

**POST-CABINET PRESS CONFERENCE: TUESDAY, 11 APRIL 2023  
HANSARD TRANSCRIPT**

**PM:** Good afternoon, everybody. I hope you all had a good Easter break.

Growing our health workforce and addressing longstanding health workforce pressures has been a priority for the Government. We're making much-needed changes to the way our health system is set up and operates, and it's vital that we've got sufficient qualified people to deliver our record health investments and improve access to quality healthcare for New Zealanders. Since we've been in Government, we've made significant progress in growing the number of doctors and nurses in our workforce. We're doubling the number of funded places on the nurse practitioner training programme to 100 places, and increasing the number of GPs being trained a year to 300, and that's due to kick in by 2026. The scheme to bond rural health professionals is showing success, with more than 500 applicants since last year, and we've got a record number of Hauora Māori Scholarships, with 756 people in professional health training.

But despite this progress that we've been making and the strong focus that we've had on pay equity and lifting incomes for health workers across the board, we acknowledge more needs to be done, and that does include attracting more skills from overseas. We know that the world is currently facing a global health-worker shortage, so it is vital that New Zealand's immigration settings are not seen as an unnecessary barrier to health workers wanting to make a life here in New Zealand.

We've been working hard to tip the balance further our way. Last December, the Government signalled we would take a wider approach to the Green List for the health sector. And since then, the Minister of Health has extensively canvassed the views of the sector. The changes I'm announcing today reflect that feedback.

Cabinet has agreed to add 32 new health sector roles to the Green List. Cabinet's also agreed that 48 Green List health roles, including roles already on the Green List, will be on the straight to residence pathway. The new roles include enrolled nurses, nurse practitioners, dentists, dental technicians, MRI scanning technologists, optometrists, and pharmacists. They'll join the likes of midwives and registered nurses, who were moved to the Green List straight to residence pathway in December. Since that decision was taken, we've received 3,600 health sector applications, including 1,400 nurses, 200 doctors and other specialists, and 95 GPs. In the same period, we've seen nearly 3,000 health professionals arriving in the country.

These settings are highly competitive globally and send a strong signal to health workers internationally that we are serious in rolling out the welcome mat. We know that moving countries is one of the biggest decisions anyone can make in their lives and in the lives of their families. With these changes, the aim is to provide additional certainty when they're making those decisions, that they'll be able to create a permanent home and great life here in New Zealand. And we're moving quickly. While it's clear that the news will take time to spread, the changes will start to apply in just seven weeks' time, from 29 May.

I can also announce today some further changes to immigration settings to help ease pressure in the transport sector. In a similar way to decisions last December, when international bus and truck drivers were offered a time-limited residence pathway through an agreement with the transport sector, boat skippers and deckhands are also being added to that agreement. Our seaside cities' ferries form an essential part of the public transport system, so it's critical that ferry service operators have access to the workers to enhance the reliability of these services. This was highlighted most recently with coastal shipping providing an important lifeline to the East Coast regions affected by Cyclone Gabrielle. They're critical to help keep supply lines running. The market rate for skippers is already above the median wage. Operators will need to continue to pay migrant-worker skippers the market rate, and migrant-worker deckhands will need to be paid at least the median wage.

Over the coming weeks, Immigration will be working with the sector to finalise the details, with the same expectation that the scheme will start from late May.

Finally, today, in other news, I can announce a minor reshuffle of Cabinet. Willow-Jean Prime will be joining the Cabinet, meaning, for the first time in New Zealand's history, half of the people sitting around the Cabinet table will be women.

The economic development portfolio will be picked up by Barbara Edmonds, and the forestry portfolio will be picked up by Peeni Henare. Meka Whaitiri will continue in her role coordinating the cyclone recovery efforts in the Hawke's Bay.

I'm also pleased to announce that I intend to appoint Rachel Brooking as a Minister outside of the Cabinet. She'll pick up the oceans and fisheries portfolio, and associate roles in environment and in immigration.

Now happy to open it up for questions.

**Media:** What's taken you so long to make those immigration changes? Why are we so slow to the game every single time we try and make an immigration change?

