

POST-CABINET PRESS CONFERENCE: MONDAY, 15 APRIL 2019

PM: Oh, look, apologies for the delay. Good afternoon. I want to give you a brief overview of what I will be doing over the two-week recess. Tomorrow evening, I will be in Auckland presenting an award to the Taite music awards. On Thursday, I'll be travelling to Hastings to meet with Ngāti Kahungunu. Next Thursday, I will be speaking at the Anzac dawn service in Auckland, and on Saturday 27 April, I will be speaking at the commemoration of the Rwandan genocide. Other media advisories on relevant activities over the recess will follow.

Today, Cabinet signed off on the 2019 well-being Budget. Budget 2019 will continue to show that the Government is maintaining a strong focus on the economy and running the books responsibly in the face of slowing global growth. As well as being prudent economic managers, we are going further by tackling long-term challenges and, of course, as we've indicated in our Budget priorities, looking to break the cycle on issues like mental health, domestic violence, and child poverty. We're focusing on the health of our environment and transitioning to a sustainable low-emissions economy.

What we've signed off is a culmination of months of well-being work by officials and Ministers working across portfolios for better outcomes. It is a new approach to the development of a Budget, which is about creating a New Zealand current and future generations can be proud of. Obviously, you'll need to wait until 30 May for the full picture, but as usual we will be looking to make pre-Budget announcements before then; I just won't be making any of them today.

Number of things on the agenda, so I'm happy to take questions.

Media: The New Zealand nurse, Prime Minister—what's the Government's position on that at the moment?

PM: Look, you'll forgive me, I hope, for not commenting on that case. It absolutely remains the Government's view that it would be preferable if this case were not in the public domain. For that reason, I won't be commenting further on it, with one exception, and that is to make special mention of the domestic New Zealand media. I think the decisions that have been made over a period of time by various outlets and journalists has not only been responsible; I think it's been exemplary, and I'm sure I speak on behalf of successive Governments when I say thank you.

Media: Prime Minister, how reckless and irresponsible was it for the international Red Cross to name Louisa Akavi?

PM: Those are decisions for them. All I know, of course, is that, as I've said, the New Zealand Government maintains a position that it would be better not to have this case in the public domain, and I won't be commenting any further on it.

Media: How much pressure did the Government put on the ICRC not to name her?

PM: Certainly, it remained our view that it would be better for it not to be in the public domain, and, obviously, that was our focus and the basis of our communication. Again, though, as I say, decisions have been taken that were not our own, and I won't be commenting any further on decisions made by others.

Media: The Foreign Minister's given quite a lot of detail about a special operations unit which has been working in Iraq and Syria to try and gather information and save her. Are they still there? Are they still in Iraq and Syria?

PM: I just simply will not comment any further on the case.

Media: Prime Minister, does it seem, though, that the Government knows more than what the Red Cross knows? I mean, surely—

PM: Sorry, what was the first part of that question?

Media: —the Red Cross are on the ground there. Their knowledge is pretty good. Do you think the Government's knowledge is better than that?

PM: Again, I simply will not be commenting any further. I accept the interest, and so information has been put into the public domain based on the fact that this information is now out there and the case is now public, but beyond that I will not be commenting.

Media: How often did the Islamic State seek a ransom from New Zealand?

PM: I'm just simply not going to comment, Tova.

Media: Would it save her life, had we paid a ransom?

PM: Again, I'm just simply not commenting on the case.

Media: Is the risk to her life greater now, do you think, due to the Christchurch terror attacks?

PM: Our preference, of course, was that this case not be in the public domain full-stop, and therefore you'll appreciate and forgive me, I'm sure, for not commenting further.

Media: How many days ago did the Red Cross come to the Government and say they were thinking of naming her? Has there been enough time for the Government to make those objections heard?

PM: Our view—as has been stated here, that position was made known. In terms of the timetable around that, that would be a question for the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Media: What's your message to Louisa Akavi's family, at least?

PM: I'm just simply not going to be drawn on commenting on the case. Any messages like that would be done privately.

Media: How concerned are you that the Islamic State is going to warp your words and use them as propaganda?

PM: I am not commenting on the case.

Media: Why didn't you let the Foreign Minister, then, come to post-Cab so that we could ask and have questions answered—

PM: Again, this is the position of the Government. Information has been put in writing to media and in the public domain, but beyond that we are of the view that it would be preferable for this case not to be in the public domain.

