronting for interviews today. Did you advise him not to front?

PM: Look, specifically on interviews, I haven't given him any commentary on his diary or anything he's doing today.

Media: Is Willie Jackson fit to be broadcasting Minister?

PM: Yes, he is.

Media: Prime Minister, what do you make of Mayor Wayne Brown's proposal for seeking interest in selling the council's stake in Auckland Airport?

PM: These matters are matters for the newly elected council.

Media: What about as an Auckland ratepayer. Do you see merit in that argument, and what about—

PM: I won't use the podium as a way to broadcast the view of one Sandringham resident.

Media: Will the COVID inquiry be one of the biggest inquiries ever undertaken in New Zealand?

PM: Well, gosh, I have to say that at the time that we launched the inquiry into State abuse or the inquiry into March 15, your hope is that you don't have grounds to have to launch another. I think the reason that it is incredibly important, though, that we use the most significant level of inquiry that we have is because of the significant impact of COVID-19. And I think everyone would agree with that. But I think it's not for me to judge from an individual perspective which one has the greatest impact. For those individuals affected, those have all been of significant magnitude.

Media: You said recently that this will be the first Christmas in three years where we haven't had COVID hanging over us. We had on Christmas Day last year 44 cases. We're going to have a few thousand this year on Christmas Day with many thousands of people isolating and unable to attend gatherings. Do you feel it's a right choice of words?

PM: I am happy to give further context to the comments, because I think oftentimes I have usually given that context, and that is the potential of at any time for us to enter to the podium and use large-scale or impactful restrictions at any moment. So that anxiety that that creates, that level of uncertainty—because last Christmas, you'll recall at that point we were waiting, essentially, for the arrival of Omicron and the impact of that on the settings that we had. So that was what my reference was, and in no way am I discounting the fact that COVID is still with us and must still be managed. Some, for instance, have questioned whether or not we should still have isolation requirements. We've stood by that as the most effective tool to continue to reduce down the amount of COVID spread in the community.

Minister, anything further?

Hon Ayesha Verrall: Just a reflection, having worked lots of Christmas shifts in public hospitals, the fact that some people can't be with their family over Christmas is a reality, because many infections—and I just encourage everyone to do what they can in the run-up to Christmas, if that's an important holiday for them and their family, to make sure that they're wearing masks and are able to participate fully and keep well.

PM: That was actually one of the pieces of advice from public health right at the beginning, when we started easing restrictions, that, yes, if you're concerned about infection control at a large-scale event, or you have a significant event coming up, that you don't want to be impacted by COVID. That was one of the circumstances that Health encouraged—the use of masks.

Media: Do you think Minister Mahuta gave you sufficient information about that SOP at caucus?

PM: Keep in mind that my recollection is that the SOP had not been tabled at that point, and, again, as a context I've given that, as you well know, not every SOP, for instance, will even have an opportunity to go to caucus. Now, I've acknowledged that there was a general discussion. I've not got into the detail of that to preserve caucus, but, again, I come back to the final point: regardless, we've acknowledged that what happened here was a mistake and we're fixing it.

Media: If she knew that the 60 percent threshold was going to be the new threshold, should she have communicated that to you?

PM: I can see that the issue here is that everyone amongst you is looking for one individual person to blame here. The point I'm making is that as a team, we are taking responsibility for the fact that we voted for another party's amendment. It has then taken effect. Our view is that is a mistake, and we're fixing it.

Media: But is there an individual to blame, and you—the team—are covering for that individual?

PM: No, we are taking responsibility, as the largest party in Government, to fixing the problem.

Media: Will the local government Minister keep her portfolio up to the election?

PM: Sorry?

Media: Will the local government Minister keep her portfolio up to the election?

PM: Yes, because we'll win the election. Thank you for the question.

Media: Up to the election.

PM: Oh, "up to the election"—again, I have not set out any changes at this point, but I would not have you speculate on that based on the fact that we haven't formulated our reshuffle. So I have no plans on changing the Minister based on anything that's happened here—so that would be an unfair speculation.

