

**POST-CABINET PRESS CONFERENCE: MONDAY, 29 MARCH 2021
HANSARD TRANSCRIPT**

PM: Kia ora koutou katoa. This week is a recess, so Parliament is not sitting, but a busy week none the less. Tomorrow I will be in Auckland undertaking electorate work, but I will also be visiting Papatoetoe High School and also the Auckland City Mission. On Wednesday, Minister Woods and I will be in Taupō for the sod-turning at Contact Energy's Tauhara new \$580 million geothermal power station. This is an exciting project which aligns with our priority to reduce carbon emissions and move New Zealand to 100 percent renewable electricity by 2030. On Wednesday night, I will present the Kiwibank New Zealander of the Year Award.

This Thursday, April the 1st, sees the delivery of a range of Government policies. First, the minimum wage will increase to \$20 an hour, fulfilling a key pre-election promise that we made. Since 2017, we have lifted the minimum wage by \$4.25 an hour in total. That is significant when compared to the \$3.75 increase that occurred over the whole nine years of the previous National Government. Around 175,000 New Zealanders will receive this week's increase, which equates to around \$44 a week more, before tax, for a full-time worker. In total, our minimum wage increases over the last three years mean the lowest-paid New Zealanders who work full-time now earn \$170 a week more before tax.

This Government's support for those on the lowest incomes is also extended to those who find themselves unable to work or struggling to find work. On April 1, main benefit levels and superannuation rates will also increase by 3.1 percent for over 1 million New Zealanders. This is the second increase to main benefit levels as a result of our policy of indexation and will see rates increase by up to \$16.16 a week. Around 390,000 families and individuals will be better off with the annual increase to benefit rates—more than double what it would have been using the old inflation adjustment measure. Benefit abatement rates will also increase this Thursday, the abatement threshold being the limit of how much a person can earn each week before their benefit is impacted.

Overall, around 82,900 low-income individuals and their families will be better off by \$18 a week on average by the delivery of this election promise to ensure those on benefits can keep more of what they earn. Cumulatively, our Families Package and main benefit changes to date mean that around 111,000 beneficiary families with children are now \$118, on average, better off per week than they would have been without those changes. In fact, that figure rises to \$150 per week during the winter period, thanks to the winter energy payment.

There is still much more to do, including building more homes, improving our health system, investing in education, training, and job opportunities, but as we head into the Easter break, I think the raft of changes that come into effect later this week represent real and long-overdue improvements to the support we provide to our most vulnerable. These are policies that represent real delivery.

I have Minister Sepuloni here, so if we have any questions on those April 1st changes, perhaps we'll start with those, and then we can move into any general questions for the remainder of post-Cab.

Media: Given the big surge in food grant demands, are you in agreeance that perhaps these increases have simply kept people's heads above the water in terms of other rising costs they've had to deal with, as opposed to really pulling them out of the drowning situation they're in?

PM: I think what I'd say first of all is you can see by the changes that we've made—\$118, on average, better off for such a large number of families—that we have absolutely recognised that, actually, the level that those rates were set at were far too low for people to survive. So that's why we've made those substantive changes. I will throw to Minister Sepuloni, but before I do—I was just last night looking at some of the increases that we've seen in people accessing hardship grants. A lot of that actually started—back about 2016, you start to see the trend move upwards, and there'll be a range of factors for that. We have

made it easier to access those grants, and that was for good reason. I think there was a lot of demand there that wasn't being met previous to those changes being made. But also some of it will be simply the housing crisis we've faced as well.

Hon Carmel Sepuloni: Yeah, I think you've covered off the main points. I think it's important to note that the Welfare Expert Advisory Group's recommendation was for increases between 12 and 47 percent. And although we acknowledge that, there is actually more to do with regards to addressing income adequacy in the system. If you only look at jobseeker support for people over the age of 25, then what you see with the changes that will come into effect from 1 April is that it's effectively a 21 percent increase from what they would have been getting in April 2017. So we have, I think, made more traction than what people realise.

Media: Prime Minister, is this it for minimum wage increases? Can you commit to them going up next year and the year afterwards?

PM: Well, I think what you've seen here is the completion of the commitment that we made at the beginning of our time in office. We said that we wanted to get to \$20, and we've done that in the time frame that we indicated. We haven't then forward projected across a number of years, so we'll get back to the regular annualised process that we otherwise would be in.

