

POST-CABINET PRESS CONFERENCE: TUESDAY, 6 JUNE 2023
HANSARD TRANSCRIPT

PM: Good afternoon, everybody, and welcome to the shorter parliamentary week. I hope everybody had the opportunity to celebrate the first public holiday marking King Charles. I have Dr Verrall with me today because we're going to talk about vaping.

Now, over the past couple of weeks, I've indicated that the Government's been taking a close look at issues around vaping. While vaping can be a useful tool as part of our smoking cessation efforts, we have also clearly heard concerns about the growing uptake of vaping amongst younger New Zealanders. We've heard from parents, from other family members, and from teachers and principals, all of whom are concerned at the prospect that a lifelong bad habit is becoming established for many at a young age.

Today, we are responding to those concerns with changes in four key areas. All of them are practical, sensible, and achievable. The first is a crackdown on disposable vapes, also known as single-use vapes. From August this year, all vaping devices sold in New Zealand will need to have removable batteries, so as to improve their safety. The upshot of that is that it will effectively curtail the availability of much cheaper single-use vapes that are popular amongst young people, and it will make it more difficult for them to start and a real hassle for them to continue.

The second step is to stop new vape shops setting up near schools and marae. We want vapes as far away from the minds and reach of young people as possible, so any locations within 300 metres of schools and marae will be off limits. The third is to tighten up on product descriptions. Words that appear to be designed to appeal to young people—like candy floss—won't be allowed, and they'll need to be replaced with more generic and bland terminology. Finally, reusable vapes must have child safety mechanisms that would, for example, require a number of steps to activate them, something that a young person would have more difficulty doing.

These changes will be phased in over the next six months to give the industry time to adjust to the new law. The new regulations build on protections that the Government introduced back in 2020 that included banning sales to under-18s and prohibiting vape advertising and sponsorship. There is a balance to be struck here when it comes to vaping. It's one thing to make it expensive and difficult for young people to start and carry on vaping, which is what these actions are designed to do. It's another that would—would be to do something that gets in the way of adults who are using vaping as an alternative to smoking, something that we support.

These changes draw a clear distinction between the two. Vaping has played an important role in the record reduction of New Zealanders smoking over the last few years. Our smoking rate is half of what it was 10 years ago, with the number of people smoking falling by 56,000 people in the last year alone. We're making good progress when it comes to tackling smoking. What we don't want that to be replaced with is a problem around young people vaping.

So, to the week ahead. Tomorrow I will be back here in Wellington. I'm looking forward to welcoming the Fiji Prime Minister, Rabuka, to Wellington for a bilateral, followed by a joint media conference. On Thursday and Friday, I'll be in Tairāwhiti for a two-day regional visit.

Now, we'll take vaping questions first, if that's all right, and then Dr Verrall can go and we can get into all the other topics.

Media: Just in terms of the proximity to schools, why is that only for new shops? Why will any shops that already exist near schools be able to remain there? And secondly, does that include dairies, as well, that sell vapes? Can they not set up near schools?

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: That's right. It applies to new shops from now on. Those other shops that existed did so under the law as it was at the time.

Media: And what about dairies? Can they set up near schools?

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: This applies to all of the vape shops.

Media: Will it include marae there as well, because—

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: That came through in consultation—that Māori asked for that ability to not have vape shops near marae—and so we responded to that feedback.

Media: Why not, like, sports centres and stuff like that as well, where there's going to be lots of other young people?

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: Those were the areas that came through from consultation, and just remember these are particularly targeted. The school one is particularly to address issues around young people.

Media: You said that there would be—or you plan to replace things like cotton candy or maybe strawberry or things with more generic-type phrasing. Could you just give an example about what cotton candy would be replaced with, for example?

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: It could be with “sweets” or, for example, a “strawberry doughnut” might be replaced with “berry”. So more generic names like that that restrict the ability to develop a brand that is particularly appealing to young people.

Media: Why not go further and just ban flavoured vape products altogether? They're clearly appealing to a certain demographic and it looks like you're going far with these other recommendations but not quite far enough with this one.

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: I think with this one you'll see it is yet another way in which we are stopping vape companies from developing particular brands that target young people, and the packaging will have to be quite reduced from what it is now in terms of its appeal to young people.

Media: Why the plain packaging?

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: That was, I believe, explored at an early stage, but this proposal was the one developed and consulted on.

