

POST-CABINET PRESS CONFERENCE: MONDAY, 23 SEPTEMBER 2019

Acting PM: Good afternoon. As you know, the Prime Minister is this week in New York, at the UN General Assembly. Whilst in New York, she has a number of bilaterals, events and speeches, including delivering the keynote at the Climate Action Summit, meetings with US President Donald Trump and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, taking part in the Christchurch Call leaders' dialogue, and delivering New Zealand's national statement. The Prime Minister will return to New Zealand on Saturday.

This week, the House will be sitting. Happy, of course, to answer any questions Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, should the Opposition be inclined to get themselves organised and ask me.

On Tuesday, I will be attending the Chinese National Day 70th anniversary reception at Te Papa, and on Thursday morning will be speaking at the Pacific Public Service Commissioner's Conference here at Parliament. And on Friday, Dargaville High School have extended an invitation to visit their building academy and meet with students and staff.

As you know, today marks two years since the 2017 general election—two years since most New Zealanders voted for change, two years since people went to the ballot and ticked a box they hoped would topple the status quo, and two years since New Zealanders had had enough of the nine years of neglect of our roads, hospitals, schools, rivers, and social services, and told us to get started on tackling the long-term economic and social challenges of this country. And we are making progress.

I'll get to that in a moment, but, first, the reason why we were able to act—well, it's called the economy, and, contrary to some rumour-mongers, and, contrary to the evidence, it's in good shape, and it is growing. More New Zealanders are working than ever before, they're earning better wages, and unemployment is at its lowest level in a decade.

On the global issues that are beyond our control, we're investing in infrastructure to stimulate the economy, supporting innovative businesses to diversify, taking financial pressures off families, and chasing more and higher quality free-trade agreements. So to our infrastructure services and natural resources: we are making a start on getting them back on track.

From a list of about 100 of the Government's key achievements in the past 24 months, can I name just a few. We've invested heavily in health, lowered the cost of general practice visits by an average of \$20 to \$30 for an extra 540,000 people. We'll fund more cancer treatments, a front-line mental health service, and secure the future of ambulances, and that's one.

Two: our \$3 billion Provincial Growth Fund is supporting businesses and innovating and diversifying across provincial New Zealand, where half of our people live and where an enormous amount of our export wealth is created.

Three: we've canned NCEA fees, meaning savings for 145,000 households across New Zealand.

Four: we've introduced new family violence laws and backed that with a record number of new police, joining the biggest and most diverse police workforce in this country's history.

Five: we're cleaning up the environment that we all so much depend upon, including banning single-use plastic bags, planting a billion trees, and working with farmers to protect our elite soils and waterways and to show the world that our potable, efficient, sustainable, low-emissions food and fibre sector, with sustainable farming, is possible.

Six: in the wake of the 15 March event, we've banned military-style semi-automatic weapons, magazines, and parts, and led the Christchurch Call to eliminate terrorist and violent extremist content online.

Seven, with respect to infrastructure: we have sorted out major longstanding infrastructure problems at the Auckland City Hospital, the Greenlane Clinical Centre, Middlemore Hospital, and the Manukau SuperClinic. We've also fast-tracked the redevelopment of Dunedin Hospital, and we have a 10-year plan for school property to build new schools and classrooms for up to 100,000 more children by 2030.

Eight: New Zealand's history will be taught for the first time in our schools.

And, nine: we have boosted Kiwi Rail investment to improve connections and get freight off the roads, as every other country has sought to do.

And we're getting things back on track, which will take, as we know, more than one term. But it will not be upended by the relentless negativity of an increasingly desperate Opposition, that has chosen to base its brand on fake news because it has no new ideas, or is so desperate for a spokesperson that it has Steven Joyce opining once a month in one of our Sunday papers, which is surely a comment on their present economic spokespersonship from within their caucus. But I'm sure you've worked it out yourself.

For too long, New Zealanders have been paying the price of inaction. We have started to tackle the long-term challenges and progress is progress. Any questions?

Media: Mr Peters, over the weekend you called Spark's streaming saga—over here, hi—an abject failure.

Acting PM: No, I can tell where you are.

Media: Well, you were just looking around so I thought—anyway. And you also said that the Government would get to the bottom of the issue. You went on to say, "I can assure you we'll find out as fast as possible what on earth is not going on." Have you or any other Government officials spoken to Spark officials today about the issues?

