

POST-CABINET PRESS CONFERENCE: MONDAY, 9 SEPTEMBER 2019

PM: Tākiri mai te ata, ka ao, ka ao, ka awatea. Tihei mauri ora. Tātou katoa ngā iwi o Aotearoa, tēnā koutou. Tēnā tātou e whakanui ana i te wiki nei, te wiki o Te Reo Māori. As you'll see by the iconic symbol behind me, kindly lent to us by the Māori Language Commission, this week is Māori Language Week, and the theme, again, is Kia Kaha Te Reo Māori, or Let the Language Live. Kei te ako tonu au i Te Teo Māori.

I'm still learning Te Reo Māori, but I've always encouraged everyone to learn, to speak, no matter how small or where you are in your language journey.

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—lots of ups and downs—but it's now a living and thriving language, in no small part due to its champions. As I've previously said, 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.

But even for those of us who didn't learn in school, now more than ever before we have the opportunity to learn and practise even in small ways every single day, and that is what this week is all about. So kia kaha Te Reo Māori.

This week, I'm going to give a more detailed summary of what I'm up to, as the focus this week is particularly on mental health. As you know, one in five New Zealanders experience mental health and addiction challenges at any given time. Fifteen thousand people a year turn up at hospital emergency departments needing mental health support, and, as you will have heard us talk about before, the estimated cost of mental health to families and the economy is \$12 billion. We have the highest rate of youth suicide in the OECD.

Demand for mental health services increased 70 percent under National, and funding did not increase by even half of that. But over the next week, you will see an accelerated roll-out of what the Government is doing to respond to the mental health inquiry, an inquiry that crystalized for us the state of our mental health services, following significant under-investment, an inquiry that led to more than \$1 billion going into mental health in the Budget. And yesterday, we started our roll-out of primary mental health care, starting with GP clinics, that will reach over 170,000 people.

From there, we expand that so that more people, wherever they are and whenever they may need it, can access free front-line mental health care, with nationwide coverage expected within a five-year period.

Tomorrow, I will make an announcement here in Wellington with Minister Clark. It will also be international suicide prevention day. We will announce our suicide prevention plan. It includes important initiatives around those who have lost loved ones to suicide.

In the evening, I will speak at the Education Excellence Awards here at Parliament, and on Wednesday, I will also be here, and it will be two short years since the 2017 general election.

On Thursday, I will speak at the unveiling of the parliamentary plaque commemorating the New Zealand Wars, where I will also make a curriculum-based announcement.

Later on Thursday, I'm in the Waikato. There I will announce the members of the interim Mental Health Commission. You will recall the commission was disestablished by the previous Government. It was independent. It challenged everyone to do more and at pace, and, obviously, it has been a focus for us to reinstate that kind of activity.

On Friday, I will travel to Christchurch. It will be roughly six months on from the March 15 terror attacks, and so we'll be making relevant announcements to the ongoing work that's required.

I do want to just highlight, though, that amongst these mental health initiatives, these are, of course, part of our ongoing roll-out. We have already ensured that 83,000 students have access to nurses in schools. We have 1,500 children who have had help through Mana Ake's dedicated health services that have been rolled out in Canterbury and Kaikōura. That means that 219 schools are covered, and we've had 80 staff members involved in that.

We've invested a billion dollars in the last Budget to mental health services and addiction services and programmes. We've made it cheaper for about 600,000 people to visit their doctor, which is where people first show up and seek support for mental health when they need it. We've increased our mental health workforce by nearly 300, and, of course, we're paying them fairly but not leaving them out of the care and support worker pay equity settlement agreement. The voluntary bonding scheme, which has been running for a decade, had 148 mental health nurses accepted for the 2019 intake, and that was the highest ever, with 10,000 young people with access to Piki, which supports 18 to 25-year-olds with mild to moderate mental health needs across Wellington and the Wairarapa.

