



The Hon. Scott Morrison MP
Prime Minister

TRANSCRIPT
PRESS CONFERENCE
AUSTRALIAN PARLIAMENT HOUSE, ACT
THURSDAY 23 APRIL 2020

EO&E...

PRIME MINISTER: Good morning everyone. Before I make some remarks on an economic update and progress report, I just want to commence, and I am sure the Treasurer will join me, in extending our deepest sympathies and condolences to the families and the friends and the fellow serving officers of the four police who were tragically killed. This is a terrible time, more broadly, but for these families and for the Victorian Police family and for police officers all over the country, and I know their families will be feeling the same way, this is just an awful tragedy. A terribly dark day for that police force and our thoughts, our prayers, our sympathies are there for all of them, but also our thanks to police officers serving all over the country. It is a dreadful and terrible reminder of the dangers that you face every single day. You step up every day, you stand between us and that danger every single day and we are deeply grateful for your service, deeply grateful for your sacrifice and to those families who are knowing nothing other than terrible grief today, we stand with you as much as we possibly can and we hope that provides at least some comfort to you and we extend also to the Victorian Government our appreciation for the work they are doing to support those families. It is a very, very sad day.

More broadly, today is an opportunity for the Treasurer and I to give you an economic update and progress report on some of the important programs that we have been putting in place over recent weeks. We have always been fighting this battle on two fronts. We always have been fighting it on the health front and on the health front and on the economic front. Both of those issues have been considered equally, as we have dealt with this issue from very early on and that continues to be our focus and will be into the future. We are getting, obviously, good news on the health front. Yesterday with just four cases, a rate of growth of 0.22 per cent. Those sort of figures were unimaginable weeks ago and they are being achieved now because of the patience and discipline and efforts of the Australian people right across the country. We thank you again for your patience and the way that you are going about your lives each and every day as Australians. It is a credit to you and a credit to our country in this difficult time.

Tomorrow I will be providing you an update with the Chief Medical Officer on the effective rate of transmission figures that I first raised with you with the Chief Medical Officer a week ago. This modelling work, which is being updated on a weekly basis, will give you a further indication of how we are travelling this first week down into that four week process that National Cabinet flagged as being the period of time in which we will be assessing our performance and looking at how we can start to ease restrictions in that

four week period. As I say, we are one week down almost and we are making good progress and we can report further to you on that tomorrow. That also involves making good progress on things like testing kits, personal protective equipment, respirator supplies, the status of those and the supply lines are in place and they are strong and that is enabling us, I think, to make a lot of progress.

We are on the road back and that is demonstrated by the measures that we already have taken and we are on the way back to a COVID-safe economy as well, which is what we have to achieve. We are building the protections for this COVID-safe economy in the areas that I have mentioned. Importantly, in the areas of surveillance, or I should say sentinel testing, in the area of industrialising our contact tracing capabilities and our immediate response capability to outbreaks, wherever they may present themselves. We have moved on elective surgery. States are moving on schools and I welcome that very much. The schools changes are a very important step in how we reopen our economy going forward and, most importantly, to ensure that children are getting the best possible education. We are in three weeks as I said, we will be moving on the baseline restrictions after considering this further information from the health advisers and states also are already moving where they have gone beyond the baseline restrictions in scaling that back already and we expect to see more of that in the weeks ahead.

But let's not get complacent. While our numbers are good, one number that is never good is the fact that 75 Australians have passed away. As sad as that is for those families, let's not forget that in countries that are smaller than Australia, like Belgium - 6,262 people have died. In the Netherlands, 4,068 have died, in Sweden 1,937 people have died. If you look at the fatality rates as a proportion of population, in the United States it is almost 50 times higher than Australia. In France it is over 100 times higher than Australia. In the United Kingdom also, just under 100 times higher. In Germany it is over 20 times higher. In Switzerland it is over 60 times higher, Denmark over 20, Norway 12. These are all sophisticated, developed economies with good health systems. This can happen in Australia if we are not careful and that is why Australians and our governments have been so careful to balance the needs to get our economy back to a COVID-safe level so it can support people's incomes and we can return to higher rates of growth into the future.

