

POST-CABINET PRESS CONFERENCE: MONDAY, 8 APRIL 2024
HANSARD TRANSCRIPT

PM: Kia ora koutou. Good afternoon, everyone, good to see you all. Today, I'm announcing the nine ambitious Public Service targets that our Government has set to get New Zealand back on track. Delivering better public services is one of our Government's three key priorities, along with rebuilding the economy and restoring law and order. We've made good progress already, but we are under no illusions about the scale of the challenges that we face as a country. Despite the hard work of our front-line staff on the ground, people like our brilliant police officers, doctors, nurses, teachers, and principals, New Zealand has been going backwards over the last few years.

The public sector, I think, was let down by the previous Government which scrapped Public Service targets, was distracted from the basics, and failed to drive focus and delivery in the services that New Zealanders rely on. Every New Zealander deserves to feel safe in their homes, their businesses, and their communities. Every New Zealander deserves to have confidence that if they or their loved ones get sick or injured they will receive timely health care. Every child in New Zealand deserves the opportunity to succeed and every parent deserves to know that when they send their child to school that they are receiving, in fact, a world-class education each and every day.

Law and order, health, education, work, housing, and the environment: these, along with the economy, are the things that matter most to Kiwis. Our Government is bringing back ambitious Public Service targets focused on improving results in these key areas. Some are very aspirational and will be very difficult to achieve. But our Government was not elected to tinker or tweak while the big problems go unsolved. We are not elected to manage decline, so I make no apologies for being ambitious and having expectations in our public sector.

I'll now take you through the nine Government targets to be delivered by 2030. We have two health targets. The first is aimed at shorter stays in emergency departments, with 95 percent of patients to be admitted, discharged, or transferred from an emergency department within six hours. The second is a target of shorter wait times for elective treatment. We want to see 95 percent of people wait less than four months for elective treatment.

There are also two targets aimed at reducing crime. The first of these is a target to reduce child and youth offending. We are targeting a 15 percent reduction in the total number of children and young people with serious and persistent offending behaviour. The second target is about having fewer victims of violent crime. This target aims to see 20,000 fewer people become victims of assault, robbery, or sexual assault.

And then we also have a target aimed at getting more people off welfare and into work. We want 50,000 fewer people on the jobseeker support benefit because we are ambitious for Kiwis, and I don't know anyone in this country whose creativity and spark is best served by a life on welfare.

As you know, education is a particular passion of mine, and a significant decline in educational achievement is a worry that does, frankly, keep me up at night. We have two targets aimed at turning that around. The first is: we have to get our kids back to school, so we will have a target focus on increased student attendance. It is a national shame that 54 percent of our kids haven't been attending school regularly, and our target aims to get 80 percent of our students present at school for more than 90 percent of the term. We'll have more to say about our plan tomorrow to achieve that. The second education target is to get more students at expected curriculum levels. We are targeting 80 percent of year eight students being at or above the expected curriculum level for their age in reading, writing, and maths by December 2030.

Our housing target is aimed at getting emergency housing back where it should be—needed rarely and only for brief periods, not a long-term place for people and families to

live. This target aims for fewer people in emergency housing, with a 75 percent reduction of households in emergency housing.

And finally, our target to get emissions down: we want to achieve reduced net greenhouse gas emissions and be on track to meet New Zealand's 2050 net zero climate change targets with total net emissions of no more than 290 megatons from '22 to '25 and 305 megatons from 2026 to 2030.

So as you can see, these targets will not be easy to achieve. But we are not here to do what is easy. We are here to do what is needed to tackle the big challenges that New Zealand has, no matter how difficult they may be. The targets are deliberately ambitious, and they will be challenging, and they will require the public sector to think differently, to dig deeply into root causes, to look at what's working in other places, and to be innovative and disciplined in directing resources to where they will have the greatest impact on outcomes. That is what New Zealanders expect and deserve. Part of why our Government is so focused on rebuilding the economy is so that we can afford to invest in the public services that New Zealanders deserve.

But we know that spending more money will not in itself deliver better results. Despite significant increases in spending under the previous Government, New Zealanders got worse results from their public services. Our Government has a different approach, one that is focused on improving outcomes by having a clear plan and real solutions rather than just simply throwing money at a problem and hoping that it will go away. Delivery of the targets is the responsibility of a lead Minister and also a lead Public Service agency CE, working in partnership with other Ministers and agencies as appropriate. Progress towards these targets will be reported publicly every quarter so that New Zealanders can see what results they are getting from their taxes.

Before we get into any questions about the targets, I'll just run through my movements for the remainder of this week. I am in Wellington until Thursday morning; I'll then be in Auckland until I leave for South-east Asia on Sunday morning. I will be leading a mission to Singapore, Thailand, and the Philippines alongside a senior business delegation.

South-east Asia, as many of you will know, is one of New Zealand's most significant export markets. Collectively, the region is the world's fifth-largest economy, and it accounts for just under 10 percent of all of New Zealand's exports, worth more than \$9.1 billion in 2023, and with that growing prosperity and influence will come opportunities for more enterprise and partnership in New Zealand. A top priority for my Government is bringing fresh energy and intensity to New Zealand's relationships offshore, re-engaging with our old friends, and reaching out to new partners. Ministers across Government are achieving that engagement in a range of areas—technology, commerce, defence, and trade—already. South-east Asia is in particular a region that is more crucial than ever to New Zealand's prosperity and our security, so it's an exciting trip. It's the first bilateral visit by a New Zealand Prime Minister to Thailand and the Philippines since 2013.

