

POST-CABINET PRESS CONFERENCE: TUESDAY, 3 APRIL 2018

PM: Good afternoon, everyone. I hope everyone had a safe and enjoyable Easter. Look, before we talk about today's announcement—which, obviously, I have Ministers joining me for today—let me quickly run through the week ahead. Today and Wednesday I will be in Wellington, obviously, with Parliament sitting. On Thursday, I'm travelling to Central Otago for two days. On Thursday, I will open Waitaki Boys' High's new science building. On Friday, I'll be in Queenstown meeting representatives of the tourist industry, visiting a prefabricated building factory, meeting students at Mt Aspiring College, and talking to women involved in the wine industry—I have chosen the wrong timing for that. I will also launch and take part in the annual ideas festival in Wānaka called Aspiring Conversations, and I'm very much looking forward to meeting the former President of Ireland and former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson, who is also attending that conference. Over the course of this week I also intend to announce my programme around my trip to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, which kicks off at the end of next week.

But, for now, today's announcement: today we are shifting the focus of transport policy and releasing the draft Government Policy Statement on Land Transport—obviously, a piece of work which will have a huge impact from the Minister of Transport's perspective, from the Minister for Regional Economic Development's perspective, and also the Associate Minister who has a specific focus on transport safety. This Government is prioritising safety, investing in roads neglected under the last Government, supporting greater public transport use, and rapid transit. Our themes are very clear: as I said, safety, particularly coming out of another Easter break where we see more loss on our roads; access, be whether you live in regional New Zealand or whether you live in cities; and the environment; and also making sure we improve access to public transport, cycling, and initiatives that focus on less congestion. We're also focused on value for money. What you won't see under this Government is investment in a small number of dual carriage highways while local roads and safety and other transport options suffer.

I'm going to start by handing over to Minister Twyford and then move through the other Ministers for their perspective on this announcement today.

Hon Phil Twyford: Thank you, Prime Minister. I'm proud to be here with my colleagues and with the Prime Minister as she announces what we believe is a transformative transport strategy for New Zealand. Transport can be a powerful enabler of housing, employment, business, and regional economic development. It shapes our towns and cities. Underpinning this Government policy statement is our commitment to a transport system free of death and serious injury.

Over Easter, eight people died on our roads. It was the worst in eight years. This morning I read about Arteen and Radeen Mosaferi. On Good Friday, these two children were fatally injured when the vehicle they were in collided with another car and two trucks on the Desert Road. It was heartbreaking to read about how these two wonderful children died on our roads this weekend. On Monday, a driver and a passenger died following a two-car head-on crash on State Highway 10, just south of Kerikeri. These are not isolated stories. The fatality rate per billion kilometres travelled has risen 16 percent between 2013 and 2016. The number of fatalities and serious injuries are increasing at a much faster rate than can be explained by simple traffic growth. It's about how we drive and the roads we drive on. Over a hundred people have died between January and March 2018 on the roads. The deaths of our friends and family and neighbours is no longer a price we pay to travel. It is absurd to call it a road "toll". We will not tolerate it any longer.

Early work by the New Zealand Transport Agency and the Ministry of Transport suggests that there may be around \$800 million worth of high-value road safety improvements in

need of funding on local roads alone. It's estimated that once complete these improvements could prevent 160 deaths and serious injuries per year—160 deaths and serious injuries per year. And that's less than half the cost of the previous Government's East-West Link motorway project. This Government policy statement shifts priorities away from costly white elephants into making those high-value improvements that will save lives.

I want to make a comment about regional and local roads. Over the nine years of the last National Government's transport spending, spending through the National Land Transport Programme reduced in the West Coast, Taranaki, Southland, Otago, Northland, Hawke's Bay, Gisborne, and the Bay of Plenty. Every one of those regions had increased under the last Labour Government, many of them, in fact, doubled or tripled. Instead of hand-picked, low-value, and very expensive urban motorway projects, this Government will double the spending on regional road improvements over the next three years. Half of all vehicle journeys are on local roads, and yet less than only 5 percent of the National Land Transport Programme has been spent on improving them.

In order to fund its pet projects, National starved local and regional roads. Spending on local roads only increased by \$6 million across the nine years of the last Government. By comparison, the last Labour Government tripled the amount of funding over their nine years. This GPS, this Government policy statement, increases local road improvements by 43 percent over the decade.