Media: So what will the minimum wage be [*Inaudible*]?

PM: We as a Cabinet have not made those decisions in advance, but because of our view that when we started in office we needed to see increases to catch up with what we viewed was a lag for those on the lowest incomes, we mapped out our path for that first four years. We've done that. We haven't gone beyond that at this stage.

Media: Can you at least commit, Prime Minister, to minimum wage increases every single year that you're in Government?

PM: We're obviously a Labour Government. What we want to do is make sure that, of course, we continue to see those who are at the minimum level of wages, which is the statutory rate that's set to make sure that we have a floor—we've always seen gradual increases there. What we haven't set out is exactly what that will look like. But Governments of both stripes have always moved; it's always been a question of by how much.

Media: How disappointing was it that almost more than 700 people's data was breached at the CDHB over the weekend? And what are you—

PM: Do you mind if I just wrap—I'll just wrap up these 1 April, and then happy to canvass more broadly. Just going to spare Minister Sepuloni from the stage the whole time.

Media: Is another rise to the benefit level on the table for this Budget—the coming Budget?

PM: Of course, as a general practice, we don't discuss what is or isn't in the Budget, but what we are doing today is just highlighting the impact of previous Budget decisions, particularly indexation. I think the Children's Commissioner, Andrew Becroft, was right to say that indexation has the potential, going into the future, to make the most significant difference, because it means, unlike what we saw in previous decades, we won't see this massive lag as those who are on Government support fall further and further behind from being able to cover their basic costs of living.

Media: Judge Becroft will also say that a lot more needs to be done, though, particularly—

PM: Oh, absolutely, and so do we. But our job is to make sure that we keep making this progress. When WEAG came out, we always said that it would take time to implement. The idea that you would implement that in one year just wasn't possible.

Media: Do you feel like there might be an increasing number of people heading to welfare benefits in the coming year, given the economic outlook?

Hon Carmel Sepuloni: We've actually seen a decline since mid-January, I think, and even in the last week we've seen another reduction of around 1,700 people on benefit. So that is heartening, but, of course, we know how uncertain the times are, given COVID, and so we just need to continue to watch that space and keep doing what we've been doing, which is investing and upskilling in training opportunities for people who fall out of work, as well.

Media: Do you have data on where they're going?

Hon Carmel Sepuloni: So the majority of people that are going off benefit are going into work. We've got more exits off benefit and into work than what we have had, actually, for almost a couple of decades.

Media: The Welfare Expert Advisory Group, I think, totalled its recommendations at \$5.1 billion [*Inaudible*] the recommendations. Do you know what the quantum of what you've done is in relation to that five-point-something-billion dollars a year?

PM: Well, I can tell you for the Families Package, it was over \$5 billion. But keep in mind that also, from memory, included the paid parental leave changes. But that was the winter energy payment, the Best Start payment, the family tax credit changes. We then had the indexation changes on top of that. It was, from memory—we've then got the WEP changes and the \$25 a week that was in the COVID package. So I would say upward of seven.

Media: The Families Package was over the standard Budget period of, I think, four or five years, but the WEAG recommendations were just—that was \$5 billion a year, so substantial quantum. Are you even measuring—

PM: Which is more than, obviously, usually, the operating allowance for a single Budget.

Media: Indeed. So are you measuring yourself against what it recommended? Are you still targeting the targets it set you?

PM: Well, as you've just heard, the Minister—the Minister actually just did that very thing, by referencing the percentage increases suggested by the Welfare Expert Advisory Group and then what we've actually done for, for instance, someone who's a job seeker. I think, unfortunately, people have generally just looked at blanket benefit increases as the way to achieve the lift in people's incomes, whereas, actually, we've done things that have affected the family tax credit. We brought in a whole new payment with, for instance, the Best Start payment, and those additions to our benefit systems have not always been included when people have looked at income adequacy. So that's obviously what we always reflect, is how much has that increased people's incomes, and does that start to meet some of the adequacy issues that WEAG were raising.

Media: So if you're saying that incomes are still inadequate, why don't you move now or in the Budget to make them adequate and to get to that \$5.2 billion?