Now, in terms of getting our programs in place to support our economies, we are making good progress. The Treasurer will update you on those key support measures on accessing super, on JobKeeper enrolments and cash flow supports to businesses. There has also been an unprecedented ramp-up in public service in responding to these programs. Some 3,000 extra staff have been surged into the Australian Taxation Office and they soon will be approaching some 50,000 enrolments a day processing, which is a great achievement. At Service Australia they are getting close to those levels of 50,000 claims processing a day also, they are currently around 40,000 a day. Some additional 5,000 additional staff have been surged into Services Australia and, on top of that, another 3,000 have been redeployed both within Services Australia and across the Australian Public Service to be part of that effort which has today, just before this press conference, has now processed some 587,686 JobSeeker and related applications. That is more than we do in a year. That has been an extraordinary effort from those services and I also want to thank the patience of Australians for the way they have been engaging with Government Services Australia. The outstanding claims that we have now, 80 per cent of those have only been there for around two weeks. We will get through those, I think, over the next week or so. But I want to thank Australians for their patience for engaging, whether it has been with the Australian Taxation Office, the businesses or others, as well as those dealing with Services Australia at Centrelink and their patience. They understand these claims are at historic, unprecedented levels and their patience is helping those staff get through those claims and achieve these highly ramped-up levels of claim processing, which means we can get that support to Australians quicker and in the days ahead.

The Australian Office of Financial Management now has succeeded in raising over \$40 billion. The AOFM issued since last week was \$19 billion, it has a planned issuance of \$11 billion this week and they already have done \$5 billion this week so far. So we will be over \$40 billion. Two-thirds of that in bonds and the third in notes. The AOFM has indicated the trading volumes and pricing out to around 12-year bonds are returning to more normal levels. Now, our ability to raise this sort of finance in these sorts of markets, I think, says a lot about the standing of Australia in these financial markets and the credit worthiness of Australia and this will be critical to ensure that we can continue to provide this economic lifeline Australians. We are fast approaching the date in May when the first JobKeeper payments will be made to those businesses and so I commend the AOFM on the work they are doing to ensure that we meet those targets.

For these arrangements to work, though, it can't just be the public service agencies who are stepping up to the mark in processing these claims and these arrangements. For these arrangements to work, we obviously need continued strong cooperation from the banking sector over and from the superannuation sector. Now, the Treasurer has been working closely with the banks, meeting with them last night again and also again today and I am aware that there has been some frustration amongst businesses, in particular, in accessing bridging finance with banks. We are aware of that. I have no doubt the banks are aware of that as well and we need to be addressing that. Early on in this crisis, the bank's decision to pass on the cash rate reductions and provide deferrals and waivers of various arrangements for businesses and individuals is very much welcome. But that needs to be continued. It is important that the banks stay up to the mark here. I am concerned at the increasing number of stories we are getting and those issues I am sure are being raised directly with the banks, but we need those turn around times to improve. These banks know their customers. They know these businesses. They work with these businesses, they are there to stand by these businesses in their time of greatest need and that is now. So they know their history. They know their trading performance. They know what they are capable of doing. When it comes to the JobKeeper arrangements, they are very straightforward when it comes to businesses impacted on their turnover and there is a further instrument today which the Treasurer is pursuing which will make that even more clear when it comes to the delivery of the JobKeeper program.

Finally, while there remains important immediate challenges for us to address the COVID-safe working environment work that has been done through the COVID Commission and together with the Minister for Industrial Relations, the rollout of all of these programs, the adaptation that businesses themselves are doing which has been extraordinary. We also must look to the recovery, as we are. We are looking afresh at all of the work that has been done over the past decade, but we are looking at all of those important reform documents that have been prepared by groups like the Productivity Commission, the Shifting the Dial Report which went well beyond issues that relate at a Commonwealth level and significantly to reforms that can be achieved at a state and territory level.

All of these areas need to be looked at with fresh eyes. We need to go through this process at the moment of harvesting all of these important policy options and how they can be utilised to have an effective and sustainable and strong recovery on the other side of the coronavirus. We will take the opportunity in the months ahead to work through all of those arrangements. The COVID Commission is engaged in that process, Treasury of course and the Government more broadly, but also engaging with the many partners we're working with at the moment as part of the broader COVID response. The states and territories through the National Cabinet, the excellent working relationship we've been establishing with the ACTU. These are all important relationships being forged during this crisis which we believe we can put to work for the broader economic recovery piece that will be there. But it is not a matter of just dusting off old

reports or old submissions that have been made to the Government and bowling them up again. That's not what we are doing. We are looking with all of these things with fresh eyes, with very fresh eyes, with a view to what the post-COVID economy is going to look like globally and domestically and see how these can best help Australians get back on their feet, support their income, grow the businesses and have a business-led recovery that will put Australia in a even stronger position in the future. Treasurer?

