# POST-CABINET PRESS CONFERENCE: Monday, 23 May Hansard Transcript

**PM**: Kia ora koutou katoa, good afternoon. Just a very quick heads up that for today’s press conference, we will be keeping it relatively tight just because of logistical issues out the other end with flight schedules.

Today, I’m joined by the Minister of Defence, Peeni Henare, and chief of defence, Air Marshal Kevin Short, to announce further military support for Ukraine. At the conclusion of my introductory comments, I will ask both to join me at the podium. Cabinet has today confirmed that New Zealand will make a further deployment of 30 defence force personnel to support the Ukrainian armed forces against Russia’s ongoing invasion.

The soldiers will be stationed in the UK until the end of July. Their specific purpose will be to help train Ukrainian soldiers in using a particular type of artillery that New Zealand soldiers are familiar and well versed in. The weapon in question is the L119 light gun, and it’s only used by a handful of countries—and New Zealand has been asked specifically to provide the training team for this purpose. The UK will co-ordinate the strategic airlift to take our team over, along with training, ammunition, and surplus equipment including aiming systems. The 30 NZDF personnel will at no point enter Ukraine for the purposes of this training. They will remain in the UK throughout.

This follows an earlier deployment of 66 New Zealand Defence Force personnel in April, along with the C-130 Hercules. I want to today acknowledge the men and women of our defence force, both past and present, who take their skills to the world to keep New Zealanders safe but also to restore security and stability around the world when they are called upon.

Later today, I will depart for the United States, accompanied by a business delegation, in my second trade mission so far this year. I’ll be taking a simple message: that we are open for business and, of course, that we’re open for recreation—especially as US visitors will begin to make their plans now to arrive in time for our summer. We’re a small country that makes a living selling our exports to the world. As we all recover from COVID and open back up for business, I want to make sure US businesses, tourists, and skilled workers have New Zealand at the forefront of their minds.

The US is our third-largest export market and visitor market by arrivals, with two-way trade worth $18.5 billion last year. Technology’s a particularly important market, and US firms are planning multibillion-dollar investments in cloud computing in New Zealand, which will unlock big opportunities for our digital exports in the world. In Washington, I will meet senior members of Congress.

In New York, I’ll meet with the United Nations Secretary-General, US investors, and will attend a launch event for sustainable meat exports. I’m particularly honoured to deliver the Harvard Commencement speech and meet with New Zealand students and staff at Harvard University.

In San Francisco, I’ll meet with the Governor of California, Gavin Newsom. California is a world leader in green technology, which will be essential to our work to meet our carbon emissions reduction targets. I’ll also meet with executives from Twitter, Amazon Web Services, and Microsoft to discuss investment in New Zealand, skills development for New Zealanders, digital co-operation, and to further Christchurch Call objectives.

Just before I head off, I will take part in the launch event of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, hosted by President Biden and the Prime Minister of Japan. I’ll be doing that virtually from Auckland Airport before I fly out.

I’ll now invite Minister Henare and the Chief of Defence Force to join me at the podium and we’re happy to take your questions. I’ll start up front with questions on Ukraine and then we’ll pan out for other questions.

**Media**: How significant is this move towards training Ukraine soldiers?

**PM**: We see this additional deployment as really another way that New Zealand can support Ukraine. This also is a demonstration of the fact that our defence force do have specific skills that are in need. There are very few armed forces that could provide this training right now, which is why New Zealand has been specifically called upon. So with these personnel—30 individuals who’ll be travelling—we can make a big difference. But also, they’ll be doing it from Europe, not within the Ukraine or any of those contested areas—but it will still be a significant difference. Perhaps Minister Henare could comment as well.

**Hon Peeni Henare**: The only thing I’ll add is that this will be much welcomed by our international partners, who have already recognised our contribution to date and will be looking forward to our most recent announcement, and that I’ll be meeting with them again very shortly to discuss.

**PM**: Minister Henare, as I understand, is part of a Ukraine contact group that are convening again—this evening?

**Hon Peeni Henare:** Correct. Midnight tonight to the early, small hours of tomorrow morning, led by Secretary Austin from the US and 40-odd countries coming together to discuss the conflict in Ukraine.

