

ALL OF GOVERNMENT TEAM PRESS CONFERENCE: TUESDAY, 24 MARCH 2020

John Ombler: Welcome, everybody. Thank you for being here. As I mentioned yesterday, this stand-up will normally just focus on a few different issues each day to try to keep people up to date with what's going on. Today, Ashley will give his regular health update as part of this. I have Iona Holsted with me as well, who is the Secretary for Education, who can talk about schools; and Paul Stocks, from the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, who will talk about the work we're doing to get clarity around essential services.

Just before going to those, just note that our response to this COVID-19 disease is unprecedented. We've got staff working from across the public and private sectors, working hard to continue to deliver essential services to New Zealanders, and I want to thank those people right across the public and private sectors who are carrying out those essential service roles. Staff are working at pace and things are changing, and I know many will have questions, and we'll do our best to answer those.

From midnight—one minute before midnight—tomorrow night, on Wednesday, everyone must stay at home unless they're working in essential services, and Paul will talk more about that a little bit later. This means that people must stop interactions with others outside of their households. Self-isolation is a very effective way to help protect all of us—our families, whānau, friends. You must spend time just with those with whom you are in self-isolation, and keep your distance from everyone else at all times if this is to work—and we must make it work. You can still go outside, go for a walk, exercise, take your children outside, but keep 2 metres away from others at all times.

You may recollect, yesterday I spoke of the need to have physical separation but to maintain social connection. Over the next four weeks, that's going to be very important, whether that be over the phone, over the fence, but always 2 metres apart. Food will always be available. You can continue to go to the supermarket or to a pharmacy and so forth, but, again, keep your distance from others. And, if you are coughing, sneezing, and spluttering, please do not get anywhere near anybody else. We absolutely need everyone across society to observe these requirements, so that we can protect New Zealanders and slow down this disease, and we will have to take enforcement action if that does not happen. We know that's asking an awful lot of people, but this is our best chance of eradicating the disease and making sure that our health system can cope.

Our national leadership team is pulling together the many agencies that keep New Zealanders well and safe and to keep the economy running. The National Crisis Management Centre is coordinating multiple streams of work, as you'd imagine, across Government, and these are continuing to ramp up.

I have been asked by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade to reiterate a couple of key points from them. These are not matters I'll be able to answer any questions on, but it's a message to New Zealanders overseas. We're asking them to make plans in case they cannot find flights home. The most up to date information is available on the SafeTravel website, and all New Zealanders overseas should visit that website and keep up to date. The ministry would also like to recommend to those New Zealanders that they should not rely solely on Government-assisted flights.

Now, just before I hand over to Ashley, I'd like to remind everyone that the [covid19.govt.nz](https://www.covid19.govt.nz) website is the first point of call for updates around Government actions, help, and advice and resources. It is updated constantly, and we're seeking to make it the best source of information for everyone. Now, I just want to hand over to Ashley to give the health update, and then he can answer questions on that. Ashley.

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Thank you, John. Kia ora koutou katoa. So there are 40 new confirmed cases of COVID-19 in New Zealand as at 10 o'clock this morning. We also have three new probable cases. In these cases, this is a person who has returned a negative

laboratory test result but the clinician looking after the person has diagnosed them as a probable case due to their exposure history and their clinical symptoms. These cases are actually treated as if they were a positive laboratory confirmed case, and the actions taken are the same as for confirmed cases—that is, self-isolation and active contact tracing.

So, therefore, our combined total of confirmed and probable cases is 155, and we will now report the total combined, confirmed, and probable cases each day. More details of the new cases, including the probable cases, will be provided via our website—that is the Ministry of Health website—shortly and updated as new details emerge. There are 12 cases that we can confirm are recovered. We will be updating this number also on a daily basis.