THE HON. JOSH FRYDENBERG MP, TREASURER: Thank you Prime Minister, and can I join with you in expressing our deepest sadness at the loss of four police officers' lives yesterday. A tragic accident occurred in my electorate, in Kew, and our thoughts as a Government and, indeed, people right across this nation, are with the families of those police officers and with their colleagues and with the first responders and a very, very sad day for Victorians and, indeed, for the country.

Two weeks ago, the largest economic lifeline that this country has ever seen passed the Parliament. The \$130 billion JobKeeper package providing a wage subsidy of \$1,500 a fortnight will support the jobs of millions of Australians. And it was part of a broader sweep of economic measures totalling \$320 billion, or 16.4 per cent of GDP, which the Government and the Reserve Bank rolled out to support our economy at this very difficult time. Cash payments to households, cashflow boost to businesses, support for the financial system, early access to super, accelerated depreciation, instant asset write-off and a range of other economic measures. Well, we're now firmly in the implementation phase and providing that support to millions of Australians.

In terms of the early access to super, the ATO - the Australian Tax Office - has approved 456,000 applications, totalling \$3.8 billion. Those applications are now with the superannuation funds for their payment over the next five days. The average withdrawal is around \$8,000. And just to remind you that you can access up to \$10,000 from your super this financial year and up to another \$10,000 next financial year. The ATO has also paid out \$3 billion to 177,000 businesses employing 2.1 million Australians as part of our cashflow boost measure, which was a measure designed to support businesses, keep people employed, meet their fixed costs, by linking those payments - up to \$100,000 and a minimum of \$20,000 - to those payrolls. Importantly, the ATO have done an outstanding job. As the Prime Minister has said, they've brought extra resource to this challenge, done an outstanding job in processing so many claims so quickly, have paid out support to businesses, ahead of what they thought would be the start date on 28 April, so they're ahead of schedule.

In terms of the \$750 cash payments, which are going to pensioners, to carers, to people on the disability support pension, on family tax benefits - those payments have now gone to 6.8 million people totalling \$5.1 billion. In terms of the JobKeeper payments, as you know, more than 900,000 Australian businesses have registered their interest in accessing the JobKeeper payment. The formal applications have been open for three days. Already, 275,000 businesses have filled in those formal applications for the JobKeeper payment. Around half of those are sole traders. The others are obviously incorporated businesses, partnerships, trusts, not for profit organisations. They cover a whole range of sectors - technical, scientific, financial services, construction, retail, accommodation and the like.

As the Prime Minister said, we're very conscious, very conscious of the fact that the banks are playing a vitally important role in bridging the finance that these businesses need to pay their staff ahead of receiving the first payment in the first week of May. Now, it was an integrity measure as part of the system that businesses had to pay their staff before receiving their first payment. Today, I held a telephone hook-up with the four bank CEOs and the Tax Commissioner, Chris Jordan. It was a very productive discussion and we emphasised the need for the banks to provide the support to those businesses. They have agreed

to set up, each of these four major banks, a dedicated hotline for their customers to call to receive the bridging finance necessary to pay their staff ahead of receiving that money under the JobKeeper program. Importantly, they have also agreed to expedite the processing of all those applications to the front of the queue. So our message today is if you are a business or a not for profit operation that is eligible for the JobKeeper payment, as required, you need to pay your staff ahead of receiving the money from the Tax Office. Go to your bank, ring their hotline, ask for that support, and that support will be forthcoming. As the Prime Minister said, the businesses, the banks, they know their customers and they want to work with their customers as we want to work with the Australian businesses to ensure that they get their payments under the JobKeeper program.

Finally, we are living, still, in a very difficult time with the coronavirus and the pandemic playing out across the world. Many other economies are doing it even tougher than we are doing it here in Australia. But the success of our health measures, the cooperation of all Australians, has helped us flatten the curve and, as the Prime Minister did at this podium just a few days ago, announce the early relaxation of some of those health restrictions on elective surgery. It is a start, because our focus is on keeping as many Australians in a job and as many Australian businesses in business.