Singapore is obviously an old friend of New Zealand, and I'm looking forward to being back there as well. The region's economy is growing faster than just about anywhere in the world, even as new challenges arise from the impacts of climate change and strategic competition. But with those challenges brings incredible opportunities for New Zealand, and I want us to be front and centre so that we are actually hustling and harnessing all of those possibilities from continued dialogue and stronger partnerships.

Just in terms of House business, this week in Parliament we'll pass the misuse of drugs amendment bill. We'll also be progressing several Treaty settlement bills, and on Wednesday there'll be a members' day. And, with that, I'm very happy to take your questions.

Media: Prime Minister, just in terms of the serious young offenders, is that 15 percent target ambitious enough when thinking about pulling some of our most vulnerable and young people back onto the right tracks? Did you think about going higher than 15 percent?

PM: Well, we've got about 1,100 young children, or children and young people, that are actually what we call serious or persistent offenders, and, obviously, if we target 15 percent, we're bringing that down to about 900. For us, that's a starter. You know, we want to be able to set these targets. They are out to December 2030. If we feel we can achieve it quicker, faster, we'll continue to adapt them or adjust them, but for now it would be pretty good to actually do what we're trying to do, is, you know, we've had a decline in a lot of measures and outcomes; we've got to get it stabilised and then we've got to start to improve them, and so that, for us, is a good starting point.

Media: How realistic is a 75 percent reduction in emergency housing, and where will they go?

PM: Yeah, well, the benefit of picking these nine targets is that it actually forces us to get into conversations about the root causes. So I appreciate we have other indicators, for example, on housing. You know, we want to make sure that we open up new houses for sale and purchase, we want to make sure we open up more in the rental market, we've obviously got to expand the social and State housing list as well. But by focusing on the emergency housing piece, it's actually going to force us to have conversations across the whole of the housing sector. And so, for us, no, we've got to say that enough is enough. You know, that has to be an ambition. You know, we want New Zealand to be one of the leading small, advanced countries on earth, period, and for that to happen, we've got to set some pretty big ambitions. And I don't think 3,100 households waking up this morning in emergency housing in motels, being there often for longer than 12 weeks, is actually a success.

Media: That's around 2,000 households, though, that you're trying to—

PM: Down to about 800.

Media: Where will they go?

PM: Well, that's why we'll be wanting to increase the supply of State and social housing. We've talked about a review of KO, which is coming together now, but also opening up community housing providers. We want to expand the private rental market as well, and we also need to expand the actual supply of houses. We have supply problems in our housing sector for ownership, for rent, for State and social housing, and also for emergency housing. So by working on these goals, it forces us to have conversations about what we're doing to deliver in general.

Media: So just in terms of chunking it down, as you might say, are there interim goals on the way there, because that's two elections away before you can expect to be held accountable for these targets?

PM: Yeah, well what I'll be doing is I'm chairing the strategy committee of Cabinet. That's where we discuss the quarterly work plans, but also the progress against the goals and the targets. We'll be able to actually bring the CEs and Ministers in to jointly discuss what are some of the root causes of why we're not making sufficient progress or fast enough progress along the way. But these are markers and targets set out to the end of December 2030.

Media: Can you promise you won't be changing them as you go? Because last time they were introduced, sometimes they were changing percentage reductions to flat numbers to make them easier to achieve. Can you promise you won't be doing that with these targets?

PM: Look, this is what we think is the right way for us to set out and to focus—what are we trying to do here? We're trying to focus the Public Service. I want to focus our Ministers and our Government, and I also want the New Zealand people to understand these are the things that they tell us are important to them. There's lots of other indicators. There's lots of other things we've got to do as a Government; don't get me wrong. But these are the ultimate outcomes that we actually need to be really focused on as a country.

Media: How's the Public Service going to be resourced to meet them?

PM: Oh well, I mean, we want—this is what's going to help the Public Service get very, very focused with the resources that they have. We want them to actually stop the dumb spending on programmes that aren't working in delivering these goals. We want them to make sure that they're actually, you know, in terms of back-office efficiency that it's as efficient as it can be. Remove the consultants, the contractors, and focus on frontline delivery of these goals.

Media: Have you asked them what happened with the Suicide Prevention Office, and that communication between the ministry and the Minister?

PM: Look, I think on that one, you heard the Ministry of Health say they didn't adequately brief the Minister. It was good to see the Minister jump in and actually say, look he wants the function of the Suicide Prevention Office to continue and that will happen.

Media: This is the second time though, that something's happened—it happened with Penny Simmonds and the disability carers allowance. Are you happy with what's happening, the communications with the Ministers and the ministry?

