

POST-CABINET PRESS CONFERENCE: MONDAY, 24 JULY 2023
HANSARD TRANSCRIPT

PM: Good afternoon, everybody. This afternoon, I have worked to reallocate Kiri Allan's ministerial portfolios across existing Ministers.

Ginny Andersen will become the Minister of Justice. Ginny's been a strong performer in the justice space since taking on the Minister role as Minister of Police. Aligning the justice and police portfolios will be important in the coming weeks as we look to progress the legislation that we announced last week around ram raids, to ensure that young offenders face more accountability for their crimes. Ginny Andersen's focus, and my focus, is firmly on backing the police with the tools and the resources that they need in order to fight crime. We're creating opportunities to break the cycle of offending with rehabilitation programmes while ensuring there is strong accountability and consequences for those who don't take up those opportunities and continue to commit crime.

Kieran McAnulty will become the Minister for Regional Development, aligning with his existing portfolio as Minister for Rural Communities. Grant Robertson is already leading the Government's rolling maul of initiatives to support the communities that have been affected by Cyclone Gabrielle. He'll take over the lead coordination role for the Tai Rāwhiti region. There'll be further support for local infrastructure in those areas announced later this week.

At his request, David Parker will pass on the revenue portfolio to Barbara Edmonds to free him up to focus on the transport role that he has recently taken up. Prior to entering Parliament, Barb was a specialist tax lawyer, and I've got confidence in her ability to pick up a greater share of the economic work of the Government, which is why I'm also making her an Associate Minister of Finance. She'll be relinquishing her associate health role, which will be redistributed amongst the existing health Ministers. Damien O'Connor will pick up an associate transport role, and he will be supporting David Parker in that.

With only five sitting weeks until the House rises for the election, I've decided not to bring any new Ministers into Cabinet. Overall, there are 25 Ministers in the executive, and I believe that all of them have a fair and manageable workload. Those promoted are all hard-working Ministers who are performing well, have the capacity to take on more, and now have the opportunity to demonstrate their strengths. Our focus must be on the issues that matter to New Zealanders, like the cost of living and law and order. As a Government our singular focus must be on making life better for everyday Kiwis, and that is what I've sought to do, and I need everybody in the Government to be doing the same.

To the week ahead: tomorrow, I'm in Wellington, where I'll be attending the sold-out Football Ferns/Philippines game here in the capital; on Wednesday, I'm hosting Australia Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, or "Albo", at the annual Australia - New Zealand leaders' meeting; on Thursday, I'll be meeting with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken before travelling to Christchurch to speak to the Canterbury Chamber of Commerce and the Local Government New Zealand meeting. Now happy to open up for questions.

Media: Did David Parker request to get rid of revenue because you killed his wealth tax?

PM: He indicated that he was keen to move on from revenue.

Media: Why?

PM: He indicated that that's what he would like to do.

Media: Did he give you any explanation, and was it because you killed his wealth tax?

PM: He indicated that he wanted to move on from revenue, and I've accepted that.

Media: Prime Minister, did Kiri Allan come back to work too soon?

PM: She was offered more time off and indicated that she wanted to get back to work.

Media: What impact does this have on the Labour Party, given that we're only three months out from the election, and how worried are you?

PM: Ultimately, this isn't about me or about us; it's about New Zealanders, and they want to see us focused on cost of living, on law and order, on the issues that matters to them, and that's where our focus will be.

Media: So you're not paying any attention that we're three months out from an election?

PM: Of course politics matters, but actually I think what New Zealanders want to see the Government focused on are the issues that are important to them.

Media: Why did you just take her word that she was OK with it? Wouldn't it have been, in hindsight, better to get the advice of a clinician or have her sit down with someone and have that assessment be provided to you before you made a decision?

PM: I made sure that she had got support—that she had been seeing a counsellor. She came to meet with me. She indicated that she wanted to come back to work. I did not compel her to stay away from work.

Media: Isn't it a bit irresponsible to not have a professional look into the situation before you put her back? It's not a normal job. Obviously, you know this. Isn't it a bit irresponsible not to have somebody of a professional standard look at this?

PM: I think the Minister herself indicated that she wanted to come back to work. I'm not in a position to compel her to do otherwise.

Media: Do you believe that Labour has a chance of winning this year's election now?

PM: Yes.

Media: Why?

PM: Because we're just getting started with the campaign, and there's a lot more that we have to offer in the forthcoming campaign, and I'm looking forward to the opportunity to set that out.

