

**POST-CABINET PRESS CONFERENCE: TUESDAY, 23 JANUARY 2024
HANSARD TRANSCRIPT**

PM: Well, good afternoon, everybody, and welcome to what is our first post-cab press conference of 2024. I trust you've all had a chance to have a bit of a break and refresh and recharge after what was a very busy end to the last year, and, frankly, the start of this year will be no different. With me today is Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Winston Peters and also Defence Minister Judith Collins. Today, we are announcing that we are sending six NZDF personnel to support any future military action against Houthi targets in Yemen and the Red Sea. This is in response to Houthi actions which threaten commercial shipping. Freedom of navigation is an integral part of New Zealand's national prosperity and our trade security. Our Defence Force has a longstanding role in supporting maritime security in our exclusive economic zone and throughout the world. Secure shipping lanes are integral to our national interests, and nearly 15 percent of global trade flows through the Red Sea.

The Houthi attacks are disrupting supply chains, they're driving costs higher for Kiwis, and causing delays to shipments that now have to round the Cape of Good Hope. More than 2,000 ships have been diverted from the Red Sea, and it is also hurting exporters trying to get their goods to Europe and to the Middle East. The Houthi attacks are illegal, they're unacceptable, and they're profoundly destabilising, and we and our partners have made repeated calls for them to stop. The Houthi choose to defy those warnings, and, indeed, their attacks have become even more indiscriminate, so it is a logical consequence that we join international partners in tackling this ongoing threat to security. More than 60 nations have been affected in at least 31 attacks by the Houthi on ships in recent months. And choosing to support action in the Middle East is not unusual for New Zealand. New Zealand has contributed to maritime security efforts in the Middle East and elsewhere continuously since 2013, to protect not only our vital national interests but also the international rules-based order.

I'll now ask that Minister Peters and then Minister Collins pass some remarks to add to these comments. Winston.

Rt Hon Winston Peters: Thank you, Prime Minister and Minister of Defence. Our foreign policy goal is to protect the prosperity and security of New Zealanders. The illegal Houthi attacks on commercial and naval vessels pose an economic threat to our trading nation by imposing supply chain costs for our exporters and importers. As a consequence, it also impacts the cost of living here. Clearly, there are consumers worldwide desperate for essential shipped products, including food and medicines. This piracy threatens the existence of hundreds of millions of innocent consumers worldwide. More broadly, Houthi attacks on the Red Sea shipping lanes defy the international rules-based order—the United Nations Security Council thinks so, and so does the New Zealand Government. Freedom of navigation is a principle that goes to the core of our national interests. The support for maritime security in the Middle East is not new. We have been doing so continuously since 2013 with the same goals in mind: defending lives, deescalating tensions, and restoring stability to the Red Sea. Now back to you, Prime Minister.

Hon Judith Collins: Thank you. Thank you, Prime Minister, and thank you, Minister of Foreign Affairs. This deployment shows the New Zealand Defence Force stepping up to defend our national interests and support our international partners. New Zealand's support for international law, peace, and stability is perhaps even more important given we are a small country at the bottom of the world. Our isolation means any international or intentional disruption of global supply chains will directly impact the lives of New Zealanders by driving up prices, and it's not just about that; it's about doing the right thing by our international partners in playing our part.

Our personnel will support coalition forces in carrying out precision attacks on identified military targets. They will be at operational headquarters in the wider Middle East region and elsewhere, but they will not go into Yemen. The New Zealand Defence Force team will hold

a number of roles at operational headquarters, but as I'm sure you all know, we cannot go into the specifics for security reasons. But what I can say is our New Zealand Defence Force personnel are immensely skilled. They signed up to defend New Zealand, and they are trained to do it. They're ready to do our bit, and I'm extremely proud of them.

PM: Thank you, Judith. With that, all three of us are here happy to take questions around this issue, and then Ministers will leave and then we'll take the normal order of questions.

Media: Prime Minister, are you able to give us a little bit more information—granted, I know, that there are security concerns—what exactly the six New Zealand Defence Force personnel will be doing? Minister Collins mentioned precision attacks. What exactly does this logistically mean?

PM: I'll let Judith talk to that a bit further.

Hon Judith Collins: Right, well, that requires—it's obviously very much targeting, based on intelligence information and other information of that nature. That's really all I can say on the matter.

Media: So will this personnel be intelligence personnel or will there be combat personnel?

Hon Judith Collins: They'll be there to provide the precision targeting. They're not there to be involved in combat.

Media: So will they be involved in any combat at all?

Hon Judith Collins: We're not expecting them to be. We're certainly not expecting that they will be going—we've simply said they are not going into Yemen. So they're not there for that. They're there for targeting purposes only.

Media: Ministers, was this a response to a request from a particular body, and is this the most that was asked for or the least that was asked for, and by whom?

PM: What I'd say to you is since November last year, there's been a series of statements from a number of countries around the world coming together to warn Houthi that this is unacceptable. We saw UN Security Council statements in, I think, early January and again on 10 January, with a UN Security Council vote as well. So there has been a very much building pressure. We were asked by our American partners whether we would consider sending some support there. We've obviously been right there from the beginning in terms of making political statements condemning Houthi action, so this is the right response for us, which is to identify six NZDF [*Inaudible*].

Media: Will these personnel be under American command? Who will run the operation?

PM: Again, we're not going to go into the specifics of composition and location of that team for security reasons. But suffice to say they'll be part of a coalition—

Media: But no, I'm not asking composition, just who will be running the overall operation—

PM: They'll be part of a coalition of like-minded countries that will be working together as a team.

Media: These Houthi attacks, they're all linked to the war in Gaza at the moment, and they're trying to stick up for the people of Gaza who are being slaughtered en masse at the moment by Israel. Should New Zealand not perhaps be putting more pressure on the United States to support a ceasefire call in Gaza rather than taking this action and supporting this military action?

Rt Hon Winston Peters: Can I say that's not the view of the United Nations. Dare I say that's not the view of China or, for that matter, Russia. So why is it your view?

Media: It's not my view. It was a question.

Rt Hon Winston Peters: No, it wasn't a question; it was a statement you made: they are doing this for that reason. There are countless Muslim countries who do not follow that reasoning at all either.

Media: Why not pursue diplomacy here rather than sending out the Defence Force?

