

POST-CABINET PRESS CONFERENCE: MONDAY, 19 FEBRUARY 2024
HANSARD TRANSCRIPT

PM: Good afternoon, everybody. I have to say, with the deadline rapidly approaching for this coalition Government's first 100 days, we are making good progress. Some 27 of the 49 action points on that list have now been completed, and this week in the House we continue that work. Those areas of work include bills around rebuilding the economy, easing the cost of living, restoring law and order, and delivering better public services. With me today is our social development and employment Minister, Louise Upston, to talk about one of our Government's other priority areas.

Today, we're announcing that Cabinet has agreed on the early actions this Government will take to support more people into work and break the shackles of welfare dependency that has trapped far too many people on benefits under the previous Government. Minister Upston has written to the Ministry of Social Development setting out our Government's expectations that all benefit sanctions are applied to people who refuse to comply with their obligations to prepare for and look for work. MSD will be required to report back regularly to the Government on its use of sanctions so that we can be sure that they are working as part of the tools we need to help move people off welfare and into work.

This Government inherited a country in decline, and as you heard in my state of the nation speech yesterday, this will require some hard decisions to repair. But we are also a Government that is prepared to make those hard decisions. And it is appalling that the previous Government, frankly, let the situation slide to the point where work-ready job seekers are now projected to spend an average of 13 years on a benefit, and that teenagers who go on to welfare will become trapped there for an average of 24 years of their working life. Putting that into perspective, a teenager who becomes trapped on welfare now may not get their first job until they're 40 because of how broken the welfare system has become under Labour. So the cost of this is significant, both in terms of the social harm that a life on welfare can have and then also the actual cost of that ongoing support. Current modelling shows young people who spend almost their entire working life on a main benefit could end up costing the taxpayer nearly \$1 million each in future payments. We cannot and we will not accept that as a future for our young people.

The welfare system under this Government will continue to support job seekers who can work into work and make it easier for people to stay on track with their obligations. We will back hard-working people who get up at the crack of dawn to open a corner dairy or to milk cows so they can raise their families and provide them with greater opportunities. And we will back those people who stand up and say they aren't prepared to live life on a benefit and are prepared to put their best foot forward in search of a job. We want to know that we will back them strongly. But there also needs to be consequences for those who knowingly abuse the support that they received from taxpayers by refusing to do their bit and to deliver on their obligations. And with that, I'll hand over to Minister Upston to make a few more remarks.

Hon Louise Upston: Thank you, Prime Minister. I'm pleased to announce that we are also taking the first steps towards more regular monitoring and support for people on jobseeker benefits. From June, MSD will begin holding work check-ins that people will be required to attend if they've been on the jobseeker benefit for six months. MSD will proactively book job seekers into these group check-ins for those who don't already have a dedicated case manager. This is expected to result in an additional 2,500 job seekers each month having a work-testable activity to check in on what they have been doing. These will be people who MSD currently has less visibility of in terms of whether they are regularly applying for jobs. These check-ins will make sure job seekers are taking adequate steps to find employment and they are getting the correct support from MSD to help them overcome any challenges they face.

This is an early step we are taking towards resetting the welfare system to be more proactive about helping job seekers into work. This will include mandatory reapplication for jobseeker support every six months, greater use of community organisations to provide job coaching and other support, proper needs assessments for job seekers to overcome their barriers to employment, a traffic light system that makes it clear what their obligations are, new non-financial sanctions. Action will be taken against those who repeatedly fail to comply with their work obligations. MSD's front-line staff do excellent work in finding job opportunities for people who sometimes have very challenging circumstances. But I believe the previous Minister set the tone for a lighter touch to benefit sanctions by saying they needed to be used—and I quote—“sparingly and as a last resort.”

I believe this has hindered MSD's efforts to shift some people off welfare and into work. Remaining on a benefit has become the rational choice for far too many people, with 70,000 more people now on jobseeker support compared to when National left office six years ago, and about 40,000 more people have been receiving this support for a year or more. I don't think it was kind of the last Government to abandon beneficiaries to a life of handouts. Nor is it fair on hard-working taxpayers who expect to see their money spent wisely. We know that having a job is the best way for people to lift themselves and their families out of hardship. There is significant evidence that shows employment leads to a better way of life for people in terms of their financial stability, social connectedness, better health outcomes, and greater opportunities for themselves and their children. It is right that our welfare system acts as a safety net for those who need it, but that support comes with certain responsibilities. And with that, I'll pass back to you, Prime Minister.

PM: Thanks, Louise. Look, in terms of the House, before we open it up for any questions, this week we've got the third reading of the pseudoephedrine bill. We've also got the repeal of section 27 reports—the funding of that—and also the repeal of the Auckland regional fuel tax. As you know, they are projects that we've signalled very strongly in our 100-day plan. As a consequence, the House will be in urgency on Tuesday and Wednesday.

