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The Hon. Scott Morrison MP
Prime Minister

The Hon. Greg Hunt MP
Minister for Health and Aged Care

The Hon. Karen Andrews MP
Minister for Home Affairs

The Hon. Dan Tehan MP
Minister for Trade, Tourism and Investment

JOINT MEDIA STATEMENT

Monday 7 February 2022

REOPENING TO TOURISTS AND OTHER INTERNATIONAL TRAVELLERS TO SECURE OUR ECONOMIC RECOVERY

Australia will reopen to all fully vaccinated visa holders, welcoming the return of tourists, business travellers, and other visitors from 21 February.

These changes will ensure we protect the health of Australians, while we continue to secure our economic recovery.

Australia's health system has demonstrated its resilience throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, including through the recent Omicron wave. With improving health conditions, including a recent 23 per cent decline in hospitalisations due to COVID, the National Security Committee of Cabinet today agreed Australia is ready to further progress the staged reopening of our international border.

Visa holders who are not fully vaccinated will still require a valid travel exemption to enter Australia, and will be subject to state and territory quarantine requirements.

Today's announcement will give certainty to our vital tourism industry, and allow them to start planning, hiring and preparing for our reopening. In 2018-19, tourism generated more than \$60 billion for the Australian economy, with more than 660,000 jobs dependent on the industry.

Since the Morrison Government commenced Australia's staged international border reopening on 1 November 2021 we have seen almost 580,000 arrivals come to Australia including to reunite with loved ones, work or study.

The Commonwealth continues to work with States and Territories on the safe resumption of the cruise industry and looks forward to further announcements on this in due course.

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PRESS CONFERENCE - CANBERRA, ACT

TRANSCRIPT

07 Feb 2022
Canberra, ACT
Prime Minister
E&OE

PRIME MINISTER: Good afternoon, everyone. The National Security Committee of Cabinet has met today. First item on the agenda was to be dealing with the situation in Ukraine. We remain highly concerned about the deteriorating situation in Ukraine, and seeing the military build-up that has been taking place there for some time. All Australians in Ukraine, we have endeavoured to contact them all over the last few weeks, with a very clear message - now is the time to leave. And we reinforce that message. The travel advisories are very clear. The vast majority of those Australians who live in Ukraine, their lives are in the Ukraine. Many of them have dual citizenships. Their families are there or in neighbouring countries, particularly in Poland. And they will be looking to their own arrangements, as we understand it. But our message has been very clear, and I want to thank the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and our consular officials who have been working tirelessly to get that message now for some weeks, that it is time to leave if you wish to leave.

We also encourage Russia to continue in their engagements and discussions with other countries who are seeking to resolve this issue. But we hold out real concerns about where this will ultimately lead to. Australia supports Ukraine's sovereignty and their territorial integrity. And we will continue to stand with them on these issues and continue to engage with our partners on these very difficult issues as they continue to evolve.

The Quad Foreign Ministers will actually be meeting here in Australia later this week and that will be a further opportunity for us to be discussing collective security issues and our shared prosperity from our engagements together, particularly in the Indo-Pacific.

But, again, we would be urging Russia to remain engaged in the reciprocal dialogue. And any breach of Ukraine's territorial sovereignty is not a mark of peace, it is a mark of those who would seek to take sovereignty from others for whom it should reside with.

Now, also, it's almost two years since we took the decision to close the borders to Australia. The National Security Committee has, Cabinet, has decided today that Australia will reopen our borders to all remaining visa holders on the 21st of February of this year. We have been progressively opening our borders since November of last year. Those programs have proceeded very successfully, whether it was the programs we had in place with New Zealand or Singapore, and then with Japan and South Korea, opening up to international students and backpackers and economic migrants who are coming to Australia. That will now be extended, principally, to international visitors who will be able to return. The condition is you must be double vaccinated to come to Australia. That's the rule. Everyone is expected to abide by it. And it's very important that people understand that requirement if they're seeking to come to Australia. But if you're double vaccinated, we look forward to welcoming you back to Australia, and I know the tourism industry will be looking forward to that, and over the next two weeks they will have the opportunity both for visitors to be coming and for them to be gearing up to welcome international visitors back to

Australia.