PM: We have made statements—we've aligned with many other countries—making it very, very clear that the actions of the Houthis are causing huge pain and suffering. That is unacceptable. We have been a party—Government—country, frankly, since 2013 that has been part of the Combined Maritime Forces that has actually been ensuring that these shipping lanes actually are peaceful and secure so that goods can flow freely throughout the world. This is the next step that is needed to underscore that actually this is unacceptable behaviour. We are a country that believes in the international law. We believe in actually upholding the freedom of navigation. Those are values and principles that are important to us as a small trading nation.

Media: American media are saying that the White House is bedding in for a long and sustained campaign against the Houthis. The first strikes haven't deterred further strikes. Have they given you any indication of how long this deployment may be needed, and what is the extent of your commitment? Are you going to be there as long as it takes to stop them from—

PM: The extent of our commitment with the six personnel that we're sending is through to no later than 31 July this year.

Media: Right. And then are you prepared for further deployment if it's necessary?

PM: Well, again, our commitment is to 31 July this year.

Media: Who are the other "like-minded partners" that are joining us on this, and why aren't all these like-minded partners that signed the original statement about the Houthis offering to help now? I'm referring to countries like Singapore.

Hon Judith Collins: I think one of the things is that we do actually have some capability to offer and to make a real difference. We do have people who are able to commit but also to, as I say, add value, and we're not responsible for what other parties do—other countries. But what we can say is that we understand how, in the best interests of New Zealand and New Zealanders, this is the right thing to do.

Media: But who are the countries that we're joining with, and why aren't some of our closest friends being part of that agreement?

Hon Judith Collins: Well, many of our closest friends are. I mean, there's—

Media: Well, Singapore is not.

Hon Judith Collins: Well, Canada—

PM: The UK. Australia.

Hon Judith Collins: UK, Australia. These are—

Media: So it's a Five Eyes operation.

Hon Judith Collins: No, it's not a Five Eyes operation.

PM: No, it's not. That's incorrect. I mean, there was up to 44 countries that were condemning the actions of Houthi. There have been a number of subsequent statements that have been made by different coalitions of countries. What we're doing here is doing something that—we're building on a longstanding commitment we've had since 2013 to ensure that there is peaceful security in those shipping lanes in the Middle East.

Media: The first statement you signed on to, I think, had 10 nations supporting, including Australia—back on the 12th, I think it was. Did that come from a request from either the US or UK?

PM: I'll let Winston talk to that.

Rt Hon Winston Peters: Well, in all these matters there are discussions between Governments, through Foreign Affairs and through the defence forces as well, and as to whether it came as a request or it came as a decision, having discussed the seriousness of the issue and the piracy involved, and also the hundreds of millions of people who are going to have their lives dramatically, adversely affected for the very worst, even to starvation, it was thought that some action should be taken, and it went with the view of the United Nations as well, and that's what we've done.

PM: We're also a country that stands up for our values, and our values here are about international law, about freedom of navigation, about making sure that there is a free flow of trade. Those are values that are important to us, and so for us this is the logical step.

Media: Prime Minister, just a bit of a logistical one. Are personnel actually being deployed overseas or is this a job that can be done from New Zealand?

PM: They're being deployed overseas.

Media: And as Prime Minister, how does that sit with you, deploying New Zealand Defence Force personnel overseas into a potentially dangerous environment?

PM: Well, I think, for myself and our Cabinet colleagues as we discussed it today, we understand the seriousness of what we're doing, but, actually, we also are proud that actually we have a responsibility as a country that actually believes in values around international law, that we're actually doing the right thing here. So we think we've got it right size. We think we've got a proportionate response. We think the personnel that we will send will add tremendous value and capability to the coalition, and we think we've got it right.

Media: And is six the limit or is there potential scope for that operation to be expanded with more Defence Force personnel deployed?

PM: Our proposal is six and, as I said, no later than 31 July.

Media: Did you consult the Opposition and did you ask for their support?

Rt Hon Winston Peters: No, we didn't consult the Opposition in that context because it was a position that they had already evinced themselves, some time back, on these matters and some of the statements they've made, and it being a limited engagement and one of, over the last 30 years, of 21 engagements such as this on a larger or smaller scale, we did not think it was required for us to do that.

Media: Mr Peters, you tweeted today about some comments coming out of the Israeli Government. How viable is a two-State solution in your view, given that repeated commitment from Israel?

Rt Hon Winston Peters: Well, it's our position as a country across different political parties over a long period of time, and of most other countries as well. And that's our view and will go on being our view, and that's what we want the solution to be, and now.

Media: Can you clarify what language you found concerning from the Israelis?

Rt Hon Winston Peters: Beg your pardon?

Media: Can you clarify specifically what language you call concerning from the Israelis?

Rt Hon Winston Peters: Well, it's rather obvious in the Prime Minister's statement that he did not see the two-State solution being viable. It was the bluntness of that statement which caused us to repeat what we've viewed and said for a long, long time.

Media: Given New Zealand's position, are you interested in exploring or considering at all New Zealand recognising Palestine as a State and developing that policy? Australia's doing the like.

Rt Hon Winston Peters: I beg your pardon?

Media: Are you considering at all, or would you consider, the Government recognising Palestine as a State?

Rt Hon Winston Peters: Well, look, you can make those sorts of theoretical, hypothetical statements as a Government or by way of a question, but the problem is there's got to be a consigned internationally recognised land for them. That's what the two-State solution means. That's the position that successive Governments have taken for decades in this country and it's still the position of the New Zealand Government today.

Media: But there is. There are borders.

PM: Sorry? Where's the question coming from?

Media: There already are internationally recognised borders for what the State of Palestine—you know, what land a State of Palestine would occupy. So why not recognise the State?

Rt Hon Winston Peters: Because the Prime Minister of Israel made a statement that was to the contrary of that. That's why we made our statement.

Media: The President of Russia has made many statements about what Ukraine's borders are or aren't, and we still obviously recognise Ukraine as a State within its internationally recognised borders. Why not the same for Palestine?

Rt Hon Winston Peters: If you want to have an international discussion about the geography of a nation, then go back on the map of Ukraine, and it's a far greater map than it was and is under the Russian definition of Ukraine today, but I don't think this is part of the discussion at this point in time.

Media: What is the difference between the recognition of borders here? There is a recognised border of Palestine. Why won't we recognise it as a State?

Rt Hon Winston Peters: One more time: it was the Prime Minister of Israel that said that he did not recognise the two-State solution, which other countries around the world do, and we were just reiterating our position.