In terms of my movements, I'll be in the House Tuesday and Wednesday. On Thursday, I'll be heading to Christchurch for the 13th anniversary of the Christchurch earthquake, and also to actually thank our first responders dealing recently with the Port Hills fires that we've seen. And I just have to say, having watched that and had regular briefings throughout the course of every day for the last six days, we have been incredibly well served by FENZ and our front-line firefighters in particular, and I think they've done an exceptionally good job, so I'm looking forward to spending some time with them. And then on Saturday I'll be at the Bluegreens conference in Paihia. And with that, happy to take your questions.

Media: Have you got any figures about how many people so far are refusing to comply with their current obligations? You were saying at the beginning that it's a big problem.

PM: Yeah, look, what we know right now is that there's been a 57 percent increase in the number of people on jobseeker benefits, right? It's gone up 70,000 people over the course of the last six years. At the same time, we know there's been about a 58 percent reduction in sanctions actually being applied, and so the gap between the two is actually pretty profound. All we're saying here is, look, the vast majority of people on jobseeker will actually be compliant and actually upholding their obligations to look for work, to train for work, to put themselves into a better position for a job. As for the people that aren't following up on those obligations, we need to make sure that we're following through on that.

Media: But how many people is that currently? I mean, you've got a target here—what's the number of people you're talking about?

PM: Well, it's really based off forecasting—and because it hasn't been happening, it's difficult to identify particularly. But what it is is making sure that everybody understands in New Zealand you have a responsibility and you also have rights, and your right is that, yes, you get helped out when you need it, but you have a big responsibility to make sure you're holding up your obligations. I think it will be quite a small amount of people, but, as a result,

we need to send a message very clearly: the sanctions that already exist in law today are to be enforced.

Media: How much of this is actually based on evidence?

PM: Well, we've got great evidence, haven't we? We've just seen a Government, after six years at record levels of unemployment, record levels of worker shortages, actually increase the number of people on a jobseeker benefit by almost 70,000 people—up 58 percent—and we've also seen, at the same time, sanctions coming down. So we know that what has been happening hasn't been working.

Media: Sorry to interrupt, but what evidence is there that sanctions actually work? In 2018, MSD actually said it's pretty inconclusive as to whether they work, and actually lesser penalties in New Zealand could potentially be effective, but harsher ones are not effective. So how does that square with what you're saying?

PM: Yeah, well, I'll let Lou talk to that. We've got evidence from 2010 and beyond.

Hon Louise Upston: So the MSD evidence from February 2010 draws on some of the OECD evidence as well, that actually says the use of sanctions and the threat of sanctions does actually improve work exits. That's what we're focused on. We want to see more of those who are currently on the jobseeker benefit in work, and we'll take a number of steps, including making sure they meet their obligations, to do that.

Media: But that's different—so the 2018 evidence doesn't say that. So are you—

Hon Louise Upston: So the 2010 evidence does actually say that the use of and the threat of sanctions—

Media: So you're relying on older evidence?

Hon Louise Upston: Yeah, and as the Prime Minister said, the current data that we have around jobseeker numbers and the decline of use of sanctions gives up a pretty good steer.

PM: Let me give you two key numbers that you need to understand, right? How on earth can you be on a jobseeker benefit and your average time on a jobseeker benefit has gone from 10½ years to 13 years under the last Government? On the same hand, you've actually got young people receiving benefit payments who are now languishing on benefits for 24 years on average. That is up over 50 percent in three years, right? So what we've been doing is not working, and it comes back to a very simple principle of rights and responsibilities. And all we're saying is, look, the vast majority of beneficiaries are doing a great job, they're holding up their end, they're doing their obligations, but for those that refuse, I'm sorry but we're not going to be apologetic about making sanctions come into play.

Media: I appreciate that but why so aggressively pursue sanctions now when there's no evidence and we're in a cost of living crisis?

PM: Because we don't believe that that kind of attitude, you know, with all respect, that you've expressed is actually acceptable—that, actually, we're going to consign people to a life languishing on welfare. We're not doing that in this Government. I'm sorry; it's not going to happen. We're going to do everything we can to make those young people get set up for work. We're going to support them to do that, but, actually, people who are actually on jobseeker benefit, they are deemed by the Government to be able to work, can work, should be working, on a pathway to work. That's why they're on that benefit. It's not supported living. It's not sole parent benefits. It's purely jobseeker benefits. We have lived in a country that has generated low levels of unemployment and massive worker shortages and as a result we've put 70,000 more people on a benefit. That is utterly, utterly unacceptable.

Media: Have you done any modelling as to how many sanctions should be applied under your model? So there was 60,000 in 2017. Is that the level that you want it at?

PM: Well, it would be a good start. I mean, what've we've seen is a 58 percent reduction in sanctions over the last six years. At the same time, we've seen a 57 percent growth in the actual number of people on jobseeker benefits. So that's a good place to start, but the message that we need to send back to MSD is to actually say, "Hey, listen. We want you to be applying the current set of legislation that exists in law today"—that the previous Government said, "Hey, listen. Back off; it's going to be quite permissive. Let it just go; be a bit loose." We're going to say to you, "Sorry, actually, we expect those obligations to be upheld."

