

POST-CABINET PRESS CONFERENCE: MONDAY, 7 AUGUST 2023
HANSARD TRANSCRIPT

PM: Good afternoon, everybody. Today, I'm going to set out some additional steps that the Government is taking to turbo-charge New Zealand's renewable energy generation, but before I do that, I want to acknowledge our country's nurses, who have today accepted the Government's latest collective pay offer. It's further proof that the Government is in it for the nurses, and over six years has delivered pay equity as well as regular increases to this historically underpaid group of, predominantly, women workers. When we took office in 2017, the top of the registered nurse pay scale was \$66,755. As a result of the most recent agreement, that will be \$106,738. That's a near \$40,000 a year increase, or 59.9 percent, in just six years.

I have asked the Minister of Health to join me today to speak about some of the details of the deal. We'll then take questions specifically on that, and then I'll go on to talk about renewable energy and other issues of the day. So to Dr Verrall.

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: Tēnā koutou katoa, and thank you, Prime Minister. This afternoon, I was delighted to announce Te Whatu Ora and the New Zealand Nurses Organisation hospital nurses have reached an agreement on their collective employment agreement. This is in addition to the \$4 billion announced last week, which meant we made history with pay equity for nurses.

When Labour took office in 2017, as the Prime Minister has said, the top of the registered nurse pay scale was \$66,755. With this deal, it'll be up to \$106,738—as has been said—a \$40,000 increase, or 59.9 percent, in just six years. The Government values the enormous contribution nurses and midwives make to the health system, and we thank them for the critical role that they play in looking after our people and communities. The Government has also already invested \$200 million a year, on top of increased funding for primary and community sectors, to support primary and community providers to lift their nurses' pay rates, too.

The rates we pay nurses in this country is important for keeping them in our health system. I recently announced a workforce plan which looks across the entire health sector to address workforce pressures, and this is a significant piece of work that continues in this space, including focuses on how we train, recruit, and retain our healthcare workers.

Last year, over 8,000 nurses registered for the first time, a 60 percent increase from the previous year, and in the last quarter, the number of nurses registered to practise in New Zealand has grown by about 2,000. The Government's aspiration is that the health system is sustainably staffed and where New Zealanders can access excellent planned and urgent care when they need it, and I look forward to working with all healthcare workers to achieve that.

PM: We're happy to take a few questions on health before we move on to other topics.

Media: Last week, we had the secondary teachers' pay increase; this week, we've got the nurses' pay increases. How is the Government affording all of this?

PM: We did have a contingency set aside in the Budget for the nurses' pay deal.

Media: How much?

PM: Well, it was a contingency. It was set aside in the Budget, and so we can certainly afford to pay for this one.

Media: Was it exhausted?

PM: Certainly the pay deal—the nurses extracted a good pay deal.

Media: But was the contingency—

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: So the pay equity deal had a Budget contingency. This new settlement of the collective agreement was from within Te Whatu Ora baselines and can be afforded.

Media: Do you expect to see other public sector groups also argue for better pay in light of the teachers and the nurses?

PM: Typically, with nurses and teachers, the bargaining from them is often a little removed from other public sector bargaining. But, of course, I know that police, firefighters, other big public sector workforces will watch what happens with teachers and nurses closely.

Media: What about junior doctors? Their rates are now comparable to the nurses—right? Or is that the idea of it—of the pay equity?

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: Look, I think it's important to look across the precise comparisons there—I know that is being discussed in the sector. But to look across the work that is being done by, say, a first-year junior doctor versus a senior nurse, there it is possible that the nurse may be better paid in that instance.

Media: So that is the idea of that, though—that it's equitable work, so it's equitable pay. Is that the idea, because that comparison has been brought up before—right? So it's—

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: The principle of pay equity is to identify, actually, not from within health, but from across different roles inside or outside health and provide comparisons. I don't believe the pay equity settlement for nurses was based on a comparison with junior doctors. It was outside of that.

Media: Prime Minister, are you—

PM: I'll let Amelia finish, and then I'll come back to you, Jason.

Media: So what are you then saying about the comparison being made to the junior doctors?

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: I think the point is I am aware that the nurses' salary settlement has affected relativities within the health system, but I think we all agree the important thing is to end gender-based pay discrimination within our health service, which is what occurred with the nurses' deal.

Media: So does that mean that you'll expect to see other health sort of jobs and sectors then go up for more money in light of the sort of inflation—you know, the inflation of salaries?

