

POST-CABINET PRESS CONFERENCE: MONDAY, 10 SEPTEMBER 2018

PM: Good afternoon. [*speaks in Te Reo Māori*] Greetings to you all. This week is the Māori Language Week, and the theme is “Kia Kaha te Reo Māori”, or “Let the Māori Language Live”. And I, of course, am encouraging everyone to celebrate and use our country’s indigenous language at all times of year, but, of course, this week especially.

It goes without saying that Te Reo Māori is part of who we are as a country. It has survived ngā piki me ngā heke—all sorts of ups and downs—but it’s now a living language because of the love that New Zealanders have for Te Reo Māori and the activism that has ensured that the language is now beginning to thrive and continuing to thrive.

I have an aspiration that my generation will be the last generation to regret not having the chance to learn Te Reo Māori in our learning and education journey—at least, not to the extent that we would have liked. I am still, if it’s not obvious, at the beginning of my journey to learn Te Reo Māori, but every little bit helps.

Today: I’ll rattle through a few things that Cabinet has discussed. Today at Cabinet, I reminded Ministers of their obligations under the Official Information Act and their responsibility to ensure they are maintaining appropriate record-keeping. Ministerial Services, alongside the chief archivist, provides guidance to Ministers and their staff in regard to their information management obligations under the Public Records Act 2005. Under the Public Records Act, Ministers are required to create full and accurate records of their ministerial affairs. That includes information held in various formats.

The DIA spoke to Minister Curran’s office on Wednesday, 5 September to highlight the Minister’s obligations under the Act in regard to the use of personal emails, and that included ensuring all information created and received in her official capacity as a Minister was provided to the office for correct storage and retention, and that’s guidance I’ve given Ministers today as well. Clare will follow the requirements under the Act and submit the relevant papers to Archives New Zealand. Access to these papers will be the same as accessing any other papers from previous Ministers, and, of course, the guidance I’ve given to Ministers is to ensure that any records, of course—as I’ve said before, the OIA is mode-neutral, be it text, WhatsApp, Facebook, LinkedIn. Those are all subject to the Official Information Act and we need to therefore make sure that we allow those to continue to be discoverable.

This week I will be based in Wellington. As you know, the Duke and Duchess of Sussex will be visiting New Zealand later this year. I’ll make an announcement later this evening on times and places, once the palace has made their announcement. Later today, I’m meeting Li Xi, Party Secretary of Guangdong Province. Mr Li is a politburo member and will be the most senior Chinese visitor to New Zealand this year. On Wednesday, I will attend the launch of the Federation of Primary Health Aotearoa New Zealand. On Thursday, I will speak at the Suffrage 125 rally in Christchurch, leading into a full week of suffrage events, and on Sunday I will be delivering a speech in Auckland that will mark nearly a year since the election, at which I will set out the Government’s key priorities and next steps.

Today, though, I wanted to mark an important milestone for the Government’s flagship KiwiBuild programme. Today, the ballot opens for the first 18 KiwiBuild homes at the McLennan development of Papakura: 12 three-bedroom homes selling for \$579,000 and six four-bedroom homes selling for \$649,000. They are warm, modern, and architecturally-designed stand-alone homes; a new family-friendly community. These first houses represent the first step in restoring the dream of homeownership for families priced out of the market in Auckland and around the country.

The ballot process means anyone that pre-qualifies for KiwiBuild and has sufficient financing has an equal chance of owning their own new home. And it is exciting to think that

they will have that opportunity to walk into that home and wake up and enjoy that place in Christmas and across the summer period. I am proud to lead a Government that is making housing more affordable.

Today's ballot shows that we are progressing the KiwiBuild agenda, and there is, of course, more to come. But, for now, I'll hand over to the housing and urban development Minister, Phil Twyford, to talk through the details of the ballot.

Hon Phil Twyford: Thank you, Prime Minister. Tēnā tātou katoa. As the Prime Minister said, there will be 18 separate ballots in this first block of KiwiBuild homes at McClennan, in Papakura. People can enter every ballot, but the system will only let them win one. Buying a big house—sorry, buying a house is a big step for everyone, and I want to encourage all of those people who are interested in having a crack at homeownership through KiwiBuild to get advice, to visit the houses, actually, and look at them—as several hundred people did over the weekend—to talk to their bank manager and make sure that they've got their finances and everything lined up.

