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Covid 19 coronavirus: Cabinet decides on alert levels; Winston Peters breaks rank

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4 Sep, 2020 09:05 AM ⌚ 8 mins to read

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NZ First leader Winston Peters has completely broken ranks from the Coalition government, saying he'd pushed for the army to be called in, masks to be worn and independent oversight of the Covid response, two days before New Zealand's first lockdown in March.

He told Newstalk ZB's Mike Hosking today that he regretted "in a way" not speaking out publicly at the time, but said he was bound by ensuring the Cabinet worked as a team with a cohesive approach - and that systems mattered.

Peters was responding to what he described as a "cheapshot" , after Hosking yesterday suggested Peters was gilding the lily in not taking responsibility for some of the holes in New Zealand's Covid response. "It's a cheapshot, you're wrong."

He said he had urged the Cabinet, two days before the first lockdown, that the military needed to be called in, that masks needed to be used, and that independent overseers such as Heather Simpson should be hired.

"The problem was we were trusting a bureaucracy and frankly I never would. In this business you ensure you have oversight, constant referral back every week - what's going wrong,

what's going right."

Asked why he didn't speak publicly at the time, he said if he you wanted to win an argument in an organisation, you work with people behind closed doors. But there was no harm in outlining the facts respectively - and no one in the Cabinet, including the PM, could deny that he'd been pushing the case for the military and masks.

"We're five months too late doing most of these things but we are doing them now. We finally got the army in, we finally got masks in."

He had a final swipe at Hosking: "Your team, Mike, the National party and Act party, haven't got a hope in China of making it. You know that. You better be counting on commonsense and rationality, you better be backing a party called NZ First."

Act leader David Seymour said Peters "is conceding that he's been completely impotent inside Cabinet".

"He is one of seven members of the committee overseeing the Covid response and the Deputy Prime Minister.

"It's unsurprising his ideas haven't been taken seriously inside Cabinet. New Zealanders don't trust him and neither do his own Cabinet colleagues."

EARLIER

The Government meets today to decide the immediate future of New Zealand's alert level-2 status - and a health expert believes stricter rules around masks in Auckland will help speed up a lowering to level 1.

Health officials are confident they are on top of the community outbreak of Covid-19 cases, ahead of the Cabinet meeting today to assess alert level settings - but warn cases will likely continue for several more weeks.

There were two new Covid-19 cases announced yesterday - one case a 21-year-old man linked to the Americold cool store group of cases and who was already in isolation as a close contact, and another woman in managed isolation.

The current alert level settings (level '2.5' for Auckland and 2 for the rest of the country) are in place until September 6 - Sunday - but Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern is set to announce a decision today on whether the country stays with that status for longer.

Otago University Professor of Public Health Nick Wilson told Newstalk ZB today that he did not expect Cabinet would lower the alert level to 1 from Sunday - but he did not think it would be too far off, especially if masks were used more frequently.

"We are not really seeing enough evidence yet of really good control ... we still get cases every day in the community. To be really confident, we should be waiting to see days where there's

no new cases," Wilson told Mike Hosking.

"I think we could move faster [by] using masks better."

He believed masks could be made mandatory in areas other than public transport, which would help speed up elimination of the virus and a return to level 1.

That would be good for business, too, he said, in that with more mask-wearing, physical distancing could be reduced.

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Dr William Rainger, director of Auckland Regional Public Health Service, joined Health Minister Chris Hipkins at Middlemore Hospital for yesterday's cases update, and told media "we can be pretty confident that we are on top of this".

"The epidemic curve peaked about two weeks ago, it is undulating downwards. We have had the Mt Roskill church congregation, which has given it a little spike, but the direction of travel is downwards," Rainger said.

"So all the current clusters that we are aware of and working on, we believe we have well contained ... but we would expect to see cases for probably another few weeks."

An "overwhelming" majority of cases were already identified through contact tracing and tested as a result of that, Rainger said.

Asked about one recent case without a confirmed link - a person whose brother travelled to Hobbiton - he said it was under investigation but "is likely to have been a historical exposure".

"There has been no onward spread as a result of that. That makes us believe that there is no further risk associated with those cases."

Earlier yesterday Ardern said the Government "will always be very cautious" about the timing of a [potential move to alert level 1](#).

Hipkins said Cabinet would consider not only the number of new community cases, but what was known about them.

"You can have a large number of cases, but they can all be known, for example, and they can all be people who are already isolating.

"Over the last couple of weeks we did see some days where we had a higher number of community cases, but they were often directly linked to one another ... they were already isolating. So that in itself doesn't create a huge degree of extra anxiety.

"Normally they are linked, and we have seen that through this episode that we have been dealing with. Sometimes it takes a day or two just to gather that information."

Hipkins and Rainger stressed the need for ongoing vigilance and testing if any symptoms developed, and that anyone identified as a close contact must stay at home in isolation for the full 14 days.

"This outbreak affects all parts of Auckland," Hipkins said. "It doesn't matter where you live or work, please continue to take action to protect yourselves."

"We cannot relax just yet."

It is now compulsory for the Covid tracer QR codes to be on public transport, including taxis and Uber, and the Ministry has issued six alerts to people using the Covid app.

Hipkins said reports of bus drivers not wearing masks would be followed up. He wouldn't rule out further delays to NCEA exams or assessments, and asked parents to get their children back to school.

"My plea to parents, really, is do send your kids back ... they are losing valuable learning time."

The Health Minister also said he had received an "alarming" number of letters from people who wrongly believed the Government would make it compulsory to be vaccinated against Covid-19 - something he attributed to "a direct result of deliberate misinformation which is being spread through social media".

Roskill church 'resistance' now overcome - Health Minister

There "may have been a little bit of resistance" to health officials from a church which has had a number of Covid-19 cases, Health Minister Chris Hipkins says - but that was quickly overcome.

Earlier this week 1 News reported allegations that members of the Mt Roskill Evangelical Fellowship had defied level 3 lockdown rules and gathered privately for prayer meetings, something a church leader denied.

Asked about those allegations yesterday, Hipkins said "very early in the lockdown there were a couple of dates in question that were being investigated", but he had no update on what, if anything, those inquiries had found.

He said the church and its members were being co-operative.

"The feedback that I've had is that there may have been a little bit of resistance in the beginning, but that that's been overcome - that there are good relationships there, the church

is doing its part to encourage people who are involved with the church to get the test, and the testing numbers would indicate that is working."

A Ministry of Health spokesperson declined to say what the outcome of the investigation referred to by Hipkins was.

"The church has provided the necessary information to us for contact tracing for this period so from our perspective any other information we may have collected should on balance remain private."

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