Media: So 60,000 is a bare minimum of sanctions that you—

PM: Well, I'm just saying to you, previously we had a situation where you saw, you know, higher levels of sanction being imposed; at the same time, you saw lower levels of people actually on jobseeker benefits. What we've seen over the last six years, where we've seen a massive spike of people on jobseeker, we've seen unemployment trending down, that's not acceptable.

Media: Given those with disabilities and significant impairments currently fall under that jobseeker category as well, what sanctions are going to be applied against them? Are you doing some sort of a carve-out? How's that going to work?

Hon Louise Upston: Yeah, so those—as you'll be aware, those who are on the jobseeker benefit with health condition and disability are deemed to be ready for work within a two-year period. They don't have the same work obligations as those who are work-ready. Their obligations might be to look for a few hours' work. Their obligations might be in training or work preparation. But we don't want to wait for the two years before we start to provide the support that they need to get back into employment, and that's why we will focus on job seekers across the board, but absolutely there are different obligations for people who have health conditions and disabilities.

Media: Because there are those with permanent disabilities, and there has been examples in the past where they have had sanctions applied against them, so there is presumably going to be some good checks on that not happening, right?

Hon Louise Upston: So the regime that we are talking about today is for job seekers, and that is our focus. We have seen far too many people go on to the jobseeker benefit and they're staying for longer. This policy and the regime and my expectation with MSD is very clear: it is about job seekers.

Media: Would you look at separating those two categories back out again so that the sickness and disability benefit was dealt with in a different system and all of that focus on the job seeker stuff that you guys want to do could be more targeted to people that can immediately get to work?

Hon Louise Upston: So let me be clear: there is the supported living payment, who have permanent disabilities. This policy is not about them. This policy is about job seekers, and those who are work-ready have different obligations to be finding work now.

Media: Yet there are also people in the jobseeker—so there used to be the sickness benefit as well, right? As well as the supported living—

Hon Louise Upston: No, no—no, the jobseeker benefit was the old unemployment benefit. The sickness benefit is now the supported living payment. They are two separate issues. This policy focuses on job seekers, whether they are work-ready—that's the primary focus. But, for those who have health conditions and disabilities, where they have been deemed to be ready or able to work within a two-year time frame, I think it's really important that Work and Income start working with them now. I don't want to leave them sitting there for another two years and not start their steps, but their obligations are different.

Media: Can I just clarify: sole parent beneficiaries also have work-ready obligations. Will this apply to them?

Hon Louise Upston: This focus is the jobseeker benefit.

Media: No focus on sole parent—

PM: Not sole parent, not supported living, just jobseeker.

Media: Minister, you've also said that you're concerned of the impact of sanctions on children. How will you ensure that children won't go without?

Hon Louise Upston: So we're not changing the existing sanctions regime in this first step; what we are saying is we want the current graduated sanctions regime to be fully utilised. So that means no change to the 50 percent reduction if there are children in a household. What we want to see is parents comply when they are given notice that they're at threat of a reduction of their benefit—that they take steps to comply, and that means that there is no action taken on them. We want to see parents in work; it's better for them and better for their kids.

Media: How do you expect sanctions to actually increase? What do you want to change? Is this the use of discretion?

Hon Louise Upston: So what I've said in my expectations to the chief executive is that they use the existing regime. So that's the first step. Further down the track, we will be rolling out our traffic light regime, but that will be in the later half of this year. And the other part of it, as I mentioned, is these work check-ins to make sure that people that otherwise might not be in much contact with Work and Income are actually fronting up, we know what steps they're taking, and if they're not taking steps there is action taken to support them, and they're clear about their obligations, and they're clear that there will be consequences if they don't take the necessary steps to be in work.

Media: The previous Government introduced the system where a sanction would need to be approved by a second person before applying it, to reduce the incorrect use of discretion. Are you guys going to get rid of that?

Hon Louise Upston: I've made my expectations with the chief executive clear that we expect the graduated sanction regime to be fully utilised.

Media: Minister, can I just take you back to Bridie's question around the reports? Why would you prioritise the research of an OECD report that is 14 years old that encompasses a bunch of countries rather than MSD research that is specifically about New Zealand and done in a shorter space of time? Your critics might look at that and say you're cherry-picking data.

Hon Louise Upston: Look, if you want, there's two sets of research that give different messages, but the statistics, that is the strongest empirical evidence.

Media: But how? The MSD ones are talking about New Zealand—

Hon Louise Upston: 70,000 more people on the jobseeker benefit at the same time that we've seen a 58 percent reduction in the use of sanctions. That's evidence enough for me to be deeply worried about the number of New Zealanders not in work today that we could be supporting to be a life of greater choice and opportunity through work.

