

**POST-CABINET PRESS CONFERENCE: MONDAY, 19 APRIL 2021
HANSARD TRANSCRIPT**

PM: Kia ora koutou katoa. Good afternoon, everyone. I'll start with a look to the week ahead. At 5 p.m. today, I'll be attending Wellington Airport's trans-Tasman bubble celebrations. Tomorrow, I'll be in Wellington, visiting Papatūānuku Kōkiri Marae which has partnered with LegaSea on the Kai Ika project, which seeks to reduce wastage in the fishing industry. On Wednesday, I'll be attending Prince Philip's memorial service here in Wellington. On Thursday, I'm in the Hawke's Bay on a regenerative agricultural visit. On Friday, I'm speaking at the official opening of MIT's TechPark campus, and on Sunday I'll be speaking at the Anzac dawn service at the Auckland War Memorial Museum, before attending the Mount Albert Anzac services.

Today marks an important milestone in New Zealand's COVID-19 recovery: 12.30 this afternoon, I understand that Jetstar flight JQ201 touched down in Auckland from Sydney, bringing with it over 200 passengers to either reunite with friends and family or enjoy a holiday in New Zealand. Throughout the rest of the day, thousands more will cross the Tasman to land in Auckland, Wellington, and Christchurch. These people are able to pass through a green travel zone in the airport, meet loved ones in the arrival hall, and then exit the terminal to begin their stay. It is truly exciting to be able to welcome our Tasman cousins—quarantine-free—to Aotearoa, in what is a world-leading travel arrangement.

Australia aside, we're not aware of any other countries allowing travel outside their borders in quite the same way as we are, whilst also maintaining a COVID-19 elimination strategy. In fact, in some countries—including, I understand, the United Kingdom—it remains illegal to leave the country on holiday. The bubble marks a significant step in New Zealand's reconnection with the world, and it's one we should all take a moment to be very, very proud of. Because, after all, it has taken a team effort. What the bubble will mean for each of us personally is important, but what's also important is what it will mean for the economy and our economic recovery. According to Tourism New Zealand forecasting, welcoming Australians back could mean a billion dollar boost. Just this week, we saw that the Government's economic response has supported a record number of people moving off a benefit and into employment, with nearly 33,000 people taking on work in the first three months of this year. That's more people than at any time since 1996, when the Ministry of Social Development began keeping electronic records. The bubble will only bolster this trend, especially in hard-hit regions—for example, Queenstown ski areas are planning to be at 100% for the season ahead.

But this is just the start of the opportunities that quarantine-free travel opens up. In the coming weeks, Ministers Hipkins and Faafoi will make further announcements around the reallocation of spaces freed up in MIQ as a result of the bubble. A proportion of these spaces will be made available to bring in workers to further drive our recovery. Other spaces will be absorbed by changes to our MIQ arrangements to further enhance the safety of those facilities, and also reduce risk. This, in conjunction with a safe, effective vaccine roll-out and Budget 2021, which will have a strong focus on the COVID rebuild, will put New Zealand in an incredibly strong position as we rebuild. But, for now, thank you to our airports, airlines, airline staff, officials, the Australian High Commission, and travel agents, working so hard in the lead-up to today. And thank you to all those who have joined us from Australia. Nau piki mai, nau kake mai, nau hoki mai, ki Aotearoa. Welcome. I'm now happy to take questions.

Media: Prime Minister, you talk a lot about celebrations, but there will be a group of people who are feeling really nervous. Don't they have a right to be concerned about opening up to Australia?

PM: The message that I'd share with anyone who has concern about our opening up with Australia is this trans-Tasman bubble is something that we have not taken lightly. That's why we have taken our time, in our view—and the view of our experts who rely on—is that it is low-risk. Now, that's not to say we won't see issues in Australia, in the same way that we've

seen the odd issue here in New Zealand. But what's important to remember is that we have effective management tools to enable us to deal with those in a safe way.

Media: You've given us these reassurances before. How confident are you that we can keep COVID out and still have that bubble with Australia?

PM: Oh, look, I have the same confidence in managing the trans-Tasman arrangements that I do around managing our own country, because, essentially, what we've created is a management regime that means: look, if we have a border incursion that happens in any state, we'll treat them in the same way that we would here—put in a non-travel area around it, contact trace anyone who may be in contact with a case explicitly, and deal with any incursion in exactly the same way we do in New Zealand, which is to be very, very cautious, take a risk-based approach, and make sure we maintain that COVID-free status that's been so important to us.