Media: But further to that, I mean, there are a number of other countries that have been recognising Palestine as a State. It's seen elsewhere as a sort of a policy development that can contribute to creating a two-State solution. Do you see any room for that, for New Zealand to do that?

PM: Well, we haven't recognised Palestine as a State because, actually, there isn't actually—I would put it to you—a functioning Government there and an actual State in place. What we are very supportive of, and continue to be very supportive of, is the two-State solution. The comments by the Prime Minister of Israel, by other senior Ministers, have actually been incredibly unhelpful, suggesting that they don't actually see that as a viable pathway forward. That is the only pathway forward here. We want to see, you know, a cessation of hostilities in that region immediately, but for that to happen we have to get to a permanent sustainable ceasefire. For that to happen we need to see both Hamas and Israel be able to get around the table and actually kick off the Middle East peace process, as difficult as that may be with lots of complexity and lots of complex history in that conversation. So for us it's about making sure that we recognise that this military action and military conflict is not going to bring peace in this region. What is important is actually generating the two-State solution and getting back into the Middle East peace process.

Media: Just on the deployment again, and sorry if I'm getting you to answer the same question that occurred before, but will those personnel be doing anything operational—boarding ships or anything like that?

Hon Judith Collins: That's not what they're being deployed to do there—

PM: Not operational.

Hon Judith Collins: Their deployment is around the targeting—precision targeting—of strikes on military operations, and that is what their job is to do.

Media: So you're saying that our forces will be assisting the Americans to bomb Yemen?

Hon Judith Collins: No. Our forces—

Media: Well—if they're targeting?

Hon Judith Collins: No. Our forces will be assisting the Americans and others, such as the UK, to take out sites that are actually attacking peaceful ships that are trying to work through the Red Sea. This is a very important issue for New Zealand as a country that is most dependent on trade. This is absolutely crucial not only to our economy but also, as the Prime Minister said, to our principles around freedom of the sea. And so that's why we're doing that.

Media: What branch of the NZDF are these—what—six people coming from?

Hon Judith Collins: From the New Zealand Defence Force, full stop.

Media: What branch, specifically?

Hon Judith Collins: What are you asking?

Media: What part of the Defence Force are they coming from?

Hon Judith Collins: From the Defence Force itself, and I'm not going down branches. The Defence Force is the New Zealand Defence Force, which is why we have put that statement out.

Media: Would you categorise their role—would you categorise just the last few conflicts that New Zealand has been involved in? We've either been involved in a peacekeeping or a training initiative. Would you define what these troops are doing as either of those?

Hon Judith Collins: Well, I think it's really clear that that's not actually a correct summation of what our troops have done in the past. They've actually been involved in—in some cases—dealing with very difficult situations that are not only peacekeeping. But I think this is simply nothing more than the New Zealand Defence Force stepping up and doing its part in a way which is very discreet—six members, including, obviously, rules of engagement and legal assistance with them, legal adviser. They're not going to be doing anything that—I'm sure that we will all be very proud of.

Media: Right, but the definition of the missions—past—have been peacekeeping or training exercises. That's what everyone has stood at this podium and told us before—

PM: I'd just put it to you that I think it's an extension of what we've had, which is a long-standing history of actually defending freedom of navigation. We've had a team in the Middle East as part of the team combined CMF team—the Combined Maritime Forces—since 2013, making sure that these shipping lanes are secure and that commercial shipping is safe. That is an extension of what we're doing here. But what we've seen from the Houthis is actually totally unacceptable, and it's important that we actually are putting the right team with the right resources and the right capability that New Zealand can bring to our coalition partner to make sure that we get the analytics and the targeting right and actually do that under clear rules of engagement. And as a result, I think we should be very proud of that contribution.

Media: Do you see this deployment as an extension of the Israel Gaza conflict? Because the Houthis do.

PM: I have to say to you, I think you are absolutely wrong to conflate those two issues. We are standing up for values, very clearly here, about freedom of navigation. These are long-held beliefs of New Zealand for a long period of time. New Zealanders have engagement in the Middle East around peacekeeping and around making sure we have security in the Middle East, given how important it is to the world, and that's what we're doing here. So this is about Houthis taking action indiscriminately on commercial ships that actually are impacting the world and are going to cause a lot of pain and suffering around the world. So we want to make sure that we can work with our coalition like-minded partners to stand up

for the values that we believe very strongly in. And I think conflating the two issues is very unhelpful.

Media: Have you had official advice on the impact of prices of stuff as a result of this?

PM: Well, there's no doubt about it. I mean, in the sense of we have a situation where the Panama Canal is actually suffering drought conditions—I think something like 35 percent of shipping volume is actually down through that channel. As a result, it puts even more pressure on the Suez Canal and also, obviously, the Red Sea. Fifteen percent of global trade—it's about 10 percent of our exports, about 20 percent of our imports go to the UK, go to Europe, go to North Africa, and so it will have an impact on New Zealand. And we've all gone through a COVID experience where we've seen what disruption to supply chains can do. And, you know, in other parts of the world where food security is a major problem, as Winston—we talked about today in Cabinet—raised the point about the pain and suffering and starvation and food security issues that are going to exist for many countries around the world as a consequence of this.

Media: A barrel of oil is worth less than it was when the conflict began, so, you know, it's not showing up in the prices yet. Maybe you're on the wrong side of this conflict.

PM: I would just put it to you that we know where this goes, and we know that when we already have a huge number of—I think, 40 percent of shippers now are diverting away from the Red Sea and through the Suez. That's adding 10 to 12 days' worth of delivery, say, to a part of our world—to our part of the world—and that will inevitably lead to higher costs. But this is actually about values. It's about us standing up for things that we believe in, and we can either talk about them or we can actually do something about it as well and actually make sure that we put real capability alongside our words. And that's what we're doing here.

Media: Just back to the impact of prices, so have you had official advice on that?

PM: I haven't seen—no, I haven't seen official advice on what the inflation impact will be. But we've all seen the impacts of COVID and what that did to our supply chain. We know what the risks here are, having seen previous examples in the past.

Media: Why do you think the Houthis are attacking the ships?

Rt Hon Winston Peters: Look, if you add 15 days to a ship's travel, enormous costs are occasioned to it. This is not a flippant matter. Hundreds of millions of people are going to be suffering as a consequence—they already are. And all the international evidence says that. When you say have we got that advice, well that advice has been running large publicly for a long, long time.