Media: I'm talking specifically about the sanctions.

Hon Louise Upston: Yup, absolutely.

PM: It's about principles—that you have an obligation, and we want to make sure—

Media: It should be about statistics, not principles.

PM: No, it is about principles. Because, actually, we have an obligation here in New Zealand to make sure that you're holding your end up. Taxpayers are paying your benefits—so they support you at a time when you desperately need it. That's great. That's what we want to make sure is always the case here in New Zealand. We're just making sure that everyone understands their obligation. The equivalent part of that equation is you've got to hold up your responsibility to deliver on your obligations. So just making sure that we are

acting and making sure that we are enforcing the current sanction regime that has been in power, been in law, for a long period of time—that's not unreasonable.

Clare—sorry, Clare Trevett, and then I'll come to Katy.

Media: Louise, you are also the Minister for Child Poverty Reduction. You have to set new targets, short term and long term. When are you expecting to do that, and will you be looking at whatever advice you get on the impact of the sanctions and the minimum wage increase before you do that?

Hon Louise Upston: Well, I'm obviously getting a range of advice around reducing child poverty. One of the biggest ones is that 60 percent of children who are in material hardship are in benefit-dependent homes. That is why I'm absolutely focused on how we support more people into work, because it makes an enormous difference for their children. So, yep, absolutely focused on the welfare system and how we ensure it works for families with children, because that will assist us in achieving our child poverty targets.

Media: Are you going to change the Child Poverty Reduction Act or are you going to set your targets as required to, and will they be more or less than they currently are?

Hon Louise Upston: We're on record that we will not be changing the Child Poverty Reduction Act. We worked—I personally worked—with the last Government to ensure that we had a piece of legislation that the National Party in Opposition could support, and so that hasn't changed.

Media: Has the Government set any expectations with MSD in terms of which sanctions are applied—like, for example, is it your preference that the benefit is suspended for a short period, or something like that?

PM: It's escalations.

Hon Louise Upston: No, there's a process already that is a graduated regime, and I've just made it clear to the chief executive that the graduated sanction regime that is in place should be utilised.

Media: Can I just get a bit more clarity around the health and disability thing. So inside the jobseeker support benefit numbers, 109,698 of them were work-ready; 80,000 of them are there because of health conditions or disability. Will those people—

PM: Still able to work. Still deemed to be able to work. So they may be disabled, they may have a health issue, they have a mental health issue, or a challenge, but they are still deemed able and capable of working.

Media: So if someone has cancer and is on the jobseeker benefit, will you cut their benefit if they don't turn up to an appointment?

Hon Louise Upston: As I said before, if someone is on jobseeker health condition and disability, they have different obligations, and the Work and Income front-line staff do a fantastic job about recognising what support people need, when, and how—

PM: And what exceptions.

Hon Louise Upston: —and what conditions, if you like, would be required. So for someone in that situation, they might have obligations to be preparing for work—

PM: Part-time work, or—

Hon Louise Upston: Part-time work, exactly.

PM: Ten hours a week.

Hon Louise Upston: So it's quite a wide range, but the main thing is that there are obligations to be preparing for work, looking for work, or accepting work, and that is very different based on whatever—if you're in the health condition and disability category, there are different sets of obligations, but they do exist.

Media: Minister, you've obviously been speaking with your officials about this. I'm just interested: have you spoken with front-line workers about how they have been implementing this, concerns they have about, I guess, implementing it more so or whether there's benefits to, I guess, having a little more of a hands-off approach. What has the feedback been—

Hon Louise Upston: So I've absolutely been getting around Work and Income offices and talking to lots of front-line staff. I have some who have said to me, actually, this will help them to support more people into work. This is a tool of a whole suite of tools that we will roll out in Government to help front-line staff do their job.

Media: Did you get feedback on the other side of it at all, and what was the concern about, I guess, having to enforce some of this? Was any of that fed back to you?

Hon Louise Upston: No, but they're deeply worried about the number of people on jobseeker benefit. They go to work each and every day to support people to have a better life, and so part of it is to support them into work.

Media: Will this require more front-line workers, because obviously a lot more meetings; it's going to be a lot more, I guess, regimented in how you're rolling this out. Is it going to require an increase to MSD needing to have more staff available?

Hon Louise Upston: That's not my expectation. So if you think about the work check-ins—they're done in a group environment rather than one on one. So we're deliberately kind of looking at—case management is for those who have more complicated circumstances. This sort of check-in provides another option for a job seeker to be in front of MSD and just make sure they're getting the assistance they need. For some of them, it won't be much; for others, it might be quite a bit. And I've seen some of the activities that Work and Income do at the front line, and they're great.

Media: And just lastly, do you expect that there is, I guess, a group that will fall through the cracks—is that not an option for you, or is there a number of people who just aren't, despite being in the work-ready group, necessarily ever going to fulfil that category? Is there a number you have in mind that that group is?