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: Formally, they are two separate processes. I expect to know that a number of health clinical groups have claims in under the pay equity process and, separately, these issues are relativity, which you're describing between doctors and nurses, come up at collective negotiations.

Media: Prime Minister, are you able to just tell us a little bit more about this contingency fund: how much was in it, and when you say it's almost been exhausted, like what is the exact dollar figure?

PM: So I guess there are a variety of ways that we pay a settlement—well, there are multiple settlements in question here. So there's a settlement and a pay equity deal, which is, of course, part of the numbers that we've just gone through. There was money set aside specifically for that. The money set aside for the wider nurses' collective agreement, which is the most recent announcement today—that gets taken into account when we set the overall cost adjustment that the health system gets in each Budget.

Media: Just to follow up, does this include back-pay for the nurses as well, or is it just looking forward?

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: The collective agreement is back-paid from April 2023, and then another tranche will be effective in April 2024.

Media: And this all comes from the contingency?

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: No. The collective agreement agreed today is from the Te Whatu Ora baseline. The pay equity deal announced last week was a contingency.

Media: What is the total cost of the collective agreement announced today?

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: I am not able to give you that figure. That is being calculated, but it was within the parameters that were set when the Te Whatu Ora budget was written.

Media: Are you worried that some nurses may cash in their claims and then leave the profession?

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: I think this is an excellent time to start and stay nursing in New Zealand, given that we have turned around historic pay inequity and are doing a great job of addressing relativities with other professions and jurisdictions.

Media: Have you heard of that in any instance? Any—

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: No.

Media: The Nurses Organisation said a lot of the other factors weren't—they're not entirely happy with this collective agreement. They're making emphasis on the fact it was a close vote, including that it's not inflation-adjusted. Was there any discussion around sort of futureproofing negotiations—so tying their pay to inflation? I know that that has been bandied around with the teachers, for example. Did that form part of the discussion for nurses?

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: I'm not aware of that conversation being part of the negotiations. I believe the comment was about cost of living, and I note that many elements of the deal reflect the PSPA—or the public sector pay agreement—which I believe is an appropriate setting for the constrained situation we are in.

PM: And I note that we don't typically build automatic adjustments into people's pay in almost any aspect of the public sector, because in collective bargaining there are always trade-offs to be made around what's more important to the people who are doing the bargaining—whether it's base pay or whether it's other things related to their working conditions—and there's always trade-offs between those. That's the essence of collective bargaining.

Media: The education Minister has said that would be something she'd be interested in because of how disruptive the strikes were to education this year, and also for the health system—how disruptive the strikes can be—and if that is sort of one of the baseline arguments that you face at every negotiation table, why not then build that and futureproof it so we don't have such a disruptive—

PM: It would be quite a big change to employment law. So, at the moment, the law still works on the basis that there is regular bargaining for base salary and for other employment conditions.

Media: We've seen this so many times with the public sector groups, public sector unions. Are they just doing this because they can see a change of Government coming?

PM: No, I doubt it.

Media: Minister, do you think that the current level of free dental care in New Zealand is good enough in this country?

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: I am certainly aware that people don't—that people sometimes forgo the dental care that they need because of cost. I've seen it in my own practice, and I'm aware that that's an issue across the country.

Media: Do you think, though, that dental care is something that should be more embedded in the health system, because at the moment it is very much, for the most part, pay-as-you-go - type healthcare. Would you like to see it more embedded—as a doctor, would you like to see it more embedded in the free healthcare system?

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: I think that's an important aspiration, and I'm pleased with the progress we've been able to make with increasing the access to emergency dental grants.

Media: Do you think that the grants that are available are actually reaching enough people in terms of getting good dental healthcare, or is there still a large chunk of the population who it's still just outside of their ability to pay for it?

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: I accept there's unmet need with the present settings, but I think we've addressed an important component of that with the emergency dental grants.

Media: Prime Minister, just on that, can I just ask: do you see a way of paying for much more substantial free dental healthcare for all New Zealanders without needing to do it through, say, the way the Greens have suggested—something like a wealth tax? Do you actually see on the horizon ever being able to do it, because for election after election, we've heard, "It's just too expensive; it's too expensive.", but at what point do you actually do something about it?

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: I think all—sorry.

PM: No, no.

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: I mean, I think all of these issues come down to a matter of setting priorities.

PM: We will set out our health policy well in advance of the election and we'll answer those questions, and we'll also set out our full text policy well in advance of the election, as well.