**Media**: How many—Prime Minister or Minister—how many Ukrainians will be trained, and do you have any information on the rank of the trainees and how long it takes each one to be trained up?

**PM:** Yeah. Good question. Over 200, as I understand.

**Air Marshal Kevin Short:** Yes. We’re expecting 230 Ukrainian forces to be trained. We’ve been told that they have already got experience on artillery, so we think it will take at least a week for the gun crew to be trained, but we need to test and adjust once we actually get the men and women to actually have their hands on equipment.

**PM:** Ultimately, though, we’re anticipating that they’ll be there through to July, that’s supporting the deployment.

**Media:** So you’ll be able to do several; a couple of rotations of Ukrainian trainees, presumably?

**Air Marshal Kevin Short:** Yes. We think we’ll end up training at least—well, over 30 gun crews, and they may want a second group to go through as well.

**Media:** The walkout from the APEC Ministers’ meeting over the weekend, when the Russian representative began speaking—what was the background to that, who suggested the idea and why did New Zealand decide to take part in that?

**PM:** Look, some of the finer details there you would actually probably have to put to Minister O’Connor, given I wasn’t present. Look, there have been a number of circumstances now where we’ve seen there’s been international forum where Russia has been present, and while those events have continued, at the point that the Russian representative has made their contribution you have seen walkouts from, often, many countries at once. I think these are examples of where forums are continuing; Russia continues to participate but countries are choosing to send a very clear message through those actions around their view on Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, and so this really reflects what’s been happening in other forums.

**Media:** And what precedent does this sort of set moving forward? You know, will we do this at further meetings involving Russia, what about at an official level as opposed to political representatives?

**PM:** One of the things that we’ve discussed is the importance of still participating. In some quarters I’ve heard there being discussions over whether or not decisions are made to boycott meetings where there is Russian attendance. Our view is that, being in the room to clearly articulate a view and send our strong condemnation—if Russia is present there as well—is really important. But, from time to time of course we may choose at the same time to send a message when the Russian representatives are speaking, a very clear message around our view of their actions in Ukraine.

**Media:** Just in terms of that training, beyond training—how far would we be willing to go beyond training, and also are we considering training like in Poland, or anywhere else other than the UK, would that ever be a consideration?

**PM:** So no such request has been made. And I think what you’ll see here is that we are taking these requests, giving them full consideration, and making sure that they sit within the parameters on which of course we must ensure that we are, that they fit within our international obligations in the framework around this conflict. So we’ve given that proper consideration; we’re very comfortable that we are acting appropriately here, that this is a meaningful contribution that we can make, and also makes use of the training that our personnel have. We’ll take every request in that way: looking at our independent foreign policy, but also the parameters of our engagement with our defence force, which we’re very careful about.

**Media:** Are we able to get Air Marshal Short on, just to give some comment on that?

**PM:** Yeah, of course—anything that you want to add on that; the parameters of future deployments?

**Air Marshal Kevin Short:** We’ll take the requests that we have. But of course, we’re already operating around the outside of Ukraine, delivering military aid at the moment, and actually some personnel. So they are actually operating, for instance in and out of Poland, as an example.

**Media:** When we had that 2015 training mission in Iraq, that was quite different in that that was against a non-State actor, and it was a civil issue, whereas this is more nation versus nation, so how does that change things for us in engaging in this training?

**Air Marshal Kevin Short**: We’re going to use—at this stage, the training will be done in the UK. They have the environment to do that. We won’t go into Ukraine because that would actually change the status of New Zealand personnel. So we won’t do that, but actually training individuals and providing equipment to allow Ukraine to undertake self-defence operations is completely acceptable internationally.

**PM**: And no other nation is acting in that way because, as the CDF has pointed out, that is a considerable step change in that conflict.

**Media**: Will New Zealand join the Quad?

**PM**: Look, there’s no discussions of that nature, no requests either way, and, again, each of these forums have, often, their specific purposes. In our view, so long as they are operating in such a way that they’re maintaining the values and aspirations that New Zealand shares, then we’re supportive of them. New Zealand is, equally, members of other groupings that don’t always involve others’ membership, and we see no issue with other countries doing the same.