Hon Louise Upston: No, I don't, but what I do expect is that when low and middle income workers go to work to fund the welfare system, they have an expectation that those who are receiving the jobseeker benefit do their bit. And I don't think anyone would think that that's unreasonable. So all we're doing today is just making it really clear there are expectations, there are obligations, and there's a consequence if people don't fulfil their end of the bargain.

PM: And, frankly, it's up to an individual to make sure that they're compliant, and at any point in the sanctions process, they can get compliant—get back in the system.

Media: So when do you expect to introduce the broader changes to work obligations and sanctions?

Hon Louise Upston: The traffic light system?

Media: Yeah.

Hon Louise Upston: Yeah, so work is under way with that at the moment, and this really is phase one, and there will be a number of phases that we need to go through before it's fully rolled out, and it may well include legislative change.

Media: Prime Minister, so what's the average amount of time a person's on jobseeker?

PM: Well, the average amount of time now for a jobseeker is 13 years, up from 10½ years. The average time for someone on a youth payment is actually 24 years. It's up over 50 percent in three years.

Media: You've said a few times today that part of the purpose of this is to get people into work, but you've opted for quite a low—historically low—minimum wage increase this year, and one of the first things your Government U-turned on was the Working for Families

abatement threshold that was in your tax plan. Is there anything that you're doing to improve the working situation of the people to make work more enticing on the other side of this transition? There's a lot of stick and no carrot.

PM: Well, there is. I mean we've—I think, you know, by repealing FPAs, by actually putting 90-day trials in place, we're actually giving employers every chance possible to actually go out there and take a chance on someone that may have been on long-term welfare dependency and actually give them a chance to take a job and actually make that a much more seamless and a more frictionless process to be able to get into work. That's a good thing. There's number of employers I've talked to that would love to take on someone, but it comes with risk, and as a result, the 90-day trials is a good way of enabling them to do that.

Media: To that point, the FPAs weaken some of the protections around workers, making it potentially less enticing for that worker to look for work, because it has less of the protections than it might have done otherwise.

PM: Well, I just disagree. I mean I think the reality is people—we want to support New Zealanders in need. We'll continue to do that. We all understand what that means. We're deeply committed to that as a new Government, but what we are also deeply committed to is rights and responsibilities, and it doesn't make sense, and I can't stand and talk to a lower middle income New Zealander who's paying their taxes, working incredibly hard and then not be able to have that money being obligated and being used in the right way with a good return for it. And so that means that we actually need to make sure that people who are receiving the benefits—it's very simple: the vast majority are meeting their obligations, but, for those that aren't, we need to be pretty straight up and actually have some pretty straight talk about them doing so.

Media: When you repeal the Māori Health Authority, will the operating budget for the authority go back into the centre, or will it remain within the health vote and be reallocated to other parts of health?

PM: Again, our intention had been to keep it within the health vote and to be able to use it to deploy as we think where there's better ways for us to deliver health outcomes, as we've talked about, for Māori. We'll have more to say about that very shortly.

Media: Another health-related question: St John Ambulance is pulling ambulances off the road to rein in costs when staff go on leave or call in sick. Do you think that's acceptable? Is there something the Government needs to do here to intervene to prevent that from happening?

PM: Yeah, look, it's not acceptable. I mean, we want to be in a situation where St John's is available to New Zealanders when they need it. We have—you know, obviously we've had conversations with St John. I remember talking with them in Opposition. You know, they don't wish to be fully funded by the Government. That would be a bad thing for them and also not great to the Government running such a system like that, but the combination of good Government subsidy and support has been a good thing. I haven't seen the detail of those reports. I'm sure Shane Reti will look into that further.

Media: Just going back to Thomas' previous point around the enticement of work and that sort of thing, alongside setting these expectations are you also doing work to make sure that people are getting into sustainable jobs or appropriate jobs, like ensure an older person, for example, isn't going into a construction job or—

PM: Yeah.

Media: Yes?

PM: Yeah. Obviously making sure there's a good match and making sure that we can actually keep people in work for longer than 12 months, so they actually can stick at it and actually have a pathway forward.

Media: How are you measuring that?

PM: Sorry?

Media: How are you measuring that?

PM: Well, that's what we're working with individual people around. I mean, you know, we've talked a lot about, actually, how we support people with job plans and job coaches and young people in particular, getting them work-ready so they actually can stick at jobs and stay at jobs.

Media: Are you considering at all decreasing the level at which jobseeker is paid?

PM: No.

Hon Louise Upston: Not at all.

PM: No. That hasn't been a topic of the conversation at all.

Media: Is the winter energy payment being paid this year?

PM: Yes. We're making a commitment that the winter energy payment will stay. There's no change to that at all.

Media: Is there a concern that this crackdown comes as the unemployment rate is scheduled to rise? Like, is it a concern to you that there might not be jobs available? And if there aren't jobs in a person's particular area—I'm thinking, particularly, in regional places—do you expect people to move to get them?