Media: I understand that, but what I'm asking is, because everyone always says—politicians always say it's far too expensive, and the suggestion from the Greens is that you do something like a wealth tax to pay for it. So do you see a way of actually putting something as massive as free dental care in for all New Zealanders without having to go down the route of something like a controversial wealth tax? Can the country afford it, is, basically, what I'm asking.

PM: Well, it's not just a question of how much free dental care might cost; it's also having the capacity to be able to deliver that—which I think at the moment the system wouldn't have the capacity to be able to deliver it—and there would likely be significant investment required just in order to build capacity to meet the need for additional dental care, regardless then of the question of how that dental care itself might be paid for. So I think that the proposal that we've seen from the Greens is somewhat simplistic in the sense that there would be a lot more to it than what they've set out.

Media: Have you in the last five years been specifically building on that capacity with the dental workforce in order to get to a point where you might be able to achieve something like this?

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: Certainly not at the level required to achieve universal dental—no.

Media: So it hasn't been a priority to get that—

Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall: There has been workforce development initiatives in the dental area, and I believe that was also in the workforce plan that we put out previously, but not to the level to achieve universal dental.

Media: Have the COVID isolation periods been reviewed yet, and is there any thought on any different protections for people who are vulnerable?

PM: As we've indicated, the COVID isolation periods are due to be reviewed in the next week or two, and then we'll have announcements as soon as they have been.

OK. Thank you to the Minister of Health.

Right, moving along. So coming back to renewable energy, the Government is significantly accelerating progress on new wind and solar farms to generate more of our power generation. I'm announcing today that there are new wind farm projects—three new wind farm projects—that have been approved for fast-track consenting. They would cut around 150 million kilograms of carbon emissions and create up to 840 construction jobs in the Manawatū; Waiuku, near Auckland; and in Southland. Combined, they would generate about 419 megawatts of electricity at peak output. That's about the same as New Zealand's third-largest hydro-electric dam, the Clyde Dam.

New Zealand is increasingly well positioned globally to harness wind power onshore and offshore. When it comes to offshore generation, for example, our location in New Zealand matters. The least windy sites here in New Zealand are considered to have better wind energy potential than the windiest sites in Australia. This means that we've got amazing opportunities right here at our fingertips, and we're determined to make the most of those.

But it's not just wind power that we want to make more progress on. We're also fast-tracking solar energy projects, with nearly 2 million solar panels already sped up through the consenting process. That's part of nine solar farm projects which have been fast track referred to expert consenting panels since 2021. If all of those are approved, they could add 1.87 million solar panels to the national total and generate 1,147 megawatts of energy at peak output. Again, tying that back to the Clyde Dam, that's almost three times the power output of the Clyde Dam.

When you put those things together, the fast-track solar and the wind projects, along with geothermal projects that have also been referred using fast-track consenting—they could create about 3,500 construction jobs nationwide and employ more than 350 full-time staff when they're completed. It's another of the reasons why the Government has been relentlessly future-focused and why we firmly believe New Zealand's energy future is a renewable energy future. This is the future, and we can't afford any more backward-looking thinking that would keep us tied to the past. That's why we're going hard out for half New Zealand's total energy needs to be met by renewable energy by 2035, and for 100 percent of energy generation to be renewable by 2050.

These decisions to fast track projects are the latest to underpin the strong momentum that's been building towards what we think is an achievable aim. Fast tracking is a critically important tool for us to get there. It means these projects can proceed faster, provided they meet normal environmental tests as determined by the expert consenting panels. It's already reduced consenting time by an average of 18 months per project, saving infrastructure builders time and money. It's become a key part of the Government's strategy to accelerate economic recovery, boost jobs, and speed up our emissions reductions. That's why we're making it permanent through the Natural and Built Environment Bill that will become law later this month.

Finally, at a time when the cost of power is eating into people's budgets, the benefits of maximising renewable energy will flow through to cheaper bills for households and for businesses, not just for one month or one year, but to cheaper prices the public can build into their budgeting and that they can rely on.

Now, happy to open up for questions. Jessica.

Media: Prime Minister, a lot of these projects have already been signalled before. What's actually new in what you're announcing?

PM: This speeds them up. It means we can see them coming to fruition faster.

Media: And in terms of—I mean, lots of these, though, we knew were in the pipeline, so this is kind of stuff that you've already done, isn't it?

