

**PRIME MINISTER'S PRESS CONFERENCE: WEDNESDAY, 25 MARCH 2020**

**PM:** Good afternoon, everyone. We are now a matter of hours away from an unprecedented lockdown of our country, in order to combat an unprecedented virus that, left unchecked, would have an unacceptable toll on New Zealanders. I have one simple message for New Zealanders today as we head into the next four weeks: stay at home. It will break the chain of transmission and it will save lives. If people do not stay at home, other than to go to the supermarket or the GP or to get some fresh air close to your home, then you risk both spreading the virus to others and you risk getting it yourself. Breaking the rules could kill someone close to you, and that is why it is so important. Self-isolation is our best tool to beat the virus, but if you don't comply with the rules, you run the risk of forcing us to extend the period of lockdown and, worse, you could contribute to the virus defeating us and causing harm to thousands. I cannot repeat this enough: staying at home will save lives.

The Government, of course, is doing our bit alongside all of you. Today, a state of national emergency has been declared across New Zealand. Through the early and hard measures we've taken at the border using the powers under the Health Act, the signing of epidemic notices, and now being in a state of national emergency, we have all of the legislative means possible, all of the enforcement powers, all the tools we need at our disposal to combat the spread of COVID-19. In particular, the state of national emergency declaration allows Civil Defence Emergency Management controllers to take the necessary steps, if they need to, to ensure the conservation and supply of food, fuel, and other essential supplies; regulate land, water, and air traffic; close roads and public places; evacuate any premises, including any public place; and, if necessary, to exclude people or vehicles from any premises or place. I also issued an epidemic notice, which gives us flexibility to make common-sense and pragmatic changes across our crucial governmental services to keep them functioning well during the lockdown. In particular, temporary visas will now be automatically extended until late September.

Today, Parliament will also introduce and pass the COVID-19 Response (Urgent Management Measures) Legislation Bill. The omnibus bill amends various pieces of legislation so the Government can more effectively respond to the outbreak of COVID-19. The bill amends the Residential Tenancies Act to freeze all rent increases for a specific period of time, and gives the Secretary for Education emergency powers to direct education providers to open and close, and direct how they operate.

The COVID Cabinet met today and also made further decisions relating to our borders. Border enforcement will step up, once again, in line with our expectation that the proportion of New Zealanders returning home who will have potentially come in contact with COVID-19 is likely to have increased. Every New Zealander coming through our borders will be screened. If they are symptomatic, they will be tested and they will be put into isolation in an approved facility. If they are not symptomatic but they have no plan or ability to self-isolate, they will also be placed in an approved facility. If they live in a city outside of the one in which they have landed and have no ability to transport themselves home whilst maintaining isolation, they will also be placed in an approved facility. Those who are recent arrivals who do have an appropriate self-isolation plan will be checked on by police in the days that follow. If they are not following requirements, they will be fined and they will be quarantined. These measures are tough but reflect the higher risk these New Zealanders pose, through no fault of their own. I know they'll be as keen as we all are to keep other New Zealanders safe, and these are the measures we must take to ensure that.

I want to conclude with the discussion on essential services. We need people to stay at home so we can beat the virus. This is not an area where we want workarounds. We may need to amend the rules as we go to make sure that we are doing everything we can to beat the virus and are supporting New Zealanders as we do that. But if in doubt, you should

be closed. This plan is our best shot at success. We won't get everything right every time, and we will make changes if we have to, but now is not the time to be relaxed or flexible. We do need tough rules to win the battle ahead.

I know how hard this will be, especially for New Zealanders who face the first day of lockdown unemployed and with an uncertain future. We've sought to put enough financial protections in place to ensure you can get through the next period of time, that business is positioned as best it can be for a recovery, that mortgage holders don't lose their house in the next six months, and that renters don't face rent increases or that they don't face evictions. I know how hard this is going to be for New Zealanders already living in overcrowded, cold, and damp accommodation; how hard it will be for our elderly and those who live on their own. It won't be easy, but the alternative is worse.

So as we enter into a stage that none of us have experienced before, I want to share a few final messages. I want to share the same messages I've just shared in Parliament. Firstly, you are not alone; you will hear us and see us daily as we guide New Zealand through this period. It won't always be perfect, but the principle of what we are doing is the right one. Secondly, success won't be instant. The benefit of what we do today won't be felt for many days to come. Expect our numbers to keep rising, because they will. In fact, modelling suggests we could have several thousand cases before we see the measures we're taking today having an impact. But over time, we will see change if we all stick to the rules. Thirdly, you may not be at work, but that doesn't mean you don't have a job. Your job is to save lives, and you can do that by staying home and breaking the chain.