Our laboratories across the country are working to process and report all test results as quickly as possible. Anyone who has been tested is expected to be in strict self-isolation until advised of the result of their test. So far we have information on around one-third of the new cases that I'm reporting today, and all of those that we have information on have a link to overseas travel. This may include being in the same household as someone who has travelled back from overseas or they have been at a known event where transmission was occurring—for example, the Hereford cattle conference in Queenstown earlier this month—or they are close contacts of an already confirmed case. So recent travel from overseas is still the main driver of our new infections. Anybody who has recently travelled back from overseas should already be in strict self-isolation—no exceptions. Close household contacts should be particularly vigilant for any symptoms they may develop.

At this point, we are classifying four cases as community transmission—three in Auckland and one in the Wairarapa. That is two more than yesterday, and in these cases we have been unable to confirm a definite link to overseas travel or to an existing confirmed case. Contact tracing is, of course, under way for all those cases. We continue to look carefully at all new cases as more information is reported by public health services to identify evidence of community transmission. More than 900 laboratory tests were carried out yesterday, bringing the total number of completed tests to over 8,300. We continue to test people who need to be tested.

As John has said, and as you will be well aware, we are preparing to move to alert level 4. There is a clear consensus amongst public health professionals, scientists, and a wide range of health professionals that it is better to do this sooner rather than later, and doing so gives New Zealand the best chance of breaking the chain of community transmission. This will require all our efforts, and I strongly urge all New Zealanders to play their part.

That's all I have to say, and what I am going to do is take questions now related to health matters or issues I have talked about if there are questions.

Media: Are you able to say, Mr Bloomfield, how many cases there are in hospital—have been hospitalised?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Yes. At the moment, there are six people who are in hospital, and they are all stable, and none of our cases to date has required intensive care admission. So those people in hospital are all stable. That's quite a low proportion, as you will realise.

Media: There are calls for the ministry to urgently expand case identification and tracing. Will this happen?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: So the case identification is through the laboratory testing, and you'll have seen the increase in testing over the last week especially. So we are finding cases, and that's what we want to do. We continue to increase our laboratory capacity—again, to ensure that all people who need testing are tested—and then there is also an increase in our capacity to follow up and contact trace from our confirmed cases.

Media: Once we have that capacity, will you expand the testing criteria? It seems like we may be missing some cases.

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: So there is nothing that is restricting testing at the moment. There has been, for well over a week now, an expectation and/or an enablement of clinicians to test people who they think require testing. What the expanded laboratory capacity will allow us to do is, if we have particular clusters, we can do intensive testing in

an area or an organisation or a school, for example—or what would have been a school that had been opened—to identify any cases there.

Media: Can we get some clarification from you around essential services. There's a bit of confusion about who can open and who can't—things like Bunnings, things like Mitre 10. Are they considered essential, and, if some places are able to remain open, will that blur the lines of what we're trying to do?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: So one of the subsequent speakers will talk specifically about essential services, but what I can confirm, of course, is that health services are highly essential services, and they remain open, including primary care, pharmacies, and hospitals working as usual.

Media: Are there any cases in rest homes or among healthcare workers—any confirmed cases?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: I'm not aware of any confirmed cases amongst healthcare workers. I am aware of one confirmed case in a rest home in Auckland—that's all the information I have.

Media: How is that being managed? If that's been identified, are there going to be increased measures in terms of staff protection and testing in that rest home?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Yes, so very careful identification of any people in the facility was undertaken, and staff who may have been exposed; and those people are being looked after, in what you might call a "bubble", to ensure that they are strictly self-isolated and being monitored, of course, for any symptoms.

Media: Do you have any concerns about the vulnerability of that particular cohort of people in that rest home, obviously because of the age apart from anything else?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Well, a concern generally about the vulnerability of people in aged residential care facilities. And, in fact, almost two weeks ago we proposed to aged residential care facilities that they stop visitors coming, and most around the country had already done that and now have put in place much stricter protocols. And, of course, some of the measures that the Government has taken to provide economic relief are specifically designed to ensure that staff of those facilities are not disadvantaged by staying home if they are unwell, so that reduces the risk to those people too.

Media: [*Inaudible*] have tested positive from the Hereford conference?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: My recollection is that the number of people from that conference is now six, four of whom are in New Zealand and two from overseas: one in Uruguay and one in Australia.

