

POST-CABINET PRESS CONFERENCE: MONDAY, 26 FEBRUARY 2024
HANSARD TRANSCRIPT

PM: Well, kia ora. Good afternoon, everybody, and good to see you all back here again. I trust you all had good weekends. This Government is focused on making sure kids are in school and that we are teaching the basics brilliantly so that each and every child has the opportunity to succeed. And a successful future begins with good foundations at school, and I'm proud to say that in our first 100 days we've made sure that children are being taught an hour of maths, an hour of reading, an hour of writing at every primary school and intermediate across the country. We've also ensured that children's learning is taking place and teachers can teach by removing cellphones in schools, and it's been great already to hear the positive feedback from principals, parents, and also kids. And, finally, we've also appointed a ministerial advisory group to move with great haste to make sure we get the maths and the English curriculum right for primary schools so that we can start next year with actually teaching the basics really well.

That is really just the start of our plan on education, to get our education system to be truly world class so that our kids can take the opportunities that exist in a great new world out there. We're going to continue to support choice in our education system: reintroduce partnership schools, invest in structured literacy, and then take action against attendance to get our kids back into school. It's a priority for this Government to lift student achievement, and we will.

Of course, an important part of a high-quality education is ensuring students and teachers have the right resources and learning spaces, including fit for purpose school buildings. With me today is our education Minister, Erica Stanford, to talk about the independent review that we're announcing today into the Ministry of Education's school property function. Quite frankly, our Government has inherited a school property system that I think is bordering on a crisis. This review will address the previous Government's failure to sufficiently implement a value-for-money approach to school property, schools having expectations of building projects that are not able to be delivered on, and significant cost blowouts.

Facing significant cost pressures and high demand, the Ministry of Education has been looking at the cost-effectiveness of their property projects since September last year, resulting in a number of those projects being paused. And I want to reiterate that this is in no way related to any cost savings initiatives for the upcoming Budget. We've not made any cuts to school properties since we came to Government. Teachers, principals, students, and the communities would no doubt have been excited about these projects only to have them paused and to be facing uncertainty mere weeks before many of them were due to start. We now need to take stock of what has gone wrong in recent years to ensure that we can deliver the classrooms and other buildings that our children need for learning while protecting taxpayers from further cost blowouts. And, with that, I'll hand over to Minister Stanford to talk a little bit more about it.

Hon Erica Stanford: Thank you, Prime Minister. Today, I'm announcing an independent review of the Ministry of Education's school property function. Shortly after I became the Minister, I learnt that Kaipara College had been told that their planned innovation centre had been paused. This news came just a week before the school expected that construction would begin. It was disappointing to learn about the poor communication with the college given that the decision could and should have been made with the school many, many months earlier.

And then, in December, I was told that the co-location of the three schools in Marlborough had construction estimates that had climbed as high as \$405 million for a \$170 million budget. It was deeply concerning for me to learn that spades were due in the ground in February this year for a project that had no funding secured to deliver the project. The ministry then made the decision to pause this Marlborough project, and a new way forward is now being worked through. This was deeply upsetting for the schools involved, for local iwi, and the wider

community, but that was just the beginning. In December, I was informed that up to 20 schools could be in a similar position, expecting building work that would likely need to be reconsidered to ensure the property pipeline was realistic and affordable. The ministry then revealed that they may need to reassess up to 350 projects in various stages from design through to pre-construction to ensure that they're delivering value for money so that as many schools as possible get the facilities that they need.

It's not unusual to have isolated examples of projects that experience delivery challenges, but this is of an unprecedented scale. Labour have left a pattern of systemic and embedded challenges that cannot continue. Time and time again, we see this across multiple portfolios—cost overruns, inability to deliver on projects—and here we go again in education. It is very clear to me that the current approach to delivering classrooms and school buildings is not working and a change in approach is needed. We are faced with challenges that include not just rising costs but also overly ambitious and bespoke designs that take way too long to deliver. When you add into this mix poor communication with schools and a slow uptake of standardised, repeatable building solutions, what we have is a mess.

To have plans change so soon after work is due to start, or, in some cases, early works to prepare sites have already begun. It's deeply unfair for schools and disruptive to teaching and learning. This should be the last thing that schools and students should be worrying about. This does not meet my expectations for adequate communication to schools. Schools deserve clarity on their builds.

The review that I am announcing today will ensure we don't find ourselves in this position again. The review will be undertaken by three reviewers who will bring expertise across infrastructure, school property, and commercial and Government operations. The aim is for the reviewers to report back to me in just three months. I've made it very clear to the Ministry of Education that my expectation for schools is to receive timely, accurate information about their projects so that they can plan ahead to ensure as little disruption for students as possible.

And I'll now pass back to the Prime Minister.

PM: Thank you, Erica. Just in terms of my movements in the House this week before we open up to any questions, I'm in the House tomorrow and Wednesday, and tonight I'm hosting an event for the Black Caps and the Australian test cricket side at Premier House. On Thursday, I will be attending Efeso Collins' funeral in Auckland, and this week the Government will progress the Auckland regional fuel tax repeal, the repeal of the Section 27 reports, the repeal of the Māori Health Authority, and changes to the smokefree environments and regulated products legislation.

It is the Government's intention to lift urgency on Wednesday night so that Thursday's select committees can sit. The House will sit on Thursday, but the Leader of the House, in consultation with the Opposition, will ask that the Business Committee allow for a temporary change regarding the limits on proxy votes so that members wishing to pay their respects to the late Efeso Collins can do so without losing their representation in the House.

And, with that, happy to take your questions.

Media: Prime Minister, can I ask you: what is your view of the Waitangi Tribunal continuing with its inquiries into the axing of the Māori Health Authority, given that that inquiry is inevitably now going to be retrospective?