PRIME MINISTER: Thank you. We'll start on this side today and we'll move around.

JOURNALIST: The New South Wales Premier appears to be blaming the Federal Government over the virus outbreak at the Newmarch aged care facility, because it's a federal government jurisdiction. What's your response to that?

PRIME MINISTER: We've been working very closely with the New South Wales Government on those outbreaks, as we have in other places. The aged care facilities are areas that have always been of great concern. Yes, the Federal Government does provide funding support to aged care facilities but equally there are regulatory responsibilities that are held at a state level and we will work closely together. One of the important things we did early on in the COVID response was to ensure that we were providing additional funding to support the efforts of surging additional medical staff and others into aged care areas. Because in aged care as well, state governments also provide direct clinical support into those facilities as well. So it's a team effort.

JOURNALIST: You've spoken about the need for fresh eyes to get to a COVID-safe economy. Does a COVID-safe economy involve breaking election promises?

PRIME MINISTER: It involves ensuring that Australia is put in the safest and most prosperous place that we possibly can.

JOURNALIST: Is there an updated timeline for when the contact tracing app will be released, Prime Minister? And what's the strategy for marketing it and promoting it to ensure enough Australians take it up?

PRIME MINISTER: Well, it's a very important part of the broader plan that the Government's pursuing. It's not a silver bullet. It goes along with many other initiatives that the Government is pursuing. I want to be clear about, again, what this is. This is a tool, a public health tool, to assist health officers and state and territory governments, when someone who has contracted the coronavirus, to assist them in that work and to contact others who may have been put at risk. That's what we're trying to do here. That protects every Australian. Every Australian will be safer if those health officers are able to contact you more quickly

if you have been exposed to the coronavirus and, importantly, that means that you will be less at risk of infecting others if they can get to you fast. And so we want to help those public health officers. There's been a lot of - quite rightly - praise and commendation for our health officers, our nurses, our doctors. You want the health system, you want to help nurses, you want to help paramedics, you want to help doctors and say thank you for the great job they're doing, then you can help them, by supporting and downloading the app which will be released soon. Now, that app, the information, that is collected from that app, goes into a national data store that is fully encrypted and the Commonwealth Government has no access whatsoever to the information into that data store. None. Zero. Zip. Nothing. That information can only be unlocked by the health officer at the state and territory level in direct communication with the person from whom, who has contracted the coronavirus in releasing that information into the data store. Now, that's how it works. It's got one job. Just one job. We're not having it do other jobs. It will never do other jobs. It's for a time-limited period. It has the specific job of helping public health officials help you. Help them help you. That's the simple message, I think, of this, and there will be a strong communications campaign to get across this very simple information, but also to assure people about the very significant protections that will be put in place. We've been listening carefully to the debate that has followed since I first indicated that we were going down this path, and we've been responding to that and we've been ensuring that the protections are built in, so this just does focus on this one job. We have no interest in it doing any other job. There is no geolocation. There is no tracking of people's movements. None of that is true. It is one simple job - to help that public health official - and as I said the other day, following the National Cabinet meeting, the states and territories have given their in-principle endorsement to this. They strongly support the measure and they'll be backing that up and have requested to back that up with their own communications campaigns as well.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, can you just detail what sort of inquiry you'd like to see in the genesis of this pandemic and the sort of lessons the world can learn? And what's your message to China about its responsibility to comply with such an inquiry?

PRIME MINISTER: Well, my message on the latter is the same for all nations. What I'm simply seeking and advocating for is two things - and the Foreign Minister set this out in her opinion piece this week - we will need an independent inquiry, that looks at what has occurred here so we can learn the lessons. Now, there will be debates about the timing of that. We are in the middle of dealing with the pandemic right now and I understand some of the hesitations that have been expressed about the timing of that particular inquiry. But Australia would have cooperated with such an inquiry. Any member of the World Health Organization, I think that should be something that should be understood and that's part, I think, of your responsibility - or should be anyway - in participating in such an organisation. The other thing that can happen - and you can do two things at once - and that is to look at things that can be done to improve the safety of the world more readily. Now people are aware of my view about having the sort of authorities that would enable independent public health inspectors to be able to go into areas where a virus of potential pandemic implications can be understood quickly, because that information, undoubtedly, can save lives. Now, you'll know that with weapons inspectors, that people access that because those who sign up to the weapons inspectors' arrangements, sign up to - if they're in that situation, then those inspectors would come in. Now I expect the same arrangements in terms of what I'm suggesting about how that could be done. They don't have a roving commission to go anywhere they want in the world. If you're going to be a member of a club like the World Health Organization, there should be obligations and responsibilities attached to that. That is how, that is why you would collectively band together in a global organisation like that, to protect the world's health, and I would think that the ability to understand what's happening in a particularly dangerous virus that has the potential to do what this virus has done to the world, people would want to know that information sooner rather than later. So, look, we will, I mean