**PM:** We foreshadowed these decisions back in December. We've worked through a process with the sector to identify the roles where they most need the additional support and where this extra pathway can be the most useful, bearing in mind that a number of jobs can already come into the country through other pathways that are already available, and have been for some time.

**Media:** The health worker shortage has not blind-sided you as of yesterday; this has been going on for a long time now. What has taken you so long?

**PM:** And look, we've continued to keep it under review and you will have seen, over the last year, that we've continued to make changes.

**Media:** Prime Minister, what's your view of the ads promoting online sports betting? There's been a bit of problems with that recently.

**PM:** Yeah, ultimately, those are matter for the regulatory agencies to look into. We've got some clear laws around what they can and can't do, and so, you know, ultimately, the regulatory agencies will need to follow up on that.

**Media:** Do you think that the consumers need more protections against, you know, misleading ads, for example?

**PM:** I wouldn't rule out more work in that space. We know that, you know, the world has changed, and the whole issue of online gambling has changed significantly, and that is something where we will need to make sure our regulatory settings are moving to keep up with that.

**Media:** You considered the COVID settings today. Are they staying the same or are you going to change them?

**PM:** Oh, sorry; I didn't cover that one in my announcement. Yes, indeed. So the COVID-19 settings will remain the same for the next two months, and then we will consider them again within the next two months, and further decisions will follow on that. We've asked specifically for further advice on the issue of testing to return to work, so people may not need to isolate for that full period. We'll consider that with the next round of potential changes.

**Media:** Why? Why are they staying the same?

**PM:** Look, it's a difficult balancing act, and I do want to acknowledge that we had to weigh a number of things quite carefully. At the moment, the isolation period serves not just to relieve pressure on the health system and result in fewer people being infected, but, actually, there is a labour market incentive for this as well; people with COVID-19 going to work potentially infect more people, and more people end up being off work sick as well. We see that in some sectors particularly. So if we look at some of the biggest pressure that

we faced in the education system last year, that resulted in a number of teachers getting COVID-19, being off work; some schools not able, then, to offer their full range of classes; kids being rostered home and parents having to stay home to look after them. So we have to weigh up all of those factors in making these decisions.

**Media:** Aside from China, what other countries have a mandatory isolation period as long as ours?

**PM:** Sorry, I don't have that information.

**Media:** But I guess the point is: are we becoming an outlier compared to the rest world?

**PM:** We do consider those matters. I don't have the exact list in front of me at the moment but, certainly, we are heading towards a point where COVID-19 will become normal. I would expect, certainly at the latest, by the end of the winter we'll be into that zone. You will have seen us progressively removing COVID-19 restrictions. There are actually only a couple left. One is the mandatory isolation for people who have COVID, and the use of face coverings in health settings. Over than that, pretty much all of the other restrictions have gone now, and that's happened over a period of time. We are kind of moving to that era where COVID-19 will just be another one of those things that the health system manages.

**Media:** [*Inaudible*]

**PM:** I'll come to that.

**Media:** Does that mean no mandatory isolation period after winter?

**PM:** We consider it on a rolling basis, but certainly my expectation is that we will reach the point where there isn't a mandatory isolation period.

**Media:** On another matter, have you been invited to or will you go to a NATO meeting in Lithuania, I believe it is, in July?

**PM:** I have been invited; haven't made a decision on that yet. As I've indicated a couple of times before, there've been a number of, you know, international commitments or international invitations, international opportunities that I am weighing up at the moment. I hope within the next week to be able to announce a travel programme. As I've indicated, it's a big year domestically in New Zealand, including the fact that there's another event here in October that I have an interest in, and so my international travel programme won't be massive, and so I'm just working my way through that to make sure we get the balance right. Because I also did indicate that there are some strategically important things for New Zealand: trade—and we've got two reasonably significant trade agreements where we're aiming to get them over the final hurdles this year, and so that's something that we weigh up in that, and I should be able to, in the next week or so, provide more details on that.