PM: Fast-track consenting means that these projects will come on stream faster. Obviously, the companies who are sponsoring these projects need to then go through the fast-tracked consenting process, which, as I said, shaves about 18 months off the overall

time that it will take to bring these things live. But at the moment, in the environment we're in at the moment, where we want renewable energy coming on stream faster, it's a significant advance.

Media: What's the benefit of these rather than the Clyde Dam—what are the advantages?

PM: If you look you across the country, there aren't that many more big hydro opportunities for us, so we have to look at other options. Also, just to put it into context, the Clyde Dam took over a decade to build and to come on stream—"come on stream", if you'll excuse the pun. Actually, these can be generating electricity a lot faster than that.

Media: What's the estimated time line for them to be built?

PM: It will ultimately depend on the people who are applying for the consents to build these things. The fast-track consenting project cuts about 18 months off the timetable, but of course the timetable then depends on when the companies choose to build them.

Media: And having three new wind farms—what sort of impact would that have? Would that have an impact on people's power prices, and how far into the future could they see a difference?

PM: There are a range of different things that affect people's power prices. One of them, of course, is peak demand and the price of electricity at the peak, which determines quite a lot of retail pricing. Some of that's still determined, of course, by our existing fossil fuel electricity generation. So the more renewable we have, the more sustainable our electricity prices will be; the lower, ultimately, in the long term, our electricity prices will be. But it's hard to pin point at a particular time what the impact of these projects will do. But we know that overall, the cumulative effect of more renewable electricity generation is that it means a more sustainable price path for electricity generally.

Media: These fast-track consent processes—they're the post-COVID ones, right?

PM: Yeah.

Media: So why is it—I mean, presumably, climate change has been on the Governments agenda for—well, since you got in, but over the last two years as well. Why wait until now to put these ones through the fast-track process? Why didn't this happen months or even years ago?

PM: The fast-track consenting process has itself been a fast-tracked process, and that as these applications come through, we actually have a relatively rapid process for advancing them through. So it will be a question of when the applications came in and the amount of time it took to consider those. But it is significant. As I said, it's about 18 months faster than it would be if it was under the conventional process.

Media: So this isn't a case of the Government just holding to some good-looking ones before the election period ramps up?

PM: No, no—not at all. Look, I can tell you that almost every Cabinet meeting during the time that that fast-track consenting—in this case, we were using Cabinet meetings as the sign-off point for those, and almost every Cabinet meeting had a list of them.

Media: Last week, the defence and security strategy attracted a bit of criticism from former Prime Minister Helen Clark. I just wondered whether you engaged with that and what you made of her criticism that New Zealand seems to be sliding closer towards the alliance with the Five Eyes members?

PM: I don't agree with the overall assessment, and certainly the way some of it's been presented publicly. I haven't had the chance to talk to Helen Clark about that directly in person. But what I would say is New Zealand's foreign policy approach is a very balanced one. I've been very clear all the way along in my time as Prime Minister that there are areas where we work closely with our like-minded countries like Australia, the US, the UK, Canada—our Five Eyes partners—and there will be areas where we work with countries like

China, for example, and there'll be areas where we disagree. And we have, I think, a robust enough relationship with all of the countries that I've just mentioned to be able to navigate that.

Media: Do you agree we've heard that taking Belt and Road funding to fund New Zealand infrastructure would be "risky"?

PM: We have an overseas investment process which considers where there is an investment flowing into the country for whatever reason, there's a strategic interest test that determines where the funding's coming from and whether it's in New Zealand's interests to accept that funding, and there have been some high-profile examples recently where some overseas funding has been rejected on that—using that criteria. I don't propose to change that.

Media: Thank you for that overview of the New Zealand Government process, but do you agree with Helen Clark's assessment that accepting Belt and Road funding for New Zealand infrastructure will be risky?

PM: It is not something that our Government is proposing to do.

Media: Do you have any updates on the gang tensions in Manawatū?

PM: Not in the last few hours, no.

Media: Right. Can I ask you to reflect on—so we've had about three shootings that I can recall anyway—the one on the start of the FIFA tournament in Queen Street, and then we've had this one in Manawatū yesterday. Are you concerned by that—I mean, one of those shootings was in a reserve at 2.40 p.m.