Finally, if you have any questions about what you can or can't do and you're looking for answers, apply a simple principle: act like you have COVID-19. Every move you make could be a risk to someone else. That is how we must all collectively think now. So New Zealand, remember to be calm, be kind, stay at home. We can break the chain.

**Media:** Do you have any reservations about so many powers being given to the Government and authorities?

**PM:** No. These are all necessary. This is an extraordinary time. Of course, we are very mindful of the way we exercise them. We're also making sure we're putting into our system accountabilities. We have now, for instance, within Parliament, a select committee that is being chaired by the Opposition where they can continue to scrutinise all the activities of Government, and I do think that's important.

**Media:** What can the Government do to help given that there's an anticipated spike in domestic violence cases?

**PM:** This is where we have considered as essential services those specifically working in the field of, for instance, child welfare, family violence. One of the sad things that we know and have prepared for is that this may be a time where we see an increase in those issues.

**Media:** Do we have any better idea of how many New Zealanders are going to be arriving at the borders?

**PM:** It has been speculative. That, in part, is because we have seen a no-show rate on even ticketed travel of up to 30 percent. That's either because New Zealanders have changed their mind or their transit routes into New Zealand have ceased. It could be anywhere up to—through to the end of the month—anywhere up to 10,000, and so we have designed our plan, our scrutiny at the border, to prioritise public health but also to factor in those potential numbers.

**Media:** Is the reason that people will be allowed to go home and self-isolate—obviously, under police monitoring—is that decision because there were too many numbers for the Government to put into quarantine immediately, for example?

**PM:** Two reasons. Firstly, we've got to make sure that what we do does not make the infection rate worse, and so making sure we prioritise who is moving into a facility are those

that pose the highest risk to others. That's the first reason. And yes, there is a scale question, but it's also a question of whether or not it's the best approach to put everyone in without having some screening around who we need to prioritise.

**Media:** Those approved isolation facilities—will those be hotels and motels or something else?

**PM:** Predominantly. So we will be using those facilities we've already used successfully for quarantine—for instance, we've used Whangaparāoa. But we have also undertaken activity around the airport areas to identify those hotels that are appropriate and that are available, and that work's been under way for some time, and we now have numbers in place and facilities ready to go.

**Media:** People have questions about whether from tomorrow, say, essential workers will need to present letters to police, or whether police will be at roadblocks from tomorrow. Why has the Police Commissioner not been outlining that sort of thing today? Are you able to answer to those questions?

**PM:** I had this exact conversation with the Police Commissioner this morning. My expectation, as we move into this phase across the country, is that New Zealanders will observe all of the expectations that have been laid out. So yes, people will need to go to their jobs at the supermarket; they will need to go and work at hospital facilities. Police will be monitoring and will be moving around the country, and they will ask questions of people as they move to essential services or if, for instance, they're outside their homes generally getting fresh air. They will be able to talk to people, ask them about their activities. If someone is outside and has no explanation, they will remind them of their obligations, and if they believe they need to, they can take other enforcement actions.

The police have outlined it to me as really a four-step process that they can go through, with a range of options for them. Ultimately, if you work in essential services, many of those things will be obvious. The police, as you can imagine, are well used to questioning people under various circumstances, making sure that people can identify their purpose for being outside. But, of course, someone who is getting fresh air won't be carrying a letter with them, so we do need to give some discretion and common-sense ability to the police to do their job. Ultimately, though, New Zealanders will want to do the right thing. We're being as clear as we can on the guidance. It may take a bit of time for people to really, truly understand the expectations, but police will be working with them to help them with that, as we will.

**Media:** What will you be looking for in order to lift the alert level or to reduce it? Is it just you're looking for the curve to go down, or have you actually had more specific advice on what you're looking for?

**PM:** Yes. So, actually, we're doing a little bit more work with our scientific community on some of the steps in order to move down the alert levels. At present, though, what we're looking for, of course, is a decline in cases, but that will take some time—many days, in fact—before we expect to see anything of that nature. Then we'll be looking at the nature of cases we have: are they showing us community transmission in particular communities? Can we see the linkages with previous cases? That level of intelligence will tell us exactly what's going on across New Zealand and will help guide our decisions going forward.