**Media:** Why is it important that New Zealand draw closer to NATO at this time?

**PM:** Look, I think we have to acknowledge that NATO plays a very important role in world security. We remain—as I've always said—independent in our foreign policy, and that will continue to be the case, but we will continue to work with like-minded countries. If you look at the situation in Ukraine, for example, we have a lot in common with members of NATO when it comes to our position on that particular conflict.

**Media:** And will there be more contribution to NATO efforts in the Ukraine war, particularly in light of, you know, the expected spring offensive?

**PM:** Yeah, look, I'm not announcing anything today, but New Zealand remains very supportive of Ukraine. We still believe, and continue to believe that the war is unjust; it's an illegal invasion, and we continue to maintain the position that Russia should withdraw its aggression, and we'll continue to support Ukraine. I haven't got any specific announcements on that today though.

**Media:** Just going back to COVID, is education—because obviously you've used that example every time you've been asked about the changes, the school example. Is education a motivation for you not to make any changes at the moment because basically you're concerned about the disruption that has been caused over the last however many years now to children's learning, that that is the main motivation for you not wanting to loosen up?

**PM:** No, it's not. I mean, I guess it was sort of a pre-emptive answer to a number of questions, which is if you're keeping all these restrictions in place, what about the labour market considerations, and I would like to acknowledge that that goes both ways.

**Media:** What about the risk of a measles outbreak? Has that factored into your decision-making?

**PM:** The COVID-19 rules require us to consider COVID-19, and that's what we've done.

**Media:** How much did the dilapidated state of our health system weigh into that decision, and has your Government done enough to actually build up the health system so that it's ready to deal with winter flu seasons and COVID seasons as just run of the mill stuff?

**PM:** Pressure on the health system is absolutely a factor that we consider in making decisions around COVID-19—it always has been—but we will have to get to the point where the health system will need to be able to cope with COVID-19 as part of every other illness that the health system copes with.

**Media:** Why are we not there already? What have you done?

**PM:** Well, as I've just indicated, we've had a whole programme of work around increasing the capacity of the health system, and that includes the workforce, but we have to acknowledge that every health system around the globe has been struggling with COVID-19; it's still one of the major causes of admission.

**Media:** But barely anyone else has an isolation requirement.

**PM:** Well, I can only speak to New Zealand.

**Media:** What are The Disinformation Project's current links to the DPMC, and also what Government funding, in any form, does The Disinformation Project receive; does it still provide advice or have links to any Government departments or agencies?

**PM:** My understanding is that The Disinformation Project is not currently getting any funding from DPMC, that they were contracted to provide some analysis over the last couple of years, particularly related to COVID-19 disinformation.

**Media:** And they had no links to any Government departments or Government agencies now, by way of funding or anything else?

**PM:** I couldn't give you a detailed answer on every Government agency, but DPMC being the one that I'm responsible for, certainly, the advice I've got is that they are not receiving any funding from them.

**Media:** The changes you've sort of announced today sort of just amount to an opening of the door for a certain number of sectors. When are you going to get serious about sweeteners or offerings that might actually entice people to New Zealand in this global sort of war for talent?

**PM:** Yeah, I mean, ultimately, the Government will continue to work with the health sector—the biggest provider being Te Whatu Ora—to look at how we can make sure we're encouraging people to come to New Zealand. As you just seen through the numbers that I went through though, there is a strong interest in moving to New Zealand. New Zealand is a desirable place, but we've got to make sure that our immigration settings are competitive with what other countries are offering. This certainly makes us very competitive in terms of

the immigration pathway, and then we'll continue to work with health providers around how they make sure they are providing attractive offerings to people to want to come here.

**Media:** Did Cabinet consider any revenue measures today as part of its Budget deliberations?

**PM:** Nice try. You'll see the Budget in due course.

**Media:** Are revenue changes still on the table as part of the Budget? You've alluded earlier in the year to the fact that they were.

**PM:** That's also a very admirable try. I'm not going to announce any details of the Budget today.

**Media:** And are you still committed to the RMA legislative timetable, getting both pieces of legislation passed by the end of the year? The criticism that's emerged in the last couple of weeks hasn't caused you to waver from that?

