

POST-CABINET PRESS CONFERENCE: MONDAY, 24 APRIL

PM: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. As you know, Hekia Parata and Murray McCully will be attending their final Cabinet meeting next week, so today I'm announcing their replacements as Ministers of Education and Foreign Affairs, as well as some other changes. Ms Parata will be succeeded as education Minister by Nikki Kaye, who is well placed to assume responsibility for education, having done an extended apprenticeship as the Associate Minister of Education and having particular interest, energy, and motivation.

Mr McCully will be replaced by Gerry Brownlee, who is relinquishing his roles as Minister supporting Christchurch, Minister of Defence, Minister of Civil Defence, and Leader of the House so that he can take on the time-consuming responsibility for advocating on New Zealand's behalf internationally, particularly at a time of significant global instability.

I want to pay tribute to the outstanding contribution Ms Parata and Mr McCully have made in their ministerial roles. Ms Parata's relentless focus on student achievement has changed the conversation about learning in all our schools and driven sharp rises in achievement, particularly for our Māori and Pasifika students. Mr McCully has improved existing relationships and developed new relationships between New Zealand and other countries while running a truly independent foreign policy for New Zealand. This is not an easy feat, but one he has accomplished in an increasingly complex world.

I also want to pay tribute to Mr Brownlee for his unceasing efforts to put Christchurch back on its feet after the 2011 earthquakes, and the enormous personal commitment that he's made to that work, now over 7 years.

None of these Ministers will be easily replaced, but National has a significant depth of talent within its Cabinet and in its caucus, and I'm excited to have the opportunity to promote some of that talent today. Careful stewardship of the Government's books has given all of these Ministers an opportunity to make a difference to people's lives, and we're going to continue to grasp that opportunity. Mr Brownlee will be replaced as the Minister supporting Christchurch regeneration by Nicky Wagner, he will be replaced as Defence Minister by Mark Mitchell, and Nathan Guy will take on the civil defence portfolio. Mr Mitchell has been promoted to Cabinet. The new Leader of the House will be Simon Bridges, who will be supported, as Deputy Leader of the House, by Michael Woodhouse.

In other changes, Tim Macindoe, the senior Government whip, former chairman of the Justice and Electoral select committee, and Scott Simpson, the chairman of the Local Government and Environment select committee, have been appointed Ministers outside Cabinet. Tim Macindoe will be Minister of Customs and Associate Minister of Education and Associate Minister of Transport. Scott Simpson will be Minister of Statistics and Associate Minister for Immigration and, also, Associate Minister for the Environment portfolio, where the Government is devoting increasingly more time and resource.

I've also made some small changes in the housing portfolios. Social housing Minister Amy Adams will remain responsible for Housing New Zealand and all aspects of the Government's supply of social and emergency housing. That means she'll be assuming responsibility for the Crown Land Programme and, also, have closer involvement in the Government's overall house-building programme as we consolidate the Government's three different house-building programmes into one, and she'll take on responsibility for the Tāmaki redevelopment programme with finance Minister Steven Joyce. These are responsibilities that were held by Minister Nick Smith, and he will retain his building and construction portfolio and environment portfolio, both of which focus strongly on the regulatory aspects of housing, while Minister Adams focuses on the Government building programme.

The new Ministers will be sworn in next Tuesday and the new Cabinet will meet for the first time on May the 8th.

In terms of my activities, I'll be attending two Anzac services in Wellington tomorrow. I will be in Queenstown, also tomorrow and Wednesday morning, Auckland on Wednesday, Waikato on Thursday and Friday, and Christchurch on Saturday and Sunday for the National Party's Mainland Regional Conference.

Any questions?

Media: What skills do you think Gerry Brownlee brings to the Foreign Minister's role—has he got the tact and diplomacy to do that role?

PM: Yes, I think he has. I mean, Gerry has built up a very significant set of relationships with our partners through his role as a Defence Minister and has done a very good job of that in a relatively short time. I think in Christchurch he's shown the ability to be blunt when he needs to be but also diplomatic when he needs to be, and very effective.

Media: You don't see that bluntness as being a problem at all? I mean, he can sort of hit back at his critics from time to time publicly.

PM: Oh, sometimes. But, look, I think he's keen to take on the portfolio. I think he understands the demands of it and the experience that he's shown, the skills that he's shown in Defence on the diplomatic side of it mean he's very well positioned for this.