Hon Judith Collins: *The Economist*—

Rt Hon Winston Peters: —and when all sorts of—what did you say?

Hon Judith Collins: I said, even in *The Economist*—

Rt Hon Winston Peters: Even *The Economist*—everybody else internationally has been saying this. Please read some international stuff and understand that we're part of the world too. And you can't just keep the peace; sometimes those who offend the peace have got to be stopped as offenders, and that's the stand we're making.

Media: Why do you think the Houthis are attacking the ships?

PM: There's been huge indiscriminate attacks on ships. We've had 31 nations impacted, I think—actually, 60 nations; 31 different attacks that have taken place. And what is obvious is that they try to run an argument, but it's not held up in facts. You know, there's been a really indiscriminate attack of commercial shipping through that lane.

Media: Why did they start doing it?

Rt Hon Winston Peters: Look, can I just answer the question? Look, this is not a new—it's been happening for a long, long time. But now they've got a reason for saying what they're doing. But they've been doing it for about three decades. And with reaction coming back from

mainly countries in the West, including allied countries of ours, there's nothing new about that.

Media: Will the intelligence that we're contributing towards the strikes—could those strikes take place in Yemen, or would it just be at sea?

Hon Judith Collins: Wherever they're needed to be. That's really clear.

Media: The Houthis have made threats against the Americans. [*Inaudible*] is following this. Are you concerned and have you taken any advice on whether joining up to this increases the threat level faced by New Zealanders domestically?

PM: What we understand is we're standing up for values that we believe very strongly in as a country. You can't just say the words; you actually have to follow it up and back it up at times. And that's what we're doing here.

Media: Just in terms of the terror threat, have you taken any advice or are you concerned that this action will lead to an increased risk of terrorism at home? Because that's what the argument the Houthis are making against the Americans—

Rt Hon Winston Peters: That's not an argument; that's the argument of a bully. That's the argument of a bully and we're not responding to that. In the interests of New Zealand, our role in the world, and a whole lot of people in the hundreds of millions of people around the world, we're doing something.

Media: But obviously if it does increase the terror threat, it might be a good idea to know about it before it—

PM: Yeah, look, there's a number of threats for New Zealanders across the world. Again, for any Kiwi travelling, I just say use the MFAT advisory services to make sure you understand what that threat level looks like.

Media: Do you think this actually increases that threat or lowers the threat?

PM: We don't know that. But what we can see is that, actually, you know, the world is a pretty unstable and volatile place at the moment. There are a number of theatres across the globe that actually present risk and danger and, as I say, for New Zealanders who are well travelled, make sure that check out the MFAT websites in particular.

Media: Prime Minister, I was just keen to move to the Treaty questions, but—

PM: Right, and so are there any last questions on, sorry, Audrey.

Media: Judith, the 12 currently deployed as the part of the Combined Maritime Force; are they taking part in anything to do with this security operation?

Hon Judith Collins: Not anything other than what they're already doing now, so I'm not aware of any suggestion from Defence that they would be taking part in this, other than what they're doing now.

PM: Yes, they stick with the same mission that they've had—thank you Judith; thank you, Winston.

Media: So, Prime Minister, what did you make of the hui ā motu in the weekend at Tūrangawaewae?

PM: Look, I thought it was very positive and very constructive. I'd spoken to the Māori King, obviously, earlier in the week. I'll actually have a further catch-up with him, hopefully, at Rātana tomorrow and do a bit more of a debrief, but it sounded like there was quite a good spirit.

Media: And what was the debrief given by Tama Potaka?

PM: Oh, just that was our observation across the piece, that it was, you know, actually a very positive and a very constructive hui.

Media: Can I just ask, on the number of people that arrived; it sort of well surpassed what was the estimate of people arriving. What do you make of 10,000 people showing up to this hui?

PM: Well, look, I mean, I think it was a positive and constructive hui, as I said, in terms of an opportunity to discuss where are Māori going, and what do they want to achieve, and what are their ambitions and aspiration, and I think it was a very, very, very useful session.

Media: It was quite a significant amount of people, though, is it not?

PM: Sure, yeah, and it says that people care and they care about where Māori are going and what their aspirations and ambitions are, and that's what we really want to be able to talk with Māori about and what we have been talking about, and my meetings one-on-one with, you know, iwi leaders or whether it's been in small groups of different iwi and different Māori organisations, we've talked consistently now for over a year and a half about the ways in which we can work together to deliver better outcomes for Māori. That's what we're going to be fixated on.

Media: What do you make of the leaking of the report into the Treaty's goal; the leaking of the report?

PM: Well, it was an internal Ministry of Justice document to secure a legislative bid for a future piece of paper that would ultimately come to Cabinet, but no Minister has been involved in that report; that's an internal Ministry of Justice issue.

Media: Prime Minister, can you absolutely rule out National voting for the Treaty Principles Bill after the first select committee?

PM: Well, look, we've got a very clear commitment in our coalition agreement between National and ACT, and our coalition Government commitment is that we will support ACT's Treaty Principles Bill to first reading, but there is no commitment to take it beyond that.

Media: You won't rule it out?

PM: Well, there is no commitment to take it beyond that and I'd just say, as the National leader, our position has been well understood for a long period of time and, you know, we have no intention or no commitment to support it beyond first reading.

Media: Can you be clear about that?

PM: Sorry?

Media: Can you be clear about that? No commitment or no intention or rule it out, like—

PM: Well, what I'd just say to you is there are, you know, two parts to this. The first is that we live in an MMP environment and a coalition agreement has been formed. That coalition Government commitment is to say that we will support the bill to first reading. That enables an aeration of the issues and a discussion of the issues through a select committee process. You know that there's been a longstanding National Party position against the referendum, as there's been a longstanding position from the ACT Party for a referendum. But our position as a National Party is that it's not something that we have an intention to support.

Media: A senior Cabinet Minister Chris Bishop told me this morning that it was his belief that the signatories to the Treaty—the Māori signatories—ceded sovereignty. Is that the view of this Government?

PM: Yeah, we're not relitigating sovereignty, yep.

Media: You've been clear that National has no intention to support the Treaty Principles Bill post first reading. You've also talked about the need for cost savings in the Public Service. What's the point in pouring a huge amount of money into a doomed bill?