PM: Well, look, again, that's a decision for them. What we're focused on is making sure we follow through on the commitments that we've had from before the election, which is to repeal the Māori Health Authority.

Media: Do you believe it's within their brief to do that, though?

PM: Well, they are free to do that. What we are focused on is this is one of our 100-day plan actions. We've said that we were going to do it. We've talked about doing it in Opposition, and now we're following through on that commitment. We do not believe the way to deliver

better outcomes for Māori and their health outcomes is through building more bureaucracy. We think there's a different way of going about it and that's what we're going to do.

Media: On the school buildings system, who is to blame for where we've got to this situation? The schools have obviously, as you've pointed out, had some serious issues with communication from the ministry—was it the ministry that wasn't transparent, or how did we get to this point?

Hon Erica Stanford: The buck stops with the previous Minister of Education—Chris Hipkins for five years and then Jan Tinetti. To not make sure that they were implementing good value-for-money systems and processes in school property so that we didn't end up with a pipeline of projects that were not able to be delivered on.

PM: Can I just say that this is a pattern of fiscal behaviour that we've seen from the previous Government. What we have encountered since coming to Government is endless cost overruns—think about KiwiRail, think about the school buildings project, think about transport projects, etc. We've had really intentional underfunding and time-limited funding—think about Pharmac, think about school lunches. We've had poor delivery and endless wasteful spending—think about Auckland light rail, Te Pūkenga. So this is a pattern of behaviour of what happens when you don't manage the economy well and you don't manage the finances and taxpayers' money well. So, again, here we go again, in the world of education, actually having to face up to a reality which is a Government that has mismanaged our school property buildings incredibly badly.

Media: Of the more than 300 projects which are being reviewed, the classrooms, can you guarantee that each of those schools and projects will get the classrooms that they need?

Hon Erica Stanford: The ministry will be going through a process of redesigning, rescoping, and reprioritising with those schools, to make sure that we get good value for money and we can deliver as many classrooms to as many schools as we possibly can. I'd also say alongside that, though, we are also going to be making sure that we are prioritising infrastructure in this country, and I know that school property is a priority for this Government and those discussions are under way.

Media: Sorry, just finally, the schools who are in this situation say all they want is certainty. Is, really, another working group with a three-month delay giving them that certainty that they need?

Hon Erica Stanford: There's three things we have to do here: (a) unlike Labour, we are going to make sure that the taxpayers of New Zealand can be confident that we are spending their money that's delivering good value for money in as many fit for purpose, functional classrooms, as we possibly can. But it doesn't mean that this review stops everything else happening. I'm going to be working with the ministry—I'm working with them right now—to identify schools that have critical pressures with roll growth and working through some of those immediate solutions. And as I've also said, we're working through a Budget process at the moment, and school property is a priority for this Government.

Media: There was a specific—and forgive me; I don't know the specific name; there was a lot of them. But during the COVID-19 years of the previous Government, there was a specific package of funding that was specifically for schools' maintenance and redevelopment. I mean, it was hundreds of millions of dollars. How does that fit into what you're doing now, and how is that not enough money to do what the previous Government said that it was supposed to do?

Hon Erica Stanford: That previous package—it was school improvement package I believe, the SIP; it was something like that that it was called—wasn't about delivering classrooms for roll growth; it was more about maintenance and fix-ups. And they can answer to why they put that in place. What we're talking about here is critical pressures for schools who need classrooms and buildings delivered, have had their expectations raised, a pipeline of these expectations, and an inability to deliver on that within the current Budget.

Media: How does that fit with the cost-cutting pressure the ministry is under?

PM: Well, I mean, we're being very clear. We want education to generate savings so that we can actually deploy them into the front line. But, again, here we go with an education budget that is very large, a portfolio of buildings and school projects that have been poorly managed. And that's what we're trying to get to the bottom of, because we need to have a culture of fiscal discipline put into the public services. We want to make sure we invest more in education going forward.

We know it's so critical to our future in order to make our economy and our country fundamentally wealthier and more prosperous. But for that to happen, we need good financial management, and that just hasn't happened across the piece, across the Public Service. So don't conflate the two things. You know, we can make sure that there are efficiencies and savings and the money is being well spent, as well as actually making sure we get that money from the back office to the front line.

Media: Prime Minister, can you just explain about this a bit more? Is this a value for money thing, or is it the case that actually there was just never enough money put aside for these projects, or is it, like, a process thing whereby costs blew out and no one was told, or is it a bit of all three?

PM: It's a bit of all three. At the end of the day, it's just abysmal economic management. You know, the reality is the previous Government couldn't manage stuff well, and the reality is: how on earth do you have a school property portfolio, you make a huge amount of commitments to a huge number of schools and school communities, you raise expectations big time, and literally before projects are starting, you find out you haven't actually got the funding in place to actually support that project. So a lot of it is actually coming back to the way we go about doing things.

In many cases—and I'm sure the inquiry will actually look at that really clearly, with its results coming back in May—but it is things like standardisation of classrooms, like standardisations of bridges that we see in roading and transport. We do everything bespoke. And so it's actually just letting things get out of control. We saw it on the KiwiRail ferries. We're seeing it here. We've seen it everywhere.

Media: Yeah, I get that. So if you're one of the sort of Marlborough kind of [*Inaudible*] or whatever, did you expect—you know, you've had your plans signed off; have they then just been told, "Well, actually, there's just not enough money to do that.", or they were told that the money's not available any—I mean, from their point of view, they've gone through the process. What have they been told?

Hon Erica Stanford: In the case of Marlborough, the ministry decided to pause that project and discuss with them what might be possible in the current fiscal budget.

Media: On what grounds did the ministry do that? So did the ministry say, "Hang on; we've made a mistake.", or did they say, "Oh, it's blowing out.", or, like, how does it work?