**PM:** No, the Government is still intending to progress those.

**Media:** We've heard through the *Herald*, I think, with Michael Neilson, Willie Jackson said that you've been meeting with the Māori Party, or have had quite a few talks with them. Can you just elaborate on what that's about? Is it just a "welcome to my prime ministership"? Are you talking more about politics?

**PM:** Yeah, they asked to meet with me not long after I became Prime Minister. I've worked with both of them previously, and I've had a good working relationship with both of them in my previous role. It was largely a kind of a meet and greet, and an acknowledgment of the fact that we can work together in this term of Parliament. They've asked to sort of be kept informed of legislative developments, particularly in the Māori space, and I've indicated that we're happy to do that. It didn't go beyond this term of Parliament, of course; that's a matter for post-election.

**Media:** Are you talking about running dead in electorates or anything like that?

**PM:** No. We didn't discuss anything of that nature.

**Media:** On the three waters reforms, will the four-entity model become a 10-entity model?

**PM:** You can expect to have some further announcements on that imminently. I'm not making those announcements today.

**Media:** It's been determined, has it, what the shape of it will be?

**PM:** As I've indicated, you can expect some announcements shortly.

**Media:** On the COVID decisions, you've outlined that, you know, the benefit of removing the isolation period might not be as significant for the labour market as people might think. But what are the reasons that made you want to keep the isolation period in place? What are the benefits of having it right now?

**PM:** Yeah, ultimately, it slows the spread of COVID-19, and COVID-19 is still one of the major causes of people getting seriously ill in New Zealand at the moment, and so slowing that and resulting in having fewer people getting seriously ill is still the objective.

**Media:** And then you spoke about, after winter, hopefully the health system being able to manage COVID as a normal disease. Do you think the health system will be dramatically better prepared in six months' time than it is right now for that?

**PM:** It's an ongoing process. You know, the health system's better prepared now than it was three years ago, and it will continue to improve.

**Media:** Is the health system better now than it was three years ago?

**PM:** Yes, I believe that it is, and actually—

**Media:** How? In what way?

**PM:** Well, actually, one of the things that's made a massive difference is the advance of science. Vaccination has played a significant role in the way we've been able to combat COVID-19.

**Media:** There are people waiting in ambulances for attention in emergency clinics; there are 12-hour wait times at emergency departments. How is the health system better now than three years ago?

**PM:** One of the challenges that the health system faces is a workforce shortage, and you've just seen me making an announcement on one of the things that we can do to help with that.

**Media:** Does the leak of the papers out of the Pentagon around the Ukraine war effort and other matters—I mean, does that have any implications for New Zealand, given we contribute to the US intelligence-gathering effort?

**PM:** I've not had any advice to that effect so far. There's a process that we go through when something like this happens to identify whether there are any issues that would be of concern to New Zealand, and I'll get advice on that in due course.

**Media:** Has New Zealand been briefed, though, by the US?

**PM:** At an officials level, there will be conversations happening, as you would imagine. Nothing has come to me yet at this point.

**Media:** What do you mean by "a process"? What involvement do we have in this?

**PM:** There's a process—I don't want to get into all of the details of it, but there's a process at an officials level, where they'll be comparing notes about exactly what the information is that has been released and what, if anything, in there would be of concern to New Zealand. That process needs a little bit of time to run its course, and then, in due course, I would be notified if there was an area of concern for New Zealand.

**Media:** What are the possible concerns, as you understand them?

**PM:** As I've indicated, I'm not going to speculate on that.

**Media:** Just back on your comments to Julian Wilcox in relation to three waters, and you made mention of the fact that Nanaia Mahuta had been left to kind of carry that load and had copped a lot of flak as a result, because the Government hadn't got in her. Are you concerned that that is going to continue with whatever the next steps are, and you need to wrap full Government ministerial support in terms of the messaging around Kieran McAnulty as well, or do you think it was just specific and personal to Nanaia?