Media: How can you show the public that you've got it together?

PM: Well, just watch me.

Media: [*Inaudible*] the day that you lost the election campaign?

PM: That's very premature. The campaign hasn't even started yet.

Media: [*Inaudible*] will be wondering, as well, how there were so many red flags with this Minister—from the RNZ comments through to the allegations around shouting and the management in her office, to even the last time you put her on leave, to resisting going on leave and saying it wasn't for mental health reasons. There were a lot of red flags in this process, so how did she continue to be brought back?

PM: Kiri Allan was very well supported through all of those things. Now, I do want to be clear that the concerns around her ministerial conduct—the previous issues around her ministerial conduct—were unrelated to her mental health, and she has been very clear about that and does not want those two issues to be conflated. They were, as I've indicated before, dealt with at the time, and there were no new issues that were raised, in terms of further complaints for me to do anything further with. Having said all of that, mental health is a very difficult area, and I think the experiences of the last few weeks clearly demonstrate that.

Media: So how did you expect Kiri Allan to walk back into this place, which we all know is pressurised and is brutal, and to deal with her mental health issues alongside the pressure of being a Minister?

PM: As I've indicated, Kiri was being very well supported—

Media: How was she being well supported?

PM: She had some very good support from colleagues. We had arranged professional support for her, and one of the conditions of her coming back to work was that she would continue with that professional support and that she would also be receiving coaching. That was a condition that was placed on her coming back to work.

Media: [*Inaudible*] don't you?

PM: Well, clearly, there were some further issues.

Media: In terms of her local role, she is still the MP for East Coast. Will she stay on in that role? I know that you said you were going to rethink about that, but is that appropriate given the stress she's under?

PM: That's a discussion that's yet to be had. I didn't have the opportunity to have that discussion with her this morning.

Media: But given that we're less than three months—you know, it won't prompt a by-election. Do you think—

PM: Clearly, it's something that we'll want to be getting a decision on fairly quickly.

Media: So have you spoken to Kiri since this morning?

PM: Not since this morning, no.

Media: Did you have any other concerns in between giving her the all-clear to come back to work and the events of last night?

PM: No. Actually, I had a conversation with her on Sunday morning via messages about issues that she was working on in the justice space. She was very engaged in her work, which was consistent with what we saw from her last week.

Media: Prime Minister, these questions that go to the heart of your political judgment to bring her back—do you see these as fair game, or is it a bit unedifying, less than 24 hours after a pretty serious incident with somebody that has mental health issues?

PM: I'd like to think, right the way through this, that I have handled the situation fairly, with compassion, and with respect. I don't believe that mental health should disqualify someone from employment, and it shouldn't disqualify someone from employment in this building, and it has not done in the past. I think what is important is that people are supported. I believe that Kiri has been supported here, and wherever she has needed time off, we have given her time off. I have given her time off. In fact, I encouraged her to take more time. Ultimately, people can make politics of this, which appears to be what they are doing. I think they should think about the message that that sends to other people in New Zealand who are struggling with their mental health. If the message is that someone who confesses or reveals that they're struggling with mental health should be immediately sacked, I think that's going to make the problem worse rather than better.

Media: Who's making politics of this, sorry? Just to be clear.

PM: Well, the people who are suggesting that she shouldn't have still been in the job.

Media: But was there a way to manage that more thoughtfully, in retrospect, in terms of allowing her the space to work through those mental health issues without the pressure of this place?

PM: As I've indicated, Kiri was very passionate about coming back to work, and, actually, people who are working through these issues—in some cases, that's actually a significant step in their recovery, is to reengage with the positive things in their life. And, for Kiri, being at work was a very positive part of her life. She had been receiving support. She was in a much better space. Had I been able to foresee this, of course there would have been more things that we might have been able to do. I don't have a crystal ball any more than anyone else does.

Media: [*Inaudible*] you would have done differently?

PM: In any situation where you can look back in retrospect, there will always be things you could do differently. Could I foresee this a week ago? No, I couldn't.

Media: Are you referring to the statement that Christopher Luxon made: "Clearly this situation raises questions about the judgment of Prime Minister Chris Hipkins."?

PM: Well, that's a question for him.

Media: What else can you tell us about the events of last night, in particular her refusal to accompany a police officer?

PM: I can't tell you anything more about that. That's obviously now a criminal investigation—well, you know, a criminal matter—so that really is a question for the police.