The state-based cap arrangements on arrivals and the state-based quarantine arrangements will continue, as they have them in place and they will be up to state governments to alter those, as they see fit, as has always been the case. But we just want to stress that you will need to provide that proof of vaccination. Your visa is one thing, but your entry into Australia requires you also to be double vaccinated. And I think events earlier in the year should have sent a very clear message, I think, to everyone around the world that that is the requirement to enter into Australia.

The third matter that we were dealing with today, amongst many others, I should stress, was the aged care needs and our response to Omicron, and today we were able to agree a package of measures that will see the Australian Defence Force supporting that effort that is being led by the Department of Health. Several weeks ago I spoke to the VCDF, Vice Admiral Johnston, when he was acting CDF, as part of our response to the supply chain pressures that we're seeing from the Omicron variant, and asked them to begin work, to be working up proposals as to how they could be supporting in a number of different areas. And since then, we've seen ADF personnel being there in Victoria, supporting the ambulance service and things of that nature. And we've seen them supporting in other areas. But now we'll be, they'll be joining that effort.

Now I want to be very clear about this. As I said several weeks ago, the Defence Force are not a surrogate workforce for the aged care sector. There are around 285,000 people who work in the aged care sector. So the idea that the Defence Forces can come in and just replace all of the shifts that are lost because people have COVID - we already relaxed the close contact rule and that had a real positive impact. But the idea that the Defence Forces could just simply come in and fill that gap is just not realistic and was never a scenario or an option that was under consideration, because it's just simply not feasible. But they do and can and have provided quite targeted support into the aged care sector in extremis, in some of the most difficult situations. And the teams that we'll be bringing together, just four teams, will be placed at 24-hours' notice to move from today, and that will increase up to 10 teams at 24-hours' notice, and that is to go into acute situations, working together with the health departments and public health agencies in each of the states and territories, and of course the Aged Care Minister. And Greg will speak about that in a moment. This, these teams include a registered nurse team leader, some medical technicians and five personnel to support general duties tasks.

Now, in each state and territory, it will begin with around 50 personnel going to support each state, and up to 200. So we'll have up to around 1,700 Defence Force personnel assisting. But as I stressed, this is an industry where there's 285,000 workers. So a provision of support - not all of which is clinical, only a minority of those are clinical support, because that's the resource that's available - will be going in there to assist, but it's a very targeted bespoke effort to supplement the many other things which Greg can speak to you about in terms of the response that we're providing.

So, many incredibly serious national security issues we're dealing with, whether it's the global security situation in Europe, here in the Indo-Pacific our continued battle against Omicron, but I'm going to hand over to Karen now to speak more about **the fact that our borders will be open from the 21st of February and welcoming the world back to Australia.** I think that is another important milestone that Australia is achieving, particularly as we've seen the Omicron variant and its impact on hospitalisations and those patients on ventilators and ICUs coming off their peaks and actually starting to decline. That now gives us further opportunities to free things up. So I'll ask Karen to speak as Minister for Home Affairs on the borders opening up. Greg will speak obviously on the issues relating to aged care, and Peter particularly on the deployment. Karen.

THE HON. KAREN ANDREWS MP, MINISTER FOR HOME AFFAIRS: Thank you, Prime Minister. So

Australia will reopen to all fully vaccinated visa holders from the 21st of February. This means that we will be able to welcome back tourists, business travellers and other visa holders who to date have been unable to enter Australia. Now, visa holders who are not fully vaccinated will still require an exemption, a travel exemption, to enter here into Australia, and they will be subject, on their arrival here, to the relevant state and territory quarantine requirements. So, to be clear, we are absolutely welcoming back fully vaccinated visa holders. For those who are not vaccinated, they will have to provide proof that there is a medical reason that they cannot be vaccinated.

Now, these changes that we are announcing today, in terms of reopening our borders, make sure that we are protecting the health of Australians, but at the same time working towards our economic recovery here. And that is a very important part of our announcement.

Now, in relation to our tourism industry, we all understand that tourism in Australia has been dealt with a tremendous blow through COVID. So our visitor numbers have clearly been down. They have, our tourist providers have had to rely on domestic travellers. Now, Australians have certainly stepped up and travelled when they can, but as of the 21st of February, we will be welcoming back to Australia international tourists, and that is going to be such a welcome relief for our many tourist providers all around Australia.