PM: Well, look, what I'd just say to you is that we live in an MMP environment in this country and that requires us all to come together in coalition Governments and make compromises. There's been a very long-standing position from the ACT Party and its supporters and

members that it has wanted to advocate for a referendum on the Treaty principles and, likewise, there's been a long-standing position from the National Party that we don't support a referendum. The reality is that we've come to a compromise to enable an aeration of those issues through select committee process, but there is no commitment to support it beyond that; that is a compromise from both sides as we form a coalition Government.

Media: Are you comfortable with the amount of money being spent on it, and what is the reason that National doesn't want to vote for it in second reading?

PM: Well, look, I mean we talked about this year, all of last year which is that we think it is divisive and unhelpful. And what I'd say to you is that is our position—now speaking as the National Party leader. Equally, you know, David Seymour, as the ACT Party leader, has a different position, and he's entitled to that, and what we have found between the two of us is a compromise to say, look, we will have an aeration of these issues in the context of a select committee, but there is no commitment to support it beyond that.

Media: Te Pāti Māori have been throwing around words like “white supremacy” in terms of your Government. What do you make of that sort of language?

PM: Well, I outright reject it and I think it's entirely inappropriate. I think it's very offensive and I think it's very divisive and very unhelpful. And I think what's even disappointing is when you see political party leaders picking up on those statements and actually running with them again this morning as well. You know, our job is we are here because we want to make sure all New Zealanders do well. I want to see Māori thriving in this country, I want to see non-Māori thriving in this country, and that has been the conversation that I've had with Māori leaders up and down this country for the last year and a half now, is that under the last six years, Māori went backwards—there's no way to describe it any other way—and we want Māori going forwards in this country, and we're confident we can do that with them in partnership.

Media: Just looking ahead to Rātana tomorrow, what is it that you hope to achieve; what's going to be your message when you speak?

PM: Well, yeah, my message will be actually sort of laying up where we're coming from as a Government and how we want to work and partner with Māori to deliver improved outcomes for them. You know, we want to see more Māori kids attending school regularly, we want to see more Māori kids doing well in school, being able to access higher-paying jobs, being able to own more of their own homes. Those are the conversations that I've been involved with that I've found very constructive.

Media: Mr Luxon, the review of all legislation which, for reference, is to Treaty principles with, ultimately, the intention of removing them—has that begun?

PM: No. What we're talking about there is just making sure that when there is reference to Treaty principles, that it has an application to the legislation that is being proposed so that it's clearer for everybody that, actually, what's the engagement needed, what's the consultation needed, what's the interest that exists that we must address in the legislation.

Media: So who will carry out that review, and when will it begin?

PM: Ah, well, it's not on our 100-day plan at this point in time, and we'll work that out in the coming months.

Media: But it was agreed with New Zealand First and there's an—

PM: Sorry?

Media: It was agreed with New Zealand First?

PM: Absolutely.

Media: And there's an intention to ultimately remove those references where it's not relevant?

PM: No, to make sure that where there is relevancy for the Treaty in a particular piece of legislation, that we're very clear about what that relevancy is and what that link is.

Media: Do you see that as a point of contention with Māori, with iwi, as represented in the recent hui, for example—*[Inaudible]*?

PM: Well, there was a lot of conversation about Māori ambition and aspiration going forward in this country, and about, actually, how do they get to do better in this country, and those are the things that we want to work together with them on.

Media: Do you think there could be an outcome where we do away with Treaty principles altogether?

PM: Again, you know, our position's been very clear: we're going to support a Treaty Principles Bill to select committee, and there's no commitment to go further.

Media: That bill takes a particular view on the Treaty principles. Does the National Party—or, does your Government have any interest in changing the principles themselves, the Government's principles?

PM: Well, there will be an aeration of those issues through a select committee process. As I said to you earlier, there's no commitment beyond that.

Media: The leaked report had highlighted the risks to Government now and in the long term.

PM: Sorry, can you say that again?

Media: The leaked report highlighted the risks to Government now and in the long term if the bill takes place. So will you be taking that on board as one of the reasons why you're not going to support; or are you going to support even though you were highlighting the risks?

PM: Well, I'll just say to you, the document that you're referencing was an internal Ministry of Justice memo that was sent to other departments as preparation for—as is everybody across all Government departments at the moment, we're getting together what we call our legislative bids. Everyone is making their case for what legislation they want to actually bring and then how we sequence that over the course of our term of Government. And so that's really what that was about. I wouldn't say that those comments are representative of any one of our Ministers in the Cabinet.

Media: No, it was advice from an official within the ministry on risks to Government.

PM: Yes, and it was a legislative bid designed from Ministry of Justice to talk to other Government departments in order to secure a bid for a Treaty Principles Bill to come as a proposal that Cabinet would accept and think about taking forward.

Media: Prime Minister, Minister Seymour said it was possible that an exposure draft might be put out before the first debate of that Treaty Principles Bill. Would you support that?

PM: Again, we'll look at that and we'll discuss that further as a Cabinet.

Media: And can you say how, if at all, the hui and the things discussed at the hui at Tūrangawaewae Marae on Saturday has changed or influenced your thinking about your kōrero tomorrow at Rātana?

PM: No, it hasn't, because, you know, my conversation with iwi leaders and Māori leaders up and down the country over the last year and half—in fact, since I became leader of the National Party. It's one of the things I just started quietly doing, is just meeting on weekends or regular telephone calls—everywhere I visited I'd go off and meet with iwi leaders or Māori organisations doing great delivery of public services, for example, on the ground locally and regionally.

You know, all of our conversation has been grounded in, you know, that we actually are a party where Māori have done well under National-led Governments. That is our intention. We are very much ruthlessly focused on outcomes, because we believe this country needs a

turn-around, and it's going in the wrong direction, and the last six years have not been good for Māori in terms of Māori outcomes across the economy, across crime, across health, across education, across everything. And so we want to work together with them to be able to do that, and we believe in localism and devolution as a party. Many of, you know, Māori believe in the same. That's tied to self-determination, so there's lots of commonality of values, and our conversations have been about how do we work together to deliver housing, how do we deliver—you saw a good example recently, you know, about how do we use, you know, Māori health organisations to drive immunisation rates of Māori, sitting at 71 percent. The rest of the country's at 82, and we've got a target closer to 90 percent, so how do we work together to use those health organisations to deliver better, improved outcomes?