**PM:** I think it was a combination of both. So I think you all see the Government will be taking more of a team approach to communicating what we are doing around the future of water infrastructure. In terms of Nanaia Mahuta, I think that there were some really unfortunate elements of personalisation in that that Nanaia ended up having to deal with, largely by herself. I think we probably should have provided more support to her through that. We're reflecting critically on that. I have made that observation to her as well. I think it was really unfortunate that she ended up copping the level of disgusting abuse that she did during that period.

**Media:** Are there other programmes or areas of work that you're still working on this term that might fall into that camp as well, where there might be particular Ministers who, I guess, suffer the brunt that, you know, you're mindful of, I guess?

**PM:** I think the observation here is that all of the decisions we make as a Government are collective decisions. That's the nature of the Cabinet system of government, and so we all need to make sure that we are supporting one another, and I think that probably we didn't support Nanaia Mahuta as much as we should have in the conversation around water infrastructure.

**Media:** Because some will read that as a criticism of Jacinda Ardern's leadership and that she didn't support her.

**PM:** No. It isn't.

**Media:** Do you think it's a collective responsibility?

**PM:** It's a collective reflection.

**Media:** Why will you no longer call it the three waters reforms?

**PM:** Because fundamentally, it's about water infrastructure and it's about making sure that we're dealing with the country's water infrastructure deficit. Let's call it what it is; it's about making sure we have affordable water infrastructure improvements. There is a massive bill coming down the pipeline, if you'll excuse the pun, in terms of upgrading our water infrastructure. That's what these reforms are about.

**Media:** But you've been calling it three waters reforms for years. I mean, it's all over the DIA website. Why change the name now?

**PM:** Because I think it's a term that's become somewhat confused.

**Media:** So three waters is no longer?

**PM:** Water infrastructure is what we're talking about.

**Media:** Affordable water infrastructure reform—that rolls off the tongue.

**Media:** What do you make of Emmanuel Macron's remarks regarding keeping Europe's nose out of any conflict over Taiwan?

**PM:** Ultimately, that's a decision for them. I'm not going to provide an ongoing commentary on comments that other leaders make on other countries.

**Media:** Your defence Minister Andrew Little's talked about France's renewed interest in the Indo-Pacific. Now it appears that the French President wants them to stay out of the Indo-Pacific. They seem to be quite changeable on that issue. Would you like them in or out?

**Media:** I think, you know, New Zealand has a very strong interest in the Indo-Pacific, and we welcome open dialogue with other like-minded countries. We work closely on a range of international issues with France and I'm sure we'll continue to do so, and more broadly with the European Union.

**Media:** When do you anticipate coming to a decision one way or the other on AUKUS pillar two?

**PM:** There's a process that we'll need to go through in the event that we need to do that, to have those conversations. We haven't done that.

**Media:** Other than changing the name, or, effectively, rebranding three waters as something else, is there substantive change in that policy?

**PM:** There will be significant change in that policy but I'm not announcing that today.

**Media:** Apart from that, are there other reprioritisations to come, apart from the reform formerly known as three waters?

**PM:** As I indicated, I think, when I made the last set of reprioritisation decisions, the next big reprioritisation process is during the Budget. Every year there's a reprioritisation process as part of the Budget, but then it becomes more of a business-as-usual reprioritisation process. Every year, Governments go through and reprioritise, and I think in the current economic environment we're in at the moment, there is even more imperative to do that than normal. We've got to be making sure that we are directing our resources and our energy to where they are most needed.

**Media:** So there may be more things that are thrown on the bonfire as part of the Budget process?

**Media:** It will be more of a business-as-usual approach. As I said, we do reprioritisation every Budget round, and there will certainly be reprioritisation in this one.

**Media:** Prime Minister, a recent report from Treasury and the Ministry for the Environment about the cost of climate change, essentially, and it mentions to meet the 2030 targets could cost up to \$24 billion to purchase offshore carbon credits. What is your take on that and, essentially, can New Zealand afford that?

**PM:** Look, at this point there's still a lot of moving parts in terms of our first Budget period and we're working through those at the moment. Yes, we've made some policy changes, for example, around the biofuels obligation, but we've also had some upside as well, including the fact that we've had a much higher uptake of electric vehicles than we had anticipated when we set those initial Budgets. So we're working through that at the moment in terms of reconciling where we think we're going to get to in this first Budget period. And then we've got options as to how we deal with that in the event that we don't hit that, including rolling that forward into the next Budget period, purchasing offshore—those are all options that we can work through in due course.