Now I can say that our tourism industry, with its reopening being announced today so it will reopen on the 21st of February, it gives them the time to be able to start planning to prepare for their reopening. And in 2018-2019, tourism generated more than \$60 billion for the Australian economy, and more than 660,000 people were employed in the tourism sector. Now since we started the process of reopening our international borders on the 1st of November 2021, we have seen almost 300,000 eligible visa holders come to reunite with loved ones here in Australia. So we are absolutely looking forward to the 21st of February, where we can welcome back to Australia all of the fully vaccinated visa holders. Thank you.

PRIME MINISTER: Greg.

THE HON. GREG HUNT MP, MINISTER FOR HEALTH AND AGED CARE: Thanks very much, Prime Minister, and Karen and Peter. Over the weekend we've passed the 51 million dose mark for the vaccination program and today we're expected to pass the nine million booster mark. So I thank everybody for coming forward on that front. Importantly, three million Novavax vaccines are due to arrive today, later on, from Singapore by air. And significantly, we have now begun the deployment of 50,000 oral COVID treatments - the molnupiravir, on medical advice, to our aged care facilities. I think that's a very important protection, and Professor Kelly and Professor Murphy have overseen that process, along with the Department of Health.

I think it's important to note that since the the peaks in each of the areas of hospitalisation, ICU and ventilation, the latest figures are that we have decreased by 27 per cent since the peak of hospitalisation, by 35 per cent since the ICU peak, and 40 per cent in terms of ventilation peak. So I think these are very important trends.

In terms of aged care, whilst we are seeing a decrease in the number of active cases, we do know that there are significant pressures in specific facilities. So far we've taken a series of measures, in particular, 80,000 shifts have been put in place. We've had, delivered over 120 million units of PPE, including 40 million units this year, and significantly we've had 10.7 million rapid antigen tests that have been delivered to aged care continuously since August of last year. And already 5.25 million rapid antigen tests have been delivered through the pensioners and concession card holders scheme where people go to the pharmacies and collect them. So all of those things are coming together.

Obviously Peter will give you more information in relation to the work of the ADF. But essentially

there are three components. One is the clinical teams or the clinical support teams. These will stand alongside what we have as clinical first responders. Generally these will be teams of 10, as the Prime Minister has set out. They'll grow from four to 10 teams. And they'll provide that additional support. What we may see sometimes is that the infection control leads or the clinical leads in a particular facility have had to furlough either because they're a case or because they're strongly symptomatic and a close contact. We've relaxed the rules in relation to close contacts for asymptomatic working. That has been very important in bringing significant numbers of workforce back into the field. The second group and second task of the ADF is to provide the general support, and that general support may be in terms of waste management, PPE management, other forms of assistance under the direction of the clinical leads within the particular facility. And thirdly, is to support that deployment with logistical and planning work. So they're the three particular roles, and I want to thank Peter through you and Prime Minister, the ADF for making this support available. Thank you.

PRIME MINISTER: Thank you, Greg. Peter.

THE HON. PETER DUTTON MP, MINISTER FOR DEFENCE: Thanks, PM, Greg and Karen. I want to say thank you very much to the Australian Defence Force, the men and women, 24,000 of whom have already contributed in various ways over the course of Operation COVID ASSIST. And as of the weekend, as the Prime Minister pointed out, they've now taken up additional duties in providing assistance to those most in need within our aged care facilities. So that work started on Saturday, and as the Prime Minister mentioned before, following his conversation with the VCDF a couple of weeks ago, that planning and monitoring has taken place and there's a lot of logistical effort behind the scenes to gauge what response is required. But this is a significant intervention by the Australian Defence Force. Up to 1,700 of our personnel will provide assistance at our aged care facilities, and in particular at those that are most in need.

Greg, as lead, obviously, the effort within Health, to augment and to provide additional support to the aged care facilities, and we will come in behind that. As the PM pointed out, the hundreds of thousands who are involved in this workforce need support and we're going to provide them with that support, but we can't replace that workforce, nor would we want to try and do that.

I want to also mention that we're going to deploy up to about 15 military planners to the Department of Health to aid in the coordination of the ADF support to the aged care facilities. And, again, just acknowledge the fact that the Australian men and women of the Defence Force have really made a significant contribution, as, too, have their families. Many have been deployed away from their own kids and their own domestic needs and I really acknowledge the sacrifice that they've made as well.