PM: Yes, we've got a big Government with lots of programmes and lots of expenditure and lots of change happening, and I think our Ministers are doing a very good job of actually being on top of the detail of it. And we're expecting those CEs of those major agencies to deliver those savings for us, and we want to do that while we get rid of the inefficiencies in the back office. We want to prioritise the front-line services; we do want to make sure the programmes are hooked up to the goals that I'm talking about today. And that's what's going to force these conversations because I think we've got to go back and look at the recent history; you know, we had an 84 percent increase in Government spending, we hired 16,000 more public servants, we hired a record number of consultants, and yet every single one of these nine measures went backwards over that period of time. And so we need to be able to actually say this has got to focus our system so that we actually say this is what we are working towards. And in delivering some of those goals, if you think about emergency department wait-list times, for example, and getting more people through an emergency department faster and quicker, a lot of that's actually going to lead us into conversations about why is it so hard to get access to a GP, and a whole bunch of other downstream things that actually lead, ultimately, into that target.

Media: Is the 50,000 reduction in benefit numbers only a target for those deemed ork-ready, or does it include those on the jobseeker that are there for the health and disability?

PM: It's actually the total jobseeker beneficiaries, and what it is saying is that if you are on jobseeker—as we've discussed before—you could be ready to work between now or within a two-year period. There are even those that are on health that are still on the jobseeker benefit that want to get into work. It might be part-time work, as we've discussed before, but for us what has been unacceptable is 70,000 more people on the jobseeker benefit, 130,000 people in net migration coming into New Zealand, and actually we're not doing a good service by those people by sending them out into welfare for so long. You know, the average adult now, once on benefit, is actually there now for 13 years on average. The under-25s, they're for 24 years. Well, we're not just going to just consign them to a life on welfare. We really have to do everything; we care about those young people; we want them in work.

Media: So you'd like to see the number on jobseeker for health and disability reasons drop?

PM: Again, we've looked at it at a total jobseeker level. We want to work for people who are on health and disability who want to work, that's why they're on that benefit—they're not in the supported living environment, as we've discussed before. They may want to do part-time work, they may want to get work ready. They may want to do more programmes in preparation for work. We want to make sure that we are doing everything we can to get people off welfare and into work where we think there's a much better future for them and their families.

Media: It was mentioned that benefit numbers have gone up 70,000 in the last six years but you only want to drop them 50,000. Why don't you want to go back to 2017 levels?

PM: Well, I'd just like to stop having—you know, at the moment we've had 70,000, you know, people added to unemployment. We've got to stabilise that. We've got to bring it down, and that's where the 50,000 comes in.

Media: But you've got six years to do it. So why would you not set a target—because you keep saying that 70,000 were added, so why would you not set the target from where it began?

PM: Well, we've set it a 50,000; we think that's a pretty good go. We know we're going to have a larger economy. We know we've got some, you know, difficulties going economically at the moment with respect to unemployment, with respect to 4 of our last 5 quarters, the economy not growing. We need to get that turned around and sorted as quickly as we possibly can, get the economy growing, create employment opportunities for people, get them off welfare, get them into work, do everything we can to support them in that transition, with respect to job coaches, a whole bunch of support that we can put into place, but we need to be able to get New Zealand actually growing again. A lot of it's about getting people back to work.

Media: That number—can you talk a little bit about how you arrived it at? Because, obviously, there's a lot of things feeding into that—population growth, the economy size, the state of the economy. How did you land at that 50,000?

PM: Yeah, look, those were conversations that were had with the individual Ministers and their CEs and then amongst themselves as well, and they came and we had a process that we've been through over the last couple of months, just making sure we have a comfort level about these goals. What I'd just say to you, though, is when you look at them, they are all very ambitious, you know? And I get it; people are going to say, "Oh, you've set it too hard or too high." Actually, we have to do that, because we have a fantastic country with so much potential in this place, and we have to say, "Look, enough is enough. The excuses have to stop." We've got to march this show forward with a bit of ambition, a bit of aspiration, positivity, and celebrating excellence. So we're going to get into this stuff big time and push hard for it.

Media: Can I get some clarification on that 13 years average number? Is that forecast? Because I think, in January 2023, the average time on the benefit was 3.3 years or something?

PM: Yeah, I can give you the stats afterwards, but, basically, what we were looking at was adults on main benefits, from memory. That had previously been at 10 years, as it was life on welfare. It has now driven up over to 13 years. Likewise, with under-25s on benefits, they were driven up to 24 years. And so, again, that's why—the goals in themselves are of a provocation for conversations to take place between the Ministers and the agencies and myself, actually, through the strategy committee to make sure that we're doing everything we can to deal with these numbers. So, for example, in that case, when you think about getting people off the jobseeker benefit into work and you think about the value of what we're going to spend in the next six years actually supporting people on welfare, we're better to take some of that money and surge it and do social investment properly, you know, so that we can actually get people set up for success. So we want enhancing economic productivity to be the basis for all our economic policies. We want social investment to be the basis for all our social policies—and emission reductions, obviously, for our environmental policies.

Media: Prime Minister, just on emissions reduction, I mean, you call it a huge ambition, but you've actually given yourself room for emissions to grow.

PM: Sorry?

Media: You've given yourself room for emissions to grow every year to 2025. Where's the ambition?