**Media:** There's still some confusion about what kiwis can do outside.

**PM:** Stay home.

**Media:** Can they go to playgrounds with their kids?

**PM:** No. Let me, again, give you some simple principles, because there will be many, many iterations of questions that people will have. Ultimately, we want people to stay home. We accept that people will want to get some fresh air and to stretch their legs, but any common space that they move to, a surface their child touches at a playground, presents

risk. No playgrounds, avoiding any spaces where people are having contact with those public services, and actually just sticking to essential services outside of their homes.

**Media:** What about fishing and hunting?

**PM:** Yeah. Look, again, those general principles. We want people to stay home. Again, if people are going outside, avoid all contact—any contact with those public spaces. That is ultimately the advice I will give on everything: act like you have COVID-19. It will help guide your decisions and help you think about the way you engage with other people.

**Media:** Queenstown's mayor is warning of a looming welfare crisis, with thousands of unemployed migrant workers, and they're suggesting a modest allowance to tide these people over. Is that an area of concern?

**PM:** So as you'll have seen, we have, through the notices that have been issued, as required given greater flexibility to our benefit system to deal with need as it's seen. So we do have some flexibility in there. We acknowledge this, of course, is a time where people are experiencing job loss. Our goal is to try and keep people connected to their employer through the wage subsidy. If that's not happening, we have the back-up mechanism of our welfare system.

**Media:** Do you have any update on what's happening with emergency housing, homeless people, people very vulnerable who may not actually have somewhere to self-isolate?

**PM:** Yeah, so this is where we've been asking particularly the police, potentially the Defence Force, to work with those service providers who may be operating, for instance, night shelters or other services. We absolutely recognise the need to keep those services going. Also, they are considered essential services. So that's something that we're working with providers on now but we have been very, very aware of.

**Media:** People on the streets, for example—will they be left to their own devices? Will MSD be making sure that they have somewhere to go?

**PM:** We want individuals in those current circumstances to have the same access to services that they will have always had. We do consider those social services and those NGOs working in those spaces to be part of our essential services, but we will be asking them to really use those precautionary measures during this time—applying social distancing, using equipment to look after themselves and the people they might be working to support.

**Media:** Have you heard of this thing where people are putting teddy bears in their windows so that when children are going out for walks around the street, they've got things to look for? Do you think that's a good idea, or is it encouraging people to leave their houses when they shouldn't?

**PM:** People will get fresh air, and so there is nothing wrong with someone getting some fresh air, but what we do ask is that people are doing that locally, and if they encounter anyone, don't stop and talk, and keep two metres away from people at all times. But we need to sustain this for a month, so we expect—and accept—that people will go for a walk, they will take their children outside to get fresh air, they might look for teddy bears in windows, but as they pass people, keep your distance. Don't talk to others; just stay within your bubble. And if you're in Wellington and you're walking in the local neighbourhood, you might see one in my window.

**Media:** How is it expected to work if, for example, somebody has come back from overseas, they live in a regional town which isn't served by air services—say, Taupō, somewhere like that—and a family member with whom they are going to isolate when they get home—can that family member drive to Auckland?

**PM:** Yeah, and so this is where we have our authorities at the border, who will be able to go through all of those individual circumstances and assess whether it's an appropriate plan or not. And if it's not, then that person will be supported into an approved facility for a

two-week period before they then make their way home. If, however, they have the ability to transport themselves by themselves, if they're moving into self-isolation by themselves, and if the person at the border is confident of all of those factors and those needs have been met, then that flexibility is there. But it is a high threshold, and if you can't do it, you will be put in an approved facility.

**Media:** Are they allowed to take domestic flights?

**PM:** You have to be able to self-isolate in your transportation. You'll remember that domestic flights are starting to transition to a shut-down, only available for essential services.

**Media:** What's your message to people who might be disquieted by the thought or prospect of police and military out on our streets, in a very unusual scene?

**PM:** It is unusual. That will be unusual, but what I would say to New Zealanders is that they're actually there to support people. Lots of people will have questions around what they can and cannot do. So when I talked about the steps for police, their first step will actually be asking a few questions and helping the public understand what they need to do. That will be their first approach, which is what we expect from the New Zealand Police. They are, after all, still New Zealanders who are doing the job they always have, which is to keep us all safe, and doing it in a way that we are used to—the same for our Defence Force. It might be unusual to see them out and about, but they're there just to look after us, and so people shouldn't be afraid of that. They're there to support us and support the community.