The ballot will close after 4 weeks, on October 5, and the winners will be contacted shortly after that. I'm advised that about 3,500 people are currently going through the pre-qualification process online. It does take a while to get through that pre-qualification process, but there are no prizes for coming first in this process. The ballot is open for 4 weeks, and there's no hurry for people to pre-qualify. So as long as they are pre-qualified at the end of that 4-week period, they go into the ballot.

This is just the beginning. So this is the first 12 houses at McClennan; there are another 18 houses in the same development that will be completed before Christmas. Another 58 houses will be completed next year at McClennan, but of course it's part of a big nationwide programme, and in the coming days and weeks, we're going to be announcing more and more developments in different parts of the country. And later this week, I'll be announcing the second tranche of KiwiBuild's buying off the plans scheme. The first scheme drew about a hundred proposals from different developers, and we're going to be announcing a number of those projects soon, but we're reopening the invitation to participate, and are expecting quite a bit more interest.

Yesterday, we announced the third big urban development project, at Mount Roskill in Auckland, where at least 2,400 KiwiBuild homes will be built as part of 10,000 new homes that will be part of a massive upgrade of that suburb around the construction of a light rail line connecting the central city with the airport precinct.

KiwiBuild is going to be a game-changer in the housing market and a game-changer for thousands of families who will get a crack at affordable homeownership that they otherwise wouldn't have had. Thank you.

PM: Thank you. Questions on the KiwiBuild ballot or KiwiBuild issues or urban housing development.

Media: Do you think it, the pre-qualification process—you said 3 and a half thousand people are in the process of doing it.

Twyford: I'm advised that 43 have completed, as of now, but I would expect, you know, over the next few weeks, we'll end up with quite a large number of people going into that ballot.

PM: The same number again have some form of missing information, so we might see that same number again complete. Any other questions on KiwiBuild? You're off the hook. All right—on to general questions.

Media: Prime Minister, can you please clarify the Government's position on Te Reo in schools. Is it compulsory or universal?

PM: Universal. We want universal availability, and of course we've set goals around that. We are also working towards the integration of Te Reo Māori in early childhood

education, primary, intermediate, but, essentially, we're not in a position at the moment to be able to go much further beyond that while we're still trying to make sure that we have Te Reo Māori teachers. So making sure we're investing in that learning so that we can make sure that universal provision is a goal that is attainable.

Media: So why did your Māori development Minister say this morning on *The A.M. Show* that it would be a core subject by 2025?

PM: He's talking about the integration of Te Reo into early childhood education, primary school, and intermediate.

Media: But if it's core curriculum, doesn't that mean it's compulsory?

PM: It is part of the curriculum. We also want to make sure, though, that beyond those stages, it then becomes universally available. So it's not compulsory, for instance, for Year 9—some schools are choosing to make it so, but that's an area where at the moment—it will be patchy, and not every school offers it because they simply don't have the resource to.

Media: Nanaia Mahuta said core subjects—so like maths, science, or English. That's compulsory.

PM: It is being integrated via our curriculum at those early stages, and that is our policy up to 2025, so that will have been the reference she was making.

Media: But did she misspeak when she said core—it's not—

PM: I don't believe she would have misspoken, because I think when you use that language, of course what we're saying is that it is something that students will be accessing, will be exposed to—and that is the case almost across the board right now in those early elements of our education system. But when it comes into secondary, then you get much more variation in what students are able to access.

Media: So should students be able to opt out of subjects like maths and English—core subjects?

PM: No. You're talking about secondary. I'm talking about the integration into those parts of our education system where everyone's taking the same subjects—primary, intermediate, early childhood education.

Media: So compulsory in primary and intermediate—

PM: It is integrated. It is integrated into our curriculum already.

Media: But she said core, and core means compulsory.

PM: It's part of our curriculum, Tova.

Media: Would you be disappointed if the Tax Working Group paper doesn't recommend a capital gains tax?

PM: Look, we're, essentially, waiting for that report to be released. That's, obviously, something that's been handed over to us, and that then is where it lays at this point. It's not recommendations that they're passing over to us; it's a piece of work—a body of work—to start that conversation. But, no, I've not set expectations around what they put to us. We have, of course, said what we won't consider. Now it's up to them to produce a piece of work for our consideration.

Media: The capital gains tax—it has been a longstanding part of Labour's policy to address the housing situation in New Zealand. If it doesn't recommend the capital tax gains tax, will you—I mean, you must be hoping that it has some form of recommendation to—

PM: No. I'm not pre-empting anything. We've handed over for them to produce a piece of work for our consideration and for the New Zealand public's consideration.

Media: You're completely agnostic?

