

POST-CABINET PRESS CONFERENCE: MONDAY, 19 FEBRUARY 2018

PM: Right, good afternoon, everyone. My apologies up-front that this'll be slightly shorter than usual. I'm due in Dunedin for their convocation this afternoon. I'm hoping that I will be able to return to Wellington given our impending weather event. On that note, Cyclone Gita—we are watching closely how it is progressing and any potential impact on New Zealand or the degree of that impact. Later this afternoon, civil defence Minister Kris Faafoi, our climate change Minister, James Shaw, and Associate transport Minister Julie Anne Genter will be visiting the Met Service headquarters in Wellington to get a briefing on how the cyclone is tracking and its possible force. I know a lot of work is going on in preparation, particularly on the West Coast of New Zealand. We'll be looking to make sure that we are ready in support of efforts on the ground.

In terms of the rest of this week, though, I want to flag that on Wednesday it is our intention to release the national impact statement for the CPTPP. It is also our hope, our strong hope, that we will be in a position to release the text of the agreement at that time also. You'll recall that it's been our frustration that because not all parties have yet agreed to the release of that text in parts, and translation issues, that that has been held up. We have been urging all parties to reach agreement because of our strong desire to be absolutely transparent around the text as soon as possible. So, as I say, it is our hope that it will be available at the same time as we release the national impact assessment. But either way, we're looking to release the national impact assessment this week.

We're also already undergoing public meetings to hear feedback and to make sure that we are flagging with those who are interested the range of changes that have occurred to the CPTPP. There is a meeting tonight, for instance, in Christchurch and there've been others already, and that's all in the lead-up to the deadline that's currently set for a signing in Chile on March 8—keeping in mind, of course, signing doesn't mean that it is then in force. That requires the ratification at least by 50 percent of signatories before that happens. We'll also be making sure before the signing that there is a debate in Parliament, and, of course, the full select committee examination where the public will have a chance to have their say as well.

On Thursday I'll be attending the public civic service to commemorate the seventh anniversary of the Canterbury earthquakes. I also will be looking to make an announcement in the area that's specific to Christchurch around the challenges that young people are facing there in the aftermath of the quakes. And that night I will be presenting the New Zealander of the Year award in Auckland.

On Friday we will be in Gisborne alongside the Minister for Regional Economic Development, Shane Jones, and we'll be launching the provincial growth fund and announcing the first tranche of projects alongside that. Then I will be returning to Wellington for the opening of the New Zealand Festival.

I want to speak very briefly, though, before I open for questions around the announcement that the Deputy Prime Minister has made around the Pacific Mission. Obviously, the Pacific Mission is something that we routinely undertake as a Government. I will be leading that mission alongside the Deputy Prime Minister and it will be taking place from 4 to 9 March. We'll be visiting Tonga, Samoa, Niue, and the Cook Islands. Many of you will be familiar with the make-up of those missions. This one will be slightly different. We will be taking a smaller delegation than usual and there will be a particular focus on the recovery post-Gita, and so that will be reflected in the make-up of those that we will be taking with us. But it will also include MPs, Pasifika community leaders, NGOs, and, of course, representatives from your good selves. Right; I'm open to taking questions.

Media: Prime Minister, how concerned are you about reports of a break-in at Professor Anne-Marie Brady's house and the suggestion that that may be linked to her work on Chinese influence in New Zealand?

PM: Yeah, of course, I've seen the public reports on that, but only the public reports. Of course I think anyone would be concerned that any criminal act, if it were in response to the work that she's doing—everyone would be concerned about that. So, certainly, if there's evidence of that, we should be taking stock of it and taking action.

Media: Are you seeking any further information in your role as national security and intelligence Minister?

PM: I've only just been advised of the public reports, but I'll certainly ask some questions in that regard.

Media: She was in Australia to speak at a parliamentary committee looking at legislation over there around foreign influence.

PM: Yes.

Media: She described New Zealand as being a couple of years behind Australia when it comes to, sort of, putting in place measures to deal with this. Are we a little bit behind the game, in terms of dealing with the reality of what's happening?