PRIME MINISTER: Thank you. Happy to take some questions. Chris.

JOURNALIST: [Inaudible] definition of fully vaccinated in Australia is likely to change from two shots to three. So will you change that for international travellers, if it changes inside Australia? And what guarantee can you give to ...

PRIME MINISTER: The answer to that is no. It will be two dose.

JOURNALIST: Ok. And the, what guarantee can you ...

PRIME MINISTER: There are various, there are various arrangements around the world regarding third doses. And so two doses, the CM, the Chief Medical Officer, advises will be sufficient.

JOURNALIST: And what guarantee can you give to the people who now will spend a lot of money gearing up for this that you will stay the course and not pull the rug out from under tourism operators and airport operators once this decision is made?

PRIME MINISTER: One of the, I think, key elements of our planning process as a Commonwealth Government is we've been careful about taking each next step. And that's why I said last year, when there were calls for this sort of a decision to have been made last year, we took it step by step. And we examined the impact of that, so we could then walk safely to the next station that we were embarking upon. And that's what we've done here. We've been very careful at looking at the impact, particularly when Omicron hit, and how that would flow through. **But the fact is, here in Australia, the variant is here in Australia. And for those who are coming in who are double vaccinated, they don't present any greater risk than those who are already here in Australia.** So it's a sensible and I think very important move for us to make as we sort of, as best as we possibly can this year, drive Australia back to a position of as much normality as as we can achieve. So we've been careful. That's why. And this was reinforced to me again when I was up in Cairns, just the week before last, and they were obviously keen to see that happen. I mean, in Cairns in particular and in Far North Queensland, that area of the country is more dependent on international tourists than any other part of the country. And so I know they'll welcome that and it was under consideration at that time. But we just wanted to be sure, and Greg may want to comment on this, we just wanted to be sure in taking that **next step we wouldn't be overloading the hospital system,** and the Chief Medical Officer was able to give us good confidence about that, as in in the larger states we've already moved past that that peak, and so that enabled us to now take this step.

JOURNALIST: Prime Minister, are you hoping this decision on international borders will put pressure on Mark McGowan to open his state border and take up on some of these tourism dollars that will be coming into the country?

PRIME MINISTER: Well, I think the two issues are unrelated. As I've said, we'll make the decision about the international border. What, the decisions the states take, they'll be consistent with the assessments that they're making. And that deals with their caps at their airports, as well as their quarantine arrangements, as they are in place. Jono.

JOURNALIST: [Inaudible] package to attract international tourists back to Australia, bearing in mind that you're now, I suppose, appealing to only a smaller cohort, those who have been double vaccinated. So will there be a package? What arrival caps will there be with the states, have you spoken to them about that? And on those two issues, I can't remember my third.

PRIME MINISTER: Well, look on the first point we've been talking to states.

JOURNALIST: What was the health advice that you got [inaudible]?

PRIME MINISTER: Well, I've already outlined it, and that is that we can now move safely to that next level and where we are currently with the status of our hospital system. And we're seeing the number of cases in ICU and so on decline, that this is the safe, safer time to be able to move to that next step. And the Chief Medical Officer fully supports that decision. In relation to the states and territories, they will they will continue to be putting in place the caps that they have at their airports. Some have none at all, like New South Wales, others do, and they will do that based on where their capacity is at this given point in time. The, as we know that the COVID-19 has not been experienced similarly in all parts of the country. Western Australia is very different to New South Wales and as a result, the arrangements are different between those two parts of the country, and the first one?

JOURNALIST: [Inaudible]

PRIME MINISTER: Well, I announced to you a week or so ago there was the package that went in with the support for backpackers and for students in getting them back, and some additional funds were provided to Tourism Australia at that point. We obviously got a budget coming up at

the end of next month, and when I was up in far north Queensland, I was listening very carefully to some of the plans that the tourism and travel industry has, and I thought they were very good plans and I'd be encouraging states and territories to work with us, particularly in those parts of the country that are so reliant on international visitors. But we've been a very strong supporter of the tourism sector and I have quite a fair bit of background and understanding what they would need at this time. And so I very much appreciated sitting down with those tourism operators up in far north Queensland because they are the most experienced in dealing with the international tourism trade of anyone in the country.