**Media:** In response to Jane's question earlier about homeless people and shelters, you suggested that the military—

**PM:** Well, we already have night shelters, so it's if they're needed to support the ongoing operation of those services.

**Media:** Great. Can you give us some more examples of how we might see military people out on the streets? Because this is going to be very—

**PM:** Yeah, and this is an area where I really—this is an operational question between the police and the Defence Force. Ultimately, the police will be our primary source of ongoing support for the community. They are, of course, in good numbers. They are stationed all across the country. They're known to their local community. So that's primarily what people will see, but they are working with the Defence Force, so there may be areas in which they choose to utilise them, but that's ultimately a decision that we've left to Commissioner Bush, who works alongside the Chief of Defence Force.

**Media:** Sistema workers are protesting at the moment because they've been told they're essential and they have to come to work tomorrow. Is Sistema an essential company?

**PM:** Look, I wouldn't necessarily, off the bat, be able to tell you their direct involvement in some of the services and goods that might be required for production and storage. But again, we are trying to limit, to the best of our ability, any workplace that is open, to really stick to essential services.

**Media:** Will the Government pay for the hotels and the motels that are used for quarantine?

**PM:** We're working through Government being the provider of those facilities, but some of those details are being worked through by officials as we speak. I expect that regime to apply from 2 a.m. today.

**Media:** Are you requisitioning them or are you—

**PM:** We are not buying the hotels; we are, of course, renting the rooms and making them available, or using Whangaparāoa.

**Media:** When are you expecting to be using those facilities?

**PM:** Again, we have a number that we expect over the coming days. Again, it is very speculative, and I expect it to change, particularly based on the number of people who are not showing up to take flights or are having their transit route cancelled. Within that, there will be a number who we will automatically choose to put into these facilities, based on their state of their health. We are not taking any risks with anyone symptomatic going anywhere beyond a facility we put them in.

**Media:** Are you concerned about the number of scenarios that the public are playing out in terms of how they can go outside? Because much like with panic-buying, no matter how much you harped on about not doing it, people did it a lot. Is this the way that we're going to go with this as well?

**PM:** Yeah, and some of that I see with, for instance, purchasing as being about our human nature. So what I appeal to is our best of our human nature. And that is the starting point—is stay home. Act like you've got COVID-19, and think about the impact you'll have on others if you go out unnecessarily. Now, a walk around the block—you know, I accept that that's part of making sure people can sustain themselves through this, but don't think about congregating with anyone else. Don't think about a lunch or a catch up or visiting a friend in their home. Pretend you have COVID-19 at all times and that will fundamentally change the way we all behave.

**Media:** What are your thoughts on Hone Harawira setting up medical checkpoints in the Far North and turning people away? Do you approve of that sort of thing?

**PM:** To be honest, I've seen some reporting but haven't looked in detail. The only thing I would just say, as a general statement, people have to be able to isolate in their homes. If we want people to be successful, they have to be in a place they can sustain themselves for four weeks, and so that is an important part of this plan working.

**Media:** [*Inaudible*] so some flights will get in just after midnight. They won't be subject to this border enforcement?

**PM:** That's when we expect that we will be in a position to roll it out more broadly, but remembering we are already at the border. We are already questioning and testing symptomatic individuals. We are already escorting people to their transport. So that is already under way. The approved facilities, we expect, will be on stream and online from that time.

**Media:** How big is your bubble—how many people in your contact list?

**PM:** As I mentioned yesterday, obviously I have my family, and then, within that, I have a small number of key staff and Ministers.

**Media:** Is there a limit to how many people should be in a bubble?

**PM:** No. For me, obviously, what I'm maintaining is that what it is is consistent—no change. But again, I implore everyone: just make sure that whoever you're with this month, that is all you are with, and that is it.

**Media:** [*Inaudible*] the Government extraordinary powers. Parliament will shut down soon. You can control food, fuel, and travel, and now you can mandatorily detain people. Do you accept there is a need for added checks or more transparency about what this Government is doing?