**Media**: And when will you be able to confirm whether or not you’re meeting President Biden?

**PM**: Oh look, again, some of these issues around COVID protocols sit slightly outside of our control and out of our jurisdiction, but as soon as we have an update, we’ll share it.

**Media**: Prime Minister, did you have a date and time locked in with President Biden before you got COVID?

**PM**: Actually, can I just pan around, because I can see there’s a natural departure point for the Minister and the CDF. Any further questions on Ukraine?

**Media**: Can I just ask: our former defence Minister Ron Mark has just left the Ukraine. He’s been critical of the Government’s support to the people of the Ukraine and says it could impact the way in which we do trade. What’s your response to that?

**PM**: Totally reject that. I think, unfortunately, what the past Minister of Defence—who, I must acknowledge, I did enjoy working alongside and had a very good working relationship with. But I think we take a different perspective on this issue. In my view, being present on the ground does not mean that we would be adding greater support than what we are doing right now. We—and when I say “present on the ground”, I mean having politicians visit a country that is in the middle of a war. I think the more useful contribution we can make are things like we have done today.

**Media**: Not in a show pony mood?

**PM**: Well, look, it’s not for me to put labels here. I’ve been very clear that in my mind we have to be careful when a country is in the middle of a war that our engagement is purposeful, that it’s focused on supporting Ukraine, and that we’re making decisions—as we have today—that actually will make a meaningful difference. And so there’s a balance to be struck there. Our view has been that our engagement at a senior level, that we’ve had, has given us what we need to understand the situation on the ground and provide the support we need to.

**Media**: If you do end up meeting with President Biden—

**PM**: Oh sorry, I did promise you I’d answer that question. Look, I think I’d rather not get into the backwards and forwards of the logistics of the meeting. I think the most important thing I can articulate is that there’s been a real desire on both sides to make a meeting work. But, again, as I say, COVID’s just thrown us a few curve balls that we’re working through.

**Media**: It isn’t whether, if you’re saying that COVID is throwing some curve balls, for us to know if you—

**PM**: Well, we wouldn’t be discussing COVID protocols if there wasn’t an intention to meet.

**Media**: In terms of advancing the CPTPP, how would you do that with the States if we weren’t having that face-to-face meeting with President Biden?

**PM**: Oh, in the same way that we do at any point with trade negotiations. I haven’t had face-to-face with the EU for some time, but that has not gotten in the way of our ongoing engagement with leaders within the EU and within the EU Commission, and the progress that we have made. Face-to-face of course is fantastic, but we have never let that get in the way of making progress on important issues. On the CPTPP, though, I do think that we have to come at this discussion with a degree of advocacy but also realism. We have continued to push the CPTPP for a few years now and we’ll continue to do so, but you can see that the United States at the moment is putting forward its Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, and so that is a point for us to engage in whilst making sure we continue to push those broader trade agreements.

**Media**: To what degree is that framework purely symbolic?

**PM**: Oh look, I would dispute that. It is early days, though, and I think what’s important is we’re signalling our desire to be at the table during those early conversations, even before getting into negotiations, so that we’re able to shape it and support shaping it into something that is meaningful.

**PM**: So, yes, it’s not what’s been pitched as in a traditional trade arrangement, but that doesn’t mean it can’t ease the pathway for the trade in some ways. It doesn’t mean that it can’t make progress on sustainability or digital issues, and so, so long as that subject matter’s on the table, I think it’s important that New Zealand is part of the talks.

**Media**: While you are overseas, Prime Minister, will you be seeking their advice on COVID management, given that the current daily death rate in New Zealand is much higher than in the United States?

**PM**: Are you taking into account, though, Mark, the distinction between those that are direct causes of COVID? Because you’ll know that that is roughly half of what we’re reporting at the moment.

**Media**: The US is about half of our death rate and—

**PM**: Yes, and, as I’m pointing out, we have a different way of reporting. So we are still reporting, for instance, people who tested positive more than 28 days prior to their passing, which means it’s not apples and apples. The US has a different reporting mechanism. Ours, if anything, is reporting vastly more because on the Ministry of Health’s own count, from memory, it’s about half, if you take into account the direct impact of COVID on that mortality, yep. But look, I’m sure that we’ll discuss all the pressing issues of the day.