advocating anything and pushing anything globally is ambitious at the best of times, but that doesn't mean Australia shouldn't stand up for these sorts of things, for independence, for transparency, for public health, for taking action early, for sharing this sort of information. These are important principles and Australia will stand up for them.

Phil? Sorry, and then I'll go to Phil.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, you mentioned before how dangerous this virus is. How important is it, though, that people continue to adhere to the quarantine measures in place? And are there any circumstances under which anybody should seek to make themselves exempt from those quarantine measures, irrespective of their status in society?

PRIME MINISTER: We're all in this together. All of us. And I think that's the expectation of all of Australians.

JOURNALIST: PM on the reform agenda ahead that you're flagging for the October Budget, just two parts - A, when you said you're going to cast fresh eyes on everything that's been done in the last decade, would that include the Henry tax review? And separately, you're sort of talking about this - for want of a better term - a modern-day sort of accord with unions and businesses and so forth to make this work. Would a gesture towards the unions be to drop the ensuring-integrity bill, given you're forging this new relationship with them, you want to maintain that and they clearly don't like this bill that's before the Parliament?

PRIME MINISTER: Look, Phil, I'm not about to start articulating a public reading list on the topic, nor am I about to engage in horsetrading from this podium about this process. What I'm honestly saying to Australians is we're looking at all options with fresh eyes. In a good-faith way and I would be encouraging everyone else who has a stake in this - and that includes the union movement, I mean it's about jobs - to engage in a similar good-faith manner.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister and Treasurer, we know there's a good reason why you've deferred the Budget, the full Budget to October. Would you consider some sort of economic statement or mini Budget update in the next month or two before then? And if the economic shackles are lifted earlier for some parts of the economy and we can return to some sort of normality in some areas, would you consider, perhaps, unwinding or not fully using the full 6 months' worth of stimulus measures?

PRIME MINISTER: I'll allow the Treasurer to address those issues.

TREASURER: Thanks, Prime Minister. And thanks, John. There's never been more contemporaneous data available. You've got the labour force numbers coming out on a monthly basis, and as you saw, unemployment for the month of March was at 5.2 per cent. You've got the ABS now providing some preliminary data in areas like retail and international trade that they haven't done previously. The Finance Minister will be doing what he normally does, which is put out a monthly financial statement with revenues and expenditures in the coming days. And also, you've got national accounts. As you're familiar, the March quarter will be out on June the 3rd and that's got everything from wages to profits to GDP to the savings ratio. So there is a lot of data that's out there. And we'll continue to take the best possible advice from Treasury.

PRIME MINISTER: Thank you.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, just back on your advocacy of this international investigation. I'm not sure you directly responded to the China question in particular. So what steps, if any, have you taken, or will you take, to engage President Xi or the senior leadership in Beijing? And do you agree that this public spat, I suppose it could be described as, between Minister Dutton and the Ambassador, the Chinese Ambassador here in Canberra, in which he's described, the Ambassador's comments as regrettable and he hopes that he reflects on his public interventions here - do you think that augers badly for China's engagement with this process?