PM: No, what I'd just say with that is it's actually a targets thing, in the sense of what this is is the emissions reductions budgets 1 and 2, which are over different year periods. So, if you think about it, one is actually, I think, over a four-year period. The other is over a five year period, just by virtue of how it was created at the time. What we're saying is we supported the emissions reduction budgets of the previous Government. We want to make sure that they are delivered. Obviously, we've got to write a third emissions budget for 2030 to 2035. That continues to plot us on that pathway to net carbon zero by 2050.

Media: You all talked a big game in Opposition about having targets—you know, ministerial KPIs, public sector KPIs, lots of subgoals. ACT also promised to come along, but this is just nine marketing—you're not going to get judged on them, as I said, up to 2030.

PM: No, I disagree completely. I utterly disagree completely. There have been no targets in the previous administration, and look how badly we've been served and the New Zealand people have been served. These are the nine targets that matter the most. These are the targets that actually force a really powerful conversation to take place about, "Well, what are we doing to get from 50, 46 percent to 80 percent, you know, school attendance for our kids?" And so that sparks a whole bunch of conversations around the policies, the programmes, and the plans that we need to be able to put in place to be able to improve those results. There is, of course, by each portfolio a different set of indicators that we're looking at very closely, so we make sure that these goals are not gamed. We make sure that we're making sure that social investment is at the heart of these Public Service goals as well, but no, I disagree with you completely. We need to set some ambition in this country, and when we just sit there every month with random numbers coming through at us saying how many kids are going to school regularly and it's the same number and it's worse, and it's worse than all of our competitors around the world, of similar countries that we think are likeminded to us, that has to stop. And so that's why we're setting some ambition, and it will force some conversations about what are we doing to actually get them there.

Media: Just to be clear, though, and I shouldn't have said [*Inaudible*] there won't be other targets added in different areas?

PM: These are the big nine big rocks that we think, actually, for New Zealanders sitting out there in New Zealand, that that matters the most to them, you know, in terms of if you think about the topics we've picked, around education and housing, health, you know, the environment, law and order. Those are important things to New Zealanders. These are the big things. Of course, there's other indicators. Of course, there's lots of other things the Government will be doing, but we want to focus the Public Service, we want to focus our Cabinet and our Ministers, and we want to focus for the New Zealand people to say, "These are the things that you should be judging us by and holding us account to."

Media: Is DPMC going to create a delivery unit under your instruction to drive these targets and/or other targets?

PM: Yeah, they've got a very narrow scope to monitor regularly. As I said, quarterly reporting will be going out to the public, and also we'll also have more monthly reporting going through to me with the strategy committee as well.

Media: So does that mean you're changing the shape of the implementation unit?

PM: Well, the implementation unit has stopped, and what we're doing is creating a small, targeted delivery unit that's actually designed to help us deliver this.

Media: When did that unit stop?

PM: It's part of our ongoing process around reshaping DPMC.

Media: There's a brand new surgical centre in North Shore Hospital sitting empty because it can't be staffed. How is that going to affect the target of cutting down the surgical wait times?

PM: Yeah, well, look, that's utterly disappointing, isn't it, and it is a function of actually not having got the workforce in place, and so that's where Health New Zealand are talking to the Minister about that today and yesterday, as well, to make sure that they can actually get the staff there and get that up and running. But that is an example and a byproduct of actually not dealing with the workforce in our health sector, not dealing with targets, and not actually getting the front-line money out of the bureaucracy to the front-line services, where they need to be.

Media: So if it wasn't for the targets—

PM: Sorry?

Media: So if it wasn't for the fact that targets would be set, it would be staffed by now?

PM: Well, basically, what I'm saying to you, in the healthcare agenda, we've got to make sure we raise significantly our workforce. That's why you've seen us announce a third medical school; that's why you've seen us make sure we've got medical staff on the green list for rapid importation of staff—of immigrants into New Zealand. But we've also got—you know, we've done a lot of smart things in the health space already. There's a lot more for us to do. But, yes, that is a function of actually not having the workers initially to get that facility up and running. We need to get it up and running quickly. Health New Zealand and the Minister will keep working through that.

Media: Some of the criticism about targets in the past is that they've had kind of adverse impacts that the Public Service is focused so much on one thing that other flow-on effects happen, and I just wondered if you'd put anything in place—sorry, I keep banging on about the benefits, but is there a risk that people will not be able to access the disability benefit, or the sickness and health and disability part of the jobseeker benefit because MSD is so focused on keeping those numbers down, people won't be able to access what they need?

PM: No, because the nature of how I plan to run it is that as chairing the strategy committee, in would come, you know, Debbie Power, the CEO of MSD, and in would come Louise Upston, the Minister relevant—who's responsible for that. The two of them together are meeting with us in a Cabinet committee, actually discussing "Well, how is the progress going?", and we're looking at other supporting indicators to make sure we're getting a quality of result, not just a gaming of the target, and that's quite possible to do because you actually have a series of other indicators that you're looking for. So, for example, Jenna, it's very easy to actually move—you know, there's different—you know, there are some people who have been long-term unemployed for a long period of time, and that's a much harder challenge to retrain and reskill them and to set them up for success in work than it is, say, for others that may have just recently come on to the jobseeker benefit and are in between jobs. We don't want the focus just to go to the easy bits; we've actually got to be able to have a conversation with ourselves in those meetings to actually say, "Well, what are we doing, and how are we using social investment, in particular, to actually deal with the long-term unemployed?"—the much harder cases, where people need a lot more support to be able to transition off welfare and into work.