Media: Are you fully expecting to face quite strong challenges on the marae tomorrow?

PM: Well, I think that's what we've always expected. You know, I've been to Rātana last year. I've been to Waitangi several times, even before I came to politics, and that's been my observation is that's the place where we should have challenge and provocation and stimulation, and that's OK. You know, we are a country that has a diverse set of views. The day we all think exactly the same, we've got a big, big problem in this country. But it doesn't mean that we can't go forward together, acknowledging that we will have differences with each other as well. So that's what I'm focused on is: how do we take this country of ours forward? How do we keep it united, acknowledging that we will have differences of opinion and that's OK?

Media: Would you consider meeting with the families of survivors and victims from the Tangiwai wide disaster about their plea for a national memorial?

PM: Look, it hasn't been something that's come on to my agenda. I'm not aware of it. It's something I'm happy to look into.

Media: You're open to the idea of meeting with them?

PM: Happy to look into.

Media: And just on a quite different note, a question from a colleague, your face has appeared on some advertisements which are running on the porn website Pornhub. They've registered your name as a domain name for pornography. Are you slightly worried about it, or a bit of a harmless gag?

PM: Well, I just say to you, I just was informed of that as I was coming into the room. What I'd just say to you is it's obviously fake. It's an issue for the National Party to pick up. Jo Moir. Sorry, I'll come to Jo. Sorry, guys, Jo hasn't asked a question. I want to go to Jo, and I'll come back to you, I promise.

Media: Have you thought about how you're going to juggle your National leader hat with your Prime Minister hat when it comes to Rātana and Waitangi? Because as we've seen today, you know, things have been put to you in terms of ACT's intentions around Treaty principles, and you will be asked questions at both of those commemoration celebrations about the future of your Government with you as Prime Minister. But there are differences of opinion, there are differences of policy, and there are different intentions from, for example, ACT leader David Seymour around some of that stuff. So how are you planning to go about answering those questions as Prime Minister, or are you just going to have to differentiate and speak, I guess, as the National leader at these events?

PM: No, I want to speak as the Prime Minister of New Zealand. I think that's really important, and that's what I try and do, and that's what I'm doing most of the time. It's when we get into an issue like this that you want to discuss a little bit about how have we got to the positions we've got to, I'm talking about, you know, as the National Party, what our long-held position on an issue like the Treaty principles referendum has been. But as Prime Minister, I'm representing our coalition Government, and the reality is, as I've said before, you know, we have not got a commitment to support it beyond the first reading. But I'm going to talk as Prime Minister of New Zealand, because, you know, we have a fantastic country. We have

so much potential ahead of us and so much more that we can do, but we are going to have to work together in this country. And it means that we may not agree, as I said before, on 100 percent of things, but if we can find that 70 percent or 80 percent of what we agree on—and let's get to work and get some outcomes so we can improve Kiwis' daily lives, that's why we're here. And I think that's what I've met with—you know, the Māori leaders that are actually wanting to do the right thing by their people and have got some incredible innovation. I spent two hours with Ngāi Tahu last week, with all of their governance and all of their senior management team, going through their programmes and their story of what they have achieved. That is phenomenal how they have integrated economic, social, and environmental outcomes, how they have worked together to be able to deliver better health and wellbeing and prosperity for their iwi. And I want to see that on a bigger scale.

Media: And that actually speaks to the supplementary question, because: do you feel like you are perhaps receiving some of the criticism and the flak as Prime Minister? You're clearly having conversations with Māori leaders, have continued to do that throughout your time as Opposition leader. David Seymour, for example, isn't coming to Rātana and, I believe, has made some comment about it being some event held by a church. So there are differences of opinion there, and are you, as Prime Minister, copping the flak and criticism for the other party leaders' policies? And how do you manage that, and how are you planning to respond to that?

PM: Well, I am responding to it by speaking as the Prime Minister of New Zealand, and I appreciate that we are in a coalition Government. As I said to you from day one, it is different from what may have come before. It means that we have three parties—you know, we are three party leaders, we have different personalities, we have different profiles, but what is important is that we are tight on the important stuff. And whether you're in the ACT Party, the New Zealand First Party, or the National Party, all of us want to see improved outcomes for Māori—that is genuine. That is the motivation for why people have worked so incredibly hard before Christmas. It's why, when you go and sit in a Cabinet conversation, it's incredibly exciting seeing the power and potential of that team discussing the issues that really are the things that are meant to move us forward.

Media: But are you comfortable speaking to, for example, the ACT Party policies? Because the intention there is far different to yours. The Treaty principles is a perfect example of that. So are you genuinely comfortable, as Prime Minister, speaking to and defending—because, yes, it does come under the three-party coalition, but that's not what you believe in or what your party is intending to do.

PM: But what our party has done is sign up to a coalition Government, and we've all had to make compromises along the way, in the same way I'm sure the ACT Party have made a lot of compromises, the New Zealand First Party has made a lot of compromises, and the National Party has had to make some compromises too. But what we've got is a Government that I can tell you is focused on rebuilding the economy, restoring law and order, delivering better health and public services, and that is, Jo, what unites us. And I just say to you: yes, there will be differences. I get that; there will be. But what I'm saying to you is I think, you know, at the core of what we've got in this Government is massive alignment around the things that matter most to New Zealanders. And yes, we will have differences of opinion. Yes, we will express things differently, as I've said from the get-go, but don't misunderstand that as a lack of focus. Because if we're all the same and we're all sounding the same, that is not success either, and I think—

Media: But Ngāi Tahu, Tainui, and Ngāpuhi do not want the Treaty bill. They say that that will put them backwards on everything that you were saying is aspirational in the kōrero that you've had with these iwi. So how are you managing to kōrero with them, knowing full well that they don't want this bill, but you're supporting it to first reading, and you've not stated categorically that you will vote it out?

PM: Well, I think we've been very clear about our position both in a National Party sense and also our coalition Government sense. If you look at our agreement, what we're saying is

that there is an ACT Treaty Principles Bill that all three parties have agreed to support through the first reading, but there is no commitment to take it beyond that, and so that is a pretty clear position. And I appreciate, you know, that is the reality of coalition Governments in an MMP environment, where each party has its own particular policies and programmes that it feels very passionate about, and we need to find a way to accommodate that. I'm sure ACT didn't get everything they wanted, in the same way National didn't get everything it wanted, but that's the point of the system that we have.