We've also put increased mental health services into our prisons, and our homelessness initiatives do focus on mental health issues experienced by our chronically homeless. As you can see, this is part of an ongoing roll-out on mental health, not just the beginning of it, but I do believe what we began on Sunday and will continue to roll out this week is part of a transformation of the way that we treat mental health services in Aotearoa New Zealand.

I'm happy to take questions.

Media: There's detailed allegations in The Spinoff this morning against a Labour Party staffer. What is the Labour Party position and your position on whether you knew about those allegations, and is that person still working on the precinct?

PM: To answer your second question, the person that's alleged or referenced in the article has not been on the precinct since the day after these issues arose, so I believe for roughly five weeks now, and will not be on the precinct at least for the duration of the inquiry that's being undertaken by a QC appointed by the Labour Party.

On your first question, I want to make it very clear that I am deeply concerned and incredibly frustrated by the process that has been undertaken by the Labour Party, but also, obviously, by the nature of the allegations. I was informed in the very beginning that the allegations made were not sexual in nature. That is obviously directly counter to what is now being reported. A month ago, I visited New Zealand Council—very seriously shared my view that they were not the appropriate place to undertake inquiries around concerning behaviour of members of the Labour Party, but, particularly, they are not the appropriate place to ever undertake an investigation into a sexual assault, and that would be their view too.

As of 10 August, from that meeting, decisions were taken to appoint a QC, and that is now where this process sits, but, as I was saying, I'm incredibly frustrated and deeply disappointed by the way that this has been handled.

Media: Was that person stood down five weeks ago?

PM: That person has not been on the premises, but keep in mind—

Media: So was that person stood down?

PM: Keep in mind, no complaint has been made to their employer, and so they have not been on the premises, but, again, we haven't had a complaint to their employer that has enabled action beyond that. They haven't been on the premises; they will not be on the premises until the completion of the inquiry by the QC, and that is appropriate.

Media: Have you sought assurances, others in the Labour Party, in terms of how serious those allegations were?

PM: This is what I want the QC to get to the bottom of. As I say, it'll be clear to you that I have had differing accounts relayed to me. I do need a third party—someone that is a trusted, reliable individual—to give me a sense of clarity, and I will act decisively on the findings of that report.

Media: Have you sought assurances today that there were no reports of a sexual nature that were made to that?

PM: Yes, I have followed up. As I say, I sought assurances originally that these complaints were not sexual in nature, in part because it would be entirely inappropriate for the Labour Party to investigate complaints of that nature. I was given an assurance that they were not. Obviously, now there is very different information, and it is only appropriate that I have the findings of the QC that's being appointed to give me some clear direction on the action that needs to be taken from here.

Media: Do you have full confidence in the president, Nigel Haworth?

PM: I'm awaiting the finding of that QC report. I think it's fair to say that the president, of course, has articulated to me that he only wants to ensure that he has done the right thing throughout this process, but I need absolute clarity. I have not received it through the competing reports to date. That is why I will await the report and findings from the QC?

Media: Do you have confidence in Nigel Haworth?

PM: Again, as I say, I absolutely believe that the president wants to do the right thing by those involved and by the party, but I have had competing reports now on the nature of the allegations and the complaint process. It was a month ago that I expressed complete dissatisfaction with the way it had been handled by the Labour Party, and I'm now going to await the findings of the QC's report.

Media: The complainants say they made it clear to the panel the allegations of sexual assault were made clear to the panel.

PM: Yes, and this is why I'm expressing a frustration here that I was advised that the complaints were not sexual in nature. I will be seeking from the party that they provide all of the information that they were provided to the QC, so that I can get some decisive findings that can then be acted upon.

Media: On the appeal process, some of the complainants have still got reservations about going through that process because they still think it's—the Labour Party gets to decide at the end of the day, and also they want an acknowledgment that things went wrong with that initial investigation first.

PM: I'll be asking the QC to report directly to me.

Media: When did you find out that they were sexual in nature?

PM: I sought assurances that they were not in the very beginning. I've obviously since then heard and seen reports within the media around questions around that being raised as to whether or not that was accurate.