PM: Well, we expect people to do everything they can to secure a job. I mean, we've had very low levels of unemployment. I appreciate they're forecast to rise because we've had mismanagement of the economy and we've had a huge amount of the economy slowing—no doubt about it; we get that—but to say that we'll just leave people on welfare irrespective and they don't try and find a job isn't what we're about. We're saying we expect everybody to be trying to do everything they can to meet their obligations to find work. It's that simple.

Media: Prime Minister, did you feel unsafe at the Big Gay Out yesterday?

PM: No, not at all—not at all. It was great to be there again; I was there last year. I spent a bit of time talking to the Burnett Foundation; I'm a big fan of what they do around HIV and sexual health. People are free to protest as they wish, and I thought it was a bit of a shame that actually that movement, or that protest, overshadowed the good work that was happening at the Burnett Foundation.

Media: Leaving aside the Gaza part of the protest and concentrating on rainbow issues—

PM: Yes.

Media: —did it give you pause for thought about this Government's policies for trans people?

PM: Well, what we've said very clearly, as you would have heard us say yesterday, we want to continue the support of the previous Government's HIV Action Plan—we think that's a good plan; we'll continue to do that. With respect to trans, you've seen a coalition commitment—it's really about, with respect to sport, to make sure that there's fairness and also inclusion in sporting bodies. Many sporting bodies are handling that tension and working their way through those issues incredibly well. And, at a personal level, I've been very supportive of the trans and rainbow community.

Media: You've missed a big one there, which is gender education in school.

PM: Well, let's talk about that too. I mean, we're saying there will be sex education in New Zealand schools, and we want parents to do their job, as well, doing sex education at home. All we're saying, after being talked to by many parents over the last year and a half, is, look, the Curriculum has—there was an old Curriculum, there's a new Curriculum coming, in the intervening period there are guidelines. And there are three problems with it: the first is making sure the content is age appropriate; parents want to be consulted on the content;

and the third thing is we want consistency and no variability in the education, because you can—

Media: The first two conditions exist, though.

PM: —you can go to an individual school and, actually, you can have it taught variably by different teachers within the same school, because the Curriculum—

Media: Based on parental feedback; that's the whole point of the Curriculum.

PM: No—because the Curriculum isn't locked down yet. It's in the transition from old to new. So all we're saying is, no, we want to make sure there is really good sex education across New Zealand schools. We just want to make sure that parents are consulted, it's age appropriate, and, importantly, that it's consistently taught.

Media: What about sexuality education—not just sex education, but sexuality education?

PM: I'm sure that'll be a component of it.

Media: Because they are different in the Curriculum.

PM: No, I understand, but I am sure it'll be a component of it.

Media: And I just have some questions about the changes of agencies—the changes of names. Do you know when the agencies will be expected to have their English name first?

PM: Look, no—it hasn't been a big focus for us in our first 100 days.

Media: Are you concerned that agencies might be wasting money in regards to transitioning to their English name first?

PM: Look, I'm aware some agencies have done it already, proactively, off their own back, and it's actually been very cheap and reasonable. It's as simple as just taking the old JPEG that used to have the priority—or, you know, English above the te reo, and others have flipped that around. It's pretty simple and easy.

Media: Although, for example, though, going out and buying new high-vis jackets which are unbranded because they don't have the te reo Māori name on them. Would that be a waste of money to you?

PM: I've got no idea what you're talking about.

Media: Would that be a waste of money?

PM: Well, I don't know the situation that you're talking about. What are you referencing?

Media: If an agency goes out and buys unbranded high-vis jackets for a Prime Minister and his entourage, would that be a waste of—

PM: For me?

Media: Yeah. Would that be a waste of money?

PM: I would have thought so, but I go to a venue, I get out of a car, I get given PPE, and I go look at a project. So I'm not quite sure what you're getting at, to be honest.

Media: There had been a direction from a Minister to change a name of the agency and then to go out and—

PM: Sorry, I'm really struggling to understand what you're talking about. Can you ask the question—can you say it again?

Media: So it's just an agency fulfilling the direction of a Minister who's told them to change their name—so they go out and buy new, unbranded protective equipment.

PM: Well, I'm not aware of that, and so I can't comment on it.

Media: Are you worried the agencies are wasting money to fulfil the obligations—

PM: I don't think they are. As I said, we haven't gone through a programme of talking about that. Many agencies have proactively gone about doing it. It doesn't come at huge cost. It's quite simple to just change the brand and flip it around. We've got old JPEG files; we've got new JPEG files—that's how many of them have done it so quickly. But it's not a priority for right now.

Media: Have you spoken to the Foreign Minister about the Government's response to Alexei Navalny's death? You said yesterday that you'd be having further conversations with him.