PM: I think it is fair to say that we've dealt with these issues differently, but I wouldn't for a moment concede that we aren't live to issues of foreign influence generally—constantly making sure that our laws are up to date and fit for purpose. But keeping in mind, for instance, some of our laws are already quite different to Australia, particularly for instance funding—our electoral laws. But that doesn't mean we can't constantly appraise whether or not they are up to scratch.

Media: Prime Minister, can I just clarify—so will you be seeking any official information about whether this related to anything regarding her work?

PM: Oh, look, I'll have to make sure that I don't breach anyone's privacy in asking questions about something that's specific to an incident at her home. But I would certainly want to be informed if there was evidence that this was a targeted action against someone who was raising issues around foreign interference.

Media: Do you know if the Defence Force killed a child, a civilian child, in 2010?

PM: No, I can't speak to that directly, Lloyd. If you've got a specific issue or piece of evidence you want me to take a look at, I'd be happy to.

Media: In Afghanistan, the allegations in *Hit & Run*.

PM: Oh, right, yeah—well, *Hit & Run*, obviously we said that we wanted to look further into the allegations that were made, and as I've said before, that's a piece of work that I've asked Minister Parker, in his role, to undertake.

Media: Where is that at? Where's he at with that?

PM: I would have to ask Minister Parker for an update. We spoke last week. He's progressing that piece of work, but we are looking for ways to make sure that people can have confidence in the work that we would do in that area.

Media: Do you think they do have confidence in that area, I mean, considering the OIAs that have come out?

PM: Well, look, as in Opposition, we certainly believe that there were questions that were raised that needed to be answered, and now it's about us making sure, now we're in Government, that we do that.

Media: Do you plan to attend King Tuheitia annual regatta in Waikato next month?

PM: Yes. No, I have seen dates for the regatta, and whilst I have some diary issues, I'm very keen to make sure I have a substantive meeting with the Kīngitanga movement and with King Tuheitia. So that's my intention. At the moment I understand my meeting is scheduled for late March, and so that will give me a chance to have a more substantive conversation than I might be able to have alongside the fringes of the regatta.

Media: Are you thinking about what sort of reception you might get up there, given the last time a Labour leader was up there was when Andrew Little left shortly before the coronation speech, where the Māori King declared he was never going to vote for Labour again?

PM: No, no, I'm not concerned. No, in fact, I see it as a good opportunity for us to talk about, you know, future work that we can undertake together. I had a very brief conversation with King Tuheitia in the margins of Rātana, when we were both—after the official welcome. And that was the time where we discussed how useful it would be for us to talk at greater length, and now we have that meeting booked for the end of March. So I'm looking forward to that.

Media: There was a lot of criticism that Tukoroirangi Morgan was meddling with the Kīngitanga. Andrew Little made those comments as well as other Labour MPs at the time when Rāhui Papa was endorsed. He's no longer the Māori Party president; however, Che Wilson, at the weekend, was elected. He is also one of the King's advisors and is on Tekau-mā-rua. Are you concerned that that conflicts with [*Inaudible*] and what that will mean?

PM: No. No, look, regardless of any affiliation that exists between advisors at all within that movement, my relationship is between this Government and the Kīngitanga movement, and I am not going to let any of that get in the way of us having a really beneficial relationship. So, from my perspective, we're starting afresh, and I won't let that taint any of our engagement.

Media: Are you expecting the Kīngitanga to provide another baby name for you?

PM: Do you know what? It is the area that I hail from. You know, I was born in Hamilton and, most of the time, raised in Morrinsville. So I do have a local connection. But I can't prejudge what might happen in that meeting or what might be suggested, in that regard

Media: [*Inaudible*] questioning about the regatta coming up, the Kīngitanga described their relationship with Government as warm. What do you say to that?

PM: Yeah, and I would certainly agree with that. For us, though, it's about, then, saying, "Well, what can we do together?" And I've had very preliminary conversations—as I say, informally. I would like to make sure that we put a bit more time and invest in that relationship, and extend that conversation when I meet at the end of March.