On rapid transit, we're investing in high-quality rapid transit infrastructure to build livable cities and free up the roads. This is the first time that spending on rapid transit infrastructure will take place through the National Land Transport Programme. Auckland, Christchurch, and Wellington are lining up to build rapid transit infrastructure, and this Government policy statement will make it possible.

We've also created a new activity class in this Government policy statement, so that rail can be treated as land transport and funded alongside roads for the first time. The Government has started the process by which rail infrastructure can be assessed and funded against other transport initiatives. We believe it's time to assess every transport project against the same criteria, irrespective of the mode of transport.

Finally, on petrol excise and road-user charges—the two main sources of funds for the National Land Transport Fund—what this Government did not know when we took office, and what the previous Government did not disclose is that the New Zealand Transport Agency had advised Simon Bridges, the former transport Minister, that the petrol excise and road-user charges needed to increase to just pay for the previous Government's promises on a few hand-picked expressways—was needed in order to, in the scale of 10c to 20c per litre, to increase just to continue spending on those projects. We've chosen to limit the increases on petrol excise and road-user charges to the lowest end of Simon Bridges' range.

I'll now hand over to Minister Genter.

Hon Julie Anne Genter: Tēnā koutou katoa. As Associate Minister with specific delegation for road safety, I have said that safety is my number one priority in the transport portfolio. And you've heard from both the Prime Minister and the Minister of Transport just how great a focus safety is for the new policy statement on transport funding.

We can save lives if we choose to. So 20 years ago, Sweden had the same road-death rate as New Zealand. They changed their policy. They invested heavily in safety. And today Sweden is one of the safest places to drive in the world. If New Zealand had the same fatality rate as Sweden, we would have had 255 fewer people die on our roads last year, and I think that's something that we should aspire to as a country. Now, the last Government, you've heard, spent billions—not on roads across the country but just on a few small stretches of motorway. And that came at the cost of desperately needed safety upgrades right throughout the country where people are doing most of the driving.

To put it in perspective—and this is just an example—for half the cost of the East-West Link motorway project, which is only really a few kilometres long, we could afford median safety barriers down the middle of every kilometre of State highway in the country—that's just for half the cost. So by rebalancing the transport budget we can achieve far greater outcomes and we can save lives.

Of course, under this policy, the Government is proposing to invest \$1.5 billion in regional and local roads over the next three years, because that's where the vast majority of car and truck travel is, and all of our top most dangerous roads are actually local roads, not State highways. So under this policy, you can expect to see more median barriers, safe passing lanes, rumble strips, intersection upgrades, and all of that will make a real difference to the road toll.

Every day in Auckland a pedestrian is either killed or seriously injured after being struck by a car. That's a shocking statistic and it's completely unacceptable. So making our towns and cities easier and safer for people to walk and cycle around is also a priority that we will see within our towns and cities. Instead of having cars and people on bikes mixing on busy roads, we'll be providing safe cycleway infrastructure that separates people from traffic, and we have a real priority of focusing around schools, because we know it's basically a birthright for our kids to be able to walk and cycle safely to school, and that, right across the country, that is one of the most effective things we could do to reduce congestion, to improve the health of our kids, and to improve the overall effectiveness of our transport network.

I'll pass over to the Minister responsible for regional development.

Hon Shane Jones: Kia ora, folks. Naturally, I'll be encouraging all our civic leaders out in the provinces to participate vigorously via this discussion document. There will be scope in the provincial fund—the \$3 billion fund—for certain regional provincial projects in the event that local government itself is struggling to find the cash. Two examples come to mind: Tairāwhiti Gisborne—Meng Foon—and also, further north, in the Kaipara and the Far North District Council.

In the area I come from, in Northland, I have no doubt that I'll be engaged in some pretty vigorous debates, because the reality is that far too many of our stakeholders at the sub-national level of government in the provinces have been fed a line that all of their transport woes would be dealt to by extending expressways, four-lane highways, through every inch of the country. The document clearly states that we need to make choices, and the Prime Minister has outlined the broad parameters of those choices, but for the provinces there will be a significant increase of attention and pūtea to those roads that have been neglected, and including bridges. And we're—and I repeat: the case can't be made, because of the failure or inability on the part of local governments through their own rate-base, to get over the hurdle. It's not unreasonable that our provincial growth fund should address that.