Any other questions?

Media: Oh, yeah—could you just clarify the role for Amy Adams, who's just taking on those three strands? Could you just explain that a bit more?

PM: OK, well, the idea there is just to consolidate the Government house-building programme. So we've had three streams of that: Housing New Zealand, who have their own building programme; the Crown Land Programme, which has been overseen by Nick Smith; and also Tāmaki Regeneration. These are quite large programmes, so we're just taking the opportunity to consolidate the building programmes under one Minister and the regulation for the whole housing market remains with Nick Smith. There's just too much of it to put under one Minister because of the complexity, so that's how we're tidying it up.

Media: So am I right in saying that the Crown land part was previously under Minister Smith, and that now comes across and under Minister Adams?

PM: That's right, and Minister Smith was also a shareholder in the Tāmaki Regeneration Company—TRG—and that's a big, big building programme of its own. But we're consolidating those under Amy Adams.

Media: And do you expect there to be more Government building initiatives announced before the election that fit along with what we're seeing in Tāmaki and Northcote—do you expect to see others added to what the Minister is responsible for?

PM: Yes.

Media: And how significant—how many more are you envisaging?

PM: Well, there's—I mean, we're thoroughly—we're into the implementation phase at the moment, and the Housing New Zealand plan is coming along, so there'll be announcements about that.

Media: Are we talking about announcements like Northcote, like Tāmaki, but in other areas of Auckland?

PM: Well, and an overall plan.

Media: Will Gerry Brownlee be the Foreign Minister after September if National wins the next election?

PM: Well, he'll—you know, I'm appointing him now as Foreign Minister, and it's certainly my expectation that if we win the election, he'll continue as Foreign Minister.

Media: Even if someone like Winston Peters or Shane Jones wants the role, and you need their support?

PM: Well, that's—you know, Gerry's the guy we want as Foreign Minister, and depending on what—you know, to some extent, any ministerial position, including the prime ministerial position, depends on what voters hand us in the electorate. But we're not making this appointment on an interim basis.

Media: Did other Ministers put their hand up for the Foreign Minister role? Was it a competition?

PM: Oh, there's always plenty of interest in ministerial roles, no matter what they are, including Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Media: If this reshuffle leaves you without any Minister capable of speaking Te Reo, apart from yourself—

PM: Mine's rather limited, I have to say.

Media: —is that a gap, and, if so, would you look at filling it one way or another?

PM: I would hope, in the long run, we're able to do that. We're just not able to at the moment, but the National Party has, you know, in the last few months, selected some Māori candidates and, you know, they're certainly not going to be in the Cabinet in a hurry, but it's a capacity we'd like to have.

Media: Mark Mitchell's promotion to Cabinet and Defence—why have you done that?

PM: Well, he has a good track record as the chair of the, I think, Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade select committee—in fact, built quite a reputation there for both his competence and his ability to build relationships. So he's been promoted outside Cabinet just 2 or 3 months ago. He also has a, you know, fairly unique personal background that's relevant to the portfolio, so I'm quite satisfied that he's a newer Minister with the skills that are required. I'll be working with him in my capacity as Prime Minister and he'll be also working with Gerry Brownlee, and I think it'll be a pretty good team.

Media: Did Gerry Brownlee give you any indication if he was to remain an electorate MP?

PM: Been no suggestion that he wouldn't.

Media: Will Mark Mitchell remain in land information?

PM: Yes, he will.

Media: Prime Minister, before you became Prime Minister Nick Smith was the Minister of Housing; he's now the Minister for Building and Construction and you've stripped him of some of his major responsibilities. Has he done something wrong or something?

PM: Oh no, we certainly haven't stripped him of his major responsibilities. I mean, his major responsibilities are Minister for the Environment—that remains unchanged—and the Minister for Building and Construction. Building and construction is a portfolio that is fundamentally about the regulation of the building and construction sector, obviously enough. The development roles that he's had were really ones that were opportunistic. So he ended up in the Crown Land Programme because he got heavily involved with emergency housing in Christchurch, and the team was transferred to Auckland. But now that's all set up and a lot of the complicated land and iwi work has been done. It's really just now a construction programme and, therefore, we can consolidate it with some of the other functions in Auckland, rather than running it out of the office here—running it out of MBIE here in Wellington. So it's just a practical shift.

Media: Shouldn't read anything into it?