PM: Well, our argument would be that we have been moving on income adequacy issues: indexation, the increase we saw at the time that we made significant investment in response to COVID, and also, I would argue, things like the family tax credit. All of those things were—

Hon Carmel Sepuloni: And abatement thresholds.

PM: —and abatement thresholds—have all been about dealing with income inadequacy.

Media: So why not do it now, all at once?

PM: Of course, the thing we also have to always weigh up is the fact that these, then, of course, are not single one-off investments. This is ongoing spending through our out years. We have to make sure that what we put in place is sustainable. The last thing that I want to

see, and I've said this many times before, are changes that we put in place reversed by a change in Government. And by making sure that what we do is sustainable, we lessen the chance that we will just move backwards to where we were after the 1990s.

Media: So you're saying you're worried about the political risk—

PM: No.

Media: —that the National Government could reverse some of these benefit increases; that's why you're not doing them?

PM: No, no, not at all. I want to make sure that we can afford to pay for what we do. That's what I'm saying.

Media: So you're saying that you can't afford to pay the \$5.2 billion?

PM: Well, obviously we all make judgments every time we sit down and weigh up what we are spending our allowances on and our ability to make sure that they are sustainable in our out years. I mean, every Government does that. But when you're talking about benefits, of course, these are changes forever. That's what we hope. They are things that we are able to sustain forever, and so we have to make sure that we factor that in when we're making decisions.

Hon Carmel Sepuloni: Can I also just add here, and I mean it's important to keep in mind the Welfare Expert Advisory Group also said there had to be significant investment in public housing, which we're doing. There needed to be significant investment in expanding employment support and upskilling and training opportunities, which we're doing. So all of them require a focus, and I think that we're, you know, doing our best to cover off all of those bases.

Media: That's a lot of wins in a short period of time, and now coming up on the 1st, another win for the Government but, after all of this, why is it still a struggle for families to survive?

PM: That's why we've acknowledged, in setting out the difference that we believe that we've made in those last four years, that we still acknowledge that our starting point was tough. The starting point for many families where those levels sat, be it minimum wage or be it the levels that our benefit systems sit at—they were tough. So that's why we've said we do need to keep going. We acknowledge that.

Media: Do you think that maybe it just wasn't ambitious enough, if there's still thousands of New Zealanders that are struggling? Was \$20 just not ambitious enough to close that gap?

PM: Of course, the \$25 wasn't the only thing, and that's why we keep pointing to the winter energy payment, the abatement changes, indexation, which will mean it's not just waiting for a Budget; it actually means it is built into our system now. Those increases are built in and will make a difference.

Media: Another 11 people tested positive at the border—

PM: If I may, I'll just canvass anything—

Media: On the minimum wage, can I just confirm: as at April next year, can people expect another minimum wage hike?

PM: You won't find a year where Labour Governments haven't moved the minimum wage. What I'm not committing to is what that rate will be.

Media: But you're sort of saying yes by making that comment.

PM: Sorry?

Media: Are you basically saying yes? I just want to—

PM: I'm saying what would be a change is if you didn't see an increase in the minimum wage. What I'm not committing to is by how much. OK, is that everything on that? Great, thank you.

Media: How disappointing was it that more than 700 people's data was breached at the CDHB, and how can you ensure trust in the vaccine roll-out given this?

PM: What we have here is a situation where a DHB's individual booking system has been able to be accessed. It wasn't people's personal health information; I should make that really clear. Of course that's not a situation anyone wants; we're working closely with the DHB around what's happened here, but it is not an issue that we believe has occurred in any other DHBs. It does seem to be particular to Canterbury.

Media: Wasn't that system set to be rolled out to other DHBs, though?

PM: Look, as I understand, of course, what we've been working on at this point is, because we are at this stage working with border workers, their families, and our health front-line workers, DHBs have been using the existing booking infrastructure that they have as part of their health IT systems. Of course, when we start moving to a situation we are immunising the entire country, then we have a national booking system that comes into play.

Media: But how can you ensure that the system is trustworthy if this happens and it's one of the first hurdles that it experiences?

PM: Of course, you know, we're giving that assurance that what has happened here is not the national booking system that we will be using when we come to our national roll-out. But what I would also say is, obviously, we are moving at pace here. We will do everything we can to support DHBs in the roll-out to make sure errors don't happen and to fix them quickly if they do. But also keep in mind New Zealand has never done this before. We need to make sure that if an issue arises, we troubleshoot it very, very quickly.