OK, yeah.

Media: On the royal commission, what do you say to the inevitable criticism that it's not reporting back until after the election, and so any questions, the Government—

PM: Yeah, look, a good question. We've looked over the time frames of every royal commission. They have all taken longer than 12 months, so the timing for this is based on two simple facts. We've said we wanted to wait until the immediate response of COVID was changing, so that's why we're announcing it now, but it will take longer than 12 months. No royal commission has been shorter than that, and that's why you see it tipping over into the aftermath. My hope is that on that very tight turnaround, the royal commission is still able to report. Keep in mind that once we issue them—and they're independent—you know, it is then over to those individual panellists to report back.

Media: And the question on behalf of the Iranian Kiwi community: why are you not adding the Islamic Revolutionary Guard to the terror list, despite the cross-party petition?

PM: I've seen the request and I hear—actually, the issue of who is designated as a terrorist entity is a simple question of whether or not that entity meets the criteria that is very clearly set out. It is not just a judgment call. There is a very clear set that we can be judicially reviewed against, and so it has to go through a legal process to see whether or not that threshold is met. That does not mean that the activities of that organisation we either consider to be responsible or permissible; it's simply whether or not it meets the legal threshold. I will make sure that we get back with a formal response to those parties who have signed that petition. I take the request seriously, but it's not a judgment call for politicians; it's an assessment against a piece of law.

Media: Prime Minister, just a clarification on the royal commission, just to answer my question: am I right to use the logic you applied to monetary policy to something like the borders and that you won't be reviewing every border opening; you'll be reviewing more broadly the settings as opposed to—

PM: Yeah. So, for instance, we used a regional boundary—you know, was it a good idea to have regional borders rather than: should the regional border have changed on X or Y date? So that's another example.

Media: Got it.

PM: Yeah.

Media: My question is actually about Hamilton West.

PM: Oh, sure.

Media: Do you think you are going to win by—what's a pass score for Labour? You've called yourself the underdog. I think most people would think you're up against it. What are your expectations?

PM: Oh, so I won't—I'm not going to hedge bets on outcomes. One thing that I think will be quite determinative will simply be turnout. I was just looking before this press conference at some of the numbers that were released at 2 o'clock this afternoon. Turnout at this point relative to the Tauranga by-election—which, again, turnout was low then—is lower still. There's a job for everyone to do to encourage those who are part of this by-election to make sure they go and exercise their vote and their democratic right in choosing who their candidate is.

Media: Shouldn't it be easier for Labour to mobilise its army of red-shirted supporters and get everyone out there, do you think?

PM: I think it's—and I won't quote any research behind this, but I think it's a generally accepted principle that often those who tend to be progressive voters—turnout often is lesser, and so I don't think it's fair to say that there's a natural advantage there.

I might just—I'll just correct myself very quickly on the duration of inquiries. There was only one under a year. It wasn't a royal commission, though; it was the Government Inquiry into Mental Health and Addiction, which was 10 months. Every other royal commission that I've got in recent times, mosque attacks, State abuse, and so on—the Future of Local Government was two years—were all more than a year.

Yeah, Luke.

Media: Will there be time for there to be any sort of draft or interim report, or would you like the royal commission to deliver a draft or interim report prior to next year's election?

PM: That has been used previously. Our view was because here we have what would be considered a reasonably tight time frame, we've just left a final report, and I think another reason for that is we have had also 75 reviews of the COVID response and 1,639 recommendations across those reviews. So some might argue that we've had a number of interims, and now's the time to get on with the final.

Media: How much will this royal commission inquiry cost?

PM: At the moment, we're looking, roughly, across—based on what we've seen for others, it's around \$15 million, and that sits broadly in keeping with the cost of many others. The mosque attacks came in at \$14 million, for instance.

Media: Just to complete another thing, have you sort of sussed a time when Volodymyr Zelenskyy is going to be addressing Parliament yet?