Media: Why not plain package them?

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: Yeah, I'm aware that that has recently been proposed in Australia—I think because there is an acceptance that a range of flavours is more legitimate with vape juice than it is with tobacco.

Media: If you've identified the 300 perimeter as a risk around schools, why not just ban it altogether and say they had to close down and/or move outside of that zone?

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: Just to be clear, vaping is banned in schools, and sales of vapes to under-18s has been illegal for some time now; this is an extra measure we are doing in support of that.

Media: But why not close down the shops which are already within those perimeters?

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: Yeah, so those shops were set up under the law as it was at the time, and we feel it's legitimate that they continue. However, the most impactful thing, in terms of restricting sales to younger people, in this suite of measures, will be the other two proposals around the changes to disposable vapes, and changes to the flavours.

Media: Is that because you didn't make the law strong enough in the first place though?

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: No. It's because of the things that are trying to strike that balance around appeal to young people. Those are the proposals that had the strongest evidence that came through in the advice we received.

Media: Why not just make them prescription only? Why not go as far as that?

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: I'm aware that that's a proposal being explored in Australia. We received feedback against that from some doctors in New Zealand, but there's also—our laws have to be right for New Zealand. New Zealand has some of the most ambitious tobacco control goals in the world. If we were to put vapes—that have a legitimate role for adults quitting—behind a barrier, then those people who face the greatest barrier accessing their GP would have the greatest barrier to quitting smoking.

Media: So it's the barrier to get the prescription that would be the issue?

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: That's right, and we know many people face barriers getting to the general practitioner, and so we've had that—in terms of providing a quit tool for people, we've chosen not to put an obstacle in the way.

Media: Sorry, what was that specific feedback from doctors that meant that you didn't go down that road?

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: Yeah, I believe the chair—Bryan Betty, for example, who is the immediate past medical director of the college of general practitioners—said that recently: that putting a prescription requirement would be a step too far in terms of vape control.

Media: When you marry the vaping changes with the goal that you're trying to reach around Smokefree, how does that work? I mean once we get to—I can't remember what year it is that we are meant to be smoke-free by—but once we get to that, if there's still a whole chunk of people vaping, have we still technically reached that goal?

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: The Smokefree 2025 goal is a tobacco control goal, and let's just remember that 5,000 people a year in New Zealand die from smoking because tobacco is one of the most deadly substances we have; it contains tar and that's what causes lung cancer. Now, I'm not saying vapes are good for you, but they are far, far less harmful than tobacco.

Media: Isn't the science still, kind of, out on that? I mean, can you actually say that by 2020—what was it, 2025 you said—the Smokefree goal, if you've still got a massive chunk of the population who is vaping, can you honestly say that that's not causing significant health impacts for people?

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: The health impacts would be markedly less. There is no credible scientist out there saying vaping is anywhere near as bad as tobacco. However, it is addictive, it distracts our young people from their education and so on, and so that's why we are markedly restricting them.

Media: So do you then have to make a new goal once you've reached the Smokefree goal to get vaping out of the system? Because presumably, if you've replaced one thing with another, that's not really fixed the problem, has it?

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: I think there is a need for Government to constantly be reviewing its regulations in this area of young people and trends. Because as we've seen with vaping, where this change came up really across a period of 18 months, things do change quickly. So I can reassure you that the Smokefree goal was set entirely around tobacco because of the particular health impacts of tobacco, and while we do want to make progress on vaping, tobacco is far and away more harmful.

Media: Just on the smoking plan, are you concerned that you've been too focused on tobacco, and the tobacco industry has shifted into a completely different market and we don't have the right controls now? The horse has bolted, effectively. You've got thousands of teens addicted to nicotine, and your controls won't go far enough in terms of what Australia's done.

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: I think these are incredibly impactful measures, particularly the change on disposable vapes. And you'll notice that we've developed these changes in parallel to many of the changes that we've done with Smokefree, because we are capable of developing regulations on two issues—

Media: Why has it taken so long though?

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: Well, the tobacco industry is incredibly litigious, so we did have to go through a process of developing proposals, consulting on them, and then bringing them out after proper consideration. It is very hard to stay closely aligned with trends in young people's substance use, but we also have to go through a proper process to make sure that our regulations will stick.