Hon Erica Stanford: Yeah, well, how it worked with Marlborough—and frankly, this comes down Chris Hipkins as well. What happened with Marlborough is they were led down a garden path, quite frankly. They were told to go away and design whatever they liked, which is exactly what they did. And as the money went up and up and up and up—and Chris Hipkins could see it the entire time—nobody ever said, "Pull up, pull up. We're at the thick end of half a billion dollars.", until literally, in December, the ministry said, "We've got spades in the ground in February, and there is no funding available to deliver this project, Minister."

Media: So just to clarify to someone like that project or any other project, was it not the case that schools got told, "Well, here's how much money you've got; work it out; come up with a plan."? Was it, "What do you need? And we'll pay for it."

Hon Erica Stanford: Well, that seems to be what's been happening, and it is a little bit difficult, because sometimes school buildings change, roll growth change, and things get rescoped. But, certainly, in the case of Marlborough, there was no clear expectation of, "How

do we sit and fit within a budget?" It got out of control, and nobody said anything to the school, and I feel very, very much for that community, who have been working on this for almost 10 years. To have this happen at the last minute is very unfair on those schools and that community.

Media: Prime Minister, can I just clarify: are you saying this is entirely mismanagement by the Labour Government, or is there also a role here that the ministry should have played?

PM: Well, the Minister's accountable for the ministry, right? So it's the Government's ministries.

Media: But were they informed of the scale of the issue here? And do you have evidence of when the Ministry of Education was passing that information on to the previous education Minister and how they responded?

Hon Erica Stanford: Yes. We've got evidence that the Minister knew the entire time.

Media: So what had they been saying back to the Minister of Education about it?

Hon Erica Stanford: He was briefed constantly. He knew at the end of 2022 that the scope had reached \$405 million, I believe. And as far as we can see, because nothing seems to be signed—there's not a lot in writing—that the project was just to continue, with Cabinet not knowing, without ever having secured the funding.

Media: Was there a similar pattern with the other 20 projects that have been identified?

Hon Erica Stanford: This school was quite different. It was of such a large scale; it was a little bit different. But, in saying that, there were many things that were very similar—scope creep, architecturally designed classrooms, bespoke designs, very poor communications. So it had all the hallmarks of everything else, but just the size and the scale of this one project was slightly different.

Media: Sorry, Erica, just following on from that in terms of the cost stuff. So you said, in your opening remarks, that various schools—the examples you gave, you had found out in December and whatnot that these weren't going to work out. So have you only found out about all of this because of schools letting your office know or letting the ministry know that things aren't happening? Or was the finance Minister who, obviously, in late October, got access to all the books and went through and told us that there was a lot of unprecedented stuff going on—was there any understanding for the finance Minister at that point that there were issues? Or is this new information for you?

Hon Erica Stanford: This was, for the most part, new information. So once Marlborough happened—because I was proactively informed about Marlborough—my next question was: how many other schools are in this situation? And that's when it became 20, it became 250, then it's now 350.

Media: So what did it look like, then, in terms of the Crown accounts? Like, the finance Minister must be able to see what money was set aside for the school property portfolio, and either the money's there or it's not there. So what happened in that space?

PM: Well, I mean, the Minister has been—and all of us have, actually, been going through with our respective departments and getting to the bottom of exactly where the finances actually are sitting. And some of it has been quite opaque, if we're really honest with you. We've talked about a funding shortfall—

Media: Were there red flags, though, on this?

PM: Sorry?

Media: Were there red flags for Nicola Willis on this last year?

PM: No. I mean, what you've had is mission creep and you've had rolling thunder happen. It started off with one school, it started off with 20, then 250, now 350 schools. So it highlights there's a problem there. We were working on, if you remember at the time, the ferries project as we started to get a sense of what was actually proposed and funded and

what was actually being proposed by KiwiRail. We've been working through things like Pharmac and school lunches that had time-limited funding that ran out. We've worked our way through a range of issues, and we continue to unearth them and bring them out because we've got to get them all out on the table so we know exactly where we're starting from. So that as we put the plan together, we can actually get ourselves to a better place.

Media: Sorry if I'm being over-dumb about this, but presumably the money is set aside for school property, right? So, when the finance Minister looks at the accounts at the end of last year, there's money set aside. Is the problem here that the money that the schools thought that they had set aside is a much bigger number and there had been literally no communication between the Government and the schools? So can you just completely unpack where the glitch in the system is here?

Hon Erica Stanford: Yeah. That understanding is correct. You've got to remember that schools are at all different phases of their build. So some will be right at the very beginning, where they're just going through: "What do we need?" Some have got plans. Some have got engineering works that have been done. Some have had buildings removed. So there is a continuum of projects across that continuum. And it's very difficult to have a really good view, from the Minister of Finance's perspective, I guess, of what has been promised. So this is something that the review will need to look at as well as to how do we have really good clarity of the pipeline to make sure that we can actually deliver on it. Because, at the moment, I'm not confident that we have that.

Media: And just lastly on that, can I just ask: do you have any idea of how much the redesigns might cost? Because, presumably, if every school's going to have to undergo that, it's going to end up costing a bit of money as well.

Hon Erica Stanford: The pipeline of projects we are unable to deliver on—or that the previous Government were unable to deliver on—runs into the billions.

Media: But in terms of redesigns, you're saying that what they've got is too expensive, so they're going to have to redesign what they need. That's, presumably, also going to cost money to consultants, etc., isn't it? So how expensive is that bill going to be?

Hon Erica Stanford: Well, look, I can tell you that the cost of redesigning and rescoping is a lot less than delivering bespoke classrooms that are architecturally designed with fancy entranceways and landscaping. If I could just read from what the ministry have admitted themselves, in their own information that was provided to me, that there is scope creep, focus on rebuilding rather than upgrading, over-engineering and add-ons such as extensive landscaping and infrastructure, and an overreliance on bespoke designs. So that is what's causing all of the bloat, and we will have to go through a process of making sure we can deliver.

