

POST-CABINET PRESS CONFERENCE: WEDNESDAY, 20 MAY

PM: Kia ora koutou katoa. Good afternoon. Welcome to day seven of alert level 2. Today, I want to provide you an update on progress towards our goal of stamping out COVID-19 and moving as fast, but also as safely, as possible in opening up more of our economy and getting New Zealand moving. Visiting Rotorua yesterday and getting out and about on the weekend, it was great to see New Zealanders returning to our new, safer normal. Cafes were full, I can confirm from multiple experiences, and you can see people also adjusting to rules around social distancing, contact tracing, and so on. Last week's Budget highlighted our commitment to job creation, keeping people in work, and supporting key sectors such as tourism to get back on their feet. And, ultimately, the best thing we can do for the economy is to stay on top of the virus and continue our managed de-escalation of restrictions when the health data says it's safe to do so.

We do intend to keep phasing in additional activity under level 2, when the evidence show we can with low to little risk of further outbreaks. As I previously said, though, descent can be more dangerous than the climb. Many countries that have started to reduce their restrictions have experienced a spike in cases. We shouldn't be so bold as to assume that that couldn't or wouldn't happen here. Remember: COVID-19 is still in our community, and we know from our clusters that one case can become 90 after a single night out or a single event. It would only take two to three instances of that for our caseload to escalate back to pre-lockdown numbers. No one wants to see that. And so we have entered levels 3 and 2 with a degree of caution, and the data so far suggests that this has been the right approach.

First, the number of new cases of COVID-19 has reduced significantly. There were 31 new cases during the 16 days we were in level 3, and so far there have only been two new cases in the seven days we have been in level 2. Importantly, all of the cases under both level 3 and level 2 have been directly traced to existing cases and, ultimately, represent the long tail of COVID. The last case of community transmission where the source of the case was unknown was early April. That means we have had three full transmission cycles with no new cases of community transmission recorded in New Zealand. We have not seen any new clusters emerge for more than a month. This gives us a high degree of certainty that there is no community transmission in New Zealand. But our journey is far from over. COVID-19 is still present in New Zealand, and it is certainly still present around the world. And, while that remains the case, there will be work to be done and there will be risk that needs to be managed.

Today, I just want to set out in a little more detail some of what the ongoing management of that risk looks like here in New Zealand. Through every level, we will maintain our underlying wall of defence against the virus. Now, that includes widespread surveillance and testing, rapid contact-tracing, physical distancing as a new normal, staying home even if mildly sick, regular handwashing, and tight measures at the border to stop new cases coming in. That's our new normal. While our border measures carry on regardless of what level we are at, let me be clear that amendments to the border rules can occur at any level also. So it is possible to have a trans-Tasman bubble, for instance, at level 2; it is not contingent on us being at level 1 for that to happen. The spike in new cases other countries have experienced in recent weeks as they de-escalate their restrictions relate to the very activities that evidence shows us are more likely to spread the virus: mixing and mingling at social occasions. This is the activity that by far and away most concerns us and that we are purposefully placing limits on. So tomorrow we take a cautious step forward with bars and clubs being able to open, but with strict level 2 restrictions around being seated and being separated in place in order to ensure that we stay safe.

However, I know many people want to return to normal as soon and as safely as we can, and, of course, that's everyone's intention. So, as we progress through level 2, we plan to regularly adjust our settings to allow more activity when the data says it's safe. The first

settings check-in will come on Monday, when Cabinet will consider increasing the size of gatherings. Currently, this sits at 10. If the data leading up to Monday continues its positive run, we will have more confidence to lift the size of gatherings, and, very importantly, that does apply to things like church services. As we move through level 2 and continue to have better data on which to make further decisions, that will include the opportunity to further increase the size of gatherings again. We will also have the option down the track of, potentially, relaxing certain physical-distancing restrictions, such as on buses and on planes. Many of you will know that, at the moment, physical-distancing requirements means that they are running under full capacity—I believe, for planes, at 50 percent. So there is the option of looking, down the track, at reducing some of those requirements, potentially even while we are still in level 2, if that's what the data supports.