Media: And could you just clarify if visitors are going to be banned from coming into hospitals from tomorrow or what the situation is there.

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: So hospitals have received information about a very clear visiting policy. It won't be banned per se, but there will be very significant restrictions on visitors.

Media: Are pregnant women considered high risk; and, if so, what does that mean for pregnant healthcare workers on the frontline?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: So pregnant women are not considered at a higher risk than any other adult, but, of course, it would be very important to protect pregnant women from becoming infected. And I suspect that many pregnant women are already self-isolating and making sure they are reducing a risk of infection. In terms of healthcare workers, of course, we would be looking to identify any healthcare workers, including those who are still working who are over 70, and people with pre-existing medical conditions, and we would put pregnant women in that same category to ensure that we can put them on work inside our hospitals or other healthcare settings where they're not to be exposed to people with COVID-19.

Media: Do you know, is the loss of the sense of smell—is that a symptom for COVID-19?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: I understand—I just saw an article overnight, actually, where this was being reported, and, evidently, this was something that also was found after the Spanish flu—or, actually, no; after the Spanish flu a century ago—that there were people who had the flu that then developed Parkinson’s symptoms. I would say this is an incidental finding and something that researchers will follow up now: that some people seem to be reporting having a loss of smell and taste, yes.

Media: How long on average is the testing process taking, from the collection of a swab to a confirmed result—do you know?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Well, it depends where the swab was taken, because we have the five laboratories around the country now processing, so it takes time to get the swabs there. But we would be aiming to get from the swab to the test result being notified to the patient within 48 hours. That would be what we would be aiming to do. Of course, just to reiterate, anyone who has been tested is in self-isolation until they get that test result.

Media: Are you able to give some clarification around health workers who are in families? If you have a health worker who’s a parent, a brother, sister—whatever—do they need to isolate from the rest of the family because of the exposure that they’re getting?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Only if—they might choose to do that, or they might need to do that if they are looking after someone with COVID-19, and that would be something to look at, remembering at the moment we’ve got five people around the country in hospital and they are all being cared for in special settings—so negative-pressure ventilation rooms, with use of PPE, of course.

Media: So there’s no strong advice on that—it’s not a “you must”; it’s up to a health worker to decide whether they stay living with their family or not during the lockdown?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Well, as I say, at the moment, we have a low number of people in hospital with COVID-19. That would be something we would look at, but I’m sure that everybody will be looking to minimise the risk to other members of their household over coming weeks, including health workers.

John Ombler: Just a couple more questions on health, and then we’ll turn to the subject of education.

Media: In terms of personal protective equipment, the World Health Organization is warning about possible global shortages and they want manufacturing increased by 40 percent. What is New Zealand doing? Do we have an accurate stocktake of our supply of that?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: We have both an accurate stocktake—or we have a stocktake of our supply both in our national store and already in our district health boards, and we have a lot more being manufactured at this point in time, with the good fortune of having—or the good planning of having—our own factory here in Whanganui. So millions more masks are being produced, in particular masks, and the initial production was 200,000 masks a day, and that’s increasing. So we’re very confident about our access to PPE here.

Media: How is that contact tracing going for the cases of community spread—particularly the one in Wairarapa?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: I don’t have any further details on the Wairarapa case, but, obviously, where we do think there is community spread, or we can’t identify the source of the infection, then there is a lot of work that goes into actively tracing back through the chain to see how many people the case may have had interaction with, particularly close contacts, and those people are all put in isolation and monitored. One last question.

Media: Do you know specifically where in Auckland the cases of community transmission are yet?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: Ah, let me think—so, yes, there is one person who is in Ōrewa, and he had travelled to and done a tour to Milford, and so we’re assuming that, probably, he came in contact with someone, an overseas traveller, who was infected. So that’s likely, but we can’t rule out community transmission. So both he and his partner have

tested positive. They've been in strict self-isolation. The other one is another suburb in Auckland—I can't remember, sorry.