Media: The bill is on the size of that quote. You said it was going to be billions for those more than 300 sort of problematic projects. Is that right?

Hon Erica Stanford: Overall, the entire—350 are the ones that are being rescoped but, overall, the entire pipeline that needs to be delivered on runs into the billions.

Media: I've lost track off how many times you've attacked working groups and reviews and consultants when on the campaign trail, yet in the first few months of this Government you've developed quite a taste for independent reviews and, you know, these sorts of reviews—

PM: I disagree completely.

Media: Why can't you just take decisions as a Minister; as a Cabinet?

PM: Well, let's be very clear. What you saw in 2017 was a Government come to power that had no ideas and no policy programme, so they formed long working groups that went on forever with broad terms of reference—232-plus of them. What we're talking about here is short, sharp, surgical review teams where we've got a really big problem and we need to get to the bottom of it very, very quickly. Here's a good example: when you're talking about

several billion dollars and you're talking about 350 schools, we've got to find out what's happening and the answer will be back with us by the time of May. If you think about what's happened with Kāinga Ora and the massive debt that we're seeing build up there, which can go into \$20 billion - plus, we've got Bill English and others leading very short, sharp, surgical things on very specific terms of reference to deal with all the challenges and the problems they've got.

So I just put it to you: I think to characterise it that way is very different. What we have is very short, sharp, surgical teams that go in to deliver the answers to problems that we're actually encountering. We have a very clear view by portfolio of what we're doing.

Media: Minister, can you confirm whether or not the Ministry of Education has removed its funding for the Māori Stage at Polyfest?

Hon Erica Stanford: I can't answer that question; I'm not sure. But I can go away and find out and come back to you.

Media: As part of that cost-cutting measure.

Hon Erica Stanford: It's not something that's come across my desk.

Media: I have question about the building and then about NCEA, Minister Stanford. So in terms of the school property having a relationship with those managers with the schools, they would have been seeking more money from the Government—the previous Government—for what you talk about as the landscaping measures and other factors. What responsibility has the Ministry of Education taken for these schools understanding that they're going to get the builds that they thought they were getting when it would have been the Ministry of Education seeking more funding and approvals from the previous Government?

Hon Erica Stanford: Look, I think the Ministry of Education have acknowledged in the reports that they've given to me that what they're doing is creating a pipeline that they can't deliver on and they are starting to take some steps to make sure that we are delivering good value-for-money, functional classrooms, which is why they're doing this review at the moment of the 350 schools to make sure we get the very best value for money.

Media: Just in terms of NCEA, you might have seen today that the provisional data in some regions we've seen drop as much as 8 percent. What's your reaction to that?

Hon Erica Stanford: I've been concerned about academic achievement in our schooling system for a very long time, and the Prime Minister and I are both committed to making sure that we're setting kids on a path of success, which is why we've started with the ministerial advisory group's review of the English curriculum. But what you will see from us is quite a change to make sure that kids who are going through primary and intermediate have a structured curriculum so that it's consistent across the country that they learn the same thing no matter where they go; that we've got the right teaching practices in place, like structured literacy, structured maths, explicit teaching backed up by assessment along the way to make sure they're not falling through the cracks and that we can deliver resource when we can see things, patterns emerging, of children who are failing, to make sure that by intermediate they are at curriculum and can go on to get an NCEA qualification that will set them up for success. The last Government were tootering with NCEA and putting in place literacy and numeracy prerequisites. What they took their eye off the ball on was primary and intermediate, because that's where it all starts and that's where we are focused on making sure that kids are set up for success.

PM: One of the key stats that Erica and I have been talking a lot about over the last year-and-a-half has actually been: we now have 50 percent of our kids arriving at high school not at the standard of the curriculum where they are. So it's no wonder, fast forward two years, they're actually not doing well at NCEA level 1. So that's why we're going back to the basics and saying we've got to get primary and intermediate sorted on maths, reading, and writing, and then we've got to make sure we've got at least 80 percent of our kids showing up at high school ready to go, because, again, if you're a 13-year-old and you read like a 9-

year-old, no wonder then we have an attendance problem at school where 55 percent of our kids aren't at school. So achievement and attendance are very much linked together, but we are very, very determined that we have to step-change education. It's one of the five things we have to do if we are to make this country wealthier and more prosperous—is get a world-class education system in place.

Media: Just, sorry, one high school teacher today had talked to me about how the need in communities because of the cost of living has seen students having to work to support their families so much—is that when they're at school, their brain isn't focused—and he said that that need is at the same level of being an emergency response, as it was in COVID-19. He would like to see an initiative where schools can respond to what works for their community to lift achievement—what's your response to that call for targeting funding for schools to put in place measures to lift achievement?

Hon Erica Stanford: Well, the first thing we need to do, and we're very focused on, is make sure that we're getting our economy back on track and easing the cost of living pressures on families so that students aren't feeling like they have to go out and work to support their families. And I have visited a number of schools in South Auckland who are putting in place bespoke solutions for their children—they'll be young learners—so that they are able to come to school—it may only be three days a week—and they're getting as much education into those three days as they possibly can. So I would applaud those schools for doing an incredible job under extremely difficult circumstances to make sure those students are getting what they need to be able to get a meaningful qualification.

PM: But I'd also just say all options are on the table as we think about how we get our kids back into school again. And each school, and, actually, each kid, has a slightly different set of challenges. In some cases, it's just that parents actually need to get up and get their kids to school; in other cases, there's a whole bunch of anxiety issues—we might need to think through how we deal with that; there's education challenges about why kids need to be in school. You know, we are really concerned about it. I know I've talked about it a lot through the course of this year already. But, you know, if you're only attending school—regular school attendance is at 45 percent—if you're not attending school regularly, by the time you get to 15 to do NCEA level 1, you've lost one year of schooling already.