**Media**: Prime Minister, Australia has a new Prime Minister. I’m just wondering if you could detail a bit of your history with Mr Albanese, when you first met, and how you’ve dealt with him in an official capacity, and how you’ve come to know him?

**PM**: Yeah, so I’ve had several engagements with now the Prime Minister-elect prior to his election over the weekend, and so a good starting point for that engagement. I think the last face-to-face would have been in February, with the last visit I had to Australia. On Saturday, I had the pleasure of speaking with Anthony Albanese on his way to give his speech to supporters. He dropped me a line, which I thought was incredibly generous given his timetable that evening, and then we agreed to speak the next day, which we did for a much longer period. You know, there’s obviously a really strong relationship regardless of leader, regardless of party. The very nature of New Zealand and Australia’s relationship is that it’s strong and enduring. What you can see, though, already is an acknowledgment from the new Prime Minister of some of the things that have been causing friction in our relationship. Now, I’m not going to pre-empt any talks that we have there, but even that acknowledgment of that friction, I think, is helpful, because it has been problematic.

**Media**: [*Inaudible*] can only be at the top of any sort of “issues to solve” agenda, what’s issue 2, 3, 4? What comes after that?

**PM**: Yeah, so, look, keeping in mind that, of course, any Prime Minister’s agenda is for them domestically. But there are some areas where there is overlap in terms of the regional interest. So, look, I do expect that we’ll have a good exchange of ideas on things like climate change, because it has been of huge interest to the Pacific region. It is a constant topic of conversation in the Pacific Islands Forum. We are, in a number of our bilateral engagements—be it the United States or be it Japan—talking about how we can share and exchange ideas in this policy area, so I imagine, given it it’s a priority for the new Prime Minister and a priority for us, it is something we’ll likely discuss. And then, of course, as you can imagine from a regional perspective, talking about just our perspective on where we currently are within the Pacific region, some of the pressures that exist in our region, and some of the most recent events—that’ll naturally be on the agenda too.

**Media**: Will having a new leader change your approach to dealing with the 501 issue and are you confident that there might be a change of policy in that regard?

**PM**: So my approach will not change, because it is a New Zealand perspective and the New Zealand perspective is: look, we accept, because we do it too, that there will be circumstances under which people will be deported. We’ve always reserved the right for New Zealand to do that, and under certain circumstances we do. The area where we have had grievance is where individuals are being deported who have little to no connection to New Zealand, and I will be utterly consistent, no matter who the leader is in Australia, with raising that grievance.

**Media**: Have you been briefed on the 501 detainee who was living in a New South Wales detention camp?

**PM**: No, unfortunately. Only that it was raised by—or that it might likely be raised by—media. I have no other details, I’m afraid. We are a little bit cautious sometimes on how much commentary we would give on consular cases. I will reach out and seek further information, though, but I haven’t received it before this press conference, I’m afraid.

**Media**: Prime Minister, what will your key themes be in that Harvard address on Friday morning?

**PM**: Ah, I might it leave it to the day lest, between now and then, I change my mind about what I’m saying. Don’t want to lock myself in.

**Media**: How long have you spent writing it?

**PM**: That’s a good question. My writing process is often that I will think about the themes for a while—sometimes canvass them with others—before I commit pen to paper. I probably started writing excerpts for it about three or four weeks ago, but I really only really committed in the last 10 days.

**Media**: Looking at the people that have previously spoken at Harvard in the Commencement address, do you think—

**PM**: Not at all daunting, at all, looking at that list of people.

**Media**: Is it, kind of, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, where you go, as Prime Minister, you know, you look, 10 years, 15 years back, and you can’t imagine that you’re going to be standing at Harvard, giving an address?

**PM**: The privilege that I’ve been offered on behalf of New Zealand is not lost on me, and I’m very, very humbled by the opportunity. So I think that’s probably why I’ve spent quite a bit of time thinking about it, is because I want to make sure that I make the most of that opportunity on behalf of New Zealand.