Acting PM: Yes, Minister Faafoi has, and we've been given a whole lot of information that's new plus significant assurances as to the future.

Media: What information do you have now that you didn't have? What's the new information?

Acting PM: Well, it stands to reason that the information we didn't have was that they hadn't done enough to make sure that it was foolproof.

Media: Did you watch the game yourself? How was it for you?

Acting PM: I watched it on my telephone—my cellphone. Not too flash, actually. I mean, well, it's a leap back to the black and white days, don't you know? And was actually a disaster, and I kind of thought to myself, "How many thousands of New Zealanders are in my boat? Paid the money, took the promise, and now you're watching this critical game, on which so much depended, and we're putting up with this." So we do hope that Spark are on top of it, and I suggest that they better be.

Media: Has Spark's poor performance make you reflect on the privatisation of those assets?

Acting PM: Now, I'm so glad that you've mentioned that, because I was there when it was happening and saying what a disaster it was. I was almost a lone voice at the time.

Media: When you say they better be on to it in the future, if they're not, what are your plans for them?

Acting PM: Well, it means, you know, we're back to a resource called TVNZ, which we've—*[Interruption]* Pardon?

Media: Do you still want to see free-to-air?

Acting PM: Well, we've got free-to-air coming, actually, for all the big major ones at the end of this tournament.

Media: What processes did Spark not have in place before this, then, that could have troubleshooted this whole issue?

Acting PM: Well, you would have heard the CEO on *Morning Report* trying to explain what didn't happen, and saying that the problem lay somewhere else in the world, in terms of some of the quality of the utility that they were employing. Well, we're going to find out whether that's a fact or not.

Media: Do you believe them when they say that?

Acting PM: Yes, I do, because he says that, well, they've had a three-game event over the weekend—at the end of the weekend, that is. Well, let's find out whether that's a fact or not. Some people dispute that, but we'll find out.

Media: Mr Peters, on the census, the census predicts New Zealand's population will reach 5 million by 2020. Do you still think net migration is too high?

Acting PM: Well, the reality is that it's not whether it's too high; it is whether you're getting the right people—that is, whether you're advancing the technical and skills base of your economy in a world where that is critical—not just hands any more—or you are just taking the kind of person that would not subscribe or benefit the economy that other smart economies have focused on. In short, they organise immigration to suit their economy, not the converse.

Media: Is it too high at the moment?

Acting PM: Well, that's one of the difficulties—we are looking at the stats, which, to be honest with you, are not as specific, not as granular, as they should be and it is very difficult to interpret. But we are putting an enormous amount of work into ensuring that what we are looking at is accurate and we do know for a fact what is going on. But if you have a department of immigration that describes a returning New Zealander, after 10 or seven years offshore, as being an immigrant, then we've got a problem with the stats straight away.

Media: Is there enough infrastructure to keep up with that growing population?

Acting PM: Well, it's not a matter of infrastructure and it's not a matter of more personnel. They've got computerisation that should have been capable of being done with much less staff but with a system that was foolproof, and ours has not been in the past.

Media: Are you happy with another electorate seat in the North Island next year?

Acting PM: Well, that will be a fact. Where it is, I'm not certain, but it'll be affected by Papakura, Hunua, and, an already beyond the margins, Rodney. As to where it goes, we don't know.

Media: One of the growth areas is Northland, of course. Would you like to see it up there?

Acting PM: Yeah, but not that far north, that's the point. If you go to Rodney, it's been huge growth there.

Media: The National Party's come out saying that figures out today might not be reliable enough. Do you think the statistics released today are reliable enough, would you say, to set electoral lines?

Acting PM: Well, first of all, it was the National Party that put together the logistical structure to bring about the assembly of this information, right? They relied massively upon computerisation and not call house by house in terms of that sort of information. What the Government has sought to do is take the shortage of that information, to fill the gaps as comprehensively as we can, and I believe we've done it.

Media: Is the Prime Minister's only getting a pull-aside meeting, as opposed to a full bilateral meeting with Donald Trump a diplomatic slug?

Acting PM: No. It's what happens at the meeting that matters.

Media: What would you like to see come out of that meeting?

Acting PM: Well, progress with respect to our trading arrangements with the United States—that's seriously important to us; greater recommitment to the Pacific from the United States; and, above all, an ability to, as two great democracies, so to speak, of a significant lineage, that we agree more often than not on the way forward where world trade is concerned and human rights and fundamental issues like that are concerned.