PM: Yeah, we speak regularly; we spoke again last night about it, and, again, what we're saying very clearly there is that it's an unacceptable situation. Ultimately, Putin is accountable for it, and MFAT officials will be talking very strongly and conveying that position to the ambassador.

Media: Will the New Zealand Government be imposing any consequences or will there be any further action taken?

PM: Well, again, we're up for any independent-type review, but from our perspective it's clear to us who is accountable, and—

Media: There won't be any further sanctions or anything like that on the table in response to it?

PM: May well be, but we'll have a look at that. At the moment, senior officials at MFAT will talk to the ambassador and raise and convey our concerns there.

Media: Yesterday, in your state of the nation speech, you talked a lot about how there's been a lot of surprises in the books and things are worse than you first thought. Are you managing expectations in any way about how quickly you're going to be able to deliver certain targets?

PM: No, not at all. What I'm just trying to do is—I just think that New Zealanders need to have a grown-up conversation and that the Prime Minister should be able to say, really upfront and really straight-up, "Hey, look, these are the challenges that we've got. This is the situation we've inherited. This is the mess that we've got left behind by the previous Government. Let's face up to the brutal facts of our reality whether we like to hear it or not, and then let's put a plan together to actually get ourselves to a much better place." And that's all that I was doing yesterday—was saying to the New Zealand people, "Hey, listen, you want me to level up and talk straight to you about the actual challenges that we've got in front of us"—whether it's been in education, whether it's been in health and housing and infrastructure and crime and the economy. But we are determined as a Government to keep moving through and actually ploughing through and getting things done for them. That's what this has been about today. It's another practical response to a challenge that we've got, which is we cannot have 70,000 people on welfare more at times of low unemployment and record job vacancies.

Media: Just on that, you are 81 days into your 100-day plan. You've got 22, by our count, policies that you still need to get across the line—policies, legislation, mixed bag; say what you will. Can you actually do this? That's not a lot of time.

PM: Yeah, no, absolutely. I get, once or twice a week, a full review of all 49 actions, the progress that's been made, whether it's on track, off track, ahead of programme. And now what it is is just about us making sure we get our legislative programme out in the sitting block that remains, and we're very confident we can do that.

Media: So you can categorically say, hand on heart, that at the end of this 100 days you will have unambiguously ticked off all 49 options?

PM: Correct.

Media: What do you envision to be the toughest part of that? Would it be the gang area—from the stuff that's left?

PM: Look, we've got work to keep going through, but in fairness we've been talking about the programmes that are still coming over the last four or eight weeks or so. Obviously there's legislation being drafted, and so that's ready to go to the House. But, look, there's been—you know, we've got some big things that we're taking on. Fast-track consenting is a pretty big one. We've knocked off the RMA before Christmas. We want to make sure we supercharge fast-track consenting so we can get things built in this country. And then our third phase is, before the end of the term, come back and we look at RMA reform. Yes, we're working through our law and order package right now, which is around the commitments we made around gangs and law and order commitments in general. We'll continue to do that. We've got a few other things that we've got to work our way through.

But, by and large, as I said, we have 100-day committee. I chair it. I get an update regularly, at least twice a week, on how those actions are going. I'm in constant dialogue and conversation with our Ministers. We have a series of meetings and mechanisms to see how that's all going. This afternoon, I'm meeting with three Ministers about their expectations that I have of them for the coming year, with their CEs there as well, the chief executives of their departments. So we're all very aligned about what we're here to do and what we've got to get done.

Media: And you've talked about taking the 100 days idea into the future—will you keep that committee?

PM: The 100-day committee? No. What it will morph into is what we call the strategy committee. So initially how we set it up was that we would have Cabinet, we had a Cabinet business committee, and we had a 100-day committee, and that was because we wanted to get moving very, very quickly. Over the last couple of weeks, we've got our full Cabinet committee structure in place, which is more normally how things are delivered, and that's been working well and that's been going for the last couple of weeks. So what I'll do is, on 8 March, I'll actually stop the 100-day committee; I will chair then the strategy committee, which will actually be a big focus on delivery and getting things done. So the work of the 100-day committee gets transferred into the strategy committee.

Media: A number of our police stations are riddled with mould and rot. Are you concerned about the state of them, and will you be doing anything to fix it?

PM: Well, look, I mean, I think what we've discovered is that we've got challenges across property portfolios, whether you look at the courts, whether you look at police stations, whether you look at school buildings. We know that there are real challenges and there's massive infrastructure deficit, and those are the issues that we're trying to wrestle with and work our way through. So we'll continue to do that.

Media: So will you make any commitment to fix up the police stations?

PM: We're making a commitment to work through a whole bunch of infrastructure deficit that we have across this country, whether it's on roads, whether it's in school buildings, as I said, whether it's in hospitals, whether it's in police departments, or whether it's in the courts. We know there are real challenges across the whole portfolio of Government buildings, but we need to make sure we've got a good assessment and then we've got to find a way fiscally that we can make those investments to improve those situations.