PM: No, just that—well, the only thing you should read into it is that the Government has got a large-scale building programme and we're consolidating that—the management of it—so it's effective and we can get scale, and we'll be talking a bit more about that over the next 3 or 4 months.

Media: Do you think there should be extra security on flights coming in from Muslim-majority countries?

PM: Well, look, in the end, that's a matter for CAA. They make those decisions independently. So they're considering it now—that a number of our security partners have put those arrangements in place. I always think with this particular proposition there is a balance there between the inconvenience for passengers, many of whom live off their laptop if they're regular travellers, on the one hand, but on the other hand, making sure that, you know, flying is safe. So the CAA are looking at it.

Media: Why are they looking at it?

PM: I think mainly because some other countries have done it.

Media: Right, so we're simply following what the US, the UK, and Australia are doing?

PM: Well, that's a reason to look at it. I mean, these are countries with whom we work pretty closely on security issues, so if they've made the decision, then there'll be reasons for that and CAA are looking at it.

Media: What sort of measures could be put in place?

PM: Well, look, I'm only familiar with what's been stated publicly, and that is that larger electronic devices wouldn't be able to go on the plane.

Media: Do you think it was mistimed for Simon Bridges to be talking about putting these measures in place, given he's trying to promote New Zealand to the Middle East?

PM: Oh no, I think he's just responding to the obvious public interest in it, and, remember, we're not talking about "the Middle East", which is actually dozens of countries, we're talking about seven or eight countries, which have been regarded by the US in particular as higher-risk destinations.

Media: In his statement, the Minister seemed to be lamenting the non-uniform nature of the ways some of these regulations have been put in place—different regulations between the US and the UK, Australia, etc.. Do you agree with that or would you like to see one uniform rule put in place throughout these countries?

PM: Look, I think it's unlikely to be all exactly the same. Everyone likes to make their own rules. In fact, they all face, you know, slightly different security risks and you'd expect them to deal with it differently. And I think New Zealand needs to keep that in mind. We are a safer place than most of these other countries; we're just further away. And, in that sense, we want to make sure that the requirements we put in place are tailored to what suits us.

Media: When you're in Queenstown will you be having a meal or a meeting with the guests from overseas that are currently there?

PM: Yes, I will.

Media: Can you confirm that it's "Five Eyes" people, and, if so, can you tell who's there—who's come?

PM: I can confirm that it's "Five Eyes"—just part of the regular cycle of conferences that are held by the people we work with most closely on security. But I can't confirm who's there.

Media: Can you explain why the plane seems to have moved to Invercargill?

PM: It's probably a more attractive destination if they want to have a good holiday. It's unfortunate they didn't have to drive through Dipton to get there.

Media: So there are no further meetings down there?

PM: Not as far—I don't know anything about that. I think my plane's going to be landing in Queenstown.

Media: Why is the CIA director and the FBI director here if it's a "Five Eyes" meeting? Because aren't they from different sort of realms than "Five Eyes"?

PM: No. We would expect that all the countries who are part of "Five Eyes" will be represented. It's up to them who they send.

Media: Have you had any more advice from the Australian Government on the immigration changes they announced last week?

PM: No, we haven't, but officials are working with them to make sure that the impact on New Zealand, particularly the arrangement was put in place for the path to citizenship—that that impact is understood and taken into account, and there will be ongoing discussion about that.

Media: Doesn't it completely undermine those gains last year, given that Kiwis who arrived there after 2001 will now have to wait another 3 or 4 years to get citizenship?

PM: No, I wouldn't agree it completely undermines it, just because the deal was put in place, and there is a path to citizenship that wasn't there before Prime Minister Turnbull agreed to put it in place. But it is disappointing for them—for the Kiwis—and for ourselves that it looks like it'll take longer. We are just going through a discussion with them to make sure we all understand what's intended, the impact on New Zealanders, and what possibilities there are for dealing with that.

Media: Would you seek an exemption or anything for New Zealanders, if you raise it with Turnbull?

PM: Well, we've got time to consider that, but we want to make sure there's a good official discussion, and, no doubt, one of the early duties of the new Minister of Foreign Affairs will be to engage with the Australian system on this.

Media: What will he be saying to the Australians, and what have you said so far, about how this is a disappointing move?