PM: I'm allowing them to do the piece of work. Why otherwise would we have asked them to do it?

Media: On Clare Curran, was your handling of that—could that have been done better?

PM: Which respect?

Media: Her resignation in total. Could it have been done better?

PM: Oh, I shared publicly the process that we went through for her resignation. My decision around her future was made not last week—the week before. I made a decision to remove her from Cabinet. She subsequently decided she couldn't continue and advised me of that, and that's as the matter stands.

Media: But do you think you could have handled it better?

PM: Which element? Just the entire thing? Oh look, on reflection, look, there are always things on reflection that I might have done differently, but, ultimately, I stand by the decision that I made.

Media: One of your MPs, Greg O'Connor, has said on radio today that it could have been done better. He doesn't think anyone would disagree with that.

PM: As I say, I, on reflection, can always learn from some of the things along the journey of Government. I don't think you would want a leader that couldn't learn from the past.

Media: On Friday morning, when you did that interview on Friday morning and you weren't completely upfront about the fact that she'd resigned—do you regret that?

PM: I was asked whether or not she was safe. In my mind, I was being asked whether or not I had sacked her. I had not. When it comes to whether or not I should have at that point proactively talked about the conversations I had been having with the Minister, at that point we were still in a process. I had not received the Minister's formal resignation. There will be times when I'll be talking or interviewed midway through a decision-making process and won't be in a position to be as upfront as I otherwise would have liked. But in my mind, I still was being asked whether I had sacked her, and I had not.

Media: At what point did you receive her formal resignation?

PM: Oh, it would have been sometime, sometime mid-morning-ish, I imagine. Sometime in the morning.

Media: You just made a comment about not being as upfront—PM, sorry, up the back here—

PM: Well not—no; let me be clear. I was mid-process at the time of undertaking a number of interviews. I wasn't in a position to share, at that point, what the final outcome of that was. My choice was either to continue on with my scheduled interviews or not. I chose to. I was asked a question as to whether or not her seat was safe. In my mind, I was being asked if I had sacked her. I had not.

Media: Greg O'Connor said that it'll be done better next time. Are you comfortable with that?

PM: Sorry, James.

Media: Do you regret the focus on those comments in relation to this matter?

PM: Oh, should I have been more evasive? In my mind, I was answering the question put to me.

Media: Greg O'Connor says that it'll be done better next time; is he predicting that you're going to have another resignation?

PM: No—no, he is not. He is most certainly not.

Media: Are you comfortable with your MPs openly criticising you?

PM: Oh, look, absolutely. I'm a confident leader. I can take feedback, and no one is going to be a greater—no one is going to critique my own performance greater than I will—no one.

Media: Can I ask you about the Crown-Māori partnership?

PM: Go ahead.

Media: Is New Zealand First on board, and why weren't any of them at the Cabinet—

PM: Simply other obligations. Yes, we've had a number of conversations. Obviously, this has been something that's been in the public domain for quite some time now. As I said, 1,600 people have come out and part of it—21 hui. I'm confident that we've taken on board the key feedback from those meetings and that the principles of what's been discussed really is now embedded in the work that the Minister's brought forward.

Media: So will there be—you know, they were talking about the potential for constitutional issues to come under the portfolio.

PM: Yeah, so that's the place where that will be held. That hasn't been the priority of the portfolio, but any ongoing conversation—that is the appropriate place for that to be managed.

Media: When do you expect the Cabinet to sign it off?

PM: In the coming weeks.

Media: And how come—I mean, do you think it was appropriate to have someone who was convicted for assaulting John Key in the Cabinet room and speaking to you?

PM: We had a representative group there of those who had come forward and been a really integral part of the hui, and they were representative of a much wider, as I say, body of 1,600 people who have really engaged in this process. As I say, though, there have been a number of groups that have been involved, but this was one final opportunity to have some of those representatives come forward and highlight, on behalf of others, some of the key elements that were important to them and they heard at the hui they represented and attended.

Media: Is there any question that Kelvin Davis will become the Minister of Treaty-Māori partnerships?

PM: Of course. We're finalising, as a Cabinet, but the Cabinet wanted that final submission, those final voices, to be fed through as we consider the paper in its totality.

Media: Can I ask about—

PM: You may.

Media: —the Pacific Islands forum? Are you disappointed that Australia sought qualifications to the communique calling on the US to go back into the Paris Agreement?

PM: Sorry, am I disappointed that—

Media: Are you disappointed that Australia pushed the qualifications about climate change in the communique?

PM: That's a matter for Australia.