Then we've got questions about the quality of what we're actually teaching in that period of time. So it's no wonder that our kids today are a year behind mum and dad, where they were in 2000—a year and a half behind where they are on maths in the year 2000—as a function of this degradation. So we actually have to get to root cause, which is teach the basics well, work with school communities, parents, whānau, and actually getting kids into school. And those two things of academic achievement and attendance are very, very linked.

Media: Sorry, just very, very quickly on the school boarding system, how much is being set aside for the inquiry?

Hon Erica Stanford: I haven't got those figures to hand at the moment, but they came across my desk yesterday. But what we will be doing is, in the next two weeks, announcing those reviewers—we're just contacting them at the moment.

Media: Is it, like, hundreds of thousands of dollars—millions of dollars?

Hon Erica Stanford: No, not that much.

Media: No, OK.

Media: Prime Minister, you're supportive, then, of part-time, taura, part-time at kura if they are working; so is that going to be something that you're going to promote in the long term—part-time kura students?

Hon Erica Stanford: Absolutely not. The number one goal of this Government is to reduce the cost of living, get our economy back on track so that families have eased cost of living pressures on them. We don't want children and young people to be out working when they should be in school. It's a legal requirement that they're in school. At the moment, it is a very

unfortunate situation where they're feeling like they have to work to support their families. Do we want that in the long term? Absolutely not, which is why the Prime Minister and our Cabinet are so focused on getting our economy back on track.

PM: And I'd just say to you that's only a subset of, actually, kids not being at school; it doesn't explain it all, by any stretch of the imagination. There's lots of reasons for why kids are going to school, and that's why we've got a full-court press on it: because there's nothing more important. When we look at the UK, as I said the other day, at 79 percent of their kids in regular school attendance, and we've got 45 percent, well, we're not being particularly ambitious.

Media: So how long will you give those kura, whose taura are working? How long will you get them to get those taura, those ākonga, back into the classroom full time?

PM: Well, again, what we've asked is David Seymour has a delegated responsibility to drive attendance into schools. He's got all options on the table, he's working those options through with the Ministry of Education right now, he'll have more to say about that shortly.

Media: Minister Stanford, in terms of that call for targeted funding—not at this stage? That's not on the table?

Hon Erica Stanford: Schools in those situations already have access to equity funding, their ops grants, and there are other pots of money like the IRF funding that they may have access to. So that's what those funding arrangements are for.

Media: You've only got, by my count, maybe 11 or 12 days left of your hundred-day plan. Given the House was suspended at the end of last week, are you still confident that you can get through the last 22 priorities out of the 49 in, like, 11 days?

PM: Absolutely. We've got 14 days to get 16 more initiatives done to complete the 100-day plan by 8 March, and so we're on track. We know it's tight, but we'll get that done.

Media: But you've got to use a lot of House time to do that. Are you going to have enough time to do that in the House?

PM: Yes, our view is yes. As I said, we discussed it every single day, our progress on our 100-day plan, and we will discuss it again in Cabinet today. We've made good progress over the last week, as I said it's basically a run a ball that we have to hit—it's 14 days, I think, and 16 actions, and so we're well on track to do that.

Media: Are you going to have to extend the House sitting time into later into the night or even into the weekends to get this done?

PM: We'll do whatever it takes, frankly. That's what the New Zealand people expect us to do, and so if we have to go to midnight we will. If we have to use Fridays, we will. But we'll get the job done.

Media: Prime Minister, community leaders in Ōpōtiki are calling your gang crackdown a joke and saying that it won't work, people won't get over their patches, they aren't afraid of the police. Are you confident that it's actually going to work, and what advice have you received from police that they'll actually be able to do this?

PM: Yeah, look, that is—we're going to do something different because what has been happening hasn't been working. And I make no apologies for it. We cannot have a situation where there is a 51 percent growth in gangs, a 33 percent growth in violent crime, and the answer is, "Let's just carrying on doing exactly what we've been doing". So I'm sorry, no apologies, tough decision, but we're going to do something different. So we are going to ban the gang patches. We are going to give police powers and more tools for dispersal and consorting. We are going to make gang membership an aggravating offence. We're going to deal with illegal firearms with firearm prohibition orders. So you know, I'm sorry, but we campaigned on this for over two years. We talked very clearly about why it's a problem. Kiwis deserve to feel safe in their own homes, their businesses, their communities. That's what we're going to deliver.

Media: And will you go ahead with the ban even if it is against the Bill of Rights?

PM: Well, I'll tell you what, you know I think one of the—it was very interesting hearing Stuart Nash say some remarks in recent days. He just said so communities matter more than gangs, and basically we agree with them. There is no doubt about it: gangs' rights are going to be impinged by this legislation. We get that. We're happy with that, because frankly that the benefit or the, you know, the social costs that they cause through criminal activity is something that's well worth doing.

Media: So you are going to go ahead with that even if it breaches the Bill of Rights?

PM: Yes, yes, we will. There'll be obviously a process where the Attorney-General will come through with a BORA assessment as happens with every piece of legislation, and—but I make no, you know, I want to be really clear. We have a notion in this country built on rights and responsibilities. So gang members want all the rights of being a Kiwi—not prepared to carry the responsibilities, causing pain, suffering to all their fellow Kiwis as you saw. Last year, we saw a mother and a daughter hiding in a coffee shop in the middle of the day in Palmerston North as gangs went at it in the main street. So I'm sorry, the counterfactual's pretty clear. Carrying on doing more of the same doesn't cut it, and we're going to try something different. We've seen it work in WA. We're going to give it a go here and we're going to do what we need to do.