So that's why I say to you, don't look at it as a single, one-dimensional sort of thing, and "He's got some targets here." The targets are there to drive a conversation and, more importantly, the actions that actually get us moving forward and into the right direction that we want to get to.

Media: And just quickly, to return to my first question: are you comfortable with 900 youth offenders being recidivist offenders?

PM: No, but I want to start somewhere, and knowing how difficult it has been and watching what has happened over recent years, clearly what we've been doing hasn't been

working. I think that is a pretty serious goal. We've seen rising levels of young people offending. We've got a number of initiatives coming, you know, around serious youth offender categories. We've got our military academies coming, but we've also got an awful lot of work to do to get social investment up and running and to get the right community support services around those young people as well, and I think—you know, that's not to say that we won't work with everybody. We'll work with as many as we can, but I'm just wanting to put a starter for 10, because, man, it would be great to have a 15 percent lower level of offending.

Media: It doesn't seem that efficient, though, does it?

PM: Well, it may not be to you, but given the scope of the problem that we've got and to make sure that our systems actually are working and we're getting all the right community partners involved that can actually deal with it, I think it's a good starting place.

Media: Is it too hard because—in your first answer there, you said “looking at how difficult it is”. Is that the problem—is that it's too difficult to kind of fight, help these young people?

PM: No, not at all. It's just that—

Media: Well, it's just because you're standing up here today talking a lot about ambition—being ambitious—

PM: Yes.

Media: —with these targets. But 15 percent doesn't seem ambitious, so why have you not made it higher? Is it too difficult?

PM: Well, I'd just say to you, you know, we have had a major challenge around ram raids, around youth offending—as you have seen—over the last few years, right? So we have to get on top of that really quickly and as fast as we possibly can. I'm not meaning to be unambitious; I'm just setting a target out there and making it very clear. If we can over-deliver it, overachieve, and set a new one, I'd be very happy to set a new one there.

Media: You realise it's a low target, though, because you have set targets of 75 percent and 95 percent, and yet with youth offenders, it's 15. It's not high.

PM: Well, I'd just say to you, on all of these nine indicators, you know, everything has been going south, in the wrong direction. We have to stop it heading south and continuing to get worse. We have to stabilise it and then we actually have to lift it and get it to a much better place. And so, I think, you know, I appreciate your point and it may well be—and I'd love it to be—a lot higher, and that would be great. But I'm telling you I want social investment in the bloodstream of how we do things in Government. I think we've got a bit of work to move from theory into action, to work with the partners that are actually getting the outcomes and the results for these young people, in particular, and also making sure we get that balance right of stick and carrot.

Media: How many staff will the delivery unit have?

PM: I can't remember, I can get that to you later. But it's—again—very focused on delivering against these nine goals and facilitating that conversation in the strategic subcommittee.

Media: And what's the sort of idea behind it? Does it draw from the sort of “deliverology” concept out of the Tony Blair Government?

PM: Well, what I'd say is it's not what we saw before with what was—I think the previous Government called it an “implementation unit”. You know, that is the job of Ministers and Government agencies and everybody to deliver and to implement and to get things done. What this is about is making sure that we are making progress against these nine major goals that we have. We look at other supporting indicators that support the delivery of these goals. And more importantly, it forces a good conversation with our policy

people to say, “Well, is that programme actually working to get that outcome or is it not? Let's stop that, let's take the money off that and put it behind this programme which is getting better outcomes.”

Media: Where does the concept come from though? I mean, DPMC officials met, I think, with Delivery Associates—a consulting firm—to discuss this, you know, did [*Inaudible*].

PM: Well, I'd just say to you I've come from a commercial world, as you know. It's quite normal when you want to get things turned around; you have a focus on outcomes. But I'd also say to you look at Singapore, go look at Estonia, go look at New South Wales state government, for example, that run things in very similar ways and have had great success focusing their Public Service and their resources on delivering these goals. The exciting thing here is that if you're a Government agency, now you've got real clarity. And so the question is: well, what do we do differently? What do we have to change? How much bolder, more innovative can we be to actually make progress on these goals? What is it that we have to do differently? Just more of the same isn't going to deliver it because it's not working for us. It hasn't been working. What's been working in Singapore, Estonia, and New South Wales, what's been working in bits of New Zealand that we need to say “That's a great programme that's dealing with that issue. Why don't we actually scale that up and make sure that happens across the whole of New Zealand, stop this dumb stuff over here and move the money from there to there?” So, you know, CEOs or Prime Ministers get to work with a given set of resources. And I know a lot of you think, you know, I'm coming from a CEO background—I make no apologies about that, because it hasn't worked for us the last six years having career politicians delivering results or improved results for New Zealanders. But you get to do different things with those resources, and you get to make decisions about how you can better deploy a fixed set of resources and the trade-offs that you have to make to get those outcomes.