Media: Sorry; so after the initial reporting about the investigation, which included allegations of sexual assault—that's when you—

PM: No. When I was advised that there were complaints that had been laid with the Labour Party around the behaviour of a Labour Party member, I sought assurances around the nature of that complaint, and was advised that they were not sexual in nature. Obviously, since then, there has been reporting that has been counter to that.

Media: Was it appropriate to bar some of the people who made the complaints from parts of the parliamentary precinct? The Speaker said it wasn't.

PM: My understanding is that that email was sent at the time that the Labour Party was investigating the complaints that had been made, and that it was based on legal advice around keeping the various parties involved in the complaint separate. Obviously, there is a different view held by the Speaker as to the appropriateness of that advice or that legal advice.

Media: You talk about the person involved in the allegations around this not being on the precinct. How actively are they involved in the party at the moment? Are they still attending meetings? Are they still—

PM: I do not believe so.

Media: Given the seriousness of the allegations, can Parliamentary Service take any action or do they need a complaint before they can act?

PM: Yes, this is something I've sought advice on. My understanding is the latter. They've not received anything formal, and therefore there is nothing for them at this stage to act on. But, obviously, in my view it is not appropriate regardless for the individual in question at this time to be in the precinct.

Media: Do you feel you've been misled by the Labour Party?

PM: I'm seeking clarity, and that clarity, I believe, will be provided by the QC. I'm obviously incredibly frustrated, disappointed, and concerned about the situation and the competing advice I've received, and I do believe the greatest way to get clarity is to have that independent, trusted voice of the QC that's been appointed.

Media: What's the time frame on that report back?

PM: I've had a suggestion that it could be an additional four weeks. I say that with caution, however, because I will be wanting to seek an assurance that the party will now provide all of the information that it was provided around the original complaints to the QC, and so whilst that's been the time line I'm given, I do not want to curtail them from feeling like they're able to do a full, comprehensive investigation.

Media: Have you asked that the person not be in the precinct—how did that come about—that that person is not here anymore?

PM: That was a decision that was made, I believe, involving line managers, and it was the appropriate, absolutely appropriate, decision.

Media: So they're stood down?

PM: They are not on the precinct and will not be working on the precinct until at least the conclusion of the QC's report.

Media: This has been asked about for the last five weeks. Why is the lack of precinct access only being revealed today?

PM: I simply don't believe I've been asked, but it was a decision that was taken some time ago. It's not something that's been hidden.

Media: Prime Minister, Treasury advised Megan Woods that Kāinga Ora would need to take an approach focused on "lowering the price of housing". Do you agree with this?

PM: Of course, we have had a longstanding focus on affordability. One of the issues, however, that is alongside affordability has been whether or not deposits have also acted as a barrier to first-home buyers. And that's some of the feedback that we had coming through strongly, as we were working on the KiwiBuild reset, and you'll see from the reset that that's where the focus has been. But we know affordability's an issue, and that's why KiwiBuild exists in the first place.

Media: Is 8chan with Jack Dorsey today? Should the 8chan Twitter account be taken down?

PM: I did raise the issue of 8chan. We had quite a long conversation about the existence of that platform and other platforms like it, and certainly it sensed an awareness of the issue. I think we'll probably have an ongoing conversation about it. But there is the added issue of, you know, if not that platform, will we see another one rise up? So it's a much bigger issue than just 8chan, but it was something we discussed.

Media: Did he indicate to you that that's something that he will look at, or has been looking at?

PM: I anticipate that we'll probably have another conversation about it again in the very near future. Obviously, at the UN General Assembly, there will be a meeting of tech companies again. I very much hope that we'll see participation at a high level from Twitter, but, to date, I have found them being very engaged on the work New Zealand has been leading in the aftermath of March 15.

Media: What other tangible aspects did you get out of that meeting?

