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POLITICS

Australia travel bubble for early 2021 agreed in principle by Cabinet - Ardern

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Cabinet has agreed in principle to establish a travel bubble with Australia early next year, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern says.



Speaking from about 2pm, Ardern has welcomed attendees to what is expected to be the final post-Cabinet media briefing of 2020, "a year no one would have imagined".

She says ministers have discussed travel bubbles with Cook Islands and Australia this afternoon.

A travel bubble with Australia can be expected in the first quarter of 2021 "pending confirmation from the Australian Cabinet and no significant change in the circumstances in either country", she says.

Officials have been working on preparations for that, Ardern says, while acknowledging

that one of the criteria was 28 days of free of community transmission.

Clear plans will need to be made in the event of a community outbreak, she says, with enough space for potential returnees if borders shut again and arrangements for air crew and airlines.

A date on a trans-Tasman quarantine-free travel bubble will be announced in the new year.

Australian Health Minister Greg Hunt said the federal government welcomed New Zealand's announcement, describing it as the "second half of the equation".

Hunt said the federal government would "absolutely" approve the agreement, and that increased travel between the two countries would benefit both economies.

"We consciously opened up Australia to people coming from NZ because their case numbers were negligible and we knew there would come a time when our case numbers would give them confidence," he said.

"Now this gives the chance for New Zealanders [and] Australians to visit New Zealand ... without having to quarantine.

"It's the first step on a return to international normality."

Hunt said an agreement would be easy to reach with their counterparts, as some Australian states have already welcomed New Zealand travellers.

New Zealand's decision to allow a travel bubble with Australia follows Queensland's decision last week to open its border to the country.

All other states had already opened to New Zealand travellers, although Western Australia requires 14 days' quarantine on arrival.

Since October, New Zealanders have been able to travel to Australia without going into quarantine in certain states, but not the other way around.

Ardern says there is more to work through, including segregation of staff and making sure contingency plans are in place, and these were key to finalising any arrangement.

Minister in charge of Covid-19 Response Chris Hipkins says he will be heading to Auckland airport tomorrow to look at how they will be doing the operational separation of passengers.

"Airlines have indicated they do need a notice period - you'll be aware they grounded a lot

of their fleets. They have a lot of crew not currently working so they need the opportunity to bring them back and get them current again.

"We have been clear we want to see separation between crews who are working in the safe zone versus crews working elsewhere, so that requires logistical rearranging for them."

The Cook Islands are expected to be available for quarantine-free travel first, Ardern says.

Over the weekend, New Zealand and the Cook Islands said they agreed to open a quarantine-free travel bubble by end of March next year.

More work is needed to ensure there are precautions in place that give the government confidence New Zealanders can safely travel there, she says.

"I think New Zealanders desperately need a break. Of course we want to progress these issues including quarantine-free travel but we haven't taken risks before that mean New Zealanders won't be able to keep their freedom and I certainly don't want to take those risks right now."

Hipkins will be providing an update tomorrow about a resurgence plan and what will be in place over the summer.

He urges people to continue sticking to the same public health measures.

Airport supportive of announcement

Wellington Airport welcomed the announcement, but said there was work that had to be done before the bubble began.

Wellington Airport general manager of corporate affairs Jenna Raeburn said: "First, airlines and airports need to be ready. Wellington Airport has been ready to make safe travel to the Cook Islands and Australia a reality for several months now.

"We have invested heavily in new infrastructure and processes to make safe travel zones work. In order to maintain these preparations, it would be very helpful to have clear signals of intention and we are looking forward to the government's confirmation of a target date in the new year."

The airport would be ready to go as soon as the government and airlines could confirm arrangements, she said.

However, she also noted the need for the Australian Cabinet to sign off.

"We are very hopeful this will occur soon, given the positive steps the Australian state and federal governments have already taken to reopen travel from New Zealand."

The airport was also pleased the government was working on a plan to deal with the event of a resurgence of Covid-19 within the trans-Tasman bubble, Raeburn said.

Bubble comes far too late - National Party

National has accused the government of "dragging the chain" on a trans-Tasman bubble.

Covid-19 Response spokesperson Chris Bishop said while it was welcome news, it came "far too late".

"Much like the Cook Islands non-announcement on the weekend, today's news gives the glimmer of progress without any real substance to it. Businesses are still none the wiser on when we will see Australians able to enter New Zealand without quarantining."

The delay would cost New Zealand businesses and their staff dearly, Bishop said.

"About 40 percent of people in MIQ facilities are from Australia, filling up spots while others wait offshore. Every day that goes by without a travel bubble is another day where people can't travel to New Zealand for compassionate reasons or to fill critical shortages in industries."

The government needed to be much more flexible and pragmatic in assessing the risk from particular countries, Bishop said.

ACT leader David Seymour accused the government of sitting on its hands.

"Suggestions that airlines with grounded fleets need time to get up and running is more of an indictment on the government than anything else," he said.

"The excuse, as I would call it, is frankly disingenuous. If that's true, it shouldn't stop the government setting clear rules and opening up. But to use other peoples' unpreparedness as an excuse for your own is incredibly disappointing.

"It's difficult to fathom what the government is up to. Everything that they are using as a reason for delay was given as something the government was to work on six months ago when this whole idea was first mooted," he said.