**Media**: Will you go by “Dr Ardern” when you get your [*Inaudible*]?

**PM**: No. No. That is a clear no. Yeah.

**Media**: Just coming back to Biden quickly; how disappointed would you be if that sit-down can’t happen?

**PM**: I don’t think there’s a need to get into hypotheticals. Maybe you can ask me that question if that’s what eventuates.

**Media**: When you meet with the people from Twitter, what involvement will Elon Musk have on those discussions, given his ambitions? And also, with relation to the Christchurch Call, what are you going to do to try and get TikTok to become one of the corporate supporters of the call, like Amazon and Twitter already are?

**PM**: So, on the first question: obviously, we’ll be meeting with those who are in positions of leadership within the organisation right now. On the question of on-boarding others, I’ll speak generally if I may. There is a prescribed process now that companies go through, as organisations or as members of civil society, to become part of the Christchurch Call. And it is a pretty rigorous process. Some will sit at different stages for some time before officially signing on, and we’re constantly looking for opportunities to bring in members. But, again, there are certain commitments that those companies need to make in order to do that.

**Media**: Prime Minister, we lost two leaders in the weekend: Joe Hawke, former Labour MP, and Dame Aroha Reriti-Crofts—two big losses.

**PM**: Yeah, and you’re right. Those are significant losses. I was just reflecting with Cabinet those giants within our community, who have been lost, and you’ll see a strong show of senior Labour people to acknowledge the contribution that they’ve made to New Zealand. For Joe, if I might just reflect on the words that were shared by actually Minister Jackson, who pointed out that through significant moments in New Zealand’s history that we saw Joe demonstrate how it is that you can send a strong message with huge integrity, with huge mana, and we saw examples of that through his history time and time again. So, yeah, what a loss on both counts.

**Media**: Prime Minister, if that meeting with Biden does end up happening, do you expect that he might ask you if New Zealand intends to spend more on aid for Ukraine and, if so, how would you respond to such requests?

**PM**: So, look, of course, I’ll never put words in any other leader’s mouth. I’ll leave, of course, their interests for them. But what I would say is that New Zealand’s contribution to the conflict in Ukraine has been significant. Very few other countries have been providing personnel for the purposes of training as we have, or for logistical support as we have. And that’s often been because some of our defence force have skills that are very specific to the needs that can’t be provided anywhere else. But that does mean that, relative to others, we are certainly doing our part.

**Media**: Just given that you are just recently out of isolation and quite a hectic travel schedule ahead, how are you feeling?

**PM**: Good, thank you—good. I think, you know, what you hear about the experience of COVID from others is that everyone seems to have a different experience, but there are some similar themes. I heeded everyone’s advice around trying to prioritise rest so that I could recover as quickly as possible so I could get back on the road. So that’s what I’ve tried to do. The one thing I’d say, though, as much as my experience was what it was, some people will feel a very heavy toll from COVID, and that’s why I think we can’t trivialise this illness. We have to still take all of the precautions regardless of our own personal experience so we can protect others.

**Media**: How much of your programme overseas being scaled back, if at all, because of your becoming infected?

**PM**: Not much. The only thing that’s changed is the up-front part of the programme. As you know, there was a beginning leg that took in LA. We’ve subsequently removed that just to meet COVID protocols, but some of what we were doing there we’ve been able to dock into a later part of the programme. So not much at all.

**Media**: Monkeypox has been identified in at least a dozen countries, including Australia. How likely is it we’ll get that disease here, and what’s the plan if it arrives?

**PM**: Actually, I raised the same question with the actual doctor in our Cabinet, Dr Ayesha Verrall. It might be worth actually putting a question in to her because he had a very interesting response, given she works in the space of infectious diseases. She reflected on previous global experiences with monkeypox, because this is not new. So she had some reflections about how this looked relative to those past experiences and what kind of response we need to make sure that we have, but I don’t think there’s been any suggestion that what we’re dealing with is an unknown in the way of COVID. But, yeah, it’s worth having a yarn with her.

**Media**: How likely do you think it is that we’ll get the disease in New Zealand?

**PM**: Look, I think with infectious diseases you never rule out their movement around the world, but I think I’d be cautious before making any comparisons to the likes of the experience we’ve had with COVID, particularly with the presence of vaccines. But it is worth having a yarn to her.