PM: We had quite a good discussion around issues like algorithm use and research. It's an area where I think that Twitter is looking in quite a bit of detail around how it can build understanding of the way that Twitter is used in debates and discussions. Again, we haven't concluded any of those conversations yet, but I expect we'll see some progress as a result of the work we've been doing in the lead up to the UN General Assembly.

Media: Do you think that any real progress has been made since the Christchurch Call?

PM: I do, and we'll be announcing some of that progress at the UN General Assembly. You know, I think what's been pointed out to me by social media platforms and others is that this is the first time we've seen social media companies, Governments, civil society, and media outlets all brought into the same call to action, and that has really focused those who have been involved. I certainly sense that none of the momentum since March 15 has been lost. And, in fact, if anything, I think they're more resolute now than ever.

Media: What can you point to in terms of concrete action that those companies have taken since then?

PM: I think you'll see some progress around the commitments to the body that brings together the tech companies, and that, essentially, almost around the crisis protocols in situations like March 15. So we'll be looking to say a bit more on that once we get to the UN General Assembly.

Media: Do you think that Twitter is offering a level of corporation in this space that Facebook isn't?

PM: Oh, look, I don't want to create a hierarchy of engagement because, actually, there has been ongoing engagement from all of the social media companies. All of those who are represented at the Christchurch Call have continued to work with us. And there have been ongoing gatherings that have been all building towards work that will be announced in September, later in September. But it is fair to say that I think Twitter has been particularly engaged.

Media: Has any progress been made in terms of our laws and looking to Australia and what it did with the kind of punitive measures when social media companies didn't take down quickly extremist or violent terrorist content?

PM: As you'll recall, we know that there are some gaps in our legislation there. Our current legislation didn't enable us to act as quickly as we would have liked to on the manifesto. I expect Minister Martin will have more to say on that in the not too distant future. But, actually, it was one of the obligations we placed on ourselves and all of the other signatories. Yes, the international work's important, but we have to get it right at home as well.

Media: So fines and legal action could be—

PM: No, I don't want—I'm not going to pre-empt the decisions and announcements that will be made by the Minister, but work is ongoing domestically. We know that we need to do more to plug some of the gaps that we discovered on 15 March.

Media: On Southern Response, the Government has to make a decision on liability by Friday. Has that come across your desk yet?

PM: Yes, and I will leave it to the relevant Minister to make announcements on that. We are aware that, obviously, the deadline, I believe, is 13 September.

Media: What is the liability on that?

PM: Again, I'm going to leave that to the Minister. Of course, some of that would be speculative and difficult to quantify, but you'll be seeking some direction as to whether or not there'll be a challenge, and that's something I'll leave to the Minister to announce.

Media: But \$300 million—is that what taxpayers are looking at?

PM: Again, there's speculation, and some of these matters have been difficult to quantify, but I'll leave it to the Minister, when he makes further announcements on the decision around how we'll proceed, by 13 September.

Media: You mentioned the six-month anniversary of the Christchurch attack. In terms of the Government work, legislative work, policy work, where do you think things have gone well and where do you see room for improvement?

PM: Yeah, it's a good question. Some of the areas where we needed to undertake work were absolutely clear. Right from the beginning, obviously, our gun legislation—and you can see from the response of members of the public, you know, a general agreement that was an area we needed to do work. So the buy-back was part one. Tranche two, obviously, being finalised now. But, ultimately, making sure that we treat gun ownership as a privilege that has all of the checks and balances attached to it that you would expect to keep New Zealanders safe but to keep legitimate owners able to access weapons for legitimate use.

The second area, obviously, is that we identified that we were unique. We were a horrific first when it came to the way that the alleged offender in this case promoted this horrific terrorist act. And so that's an area where we've entered into uncharted territory but have continued to try and play a leadership role in bringing together all the parties who actually have the ability to make change around the way social media is used for terrorist acts.