Media: Minister, the latest ASH survey of year 10 students found 10 percent were vaping daily, and it's a higher rate than for adults. What kind of impact will this have on that? Is this going to basically stop the increase in young people vaping?

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: Well, we certainly hope it will stop and reverse the increase in young people vaping. I don't believe that ASH survey includes adults, but that rate of 10 percent daily vaping is too high.

Media: That was for year 10 students—10 percent of year 10 students.

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: That's right.

Media: And just on the other side too, are you worried about removing disposable vapes, which are a lot cheaper than the ones with chargeable battery packs? Less available—is that going to have an impact on people who are trying to quit smoking; who might need an immediate vape, rather than buying a pack of cigarettes?

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: Yeah, if people are trying to quit smoking they can contact Quitline and other quit-support services, to get that support that they need.

Media: Minister, just going back to the flavour names, how is that going to be regulated? Would there be a ban on certain words like "candy", for instance?

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: Just in the same way that packaging on vapes is already regulated, under regulation, and then the public health offices are able to check what's on the shelves, and where it's found to be non-compliant, they're able to make orders against those sales; those retail outlets.

Media: If you want to stop kids from vaping, are there a bunch of measures here to stop, like addiction services as well, or—

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: So all people who are addicted to nicotine—whether that's in tobacco or in vapes—are able to access help. That includes through calling the Quitline, which is free.

Media: Year 10 students to call an 0800 number?

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: Well, I talked to a lot of parents who are able to access that support in that way. Look, there are also face-to-face quit services available.

Media: Is this the perfect solution for you? I mean you're a doctor, and would you have liked to have been more transformational in this space and got rid of vapes much more broadly than where you've landed with this policy?

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: I think the most important thing we can do is get rid of a product that kills half the people who use it; that kills 5,000 New Zealanders a year. Vaping does have harms—we've talked about how it is addictive—but it is nowhere near the harms that smoke can cause. So, as a doctor, I am extremely comfortable with that.

PM: We'll do the last couple of questions on vaping, and then we'll move on.

Media: As a doctor, are you comfortable with the unknown? You spoke about the health risks before, about how tobacco is terrible, and vaping is obviously much better. But there's a huge unknown element, isn't there?

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: There is always—in health policy like this—uncertainty, and I suppose I'd say that in all areas we have to work with that uncertainty. But I don't think anyone serious is saying that a product that lacks tar—like vapes lack—could cause anywhere near the harm that tobacco causes. So I don't think the comparison is equivalent at all. However,

we acknowledge it is a problem, particularly for young people, and that's why we're acting on it.

Media: But we're talking about not just people going from smoking ciggies to vaping, from kids not smoking or vaping to vaping. So you could argue that that is quite harmful to go from not inhaling anything to them inhaling bubble gum - flavoured aerosols into your lungs.

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: Yes, and that's what we are trying to prevent with these measures.

Media: How are you going to be measuring the success of these changes?

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: So the government continues to fund the ASH survey, which surveys year 10 students each year on the use of vapes. And we also address vaping and cigarettes through the national health survey, which is an annual survey.

Media: How many new targets are set specifically relating to these changes?

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: Oh, well we certainly want to see it come down substantially, but no we haven't set a formal target.

Media: Have either of you two tried vaping?

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: No.

Media: How much did the environmental impact of disposables play into your decision to, effectively, ban them?

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: It didn't play into the policy-making decision.

Media: What did you mean by the tobacco industry being quite litigious?

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: The tobacco industry has a history of taking countries that are at the forefront of tobacco regulation to court. New Zealand is now in the forefront of global tobacco regulation.

Media: But what's been going on behind the scenes? Like in terms of this specific policy?

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: Obviously we're just announcing it today, so we'll have to wait to see if there is any response.

Media: Have the tobacco industry sent you any legal letters or legal threats whilst you've been Minister?

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: Not legal threats, no, but I think that they've been in touch with the office.

Media: Have they implied that they would litigate this with you?

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: No.

PM: OK. I might say thank you to Dr Verrall.

Media: Prime Minister, are you confident that every single one of your Ministers has appropriately declared every single one of their interests of both the Cabinet Office and the pecuniary interests register?