PM: I'm absolutely concerned about any escalation in public violence and in gang tension. We're resourcing the police to be able to deal with that. Police have issued—I think at last count it was something like 43,000 charges have been issued against gang members as a result of Operation Cobalt. A lot of the work that we're doing around getting illegal firearms out of circulation will help. The establishment of the firearms register will help us to identify where firearms have come from where they've been used illegally. All of that work is very important. I don't think that any of these sorts of events are acceptable.

Media: The police have just put out a statement—as you were coming down—to the people of Manawatū, saying that they're urging them to come forward if they knew about firearms being held—being used unlawfully, so they can ensure firearms are not in the hands of anyone who plans to use them for ill intent. Will you or your police Minister be looking—well, presumably your police Minister will be, but will you be looking for any update from police on the situation there?

PM: I'm sure the Minister of Police will be updated on that. I can say that the issues around illegal firearms have been a focus for the Government since we took office, and particularly since the events of March 15, and the establishment of a more robust licensing regime and the establishment of the firearms register, which is now being populated—licensed and law-abiding firearms owners are able to enter their firearms into the register now, and we encourage them to do that as quickly as possible. These things will give police a significant head start in addressing this type of criminal offending.

Media: Do you think the public has confidence in your Government when it comes to crime?

PM: Yes—well, I believe they should. They have good grounds to feel confident in the work that we're doing as a Government.

Media: Prime Minister—

PM: Yeah—sorry?

Media: You go.

PM: Oh, I believe that the public have reason to be confident in the work the Government has been doing around crime. I acknowledge that there's a certain heightened anxiety around some forms of crime at the moment—so around youth offending, we've been working on tackling that quite intensively over the last 18 months, always looking for where the gaps in the system are and how we can plug those gaps. Issues around gang offending—and we have seen an escalation in gang tension and gang-related criminal offending, particularly in recent years, as we've seen new gangs emerging in New Zealand that haven't been part of the gang landscape in New Zealand recently. We've been giving the police additional tools in order to be able to deal with that.

If you look at issues around violent offending, one of the big drivers in the increase in reported violent crime has been increased reporting of violent family harm. I would never say I welcome the fact that more of that has been reported, because I'd never welcome the fact that it exists in the first place, but the fact that New Zealanders are less tolerant of it and are reporting more of it to the police, and therefore it's coming through in our violent crime statistics, does mean that we can do something about it.

Media: Just out of one to 10, how would you rate your Government's performance in tackling the ram-raid problem?

PM: I generally don't give the Government a rating of one to 10 on any criteria.

Media: Can you do more?

PM: Look, there's always more to be done in the law and order space, and you've seen even just a couple of weeks ago, we were looking at more options in the ram-raiding space that we're working through the system now because I don't think that what we're seeing at the moment is acceptable.

Media: But are you happy with your lack of progress in tackling that very specific ram-raid problem?

PM: As I indicated a couple of weeks ago, when we announced the latest programmes of work in the ram-raiding space, our first port of call here is to try and avoid this pattern of offending in the first place. We've put in place some fast-track intervention programmes that were designed to get these kids out of trouble, and not undertaking ram raids and not getting into this cycle of crime. That's worked for more than three-quarters of those kids, who are not going on to reoffend, but for that persistent remaining group—it's somewhere between 20 and 25 percent—clearly, more needs to be done, and that's what we're doing.

Media: Sorry, just to clarify: do you think that the public has confidence in the Government to deal with crime?

PM: Look, ultimately, I think that the public has reason to have confidence in the Government's work on crime, but, you know, you can read opinion polls all you like. I'm sure it sounds like there are some opinion polls coming, and no doubt we'll all find out what they are.

Media: So you won't offer a judgment that—on whether the public do have that confidence? And you think that they have a reason to, but won't say—

PM: I think the public can have confidence that we acknowledge their concern around things like ram raids and escalation in gang tensions, and that we are doing something about it.

Media: If you're not willing to stand up there and say, "Yes, the public has confidence in me.", how can the public have confidence in you?

PM: There's a general election on 14 October, but that doesn't mean that I'm going to know every opinion poll question that you might be teasing in the next few weeks.

Media: Can I just clarify, then, just—have you received briefings or updates following the Auckland shootings or the Manawātū shootings?

PM: I haven't heard anything on the Auckland shooting—no, no, the answer to both of those questions is no at this point. But I'm sure the Minister of Police will have more recent updates than me.

Jo.

Media: When are you making a paid parental leave announcement?

PM: Sorry?

Media: When are you making a paid parental leave announcement?

PM: The Labour Party hasn't done much manifesto announcement yet. You'll see that coming in the next few weeks.