The areas where I—actually, there is more work to be done and, actually, the Muslim community have really raised with us is what we do around just discrimination. And we are not a perfect nation. We knew that before 15 March, but this has highlighted the experience of many in our community. This has highlighted their experience and highlighted the obligation that we all have to address that. Now, there's lots of ways that we can deal with that—making sure that we weed out bullying and discrimination in environments like our schools and our workplaces but, actually, being really aware of whether or not our migrant and refugee communities are getting the same opportunities as every other New Zealander who calls New Zealand home in terms of employment and participation in our society.

So that's the area of work that is going to take a much longer time line but is equally very important.

Media: Is the Government afraid of taking more drastic action to lower the price of houses, to increase supply and perhaps change—

PM: Sorry—sorry, again.

Media: Is the Government afraid of taking more drastic action to lower the price of houses, which is, essentially, what's necessary to make housing more affordable in New Zealand.

PM: Keeping in mind, of course, that KiwiBuild is not a subsidised programme. So it's using—

Media: I'm not talking about KiwiBuild—just generally.

PM: It is our biggest lever on the affordability front, though, of course, because the goal of KiwiBuild continues to be to use the scale of the State to increase supply and also try and bring down by building, en masse, the price of housing. It is not a subsidised programme though, so it does experience some of those costs that actually warrant us considering whether or not they're fair—like the cost of building materials. But also it warrants us looking at whether or not there are other opportunities to bring down the cost, like prefabrication. And those are all areas of work we know, actually, we do need to continue to look at. In the meantime, we will continue to use the size and scale that we have as the Government to build en masse to try and make housing more affordable in New Zealand.

Media: Should Te Reo be compulsory in schools?

PM: Yeah, obviously I've been asked this many, many times, and, you know, quite simply put, even if—even if—that were a decision that were taken, we don't have the teaching workforce to actually be able to achieve it. So we've set goals around universal availability—that everyone who wants to learn can learn—also that it is more integrated into our education system, and that, actually, over time, we try and ensure that Te Reo is spoken more informally in New Zealand as well so that there is a greater number of New Zealanders who feel that they are able to converse in Te Reo Māori.

Media: What about the Treaty and the New Zealand Land Wars—does that need to be a compulsory subject in schools?

PM: You will have heard me say before that I would be surprised if our schools were not teaching New Zealand history, and I think when you say to New Zealanders and you ask them the question, they're surprised at the idea that that wouldn't be taught in our schools. It's not an unfair expectation. It's our history, and we should learn it. All right—last couple of questions.

Media: Have you had an update on the Deputy Prime Minister's health?

PM: I spoke to him, actually, over the weekend. I've spoken to him several times over the course of his time away from Parliament. He's still waiting for clearance to fly. I understand he doesn't believe it will be too far away. He was in good spirits when I spoke to him, though, and work continues on. He's obviously working from home while he awaits that clearance.

Media: Was it more serious than he thought?

PM: No, no, I wouldn't describe it in that way, and I think he probably is a bit frustrated at not being here, as you can imagine.

Media: Why doesn't he take the train?

PM: I actually haven't put that question to him. Maybe he's factoring in the discomfort of that. Obviously, he has had a medical event, but maybe you should ask him that yourself. In fact, I dare you to. He's a big supporter of trains, as you know. Last question, Jenna.

Media: Have you brushed up on the Treaty since Waitangi? Can you recite the three articles now?

PM: Yes. Kāwanatanga, tino rangatiratanga, and also the ability for all citizens to be treated equally and fairly under the law. But, again, I want to make sure that we're learning not just about Te Tiriti, we're not just learning about the right of the Government to govern, the right of iwi to self-manage and govern, and for us all to be treated as equal citizens, as the three articles state, but actually, more than just that: the Land Wars; that we learn about, regional history as well. What happened in Waikato was different to what happened

in the North. These are all things I think it's not unfair to have an expectation that we all learn about. All right, last question.

Media: Have you found that your ability to govern has been more productive in Winston Peters' absence?

PM: Sorry, have I—? We are a coalition and confidence and supply agreement Government. We work very well as such and none of that changes regardless of whether or not someone is physically present in Wellington or not. Thanks, everyone.

conclusion of press conference