PM: The Cabinet Office interview process—and it is an interview process—is a relatively thorough one. The Cabinet Office will sit down with each Minister regularly—and new Ministers, obviously, relatively soon after they've been identified that they're going to be Ministers—and they'll interview them. They've got a series of questions that they'll ask them about. What are their assets—their things that they own—but they also go through other things around relationships and any potential conflicts that are there, and they put together a relatively comprehensive list. There will always be conflicts in a small country like New Zealand; it's a question of how well-managed those conflicts are. So the fact that a family member, for example, works in the Public Service. Yes, that can give rise to a conflict; doesn't mean that it's necessarily a show-stopper, as long as there are appropriate mitigations in

place and appropriate management in place. Similarly, peoples' assets. People will own a variety of different assets, potentially. As long as there's transparency around that and good management around that, it doesn't necessarily need to be a problem.

Media: You went incredibly hard on John Key around the Tranz Rail shares. Do you regret that?

PM: No.

Media: Why not?

PM: Because I think transparency around this is important. And I'd note that, actually, since that, there's been a significant increase in transparency. One of the things that I think is frustrating about the events of the last couple of days is that I think a lot of this would have been avoided through better transparency. So clearly that's something that Michael Wood will take some time to work through.

Media: Have you gone back to all of your Ministers and MPs, and told them to make sure their Is are dotted, Ts are crossed on every single interest they hold?

PM: I did that, actually, earlier in the year when this issue arose the first time. I'm disappointed that that clearly has not been actioned at the time.

Media: Sorry, you already reminded them to and Michael Wood didn't pick this up?

PM: I'm already on record as saying that I have reminded everybody of that at the time.

Media: You must be furious because this has created another storm through another one of your Ministers, and now them having to step back. I mean, it makes your leadership look shaky.

PM: I am disappointed.

Media: Well, I mean, surely you're a bit more than disappointed? We're talking about this yet again.

PM: I am disappointed, and I've certainly expressed my disappointment to Michael Wood.

Media: What have you specifically asked Michael Wood? He's said publicly that he moved to sell his shares but they didn't get sold for whatever reason. What specifically have you asked him about this, because it doesn't seem a very difficult thing to do to sell some shares?

PM: So to be honest, I'm not really sure of the explanation there. I'm not sure that Michael himself even has a really good explanation for that. It would simply be one of those life admin tasks that he doesn't seem to have gotten around to. I don't think that that's acceptable. Having indicated back in 2020 that he was intending to dispose of them, he should have done that.

Media: You said that he said to the Cabinet Office a number of times that he was going to dispose of them.

PM: That's correct.

Media: So, I'm sorry, I just can't get my head around how he has promised to you or the Cabinet Office a number of times that he's going to sell his shares, and then it just slips his mind?

PM: That's a question for him.

Media: What explanation did he give you—did he say that it'd slipped his mind or what explanation did he give for it?

PM: He went through the conversations that he'd had with the person who sells the shares—or, you know, manages the trust or manages those assets on his behalf—and indicated that the shares had not been sold.

Media: What does he need to do to return to the job? What are the hoops he needs to—

PM: Well clearly he needs to sell the shares, but also needs to make sure that issues around his pecuniary interests have been dealt with. So I understand he's having a conversation with the registrar of pecuniary interests around that and what may need to happen there. And if anything further arises from those conversations, then clearly that will need to be addressed as well.

Media: And when that's been cleared up, he's back as transport Minister?

PM: If nothing further arises in that area during the process of doing that, then, yes.

Media: Are you confident that in the year that he was transport Minister with the aviation delegation—a little over a year—are you confident that he made no significant—well, no decisions that related to Auckland Airport that he would've been conflicted on?

PM: Obviously we'll double-check that as well. But based on the sort of rapid check that's been done so far, yes. But we'll always make sure that we do that thoroughly too.

Media: Are there trust issues here? Because this feels very déjà vu in that you had conversations with Stuart Nash and then you had to keep coming back and the story changed. You're saying now that he will be reinstated as transport Minister provided nothing else comes to light. I mean, do you actually trust that Michael Wood's told you the full story here?

PM: Yes, I do. Having said that, it's one of those things where I'm not sure that there really is an adequate explanation for something like this. It's clearly been on his to-do list and he hasn't done it, and that's not OK. He should have done it.

Media: With your remarks before, you said that this issue wouldn't have come up if there had been greater transparency. Can you just clarify which transparency you're talking about? Are you talking about your office letting you know sooner?