JOURNALIST: On the aged care announcement today and as welcome as additional ADF support would be, you're talking about hundreds of people. The aged care sector says that a quarter of all shifts are going unstaffed at the moment, something like 140,000 shifts a week. It's a massive issue, so this isn't going to prevent that situation where residents are being forced to be locked in their rooms in aged care centres. What can you do to stop that happening?

PRIME MINISTER: Well, I'll ask Greg to join me. First of all, I agree with you. It is a very significant issue. It's a very, very difficult issue. And it's an issue that has been caused by the fact that we have large numbers of people who were contracting COVID. We've eased the close contact rules to ensure as many of them can be back and available for work as quickly as they possibly can. And that was helpful there. The health department has been working to source additional qualified workforce to go in and support these facilities. One of the things we also have to manage and this goes to the controls that are in place in aged care facilities. We want quality of life. When people go into aged care facilities, it's about the dignity and care that they receive when they are there. Now we all know the reality that it is commonplace in our aged care facilities and we've all experienced it, I'm sure. That in the in the normal course of events, around a thousand people pass away in aged care facilities every week. That's what happens year round, every round when there's not a pandemic and when there is. And over the course of particularly Omicron, around less than 10 per cent of those who passed away in our aged care facilities have passed away with having COVID. As Professor Murphy was making the point today, **there is a difference between passing away because of COVID and passing away and having COVID.** And those two things he's at pains to stress are not the same thing. And we're experiencing that in our aged care facilities. So it's not just about trying to prevent any fatalities that may occur that may be avoided, but it's also about ensuring the residents have a quality of life and an important part of the quality of life is being able to have access to your family and their support and their love and and particularly for those who are in palliative care, end of life care and to have that. So it is a very sensitive and fine balance that you have to find to try and prevent the spread. But at the same time, ensure that residents are getting the access to their family and the quality of life that they're able to have in those facilities. So these are the very difficult issues that COVID-19 has presented for our aged care facilities. And I want to thank the aged care operators and the aged care workers who are doing their absolute best to try and do that. But when you have large numbers of people taken out of the workforce, then that is very hard to deal with. And there is no simple answer because you want qualified people providing care. And then that's why, you know, we have provided the additional supports, whether it's wage supplements and so on, to provide that recognition and support for people to do those shifts. But it's a really tough challenge and we'd be kidding ourselves as a country if we didn't think the pandemic has impacts. It does, and you seek to mitigate them as best you can, but that doesn't mean you can mitigate them all. But Greg.

THE HON. GREG HUNT MP, MINISTER FOR HEALTH AND AGED CARE: So look, firstly, just in terms of the actual workforce itself, the advice that I had updated from the department shortly before joining you is that at the moment, there are approximately 5,900 workers who are furloughing out of that pool of over 280,000. So that's less than three per cent of that workforce. If

you just focus on the impacted facilities themselves, it's less than about five per cent of the current workforce in those facilities. So that's the data that we've been given to date. But in order to support that, what we've provided is 80,000 shifts so far, a little bit over that, and that comes from a variety of different sources. So the surge workforce, we've also brought back workers from retirement. We've also brought back workers from the Australian National Aged Care Classification System. And in addition to that, there's been work with the private hospitals and supply and support from that front. And then, of course, perhaps the most important decision was the change in contact for furloughing. So there was the definition of close contact, which was changed to the household and household like and then the capacity for workers who are close contact but asymptomatic to work. And that's then been backed up with the support of the over now 10.7 million rapid antigen tests that have been provided. I will just give one personal reflection of all the things we've had to do during this. The hardest part has been this difficult balance between health of keeping people safe in aged care, which has meant the lockdowns, which is irrespective of the staffing. But that has come at an enormous emotional and mental health cost. And many will say to us, you know, why aren't you locking down harder? And that's because families and residents themselves have said, this is our time where we are in the later stages of our journey and we want to be able to see family. We want to be able to walk. So I know there's a bit more discursive, but it's a deep human issue that we've wrestled with, frankly, and we are leaning now back towards opening up and that's the medical advice on health as well as mental health and emotional reasons.