Media: Prime Minister, New Zealanders are increasingly being vaccinated overseas. When they come back, will they still have to do the two weeks in managed isolation?

PM: Yes, at this stage. You know, one of the key pieces of information that the whole world is waiting for is the extent to which being vaccinated means that you aren't able to pass on COVID-19 to others. When we talk about the effectiveness of the vaccine, what we're talking about is the fact that it won't make you symptomatic, by and large, or it won't make you very, very unwell, and so that's where the vaccines have been really successful. What we don't know yet is the degree that, you know, when you've been vaccinated, you might still risk passing it on to others. Part of the issue is that there's not a lot of data around this because you're really relying on places where, once you're vaccinated, we still have testing data. So we're relying on, for instance, the health workforce overseas, where they've been vaccinated and are still being routinely tested, to try and see what effect it's had. But at the moment, no one really knows.

Media: Do you anticipate getting that data soon, or do you anticipate that New Zealand will have to be fully vaccinated before we allow any Kiwis overseas to come in—so by the end of the year?

PM: We're keeping an open mind, but New Zealand, like the rest of the world, is waiting for the evidence and data that tells us, "Look, if you've been vaccinated, not only are you personally safe but you actually then don't present a risk to other people." So we're not alone in waiting for that information. Early signs are good, but while we have a population that isn't vaccinated and carrying their own individual protection, it is a risk to move without seeing that evidence.

Media: On the developments today, there were those 11 cases that came from—

PM: Yeah, this is to your question as well—yeah.

Media: Yeah, and linking into those questions as well, does that raise questions about whether the tests that they were showing that they'd done were real or whether they were fake?

PM: We haven't seen evidence of fraud when it comes to providing testing data at the border. So we haven't seen that. Keep in mind, though, what we ask for is a test prior to

departure. That does mean that someone, of course, will get a test; they will, through a 72-hour period, still potentially come in contact with COVID-19. The important thing is we have never relied on pre-departure testing as being foolproof, which is why, as soon as someone arrives in New Zealand, we test them immediately again, and that's providing that extra layer of assurance that we've got people in the right facilities if they happen to have COVID-19.

Media: Can I get a quick follow on that, please?

PM: The final thing I'll just say is what we also can't be sure on is the types of testing that are utilised or the way that testing is utilised. So in New Zealand we have a very, very cautious approach in the way we use PCR testing. Not every country will necessarily be doing that.

Media: Just a quick follow on that, are there any plans to strengthen that pre-departure testing, and, also, are you concerned about the rising number of people bringing COVID into the country?

PM: Well, it is fair to say that whenever we see those numbers, particularly if we see a pattern around airline and so on, we do and we have asked questions. Are airlines checking for symptoms? Are we seeing the checks on the pre-departure tests that we expect? And so we have followed up on that; we've had conversations with airlines. It is fair to say that other countries are doing the same. What seems to be the case at the moment is that, simply, we have some countries where outbreaks are significant and, after people are being tested pre-departure, they're becoming sick.

Media: How does the latest lockdown in Brisbane impact next Tuesday's announcement?

PM: Look, in fact, all it does is it demonstrate why it's important that we get the settings right and the planning right. We will have situations where New Zealand will have to respond to cases in Australia in the same way Australia has had to deal with cases in New Zealand. What's important is that we get all of the infrastructure we need to make sure we can respond quickly to keep New Zealanders safe.

Media: What do you make of the escalating tensions in Myanmar, and has New Zealand done everything it can in its response?

PM: Yes, yeah. I mean, I think what we've seen through that military action in recent days has been devastating. You've seen the unusual response by nations, including New Zealand, you know, heads of defence coming out to condemn what we've seen. But we've gone beyond just statements and sentiment, of course. We've taken all the measures we can to make sure that we are not engaging at all with those who have been responsible for this coup.

Media: Just on the trans-Tasman bubble—a follow-up on that. Because you're looking at a state-by-state plan, would you consider opening with other states and just close off to Queensland or would you delay opening to the entire country if this were [*Inaudible*].