PM: No, sorry; I probably should've been clearer there. Michael should have declared these shares on his register of pecuniary interests, right the way through his time as a member of Parliament, regardless of whether they're held in trust or not. There is one exception to that, which is if they're held in a managed fund where you don't have any control over what the fund is investing in, then it doesn't have to be declared. KiwiSaver, for example, is a form of managed fund. We don't know what, necessarily—on a day-to-day basis—our KiwiSaver funds may own. It wouldn't be reasonable to expect every one of those to be declared, but where you know and where you have a control over what is and isn't sold—and bought and sold—then it should be declared, and I think the rules around that are clear and he should have declared that. So that is now a matter that he's working through with the registrar.

Media: And what about when you've received information? Because again, looking back on the Stuart Nash situation—while I appreciate it was Jacinda Ardern in office at the time—it was a situation where red flags were there, they weren't identified; red flags were there on Friday, you found out about it last night. Are you comfortable that the people that you're relying on to advise you and identify red flags are actually up to the job?

PM: Yes, I am. Obviously I would've preferred that they told me on Friday. They told me last night, and I would've preferred—but, look, at the end of the day they work for me and it's my responsibility, so I accept the responsibility for it.

Media: In your discussions with Michael Wood, have you had any sense he's withholding something from you or keeping something from you?

PM: No, I don't. I get the sense that this is just one that got away on him, and it shouldn't have.

Media: Is this some sort of a family matter within the trust? I mean, is it a family trust? What's the nature?

PM: My understanding is it's a family trust, yes.

Media: Maybe he asked someone and they didn't want to, or they didn't—is that sort of vibe you get?

PM: That's not something that he's indicated to me.

Media: Prime Minister, a number of politicians have been quite critical of the review on electoral law. Do you have a response to that?

PM: I think all political parties, as they head towards an election, will form their views on what changes they would and wouldn't support—it's a legitimate part of democracy. When you get an independent review done, it doesn't necessarily mean that the Government or that the party who's in Government is necessarily going to agree with every recommendation that comes out of that, either. There are proposals out there for public consultation at the moment. The public have an opportunity to have say on those. There are clearly some where we've already indicated, you know, we think it would be difficult to progress them—the voting age, for example. There isn't a supermajority in the Parliament for that change. I think it's unlikely there'll be a supermajority in the Parliament for that in the foreseeable future. So I'm not sure there's much more point in progressing that or talking further about that. Issues around whether or not there should be a longer term—that ultimately is a matter for New Zealanders, not for the Parliament, in my view. Whether or not there's a majority to have a referendum on that within the Parliament—that, I guess, will depend on what policies the parties take into the election campaign on that.

Media: On another matter, He Waka Eke Noa, there's been some comment that that is in the process of failing. Do you have a response to that and are you pressing on, and do you think you can get the farmers on side by election time?

PM: We are pressing on to work with the farming community on a price on greenhouse gas emissions that arises from agriculture. We continue to have good, robust conversations about that. That's always been a very challenging area. Anyone who reads the news coverage of it will know that this is not an uncontroversial area. The position of the Government continues to be that we want to work with the sector to find a solution.

Media: Is there any possibility of them being put into the emissions trading scheme before the election, since 2023 was the date by which progress had to be made when this whole thing was first announced?

PM: Well, we're not proposing to change the backstop, which would be from the beginning of 2025. We're not proposing to change the backstop provisions that exist in the law at the moment, but, of course, there's still plenty of time to run after the election. But we'll continue to work with the industry, with the sector, to find a solution.

Media: There was quite a large increase of people moving to Australia the first three months of this year. How concerning is that to you for losing some of those critical workers?

PM: I think, to some extent, it just reflects the fact that the border was relatively constrained for a 2½-year - period, and so there's been quite a lot of people movement both ways. We've seen quite a significant population growth—a net gain—in terms of people travelling across the border into New Zealand. So I think we have to recognise that in the post-COVID environment with all those border restrictions removed, there's been a bit of adjustment as a result of that.

Media: And just on the time line for Michael Wood. If he got this sorted in the next couple of days, could he be back by the end of the week as transport Minister?

PM: I think it's likely to take him a little bit of time to work through that.

Media: Any concerns with that with the delays Auckland Transport is already facing? Could that see even more delays in the transport space?

PM: No, we're going to keep cracking with the stuff that we've got on the go.

Media: Can you talk to the significance of meeting with the Fiji Prime Minister tomorrow and what you're hoping to achieve?