JOURNALIST: So what's the justification for waiting so long because it was in this courtyard about six weeks ago that you were asked, were the Defence Force going to answer the call of the nurses' union of other medical groups and go in and help? Why have you waited until now and what do you say to those families who would have hoped that that would have been available to them in their aged care providers in the meantime?

PRIME MINISTER: Well, the first point I'd make is that we put this in place several weeks ago, not just today. It's been some weeks to get to the point where we are today. The other responses that the minister has set out with the responses that were being put in place at that time, and they were the more urgent ones. So, for example, changing the rules around student nurses so they could be working. And they weren't limited by 20 hours a week because that was going to deal with the large volume of the positions that we had to fill. We always understood that the role that the Defence Forces could play was very, very acute. It was a very targeted response. It was a response that we will now be putting in place, which will help all of these other things. But first, but first things first. First things first was to get the volume of the workforce that were able to get into these places, and that was the priority that the government was working to and working through with the aged care sector. And this response to the pandemic is always finding every single thing you can do and then doing it right and making sure you plan it as best as you can and then you implement it and then you will make further decisions. And if there are further things we can do to further alleviate the pressures in the aged care system, then of course we will do it. Of course we will do it. Greg.

THE HON. GREG HUNT MP, MINISTER FOR HEALTH AND AGED CARE: I will just had one thing. Obviously, it's a graduated response, but in particular, there's a recognition that many of the staff are fatigued after the last month, and so they stepped up. Many have worked extra hours, come back from furlough, have come back from holidays and have been able to to deal with and respond to that. But now, after such a period, it is a recognition that we can help and assist not only after the planning, which has been done, because bringing people who are not clinical experts in aged care into an aged care environment is a very delicate, serious task. But in addition to that, it's a recognition that the staff have done a brilliant job, but many of them are fatigued and

therefore it's an appropriate time.

JOURNALIST: No one's disputing that this is a challenge of workforce, but you've agreed that the Defence Force can't fuel the shortages there. When you pivot to talk about opening up aged care so that family can be there as a support, it sounds like you're saying that the loved ones of these people have to fill that gap because there is no other solution. If there's nothing more, but if there's nothing more that can be done from a defence point of view and you don't want families filling that support gap and another variant comes along and we see a similar peak in cases in the sector, where do we turn to to boost that workforce?

PRIME MINISTER: Well, what I'm suggesting about families being able to be with their loved ones is about the mental health and well-being of their loved ones. That is not about providing some sort of other type of clinical support. That's not what I'm referring to. I'm talking about the quality of life and the mental health and well-being of those who are in facilities that might otherwise be prevented from seeing them because of attempts to try and constrain the spread of the virus. And so that is the difficult decision that has to be made in many facilities about whether you choose to lock it down, which can which can slow the spread. But that comes at the cost of being separated from loved ones and the impact on your mental health and quality of life. There are no simple solutions to the challenge of COVID-19 and the furloughing of workforce. It is our expectation, as the chief medical officer was saying to us today that as we've seen, we're coming off the peak, particularly in New South Wales and Victoria now with the with cases and how that's impacting on workforces more generally that we should see that alleviate more rather than intensify. That's what we currently know. But we can't kid ourselves that there are large numbers of people out there who are trained and qualified in a situation like this to come in and replace those who have had to stay away for seven days because they have COVID. So we just have to keep working through. And that's why we're so appreciative of those who are doing the work each and every day. But you know, you find wonderful stories. This morning I spoke to a lovely lady in an aged care facility, **in my own electorate. She turned 107 today and she just got over COVID and she was looking magnificent**, with her son. So Australians are pushing through and those in our aged care facilities, those residents and their families are doing all their best with the workers to make this as good as it can be. But it is incredibly tough and anyone who tells you that they could just come along and make this all go away, they are not telling you the truth. And they do not understand the difficulty of this task that we have. But it's being applied with every resource the government can to get the right answers and to find and where there are more that will be there will be applied. We have shown that all the way through this pandemic.