Media: How long would you like to see this bubble operating before we look elsewhere? How far away from a Pacific bubble are we, for instance?

PM: Look, for us it's not about a particular period of time with us in the trans-Tasman arrangement before we look to others; it's all about whether or not we are ready and the country that we are partnering with are ready. What's really important to us is that we maintain our status. So we don't want to jeopardise the open movement and freedom that we have in New Zealand with any of our arrangements. So it's about making sure we can maintain that.

The Cook Islands, we're looking to open up two-way travel in May. Keeping in mind, you can already come one-way into New Zealand. So, there, it's more about making sure that we've got the practice and protocols in place that we don't pose a risk to the Cooks.

Media: And Australia seems to be pushing full steam ahead with this idea of opening a bubble with Singapore, as well. What will be our response to that? Because that, effectively, widens our bubble.

PM: Look, any decision that may be made by Australia to open up their borders to other countries, we maintain the absolute right to take a risk-based approach. And if we're unhappy that something they've done jeopardises our status, we can act on that. Either we can put certain criteria in that says you cannot come to New Zealand—and unless you've, for instance, been in Australia for a certain period of time—or we can change our bubble arrangement. That is our prerogative and we'll make that decision based on our own safety.

Media: It could trigger a closing of the bubble.

PM: If we feel it puts us at risk, we can make a judgment as to whether or not we need to change anything about our arrangement. But nothing that we've entered into removes our sovereign right to continue to manage our borders with our safety and health top of mind, because that's always been our judgment.

Media: Prime Minister, would it be possible for us to ever open a bubble with Taiwan but not Mainland China or would that contrast—

PM: What was that, sorry?

Media: Would you ever open a bubble with Taiwan but not mainland China, or would that contrast the one-China policy too strongly?

PM: Look, those are hypotheticals that we've just not really even discussed or encountered. That's just not our agenda at present. We've been looking out towards the Pacific and, obviously, the trans-Tasman arrangements, and so we haven't even discussed the possibility of opening up to anyone else at this point.

Media: You would have seen a lot of videos, a lot of emotional scenes at the airport. What were your thoughts watching those arrivals and hearing some of the reports?

PM: Oh, I have to admit, you know, being slightly disappointed that Cabinet was timed just as, you know, that flight came in from Australia, landing at Wellington Airport. I would

have loved to have, you know, just been a bystander, to see those families reunited for the first time. Don't ruin the image I have in my mind, because I think something like a scene from *Love Actually* is probably how I anticipate it would look and how it would feel, and I imagine it's pretty close to it.

Media: What advice, Prime Minister, have you received so far in regards to how India is tracking as you, sort of, look around that suspension of flights?

PM: You see all the same data that we do, and that data is demonstrating that there is a very serious uptick in cases in India. And, look, the share scale of the population, densely populated areas are—despite, of course, vaccinating millions of people—an incredibly difficult set of circumstances for India at present. We as Ministers have not finalised decisions around how we'll manage the ongoing travel of our citizens, but we are working through all of the options to try and manage New Zealand's safety but also those travellers' safety.

Media: Given that uptick, though, if you don't start to see some of that stuff declining, then is it, kind of, a given that it would be extended?

PM: No, because, keep in mind, when we announced the suspension, we have obligations to our citizens. So that's why it was always temporary. And you will have heard us say this all the way though, that we cannot—because of, obviously, obligations under the bill of rights—deem someone to be Stateless. And so if the only legal place someone has to reside is New Zealand, as a citizen, we have to keep that in mind in all of our decisions—and rightly so.

Media: Aside from the Cooks, looking at the wider Pacific, where are you looking next for travel for New Zealanders, and would you like to take an approach with the whole Pacific or will you do it country by country?

PM: Yeah. So I've heard suggestion that New Zealand should take decisions to open up to other members of the Pacific. The point I would make is, actually, many other members of the Pacific don't want to open up at this stage. So that is absolutely the prerogative of others, and, in current circumstances, some continue to take a view that they want to have quarantine arrangements. They don't want bubbles with New Zealand at this point in time, and, look, we respect those decisions, but it's not just a matter of New Zealand saying no, in many cases.