Media: Will you be making a Labour announcement, or will there be a Government announcement, around paid parental leave?

PM: It'll be a Labour announcement.

Media: Were you aware of a recommendation to temporarily shut down Korowai Manaaki, and the warning it was a near miracle no one was hurt or died there?

PM: I wasn't aware of that recommendation, which I understand emerged from a review that was done last year. I understand it came from some earlier work that Mike Bush had been doing for Oranga Tamariki. The reason that it wasn't actioned at the time—so I understand that there were about 11, 12 recommendations, and all but that one have either been implemented or are in the process of being implemented, and the reason that that one wasn't actioned at the time was that there wasn't anywhere else to put those young people.

Media: And just given what's happened over the last year—sort of the rooftop stand-off and the fight video—do you believe it was the right decision to keep it open?

PM: As I've indicated, there wasn't anywhere else to put those young people.

Media: Can we expect a Labour Party tax policy announcement this week?

PM: Ahh, as I've indicated to you, we'll make announcements in due course. I'm not going to set out the timetable for our manifesto announcements yet. I did say it would be within the next few weeks, and we're still within that timetable.

Media: You did, and not to read too much into your protracted "Ahh", but it was—in other times you've said it's sort of coming in recent weeks. It kind of sounds like it's coming this week.

PM: I said a few weeks ago that it would be in the next few weeks, and I stand by that statement.

Media: Just on another Labour Party - esque sort of question, in previous years we've seen previous Prime Ministers and other key leaders of political parties jumping into advertisements or being involved in hyping up the campaign. Can we expect to see Jacinda Ardern at all being involved in Labour's campaign, either in televised adverts or in speeches, or any appearances whatsoever?

PM: Jacinda is going to be out of the country for most of the campaign—I think that's already been well-signalled publicly—so I'm not expecting her to be hitting the campaign trail with us. Of course, I'm sure that she'll have a view, and if she wants to share that, she's welcome to do that.

Media: What do you think her view is?

PM: What's that?

Media: What do you think her view is?

PM: Well, you should ask her that.

Media: Were you personally happy with the position that Labour took on the paid parental leave bill last week?

PM: Look, I acknowledge as a father who has taken time off when my kids have been born that families want to be able to make decisions and they want to have some flexibility to make decisions around how they handle parental leave and so on after the birth of a child. We've worked hard to give them extra resource. So the extension to six months of paid parental leave is something that I'm very proud of—a decision that was taken by this Government, and at the time we set out the reasons for doing that—and that can be taken by either parent, so it's important to note that that doesn't automatically mean that it's always mums who are taking that leave. It can be shared between mum and dad. I acknowledge some of the issues that were raised last week around the desire for mums and dads, or a different parenting arrangement—you know, the two parents—to have leave concurrently, and you'll see us say a few more things about that shortly.

Media: Do you think that mums should stay home and breastfeed for six months?

PM: That's ultimately a decision for parents to take.

Media: Are you happy, then, with the rhetoric that was shared by your MPs last week around that?

PM: That's a question for them. Ultimately, it's a decision for parents to take—how they allocate their entitlement to parental leave.

Media: Did you get feedback over Labour's stance around that from when you were out and about, or did your office get much feedback?

PM: I haven't had much direct feedback. I'm certainly aware it's generated some discussion, though.

Media: And how do you reflect on that? Do you wish you'd chosen your words more carefully, or do you perhaps feel—I mean, you know what this is like, as a parent with two kids.

PM: Yeah, I do, and, you know, I've always been quite careful in my conversations around parental leave to acknowledge the fact that both parents have a role here, and it's important that we have systems that accommodate that.

Media: Do you think the issue that needs fixing with parental leave is both the flexibility but also the amount of time at home as well?

PM: Sorry?

Media: Do you think that with paid parental leave, the things that need fixing or that haven't been addressed are both the flexibility issue—which was obviously attempted to be dealt with by Nicola Willis' bill—but also the actual amount of time at home as well? Do you think those are both issues that you could do better?

PM: I think, you know, where we can give parents more options to spend more time at home with their babies—which is something that our Government has been consistently working towards, as evidenced by the fact that we extended paid parental leave to six months—I think that that's a positive development. It gives parents more choices and more options. We'll announce our policy around paid parental leave in due course.

Media: Do you accept that if you go down the flexibility route and then you have both parents at home—and it would, obviously, then become 13 weeks as a result—that that's actually not long enough and that, actually, if you're going to have both parents at home and allow for the flexibility, you actually need to make the period longer, don't you?