PRIME MINISTER: No, I don't. I think the Minister for Home Affairs has set out the situation well. Australia is perfectly entitled to set out positions that are totally consistent with the principles and values that we have as a country. We are a transparent, open nation, and when it comes to issues of public health, we would only seek the good faith participation of any country that would find itself in that situation. We had a virus originate out of Wuhan in China, and we were very fortunate here in Australia that we moved very quickly to close off the travel of Chinese nationals to Australia early in that piece, as I said yesterday, it was one of the matters that President Trump and I discussed. I think we were in about 24 hours before the United States, but we made the decision about the same time and it was the extraordinary discipline of our Chinese Australian community, that meant that we resisted that first wave of cases, the wave of cases that impacted Australia came from predominantly returning Australians from other parts of the world, where the virus had transmitted to, out of China. What's important is that we work together in a transparent way. The World Health Assembly is coming up in May. There are opportunities to pursue that matter there. And that's our first port of call. I've obviously shared my views, as has the Foreign Minister, with other like-minded countries, about the need for a transparent process here and for a fair dinkum look at how these rules are working. Our purpose here is just pretty simple - we'd like the world to be safer when it comes to viruses. It seems like a pretty honest ambition that I'm sure most people in the world would agree with. So it would be great if we could achieve that and that's the spirit in which we're pursuing this and I would certainly hope that any other nation, be it China or anyone else, would share that objective.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, on JobKeeper, you've flagged that construction is an industry that you see as low-risk and high-value that we would keep going in a COVID-safe economy. But because construction companies are often state-wide, we've seen instances where workers are laid off in one particular area, where work has slowed down, they don't qualify for jobkeeper, because there might be projects and revenue elsewhere across the company. Is the Government looking at ways to keep those tradespeople connected to those businesses? Obviously they can get JobSeeker, but that doesn't have the same, I guess, commitment between the employer and the employee out the other side of the coronavirus pandemic.

PRIME MINISTER: Well I'll let the Treasurer comment on the issues about group companies and things like that and how that's been progressed. But the best way to get Australians back in jobs and back working, is to get our economy opening up as quickly as it can, subject to the health constraints - whether that's in the construction industry or anywhere else. I am pleased that working with the states and territories that the many significant projects that we have that we co-fund at state and territory level, well, we're keeping up the pace on those. And we're looking to, you know, put the pedal down on those. It's an important part of the economic recovery. So the best way to get people off JobKeeper and off JobSeeker is to ensure that those businesses are busy again and that's why opening up the elective surgery is important. That's why opening up our schools again is important. That's why moving on the baseline restrictions once we get these health protections for a COVID-safe economy in place - that's why it's all important. The more businesses you open up, the more people are going to have jobs, support themselves and not have to rely - as they don't wish to - on the public taxpayer.

Josh?

TREASURER: Well, thanks, Prime Minister. Well, as I was walking into Parliament House this morning, just a torpedo punt from here, I saw plenty of construction workers out there with their fluoro vests and their hard hats getting to work and I've seen that in my home state of Melbourne as well so it is good news that many of those construction workers are back at work. Obviously, those particular arrangements for the, for businesses that may have some projects working and others, will be matters for that business and we say to them to look after their staff, to make the necessary arrangements, and obviously, if there are issues that fall within the discretion of the ATO, to speak directly to them.

PRIME MINISTER: Thank you. Over here?

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, you've said a number of times here that you'll look with fresh eyes at all options. Does that include negative gearing and franking credits reforms? And also, will you bring forward the review into the petroleum resources rent tax in order for that to be one of the options on the table?

PRIME MINISTER: Well, the Treasurer can talk about where things are up to with the PRRT. But as I said to Neil Mitchell the other day, I don't understand how increasing taxes on people in that way - particularly the ones you're referring to, actually helps grow the economy. I've never understood that argument. I mean there are some things that remain truisms.

Michelle? Oh Josh - did you want to...?

TREASURER: Just to say, in relation to the petroleum industry, we made some changes in terms of the integrity of measures based on the best advice that we received from the Tax Office. There's been appropriate consultation. There hasn't been a change to that stated timetable.

PRIME MINISTER: Michelle?

JOURNALIST: Two things. A point of clarification - you gave several figures about new public servants and transfers. What is the net figure of new people brought on staff?

PRIME MINISTER: 5,000.

JOURNALIST: Is it 8,000 or 5,000?

PRIME MINISTER: 5,000 is how many additional people have been brought into the task and that includes with service providers. As you know, early on, one of the first things they did with the service providers was to lift some of the call centre staff out of, I think it was out of one of the airlines actually, and have them move in and they started processing JobSeeker claims, which has worked very well.

JOURNALIST: And on the question of substance, do you intend to make the October Budget an overarching reform Budget? Or will your harvesting yield its seed in several stages?