Media: Can I check: with Singapore, for example, would we do a, sort of, two-for-one deal with both New Zealand and Australia negotiating with Singapore? Is that happening or is that likely?

PM: Look, I would say at this stage the focus of both New Zealand and Australia has been getting these arrangements right. We haven't had any formal talks about opening up collectively to anyone else. We certainly haven't, one on one, had conversations with officials in Singapore, but hypothetically, in the future, it's not an unreasonable assumption to make that we would talk together about how potential arrangements may work. It may be, however, that Australia's risk appetite is different to ours. For us, having our freedom, having our health, is a real priority, and we'll be looking to preserve that.

Media: When we talked to Greg Foran, he suggested that Singapore was the next likely step—this was last week—after the Pacific. Is that how you feel too? Do you agree with that? Is that the most likely next option?

PM: Look, it's too early to say. We want to focus on getting the trans-Tasman arrangements right. We then want to focus on opening up to the Realm countries in the Pacific, where they are wanting to open up two-way. It's having an impact on their people and ours because of those family connections, and on their economy, and it's safe. Those are countries that have been COVID-free. So that's our next stop. We haven't looked more broadly at this stage.

Media: Prime Minister, last year you announced a lot of pay restraint for the wider public sector, including, kind of, a pay freeze on anyone over \$100k. Those are all set to expire in June. Are you looking to extend that at all, or has Cabinet made a decision on that?

PM: Look, as a general principle, rather than speaking to any decisions that may or may not have been made by Cabinet Ministers, as a general principle, as a Government, we have been focused on those who are the lowest paid, and that continues to be a focus for us. It's why, for instance, you see that manifest in the minimum wage changes that we have made. It's our view that that's an area that requires a continued focus. You can see the impacts in our child poverty legislation of the fact that because we have movement in incomes that has been slower in those lower quartiles than it has been in those middle quartiles—that we still have work to be done there.

Media: Marise Payne visiting later this week—what's the significance of that, and when might we get a visit from Scott Morrison?

PM: Yeah, it is significant having Marise Payne—the first, I believe, here in New Zealand from the Australian Government—and we're very keen to host and, you know, reignite that face-to-face contact, which has been really regular through phone, through Zoom, but there's nothing that beats that face-to-face. I'm looking to have the opportunity to catch up with Minister Payne, for instance, such do we see as the importance of that relationship. When it comes to Prime Minister Morrison, one of the very first things when I gave him a call to say that we would be making decisions around opening up the trans-Tasman arrangement—we moved very quickly to when he would be coming to New Zealand. You'll remember it's our turn to host those leader-to-leader engagements. My last overseas trip was to Sydney in February of 2020, and we will be hosting here in New Zealand and looking to do that in the not too distant future. I imagine that we'll announce times for that in fairly short order. I'll be looking to showcase the best of New Zealand in that visit, in a rather shameless way.

Media: Queenstown?

Media: What do you mean?

PM: At this stage, my plan would be to take him down South, and I will be thinking about those places that have been hardest hit by the lack of international tourism. I know that those places exist across the country, but particularly we've seen that down south.

Media: Any plans for you to go over there in the near future?

PM: I haven't made firm plans yet, but when I do, it will be very much with New Zealand's economic interests in mind. It won't be for me to have any—it won't be for recreation; it will be for work, I can assure you of that.

Media: Has Cabinet made any decisions around how many extra MIQ space will be allowed for overseas returnees, particularly from red zone countries? You mentioned, you know, there's been signals about some MIQ facilities—you get their permission, some spaces—

PM: For periods, yep.

Media: —will be for any sort of bubble emergency. How much extra space would be for overseas returnees?

PM: Yes. So I'll look to Ministers next week when they talk a little bit more about some of the potential allocation for different economic categories, and at that point they'll be able to give you some of the specific numbers around how long, for instance, we're likely to see—the two facilities that you've seen today, we've taken offline for us to do work on ventilation systems. So that's taking out over 600 places, roughly, possibly up to 900 people as a result of that piece of work.

Then there's some other pieces of work we're doing around just, again, doing everything we can to reduce down risk. So one of the policies we're looking at around cohorting will also

have an impact on numbers. We are working actively with the horticultural industry around when their demand really kicks in for, you know, their next seasonal requirements. One of the issues being that whilst we have capacity now, it actually takes a while to prepare to bring RSE workers in. Some countries don't release workers particularly easily, and it can take time. So we've already started talks with that sector.