It's important that we get New Zealand moving as fast as we can to limit the economic impact of the virus, which is why we will adopt this nimble approach and take incremental adjustments as and when the evidence tells us it's safe to do so. We do not have to move a full level in order to wind down restrictions, which is something you'll recall I indicated when we set out the framework for level 2. In the same way we broke the chain of transmission by staying a full five weeks in lockdown, and then assessed our progress by briefly going into level 3, I envisage that we will stay in level 2 until the director-general has confidence that we can de-escalate further, but do keep in mind you will keep seeing these incremental changes while we're here and that we will be regularly reviewing those every two weeks.

But, unlike in level 4, as I've said, where the rules stayed the same, we have that flexibility, and that's because our hard-won achievement in getting the virus under control now gives us greater choices and flexibility. We are doing well, our plan is working, and, as a result of our team's hard work, we have scope to get our economy moving again and, in doing so, not only avoid the worst of the health outcomes others have experienced; we can also try to minimise some of the economic pain. All through our response, we've made decisions based on what is best for New Zealand and followed our own plan and our own path, and we do that again. We are hopeful this phased de-escalation will continue our success to date while avoiding the surge in cases other countries have experienced as they moved out of lockdown. Time will tell, but, at this stage, we remain cautiously optimistic. Happy to take everyone's questions.

Media: What are the options for expanding mass gatherings? Is it straight to 100? Is it, sort of, 20, 50?

PM: Yeah, and, again, you will have the director-general talk about wanting to step in. At the moment, alert level 2 gives that maximum of 100, and so, obviously, the director-general's looking to that as we move forward. What we want to do in these early phases is make sure that, if we have a case and they have been in an environment where there have been other people, that we have greater control, and that means we affect fewer people and are less likely to have to take extreme measures like moving up levels, because we have those restrictions on mass gatherings. So that's why we use that cautious approach at this stage in our strategy to stamp out COVID.

Media: So it's likely to be closer to, say, moving it up to 20, 30, than it is to go straight up to 100 in one day?

PM: Yeah, you'll see that's been the approach of the director-general at this stage, is phasing into those bigger and bigger numbers as we have greater confidence. But, again, we do rely on his guidance around what he's seeing, what he's seeing internationally, and making sure that we don't move so quickly that, if we do have an outbreak, we see a wider number of New Zealanders impacted by that. That's what we want to prevent.

Media: And then on Monday—so is it then going to become a weekly review of increasing mass gatherings, or will it be every two weeks again?

PM: We've tended to use transmission cycles because that then gives us a sense of what's happening with the virus. That two weeks then gives us the confidence about what's

happened prior, and so, as we're moving through now, we're starting to see the impacts of the final tail of level 3, the beginning of level 2. Every two weeks gives us that greater confidence in the data that we have, and that's why we've tended to use two-week cycles.

Media: And, if you decide to change the limits on mass gatherings, when would that actually come into effect? Say you make the decision on Monday that we will increase gathering sizes, when—

PM: We'll stick to that rotation we've always had: decision Monday, 48 hours, then it comes into effect.

Media: Prime Minister, is the idea to maybe add a new public holiday, essentially, dead now that Winston Peters has said that New Zealand First wouldn't support it?

PM: So you will have heard me say yesterday that we're looking at a range of different options to try and encourage investment into our local economies, and that includes thinking about what will make a difference for those who are in hard-hit areas—hospitality, when it comes to tourism—and there are a range of options within that. And so I haven't been dismissive of those. There are pros and cons, and I think we should be open about that, and I would be interested to hear the view of some small businesses who would be positively affected and others that would find it hard. So I am still interested in hearing those different views as we look at those options.

Media: You would need Cabinet approval, right? You wouldn't be able to do it unilaterally at the moment.

PM: We go through processes, yes. But, of course, as you will have heard me say, we're considering a range of options, and I haven't ruled any in or out.

Media: But Winston Peters has said publicly that New Zealand First won't back it. So that's surely—

PM: I've seen that feedback, and really he's made some statements around assumptions about small businesses and, ultimately, small businesses have that opportunity to give their view. I've heard many who represent the business community point to the pros and cons. So let's hear those.