PM: Yeah, it'll be a significant meeting in the sense that it'll be the first time a Fijian Prime Minister has visited New Zealand for quite some time, so I'm looking forward to meeting with president Rabuka. We met during my recent visit to Port Moresby and we've exchanged

correspondence previously as well, so I'm looking forward to having another in-person conversation with him. He's also been in regular contact with both the Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, who have also had really good, constructive conversations with him. Obviously, the relationship between New Zealand and Fiji is an important one. There's a lot of Fijians living in New Zealand, but there's also a lot of Kiwis who travel regularly to Fiji. We've got an important trading relationship, so it's always a good opportunity to talk about that. It's also an opportunity for us to talk about issues relevant to the Pacific: issues of climate change have been raised with me in almost every conversation I've had with Pacific leaders in the time that I've been in the job—I'm sure that will come up as well.

Media: In 2021, the North Shore Aerodrome applied to become an airport—to get airport status. Officials recommended that it get airport status, but Michael Wood decided that it should not be given that status. Should Michael Wood have been making that decision?

PM: I'd have to look at that.

Media: But if that is correct, should he have been making that decision?

PM: Look, with all of these things, I want to verify facts before providing an opinion, which I will do.

Media: Would you have to go back and now look at all the decisions that he made as transport Minister or for the time where he was the aviation Minister, and run the ruler over them again?

PM: I'm not going to go through every decision, but if there's any issues that arise where there may have been a conflict, then, yes, I'm happy to look at those.

Media: Prime Minister, is \$13,000 enough to introduce a conflict? I mean, what sort of size decision would you have to make about the airport to profit meaningfully from \$15,000? Is that really a conflict of interest?

PM: I think context means a lot in these situations. Michael is the Minister of Transport, and so the perception, and the potential for a perception, of conflict certainly exists there—that was the view of the Cabinet Office—and therefore he should have dealt with that better.

Media: Just on the He Waka Eke Noa, James Shaw said on Budget Day that the Government would be making its own announcements on the next steps “imminently”. Do you have a sense of when that imminent announcement might be coming?

PM: In the fullness of time at the appropriate moment. No, I don't have a particular time frame for you right now.

Media: And on the [*Inaudible*] meeting with Pacific leaders and discussing climate change, the climate change Minister of Vanuatu has criticised the Australian Government, saying that their action doesn't match their rhetoric because their budget doesn't give enough money for climate action and focuses too much on subsidising fossil fuels. Have you heard those sorts of complaints about New Zealand in your meetings with Pacific leaders about our rhetoric not matching up with our actions?

PM: No, it's certainly not been raised with me. The feedback that I've had has mostly been around New Zealand's support to the Pacific in terms of the mitigations that they are putting in place, rather than any specific discussions around New Zealand's mitigations.

Media: Anna's question about the brain drain—I mean, doesn't that make you uncomfortable in any way that we've got this increase in people heading to Australia?

PM: I mean, look, I'd much prefer Kiwis stayed home and continued to live, work, contribute to New Zealand. For a variety of reasons, people will make decisions about relocating across the Tasman, including, in many cases, family reunification. Some of those families were separated for a prolonged period of time as a result of COVID-19 restrictions.

Media: But is that good enough, though, that we just sort of swap our local young people, really, for ones from overseas?

PM: It's not just local young people; smaller Kiwi businesses, for example, will often, in some cases, use Australia as a scaling-up destination—so the recent changes that the Australian Prime Minister announced, for example, were very welcomed by the New Zealand business community because it will make it easier for them to do business in Australia. And so that doesn't mean that they necessarily lose their connection with New Zealand, though.

Media: How many times did the Cabinet Office ask Michael Wood about whether he'd divested those shares?

PM: There are regular—probably somewhere around about half a dozen.

Media: Six times?

PM: I'd have to go back and count them, but it would be in that kind of range. Yeah.

Media: Wouldn't you get to four or five and just say, "Hang on a second; what's going on here?"?

PM: Look, as I've indicated, Michael hasn't really got an explanation for why he hadn't disposed of the shares.

Media: Did he recuse himself from the decision making around extending Air New Zealand's loan?

PM: That's actually a different issue. So the issue around Air New Zealand's loan, I wouldn't think, would be in any way influenced by his shares in an airport company.

Media: What company uses the Auckland Airport the most?

PM: I think that's a bit of a long bow to draw.