PM: Yeah, so I think—just to be clear, when we talk about state by state, it doesn't mean we have individual agreements; it means that we have a plan in the way that we deal with Australia that will allow us to turn on and off different states depending on what's happening there. So yes, there is absolutely a chance that if a state has an outbreak, if we're confident that border controls are in place, we could turn off that state whilst continuing with travel elsewhere if those border controls are in place.

Media: Just one on vaccine targets. Is there a reason you haven't set the target of 70 percent like the National Party has suggested?

PM: Well, firstly, of course, because very important for us that what we base our aspirations around vaccine around are delivered and provided by experts, rather than other political parties. We absolutely know that New Zealanders will be looking to say, "How do we know that we're ready to open again or to change our restrictions?" We're keen to make sure that we answer that question too, but one of the issues—and you'll see the UK hasn't just

given a number; they've got a number of conditions that sit under that. We're likely to do the same. It's not enough just to say we need a certain percentage of the population vaccinated. If you've got a really high percentage, for instance, in one city but in another it is vastly lower, then that means that you run the risk of still having community outbreaks in those areas. To distil it down really simply: we need to all carry our own—we're moving from a barricade, through our border controls, to us individually carrying our own armour so that we can, if there is an outbreak, break a chain of transmission. If not enough of you in every community has that armour, you can have an outbreak like we saw with measles, which is why a number on its own is not enough.

Media: So what does that do for the Government accountability to ensure that you're hitting targets, that people are being enforced, rather than putting it back on the population to vaccinate themselves?

PM: Well, that increases the accountability, I would argue, because it says a number alone is not enough. We need to set out what we believe would be indicative of having enough protection across New Zealand, but then add some extra criteria: what does it need to look like; how does it need to be spread across the country. So we are asking experts to help us work that plan up, work up that information, work up that criteria, and we'll provide that to New Zealand so that we can work together to achieve it.

Media: So there will be a target?

PM: We have to know what success looks like. We absolutely accept that, but we've already had the experts, like Nikki Turner and Ian Town, say, "If you just pick one number, that won't be enough to tell us whether or not we've done what's required." So we're putting more work into it. That was a long explanation, but I hope it helps.

Media: Given the record number of assaults on prison guards, are you confident that the Minister, Kelvin Davis, is doing enough in this area?

PM: Well, look, absolutely. I mean, I've not worked with someone so committed to turning around what's happening in our corrections system. This is a hard area of work. Obviously, by default, you are dealing with some of our most significant criminals in the country in any given prison facility. He has a duty of care to keep those officers safe but also to try and change the prospects of when people are released into the community, for them to ensure that they don't return. I think he does a great job of keeping his eye on both tasks. *[Interruption]* I don't think you've been given a question—yeah. And then I'll come to you, Sam.

Media: Would you consider capping rent increases?

PM: We have got no further plans at this stage around the areas of rent. I've seen a lot of speculation around what our housing package may mean for rents, but, again, it is speculation. So at this stage, no, no further plans.

Media: But if you do see that, I mean, what might you—

PM: Yeah, and that's a hypothetical. When we saw increases in house prices, we then responded to that. But at this stage, it is speculative. What we've seen in our rental market has not mirrored what we've seen with house price growth. In fact, more often than not, it's tended to mirror wage growth. So we will keep an eye on the numbers closely, but at this stage we have no further plans in that area.

Media: What level of rent increase are you—

PM: I did promise Sam.

Media: Well, if it's thematic *[Inaudible]*—

PM: Yeah, sure.

Media: Thank you. What level of rent increase would you be happy to kind of have as, I guess, a side-effect of making a transition to a different—

PM: Look, I'm not going to give you a single working number there. Of course, we know, though, over time what we've tended to see as a pattern for rent increases—I think the highest point that we saw over more than a decade was around 6 percent back in 2007. It has been—you know, it's tended to sit much lower than that in between times, and often has mirrored, as I say, what has been occurring with wage growth rather than house price growth.

Media: In its annual report last week, the SIS disclosed a New Zealand citizen it believed was spying on dissidents for a foreign agent. Has the Government played any role in encouraging that level of transparency and disclosure from the spy agencies?

PM: No. These are entirely decisions for the agency.

Media: Sure. And how concerned are you, I guess, about that issue of foreign interference?