Media: Accepting that she was a Minister at the time, doesn't the public have a bit of a right to know a bit more about what happened?

PM: Everybody is still equal before the law regardless of what role they hold. Kiri Allan is equal before the law, the same as any other person who was arrested in those circumstances.

Media: Are you able to tell us if she was led away in handcuffs?

PM: I don't have that information.

Media: Prime Minister, if these reallocations hadn't happened because of the Kiri Allan situation, would David Parker still have remained the revenue Minister and would he announce Labour's tax policy?

PM: It's not unusual, when there's a reshuffle in the offing, that Ministers will offer something up, where they'll say, "I'd like to pick this up" or "I'd like to no longer be doing this." That happens from time to time.

Media: So he wasn't already saying to you, "I want out of the revenue role"?

PM: Well, I wouldn't have gone and proactively sought out portfolio reallocations had I not already been doing—

Media: But he hadn't come up to you and said, "I don't want to keep—

PM: Well, I suspect not.

Media: Will he contest the election?

PM: Who's that?

Media: David Parker.

PM: He's not given me any indications otherwise.

Media: When you reallocated portfolios after Michael Wood's resignation, do you think you made the right decision not bringing in a new Minister then—instead loading up your existing Ministers with quite significant workloads?

PM: We are very close to an election, and, of course, there's inevitably a reshuffle after an election regardless of what the outcome of that is, and we have to be mindful that, you know, there could be additional parties in Government that need to be accommodated in those arrangements as well. Then there's the issue of Ministers getting up to speed—brand new Ministers getting up to speed—with the role in the run-up to a general election campaign, when they're going to be wanting to be out and about campaigning. So I made the judgment, over the last month or so, that now's not the time to be bringing new people into the ministry.

Media: Prime Minister, you've had four Ministers leave under your watch. Are you up for the job of leadership?

PM: I think you're including Jacinda Ardern in that, potentially.

Media: No, that makes five. Four without Jacinda Ardern.

PM: Yeah, and they're all different, and there's different reasons for all of them.

Media: Prime Minister, New Zealanders—voters—looking at your prime ministership and at this Government may see a connection with Stuart Nash, who was given multiple chances despite there being red flags about his behaviour. You then have Michael Wood—multiple chances despite multiple red flags. Now we have Kiri Allan, in a different but similar situation, where there were red flags, and we've now lost her as a Minister too. So what does that say about your political management?

PM: In every one of those instances, I've made decisions based on the information that was available at the time. Obviously, if more information comes to light, then I'll revise my decisions. I like to think that I make decisions based on information and evidence. I make those decisions fairly, I believe. In all of those instances, further things happened.

Media: Do you need to be tougher?

PM: I believe that I have been quite tough. Clearly, if I'd had all of the information related to all of those Ministers in the first instance, the issue would've been resolved much quicker than it was, but I didn't have that information. As Prime Minister, you can only make decisions based on the information that you have at the time.

Media: Just coming back to your comment earlier—that you had had a text message exchange with Kiri Allan on Sunday morning—I'm assuming you mean Sunday, yesterday?

PM: Yes.

Media: What prompted that text message conversation?

PM: We were actually having further discussions about the issues that we were working on last week, so none of it will be surprising. It's just the usual mechanics of it. She was very engaged in bringing to fruition the work that we have been doing over the last couple of weeks, and it was in line with those conversations.

Media: Can I ask whether in those conversations, or even further back on Wednesday when you stood here with her and announced the policy—you mentioned her being on top of her game—had you spoken to her about the fact that you thought that she was doing well and that she'd come back and you were really happy with her performance? Had you personally spoken to her about that?

PM: Yes, I had a conversation with her literally as we walked out of this room, indicating that I thought that she had handled the press conference very well. She'd handled question time in Parliament very well and had been very engaged in all of the internal conversations that we have been having around those issues.

Media: So, when you had that text message conversation yesterday, there was no hint at all that anything was untoward? You weren't concerned about anything?

PM: No. My understanding is that there were further developments in her life outside of work later that day.

Media: Do you want to relook at the reduction in prison population target that Labour set—in light of recent events?

PM: Look, do I want fewer people in prison? Yes, or course I want fewer people committing crime in the first place.

Media: Labour's target—Labour's policy—is unchanged in relation to recent events?

PM: If you look at the areas where the biggest reductions have been—and I know that this is being contested by others—it is in areas like traffic offences, and so on. I think, you know, it's always a work in progress. Should our more serious violent criminals continue to find themselves in prison? My view is yes, they should.