This is not new. There were 42 projects identified in the McKinsey and the Deloitte's report over the last 18 months, two years, which was designed to improve infrastructure outcomes for tourism; very few of them actually got over the line.

On the question of KiwiRail, not surprisingly it's now come into the mix. It's a key feature of our party's conception as to how we get better freight movement outcomes, and also new tourism products. So I welcome the addition of rail as a part of the broader land transport options, and I look forward to hearing not only submissions but ideas from places, such as the port of Gisborne, as to how coastal shipping, over time, might also deliver better land transport outcomes. Thanks very much.

PM: All right. Happy to take questions on the announcement, then we can move to other business of the day.

Media: On this [*Inaudible*] here of increases, is this monetary increases that you're talking about—96 percent and 81 percent?

PM: Yes.

Media: That's monetary?

PM: Yes.

Media: Where's the money coming from?

PM: Obviously, there's RUC charges and fuel excise that goes into that pool of funding. That is then distributed by the land transport authorities. We're giving clear direction here in our expectation around how that then is utilised. Finer level details are made by them directly.

And, as Minister Twyford already talked about, we are consulting on, at the lower end of the range, excise increases. Simon Bridges was told that in order to meet his last Government's ambitions around dual carriage highways and large-scale roading projects, they would need to increase excise by between 10c and 20c. We're consulting on the lower end of that range, because we didn't agree with that.

Media: So that's a 10c petrol tax increase—

PM: What's been consulted on in this document is not unlike past Governments where there's been an increase in excise. I think we had an increase six times under the last Government. A fuel excise increase of roughly 9c to 12c over three years.

Media: Does that break your promise of no new taxes other than those coming out of the Tax Working Group?

PM: Excise has always been included in land transport by consecutive Governments. It is part of the way that we've continued to treat the Land Transport Fund and ensure that it's able to cover the costs of roading projects.

Media: Prime Minister, after you met the local government chiefs at Waitangi this year, Bill Shepherd, the chairman of the Northland Regional Council, said that you had given a positive reaction to his proposal that the State Highway 1 be four-laned from Whangarei to Auckland.

PM: He made a number of pitches, as did everyone that we met up North, around their view of what would improve economic development in their area. One of the things that's consistently raised with me at the same time are safety concerns around that stretch of road. And, of course, what we're prioritising here is, yes, greater investment in regional roading, but also safety improvements. We know up North what some of those are; they just haven't been actioned. So, yes, I did meet with them. I took on board a range of ideas, but also homed in on some of the specifics around what needed to be done on regional roads.

Media: A review of speed limits is also in there, in terms of targeting, potentially, the top 10 percent risky roads. What is your intention there, in terms of potential lowering of speed limits on some routes?

Hon Julie Anne Genter: The New Zealand Transport Agency already developed a speed management guide, and set goals around the first 10 percent of roads. We know that there are roads in New Zealand where the speed limit is inappropriate for the design of the road. So there are two things that need to happen. One is we need to invest in safety improvements of existing roads and, where it's appropriate, there might be changes to speed limits. But, ultimately, that is up to the road controlling authority. So at the Local Government Road Safety Summit this coming Monday, I'll be spending a whole day with elected officials from local governments, with NZTA, with Police, and other stakeholders. We'll be discussing all of the different ways central government can help support local government to implement any changes they need to to reduce deaths and serious injuries on their roads.

Media: So speed limits could be brought down on some State main highways?

Hon Julie Anne Genter: That's entirely possible. It'll ultimately be up to the road controlling authorities to make those decisions, but I would expect them to be informed by evidence. And our job, as central government, is to support local government to make the changes they need to make, whether they be infrastructure improvements or more appropriate speed limits.

Media: Could you say how much of the 9c to 12c a litre is going to go on train infrastructure as opposed to road infrastructure?

Hon Phil Twyford: It's not really possible to put a number on that, because the rail allocation within the National Land Transport Fund is one of I think about 10 different activity classes. It's programme funded. So it all goes in the pot and then is spent according to the activity classes.

Media: Why should car drivers pay for rail infrastructure?