PM: You know, actually, from the moment that we took office, we talked openly about the fact that we need to continually review our settings around foreign interference—make sure that we are being responsive to any changes in behaviour. Heartening to see the agency's view on what happened in our general election, or, indeed, what didn't happen in our general election, but that is but one area that we need to be constantly mindful of. So, no, those decisions are entirely for the agencies, but I do think we all have a job to do around ensuring the best interests of New Zealand are protected, and so transparency around that is helpful in ensuring people are mindful of the risks that exist.

Media: And do you think Ministers and MPs are, sort of, personally aware enough or attuned to the risk to them, given they could be approached?

PM: Yeah. I believe so, yes, and I think the agencies do a good job of trying to reach out to political parties to build awareness, and also protective briefings when individual members of Parliament who are representatives travel abroad. And they do the same for other individuals who are working in high-profile roles outside of the Government sector, and that's a very useful service they provide.

Media: Do you consider New Zealand deployment to Afghanistan—

PM: Just mindful of whether or not I've panned around enough—

Media: It's for other reporters.

PM: I'll come back to you after that, Tova.

Media: Captain Tama, a popular tourism venture in the Cook Islands, says that although they're feeling the pinch of the economic downfall, he would prefer that the Cook Islands were vaccinated first, before New Zealand opened a travel bubble with them. Is that part of the considerations from Government, and what does that look like?

PM: Yeah, so we've said that we have not linked a requirement for vaccine to the border reopening, the same way we haven't done that for the trans-Tasman arrangement. But what I talked about with Prime Minister Brown was just making sure that—given we have seen issues in New Zealand, we do not want to see a situation where we are exporting COVID-19 because on both sides we hadn't undertaken the work we needed to prepare for that eventuality. So we've been very open about that. We still have some areas where we believe a bit more work needs to be done, but we are working towards May.

Media: Would you consider waiting, though—just waiting out until the Cook Islands is vaccinated before allowing New Zealanders to go across?

PM: Yeah, well, actually, instead what we've said is, "Here are the things that we think need to happen to ensure that we are ready for any eventuality". The vaccine isn't part of that list, but depending on how quickly we see those things delivered on, you may well see them happening at the same time. It very much depends on the level of preparedness, getting the PCR testing set up in the Cooks, contact tracing ready to go—things like that.

Media: Considering the health system there, shouldn't vaccination be on the list?

PM: Well, of course, we have to be mindful that these are still decisions for the Cook Islands. So we've said, when it comes to two-way travel, there are things that we're concerned about now, but we haven't then imposed this idea that everyone has to be vaccinated.

Media: Do you consider New Zealand's deployment to Afghanistan a success, and why are we pulling out completely now?

PM: We have been there for decades, and we have played an incredibly important role. In particular, I think that they'll look back—there will be a degree to which those in the defence force who were involved will look back at the work that we've done as part of the rebuild and to try and bring stability to the region and will see the difference that they made. But the time has come, and I think there's wide acknowledgment of that.

Media: Prime Minister, was the Cabinet briefed today on this lumber shortage in New Zealand, and is this something which may require some sort of policy response?

PM: Well, you'll know that I don't, as a matter of course—unless I include it proactively in my Cabinet read-out—indicate what Cabinet did and did not consider on any given day.

Media: So we know that there's a lumber shortage. Is this—

PM: I'm happy to answer questions on that.

Media: Yeah. So is that something which requires a policy response?

PM: Yeah, well, look, interestingly, I've seen some in the industry saying, "Look, this is an issue that we need to work through rather than Government." However, our view is that we have a responsibility to keep a close eye on what is happening here, because it could affect issues around our pipeline of supply and our construction plans, which is of interest to us, of course. So Ministers are engaged in looking at what it is that has caused this issue, and, of course, they are interested in what we can do as a Government through our Industry Transformation Plans to ensure that we have more processing in New Zealand.

Media: Where's that ITP up to?

PM: My understanding is that in the next couple of months you should see more on that specific for this sector, the ITP. I might come back to you with some more specifics on that.

Media: Why are we not getting daily vaccination figures at the moment?

PM: We always said that we wanted to keep it weekly when we're in these early stages. My understanding is that when we get to the more general public roll-out, we'll look to pick up the frequency on that. But at this stage, of course, we wanted to make sure that everyone was focused on delivering the vaccines, rather than just sitting and collating what has happened every single day.