Media: Could you move another holiday around? Take Boxing Day or the day after New Year's Day—move it forward to August or July and then not have it later on. That way businesses aren't facing a—

PM: Yeah, and look, again, I've heard a range of different options being floated, and what we've been careful to do is to not be dismissive of those. This is an extraordinary time, and I think we should be willing to consider extraordinary ideas.

Media: You mentioned bars and clubs are opening tomorrow. What is your message to them? Are you satisfied they'll be safe?

PM: Yeah, yeah, I am. I have huge faith in businesses that have prepared and opened to date, and including asking of New Zealanders who will be visiting them: make sure that you support those businesses by doing the right thing by them. They'll be working really hard to maintain the rules and they'll need your help with that.

Media: And what is your message to those bars opening tomorrow?

PM: I know that this time has been incredibly tough. I know that they won't be operating in the normal way. We all have a safe new normal now, and, for me, I wish them, you know, every success as we look to rebuild as a country, and my hope and expectation is that everyone supports them to do that safely.

Media: Prime Minister, can I ask about the alert level system?

PM: Sorry? About the—

Media: [*Inaudible*] the alert level system.

PM: Oh, yes.

Media: So, references to alert level 1 have largely gone from the website. So what is alert level 1? Is that the new floor?

PM: So alert level 1 does have basic ongoing parameters around it. So the expectation there, of course, is you continue with the most basic of those public health measures: we still want people who are sick to stay home, we still want you to wash your hands, and there is an expectation that we would still have some restrictions around the border. So it's not complete status quo; it does have parameters around it. But, by and large, a lot of the things that inhibit normal business activity are removed at that level.

Media: And I appreciate you won't want to be, or probably can't be, precise about when level 1 might be achievable, but is that a matter of weeks or months, or—

PM: Well, you'll hear by the way I'm talking about level 2—there's a range within level 2, and we are stepping our way into it. So you can see by the fact that we are stepping in, that we're using two-weekly transmission cycles, it will give you a bit of a sense of the time frames that we're anticipating. But again, all of this is about opening up as quickly as we can but as safely as we can, and by giving ourselves a bit of room so that, if something goes wrong, it's not straight back to 3. We've got some containment measures still in place.

Media: So no time frame aside from the fact that it won't be happening in the next fortnight.

PM: Yep, so no time frame yet, but we will continue to be giving those milestones, as we have today, that says: if things are looking good, two weeks' time we'll up those mass gathering numbers. I'll keep giving those signals at each point. If those mass gathering numbers are looking good, we'll give you the next point of consideration and potential change.

Media: You mentioned on Monday, or suggested on Monday, that the Government app would be helpful for people who aren't necessarily trusting businesses to use their data in the most responsible manner. But, even if someone has the Government app, they still do have to use the business contact-tracing register.

PM: Yeah, for a time, yeah—for a time. So what we have, of course—this is a digital diary. So, keeping in mind it's hospitality that are really required to be keeping data, information about everyone that's coming through their operation. Retail—that requirement isn't there. So, for hospitality, for a short period—it'll be a couple of weeks before the functionality is within the app provided by the Ministry of Health, which will then give them the ability not only if they know you've got COVID but to then notify anyone else who's been in that premises, that they need to take certain health measures. So that's something that will be built in. So there'll be a period of time where there'll be a bit of an overlap for ongoing contact-detail collection.

Media: Prime Minister, this morning Simon Bridges acknowledged that there were two members of his caucus wanting to take him on for the leadership. Do you have a message for him?

PM: No, no. As I've said many, many times before, my focus has always been on running the Government. And, at this time, more than any other time, my focus is squarely on what we need to be doing on behalf of New Zealanders. So I'm not going to change my practice of not engaging in the politics of the Opposition.

Media: There were some pretty tumultuous times with the Labour Party and changing leadership before yourself. What's it like being part of that?

PM: And probably for the fact that I have had my own experiences in Opposition is probably the reason that, actually, I have a policy of just not engaging in other people's politics. It's a matter for them; my job is to lead the Government and to lead us through COVID-19.