PM: There are very good reasons why road taxes should be spent on investing in a modern transport system that is efficient and builds economically successful regions and livable cities. Let me give you an example. We're going to be spending—for the first time ever, through this policy, we're going to be investing in public transport and rapid transit in our largest cities, to an extent that we've never seen before. Now, in the cities, high-quality public transport—like, for example, the Northern Busway in Auckland—takes cars off the road and allows trucks and vans and commercial vehicles, and private drivers who have no other genuine choice. It keeps the roads moving freely, and that makes good economic sense.

The second thing is that this policy statement will guide the spending of about \$5 billion dollars a year over that 10-year period. Now, a billion of that annual expenditure comes from ratepayers, not from drivers. And so that's not a road tax tied to anything. So it's perfectly legitimate and, to be honest, we'd be mad as a country not to be making the investments in rail, in public transport, alongside our roads and highways to deliver livable cities and prosperous economy.

PM: And regional rail, as well.

Media: So it used to be a hypothecated fund, though, and you're breaking that—

Hon Phil Twyford: No, it's still hypothecated, so all of the revenue that goes into the National Land Transport Fund is hypothecated to land transport. That's in the Land Transport Management Act. Nothing is changing in that regard. I mean, rail is surely land transport; public transport is surely land transport. In fact, even, in the terms of the legislation, coastal shipping is land transport.

Media: What impact is this going to have on lower-income households?

Hon Phil Twyford: Well, it's often said by people that fuel taxes, for example, are regressive; that they hurt working people and low-income people, more. Actually, the thing that really hurts working people and low-income families is transport poverty, is lack of transport choices, and car dependency. In my electorate in west Auckland, it's not uncommon in some of the poorest streets to see five or six cars parked out in front of the house, because people simply don't have a decent public transport system that gives them alternatives. Our Government is committed to breaking that car dependency and giving people genuine choices. That is the best thing we can do for low-income families.

PM: Let's also keep in mind, in the regions we've had people living in regional New Zealand who've had consecutive increases in excise which has then benefited them almost nil. Their local roads have been neglected. There's been an assumption that local government will pick up the costs, and they haven't been able to. I grew up with the mantra "local people die on local roads". We need to start reinvesting in our regions, making sure that their roading infrastructure is not just adequate, it's safe. That hasn't happened in the past, and we're committing to do that now.

Hon Phil Twyford: So we are doubling regional road improvements under this policy. We're increasing new local roads by 42 percent; we're increasing State highway maintenance by 20 percent; more money than ever before is going to be spent in the regions under this policy.

Media: How much are the road-user charges—like \$30?

Hon Phil Twyford: So we're consulting on a range between 9c and 12c in total over a three-year period. That would be between 3c and 4c per year over three consecutive years.

Media: So like car registrations—could that go up, as well or just—

Hon Phil Twyford: No, we're just talking about road-user charges and the petrol excise.

Media: Can you explain what this means for the RONS, all this?

Hon Phil Twyford: For the—

Media: In terms of RONS, roads of national significance.

Hon Phil Twyford: Well, we don't have a policy called the roads of national significance.

Media: So those seven projects that currently exist, two of which are complete—

Hon Phil Twyford: So there were a set of projects under the last National Government that they called the roads of national significance. They are all either completed or in the process of being completed. So there are several of them where there is some contracted work that will be completed over the next few years. It's currently under way.

Media: So anything that was in the previous Government's roads of national significance, all of that work will continue as is.

Hon Phil Twyford: Yes.

Media: But the previous Government said they planned new RONS; which ones of those that are not emphasised, or you say shouldn't be—

PM: Planned—unfunded.

Hon Phil Twyford: They released a press release with some unfunded, uncosted promises of nine new expressways, during the election campaign. Now, those are all roads; they all exist in the Transport Agency's planning system and all of those roads will continue to have work done on them. But under our policy, there's going to be a much greater focus on safety.

Media: On that safety note, Julie Anne, you mentioned median barriers. Will we see median barriers down every kilometre of State highway?

Hon Julie Anne Genter: I don't think we'll see median barriers down every kilometre of State highway, but we will be seeing them where they're appropriate, and there will be a great deal of funding for it.