We are in an MMP world. Look at how it works all around the world where there are other MMP systems throughout Western Europe, for example—you know, you have Governments that take 10 months to form a Government that then fall over very quickly. We've worked incredibly hard to give the country stability on the core things that matter. Yes, there will be differences of opinion. We'll find a way and a mechanism to manage that, but on the important and the core stuff—that's what we're focused on.

Media: [*Inaudible*] that you will not vote for this past the first reading, then why will you not state categorically to Māori and the rest of the nation that you will not vote to pass first reading?

PM: Well, we've said that. There is no commitment or no intention to support beyond the first reading. I don't know how to be more clearer than that.

Media: Prime Minister, will you commit to keeping the special envoy to the Christchurch Call?

PM: Look, I had a chance to catch up with Dame Jacinda Ardern before Christmas. We caught up in Auckland, the two of us, and I wanted to understand the Christchurch Call and the work that it had undertaken and what it had achieved. That is a process that we'll work through in the next few months, about whether it now moves to a different level and how that may take place.

Media: What did you take away from that meeting?

PM: Look, there's been some good work done with respect to algorithms with tech companies, in particular. There's been a very good community that's been formed together, but actually it's probably also at a stage where it needs to move to the next level, and as to what shape that takes and what form that takes, that's something that we'll be in discussion about.

Media: Did you at any point tell her that she would be removed or that the job would or could be disestablished?

PM: No.

Media: Prime Minister, on the Treaty Principles Bill, will you stake your job on National not voting for the Treaty Principles Bill after the first reading?

PM: Well, look, I've been very clear: in a coalition Government, there is no commitment to support it beyond first reading. The National Party's position has been very well understood for a long period of time; there is no intention or commitment to support it beyond first reading.

Media: The Clerk of the House, David Wilson, says the 6.5 percent budget cut that the Government has asked his office to make will limit the work of Parliament. Constitutional law experts say it's constitutionally concerning that the executive can defund the legislature. What do you make of that?

PM: That's a very disingenuous way of presenting it; I'd just put it to you. What we're saying here is we have a previous Government that increased Government spending by 80 percent and to say that there is not any waste or any reprioritisation or better use or targeting of money to get the same or better outcome is just not true.

Media: The Office of the Clerk, though, has not gone up by 80 percent. Its budget was basically flat with inflation since 2017. They still have 120 MPs to serve. You've worked with those staff yourself.

PM: They're excellent staff.

Media: They have a very important accountability function for this democracy to work, so why is the Government requiring them to make cuts.

PM: Because we're asking all Government agencies and all Government departments to look at their spending and to identify whether there are any potential savings they can make along the way, and that'll be contingent upon all CEOs of every Government agency and department to look into that, including the Clerk of the House. Once we've had all those inputs in, then we will move through and make those savings.

Media: Before the election, in your tax plan you identified 21 departments that you'd be asking to make that average of 6.5 percent cut. There was no mention of the Office of the Clerk in there or any others. Is this now a Government-wide request?

PM: Look, we've been very clear. We want to be able to make sure that we generate a 6.5 percent saving across Government agency spending. Some Government agencies, when we get them to look into their data and their numbers are actually going to be generating a lot more, others maybe a lot less. But on average we want to be able to come out of the exercise delivering the savings we've talked about.

Media: Do you have any reason to suggest there is any sort of fat on the bones, I guess, in Parliamentary Service?

PM: I don't know. That's all we're asking—for them to interrogate; to go back and look at their resourcing. Have they got the optimum structures in place? Have they got the right people in the right places? Have they improved and made that as efficient an operation as it possibly can be? It's not an unreasonable assumption to ask when you've had 15,000 more people added to the Public Service, you've had an 80 percent increase in Government spending, you've had Government borrowing go from \$5 billion to almost \$100 billion and collectively as a country we have absolutely nothing to show for it. Every outcome has gone backwards, and so I'm not trying to be political about it. I'm just saying that is the state of affairs. That is the reality of where we are in this country. If you don't confront the brutal facts of your reality, you don't have hope and a plan that get to a different or a better place. You've got to face up that, because you can't just keep increasing Government spending by 80 percent, adding another 15,000 public servants, and still not getting our kids to school regularly or getting our academic results in the right place or having people have access to healthcare.

Media: Just on the bigger picture on this huge discussion that's now emerged about the Treaty principles, you campaigned on uniting the country, so how troubling is it now to be part of this huge discussion?

PM: Well, I think what you saw, even through the hui, actually, over the weekend, as I said, was positive and constructive, Māori coming together to have a strategic conversation about where they actually want to go in this country and what the opportunities are for them to do well and to do better. That is exactly the same spirit of our Government which is we've come here to say, "Look, we've got to be better than this. We have to be better than this. We can do better than this." So we are working incredibly hard to make sure that we can do exactly that. We want to build a country, New Zealand, to be one of the very, very best small advanced countries on Earth, and for that to happen, we need to do a whole heap of work around our economy so we can be more productive, have higher wealth, have higher incomes, higher jobs. We need to make sure we continue to make sure we've got a good social contract and social cohesion with each other and we obviously do our job around environmental emissions.

Media: And do you think at the other side of this that New Zealand will be more unified than it is now?

PM: I think my job and when I leave this job is to make sure New Zealand is more unified than what it is from when I inherited it. And let's be clear: over the last six years there's been a rising level of disunity in New Zealand, and so our job is to make sure that we can become unified. But don't mistake unity for us all sounding and being exactly the same. That's something very different. What we want is unity of purpose where we're all wanting to go forward in this country to actually realise the great potential that we have. And I think something like 2040, 200 years since the birthplace of our nation, is a really good rallying cry for us to start to think about what kind of country do we want to be in 2040. How do we want that relationship to be with each other, how do we want our economy to be, how do we want our society to be, what do we want to be achieving in an environmental sense? So there's a lot of—you know, that's exciting work, and that's what we've been enjoying getting into and let's all continue to do so. And we'll work with partners to do it.

Media: Do you think you can shepherd this discussion through without things getting really harmful to New Zealand?

PM: Well, there will be strong voices on all sides of any debate that we have in this country. You've seen it already—we've just had a conversation about public services. It's clear in Wellington here, there's many people that think what we've got is fantastic—they've been doing swimmingly well apparently and delivering superbly well. Well, we disagree very strongly with that. We don't think that's the case and so there will be strong differences of opinion. But don't connote that as that we're not unified or that we can't walk across the room and talk to each other even if we hold very different views to each other.