PM: We haven't expressed a view from either myself or Ministers at this stage. We are going through a process—as I said, the officials are going through a process of understanding exactly what the decision is. It was one that appeared at pretty short notice with very rapid application, so we want to make sure that, as I said, all the implications are understood. But, on the face of it, it is disappointing that New Zealanders would have to wait longer.

Media: So Australia's Foreign Minister can expect a dressing down from Gerry Brownlee on this issue?

PM: I don't think that would be the Australian Foreign Minister's expectation. You know, look, we understand that Australia has a strong focus on its border control and citizenship. New Zealanders are caught up in that and we want to make sure that we can maintain the ongoing special relationship and improve conditions and better deals for Kiwis who are in Australia. This is just another issue that we need to work through pretty carefully to see where we can get to.

Media: Prime Minister, just going back to potential security measures in the Middle East: do you think that we could potentially see the number of flights being cut back from carriers such as Emirates? They've sort of done that in the US following their announcement.

PM: I imagine that's something that you'd take into consideration if you're considering passenger convenience, and I think it's quite important that that is considered. In the end CAA will make their decision based on their statutory obligations. As the Minister's pointed out, they're considering it, and we'll just have to see where they get to.

Media: Are you aware of any sort of lobbying from Air New Zealand, because there is speculation out there that part of these moves are to sort of limit the huge power and reach that Emirates Airlines has over flights.

PM: No, I'm not aware of that, and I'd be surprised if the lobbying effort was that complex and sophisticated—you know, to promote a security measure that might have an indirect impact. You know, I think the focus of CAA needs to be just simply about the passengers—are they safe, and can we achieve their safety with the minimum inconvenience, because all these security measures, each one of them, creates some more inconvenience?

Media: Prime Minister, if you do get a chance to have a meeting or meet with CIA Director Mike Pompeo or FBI Director James Comey, what would you say to them? Is there anything you'd like to say to them?

PM: Well, if I'm there I'll be discussing with, you know, whoever is representing those countries, just to simply reaffirm the relationship. The "Five Eyes" relationship is important to the security of New Zealanders around the world, and these are the people we work with, and I think, you know, it's become increasingly obvious, I think, as you deal with these supranational threats like ISIS, that you work together with other countries. We just want to make sure they understand our commitment to it.

Media: Was there any suggestion that New Zealand's not really pulling its weight inside "Five Eyes"?

PM: Oh, look, I think there may have been in the past, but we've, certainly in the last few years, we've completely revamped our legislation around security in a way that I think has been quite an achievement for the New Zealand Parliament and for Minister Finlayson, and been through a complete financial restructuring related to that, which is making sure that our security services are adequately resourced, and I think that means that we've got a very credible effort.

Media: Prime Minister, what's New Zealand's position on the threat from North Korea to Australia?

PM: In a sense it's just more of the same from North Korea—being provocative and threatening with any number of countries. It's good to see China and the US working constructively on trying to resolve this without conflict. When they make a threat like that it's questionable as to whether they can deliver on that threat. Certainly the advice I've had is it would be very difficult for them to extend that kind of threat to New Zealand, let alone—and probably not to Australia. But it just tells you how important it is that North Korea comes into line with appropriate international behaviour and the resolutions the UN's passed, and China and the US have enough influence that I think we can be a bit optimistic that sufficient pressure can be applied that there's no conflict.

Media: So you have had some advice on whether this is a realistic threat to Australia, and, as you said then, to New Zealand as well—what was the advice?

PM: I haven't got particular official advice. It's just my understanding from my own reading about their capacities that they'd be pretty stretched. I mean, they tried to launch a missile the other day and it blew up. So while they're very threatening in their rhetoric, we hope there doesn't have to be any testing of whether they can deliver.

Media: Do you think you should get some official advice—

PM: I would expect it's coming.

Media: Because, you know, what are we relying on at the moment—your own reading of it?

PM: Ah, no, I would expect that advice is coming.

Media: Is that a top priority for Gerry Brownlee as Foreign Minister—the Korean situation? What is his—is that going to be a big top priority?

PM: Oh, look, it will be a priority, just because so many of our partners, and particularly in this part of the world, are focused on it. And his defence background, I think, puts him in good stead to be able to make our contribution.

Media: But do you think one of his priorities should be to get you some advice on whether this is a threat to New Zealand or not?

PM: No, as I said, I'm pretty sure—I'm sure that advice is coming, that sort of technical official advice. OK? Thank you very much.

conclusion of press conference