PM: What I would note here is that parents make choices around how they use their paid parental leave entitlement, recognising that not all parents use all of the entitlement that they have now. Some will make other choices, and that's a matter for them—those are the choices that they can make. There is good scientific evidence around attachment for babies

in the sense that a consistent presence, whether that's one or two parents, in the first six months of a child's development is very good for those babies. That of course, though, is evidence that parents can draw on in making their decisions.

Media: But if both parents are at home, is 13 weeks enough?

PM: Well, that's probably a question for the people who were proposing that.

Media: Do you acknowledge, though, that you are hamstringing parents' decisions in how they raise their children by voting against that bill, though?

PM: As I've said, we haven't announced our paid parental leave policy yet. When we do—when we do—I'll happily answer more of those questions.

Media: There was a bill on the table that would have meant that families had more decisions about paid parental leave and who got to stay home and who had to go back to work, and just every decision that comes in having a child. There was a bill on the table that you could have, at the very least, put it through to select committee to flesh some stuff out there, and yet you chose not to.

PM: It would not have given parents any more choices this side of the election, and the official advice that we have is that the bill as drafted was un-implementable. So I think the decision to vote against a bill that was unimplementable was probably a responsible one for the Government.

Media: Do you acknowledge that talking about the science of having one parent stay at home for six months with a child is judgmental towards those families who, for whatever reason, aren't able to do that?

PM: No, what I've said, because if you'd listened to what I was just saying—I was saying that the science around attachment and around having a consistent presence in a baby's life in the first six months of their life is good for a baby's development. Decisions around how families achieve that is a matter for those families.

Media: The two weeks' unpaid leave that the secondary partner gets—is that something that you could look to make paid leave?

PM: I'm not going to get into speculating on what we may or may not put on the table when we announce our policy on that.

Media: Is two weeks enough for a second parent to be at home?

PM: Again, I'm not going to get into future speculation.

Media: But it's just what it is at the moment. Do you think that's enough time for the second parent to be at home?

PM: Oh look, I'll put the cards on the table: the more time that parents can spend at home with their kids and the more we can support them to do that, the better. Of course, there's financial constraints on both sides in that regard. Even with paid parental leave—of course, paid parental leave for most families is less than what they would get by being in work, and so there are always going to be financial considerations here, both for the Government in terms of what we can support and for families in terms of what they can afford to live off during that period of time. But, you know, I'll always be aiming, as long as I'm in politics, to increase the amount of time that parents can spend with their kids.

Media: How out of date is the amount of money that parents receive for paid parental leave?

PM: What was that?

Media: How out of date is the amount of money that parents get for paid parental leave?

PM: To be honest, it's not something that I've looked at in the last couple of weeks, so I'm happy to go away and have a look at it and come back to you.

Media: It's about the same as the wage subsidy. Is it enough to live on?

PM: Look, as I've said, I'm happy to go away and have a look at it—bearing in mind that the wage subsidy was not paid direct to employees; it was given to employers on the basis that they would keep their employees on.

Media: No, but like is that enough money to live off?

PM: I'd have to go away and have a look at it and see how it stacks up against the minimum wage and the living wage. I haven't looked at that.

Media: It's about 80 percent of the minimum wage.

PM: Yeah, I haven't looked at it.

So, Jason.

Media: There was quite the debate at the latter half of last week about the Government's books, and the last time that we were able to actually take a glimpse under the hood was the 11 months to May, I believe, which showed a rapid deterioration in the Government's tax take. Since then, some commentators have pointed to this situation getting worse, given New Zealand has dipped into a recession. How worried are you about the Government's books going into that 12 September PREFU document, and are you doing anything behind the scenes to bolster the numbers a little bit ahead of that document?

PM: So I guess there are two things at play here. One is that the Government's monthly accounts get released publicly all of the time, so there'll be more updates and people will be able to see them before the election. The next is the pre-election fiscal update, which is, basically, Treasury's reckons on what that means longer term—so what are the current accounts telling us about what's likely to happen a year from now, three years from now, and, actually, longer term into the future in terms of the Government's long-term fiscal forecasts. The Treasury do that process independently of the Government, but they will factor in to that any decisions that have been taken since their last update, so they will look at any areas where the Government's identified any additional spending and any areas where the Government's identified any additional savings. And so of course both of those things are a regular occurrence for Government. We're always looking at areas where money isn't being spent or where we no longer need to spend money, and we're always looking at areas where there is a new pressure where additional spending is required.