JOURNALIST: [Inaudible] off the peak that you described, you expect cases and deaths in aged care to reduce as well. And given that Professor Kelly has said that he expects another winter Omicron peak and a flu season, can you tell us **who your Health Minister will be the day after the election given ...**

PRIME MINISTER: I will be making further announcements about that between now and the next election. And the great news is there are a large number of very experienced people in my cabinet who will be able to take on that role. And of course, I'll be making that announcement before we get to the next election. But in the meantime, right now, I can tell you this. This Minister for Health and Aged Care is continuing to apply himself for each and every single day and the person I would hope to succeed them after an election should we be successful, I'll be very clear about that **before the next election.**

JOURNALIST: We're aware of an aged care home in Melbourne where dozens of residents have COVID. The centre is blaming the inaccuracy of rapid tests for the outbreak. Are RATs appropriate for an aged care environment?

PRIME MINISTER: Well, it's an interesting question because rapid antigen tests, of course, are not as accurate as PCR tests. I've been making this point to the gallery now for many, many months about how helpful they can be. They are not as good as PCR tests, but they are the tests that we often need to use because of the volume of what we're dealing with. But Greg, did you want to comment on that?

THE HON. GREG HUNT MP, MINISTER FOR HEALTH AND AGED CARE: We've done over one quarter of a million PCR tests in aged care, and this has been obviously a point of discussion over the summer. We have been very clear that we followed the medical advice and that medical advice and I was looking at some of the timeframes was very clearly in favour of PCR tests until the Omicron wave came out. And I think this is important to reaffirm. In aged care, we've continued the role of PCR tests. They have a continuous role in addition to that since August, so long before I think most people were talking about rapid antigen tests. We were engaged even though there was reticence amongst some other jurisdictions, we were engaged in active continuous aged care screening and that started in New South Wales and has broadened out now, 10.7 million rapid antigen tests. So it is important, I think, to be absolutely clear that the PCR test was described and remains the gold standard. The rapid antigen test is an important adjunct in a significant caseload environment.

JOURNALIST: Has been delivering a federal integrity commission this term been a non-core Morrison Government promise. How do you justify not delivering that to the Australian people? And can I just ask on the text messages, how can you work with Barnaby Joyce?

PRIME MINISTER: Well, I addressed that matter yesterday. But on the other matter, the term is not completed yet.

JOURNALIST: So what is your message to members of your party who have expressed hesitancy about the Religious Discrimination Act? Do you thus need absolutely Labor support to get this through Parliament?

PRIME MINISTER: This is a very important bill. It's a bill that means that a Sikh family can go and rent an apartment and not be discriminated against, amongst many other issues, whether in the workplace or in general society, and that people can speak their beliefs in this country, in a free country, which you can't do in some other countries, but you can and should be able to do it here, and that should be protected like other, like other important protections that we have. So it's a very important bill, and I will continue to work through the colleagues. On the matter, on the measures and issues that they have raised. I've been very clear about the additional protections that I said I would move as an amendment to deal with the problems that Mark Dreyfus actually put into the Act. It was actually Mark Dreyfus that put measures in the Sex Discrimination Act. Labor Party put measures in the Sex Discrimination Act, which meant that you could expel children because of their sexuality. Now I'm proposing to put forward an amendment to change that in good faith and because I think it's the right thing to do. I've said this for years and that I think goes well together with the Religious Discrimination Bill, which I hope and certainly intend to become an Act in the near future to ensure that the protections of people of religious belief and frankly, for not having a religious belief are protected in this country as I believe they should be.

JOURNALIST: [Inaudible] there is insufficient time to get the integrity commission through this term of government ...

PRIME MINISTER: I think she was referring to this sitting fortnight.

JOURNALIST: Was she?

PRIME MINISTER: That's my understanding.

JOURNALIST: So you think that you'll be able to get it through before May?

PRIME MINISTER: Well, we'll see.

JOURNALIST: Have you spoken to Bridget Archer about her plans to cross the floor over the Religious Discrimination Bill? And can you categorically deny you have any concerns that it won't be able to get through parliament because of the divisions within your party?

PRIME MINISTER: I've spoken to Bridget on many occasions about this bill and many others and will continue to have those discussions and I look forward to the bill being debated in the Parliament, in the nation's Parliament. And my hope is, as I've always hoped with this bill, is this is a bill that would bring Australians together around this issue. There's nothing in this bill that seeks to prejudice others. It's a bill that is designed to protect religious expression in this country to ensure that people who have such beliefs are not discriminated against. That's something that should unite the Parliament, not divide it. Thanks very much, everyone.

PRIME MINISTER OF AUSTRALIA

The Hon Scott Morrison MP