So I'll get Ministers to update you next week, and they should be able to give you how much is being taken offline, how much is being reallocated, and how much is therefore being redistributed across returnees. Keeping in mind, at the moment we're not needing—there's vouchers available, as we speak; quite a number.

Media: Do you want to give us an idea of how much of those rooms will be available for overseas returnees, aside from the workers that will—

PM: Keeping in mind that at the moment, there's a number available right now that are not taken up, so it's always been demand based. So I will have them do that calculation for you, because it will depend on how long we have some of those MIQ facilities offline. So, you know, between 600 and 900 rooms already being decommissioned this month—that will then come back, we anticipate, once that ventilation work has been done in person. We've been doing a lot of paper-based reviewing. And then they'll also be able to talk to you a little bit about how we intend to use some of the facilities that previously have been only used for low-risk countries anyway.

Media: Can I just rephrase that then?

PM: Yeah.

Media: How many more travellers from red zone countries—overseas returnees, Kiwis coming home from red zone countries—are we anticipating any more to come in with any extra MIQ capacity?

PM: Ah, the point that I'm making is that you're implying that we are at capacity now and therefore people can't get in, and that's not the case, because we have vacancies right now. And so you're saying, how many—you're basically asking, "How many more vacancies will we have?", because we're not currently meeting demand. That will, however, continue to—that will change from July to October. We're anticipating extra demand then. That's in part because of things like Expo 2020, the Olympics, the Antarctic programme. Demand from other areas ramps up over that period of time, which puts a bit of pressure on the system. But in terms of numbers for how many potential vacant rooms available to Kiwis to come home, I'll get Ministers to update you next week.

Media: Prime Minister, on those rooms that are out of action from pausing those arrivals to the Grand Mercure and Grand Millennium, how concerning is that? That number's bigger than the contingency set aside for a trans-Tasman bubble situation.

PM: No, not something that we are concerned about at all. We always keep contingency for any potential issues. We have upwards of a thousand spaces that are being released as a result of the trans-Tasman arrangement, so this is actually less than that, and that's factoring in the fact that we always have contingency anyway. So, actually, this is the time to do this work. We've done a review of all of our facilities—a paper-based review of all of our facilities—and their ventilation systems, but this enables us to go in, do additional work in person, in a vacant facility, which is obviously the way we need it to be in order to complete that work.

Media: Prime Minister, so maybe just following up on Derek's question.

PM: Yeah.

Media: There are certain classes of visas that can't come back into the country—some people—

PM: Correct.

Media: —some people have post-study work visas, and the reason why is because of limited MIQ capacity.

PM: Correct.

Media: This is why, we're told. So I guess what Derek's question then would be is if you brought more rooms online permanently, could you then not extend the amount of people who—

PM: Which we've done today. And so, you know, this is the constant calculation we're having to make. We have a limited number of places available. We are seeing peaks and troughs, and some we can anticipate. It was only natural that over a summer period, New Zealanders wanted to come home and did come home. Now we're moving into a winter where we're seeing that demand drop away. We've used both that period of time and also the trans-Tasman arrangement to say, "Well, let's look to the next cohort.", and we've looked to family reunification because, for us, that was the natural next place to go. But we're also having to consider later on in the year, ongoing demand from other calls on MIQ spaces. So we're constantly having to anticipate demand but also plan those that we know exist, and with those extra spaces that we've got available, it doesn't take long for them to be taken up, particularly with some of the changes I've indicated we're likely to make with our facilities.

Media: Eleven months ago, you said that one of the country's priorities would be to bring people who were separated from their lives back to New Zealand. Some of those people still can't come in and they're still paying rent, they're still paying car payments, and—

PM: Those are actually the people that we're trying to target by the "normally resident" category. So if they could demonstrate that they were normally resident in New Zealand before that border closure, we have created the ability for them to come back in. So—

Media: These people on work visas, yeah.

PM: Yeah. So if they were not normally resident and they had short periods left on visas, there will be some, but we did try and cater overall for that group.

Media: Is there a hope that for some people who might still not be captured by that, that within the next year anyone who considers New Zealand to be their home can come home?