PRIME MINISTER: Well, it's early days on that work, Michelle. And it's, we're in that process, as I said, of harvesting. The Budget will be a significant contribution in that respect. I mean it always is. And the scale

of the task that we have on the economic front is bigger than anything we've known for a very, very long time, arguably since the Great Depression. And so you can expect the Budget to be very significant in that context.

JOURNALIST: The Chief Medical Officer said this morning that among the first restrictions to be eased in three weeks will be around community sport. How can that be done safely? Will it extend to all sport like the NRL, which says it has government approval to resume on May 28?

PRIME MINISTER: Let me just deal with the NRL issue first. Look, the NRL is not community sport. The NRL is a fairly large commercial activity. Many people employed and has far-reaching commercial implications for many other sectors. And so I don't necessarily make that connection. I mean community sport, I think, is something very different. And what the National Cabinet does in several weeks' time and what recommendations the medical expert panel - which Professor Murphy is a part of - wish to recommend at that time, well, I don't want to get ahead of that and they will make their own arguments as to what is doable and how that can be achieved at that time. So until we have that advice before us, I wouldn't be offering a view on that. What we are seeking to do is focus on those activities that are more low-health-risk and more high-economic-value. My priorities are to get kids back to school, to get people back to work. That's what my priority is. And in terms of the broader social restrictions that are overseen by the states, I think there is a reasonable expectation from the public - based on the tremendous patience and discipline that they've shown - that they will get some relief on those fronts as well. I welcome, for example, the decision taken by the Queensland Government overnight in regarding to funerals. I mean, you know, people probably could see my strong views on that last night. And I really do welcome that. That is, would have to be one of the hardest measures, and one of the most difficult. I remember when I announced it some weeks ago, it was a very difficult thing for National Cabinet to make that decision. And I am pleased that we're getting to a point now where Queensland and others feel that those measures can be wound back.

Now, in terms of the NRL, I mean it's principally a matter for the New South Wales Government, because they are, as I understand the proposal, that's where the matches are being played. And so they have the health authority over what occurs with that. And so if you're looking for what the health agreements or approvals that have been provided, that's entirely really a matter for the New South Wales Government, or any other state governments who may be involved in where games may be played or how training is being conducted. The Commonwealth Government doesn't have any direct role in any of that. The only matters that we've been directly engaged in - and they're being handled by the Minister for Home Affairs - is in relation to the New Zealand involvement. Now, I had a, I mean I speak weekly to Prime Minister Ardern and there are many issues we discussed. There was the issue that came up recently about our borders. Now, if there is any country in the world with whom we can reconnect with first, undoubtedly that's New Zealand. And we have similar trajectories. Their restrictions have been far greater. Our case response has, you know, been the same, if not better than New Zealand. So if there's any country where we can look to achieve that, then I would have thought New Zealand would be the obvious candidate and that's the nature of the discussions we've had. So there already are exemptions that the Border Force Commissioner has to enable individuals to come. That is an area that I think we can look potentially favourably on provided all the other arrangements are in place regarding public safety. That's something we'll just work through patiently.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, you talked about the extraordinary demand for JobSeeker...

PRIME MINISTER: Sorry, I just didn't hear?

JOURNALIST: Demand for Jobseeker, the extraordinary demand for JobSeeker. Given that we know people will be out of work and struggling to find work for quite a period of time, are you open to having an increased level of JobSeeker longer than the six months? And specifically do you accept that we can never return to just \$40 a day for people on the old Newstart payment?

PRIME MINISTER: We've put a COVID supplement in place for the period of the pandemic and that's what we've budgeted for and that's what our policy is. Mal?

JOURNALIST: PM, you've got a blank page, you've got a lot of stakeholders and a lot of advice coming your way. There's precedent in such circumstances for what is called a national summit on these big issues. Have you - assuming domestic travel gets back somewhere near normal - have you considered a national summit? Or do you see any value in one before the Budget?