Media: You say you're going to do something different, but can you just explain practically how you are planning to do this when the police themselves say that they can't?

PM: No, you've heard the police commissioner say that he's actually very supportive of actually going after gang insignia. We already have a system in place where actually gang patches, for example, aren't allowed to be worn in public buildings, whether that's in courtrooms, in hospitals, in schools. We're going to expand that through. And so the police will operationalise this legislation and they operationalise a lot of legislation and regulations, and they'll do that with good judgement.

Media: *Sunday's* investigation last night quoted police officers who said that this is just—it's unrealistic, that it's not going to work.

PM: Well, we've also spoken to police officers who want to have more tools and more powers to crack down on gangs, and just carrying on doing the same, I'm sorry, just doesn't cut it.

Media: Can you outline how are you going to do that? Can you describe how this would happen in a place like Ōpōtiki?

PM: Well, our job in Government is we're actually going to ban the gang patches as we've talked about. We're going to make sure there's dispersal and consorting powers given to police officers, and police will operationalise those regulations in that legislation. They do that on a range of legislation and regulations that already exist today, and they will work their way through that.

Media: Are you comfortable with that trade-off, though? Police say that they're used to doing this, but it always means that they need to pull resources from one place and put it into say a place like Ōpōtiki. That might come, you know—mean that they can't address family harm incidents as much or mental health call-outs, which are obviously massive issues in our country. Are you comfortable with that, and how do you think that they are going to—

PM: I'm incredibly comfortable. The police are quite free to move resources around from one region to another region to a hotspot where there's crime or where there's real need for more resources. They are completely free to do that.

Media: But you're creating more crimes, right, for them to have to go after—

PM: Well, I'm sorry but we're not going to have a 51 percent growth in gangs and 33 percent growth in violent crime, ram raids and crime out of control, and Kiwi's not feeling safe. We're not going to have a situation in Ōpōtiki where you can't catch the bus to work, and

stores get closed because the gangs came to town. So the police will have the powers; they will want just more tools to be able to deal with it. It's one more tool that they have available to be able to crack down on gangs, and that's what we're going to do. And I'm sorry, but I have no—I think if you go outside and you talk to everyday New Zealanders who have been actually victims of crime, have seen intimidatory behaviour by gangs, we make no apologies about it. Tough decision—I get it—but we're going to do it.

Media: In Opposition, National went quite hard against Labour about the Rotorua District Council local bill, which was around Māori wards, and it was found that it could go against, or if it was put in place—you criticised Labour for that. Is it one rule for the Labour Government and one rule for the National Government, if you were going to override the Bill of Rights?

PM: No, look, successive Governments have a range of legislation that they have, with parliamentary sovereignty, the right to bring into law, and they've exercised that over successive Governments over many decades. So, look, I mean, we will see what the Attorney-General says once that legislation is prepared and it goes into the House. That's the normal process. All I'm saying to you is also our laws and our legislation also say that if individuals end up creating a social cost like crime, that is something that is also defensible for us to actually do something about, and that's what's happening here. We're saying that gangs are actually causing a huge amount of crime and suffering for their fellow citizens, and that has a social cost and a social—you know, around crime, and we're going to do something about it.

Media: You did use that as an attack line against Labour, though. Can you not see how people might see that as hypocritical?

PM: Our main issue there was about democracy and making sure that, actually, local communities had their say. That was the premise of our fundamental opposition to that particular piece of legislation.

Media: Isn't freedom of expression about democracy as well?

PM: Sorry?

Media: Isn't freedom of expression about democracy as well?

PM: Yeah, but freedom of expression that intimidates your fellow citizens and causes pain and suffering and drives crime isn't acceptable.

Media: Prime Minister, would you consider adding other insignia that are—other types of crime that are offensive and intimidate communities, like swastikas, to this law, or is it going to be illegal to wear a gang patch but legal to wear a swastika out in public?

PM: Again, you know, under the existing legislation, we define what a gang is. It's captured in legislation and, likewise, insignia is in the same gamut. But, you know, we're just saying very clearly: we don't want to have any insignia that's actually driving intimidatory behaviour driven by gangs out there, because that's not what people want and that's not what you're going to get.

Media: So if it's highlighted in legislation, then, what about those gangs—"Bike Riders for God", or Man Up, who wear insignia? What about our rangatahi—brown boys who wear hoodies down the street—

PM: That's not what we're talking about.

Media: — and we know that even before this legislation—

PM: No, no, no—no, no.

Media: —there was a significant number of our rangatahi Māori and Pasifika who were stopped by police because they were identified as gangsters—potential gangsters. What's the protection for those members of our community?

PM: In the legislation, you'll see very clearly we have a well-defined protocol for establishing what a gang is and what a gang isn't and actually listing those gangs, and we

also have a definition around insignia—so there'll be no difference here. So it's about making sure that, actually, we're very clear about it in the legislation so there's protection so that people who are not tied up with gangs are not caught up in that, but, actually, we're going to be very clear about here are the gangs, here's the insignia—

Media: So that includes Man Up, then, who do this—

PM: —it'll be a list—

Media: —who actually are intimidating?

PM: I won't go through the individuals now, but I'd just say to you there's a clear legislative process that lays out what a gang is and actually lists gangs, and we're going to continue to use the same process that we've used for banning gang patches in hospitals and jury and in courtrooms, and also in schools.

Media: Air New Zealand has asked the Government for an inquiry into the rebuild of Auckland Airport. Do you think that there is merit in a Commerce Commission probe into the way that Auckland Airport is regulated?

PM: Again, you know, we've got to let the Commerce Commission go through its pricing study that it's doing between airports and between Air New Zealand. We should let that run its course, and then that'll be a topic for the Commerce Commission to pick up.