I think it's really important to emphasise just how expensive and wasteful the previous Government's spending on State highways was. I mean, they were literally spending the lion's share of the budget on projects that carry less than 4 percent of the cars and trucks every day. And when you put it in context that just for half of one of those projects we could have put median barriers down every kilometre of State highway, it emphasises how much we can afford to increase safety improvements, road maintenance, and all of the complementary aspects of our transport system just by scaling back some of these wasteful, very, very narrowly targeted highway projects that the last Government spent all the money on.

Media: Could Minister Jones tell us, please, what he thinks the chances are of this four-lane highway from Whangārei to Auckland, which is, as the Prime Minister said, one of the priorities for the local government in the region in terms of economic development?

PM: Well, I should say it was one of the things raised. I can't necessarily assume—

Media: Well, they said—they, themselves, afterwards said it was a priority, yeah.

Hon Shane Jones: I'm no stranger to the chair of our regional council at home, and the things that I would say we emphasised in the lead up to the Government was significant improvements in expenditure as an alternative to roads in the North for tourism and freight. And I don't resile from that one inch. I'm already on record: I would rather see egregious cases of dangerous roads, such as Loop Road, just south of Whangārei, that has been on the books since John Banks was the member for Whangārei; I'd rather see that fixed up rather than this pipe dream that one day, in 2032, somehow we were going to get a four-lane highway to Whangārei.

And one thing, during the election, I would say, I saw a great deal of alarm amongst garden-variety Kiwis, farmers, and related families, is when the Transport Agency started consulting during the course of the election—that in itself I thought was a bit weird—as to where the designations would go for the four-lane highway. So I just repeat what I've been saying: a focus on rail and, most importantly, a focus, in the short to medium term, tidying up those very dangerous areas of our northern road, such as Loop Road, given that forest trucks are still rumbling down those roads every single day.

Media: How much of the Land Transport Fund would you like to see dedicated to rail infrastructure?

Hon Phil Twyford: It's less than 10 percent currently, and I'm happy to give you the—if you dig into the document, Bernard, you'll see the exact numbers. There's a spending range every year for each year of the decade. It is significant that this is the first time that rail is funded out of the National Land Transport Programme. That is the country's transport budget. Up until now, it's been treated as a silo, to one side, and it's had to go cap in hand for funding for particular projects to the Crown.

We're not intending, through the National Land Transport Programme, under this Government policy statement, to take over the annual capital funding that the Crown makes as a shareholder to KiwiRail, for example. But under this policy statement, you will see particular transport, let's say solutions, that rail can deliver—particular upgrades or benefits to particular freight corridors, for example—funded through the National Land Transport Programme.

Media: Does this mean, though, that there will be a net increase in funding; because there's a risk here—

Hon Phil Twyford: Yes.

Media: —that you get motorists to pay extra for the Land Transport Fund, and then the Government spends less on its front directly.

Hon Phil Twyford: I think there will, in time; you'll see a net increase. And the reason is that one of the important principles in the Government policy statement is the idea of mode neutrality. It sounds nerdy, but the idea is that when we make these big transport investments for the good of the country, we should choose the right mix of things, whether it's road, rail, coastal shipping, freight hubs, and all the bits and pieces that connect the transport system together. We should make those decisions in the most rational way possible, to move freight as efficiently as possible around the country, and to move people around our towns and cities in the best way possible. And what we've had historically is a kind of one-trick pony that assumes that cars and trucks are the only transport solution to invest in.

Media: With the cost of living in Auckland the way it is and their regional fuel tax of 10c, do you think that Auckland drivers can afford an extra 20c a litre in fuel?

Hon Phil Twyford: I think that Auckland is exceptional right now, and I think that Aucklanders understand that what's happening right now is not working. Congestion has got measurably worse in the last few years. The city is losing \$1.3 billion a year in lost productivity because of gridlock. It's getting worse. We understand, Aucklanders

understand, that something's got to change and it's got to be paid for. And, as a Government, we can't stand up and ask the people of Palmerston North and Balclutha and Wanganui to fund 100 percent of the costs of Auckland's growth. We have to find revenue sources in Auckland, and the regional fuel tax is one way that we do that. But we're committed as a Government to fixing Auckland's transport problems and getting ahead of the growth, not constantly chasing it 20 years after the fact, but to do that we have to spend money, and I believe that Aucklanders understand that.

Media: What's going to be the balance of urban versus rural split of how the money's going to spent then?