Media: Could it be made available or sent out to us at some point today?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: We can have a look at doing that, yes. Thank you.

Media: Have you had any issues with resources like swab tests and protective visors—that's what we've heard—and what are you doing to source more of those?

Dr Ashley Bloomfield: So we don't have an issue with the supply of those, but, of course, what we need to do is make sure that wherever they are needed in the country, we're able to resupply practices or district health boards as soon as possible. So there's a team working on that constantly. Thank you very much. I think those are all the health questions.

John Ombler: Yep. Thank you, Ashley. That's great. And, with that, I'd like to invite Iona Holsted to come up and talk about what's happening in the schooling sector. Iona.

Iona Holsted: Tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou katoa. First, can I start by thanking all of our schools and early learning centres and tertiary leaders, who have shown considerable stewardship in the last few weeks. This has been an unprecedented event and will continue to challenge us all. Your input and support has been invaluable, as is your commitment to making sure your children and young people are able to continue their learning with the support of their parents and caregivers.

I also want to iterate John's message before about the need to reduce the number of contacts as we go into this closedown period. The Prime Minister's message yesterday talked about needing to have a circle of care to support those people in need during the four-week closedown period, so while the ideal arrangement might be that you limit your connections to your immediate family, we know that in practice, some people will need help from others. In the case, for example, of a child of an essential worker who cannot stay home and they need to have a child cared for, if they identify a trusted buddy—as long as they're not elderly or vulnerable in other ways—and if that person is identified as part of your self-isolated group, they become the child's caregiver.

Iona Holsted: However, it is critical that that buddy cannot then have other contacts other than their own household. You all become one group, but it should be a tight group—the smaller the better. Another example could be helping a family with care for their disabled child to give the primary carers some time to rest. But, again, you need to be identified as part of their self-isolated group, and you cannot have other contacts other than those in your own household. As the Prime Minister said, consistency is key, and making sure that we all have a very tight circle of care is needed to minimise any risk of spread—again, the smaller the better.

You'll appreciate our foremost priority since yesterday's announcement has been to make sure that all schools, kura, early learning services, and tertiary institutions have been given all of the information that we have to keep them up to date. The ministry will be working over the next few weeks to provide support for distance learning. We'll be pleased to connect with teachers interested in working with us, and we're sourcing devices and working through the logistics of getting them to students that need them. We're also working through issues where access to the internet is needed, and, while this is a big and complex project, we are making progress.

I'm happy to take any questions.

Media: What are you doing for low-decile schools that, perhaps, kids don't have that technology at home, don't have internet speed—how are you dealing with that?

Iona Holsted: We're identifying those schools area by area, where we believe there is a gap, and we have sourced devices. We've now got a slightly difficult logistical situation of actually getting devices to the right homes, because, of course, they will have to be delivered to homes rather than to schools. But it's important to also understand that in many low-decile areas, the internet connection is not there either, so the provision of devices will not suffice. We are working for N4L, which is a Crown-owned company that does the fibre in schools, to create connectivity wherever possible, but, where that's not possible, it'll have

to be hard copy, and we're working with our suppliers to make sure that can also be delivered to homes.

Media: So working with that provider, what's the time frame on that—could that be days, would it be weeks, would it be months?

Iona Holsted: The material that we're expecting from the hard copy is between five and 10 days.

Media: I mean with the setting up—so if there's a provider who's working with schools—

Iona Holsted: No, no—so I meant internet provider.

Media: Yes, so are we talking about days, or weeks or—

Iona Holsted: It will vary. In some of those areas there won't be internet coverage at all, so we're working separately with television and radio. Those spectrums do, of course, go—are ubiquitous. We're working with them—early, early days—on how we can use those services to beam into kids' houses too.

Media: What's your message to parents or students, particularly in those senior years, who are really worried about NCEA, about assessments, about how this month is going to affect their performance this year?