Media: So you think the current regulation of Auckland Airport is sufficient?

PM: Again, those are decisions for the Commerce Commission, and once they work through the pricing rounds, they'll move into that conversation, I imagine.

Media: Stuart Nash has told RNZ that he fought, when he was in Cabinet, for there not to be that \$30,000 lower limit when it comes to seizing assets, and he still is advocating for it now, post - Parliament life. Are you going to look at that and see whether it should extend to all assets and get rid of that lower limit?

PM: Yes, we will. Mark Mitchell and I have talked about that over the last few weeks, as well. You would have seen—you know, I thought that was a very interesting insight. You know, basically, it underscored, again, a Labour Government soft on crime, and, again, Stuart Nash, I think, in fairness, was on the right course.

Media: So is that a new—you'll look to take the recoveries from whatever it's—

PM: Yeah, we want to revisit. At the time, you know, when it came through legislation last time, we were in the same position as Stuart Nash, which was that we thought that that should be much tougher. Exactly where that threshold is, we'll work that through, but \$30,000 is too high.

Media: Will you bring him on board to help you out?

PM: Well, it's just interesting—you know, Cabinet disclosures aside, I think he was probably the most effective of the police Ministers in the last few years from the Labour Government. Well, it's just interesting, you know. Cabinet disclosures aside, I think he was probably the most effective for the police Ministers in the last few years from the Labour Government, in terms of he actually seemed to be actually wanting to get tough on crime, and good on him. But, you know, the reality for us is that we're going to do something about it and get it done.

Media: You weren't saying that at the time, though. You were calling for his resignation at the end?

PM: Well, you know, as he said, I agree with a lot of what he said. You know, communities matter a lot more than gangs, and I agree with that.

Media: Prime Minister, you said previously that the previous Government's moves on smokefree legislation would make tobacco retailers a target for crime and ram raids. Do you stand by that, and why?

PM: Yeah, look, I mean, on smokefree we've gone ad nauseum around the houses on this one with you. We're not changing anything; we're just going back to the legislation that's delivered a huge decrease in smoking across New Zealand.

Media: But what is that based on, the argument that it would make tobacco retailers a target?

PM: Well, the reason is that we think by limiting distribution it makes those outlets more of a target for criminal activity. It also drives into a black market, which is some of the advice that has been received to the previous Government. And, importantly, we just disagree with that approach. We've got a piece of legislation that has worked incredibly well for New Zealand—we should be incredibly proud about it—over a number of Governments over a number of years.

Even that existing legislation that we're going back to delivered another further two points lowering of daily smoking rates across New Zealand. It went from 8.6 down to, I think, 6.8, just in the last year. We're on our way to delivering 5; that's what we've got to do. In the last decade, it's gone from 17 percent down to 6.8 percent. It's the same piece of legislation that we're going to be adopting as we continue to drive smoking rates down. We just disagree with the previous approach, which the Government only just put in before the election and hasn't taken effect—that, actually, that was the way to deal with things going forward; we disagree.

Media: The Opposition have said that you've used tobacco companies' lines to defend the Government's position on the smokefree legislation.

PM: What a load of rubbish. What an absolute load of rubbish. Again, we are focused on outcomes. We want to see smoking rates lowered here in New Zealand. We have a world-class piece of legislation that has driven it from 16.7 percent daily smokers, down to 6.8 percent, in a decade, and we all want to push on now and actually get that down to 5 percent. I know the Minister is taking that very seriously, and, like all of my Ministers, they're very focused on outcomes and deliverables.

Media: Can we get an answer on Reality Check Radio. Last week, Stuff asked your office if you were concerned that the station could be using your appearances—this is for Minister Stanford—to legitimise kind of extreme views such as Martin Sellner, who was last in the news for connections to the Christchurch terrorist. Are you concerned by that?

Hon Erica Stanford: Look, to be honest with you, it's only just come across my desk. I did an interview with Peter Williams a long time ago, and I'll consider it. But, as interviews come in, my press team deal with them and I'll take them on a case-by-case basis.

Media: Would you go back?

Hon Erica Stanford: Well, I'll have to look into it some more. It's not something I've given a huge amount of thought to, given what's been going on in my portfolios at the moment.

Media: Prime Minister, do you think that is a concern, that Ministers could be being drawn into quite extreme content on that station?

PM: Well, again, you know, that's up for individual Ministers to work out. We want to make ourselves available to as many media outlets as we possibly can. Plurality of media voices in New Zealand is very, very important. We do not want to see a groupthink emerge; it's actually very important that that happens. So, Ministers will make that call as to who they go on so that they can get their messages out and about to all New Zealanders.

Media: The Auckland War Memorial Museum is moving to a Treaty-centric approach to, I guess, telling New Zealand's war history. Do you have any issues with that, or is that a decision—

PM: I have no idea what that means. I don't know what it means. I mean, I honestly don't know what that means. I'm all for telling New Zealand's history in its fullest sense; I just don't know what that practically means, by making that statement.

Media: No, no, just—*[Inaudible]*

Media: Just on another message, just on Gaza, the situation is increasingly dire. Have you given any further consideration to a humanitarian visa for Palestinians with connections to New Zealand?

PM: Yeah, look, we have—the Minister is going to continue to monitor that and look into that. It is incredibly difficult, as you know, for people to come out of Gaza at the moment. We're on the other side of the world and it's—as we've seen with the Ukrainian visa—it's actually very, very difficult and relatively low levels of uptake. What our focus has been is making sure we've got very good consular support in country for Kiwis and permanent residents and their families, and we'll continue to do and work with that. And, obviously, a big focus for us has been making sure that we continue to support humanitarian efforts, and that's why we've put \$15 million through the World Food Programme and also international Red Cross. So that's, to be honest, really where our focus is, and, of course, calling on Israel not to go into Rafah. We think that's going to be catastrophic for people. They've got huge amounts of suffering.