I just want to say to you, you know, I've lived and worked all around the world and what I watch is increased polarisation in many liberal democracies across the world. And we actually have a choice here in New Zealand to actually say, "We can hold different views from each other. We can be respectful of each other without throwing labels and names and language and words around at each other." But it requires us to walk across the room and at least have a conversation, even if we disagree with the other person, to do that. And if we keep that up—which is our Kiwi tradition and our New Zealand way—I think we can actually have a great future in this country and do incredibly well.

Media: Just on that, Prime Minister, I mean you keep calling the hui "positive" and "constructive"—and it was, definitely. But are you able to acknowledge that it was inspired by and mobilised because of your Government and the policies that you're intending to put through?

PM: I disagree. I think it's also been a chance—

Media: It was literally in the Māori King's proclamation.

PM: No. In my conversations with Kingi Tūheitia, you know, it's really an opportunity to come together as Māoridom and actually bring Māoridom together in the spirit of unity to align around what it is that they want, and for us to come together as a new Government. It's an entirely appropriate time to say, "OK, well, what do we need to do here? How do we solve a problem around Māori education?"

Media: Sure, but you're redefining it now in your terms. What they have said is that they are aghast at what this Government is planning to do, particularly to the Treaty. Can you not acknowledge that?

PM: I'll just say to you there were five breakout sessions over the course of the hui. There was a range of topics discussed. One of them was around the Treaty. I understand and hear the concerns around that, but I'm trying to be really clear about: we are not changing the Treaty of New Zealand—you know, the Treaty of Waitangi. What I've said very clearly is we are not rewriting the Treaty of Waitangi; we are not unwinding Treaty settlements. We're going to continue to honour them and make sure our obligations are fully held up. What we

are saying is that we can, you know, work with the Treaty but it doesn't mean we're going to have co-governance of public services. It doesn't mean that we'll be undermining "one person, one vote". We can continue to do that. So, you know, my view very clearly is that I hear the hui conversation. I think it was very positive; it was very constructive. It's actually a good starting point for us to continue the dialogue to say, "Where are we going together and what are we going to do about it?"

Media: There are presumably two aspects to the Treaty Principles Bill. One is the referendum, which you say you oppose. But there is also the question of redefining—or defining—the principles of the Treaty, and the bill would do that. Would National be in favour of legislating to define the principles of the bill without a referendum?

PM: Our National Party policy has been, "No".

Media: So no principles legislation at all?

PM: Correct.

Media: The Treaty bill, though, redefines the articles of the Treaty. They are saying the chieftainship for all New Zealand to be maintained as opposed to—which null and voids the rangatiratanga, the kotahitanga, they state, for all New Zealanders, as opposed to the kotahitanga advocated by Māori. So they have redefined the original intent of those articles that were also defined within the court system. So that is what they're opposing, and you are accepting those changes to that bill, which undermines what you're actually saying.

PM: What we're saying is we're committing to actually let an ACT Treaty Principles Bill go to first reading and a select committee where there'll be an aeration of those issues and a discussion exactly along the lines, I imagine, that you've just talked about now, and what we have is no commitment to support it beyond that. OK. Last question—sorry.

Media: Sorry, can I just clarify: on the Christchurch Call, what do you mean, literally, when you say "moving to a different level"?

PM: Well, what I mean is: look, it's five years since Christchurch—coming up to five years. The work of the Christchurch Call has been important in terms of making sure that the tech companies, in particular, are managing their content and they're using technology and algorithms behind the scenes to do that. There has been some good success of actually stopping other events, but it's truly a global platform, and so the question for us is: like, well, where does it go to next? And so, as a new Government coming in, that's the questions that we're asking, and that has started the conversation with Dame Jacinda the other day.

Media: Do you expect that the future of the Christchurch Call, from a New Zealand perspective, that that looks like not having a special envoy and not having Dame Jacinda Ardern involved?

PM: Again, we'll have those conversations over the course of the next six months with her and with the team.

Media: Is that your time frame? So when do expect to make a decision on her role as special envoy?

PM: Well, again, we didn't discuss that, because, you know, I asked her to carry on, and she was very happy to do so. But what we're discussing is: how does it scale up in a way that actually can drive and have more impact? And there's some different thinking that we might want to look at and discuss before we come forward with that.

Media: Well, what's some of that "different thinking"?

PM: I'm not going to get into that now, but suffice to say, you know, there's an opportunity for us having built a large community there through the Christchurch Call to make sure that it continues with its work, and we just want to make sure it's sustainable and it's got an ability to do that.

Media: When you say “different thinking”, does Dame Jacinda Ardern and yourself have different views on where the Christchurch Call should go?

PM: No, no, no. We had a number of—we had a conversation, actually, just after the election, and we met in person just before Christmas. You know, we’ve been—you know, I’ve been very supportive of her and her work there and the actual Christchurch Call. We’re just both asking the same question which is, where does it go to next?

Media: How long did you extend her term for?

PM: Sorry?

Media: How long did you extend her term for?

PM: Ah, well, it wasn’t bounded; it was just about her continuing on. Sorry, Jo. Last question to Jo Moir. She deserves it. Hey, congratulations.

Media: Thank you. You have said a lot today about no commitment beyond the select committee process. No one’s going to make assumptions about the select committee process, and there could be a billion different things that come out of that select committee process, so you can’t actually wholeheartedly rule anything out, because you don’t know what the select committee process is going to generate, do you?

PM: All I can say—

Media: I mean, that’s factually correct; you don’t know what will come out of the select committee process.

PM: All I can say to you very clearly is that we’ve got a coalition agreement. What it says is that we’re going to support their bill—the ACT bill—through to first reading, and there’s no commitment to support it beyond that. I don’t know how I can be any clearer than that.

Media: You’re not making any assumptions about what the select committee process will deliver, though, are you? Because that, I mean, that would be quite wrong for you—

PM: Correct. No, we want to have the aeration of those issues, and that’s what we’ve committed to do, but as I said to you, there’s no commitment to support it beyond that. All right, team, thanks so much.

Media: The Government has until the end of January to respond to the Waitangi Tribunal—

PM: I’ll catch up with you tomorrow, do you mind? I’ve got to keep moving. Thank you.

conclusion of press conference