Media: So, Prime Minister, what advice did you take—in respect to the youth offending rate, what advice did you take in respect to law and human rights, legal rights, of the tamariki, rangatahi, and human rights breaches? Is that one of the reasons why your targets are so low?

PM: No, no, it hasn't been a consideration whatsoever, because, actually, the bigger consideration here is what are the root causes of what are causing young people to offend in the way that they are in New Zealand? Why have we had a big explosion of that? Those are the questions that we want to be able to answer and solve for and that's why we want to design the programmes and policies to deliver against those problems.

Media: But did you get any legal or human rights advice?

PM: No, our focus is on saying “It is unacceptable where we sit today”. And if we just start to say “That's how things are in New Zealand and we're prepared to accept that” well, I'm sorry, we're not. That's why we came to Government.

Media: So you also mentioned New South Wales, will you be adopting some of the methods that they use for their youth offenders, like [*Inaudible*] overheads or—

PM: No, no.

Media: —isolation—

PM: No.

Media: Will you be introducing those? Well, what do you mean by “tougher on youth crime?”

PM: Well, what we've said before is there's a whole range of policies as we go through the course of the next few years to make sure that we are putting the policies in place, whether it's around social investment, working with community organisations. I've sat down with a number of them that are doing amazing work with these young people—14, 15, 16 that have had their first or second or third offending experiences. We've got to work out

which those programmes are working, turn off the money to the ones that aren't going anywhere and aren't delivering results, put more money and more resources behind those that are. So the point we're starting with is here's the problem we're trying to solve and then here's the solutions that deliver against that problem. What I have felt coming into politics in the last three years is it's a unique place where we end up having a whole bunch of solutions—as ideological—that often roams around trying to attach to a problem. Whereas in my world you define your problem really clearly and then you put common-sense practical solutions to deal with that problem. So, with respect—

Media: So you will not be adopting any of those punitive measures [*Inaudible*]

PM: No. No, I was referencing New South Wales with respect to saying other jurisdictions in other states and/or countries have used targets, which was the question I was asked for before.

Media: The Remuneration Authority is currently in the process of reviewing MPs pay and salary. Is now the right time to be upping what MPs earn?

PM: Look, again, those are decisions for the independent Remuneration Authority. It's not for a Prime Minister or an MP to comment on their pay. We've set up an independent Remuneration Authority for that very reason. We need to let them run through their process and see where they get to.

Media: But the recommendation comes back to you. It's likely that they'll impose some sort of increase, or they'll recommend that. If there is a recommendation to increase MPs' pay that comes across your desk, will you accept that?

PM: Look, I'm just not going to get into that, because we have set this up with an independent Remuneration Authority for a particular reason, over many years of learning, to say that MPs should not be involved in setting their own pay. I think the Remuneration Authority—let's let them do their work, and they're in that process now.

Media: Just one more: wouldn't it show quite a bit of leadership from you that while you're cutting jobs in the public sector you took a stand or you stood up and said, "No, we're not actually going to receive a pay increase."?

PM: Yeah, so, Jason, I don't know how to be any clearer: there is a process that has been set up under successive Governments to have an independent review authority to look at MP pay. I am not involved with that. I don't want to be involved with that. That should be a decision for the independent Remuneration Authority to do so. You do not want MPs making decisions about their own pay, and that's why it was set up in an independent way. Let's let them do their work, and let's see what they come up with.

Media: Prime Minister, on voluntary redundancies at the Ministry for the Environment, it's prompted the PSA to describe the Government as shortsighted and shallow and that it's prioritising tax cuts over the environment. What do you say to that?

PM: I've seen lots of statements from the PSA, but what I just say to you first and foremost is that—you know, let's be clear: any job loss, whether in the private sector or the public sector, are incredibly difficult for people impacted and also their families. So let's start there first and foremost. What we've said in the public sector is that we actually need our public sector CEOs and agencies to deliver savings. We believe that there are inefficiencies in the back office of these Government agencies. We want them to prioritise the protection of front-line services, and we also want them to be able to make sure that they are delivering against these goals that we're setting. And so if that means stop the dumb stuff, stop working on projects that actually aren't leading to the improvement of these outcomes or these results, let's move the money and the resources from the back office to the front line, so be it. And so the CEOs have been charged with delivering savings, as you well know—6.5 percent or 7.5 percent; how they deliver that, given they are closest to it to make the choices within their own organisations, to say how they make trade-offs between the different resources they have in order to deliver these goals. So, you know, I think many of

them are coming back and cutting out on consultancy spends. Many of them are looking at their back office functions, saying, "Have we got that optimised, working right, or is that just bureaucracy?" And, in some cases, sadly, yes, there will be job losses.

Media: Just on AUKUS, New Zealand has been in discussion for months now. So if Japan is about to sign up, how serious are Kiwis to join in too?

PM: Well, look, again, there have been no formal announcements. I've read some of the reports as well. As I've said, our position is no different from the previous Government: we're open to exploring AUKUS pillar 2, and that's a conversation that'll be ongoing through the course of this year.

Media: What expertise would New Zealand bring to AUKUS?

PM: Again, I'm not going to get into that. All we've signalled is that we want to explore looking at what the opportunities for New Zealand might be under pillar 2 of AUKUS.