Media: Would you like to go toe to toe with Donald Trump in that meeting?

Acting PM: Well, toe to toe doesn't get you anywhere. I'd rather go to a meeting where we see eye to eye.

Media: New Zealand is calling this meeting a bilateral while the Americans are calling it a pull-aside and the Americans are calling other meetings at the UN a bilateral. What's the difference? What's been lost in translation?

Acting PM: I think—nothing actually. I've looked at the list and it is a very important meeting that the Prime Minister of New Zealand is having. I would rather wait for the outcome and the reports from your colleagues who are going to be there to hear from Jacinda Ardern when the meeting is over, and I'm confident of the outcome. We put a lot of work into improving our relations with the United States.

Media: This week, Mr Peters, the special select committee on abortion law reform commenced its public hearings. I wonder if you share the concern that's being expressed there that the proposed changes might increase the incidence of late-term abortions.

Acting PM: I'd love to answer your question, but frankly that's a decision for me and my caucus. When it comes to the vote, it's a conscious vote after all, and we'd want a discussion on issues like that with our caucus before we freelance, so to speak, on a meeting like this.

Media: Have you made up your mind yet personally?

Acting PM: It always pays to make up your mind when you've got all the information as to what everything means. And at this point in time, that information's not in.

Media: Last week in the House, you said that the Government would be making announcements about a super SuperGold card this week. I was wondering if you might be able to—

Acting PM: No, I didn't say this week; I said soon.

Media: Soon, my mistake. Could you give us a little bit more detail as to what that might look like and which areas you're looking into?

Acting PM: It'll be very exciting for your grandparents and perhaps your parents to look forward to, but I can't give you the details just yet. You'll have to wait.

Media: Could you give us maybe an indication of why my late grandparents might be interested?

Acting PM: No, I said your parents.

Media: You also said [*Inaudible*]

Acting PM: I'm glad you've paid attention. Why didn't you write about it back then?

Media: We did.

Acting PM: I didn't see the headline on your paper.

Media: Has there been progress in that—

Acting PM: I didn't see a big headline in your paper: "Excitement for over 740,000 New Zealanders is coming".

Media: Will the GoldCard be payWave?

Acting PM: It'll be a lot of things; you'll just have to wait. But it will be exciting, in a sense, that nine years of doing nothing and paying dim respect to the elderly, the senior people of this country, is going to be turned around, and brought up to date and said, yes, it'll be, for a lot of older people, simply an electrifying experience which they should have had a long time ago.

Media: Older people are some of the wealthiest people in New Zealand. Do you think those kind of targeted benefits always make sense to that sector of society and not 18- to 24-year-olds?

Acting PM: Now, look, I think that some people who you're talking about, who paid taxes sometimes at over 60c in the dollar, deserve a better response from the political system than they've been getting for the last 30 years from some political parties. My party's not one of those parties, of course, and we've always had respect for them. We believe that they've earned the right to retire in dignity and grace; our job is to ensure that their dollar goes a whole lot further, by putting together their buying power, amassing that over 725,000 people, in the interests of cheaper services to the elderly of New Zealand. Yes, I think we should have been doing that a long, long time ago, but I saw, you know, people like—what's her name?—Maggie Barry and others do nothing while they called themselves the Minister for Senior Citizens.

Media: What were the nature of discussions between Grant Robertson and Fletchers, when they met last week?

Acting PM: The nature of the discussions was to have a talk at the request of Fletchers, which I understand to be been a meaningful discussion where various potential options were aired, the character and nature of which I can't share with you because no finality resulted from those discussions.

Media: Was there any pressure coming from them to start the building again?

Acting PM: Um, no, I can't say it in that way, but that's not to dismiss that they might want to be involved in some future building. It wasn't part of the reported conversation that I've heard from Mr Robertson.

Media: Mr Peters, is the housing market keeping up with the population growth?

Acting PM: Well, the answer to that, is, curiously, despite the putative stumbling beginnings of KiwiBuild, the rest of the housing market's going gangbusters, the best it's been going since 1973, and that's a long, long time.

Media: So you believe that it is?

Acting PM: I believe certain aspects of it certainly are, and I just picked up a paper dated, I think, 9 August—I don't know why I'm reading it now—saying that, for example, in Mr Bridges' electorate they've had the biggest growth rate ever in housing. It's on the front page of the *Bay of Plenty Times*, actually, for that day.