PM: No, not yet, as I believe—I believe Business Committee is still working through some of the finer details there.

Yeah, I might come in and just start wrapping in here, and these two.

Media: So in terms of the Treaty balancing, will 50 percent of that inquiry be made up of the Te Ao Māori perspective and how they found your Government strategy?

PM: We haven't been so prescriptive as to designate to the panel the makeup of the report, the proportionality of the report, but we have been specific on our expectation of it reporting specifically on the response's impact on Māori.

Media: How much of the detail will be focused on hapori Māori and Te Ao Māori, Minister?

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: The commission is independent and it can get that balance as it chooses to see fit. It's clear in the terms of reference that it's a very important component of it, not just in terms of considering Māori as an important group for receipt of service but also from the Treaty of Waitangi perspective in terms of Government decisions.

Media: Considering that Māori were very bitterly disappointed in the strategy roll-out and if they didn't go and implement their own strategy it would have been a lot worse for us. So is there some expectation that there will be an emphasis on how we perceived your strategy?

PM: Well, I think the fact that as we've said, there is a very clear stipulation in the terms of reference that we have an expectation that the panel report to us on the interests of Māori in the context of the pandemic. We want to hear about the pandemic impact and response on Māori. Now it's over to the royal commission as to how they do that and what, of course, they report on. Last question for your birthday. Happy birthday, Jason.

Media: Thanks. Should I wait for you to start singing, or should I just get on with it?

PM: Absolutely not.

Media: Not to pre-empt our good friends at TVNZ, but how well served do you think that the New Zealand constituency is by the Labour Party?

PM: How well-served do we think—

Media: How is Labour doing?

PM: You want me to generally on this podium give you an assessment of how the Labour Party—

Media: Fine. How do you think National's doing?

PM: Ha, ha! Oh, I see what you're trying to do, because you've seen the advertising that TVNZ has a poll tonight.

Look, I'll give you my response to where we are at in this point in time. There is no question that right now we are, as a country, going through some very particular issues that rightly and understandably are of great concern to voters. Two quick examples, of course, are the economic headwinds that we're feeling as a trading nation that is affected by our international environment, and of course we have had a spate of criminal offending that has impacted on people's lives. Our job is to manage those events when New Zealanders experience them. That's why we released the largest crime prevention package that I've seen in memory, alongside, for instance, our record investment in police. It's why, for instance, we're focused on keeping debt down, reducing Government spending, increasing support for our exporters as those economic headwinds come our way. We're a Government, unfortunately, with experience in supporting New Zealand through crises; whether or not it's health or economic, that's what we have experience in and that's what we're focused on.

Media: One quick question of the Minister—a clarifying question.

PM: And then we'll finish.

Media: Just going back to what's in and out of the review, the impact or the effectiveness of a lockdown in general is in there, but do individual lockdowns and the length of lockdowns—say, the Auckland lockdown that went on for three months—will that be assessed as either—

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: All of those things about how tools were used, of course that's part of evaluating them. Whether we're going to say it was the right time to do it at four o'clock on this particular date and whether those regional boundaries—are really good examples—of should it have been here or there; you know, those sorts of decisions—

PM: And we'll also be able to take into account if you are using lockdown as a tool, for instance, how that is used if you see, for instance, changes in the virus. So those are the kinds of things that they will be able to discuss and look at. We just don't want them hampered by looking at individual decisions on individual dates because obviously we've had 75 reviews that traverse many of those issues.

Media: I guess that one particular example—that three-month Auckland lockdown—will it look at when that could have been lifted earlier or will it be able to make recommendations on the length of it, for instance?

PM: Yeah, they've been asked to look generally at tools like lockdowns and their use and their impact, so obviously that gives relatively wide scope. But I think issues around, you

know, should there have been a one-day extension here or a three-day extension here, that's a different story. But the issue of lockdown—absolutely.

Thanks, everyone.

conclusion of press conference