Hon Phil Twyford: You'll have to look at the numbers. I can't tell you that off the top of my head.

PM: But we are doubling regional roading.

Hon Phil Twyford: We're doubling regional roads. We are substantially increasing local roads and local road maintenance and regional rail. So this is a very strong policy statement for the regions, no question about that.

PM: And when you keep in mind that the significant investment made by the last Government on some of those more significant projects tended to happen around urban centres, where, as Minister Genter has said, a small percentage of everyday road users were using. So this is about investing particularly in regional New Zealand, whilst trying to make sure we cover off the needs of growing cities like Auckland, whilst making sure that Aucklanders are covering themselves and the cost of doing that, and we're not having that impact there down on the rest of New Zealand.

Hon Phil Twyford: The roads of national significance policy gobbled up about 40 percent of the total transport spend over the last nine years. They were a handful of hand-picked motorway projects that were all in the major cities; they were not serving the regions.

Media: What proportion of the provincial growth fund will be applied to transport projects, and was that always the intention that they should?

PM: Yeah. We've said the criteria for the provincial growth fund is one around economic development. So it's not predetermined. It has to meet the criteria in order for it to satisfy the needs of that specific fund. But we've made very specific provision in what we've proposed around this Government policy statement for greater investment in regional roading where there is a good value-for-money and safety and access argument for it. Is there anything you want to add?

Hon Shane Jones: Just Meng Foon's the classic example from the East Coast.

PM: Yeah.

Media: Will the provincial growth fund be funding roads that NZTA has decided are not worth it?

PM: If there's an economic development case to be made. That's the basis on which projects are being considered by the provincial growth fund. Look, I'm mindful that it's half past and you probably have other questions. Any final questions before I release the Ministers?

Media: Given the comments around the focus on regional growth, is places like Wellington and Christchurch going to be the big losers in this? Because they're not Auckland—that's at crisis point, which has got a focus—and they're not a regional road. Wellington has its own problems, but are they the ones that are going to miss out on all of this?

PM: No, no, no. Would you like comment on the public and rapid transit?

Hon Phil Twyford: Yeah, so if we take Wellington and Christchurch—we're spending more money than ever before on public transport, and that will be in those centres. We're

going to be spending money on rapid transit infrastructure—that's not just for Auckland; that's intended to be for Wellington and Christchurch as well. The councils in those areas are going to get the benefit of more spending on local roads and local road maintenance—and rail, actually. So I would expect those places are going to do fine. And in the case of Wellington, the Government is talking with both Wellington City Council and the Greater Wellington Regional Council about a Wellington-wide transport plan, just as has happened in Auckland in recent years.

PM: All right, thanks everyone. The final statement I'll make on that is just keeping in mind this GPS is out for consultation. We're seeking feedback from local government, road users, anyone who has a view on the way that we are reprioritising the future of spending in this area. And, again, emphasis on the fact that estimates were made under the last Government that excise would end up being possibly as high as 20c. We've chosen not to do that, and to prioritise at the lower end of the scale. But, again, seeking the public's view on that proposal. All right—other questions for today?

Media: Prime Minister, can I just ask you about a stadium in Christchurch. Post-election there was some talk of combining the Christchurch Stadium and the Metro Sports Facility into one. Is that firmly off the table now?

PM: Yeah, there was talk of that. Since then there's been some developments around the metro centre. What we're focused on now is, through the Budget process, finalising the way that we anticipate our acceleration fund to work—that was the \$300 million infrastructure fund that allowed investment in horizontal infrastructure and, also, things like the stadium. We wanted the council then to pitch to us how they would like that money spent. So we're really seeking a local input on what they would like to see.

Media: So is the Government looking at funding for a new Christchurch stadium in this year's Budget?

PM: Yeah. Our focus is, through the Budget process, finalising details around that acceleration fund. It will then be up to the council to pitch to us what they think the money is most appropriately spent on. And, of course, you'll recall before the election we talked about a fund in the order of 300 million.

Media: Will it be a gold-plated option with “nice-to-haves” like roofs and retractable turf, or will it have to be a compromised—

PM: Again, council needs to make a decision over what it would like to prioritise. We've said we recognise some of their critical infrastructure needs are things like their horizontal infrastructure; they've got other issues, like the East Frame and the stadium. It's up to council then, once we make that special fund available, to pitch to Government a business case, which we'll then work through together.