Media: That's a no? No change in that policy?

PM: We always keep everything under review.

Media: Last week, you concentrated on law and order. Obviously putting aside the events that have happened last night and this morning, did you have a focus and a plan of anything that you were wanting to talk about solely this week?

PM: Well, we've got a few more things coming up over the next few days, as I've indicated before. We've got Prime Minister Albanese here. The trans-Tasman relationship is clearly going to be a focus for the week. We've got the Secretary of State from the US here, and I am sure there will be a [*Inaudible*] that. And, as I've indicated, we have got some further cyclone recovery announcements shortly to come.

Media: Is it also your intention to announce Labour's tax policy this week?

PM: We'll announce that in the fullness of time, at the appropriate moment. I'm not going to put a particular date on it.

Media: [*Inaudible*] Jason Ake about this story?

PM: Sorry, what was that?

Media: Have you seen the comments from RNZ board member Jason Ake about this story, saying, "When there's blood in the water, the sharks circle, and they're more than happy to digest every last morsel and watch the bones sink to the depths. It's a blood sport."? Is that appropriate given RNZ itself wrote this story?

PM: I have not seen that, and I will look at it before I provide judgment.

Media: Do you think it's appropriate, though?

PM: As I said, I'm not going to pass judgment on something that I haven't seen.

Media: Just on the visit of Anthony Albanese—I mean, obviously, we're celebrating all these milestones in diplomatic engagements—is there anything tangible that's going to come from this visit? What do you hope that you can announce from it?

PM: Well, I don't want to get ahead of the visit itself, but, obviously, we have a very warm relationship with Australia. We'll certainly be aiming to build on that.

Media: There's traditionally been a separation between justice and police portfolios. In fact, it's very unusual for one Minister to hold both of them. I was wondering if you could walk us through the rationale behind giving both weighty justice portfolios to one Minister, and if you're worried about the imbalance that that might create?

PM: No, it has happened before: Annette King held both roles in the Clark Government—both Minister of Police and Minister of Justice. There are a few areas of conflict—they're relatively small areas—and they're handled by way of delegation. So an Associate Minister of Justice will pick up those areas where the portfolio potentially has a conflict with the police portfolio. I can provide a list of those. It's not a big list; it's a small list.

Media: So who is the associate justice Minister now?

PM: Deborah Russell, in this case, will pick up any areas where there's a conflict between the two portfolios.

Media: Does this show, though, you're running out of people?

PM: No, it doesn't at all. It shows that, actually, there's a logic in bringing the portfolio together, given the issues that we're dealing with at the moment, where there is a clear interface between the work that justice are doing in the policy space and the implementation that the police are doing in the operational space. Bringing those two portfolios together to really focus in on those issues makes sense, and I believe that Ginny Andersen is a good person to lead that work. As I've indicated, I have plenty of people who, in the fullness of time, in the team, I think will make outstanding Ministers. But I just think three months before an election isn't the time to be bringing them into the ministry.

Media: If you had a depth of talent, though, you wouldn't be putting these two weighty portfolios on one Minister's shoulders, though.

PM: No, I disagree. I mean, if you look at the overall sort of job-share across the Cabinet, I think that the portfolio allocation is relatively fair across Ministers.

Media: But, for Ginny Andersen, though—you know, she's a new Minister; she's got a big, beefy portfolio like police already, which she's just trying to get used to, get her head round; and now you're giving her another big, beefy portfolio: justice. Can she handle it?

PM: I think she's well and truly demonstrated in her time as Minister of Police that she's got her head around the portfolio.

Media: Just going back to what you were saying before, about something further happening personally with Kiri—without wanting to breach any privacy or go into too many personal details—did you have a conversation with her about—

PM: I don't know the details of that. I know that she's had other things going on and that there were other things—I don't really know the details of that, so I can't really add more.

Media: Prime Minister, for you personally, has this been one of the hardest days of your premiership?