Media: In January, your Government deployed personnel to the Middle East—

PM: Yes.

Media: At the time, you said it was wrong to conflate the issues in Israel and Gaza with the Houthi attacks in the Red Sea. Do you stand by that?

PM: Yes, I do.

Media: Why do you stand by that?

PM: Well, we believe in the values of freedom of navigation. We're a small trading nation, and we believe in international law. We saw a situation where there were a number of countries that had their shipping—you know, ships—attacked, and we're backing up our values with actual action, and that's why we sent six personnel there as part of that targeting team to work there.

Media: We've seen some of the Foreign Affairs advice that your Ministers considered at the time, and it said that the events in Israel and its war with Hamas have been broader effects impacting New Zealand's trade interests, and it mentioned the Houthi attacks in the Red Sea. Doesn't that contradict your statement that we shouldn't conflate the two?

PM: No, I disagree. I disagree. To conflate those two issues, I don't think is fair.

Media: Isn't that what the advice—

PM: Sorry?

Media: Isn't that what the advice from officials was doing?

PM: No, I would dispute that. What I'd say to you is that there has been a particular challenge in the Red Sea, where New Zealand sends a huge amount to its exports through, as do many other nations around the world. We saw indiscriminate attacks on ships, and as a result, we believe in a certain set of values, as I've said before, and in our foreign policy reset, it's very important for us that we stand up to those values, and so when we believe in things like freedom of navigation, as a small trading nation, that's important. When we believe in the international law—and so for us to send a small team of six there to be part of a coalition response, that's important. What I would just say to you is without doubt what we're seeing in Gaza is utterly unacceptable. You know, we want to see an end to hostilities there. We've been calling for that for some time. I've tried to coordinate the positions of—you know, I've been joining statements with Prime Ministers from Australia and Canada, in particular, in recent months, as you've seen. You go look at our statements in the General Assembly. We know that military action is not the way we get peace in Gaza. We need the peace process to kick off. We need parties to get round the table. Hamas needs to release the hostages. Israel needs to make sure that it's not indiscriminately targeting civilians, or civilians getting caught up can get humanitarian aid into there as quickly as possible. But they need to get round the table and a peace process needs to be commenced to get to a two-state solution.

Media: Do you accept there's a link between what's happening in Israel and Gaza and Houthi attacks in the Red Sea?

PM: We made the decision to send six New Zealanders to the Red Sea because we believe in a set of values around the international rule of law. We believe in the freedom of navigation. We are a small trading nation, and we're going to back that up with our support.

Media: But do you see the link between the two of these?

PM: I've seen Houthi attacks on ships that have got nothing to do with Israel as well in that region.

Media: As part of Callaghan Innovation's proposed cuts, they're looking at targeting 30 jobs that are of scientists and engineers. Are you comfortable with that, seeing as your Government is one that wants to further technology and innovation?

PM: Well, look, again, as I said, those are decisions for the CEO of Callaghan in that case, in that instance. I think there is a bigger, broader question, which we'll talk through in the coming months ahead, which is our growth plan for New Zealand really relies on us actually embracing science, technology, and innovation, big time. And we have to do a much better job of getting our Crown research institutes and our universities and our research and development spend from our businesses joined up, working together on actually commercialising our science, technology innovation. We do a great job with our scientists. We've got some of the smartest people, I think, in the world, but we do a very, very poor job of commercialising that science for the benefit of New Zealanders, and that's where I want to see a step change over time.

Media: In respect to your Government's targets, will you resign if you don't reach those targets?

PM: I don't think that's necessary because I think the New Zealand people are going to be able to judge us on our performance and progress against those targets with elections. But what I'm telling you is I am deeply committed to getting things done for New Zealanders. That's why I've come to do this job and that's why I've come into politics three years ago. We have a fantastic country—it is jam-packed with huge amounts of potential—but we have to get the show on the road, and part of it—

Media: Well, who's going to take responsibility, though, if you don't reach those targets?

PM: Well, I'll take ultimate responsibility, but the New Zealand public will have their say every three years in an election.

Media: But you're not going to resign if you don't take—

PM: Every three years in an election they'll have their say. These are goals to get us to December 2030. There'll be plenty of time for that.

Media: Prime Minister, I just have a couple of questions on behalf of a colleague about the survey that was released today about media trust. Are politicians partly to blame for eroding trust in the media?

PM: No, I don't think so. Sorry, I haven't seen the data, first and foremost, so it's probably inappropriate for me to comment. But I'd just say, all of our institutions, whether they're, you know, politicians, media, we all need to be working on our own ability to make sure that we're building our institution and its trust that it has with New Zealand people.

Media: So the kind of headline figure out of it is that the report shows only 30 percent of Kiwis trust the news media. Does that worry you?

PM: Well, I think, as I said earlier in recent weeks, that's something obviously for the media sector and the media industry to start to think and reflect upon, you know, to make sure that it is actually building trust with the New Zealand people.

Media: Do you think politicians have a role to play in maintaining public trust of a functioning media as a pillar of democracy?