Media: Is it?

PM: Yeah.

Media: Over what time period were the six times?

PM: Since 2020.

Media: And each time you just say, you know, "This is personal admin that he just didn't get round to."; do you think you're underplaying this a little bit?

PM: Look, as I've indicated, I'm frustrated. I think he should have dealt with it long before now.

Media: Do you think if Air New Zealand collapsed, Auckland Airport would be fine?

PM: What was that?

Media: Do you think if Air New Zealand collapsed, Auckland Airport would be unaffected?

PM: Hypothetical question.

Media: No, no, no, it's not a hypothetical question, because if he's making decisions around keeping Air New Zealand afloat while he's holding shares in the airport, then that's a really material question.

PM: There's absolutely no suggestion that his minor shareholding in Auckland Airport played any bearing on any decisions, which, of course, were Cabinet decisions around Air New Zealand.

Media: Should he have recused himself?

PM: I'd have to go back and check whether he did or not?

Media: Have you been invited to visit Ukraine?

PM: Yes.

Media: And do you plan on going—possibly on your trips later in the year?

PM: I haven't ruled it out, but what I have said is that, logistically, it's quite challenging, because the travel in and out of Ukraine is quite a long—it's quite a long journey at the moment, and whether or not that's going to be possible just logistically within the time that I'm going to be out of New Zealand—it's looking pretty challenging. I am trying to keep that a relatively short trip. Obviously, I'm hoping to have the opportunity to meet in person with President Zelenskyy at the NATO summit, where no doubt I can reiterate New Zealand's ongoing commitment to supporting Ukraine. But whether or not I can actually go and visit Ukraine or not—I think the logistics are looking to be quite challenging.

Media: And what's your position on the electoral review's recommendations on donations? They seem pretty sensible; they said they've heard overwhelmingly from Kiwis that they want to get rid of the smoke and mirrors element of the way major parties are funded. Are you supportive of the changes?

PM: Well, we've already made changes to make donations more transparent, including by lowering the threshold in which donations have to be declared. There are issues around whether, for example, there should be a cap on donations—you know, whether there should be a maximum amount that any individual can donate or not. They've been debated in the past. There are a range of views on them. We'll set out a position on that before the election.

Media: What about a ban on donations from companies and unions—anyone other than a registered voter? Do you have a position—in principle—on whether or not you would support that?

PM: As I've indicated, we'll set out a position on that before the election. We haven't had a discussion about that as a team.

Media: At a macro level, what is the point in doing these reviews what is the point in doing these reviews? And yes, Labour's got to set out its position. But there was the 2012 Electoral Commission Review, which the Government of the day promptly ignored, before that the royal commission into MMP, which made some recommendations that were ultimately not taken up. Is there any point in commissioning these independent reviews if nothing ever comes of them?

PM: I think one of the challenges around electoral law is that we do try and approach most electoral law issues on a more bipartisan approach. That does tend to, kind of, lean towards more of an enhanced status quo, rather than significant change. The risk of doing the alternative, of course, is that you end up with a situation where the incumbent Government of the day can change electoral laws to its own advantage, and we've generally tried to steer away from that in New Zealand.

Media: Do you have confidence in Michael Wood?

PM: Yes.

Media: Why?

PM: Because he's hard-working and conscientious.

Media: How is he conscientious if he was reminded six times by Cabinet Office to sell some shares, and didn't sell the shares?

PM: I've already indicated that I don't think that that was acceptable.

Media: Have you had any update on when you will get that report back re: Stuart Nash's donors—that investigation?

PM: I think it's due within the next week or two. I'm happy to get the time frame for you.

Media: Are you worried that this Michael Wood situation playing out, Jan Tinetti in front of the Privileges Committee, and then the Stuart Nash report all coming out within a few days of each other makes your Government look shambolic?

PM: No.

Media: Do you need to give your Ministers a bit of a half-time pep talk just to up standards a bit going into an election campaign? You've lost or stood down a Minister every eight weeks you've been Prime Minister. That's not quite what you'd want leading into an election.

PM: Thank you for keeping count. Look, Ministers are aware of my expectations. Michael clearly has not met them on this occasion.

Media: But I mean, surely you must be afraid that this is just going to keep on happening?

PM: Look, as I've indicated, I'm not going to deal on hypotheticals. Right, thanks everybody.

conclusion of press conference