Iona Holsted: It's the reason, of course, that we expect senior secondary schools to be able to provide online learning, and many of them do. Most of them have got capacity to do that. My advice to those students is to use the time to study. NCEA is not at risk yet, and assessment will need to be shifted around a bit. If this is prolonged, of course it will be affected, and NZQA will provide advice to those schools and to those kids as to what they need to do.

Media: Isn't there a big risk here, though—and, obviously, understanding the whole situation—that, you know, children's learning might be disadvantaged because of resources or just where they are, and I suppose it comes to Jess' question: you know, how do you really make sure that that's as even as possible for all kids?

Iona Holsted: In a situation like a pandemic, it reveals the inequity in our system; it doesn't create it. Many, many children in this country suffer from poor learning outcomes because of where they live and the lack of support they have. This actually might be an opportunity to give them more resources.

Media: What about healthcare workers. Can you just tell us a bit more about the buddy system or any other ways healthcare workers can get their childcare when they don't want to leave them with grandparents?

Iona Holsted: We're working today on an option for that, along with the Ministry of Social Development, to identify organisations that may be able to help. Naturally, anybody who provides any of those services, though, would also have to meet the public health guidelines in their dealings with those children.

Media: There's concern that children who rely on food in schools, they'll go hungry during this time. Is there any consideration being given to distributing those services in another way?

Iona Holsted: Yes, there is. Some of the providers have already indicated they can do that—so those are voluntary organisations. KidsCan, I think, publicly stated that the other day. Our own food in schools programme, which is very, very new, we're just going through case by case to see whether or not there is anything we can do to repurpose that. That is difficult because the provision of food, obviously, creates a risk, so we have to have very, very high standards to ensure that we're not doing damage.

Media: A lot of nanny agencies are being called by essential workers needing urgent childcare, and former hospitality workers are becoming nannies—is that OK, with families having new people coming into their homes [*Inaudible*]?

Iona Holsted: That's up to each family to decide. The particular example I think you're referring to, my concern would be around police vetting, because I, like you, probably, read that online and noted that they were looking for urgency around police

vetting. What we do know is there's large numbers of early childhood staff who also will not be at their early childhood centres. We know that there's organisations like Porse and Barnardos, who've got staff who have been police vetted and have got experience. So we were looking to how we can join people up with those sorts of known services.

John Ombler: Perhaps just another last question on education, or is there none? If there's not, Iona, thank you very much indeed for joining us today.

I'd like to invite Paul Stocks, who's deputy secretary at the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment. Paul's working with a group of people looking at the issue of essential services and lists and so forth—Paul.

Paul Stocks: Thank you, John. Kia ora koutou. I'd like to talk through the work that's been happening to date and the decisions on essential services under an alert level four. I suppose to start though, just a reminder that the purpose of alert level four is to eradicate and eliminate COVID-19 in New Zealand. By definition, this means that life under alert level four will not be the same as under alert levels one, two, or even three. The purpose of the essential services list is not to ensure that life goes on unchanged; it's to ensure that we are able as a nation to self-isolate and eradicate and eliminate COVID-19. The purpose is to ensure that we provide for the necessities of life, for health, for safety, for welfare, and for essential infrastructure. What that also means is that when we think about whether something is an essential service, there are two tests: firstly, is it essential for those purposes, and, secondly, how might it be delivered in such a way as to limit the risk of spread and transmission of COVID-19.

To date, we have identified 15 sectors that are considered to be essential services. You can find those on covid19.govt.nz. We have allocated lead Government agencies for each of those agencies who are working with those sectors—whether that is accommodation, whether that's transport and logistics, or whether it's utilities—to ensure that those essential services know who they are and know the steps that they need to take to provide for New Zealanders through the alert level four. We will continue to update that website, and, from 5 p.m. today, there will be an 0800 number where firms can call in if they are unclear about their essential services status.

This is a principles-based regime. We won't be able to list every firm in the nation. My suggestion, however, is that if you're in doubt about whether you are an essential service, you're probably not. We will provide support; we will help to identify you if you are. We expect New Zealanders, firms, businesses, and people to assist in the self-isolation process, not to assume that they are an essential service when in fact they are not. We will help you make those decisions. If we have helped you and you continue to provide services, we will help you further, and that will be in the form of compliance and enforcement.