PM: Yeah, and we've done our best to try and define that, and that's one of—one of the difficult things with immigration policy, of course, is that we are trying to create criteria to really define someone's connection to New Zealand, and that's quite a hard thing to do. And then we've tried to create criteria that define people's connection to New Zealanders, and in some cases that's even harder, because you're constantly having to make sure that you've got back-up so that people can prove that as well. But I think we've always, at our heart, we've tried to be fair, we've tried to bring people back together who have been separated. It hasn't always been easy and it hasn't always been fast, but that has been what we've tried to do.

Media: How concerned are you about the case discovered in Vanuatu—a Filipino fisherman's body washed up on shore and it's just been confirmed as a COVID case they're trying to trace. Is that concerning as we look to maybe expand to the Pacific?

PM: Look, I think, you know, you look, as well—Fiji have experienced a case today, but, actually, their track record has been very, very good at managing cases as they've arisen, and, in fact, you know, they've done a really exceptional job. Even then, for us, it has been about looking to, naturally, those countries where New Zealanders have that really deep connection, and our Realm countries has been the natural place to go. We haven't firmed up plans for anywhere else because, keep in mind, every time we do that, we are bringing in another country that we have to then have a very close connection to understanding how their COVID regime works, being able to be really agile in shutting down borders where we need to, and making sure that we can just continue to operate, as much as possible, a safe and seamless set of travel arrangements. Let's just make sure that we've got that right for the countries we've already entered into before we expand in other places.

Media: Prime Minister, last year you announced \$25 million for tertiary education mental health. It was in the midst of the pandemic and it was specifically tagged and, kind of, sold as helping students through a tough time with COVID. None of that money has been spent yet. Is that a disappointment to you that the Ministry of Health haven't managed to do that?

PM: Yeah, and, look, you know, as much as we had universal provision for telehealth services and online mental health services, some of which did emerge over the COVID period and demonstrate that they provide, in some cases, as good a service online as what you would get in person—as much as we've seen and supported that to emerge during COVID, we did want to see specific service for those tertiary students. My understanding is that the Ministry of Education, whilst receiving that funding, had an expectation that that would be delivered by the Ministry of Health. I will be asking questions about what has occurred there, because Cabinet's expectation was that there would be specific service, not just, say, 1737 or online tools.

Media: Is part of the problem here that you're, kind of, consistently trying to reinvent the wheel with mental health and not just putting money into stuff that's already happening?

PM: Well, I think the point I would make is, actually, one of the issues is that we're in the middle of rolling out primary mental health care for our young people. So we are, for instance, putting greater service into schools, we're expanding a service into primary schools; at the same time, trying to create entirely new functions within primary mental health services. We funded Youthline directly as well. So the issue is that in the future, you wouldn't need, necessarily, to specifically fund a mental health response due to an event; you'd have confidence that you had the primary mental health care already in place. That's one of the issues that we've got. Once we have that, I wouldn't see the need for this in the future. [*Clears throat*]

Media: Last week, we were told that—

PM: It's a tickle, everyone; I just want to—[*Coughs*]

Media: Last week, we were told that there were 60- to 70-odd MIQ workers who weren't being regularly tested. That was some of the sampling that had been done. Do we know how many of, sort of, that higher-risk wider border workforce is also missing regular tests?

PM: So, of course, the issue there is more about whether or not those individuals are necessarily consistently in the workplace or whether or not they actually have exemptions. I think the Minister of COVID-19 response has already gone through this. So roughly half of those now are being scheduled for testing, the rest are going through an exercise—because, in some cases, they may have exemptions around testing or they'll be a contractor who may have entered a site, say, once. To give you an example, Minister Robertson recently had to be tested as part of our requirements because he visited the behind the scenes of an airport where we have red zoned travellers. So we will include in those numbers people who are coming in and out—a contractor who visits once, for instance. So some of that will not be people who are routine. What's been asked of us, though, is the question of border workers who—in some cases, we are relying on those companies, if it's private, because they're the ones who know who is routine and who is a visitor. So that's why, when we drafted these orders, we did create a difference between our responsibilities within, say, MIQ and, say, customs staff versus a port who may have a number of private contractors, and it will only be the port who will be able to tell who needs to be tested routinely. So that's why that obligation sits there. On the question of numbers, though, for us and, you know, customs or immigration, I'll get the Minister to come back to you because those are just not numbers I have in front of me.