Media: But have you or the finance Minister, or both of you in some combination, gone to, say, for example, heads of Government departments and said, "You really need to reign it in."?

PM: Look, I'll refer you back to the comments the Minister of Finance himself has made about the meeting that he had last week, which I think has been somewhat misrepresented.

Media: Who do you think is odds on to win the World Cup at this stage?

PM: If I had McAnulty here, I'd tell him to give you some bookie's odds, but I generally don't tend to offer them myself.

Media: Have you been watching any games?

PM: I'm heading off to one on Friday, but, to be honest, I haven't had the opportunity to see many other than the Kiwi games.

Media: It did the trick last week, so, you know, the Matildas have got a big game tonight. Would you be willing to, you know, do the favour again?

PM: I think I already did make—I made my contribution for Australia last week.

Media: Is \$17.80 an hour enough to live on?

PM: In the context of paid parental leave, I'd note that paid parental leave is a supplement to help parents to have more choices. Of course, I know from experience and from other families that I've spoken to that they will also draw on other financial sources when

they have new babies, as well. We'll always look at how we can better support parents to have more choices.

Media: It's lower than the minimum wage.

PM: Point noted—thank you.

Media: Just on your energy announcement, is there any chance that these three wind farms and nine solar farms won't be approved?

PM: It's a fast track consenting process—so it still has to go through a consenting process, as I indicated. There are still some criteria it needs to meet, but it cuts about 18 months off that timetable.

Media: So there's a chance that they won't get approved?

PM: There's always a chance. But in order to refer them to the fast-track consenting process, they'd have to have a pretty robust case to get through that particular gate.

Media: So why have you come out today and announced them when they actually might not go ahead?

PM: Because we've been transparent around the fast-track consenting and the fact that we are making it a priority to get more of these projects through the consenting process.

Media: Yeah, and we understand that. You know, you're celebrating the jobs and the amount of clean energy that this is going to create, but, actually, there's a chance they might not happen.

PM: Well, regularly we will announce things that haven't been consented yet. Typically, new roads get announced before they've been consented, as well.

Media: So is the 100 percent renewable energy target still 2030?

PM: We haven't changed that.

Media: Will this help us get there any quicker?

PM: Certainly, more renewable energy projects—be they solar or be they wind—going through a fast-track consenting process and, potentially, coming on stream faster are going to help us get to that target.

Media: So can it help us get there any quicker—because you're fast tracking them, are we going to get to 100 percent renewable before 2030 now?

PM: 2030 is still a very ambitious timetable.

Media: So do we need it to hit the 2030?

PM: It certainly helps.

Media: Speaking of your finance Minister, what are we to make of his now repeated attempts to try and persuade us that boondoggles can actually turn into good things, and what have you read into that?

PM: I cannot promise you that I will be as humorous in my discussion of boondoggles as the Minister of Finance is, but I'll let him speak to his own comments on that.

Media: Has he given away the game?

PM: Well, no, I don't think so.

Right, are there any other questions that—

Media: So you ruling out GST off fresh fruit and veg [*Inaudible*] appear to have given away the game?

PM: I—you've left me speechless, Jenna.

Media: Just on the [*Inaudible*] announcements today, some of the fast tracking for them had already been previously announced [*Inaudible*] that's not all new fast-tracking announcements today, is it?

PM: The wind farm ones are the new ones that we are announcing today, and then solar ones—I think some of them might have been. OK—

Media: [*Inaudible*] a re-announcement of the fast tracking?

PM: What was that?

Media: So it's a renouncement of the fast tracking?

PM: It's a summary of the recent decisions that we've taken around fast-track consenting.

Media: Of the 108 projects that have been referred to fast tracking, do you know how many have been approved?

PM: I can get you that number; I haven't got that with me. Of course, not all of those are energy projects. There's a number of land development projects that have gone through the fast-track process, as well.

Media: Do you have like a percentage?

PM: I haven't got it with me, but I certainly can get it for you.

Media: If the consents are approved, when will the first towers be installed and when will the first panels be up?

PM: That ultimately comes back to the companies who are constructing them, and, obviously, we'd like to see them done as soon as possible.

Media: Like a year, six months—what are we talking here?

PM: Well, again, that'll come down to the companies who are building them.

OK, thanks everyone.

conclusion of press conference