As I've said, this is an evolving situation. We are working with firms today to identify the core essential services. We will update on the website and we will have an 0800 number, and I look forward to your assistance in that. I'm here to take questions.

Media: The big questions we got yesterday from people—the big questions we got from people yesterday were: what can they do for supermarkets, service stations, that sort of thing? Can you very clearly lay out how people can access those services and what the situation is with public transport—i.e., buses and trains versus taxis—very clearly?

Paul Stocks: Sure. So far it's been very clear. The essentials of life, and that includes supermarkets, will remain open. There will be an ongoing supply of food and essential supplies. Supermarkets are already taking steps to ensure that self-isolation can proceed while people are shopping. I know that that's an in situ shopping and we're also looking to do online contactless deliveries. Similarly, essential infrastructure like service stations will remain open and will be supplied. When we're talking about essential services we are talking about the point of delivery and the supply chains that sit behind those essential services.

Media: How do people get there if they don't have a car?

Paul Stocks: So if they don't have a car, then there are facilities for using transport. We're working through the transport operators now. Where you can self-isolate—for

example, if you are taking a taxi, then you should sit in the back seat to maintain as much distance as possible. Public transport will remain open for essential services workers. I've seen already, for example, in terms of parking that Wellington City Council has announced that parking will be free during the period of alert level four. I think that's good. It provides for transport options for essential service workers.

Media: But people can't rely on buses and trains over the next four months to get to the supermarket or the doctor or—well, not the service station—if they're not an essential worker.

Paul Stocks: So it's four weeks for the alert level four. So transport is considered to be an essential service and will continue to operate and we recommend—we require—social distancing while it's being used.

Media: Could we get some clarity around places like The Warehouse being open. What's the thinking behind that?

Paul Stocks: So the Government has not decided that The Warehouse will be open. We are working through those firms that will be required or allowed to remain open. I would caution firms from leaping to judgements about what their status will be before they have received an adjudication from the Government.

Media: So the Warehouse will be closed.

Paul Stocks: I don't want to go through a list of individual firms or businesses today

Media: It's quite a big one though.

Paul Stocks: Yes, I understand that. We are working through: how do we ensure that essential services and goods remain available to New Zealanders whilst reducing the risk of spread? And one of the things we're clearly thinking about is that we don't want a bunch of people showing up to retail stores.

Media: Is The Warehouse a necessity of life?

Paul Stocks: I don't think any particular firm is a necessity of life. The goods that they supply might be, and we'll have to think about how they are supplied to New Zealanders.

Media: What about those smaller food suppliers like dairies, like butchers, like bakers. You've said supermarkets are open, but what about the smaller—

Paul Stocks: Yeah, we are also working through, because, of course, around the country there are different circumstances for different communities. We want to make sure that all communities have access to food and essentials. Whether that's through a small supplier or a large supplier is not the key test; it's how do we make that available. So we're working through that now.

John Ombler: One last question.

Media: [Inaudible] essential workers. Ashley Bloomfield mentioned before about health workers and them choosing whether they want to isolate from their families or not. People working in supermarkets, big stores that are still going to be open, they're going to have a lot of contact with the public still. What are they meant to do if they are then going home to families? Take a supermarket checkout person, for example.

Paul Stocks: So I'd apply the same judgment that Dr Bloomfield provided you. So we do ask people to take care for themselves. I know that supermarkets and other stores are already taking active steps to minimise the number of people in the store at any one time, which facilitates social distance as required. I think everyone should take care, maintain that distance, and—when they return home—enter into self-isolation. Thank you.

John Ombler: Last one.

Media: Can you please clarify if liquor stores are an essential service?

Paul Stocks: We're very aware of the issues that are raised by that question, and we're working through it right now. So we'll provide clarification when the day is over.

John Ombler Look, everybody, we've used our time available. I think this—as you'd imagine, Paul and a bunch of officials are working through this stuff right now. There'll be further work done during the course of the day, and my intention is that there's far greater clarity by the end of it, and we can answer more questions tomorrow. So thank you very much.