Media: Minister Hipkins talked about the need to be around 6,000 or 7,000 a day at the moment. Are we at that level?

PM: We certainly are seeing the ramping up, and what we're seeing is we're broadly in line with where we'd expect to be. When we get to—in several months' time, we get really tight around how many we're wanting to vaccinate and how much vaccination we have. So that's why we're very carefully working through the process at the moment. But you can see the ramping up occurring. But, as I say, we'll get into a more regular cycle probably in a couple of months' time.

Media: You don't expect to release daily numbers until much later?

PM: No, until we're getting more into the general population. I'll let him give you some more specifics on what his plans are there.

Media: Do you have a date for when the vaccine booking platform will be ready?

PM: In time for our general population roll-out, so—

Media: Is it fair enough that a DHB would set up their own system in the interim?

PM: I don't think for a moment you should assume that—DHBs have booking systems that they utilise.

Media: This one appears to have been set up for the interim.

PM: Indeed, or they've had, obviously, some particular reason to bring in an external provider to add additional functionality. Look, it's Minister Hipkins who's been briefed on the ins and outs, but keep in mind, of course, this is not a widespread issue, as far as we understand.

Media: And the Hawke's Bay—

PM: Look, I'm taking slight liberties, there.

Media: Yeah, thanks. The Hawke's Bay DHB has been quite critical of the ministry in a paper that's going to their board, saying that the ministry's been slow to start a public awareness campaign, leading to more conspiracy theories in the community and that they are hampered by difficulty in obtaining vaccinators. Are you assured, at the moment, that the Ministry of Health's, like, progressing this quickly enough and in conjunction with DHBs?

PM: My understanding is that they don't consider that to any longer be an issue.

Media: Have you decided on a threshold—

PM: I'm going to take the last couple of questions.

Media: You talked previously about a threshold for closing the trans-Tasman bubble, when there was, like, 10 cases a day, over three days; in Australia, that wasn't good enough. Have you decided what our unilateral threshold will be?

PM: And you can see these are the complexities, of course, that we're dealing with when making the decision for the opening. We have to pre-prepare with some protocols and a bit of a template, and we need to make that public so people can make a judgment, when they travel, around what kind of level of preparedness they need to have around potentially having to stay where they are if there's a border closure. And so what we've broadly been working to is the same principle of, "If this happened in New Zealand, what would our response be, and how would we treat other regions?" And so that's the approach we want to take, because that will be, of course, you know, much more predictable for New Zealanders who are travelling.

Media: You kind of suggest, though, that the 72-hour lockdown, as has happened in Brisbane—that travel to Queensland would be stopped even though, when that happened in New Zealand and Australia stopped that quarantine-free from Kiwis coming over, you expressed—

PM: We weren't in a lockdown. So, of course, you know, I don't think it would be reasonable to, you know, draw an issue with a country stopping travel with you if you yourself have made the decision to be in a lockdown. That closure was off the Northland case, which didn't trigger a lockdown. But, again, this is not me making a statement about what exactly would happen right now with Queensland in this case, because we haven't actually sat down and looked at what's occurring in their current situation. However, what we are going to try and do is mirror the response we would take if it was us in the way that we deal with Australia. OK, last question—Bernard.

Media: Prime Minister, on China and its activities in Xinjiang, should New Zealand take some form of action or sanctions in line with other countries to protest against China's persecution of Uighurs?

PM: We don't have an autonomous sanctions regime, but, of course, you will have seen that we did respond and acknowledge the response from the likes of the EU to leaders within the region as a result of issues experienced by the Uighur people. We have also, though, bilaterally made sure that we have raised those issues ourselves directly, face to face, and

that is in keeping with the way that we as a nation deal with issues of concern and human rights concern to us. We will continue to do that. We are entirely predictable in the way we're dealing with this issue. When we see a concern that we have, we raise it and we raise it directly.

Media: So you are concerned about this, and what's your view on what's happening?

PM: Well, Bernard, I was concerned enough to raise it directly with the president in Beijing. We have been, as I've said, consistent. Yes, we have also signed on to statements—sometimes they've been with other nations, sometimes on our own, sometimes under UN banners, but it's a concern that we have raised and we will continue to raise. Thank you.

conclusion of press conference