Media: You've gone up against Nikki Kaye quite a few times in elections. Do you rate her as a politician?

PM: Again, you keep asking this line of questioning and I'm still not going to engage with it. My job is squarely to make sure that I'm focused on jobs, employment, our recovery. So I'm just not going to engage in the politics or the personalities on the other side.

Media: On that Newshub poll about the Labour Party, then—on that Newshub poll—do you know who's in the high sixties and low seventies in your list, and do you think they're, you know, worthy of being MPs?

PM: We haven't completed our list. So, obviously, that's a public list. Once it's completed, people will be able to see the full ambit of talent that we'll be looking to bring in. I am, of course, very involved in that process, but it is, certainly, not complete; when it is, we release it immediately.

Media: How would you describe Simon Bridges' leadership as the Opposition leader during this COVID-19 time?

PM: Again, talking in generalities, my view is that, at any time, the role of the Opposition is an important one. They are the ones that hold the Government of the day to account; in extraordinary times, that role becomes even more important. But I tend not to get into, then, the individual role played by particular personalities, other than to acknowledge that Opposition is an important function of our Parliament.

Media: Is it your view that the epidemic response select committee has kind of run its course and should now be shut down once Parliament returns?

PM: Yeah, well, I do think we should acknowledge the purpose for which it was there. It was there because we had a time when Parliament couldn't operate, and it wasn't right that there was no ability to make sure that we had some accountability check. Parliament is now returning to normal. Select committees are functioning again. Question time is functioning again. The House is meeting again. And so things have changed, and I think we should therefore expect things to change.

Media: There was an email sent from the Leader of the House's office around Ministers not having to appear before the committee any more. Is that a call you back personally?

PM: Again, I think we should be clear about what was being asked of there. You are all very familiar with the fact that, after a Budget, there's a process whereby Ministers and officials appear before select committee for scrutiny. That is a right and proper process. What doesn't make sense is to duplicate that through one select committee, and so I think that's a fair point to raise.

Media: On the issue of Labour and New Zealand First positions on the additional public holidays—as you sort of work through that with your coalition partners, will you be making the point that currently your relative polling positions are very different?

PM: Look, I think we should be fair here to, actually, the sentiment I expressed yesterday, which is that we are, as a Government, looking at a wide range of options to support tourism, to support small-business owners, to get our economy back up and running again. And so I haven't ruled things in or out. But those are discussions that are still being had and ideas that are still being considered.

Media: But your positions as a Labour Party, as part of that Government, are clearly more popular than the positions of the other parties that form—

PM: That's not how I operate, though.

Media: Prime Minister, will National actually be able to hold a caucus meeting on Tuesday? Will the rules allow it?

PM: Yes. Obviously, what we're having to do is make sure that we give space for physical distancing. Parliament is a workplace. So, obviously, there are different rules that

apply to the way that we operate here. But, working through the Speaker, just making sure that we can have spaces, because it can be quite cramped in those caucus rooms—spaces to be able to meet, with a bit more physical distancing. I know that's what I was intending to reach out to the Speaker and just find alternative spaces.

Media: Just on your extraordinary popularity at the moment, are we likely to see new faces on the Labour list when it comes out—

PM: Always—always—you can have that expectation. That's a given. Regardless of how a party is polling, you will see new faces, new talent, new people coming through, new representation. And that's regardless of a party's polling.

Media: I guess my question was going to be, though: has your popularity brought people willing to join the Government, willing to join the Labour Party, to stand for the party?

PM: Look, again, I would hope that our values as a Labour Party will be drawing people in. And you'll always find that I'm very circumspect about polls—always have been. When they're good; when they're not so good. Ultimately, it's the opinions of people and their view on election day that counts, and I take nothing for granted.

Media: Prime Minister, the phase-down for the alert levels seems to be quite nuanced. Do you regret not taking a more nuanced approach in late March?

PM: No—nope.

Media: Because, clearly, there's been quite an impact from going straight from 2 to 4, and maybe the thousands of workers who're going to lose their jobs at Fletcher's, you know, some of them might be thinking "What was the justification for that move?"