**PM:** We are—and this is why I will be here consistently answering questions. We will have the select committee process. I'm trying to now maintain that frequent contact with the Leader of the Opposition. I do not take this moment in our history lightly, nor the powers that come with it. But everything and every decision we are taking, we are taking with the best interests of New Zealanders' public health in mind. But I do not take it lightly.

**Media:** When can we expect more information about the mercy flights?

**PM:** Ultimately, we are now in a position where unless there are commercial flights operating, it is almost impossible to bring people home. So the message now, as you will

have heard me say yesterday, the message now for many New Zealanders will simply be: wherever you are, set yourselves up for the time being, because it has become increasingly difficult for us to bring you home.

**Media:** So are mercy flights off the table?

**PM:** So, obviously, we have now some flights that are continuing that New Zealand has been supporting by keeping Air New Zealand operating, but there are parts of the world where they cannot get to. So yes, some will have flights still available; many will not. For them, our message is: make sure that you've got what you need. If you don't, contact us, but otherwise, you will need to stay where you are.

**Media:** So can we know what the Government is doing to help Kiwi woman Raewyn Schultz, who has terminal cancer and is stuck on the *Norwegian Jewel* without a flight to New Zealand?

**PM:** Yes, my understanding is that, in that case, we are aware of Ms Schultz's circumstances and that she is being provided with consular support. As you can imagine, it's difficult for any New Zealander offshore at the moment, but particularly if they are with a cruise ship. Our consular assistance is being provided, and they're doing as much as they can. They are trying to support that individual, yes. They are a set of pretty unique circumstances.

**Media:** How come Germany can fly here and provide mercy flights to their citizens but we cannot fly elsewhere?

**PM:** Keeping in mind that we are talking about New Zealanders who are scattered all over the world.

**Media:** [*Inaudible*] Germany to New Zealand?

**PM:** New Zealanders are scattered all over the world. What Germany is looking at are several thousand Germans in one place. New Zealanders are in many, many different places. We took proactive steps to send a message to New Zealanders around when they needed to return home, and now that window for travel has closed, not through any fault of the New Zealand Government, just simply because of what is happening around the world.

**Media:** Yesterday, you said you'd spoken with Scott Morrison about the need for New Zealand citizens living in Australia to have access to welfare benefits. Do you have any update? Have there been any more recent conversations?

**PM:** No. I know that that's something that the Foreign Minister also spoke with his counterpart about. I obviously sent a message and intend to follow up on that also, and I expect that some of our other Ministers who have relationships may raise the issue too. In our mind, it's all part of a wider response that's required to help support people to stay at home. If people don't have that financial support, they have an incentive to work when they shouldn't, and so it's in everyone's best interest that that support's provided to as many people as possible.

**Media:** Do you expect that some New Zealanders may actually decide to move back home to New Zealand if they can't access these payments?

**PM:** And look, New Zealand will always accept its citizens home. You know, we will never be a country that says a New Zealander cannot come home. That would be wrong. Even under the most difficult of circumstances, this is their home. What we will do, though, is make sure that we do our best to look after them and to look after anyone they may have contact with, and that is why we have the strict requirements at the border that we have right now. OK, I'll take the last question.

**Media:** Is that decision heartless by the Australian Government?

**PM:** Well, we've always maintained that New Zealanders should receive the same social assistance as Australians, so for us it's completely consistent. But right now, it's not

just an issue of fairness; it's an issue of public health as well. So we will continue to make that argument on behalf of those New Zealanders.

**Media:** Are you able to say in real terms what that conservation of food and fuel will look like?

**PM:** That's why I keep giving a caveat on that one. That is simply a suite of powers that exist generally under the declaration of a national emergency. Ultimately, though, those powers you'd expect to see in situations where you have constrained supply or no suppliers. I don't expect that to be an issue under these circumstances. We're keeping essential services open. We have our supermarkets under way. We still have service stations. We still have pharmacies. So it is a suite of powers that generally just exist for these declarations.

**Media:** Are you worried that mercy flights will encourage Kiwis to use the New Zealand Government as a cheap form of travel insurance?

**PM:** Well, as I've already pointed out, the method that people have been able to use, via the New Zealand Government, has been the support we've provided to Air New Zealand to keep flying those routes. But they are closing up, and so that ability, those flights, are drying up as an option for New Zealanders. I think that's why it was important the message was sent when it was, but it's not going to be able to be sustained. OK, thank you everyone.

**conclusion of press conference**