PRIME MINISTER: I must admit, Mal, I feel like we're in a rolling national summit at the moment with the amount of engagement that is taking place with ministers, with states and territories. I mean, the Treasurer has been with the four major banks twice in the last 24 hours. The actual pace in this COVID environment where people aren't physically moving around to connect with each other, even including at international level, is like nothing I've seen before. The level of cooperation that is occurring between the COVID Commission, industry, business, unions, others - this is quite an interesting period. And I think it is positive in the sense that it is drawing so many different views and feedbacks far more quickly than it normally does and I welcome that. So while not being drawn on any specific events, Mal, and of course we're trying to harness what I think is a very strong institutional ambition here, among the many different strands of our economy and our society, whether it's in the not for profit sector, whether it's in the industrial sector, mining, resources, manufacturing, the educational sector, our universities, our research institutions, the CSIRO, our states and territories, our independent schools. There has never been, I can't recall a time in my public life or in public policy where there has been so much of this occurring and I think that's creating some good habits, good habits that I would hope we would be able to continue in a non-COVID crisis environment. Whether that will be done, we'll see, but I'll remain forever optimistic. Shane?

JOURNALIST: If you're going to look at major reforms, reforms over time have cost money to the Budget, either in compensation. The Shifting The Dial report has some very contentious and expensive proposals in the short-term to deliver long-term benefits. Would you consider running the Budget in deficit a little longer so you can afford to put in place those reforms if you're going to see a pay-off longer term?

PRIME MINISTER: The Treasurer might want to comment on this. I'll simply say this. The way we have sought, as a Government, to manage and handle and respond to the coronavirus crisis is we've got some very clear principles that have guided us and I, in particular, outlined those some weeks, if not months ago, in Sydney at the AFR conference. And we have been guided constantly by the evidence - not the opinions, but the evidence. And we've been guided by some outstanding expert advice, whether that's the Governor of the Reserve Bank, the Secretary of Treasury, whether it's the Chief Medical Officer, whether it's Alan Finkel or any number of people, Nev Power, the team of people working with Nev, David Thodey and Catherine Tanner and a whole range of others, Jane Holton, there are so many people that have been guiding us with good expert advice, and this is a model that I think has always underlined how our Government has operated and we'll continue to do that. We'll continue to be driven by the principles that we hold very dearly, the data and the evidence to inform our views and the solid and respected expert advice that can input into that process. And what's our goal? Save lives. Save livelihoods. See Australia stronger again.

THE HON. JOSH FRYDENBERG MP, TREASURER: Prime Minister, as you've said before, and Shane, as you know well, the pathway to paying back that higher debt that has been incurred by this necessary spending at this difficult time, is by growing the Australian economy. It's not through higher taxes. It's actually by growing the Australian economy with productivity-enhancing reforms. That's what we're committed to. And because National Cabinet has led so strongly, we've now got at ministerial level regular meetings between the federal and state counterparts. So the treasurers will be meeting later today and among the issues that we'll be discussing relate exactly to what the Prime Minister has been talking about with Shifting The Dial, in terms of health reforms, talking about how we can work more closely together in a whole range of areas to enhance the productivity of the nation. The Governor of the Reserve Bank gave an important speech just a few days ago. Not only did he point to our responsible fiscal position that allowed us to use our balance sheet to support the economy at a time of a significant income shock, but he also pointed to the need for productivity-enhancing reforms into the future. It's not business as usual. It's about the Federal Government and the state governments working together in a whole field of areas from tax to industrial relations to infrastructure to skills and, of course, to cutting red tape and deregulation.

PRIME MINISTER: Thanks. Look on that note, particularly on cutting red tape, can I... the Education (sic) Minister will be standing up later today but a positive report on the progress being made on environmental approvals. In the December quarter, 19 per cent of projects were being approved on time. In the March quarter, that rose to 87 per cent. And we're looking to be at 100 per cent by the end of June. I'll let the Environment Minister speak to that later today. But ensuring that we're moving quickly through approval processes and providing that certainty for business investment and the regulatory arrangements that are in place, that will be a key part, a key part of the economic recovery strategy. Tomorrow, I'm sure you'll be pleased to know, we'll be upstairs. It's a little warmer up there. But Professor Murphy will be taking you through that next round of now-casting, as they call it - we're all getting used to a lot of new terms these days - on the effective rate of reproduction of that virus and where that's sitting a week down in that process. Of course, National Cabinet is meeting tomorrow. But let us finish where we began, in remembering those four brave police officers in Melbourne, and their families, and all their, all the police family all around the country. Let us remember all of them and just say thank you for what you do every day. And for those who have made the ultimate sacrifice for protecting their community, we are forever in your debt.

[END]

**Contacts: Press Office, (02) 6277 7744
The Hon. Scott Morrison MP, Sydney**

Press Office of the Hon. Scott Morrison MP, Prime Minister, Canberra