PM: I mean, I want to say, when you're dealing with issues around mental health, that's incredibly difficult. I know that there'll be a number of employers around the country who have worked with employees who have found themselves in periods of mental distress, and it is incredibly challenging, and I don't take that lightly. I've taken it very seriously right from the beginning; I've been working very hard to ensure that Kiri has been supported through that. And, yes, I have been guided along the way by the feedback that I have received from her, about what's important to her and what's going to work for her. But it is really tough, and, on one level, I commend Kiri for speaking openly, as she has over the past few weeks, about her struggles with mental health. It is an absolute tragedy, what happened yesterday, that it got to that point. It is very brave to be speaking publicly about it, and I think, in that regard, I do want to acknowledge that she has been willing to do that. Clearly, it is not acceptable that it got to that point yesterday, and, of course, she could not continue in her role as a Minister.

Media: How seriously should New Zealanders take the announcement in the weekend by one of the minor parties of a gang-only prison?

PM: Finishing school for gangs?

Media: But how serious is that of a policy, and how—you know, considering that we are coming up to an election, this is what some of those minor parties are saying as decent policies. What's your response to that?

PM: Well, if you look at the gang membership in our current prisons, it is quite a high proportion of the people who are in our prisons now, and that is because of the work that the police have been doing to target gang offending and to make sure that those who are doing it are held accountable for their actions.

Media: Just picking up on something you were saying there, do you feel like you've let Kiri down?

PM: I believe that I have done everything that I could to support Kiri. Now, I'm not saying that the outcome is acceptable, and, you know, I think, clearly, this is a tragic set of circumstances.

Media: [*Inaudible*] over the minutiae of what happens in this place and move on by election day, but they're likely to remember this, aren't they? So what is your message to New Zealanders today?

PM: I think mental health is something that we should always take seriously, and it's always something that we should speak respectfully about.

Media: Prime Minister, do you know or have you been told that Kiri Allan left the scene of the accident before she was arrested last night?

PM: I'm kind of cautious—I went through a bit of this this morning, and I am aware that now we're moving into that phase where police will be doing their investigations, they'll be making decisions about prosecutions and so on, and I don't want to get in the middle of that. So I don't want to continue to add to that. So I'll be dialling back my comments in that space because it is an active matter for the police.

Media: One more on that: do you know if she went to the hospital before she went to the police station?

PM: I'm not aware of that.

Media: She is currently still a member of Parliament. She is still a Labour MP. There's a really high degree of public interest, in that she represents the people of New Zealand. So isn't it important that a detail like if she walked away from police as justice Minister—isn't that crucial?

PM: Ultimately, it's a matter for the police. If the police are going to take a prosecution, for example, it would be utterly inappropriate for me, as Prime Minister—or any Minister or any member of Parliament—to get in between that.

Media: But it's not a normal—

PM: The last Minister that did that got removed from his role.

Media: Do you know?

PM: What was that?

Media: Do you know if she left the scene?

PM: As I said this morning—I guess, the information about that hasn't been completely clear to me. So that really is a matter for the police.

Media: So, just to be clear, you are not aware right now whether or not she walked away from that scene?

PM: I certainly can't say for certain what happened last night.

Media: Just on her future in politics, you said that a decision would need to be made regarding her future quite quickly. Is there a time by which that decision needs to be made?

PM: Well, nomination day.

Media: And is that something that you'll be talking to her about?

PM: Yes.

Media: With the all reshuffles in your Cabinet, are you actually able to name, say, the workplace relations Minister, the customs Minister? Do you know everybody who has their own portfolios at the moment?

PM: Carmel Sepuloni is the workplace relations Minister, and, I believe—I'd have to check the customs Minister, actually. It's not a portfolio that papers have come up from in the last few weeks.

Media: And what does that say about the current state of the Cabinet?

PM: It says that everybody's working hard.

Media: Does it not say that you've had to reshuffle so many times that you've lost track?

PM: No, it does indicate that there's a lot of portfolios.

Media: Prime Minister, yesterday, the Green Party made some comments about your ruling out of the wealth tax, capital gains tax, saying that, essentially, it depends what the voters say, and they'll be pushing hard for it and could potentially not be in a coalition if they don't get that over the line. The Māori Party have said you won't be calling the shots on

election day. What's your response to these from parties that you're potentially going to have to work with?

PM: I think the posturing that political parties have before an election and the negotiations that they do after the election don't always completely reconcile with one another. Obviously, there's an election campaign, and it's up to voters to vote for the parties whose policies they most strongly support.

Media: Do you still have quite serious concern for Kiri's wellbeing at the moment?

PM: She has people supporting her at the moment.

Media: When did you have time to get a haircut between this morning's press conference and now?

PM: It was actually booked in to do before this morning's press conference and it got delayed a little bit. Thanks, everybody.

conclusion of evidence