Media: There was a story that was written on Saturday by Jon Stephenson about New Zealand troops operating out of Qatar. Why wasn't the public told about that?

PM: Yeah, I would need to go back and look at any public releases that were made at that time, keeping in mind these were decisions that were made well beyond this Government—questions over mandate were all decided before this Government, as well. So what I need to make sure is that I'm looking at all of the current relevant information for ongoing decisions that we need to make, and all of the ones that have been referenced thus far have not related to decisions that the Cabinet or myself have made.

Media: Sure, but were you aware that they were operating out of there, and once you discovered that, do you think that your Government should have told the public?

PM: A lot of the briefings that I receive in this area often in response—actually, that's not—we get an overview as required. I don't like to go into too many of the details around what triggers those conversations, but it's fair to say that we have not made any of those decisions, and the decisions we're likely to make will be around future deployment, not past.

Media: So you're saying as Prime Minister you have an overview of what our defence forces are doing?

PM: Of course I do, but I don't discuss in detail anything that affects the security of individual deployments. But what I can tell you is that I've not been responsible for any of the decisions that have been raised with me by the media to date.

Media: The coalition agreement includes a provision for a review of local government. When do you think that might be announced, and will it include a consideration of Māori wards on local bodies?

PM: Yeah, we haven't announced any particular dates, firming up, but that's something that we're considering at the moment, and who's best to undertake that piece of work, and when we have an announcement on it, we'll make sure that we let you know.

Media: But what—

PM: There's a number of things obviously set out in our coalition agreements that we need to make sure that we stage, based on the capacity of each of those departments to undertake that work.

Media: What's your thinking, though, on the question of Māori wards?

PM: That these are, at the moment, issues that councils are individually dealing with.

Media: Shane Jones has ruled out his funding for four lanes to Whangarei, and there's the provincial growth fund announcement on Friday. Has your Government looked any further at funding that?

PM: Ah, and this was raised when we were at Waitangi. We absolutely agree that there are safety issues with some lengths of the road that have been brought into question, and NZTA have been actively looking at projects in that area, but no final decisions have been made. But as Minister Jones has pointed out, there's obviously priorities in that area where we believe we can make a bigger economic development impact. Rail is also a big priority for that area too.

Media: Prime Minister, just a question from Mike Wesley-Smith from *The Nation*: the royal commission of inquiry into State abuse. Michael Cullen has said that faith in royal commissions in New Zealand is as misplaced as faith in the courts. What is your response to that?

PM: Look, the royal commission that we've instigated has primarily been driven out of those who are survivors of abuse in State care who have asked us to undertake a piece of work that is as independent from us as it can be. A royal commission is the best way to deliver that. I think a lot of those survivors are placing hope in that process, and it's up to the royal commission and us to make sure we get it right so that their faith is not misplaced.

Media: Is that faith misplaced, though, because they think there's going to be some kind of outcome—someone held accountable?

PM: The only reason we go into these pieces of work is so that there will be an outcome. We have tried to make it really clear. If people are pursuing individual justice against, for instance, criminal acts that may have been perpetrated against them, then that needs to be pursued with the police. The royal commission overall is trying to make sure that the State doesn't repeat any of the mistakes that it's made in the past.

Media: And just on another matter: Mark Mitchell, what do you make of Mark Mitchell?

PM: Oh—ha! I've tried, by and large, to stay out of the contest between leadership contenders, other than to wish them well. Of course, having been there before, just as a member of a political party, I understand these can be challenging times. So I wish each candidate well in their endeavours.

Media: There are now four candidates in the race. Do you have a favourite you'd like to go up against?

PM: I definitely wouldn't be picking favourites. That's not my job.

Media: Are you scared of any of them?

PM: No, no. And nor would I expect any of them to be scared of anyone on the opposite side. You know, I'm sure we all see each other as formidable, and it's a matter, really, then for the party to pick who they would rather put up to lead them through to 2020, which is every individual party's duty.

Media: It's well known that Mark Mitchell and Winston Peters are very close. Does that worry you?