**Media**: Just on the incoming Australian Prime Minister, he seems pretty committed to advance the rights of the indigenous people of Australia. Given the mahi that this Government does in that space what do you think are some of the challenges ahead of him?

**PM**: Look, I’m always very careful when we have our own mahi to do, making sure that we are constantly working on our own progress before being too quick to reflect on anyone else’s. But I think it will be really useful, as I say, to just exchange ideas and experiences if indeed the new incoming Government is interested in doing so. There have been some areas where we have looked closely at one another’s policies and we’ll look for those opportunities.

**Media**: Just to pick up on Claudette’s question, how will you remember Joe Hawke, and how would you describe his contribution when we’re thinking of Crown-Māori relations?

**PM:** Significant. Joe didn’t just demonstrate that political leadership in here. He did it out on the ground day to day in all of the mahi he did. And it’s often not an easy thing to walk in both worlds, but he did. I think his legacy will be huge, not just because of what he did but the way that he did it.

**Media:** Golriz Ghahraman has had her democracy bill drawn from the members’ ballot, recommending a number of changes to our electoral laws. How likely is it that Labour bill back that to first reading?

**PM**: We haven’t yet had a discussion as a caucus, so I’ll just make sure that we do that before I give—

**Media**: Are you as leader open to—

**PM**: The one thing I would say is that we have, of course, just actually watched a process, quite a rigorous one, to canvass the views of many and our experts and other political parties on electoral reform. So we’ve been quite considered about how we go through that process. And so some might argue there’s an avenue to have some of that discussion already, but, again, I do need to let caucus discuss the member’s bill.

**Media**: Do you have a personal view on lowering the voting age?

**PM**: Yeah, actually, I’m open to having the discussion as part of the review, which is actually—there’s room for that in the review process. One thing I would say, though, and I’ve always been firmly of this view: we actually need to do a better job of ensuring that young people have access to civic education. I think that’s an area where probably everyone agrees that we could improve. It’s so patchy—not every young person actually even has the opportunity to learn about our system within the curriculum.

**Media**: Prime Minister, on the Budget—

**PM**: Yeah.

**Media**: There’s a whole lot of running—

**PM**: And then I might just—who’s really desperate? Because we are really hitting upon time. I’ll try move quickly.

**Media**: There are a whole lot of areas that contribute to the Christchurch mosque attack royal commission. There’s more money for huis and more money for intelligence agencies. Do you think all of that will achieve—

**PM**: On the royal commission?

**Media**: Yes. Thank you, I misspoke.

**PM**: No, no. That’s fine.

**Media**: Do you think all the money and all of the initiatives will contribute to those recommendations in the royal commission, and how does Christchurch actually inform the new money in intelligence?

**PM**: So look, ultimately, so much of what we’re doing is literally guided by the recommendations of royal commission. So the hui on counter-terrorism, the new centre of excellence, the work that we’ve done to engage communities, has all been informed by the royal commission.

Then there’s wider machinery of Government work that’s still under way. We prioritised doing some parts of the royal commission first and then we’ve got a longer-term work programme.

Then, of course, there’s the issue of the funding for the intelligence agencies themselves. One of the very obvious things was making sure that there was resourcing for our intelligence agencies to pursue a wide range of threats, and so of course we need to make sure that we’re resourcing them to do that.

I’m going to move through quite quickly if I can.

**Media**: Just a quick one, Prime Minister. Both yourself and doctor Albanese have some DJ experience; would you do a set together?

**PM**: No. Ha, ha! That’s a firm no. I have not raised that question with the Prime Minister elect, but I think I could feel fairly confident in answering on both of our behalves.

OK, maybe we’ll finish on that note. Thank you, everyone. Look after yourselves this week.

Oh, Mark. Sorry. Because I was going off the top of my head, I will just make sure that I give you some actual figures: of all the deaths so far, as of last week, 54.5 percent were classified as from COVID, others were “contributing factor” and “unrelated”—18 percent were, for instance, unrelated.

Thanks everyone.

**conclusion of press conference**