(Scotcher, 2021)
[18 Mar 2021]

POLITICS / COVID-19

Australia backed out of trans-Tasman bubble plans in February - NZ government

5:32 pm on 16 March 2021

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The government has confirmed officials were close to finalising a trans-Tasman bubble last month, but Australia backed out of the deal and changed its position.

Covid-19 Response Minister Chris Hipkins. Photo: RNZ / Dom Thomas

Talks between the two countries have been ongoing for nine months but New Zealand is still no closer to quarantine-free travel across the ditch, despite indications from the government the arrangement could have been in place by the end of March.

The delay has raised questions about the state of talks between the two countries but the government is adamant they are ongoing.

Covid-19 Response Minister Chris Hipkins has, however, clarified that officials were close to reaching an agreement at the start of February.

In response to a written question from National MP Chris Bishop, Hipkins said the two-way quarantine travel could start when "the respective health authorities have determined that the rate of Covid-19 transmission and associated public health risk is acceptably low in both countries".

He also revealed New Zealand and Australian officials had discussed the draft arrangement text on 4 February but Australia changed its mind, deciding it wanted to be able to make independent decisions.

"We were relatively comfortable with where things were heading, we were sort of on track. Since then Australia's position shifted so we've had to recalibrate," Hipkins said.

"Look, these things happen."

The independent approach Australia wants to take will be more challenging for the government to manage and as Hipkins explained during Question Time, there is a lot for officials to work through.

"Issues that we're working through include understanding the circumstances that could lead to a suspension of green zone travel on either side of the Tasman; what we would do with those whose travel is disrupted by the suspension of a green zone; testing requirements that may be put in place on either side; Australia's current exit visa restriction that prevents Australians travelling to New Zealand without a visa; the state-by-state differences in decision making in Australia; decision making around expansion to other countries outside of the safe travel zone and who would make those, and whether New Zealand would have any input into that process; and contact tracing system interoperability, in the event that we needed to do contact tracing for people who had been in one country, and were then identified as being more at risk after they had travelled to another country," Hipkins said in the House.

After many months and many discussions, the National Party wants the bubble open now.

National leader Judith Collins said there was no reason the trans-Tasman bubble could not happen now.

"We have at the moment Queenstown and other towns that are dependent on tourism are actually dying and if the Prime Minister doesn't essentially pull finger and get on with this we're going to end up with the death of Queenstown on her," she said.

The trans-Tasman bubble is not the only one the government is working on - it is also looking at two-way travel between Cook Islands and New Zealand.

Its Prime Minister Mark Brown is set to visit New Zealand next week, the first visit by a leader since Covid-19 closed our borders.

The announcement has boosted hopes that a travel bubble between the two countries will be confirmed.

Just 24 hours after Jacinda Ardern announced his visit however, news broke that he is facing charges of fraud.

Despite that, the government has confirmed Brown was still planning to New Zealand next Thursday.

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