PM: No, not at all. I would say that I get on with Mr Mitchell well, and there are other members of the National Party that I've worked well with in the past. That doesn't change my view that it's a decision for the National Party. I don't think it would add to anyone's campaign if I was going around giving opinions on different contenders.

Media: Would you see any significance in the strong possibility that this could be female v female in New Zealand politics, which would be a bit of a first, wouldn't it?

PM: Yeah, but it shouldn't particularly be noteworthy, should it? I don't think anyone was aghast when we had, for instance, Andrew Little versus Bill English. So I hope we get to a point where it becomes something that's not really of note.

Media: PM, could I ask about [Inaudible]. Kuwait—did New Zealand send someone to that meeting in Kuwait last week about the—

PM: Yes, we did have representation at the meeting in Kuwait. In fact, I think I flagged it at the last post-Cab.

Media: So have you received any briefings from that meeting?

PM: Not yet.

Media: [Inaudible] that the Green Party [Inaudible] was it in the New Zealand First policy [Inaudible] for the last election. [Inaudible] duty of care [Inaudible]

PM: Look, speaking generally, because, of course, these were negotiations held in good faith between the Labour party and two distinct parties, and, of course, it was up to me in a blind negotiation to do my best to take into account various considerations. But what we have now is a piece of legislation that's been supported in order to be considered at select committee, and I think that's a useful time for all different members of Parliament to have their say on what would give them the greatest comfort for that piece of legislation.

Media: Does the Government plan to send anyone to the ASEAN-Australia meeting next month?

PM: I would need to check with my officials on that specifically.

Media: And just related that, there's been murmurs again that New Zealand and Australia could eventually become community partners in a deal. Has the Government given any thought towards that yet?

PM: In [Inaudible] or—

Media: ASEAN.

PM: On ASEAN—yeah, again, I would need to come back to you with some advice on that. Certainly, I know generally of the attendance for that meeting but I'd have to give you a specific name later if you don't mind.

Media: Have you caught up with the fact that Malcolm Turnbull's banned Ministers from having affairs with their staff?

PM: Yes, I have.

Media: Are you thinking of doing anything similar?

PM: No, I don't consider that to be necessary. My expectation is that my Ministers have a very clear sense of the expectations that we have of them in terms of their behaviour

Media: Just quickly on the cyclone, have you heard any sort of updates from a very high-level, kind of, viewpoint about what impact it's going to have?

PM: Look, as far as Gita, the updates that I was given just before midday today probably sits alongside those updates that you've received—that we are tracking its progress, trying to get a sense of its magnitude and making sure we have a coordinated response across areas where it might affect multiple local councils. As far as I'm aware, though, there's been really good conversations going on at local government level. I'll be making sure, from Dunedin, that I'm staying in touch with Civil Defence here centrally, and making sure that we're doing everything we can to support those communities and their preparation. But my strong advice would be locally keep an eye out for the advisories coming out of Civil Defence and Met Service, and please take those advisories seriously and prepare as much as you're able.

Media: Did you consider cancelling your trip to Dunedin, given the cyclone warning?

PM: Yes, I did see the cyclone warnings—constantly trying to weigh these things up. Of course, I understand that there's several thousand students attending this event, so I did feel a duty to make myself available for the commitment that I'd already made. And my hope is that I'll still be able to return. It won't be forever.

Media: Just because Audrey has already asked, a follow-up on a question about ministerial standards.

PM: I'll have to make this the last, I'm afraid.

Media: Would you not consider something similar to Australia because that activity is not happening here or because that activity isn't inappropriate?

PM: My expectation is that our Ministers already have a clear sense of the expectations I have around their behaviour, and that cuts across a wide area. I do not believe at this time that that's the kind of thing that is necessary for our New Zealand Ministers.

Media: Is it a sackable offence, though?

PM: A sackable offence? Look, we have a high standard of expectation for our Ministers, and I wouldn't want to be in a position of having to consider that kind of thing.

Media: Would you sack them, though, if you found out a Minister was in a relationship with a staffer?

PM: Again, as I've said, my expectation is that I will not have to deal with a hypothetical like that. Thanks, everyone.

conclusion of press conference