**Media:** So you don't think that that bill will be that high?

**PM:** As I've indicated, there are some other things that at the moment aren't considered in that analysis, including the fact that we've got other things—yes, we've done some things that—biofuels being the main one that has had an impact on the Budget, but there are also some upside things as well, including faster uptake of EV, and so on.

**Media:** What is the significance of a 50:50 gender split in Cabinet?

**PM:** I think it means that we're more closely representing the population.

**Media:** Is it disappointing it's taken this long?

**PM:** I think it's a good milestone to achieve. You know, we achieved 50:50 representation in Parliament in this parliamentary term—I think that's a very welcome thing—and now we have that around the Cabinet table as well. And in fact, overall, there are more women in the executive than there are men, if you count the Ministers outside of Cabinet as well.

**Media:** Just to further that point, why did you pick Willow-Jean to come into Cabinet? What skills does she bring, in your eyes?

**PM:** If you look at the portfolios that Willow-Jean currently holds—including relatively hefty health delegations, being the Minister of Conservation—it was a combination of her skills as a person and the portfolios that she currently holds. Willow's got up to speed very quickly with the new portfolios that I gave her when I did the reshuffle—you know, it feels like a lot longer ago, but it was only a couple of months ago. I'm confident that she'll be a very active contributor around the Cabinet table. I feel fortunate in the sense that there are a lot of choices, there are a lot of options there.

**Media:** Has she read the *Cabinet Manual*?

**PM:** I'm confident that all Ministers are making themselves well familiar with the requirements of the *Cabinet Manual*.

**Media:** Was the gender balance part of your consideration in choosing, you know, around the reshuffle?

**PM:** I was going to say I chose the best person for the job; that's always difficult because there are a number of other Ministers and MPs outside of Cabinet who would also like to have that opportunity. But it was not the factor that tipped it in favour of one person or another.

**Media:** Were you considering it, though?



**PM:** Clearly, I think it's nice to have a Cabinet balance that reflects the population.

**Media:** How concerned is New Zealand about the latest Chinese military drills around Taiwanese territory, and what can be done to deescalate the situation in the Strait?

**PM:** We are concerned about escalating tensions in the Strait, and we continue to maintain the position that we would prefer that there was a diplomatic solution to those escalating tensions.

**Media:** Can New Zealand play any role in that? Is that something you're looking at?

**PM:** I guess I would say, you know, if there's a role that we can play diplomatically, then that's something that New Zealand will always do its part diplomatically. But, ultimately, that's the course of action that we would prefer to see happen.

Last couple of questions.

**Media:** You spoke this morning about some of the environment or climate change policies coming in nine months. Does that mean it's going to be introduced to Parliament after the election?

**PM:** Sorry, what was your question?

**Media:** On the climate adaptation bill, you were talking about some of the policies, this morning on *Breakfast*, coming in in nine months—"it will be introduced within nine months."

**PM:** Sorry, I don't recall the particular comment that I might have made in that regard.

**Media:** It was on the climate adaptation bill. When would you like that to be introduced to Parliament?

**PM:** Look, I haven't got a specific date on that. I think the nine months that I was referring to this morning was the length of time it took between the September earthquakes in Canterbury and first red-zoning decisions. So that was a nine-month period. Obviously, if we can make decisions around what happens with land use following the cyclone in a faster timetable than that, then we'll seek to do that. I guess what I was wanting to do is illustrate that these are not overnight processes, that it will take some time to work through those options.

**Media:** What do you say to people—probably, particularly business owners—that are frustrated that you've kept the seven-day isolation rule, and what kind of certainty can you give them, heading into the future, of when that will no longer be the case, when they can start staffing without factoring in the seven-day isolation rule?

**PM:** We keep this under regular review. As I've indicated, we'll be reviewing it again within two months. So they can certainly expect to hear more from us during that time period.

All right. Thanks, everybody.

**conclusion of press conference**