Media: Why is that, given that very little progress has been made on this by the private parties?

PM: I believe that position has been made clear.

Media: Prime Minister, I understand that you signed off the Let's Get Wellington Moving project today. Are there any details we can ask about?

PM: Around transport programmes?

Media: Yeah. Let's Get Wellington Moving, specifically.

PM: I'd ask that you put questions specifically on transport planning and programmes directly to the Minister Phil Twyford.

Media: Did Cabinet sign off on the Government's response to the capital gains tax report today?

PM: We've stuck to our timetable. While I won't get into the specifics of different decision-making points, we're sticking to our plan for information and the final decision of the Government to be released in April.

Media: Will you release it on 29 or 30 April, or are you likely to bury it among the Easter-Anzac period?

PM: It will be released in April. We haven't given specifics at this point.

Media: You did say, though, Prime Minister—you have said late April, so are we assuming that it could be earlier than late?

PM: Again, Barry, we're sticking to our timetable. It will be this month. I haven't given any more specifics beyond that.

Media: Did the New Zealand Government reconsider its ransom policy after the Labour - New Zealand First Government came into power? I understand the previous National Government did when news of Louisa Akavi—

PM: We have no plans in that regard.

Media: Prime Minister, just going back to the Let's Get Wellington Moving project, was that part of the Budget sign-off today?

PM: Again, I'm not going to comment on specific elements of the Budget. That has to wait for Budget announcements.

Media: But it was part of the Budget, is that right? Or is it separate sign-off on its own?

PM: I'm not going to comment on any elements of the Budget. If you have any specific question relating to transport policy, please feel free to put that to the Minister of Transport.

Media: What is the Government's position on paying ransoms?

PM: That, in my view, has not changed. I'm not, at this current point in time, willing to be drawn individually on that policy, but it's remained unchanged.

Media: Some of the families of other victims of the Islamic State have felt let down by their Governments—James Foley's mother said she felt let down by the US Government because it didn't pay a ransom. Has the New Zealand Government let down Louisa Akavi?

PM: I am simply not going to comment on this case.

Media: You thanked New Zealand media earlier when you talked about this case. Do you believe—you didn't mention international media. Do you believe that the Red Cross' decision had anything to do with pressure from international media?

PM: Again, and that's simply jurisdictional. You know, this is—in terms of New Zealand media, that's where that relationship obviously has been directly with successive Governments. All right.

Media: There is no comment.

PM: Yeah. There's no comment. All right, look—

Media: Do you know much about Louisa Akavi? Can you give us a sense of what her life was like?

PM: Yes, but I will not be commenting further, including on those kinds of details.

Media: Do you believe that she's still alive?

PM: Again, I'm just simply not commenting on this case.

Media: Do you hope that she's still alive?

PM: I'm not commenting on the case.

Media: When will Cabinet officially sign off on KiwiBuild's recalibration? Phil Twyford said that it was coming soon. I just want to get an indication of timing around that.

PM: We haven't set down an explicit timetable. We'll make sure that once decisions are made, of course, that those will be publicly announced.

Media: Will there be any more targets, as there were before—an interim target, so a yearly measure?

PM: Again, decisions around targets we've said will be rolled into the decisions around the KiwiBuild reset. Once those decisions have been made, we'll release them. OK, all right. Last one.

Media: I understand there's a discrepancy between the last sighting that the ICRC had of Louisa Akavi and the last sighting, last lead, that the New Zealand Government has had. Are those all squared—the December and January sightings?

PM: And, again, I will not be commenting on any element of the case, including any specific elements such as those questions you've raised.

Media: When were you first briefed on the case? Was it when you Leader of the Opposition, or did you become aware of it after—

PM: I believe that's already been put into the public information that's been made available to you.

Media: Why are you so loath to comment?

PM: Again, it is the preference of the Government—and I'm sure it would have been of the last Government—that this case not be in the public domain.

Media: The fact that she's been named now, so soon after the Christchurch terror attack, does that exacerbate the risk?

PM: Again, I'm not commenting or speculating on this case in any regard, and that includes on timing issues.

Media: Does it make the naming of her that much more reckless by the ICRC and the New York Times?

PM: I will not be commenting, but the Government's position has not changed. We'd prefer this not to be in the public domain. OK, thanks, everyone.

conclusion of press conference