Media: They've been without a stadium since 2011 now. What sort of time frame are we talking about? Because they are missing out on big events.

PM: Oh, we're certainly prioritising, in this Budget, being able to firm up what that capital accelerator fund will look like, so that we can get on with some of those projects that council want to prioritise.

Media: On Clare Curran, is it appropriate that she contacted the chair of Radio New Zealand? Shouldn't she just have kept out of it?

PM: Oh, look, the point has been made that her relationship is meant to be with the chair. She's advised me that when she found out that Radio New Zealand were no longer able to appear at the committee, her concern was that the record be corrected as soon as possible, so she contacted the chair to advise of an alternative option to make sure that was able to happen.

Media: Is that her job, though? Is that usual, as Minister, to pass on information like that?

PM: I think it's fair to say I haven't seen many circumstances like this one, where we are correcting the record of a select committee. Of course, the Minister's relationship primarily is meant to be with the chief executive and the board chair. When she was unable to reach the board chair, she had the Chief Executive of the Ministry of Arts, Culture and Heritage pick up the message.

Media: Wouldn't it have been smarter politically, though, to keep your hands away from it?

PM: Oh, look, even though she certainly advised me that her intent was to pass on a message around correcting the record directly to the chair, there are indeed multiple ways that she could have done that.

Media: Given it's quite a procedural thing around select committees, would it not have been a smarter move for either the Leader of the House or the chair of the select committee itself to have made that contact?

PM: I'd say that would have been preferable under the circumstances.

Media: Have you told her that?

PM: No. Her focus at the time was getting the message through; she managed to do that. When she was advised that the meeting had already been scheduled, she left it at that.

Media: The Leader of the House said, after question time today, that he advised the Minister to make that call. So, in actual fact, should the Leader of the House just gone and made that call himself?

PM: Look, as we say, I think, under the circumstances, it would have been cleaner to either have someone from the select committee office or the Leader of the House pass on that advice. Ultimately, though, the Minister's focus was on getting the record corrected. It's something that she'd been criticised for in the past. When she found out they were already scheduled to come in the following Thursday, she left it at that.

Media: Because the Leader of the House says it would have been inappropriate for him to have been the one that made the call because he would have been another Minister weighing into the topic.

PM: Oh, look, indeed. Select committee—there are a range of different people that perhaps could have, but is that the major issue here? I think the major issue is making sure that the record was corrected, from the Minister's perspective. When she found out that couldn't be done in that manner, a scheduled meeting was already taking place; she left it at that.

Media: Was the call by the chief executive of arts and culture therefore on the instruction of the Minister?

PM: She certainly advised the ministry that she was trying to contact the chair and had been unable to. I think it wouldn't have been an issue for the ministry to then pick up that issue if she couldn't continue to raise the chair.

Media: Did she show good political judgment in this instance?

PM: Again, she'd been criticised for not having corrected the record immediately personally. She was seeking for the chair to find the earliest opportunity to do the same.

Media: Have you given her a warning?

PM: As I said last week, she had already apologised to me over the issue of not having correctly answered a written question in the first instance. She's apologised for that; I accepted her apology.

Media: Has she apologised for the latest thing?

PM: Again, I've said it would be advisable. The fact that she sought to have the record corrected as soon as possible is something that's been sought from—by her, by many. She sought to do that. When she found out they were coming anyway, she left it at that.

Media: Simon Bridges says the unions are “emboldened by their Labour mates” and is warning of—quote—and is warning of more strife. Do you think that's going to happen?

PM: I'd probably need some more evidence of what he's talking about. If he's talking about, for instance, those who work in the public sector, those are negotiation rounds that started before we even took office, in some cases.

Media: What about nurses?

PM: Well, nurses were due to start, I think, at the latter part of last year. It's got nothing to do with the election; they were due up for a negotiation, and that's what we're now working through.

Media: So you think we would see the same amount of striking under a National Government?

PM: Look, are we seeing now, I think, the reverberations of ongoing, across-the-board, a low-wage economy in New Zealand? Yes, I think we are, and that is now bubbling to a head at this point of time, regardless of who is in office. These are issues that are raised as part of negotiations and as part of pay settlements.

All right. OK, thanks everyone.

conclusion of press conference