Media [*Inaudible*] that people are confused, like. When can we—

John Ombler As I said, we're working through it today. I expect there to be far greater clarity by tonight, on the website. It won't be perfect. We'll have to keep finessing it. We're going to uncharted territory. So please just bear with that—[*Interruption*] No, I'm sorry, I said it was the last question, so—

Media We had a transport question for people who only have a 24-hour window, and you alluded to it in your opening statements, that people can't—people overseas. Are there any arrangements to help put on extra flights, extra transport, for people trying to get home?

John Ombler I'm sorry, I can't answer that question, as I said earlier. Thank you very much.

Rt Hon Trevor Mallard I'm just going to hijack the fact that people are here to do a very quick explanation about what's going to be happening as far as Parliament is concerned. Parliament will meet tomorrow afternoon. It will be a differently shaped session. It will start off with a debate similar to the one that was held on Tuesday last week, this time around the epidemic notice and any other documents which have been tabled by the Government.

There are likely to be very few members of Parliament present tomorrow. The Business Committee, which met this morning, has agreed to relax the proxy voting requirement so no one who is not in Wellington will be required to attend Parliament.

The Business Committee has agreed to recommend to the Parliament a special motion to set up a special select committee which will run for the next four or five weeks at least. It will be a committee that sits remotely. It will be chaired by the Leader of the Opposition or his nominee and will have a majority of Opposition members on it. The committee will have the unusual powers which generally reside with the Privileges Committee to send for people and to send for papers.

Rt Hon Trevor Mallard: As I indicated, it will only meet remotely; members will not be in the same room at the time that it does meet. There will be a few tidy-up type arrangements done for the Parliament, a bit more time for Ministers to answer questions. There'll be a deferral of report-back dates, and then there will be an adjournment motion, and the agreed date to which Parliament will be adjourned will be 28 April—Tuesday, 28 April. So the effect of this is that the two weeks which Parliament would be sitting—the next two weeks it would be sitting, and the following recess—will all be rolled into one recess. At that stage, Parliament will adjourn and won't come back for nearly five weeks.

Media: What do you say to the concerns that have been raised about a Government that might go unchecked because of this kind of geared back version of Parliament?

Rt Hon Trevor Mallard: Well, there's a real balancing act in here. I think there's a strong view amongst most members of Parliament that Parliament has to take leadership in stamping this virus out, and having members of Parliament flying around the country, interacting in big groups here, and then going through airports—if, in fact, planes are flying—would not be a good thing. So what we think we've got here is a balance of accountability because of a very powerful committee, chaired by the Leader of the Opposition, who can make arrangements to, effectively, interrogate Ministers or public servants on their actions around the pandemic, and, that way, we think that a balance will occur between accountability and, clearly, responsibility.

Media: Will those inquiries, those interrogations, be open to the public?

Rt Hon Trevor Mallard: Yes, they will be broadcast. Yep—no, they will be. Parliamentary select committees I think, for about a year now have all been broadcast via

Facebook or similar arrangements, and I'm not a technical expert, but that will continue. The witnesses will be interviewed remotely, but all of that will be available to the public.

Media: Are deadlines for hearings for submissions on things at select committee—are they all automatically being extended? There seems to be some suggestion online that the smoke-free legislation would still be—

Rt Hon Trevor Mallard: There will be a decision taken by the Parliament tomorrow, if, in fact, it wasn't automatically happened today, for all report-backs to be deferred until very close to the date that the Parliament's coming back. There's no point having legislation back in the Parliament, and, frankly, not many of us think it will be business as usual when the Parliament does come back, but there is a commitment that there will be a sitting on that date.

Media: Not report-back dates, though, but the closing dates for submissions.

Rt Hon Trevor Mallard: That is a matter that committees can organise for themselves. It's not something that has to happen separately, and my view is that it just—I mean, it wouldn't be appropriate either for the Government or even the whole House to interfere in that. A committee can change its closing date.