Media: So you're not disappointed about it?

PM: That is, ultimately, a matter for Australia. I can only speak on behalf of New Zealand's position, and New Zealand strongly believes that as a globe, there is strength, power, and importance for all of us signing up to the Paris Agreement.

Media: You said on Wednesday night that there were no concerns from Australia, no pushback regarding Paris, but the Prime Minister of Tuvalu says that there were.

PM: I believe you might have asked me that question during the day, James.

Media: I think it was at night.

PM: I believe it was during the day. But I can speak only on behalf of New Zealand's perspective, not on behalf of anyone else at the PIF.

Media: Prime Minister, just back on the Crown-Māori portfolio, have the details been ironed out about what sort of budget would be given, how many staff would be in that office?

PM: I'm not going to pre-announce Cabinet papers, but the Minister has done a good amount of work around the shape of the group. I think, at this stage, the sense does seem to be that it will be consolidating some of the disparate parts of that post - Treaty settlement work that's going on across Government.

Media: Last Thursday, Scott Morrison and Marise Payne put out a statement with respect to the British findings on the poisoning, and they said that they were in close consultation with the UK Government and other partners, and that they were committed to acting with our allies and partners to deter further Russian violations of international security. Are they in consultation with you, and, if so, what actions is New Zealand prepared to take?

PM: Yeah—yes. So following on from our attendance at the PIF, I had the opportunity to be briefed on Thursday—following our immediate statement that we put out, we had that opportunity to then be briefed. And like our partners, we absolutely condemn—as we have done before—the use of chemical weapons, be it in Syria, be it on the streets of the UK, and anyone who uses such weapons must be held to account. Now, I have absolute confidence, we have absolute confidence as a Government, in the UK's investigations. It has confirmed that it has been publicly demonstrated and suggested that two of the suspects were officers from Russian military intelligence. We believe there is that clear chain of evidence to support the UK's call for those individuals to be held to account, and, alongside our international counterparts, we call for cooperation for them to indeed be brought to justice.

Media: The first statement put out by Winston Peters in the wake of that information—this is before the briefing—was that intended as a placeholder statement before you were briefed?

PM: It was—it was. It was intended as a placeholder. I then made the decision to offer up our position once I had access to a briefing. I waited to be asked by the media. The first opportunity I had to then put that statement was on Friday afternoon when I was first asked for our position following the briefing.

Media: So, to clarify, were you briefed by MFAT officials or at the British High Commission?

PM: I was briefed in the normal way that I am briefed with security and intelligence information.

Media: Just what actions—going back to that statement, what actions, then, is New Zealand prepared to take along with its allies and partners to deter further Russian violations of international security?

PM: Of course, we have continued to use the international platforms that we have to condemn the use of chemical weapons. There have been no specific requests, other than, of course, joining in the international community calling for the condemnation of the actions and the bringing to justice of those individuals who have been involved, and we've joined the international community in that.

Media: But they say—I mean, the Australians are saying that they want to deter Russia's violations of international security. They're not talking, in that sentence, about chemical weapons; they're talking about Russia and the Russian Government.

PM: If you're trying to find some kind of distance between us, there is none.

Media: No, I'm trying to find out what you're going to do.

PM: Yeah, well, already we have put on ice any further conversations with Russia in an economic sense. We fulfil the spirit of sanctions that are being applied. At the moment, though, there has been no further request of action, other than, of course, to join the condemnation alongside the international community, and we have done so.

Media: Have you spoken to your British counterpart or anyone at the British Embassy?

PM: No.

Media: If there's a request for sanctions, will you consider imposing them?

PM: That's a hypothetical at this stage. My understanding is, as I say, like our counterparts we've condemned what we've seen strongly. There is a clear chain of evidence. These individuals must be brought to justice and held to account, and we're calling on Russia and all those who may be able to assist in that to do so.

Media: Why didn't you proactively issue a statement rather—

PM: To be honest, Audrey, I thought I would be asked before I even had the chance to put it out, and I wasn't.

Media: Well, there were ministerial resignations going on on Friday, so we were slightly distracted, but you had changed your position. You'd strengthened your position, and yet—

PM: No, we did—we did—we put that out, as I say, as a placeholder, and then, obviously, I had every intent of being asked, it took until Friday, and, as I say, our position is similar to every other nation—partner nation—that's been given the same information.

Media: Have you spoken to, you know, anyone from Russia or the ambassador, or—

PM: No. No, I have not. All right, everyone, thanks very much.

conclusion of press conference