PM: Well, the primary responsibility sits with you and the media industry yourselves to make sure that you are building your social licence; you're building your trust with the New Zealand people, that they trust you to tell the stories straight and to do it as you should. We in Government have a job to make sure our Government has high levels of trust as well.

Media: What about, Prime Minister—do you trust the media?

PM: I think you do a great job. I think you're a really important part of our democracy. I may not agree with everything you say about me over the last three years—as I'm sure every other politician of any political party would say to you as well—but I think you are an absolutely critical part of our fabric, of our democracy, of a liberal democracy. We want a strong media institution and it needs to be able to build back trust with the New Zealand people.

Media: Prime Minister, the firearms Minister's been accused of misleading the public over the number of people allowed to have prohibited semi-automatics. Have you spoken to her about being more clear about the numbers that she uses?

PM: Look, I haven't, and I haven't seen those reports and I just would ask you to direct those comments to the Minister herself. But what I'd say is that she's very committed to firearms safety. She's very committed to making sure we get the balance right.

Media: On the Public Service cuts, is it your expectation that Ministers go line by line through these dumb projects or is it an operational issue?

PM: Look, from my point of view, I want the Ministers to be aware of—they need to be aware of the savings that are happening within their purview and within their portfolio. And, you know, I want them to be really understanding of exactly what is going on within their portfolios.

Media: Why is it that the mental health Minister seemed to be caught out by media reports about his own ministry, and the same happened, I guess, with Whaikaha?

PM: I disagree. I think what you saw was a Minister and a Ministry of Health that said itself it didn't adequately brief the Minister. But, importantly, the Minister has signalled very clearly that his expectation of the function of the Suicide Prevention Office would continue.

Media: Winston Peters is spending a week in Washington and New York, taking high-level meetings. You might say he's bringing fresh energy to the relationship. What is the status of New Zealand under the ANZUS treaty?

PM: Well, we're very supportive of ANZUS, clearly, but what you're seeing is an all-of-Government effort for us to lift our intensity in our foreign affairs relationships, because whether it's around foreign affairs, whether it's around defence, whether it's around trade and security, we are having a full court press, particularly with Ministers McClay, Peters, Collins, and myself, to make sure that we actually are lifting our engagement with our traditional partners and friends, and also new partners as well.

Media: Do you intend to commit to any sort of new architecture around—and I'm not necessarily talking about AUKUS, but, like, you know, there has been discussion that New Zealand is not in ANZUS, like, at all. Is it time to reaffirm—

PM: No, you've heard us come out before Christmas and, I think, for the first time in a long time declare with our two-plus-two meetings with our Australian counterparts, which I've instituted since I met with Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, that actually we declare very strongly our wanting to be a very important part of that, our ANZUS relationship, and to renew that.

Media: Is it your intention to represent New Zealand at the NATO summit in July?

PM: Again, I won't talk about that. I'll talk about that closer to the time, but, as you know, we've been well represented as affiliates of NATO.

Media: You mentioned Estonia as a comparator country a couple of times there. What is it about Estonia that we should compare ourselves to?

PM: Well, I guess the thing is there are so many great things about New Zealand, right? Like, there are things that we just do brilliantly, better than any country on earth, but I also believe that you should learn from others, because what's the point of us repeating the same mistakes if we can get some insights as to how someone else has dealt with it. So if I look at Estonia, for example, I look at them and the way that they have digitised Government services and put a customer service mentality into their Government public services is really fantastic. You know, they probably do that now better than Singapore. I look at Ireland a lot, because I look at them with respect to the research and development and how they've built an ecosystem that actually now leads that they've got many, many billion-dollar-plus companies out there in the world raising huge amounts of exports, and Ireland now is twice as wealthy as New Zealand. I look at New South Wales because they've done things around infrastructure development, as has Victoria. That's why I went and met with the Premier of Victoria when I was in Melbourne recently, because they've done some great work on public infrastructure.

Media: Estonia has also turned around its education system. And a couple of the programmes that they used were universal free school lunches and only having three exams: one in Estonian, one in maths, and one in a subject of choice. Would you learn from that?

PM: Well, there's lots that we can learn from lots of places, and as you've seen, I can look at education systems in Denmark as well. I look at Estonia. I look at what Ireland has done, for example, in education.

Media: That's good evidence to keep free school lunches, isn't it?

PM: Well, I just say to you there's lots for us to learn. If you look at Ireland, they've also done a great job on education. And why are we so hot on education? Why am I personally so agitated about it and determined to change it? It's because, as I said before, I am a kid whose parents left school at 15, 16. I did well in the world because I had a good education and I was able to go out and do well for myself. I want that for every Kiwi kid, but we know that there are really high-paying great jobs coming for the New Zealand economy, but if we can't get our kids to school and we can't get them educated right, how on earth are they supposed to access those jobs? So that's why you've seen such a big focus on those two goals. Get the kids to school. Get them ready to go for high school.

Media: Will school lunches be a part of the attendance plan tomorrow?

PM: What you've seen very clearly from us, despite what you have seen online, is that we are very committed to the school lunch programme, and we just want to make sure that all programmes are efficient and they're working as effectively as they possibly can.

Media: Make it universal?

PM: All right, team. Thanks very much. Appreciate your time. All right. Take care.

conclusion of press conference