Media: Sure, but does that leave us essentially blind to how many private employees need to be regularly tested—

PM: Not for MIQ, because—

Media: No, I meant for the—

PM: Yeah, not for managed isolation because managed isolation, they have a system called “who’s on site”, so people are basically recording when they’re on site so we know if someone’s there regularly and, therefore, if they need to be tested, and that’s then matched against the testing register. But for a port, where literally thousands of people are coming and going, we are, of course, asking that those who are operating those large-scale operations to play their part, as well, in ensuring those who need to be tested are being tested.

Media: Is there anything we can do about that? Because we’re essentially blind to that, we’re reliant on them. What can be done?

PM: No, I mean, we, of course, do keep a testing register, so we know who’s been tested, but we need those who are employing to make sure that those who need to be regularly tested are being done. The one thing I would just say, look, we set a speed limit in New Zealand, we don’t stop every single individual traveller on a road to check that they’re complying. We set an expectation, we want people to comply with the law. We’ll do our bit to make sure that we’re doing a cross-check, but we do ask everyone to play their role, as well. When it’s really high risk, like MIQ, we go even further than that.

Media: We do have higher-risk workers in that wider border workforce who are—

PM: Yeah, and often they’ll be—

Media: We have reports every day in the international air crew, for example. Is there any—

PM: Oh, and often if they’re our staff, then yes. So if it’s customs and it’s immigration, it’s different. Where I’m talking about are the likes of ports, where we have thousands.

Media: Do we want to have them on the register at the moment, [*Inaudible*] MIQ?

PM: So we’ve created an order that requires everyone to be using that testing register, the issue being, of course, it’ll be the private employers that know how often they need to be tested and that they’re testing everyone that needs to be.

Media: Will any of the exemptions that were announced today, will they apply to New Zealand citizens or residents who have families overseas, including New Zealand citizens or residents who are healthcare workers, will they be able to apply to get their families here or is it only temporary—

PM: Sorry, can you start that example again, Tova?

Media: My understanding is that the exemptions today are just for temporary work visa holders here in New Zealand, or [*Inaudible*] workers, etc., but if it was a New Zealand citizen or resident—

PM: That’s because they should’ve already been covered by the existing exemptions that we put in place some time ago. So this is an expansion into those who are not citizens and permanent residents who should have already been covered by our previous changes to our immigration laws.

Media: Immigration lawyers are talking about—they’ve got cases of people who are New Zealand citizens or residents who can’t get their families in from overseas.

PM: And those are cases where, in our view, we’ve already made the alterations required that if someone—if their partner or their dependents are stranded, that they should be able to be reunited. I would encourage you to take any specific cases there to the Minister of Immigration, but, of course, what we’re trying to do today is pick up those who have not been covered by those previous changes, and there is a legitimate inequity between them and those who have more recently been able to bring in their family members. OK, I’ll starting wrapping in a moment.

Media: The hate speech proposal that went through Cabinet in December, it includes a line around—it would make political belief a protected ground, so that you could be prosecuted for hate speech against someone on the basis of their political belief. Do you have concerns around how that might have unintended consequences?

PM: So I'm going to be really clear here. Cabinet has not made any final decisions on hate speech. I'm really disheartened to see the ACT Party has started a campaign on something that has not even been concluded by the Government yet, and the reason I'm disheartened by that is because one of the things we've been really clear on is that once we have set up some ideas to firmly test, I want them to be tested with other political parties. I want this as much as possible to be something that we have some cross-party consensus around. What I see from ACT suggests to me that they're not willing to engage in that way, because we haven't even concluded the debate yet and they've already started a campaign.

Media: Do you have any personal friends or family coming over from Australia that you're looking forward to seeing?

PM: Yes, to answer your question. I, like many New Zealanders, have friends and family in Australia. I have some family members that are really desperate to come back, in some cases because they've had really distressing situations, and in particular there's a few friends of mine I'm really looking forward to seeing. In fact, when I was on the podium, I'd only just announced the date and one of my friends sent me a copy of the ticket that they'd just purchased online. So I know how enthusiastically this has been greeted, and I'm really pleased about that. Every New Zealander has worked so hard to bring those beautiful moments to pass. So thanks.

conclusion of press conference