Media: You mean the house price value or do you mean in terms of construction—

Acting PM: No, house constructions—consents in flats, units, and buildings around New Zealand.

Media: But the question is whether those consents are keeping up with the population.

Acting PM: Well, it's an excellent question, and I don't know why it occurs to you now, because one political party has been saying for years that to get in front of the demand side, we have to slow down immigration and get supply-side housing done. We're not getting on top of that, and I think the answer to you, though I can't give you the definitive figures, is that the beginning of that turnaround is happening, yes.

Media: Does New Zealand First support kind of broad-based reform of the rental laws—laws that govern tenancies? The Government went out to consult on these mid last year and we haven't heard anything since—is there a hold-up?

Acting PM: Well, we're out to promote responsible landlords and responsible tenants, and to treat them the same.

Media: Just back to what you were saying about slowing migration there—is the Government actively trying to slow the number of people coming into the country?

Acting PM: Well, the Government campaigned, in terms of Labour and New Zealand First, exactly on that—to improve the quality of immigration while slowing down its number. You know that OECD and other organisations were saying that the quality of our immigration was suspect, and we're seeking to address that.

Media: You raised earlier how important it is to know the exact statistics or have correct statistics around that. So do you have specific numbers of how much you would like to see that slow by?

Acting PM: I'm afraid to admit this to you, but when you're doing your best to get to the bottom of the reality of what's actually happening, it's rather a shock to suspect that the figures aren't accurate, and so we're putting an enormous amount of work into that, at the moment.

Media: Why is the Government not doing population figures modelling on its new immigration policies that are coming in? Why is there not modelling on how many people you expect that to impact?

Acting PM: Well, whoever's done that?

Media: The immigration Minister said that there has been no specific modelling on the latest—

Acting PM: I know, but where in the world do you see that?

Media: So you don't think that's necessary, that modelling?

Acting PM: No. What you can do is look at your economy, understand that the secret of our future lies in the serious expansion in export wealth and productivity, and put in place the policies that will bring that about. And we've got a lot of work to do; we should have begun a long, long time ago. One of the great things, for example, was just five years ago, the dollar was going at US84c; now it's 64c, and exporters have got a chance, in an export-dependent economy.

Media: A group of organisations representing under-privileged families have delivered a petition to the Prime Minister's electorate office demanding urgent changes to welfare. Do you think the Government's moving fast enough at the moment to help those struggling families?

Acting PM: Well, look, I haven't seen a petition. It's the first time I've heard about it. And I have to tell you that one of the difficulties that any Government of the type and character that this Government is, has to confront an enormous backlog, and sometimes that backlog keeps building, even though you're turning it around. It takes a while for us to reshape that. My answer to you is: are we succeeding with those people yet? Not yet, but we will if we keep on the pathway we're on.

Media: Are there any changes that are in pipeline to the current welfare system, then?

Acting PM: The current what?

Media: Is there any changes in the pipeline to welfare currently?

Acting PM: Well, a whole range of measures have come as a result of this Government, and more in the pipeline, but I can't just, off the top of my head, tell you exactly what they are where it concerns those petitioners and where it concerns their

petition plea, which I haven't seen. One more question. [*Interruption*] Hang on. Did you hear that? One more question. All right, two. You first.

Media: The Opposition has put out a list of what it wants to see in the new gun legislation that's going to have its first reading tomorrow, before they will support it. It says they would support a gun register per se. What are your thoughts on that?

Acting PM: On what the Opposition thinks?

Media: Yeah, but—yeah, just the changes that you would see.

Acting PM: Well, I can't describe what the Opposition thinks on this matter, because they're dancing around a pinhead, and, in my view, behaving in an enormously irresponsible manner in that context. All I can say is what the Government parties will do is put a bill in tomorrow. I assure you that we will listen very carefully to all those submitters, and any sound and rational improvement that is out there we will listen to as well. But to tie ourselves to a political party that wants to politicise and see some advantage in the misery of 51 people who lost their lives and scores of others who have been damaged for life is just not something we're going to contemplate.

Media: I just had one more question about immigration. New Zealand is encouraging foreign students to do their post-graduate education in New Zealand. At the completion of that—of their courses—should it be easier or harder for them to gain residency afterwards?

Acting PM: Well, if you believe in the quality of your export education and if you've put the money in and the investment in to ensure it is world-class quality, you wouldn't need the inducement of immigration to make up your shortfall. And that's precisely where the previous Government left us. Thank you.

conclusion of press conference