Media: Was it appropriate for your Minister Shane Jones to say that he was "horrified by a recent Supreme Court ruling", and to say that the courts have been Americanised?

PM: I don't have any issues with that. I've spoken with Shane; he and our offices talk regularly. What I can say is that he's well aware of his Cabinet obligations and, importantly, I think he's doing a great job. He's advocating very strongly for business sectors that we want to see growing in this country, and he's a proud advocate for those sectors, and he should be, and that's what I expect him to do, because this is a country that's declined. Our economy has shrunk three of the last four quarters. We do not have the luxury of turning off growth. And so the same way he's been advocating for his portfolios and the sectors that he has charge of who are his portfolios. That's why, you know, Todd McClay and I met, for example,

at Premier House last week for a whole day with folk from Tohono, which is actually about innovation in the agriculture sector or the primary industry sector. So, you know, we want to see growth in each of our sectors. That's why we're spending a lot of time with those communities. And I think he's doing his job well, advocating strongly for them.

Media: Well, his comments weren't specific—you know, it wasn't about promoting industry; it was about criticising the Supreme Court. Do you have concerns when your Ministers are criticising—

PM: Well, no, I think he understands his obligations as a Minister, and I think what he's got to focus on is the effectiveness of the law rather than individual cases, and he understands that.

Media: Did you remind him of the Cabinet obligations following the report—

PM: I'm sure my office had a chat about it, but the bottom line is I'm pretty relaxed about it.

Media: You weren't pretty relaxed about it when it was Stuart Nash.

PM: Well no, no, let's be very clear. That's a very different situation when you've got a Minister that's actually reaching out to a Police Commissioner advocating for a particular case or leaking Cabinet documents out to donors. So let's be really clear that is apples and oranges.

Media: Also you went for him for criticising the judiciary.

PM: Well, as I say, the Stuart Nash situation is completely different. And as to why he was, you know, should and was rightfully kicked out of Cabinet—quite right.

Media: Do you stand by all of the comments that you made about Stuart Nash when you were criticising him over criticising the judiciary now?

PM: Well, I just say to you, when you've actually got criticising the judiciary and calling the Police Commissioner to advocate for a case, coupled with actually sharing Cabinet papers with donors—different gravity of situation.

Media: Prime Minister, do you see testimony from these organisations on the fair digital news bargaining bill, and are you positively disposed to getting giants like Meta and Google to pay for advertising [*Inaudible*]

PM: Yeah, again, I haven't followed the submissions that I know are going on right now. In fairness, that's up to Melissa Lee as our broadcasting Minister to digest and work out where we go forward from that. You know, I think, you know, in Opposition we had a clearly stated position which was that we fundamentally felt we don't want to see any of those actions as we saw take place in Canada that ended up, actually, narrowing the plurality of media voices, for example, with small regional players that end up being impacted heavily in legislation like that. So, in fairness, Melissa Lee, as the Minister, needs time to digest all of that. We'll hear the submissions out and see where things get to.

Media: Do you agree, though, that there is a problem and that Kiwi businesses are missing out on revenue that they could have from multinational giants—

PM: Well, I'll just say to you: I think many media outlets, if they're smart, and many of them have been, they go do their own commercial deals with the tech platforms.

Media: Would you consider a humanitarian visa for Palestinians which allows them to work and to access healthcare?

PM: Yeah, look, I mean that's something that I know Erica Stanford's considering, as she talked about on Sunday morning, and so we'll see where that advice goes to.

Media: What's the latest on the ceasefire—what's the latest on the calls for a ceasefire, and can we expect any other action in this space?

PM: Well, I mean, last week, I actually initiated and coordinated the response from the Australian Prime Minister, the Canadian Prime Minister, and myself to come together. We put a statement together within 24 hours, which was to say our position on Rafah, for example, which was that we do not want Israel to enter into Rafah. We don't think that's appropriate. It's going to cause massive civilian pain and suffering, and that's something that I think we're very proud about.

Media: You initiated that response?

PM: Yes, yes, we did, yeah, and the reason was to make sure that we could actually get—again, we had worked together as a CANZ group, as we call it, before, as you knew, when we called for a humanitarian ceasefire, and we wanted to make sure we sent a very strong signal to Israel in particular that we do not want them in Rafah, obviously.

Media: What other countries did you reach out to to be part of that response—was it just those two—

PM: It's those two. I mean, I've spoken to Prime Minister Trudeau a couple of weeks ago. Obviously, I've spoken to Anthony Albanese several times as well, and, you know, those are like-minded countries of New Zealand, and so when we have common interests, we have strong values that we want to stand up for, I think there's some real value in us doing that as a threesome—that actually have countries that are very aligned in our perspectives on these things.

Media: Did you ask other Five Eyes partners—the UK—

PM: Ah, no, I think I just worked with the two that I've previously worked with. Yep. OK, thanks so much team; appreciate your time. Have a great week.

conclusion of press conference