PM: The justification was what we saw in almost any other country around the world who did not have that early-mover advantage, and I don't think that we can assume success could have been achieved, necessarily, through any other means than the path that we took. And so we took that position so that we could move out of those heavy restrictions quicker and sooner, but safely, relative to others. And I think you're seeing that we are doing that. There are others, who took a different approach, who may not have had the kinds of restrictions we did, who are now almost limping on with ongoing restrictions that are very tight, months later. So that was what we wanted to avoid.

Media: Is the Transmission Gully PPP about to fall over?

PM: My understanding is that NZTA are still negotiating alongside the contractor there and working through issues. So I think any statement is premature at this point. Of course, we all want to make sure that it's finished as soon as possible.

Media: The Government stands ready to fill the breach if the private partner does walk away?

PM: Again, I don't want to pre-empt any of those contract negotiations that are going on.

Media: Was it appropriate for Kelvin Davis to skip the Epidemic Response Committee this morning to do a Facebook Live?

PM: Oh, well, again, I wouldn't summarise it in that way. Keep in mind, the Minister appeared before the Epidemic Response Committee seven days ago. Appearances from Ministers before select committees often are usually associated with Estimates hearings and so on. Those are coming up as well, but I don't think it's unreasonable for the Minister to say, "Well, I've appeared at that committee seven days ago. My next expectation is to appear at the subject committee for Estimates.", and I don't think that's an unreasonable expectation.

Media: But if it's, as you say, a replacement for Parliament during this time, usually Opposition MPs would have the opportunity to question Ministers daily at question time, so—

PM: Yes, and Parliament has resumed in normality; the schedule has not changed. We're in a recess, and that's as per the schedule. We're back next week, as per the schedule. Parliament is back to business, and so the select committees are all back to business, as well. So simply saying there shouldn't be duplication between the work—and depriving other Opposition members who are on those other select committees of being able to do their job, either.

Media: Do you have a message for the people who might be putting fake details in those contact-tracing sheets at cafes and restaurants? Are they putting people at risk?

PM: Well, the very point of it is to look after them. But I do understand that nervousness around handing over details, and so that is why that work is being done by the Ministry of Health to create a personal digital diary. And, look, that is going to take some time to give it all of the functionality that means people are no longer handing over any details, but that's one of the reasons the ministry has worked to do that.

Media: Usually, marae in Auckland open up their wharenui for homeless, and because of COVID-19 the most vulnerable will be needing their help at this time. Do you have plans to engage early with these marae and their iwi?

PM: Yeah, and so I know the work Waatea and others have been doing has been incredible through this time, and they've played a significant role in providing for whānau. We've looked to try and support that where we could, and what I'd like to see is ongoing partnership, working together to make sure that, where those community organisations—be it marae, be it other NGOs—that, actually, we acknowledge that they do have those connections with whānau; they are reaching into where the need is and that we need to walk alongside them in that. OK. Last couple of questions.

Media: Have you had much to do with Todd Muller?

PM: Oh, a little bit—during climate change talks.

Media: What do you think of him?

PM: Again, I don't make a habit of giving personal judgments on other members of Parliament. I don't think it's my job, but, where we all have a constructive role to play together, that's where I tend to engage.

Media: One more on that poll.

PM: Sorry, what was that?

Media: One more on the poll. Numbers like that mean the Labour machinery would feel very excited about this election, but it would also mean that they probably want you to get a big mandate for big changes, right? Are you worried about the level of policy ambition that your party will push on you ahead of the election?

PM: No. Again, you're making a huge amount of assumptions. I take nothing for granted. I never rely on polls. I rely on garnering the public support through hard graft, through hard work, and, right now, that will mean making sure that Kiwis have jobs, because that's their expectation of me.

Media: You might not pay attention to the polls, but, presumably, your policy—

PM: I don't. But presumably?

Media: Your policy people [*Inaudible*]

PM: Oh, I think that's a pretty cynical view of political parties and their motivations. OK, thanks, everyone.

conclusion of press conference