Media: Is there scope for urgent—or what some might call urgent—legislation, like the smoke-free, like the gun reforms, to get through in any way if the Parliament's held off longer?

Rt Hon Trevor Mallard: If Parliament's not sitting, then legislation will not be progressed.

Media: So if it goes further than this and we don't really have any rules around—

Rt Hon Trevor Mallard: That's right, and I think people should look at what's happening internationally. My understanding is that the Australian Parliament's not coming back until August. The Canadian Parliament, I think, is sitting for a day or two, and then I think it might be May, late May, until it comes back. The UK Parliament's about to do some emergency legislation and then go into recess. I think we know these are not normal times, and things which were otherwise very important don't have the same urgency as a virus that could kill so many people.

Media: Is Parliament's resumption tied to a certain alert level, or is it more ad hoc?

Rt Hon Trevor Mallard: No. What we've done is we've worked the Business Committee—which is, you know, the cross-party arrangement—to make these arrangements. It's not tied to an alert level, and I think there is a general view that by 28 April, we should come back, because there may be some things that have to be done at that stage which are very important.

Media: You've raised concerns about Parliament's IT infrastructure in the past. Now that Cabinet is going to be meeting with some kind of virtual components, is that a cyber-security risk?

Rt Hon Trevor Mallard: That's a matter for the DPMC to work through. The one point that I will make is that we did make some changes last year which have significantly improved the cyber-security of these buildings and our systems.

Media: Who will sit on the committee and how will those members be—

Rt Hon Trevor Mallard: There will be a total of 11 members. It will be chaired by the Leader of the Opposition or his nominee. There will be, from memory, three other National members, an ACT member, a couple of Labour members, a Green member, and a New Zealand First member. Those names will not be in the motion, and there will be an ability for parties to sort of shuffle through and put different people in for different meetings depending on which Minister is going to be appearing before the committee on that particular day.

Media: Was that a nine-person committee?

Rt Hon Trevor Mallard: Sorry, my maths might have been wrong. I'll see if I can work it out: 4 National, 3 Labour, 1 Green, 1 New Zealand First, 1 ACT, and the Leader of the Opposition. Sorry.

Media: Could you clarify if the Opposition are totally on board with this—

Rt Hon Trevor Mallard: Well, this is a decision which is always a consensus decision of the Business Committee; so you can't have a decision of the Business Committee that the Opposition do not support.

Media: How likely do you think it is that tomorrow's the last day that this Parliament will sit?

Rt Hon Trevor Mallard: It will resume on 28 April—that will be the motion. The only way, in my understanding, of avoiding that would be a proroguing, and people are agreed that that would not be the right approach.

Media: So even if the lockdown is extended past the four weeks, Parliament will come back on the 28th?

Rt Hon Trevor Mallard: That is the current intention.

Media: And that could be a procedural, "let's have another four-week break", or whatever it is?

Rt Hon Trevor Mallard: Well, I think we're anticipating too much, but, remember, the decisions that we've taken today and I announced earlier mean that we do not have to have a whole pile of members of Parliament coming; and, even tomorrow, I think you will find there will be very few people there.

Media: What's the point of the break? Is the point of the break because it's level four, or is it because you want to show some leadership? How would you resume—

Rt Hon Trevor Mallard: I think it's because we don't want to have people gathering any more than is necessary. Frankly—

Media: So if level four continues, then Parliament shouldn't proceed.

Rt Hon Trevor Mallard: At some stage, the constitution will require some questions to be addressed, and we will know what those questions are much better at that stage.

Media: How frequently will that committee meet?

Rt Hon Trevor Mallard: It will be a matter for the committee. I think the general feeling is that they'll meet Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays, probably in the mornings. I think someone suggested 10 o'clock in the morning for an hour or so.

Media: So there's nothing binding as to what is discussed there; it's purely for transparency and accountability?

Rt Hon Trevor Mallard: The committee is not a decision-making committee; no select committee is. Right, thank you.

conclusion of press conference