But, equally, on the other hand, we expect Hamas to release hostages and we want to see all those parties get around the table and get into a Middle East peace process that ultimately delivers a two-State solution.

Media: And are you confident New Zealand is doing all it can to avoid a genocide occurring?

PM: Yeah, I think we are. I mean, I've partnered with—as I said last week—the Prime Ministers of Canada and also with Australia to put more voice to our statement and to our view that we want to not see Israel going into Rafah, we want to see Hamas release hostages and we want to see peace. We want people to get around the table. We have to give a lot of—the regional actors: Qatar, Egypt, the US that are deeply involved in trying to get those parties to the table, we support all of that action. We all want to see a cessation of hostilities in that region and we're doing everything that we can from this side to exhort for that.

Media: Seeing Glen raised it, are you concerned at all that a senior editor of Newsroom has gone on the record on Radio New Zealand saying that senior editors from across a range of legacy media have informally discussed the idea of, for instance, simply refusing to report your Deputy Prime Minister because they didn't like what he was saying?

PM: Well, look, what I'd say is that media has a very important role in our democracy. And I think if media feels that it's losing trust with the New Zealand people, that's something that obviously the industry should face up to and think about. I mean, with respect to—

Media: Do you think that sort of discussion embodies trust?

PM: Well, again, that's something for the media industry and outlets themselves to come together and actually say, "Is that driving a plurality of voices and media voices in the country?" But that is something you as media operators and spokespeople should be thinking about. What I'd just say to you is: Winston Peters' views are long-held and he has complete freedom to express them as he wishes.

Media: Prime Minister, could you tell us the cost to dismantle to Te Aka Whai Ora versus the keeping Te Aka Whai Ora, what is the difference in cost savings there?

PM: Yeah, look, I mean, what we're trying to do there is just make sure—and it's been a long-standing position of ours, as you well know, as a party that we have certain values that we believe in and we don't believe building massive bureaucracy here in Wellington is the way in which we improve Māori health outcomes. A better example is what we did before Christmas. We took \$50 million, we partnered with Māori iwi health organisations that have high trust in their communities and we set some clear targets to move immunisation rates of under-two-year-old Māori—young Māori under two—from 73 percent up closer to 90 percent. That's a task that we've actually got a clear objective around; \$50 million goes in, we work with the partners, and the iwi organisations actually deliver those outcomes. That is the model

that we want to use going forward. You know, because we want to see immunisation rates improve, we want to see waitlist times [*Inaudible*], we want to see faster treatment for cancer times. That's how we'll actually deliver that. So, essentially, yeah, we'll dismantle the Māori Health Authority and we'll make sure there's good investment to deliver improved outcomes for Māori.

Media: So do you expect iwi—those that have settled their Treaty claims—do you expect them to use their Treaty settlements to improve the health outcomes of their iwi?

PM: They may well do and many iwi have done a phenomenal job. If you look at the work of Ngāti Whātua and what they've done doing a deal with, say, nib to get better health outcomes for their iwi, I mean that is just fantastic. It is genius and brilliant and we should be pretty proud about it. But, actually, what I'm talking about is actually Government money getting out of Wellington, getting out to devolved and localised organisations—many of them iwi organisations—that then are tasked to actually get an outcome for us, and that outcome is often on those basic health outcomes.

Media: Can I just understand your thinking around the timing of that Māori Health Authority legislation going through the House; how long have you known when the tribunal hearing was to take place this Thursday?

PM: I don't know. It hasn't been a consideration at all. We've talked about opposing the Māori Health Authority since its inception. We talked about it really clearly in the election campaign, we put it into our 100-day plan immediately after we formed a Government, and that's what we're continuing to do. We're just working our way through our 100-day plan. Frankly, it hasn't been a consideration.

Media: If it wasn't a consideration though, why not just wait a week for the hearing to play out?

PM: We're just working our way through our plan. As I said, we've got 16 actions to do in the next 14 days; this is one of them. This is when it was scheduled to come together. We've been working on the legislation with the Parliamentary Counsel Office to actually take to Parliament, and that's what we're going to do.

Media: Many people might say that this is the Government looking to avoid accountability. What do you say to that?

PM: I'd disagree completely. I think: go back and look at the record of what we've been saying in Opposition. Look at what we took to the people of New Zealand in the election. Look at how fast we formed our 100-day plan, when it emerged, and what was on it, and you'll find that this was one of our 49 actions that we committed to doing and we're just working our way through our programme.

Media: Have you been advised—

PM: OK, sorry, last question.

Media: I was just going to say does this undermine the jurisdiction of the tribunal by introducing it beforehand?

PM: Not at all. We're just working through as a Government on our plans and moving forward, you know, as we'd planned to, and that's what we're doing here. So the tribunal is free to do its thing. The reality is we're also free to do our thing and we've said this is our plan. We went to the election talking about it. We think that we can get better outcomes for Māori by dismantling it and not through building bureaucracy. The tribunal is free to do its thing. The reality is we are also free to do our thing, and we've said this is our plan. We went to the election talking about it, and think that we can get better outcomes for Māori by dismantling it and not through building bureaucracy.

Media: However, have officials—

PM: Cool. Sorry, last question.

Media: Thank you. Have officials also informed you that there could be further litigation as a result of this?

PM: Look, there's litigation that happens all the time on a range of issues from a range of parties. But, you know, I'm telling you: we're here to get things done. We're going to move through our 100-day plan and we're going to move into a quarter two action plan, quarter three action plan, quarter four action plan. So that's what we're focused on right now and this is just part of us getting that done. All right, thanks so much, team. Appreciate it.

conclusion of press conference