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COLLINS' SUPER CHALLENGE

National MP Judith Collins yesterday subjected NZ Super Fund CEO Matt Whineray to intense questioning over his decision to divest from genesis energy because it burned coal. This was a continuation of her role within the National Caucus as its leading climate change sceptic. POLITIK has learned from a number of sources that she came much closer last November than has previously been acknowledged to persuading the Caucus to oppose the Zero Carbon Bill.

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WALKER TO CHAIR WTO COUNCIL

New Zealand's Permanent Representative to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) Ambassador David Walker has been appointed to chair the WTO General Council. It is the first time a New Zealander has chaired the General Council, which is the highest-level WTO decision-making body in Geneva.

Minister for Trade and Export Growth David Parker welcomed Ambassador Walker's appointment, which comes at a critical time for the WTO. "As the WTO faces unprecedented challenges, it's more important than ever that we use our seat at the table to speak clearly on the benefits of open and active trade," he said. "The Twelfth WTO Ministerial Conference in June in Nur Sultan, Kazakhstan, is fast approaching. It will be an important opportunity for WTO members to seek

meaningful progress in key areas. "That includes the successful conclusion of fisheries subsidies negotiations, and outcomes on issues like agriculture subsidies, sustainable trade practices, e-commerce and women's economic empowerment, as well as ongoing efforts on WTO reform and restoring the functioning of the WTO appellate body," David Parker said.

Ambassador Walker chaired the Dispute Settlement Body (DSB) in 2019 and has previously served as Chair of the Committee on Agriculture in Special Session. His appointment will run for one year. He replaces Ambassador Sunanta Kangvulkulkij of Thailand.

RECORD NUMBER OF TOWNHOUSES

The annual number of new townhouses, flats, and units consented reached a record high of about 8,400 new homes in the January 2020 year, Stats NZ said yesterday. The new record was an increase of 28 per cent compared with the January 2019 year. The number of apartments consented also grew significantly (up 24 per cent). "Multi-unit homes are making up a greater portion of new homes consented, partly driven by intensification in Auckland. However, stand-alone houses still account for about 60 per cent of all new homes consented nationally," construction statistics manager Melissa McKenzie said.

The number of townhouses, flats, and units consented has more than doubled since the series began in 1992. Over the same period, the population grew by around 1.4 million people to nearly 5 million people today. In total, just over 37,600 new homes were consented in the January 2020 year, up 12 per cent from the year ended January 2019.

The seasonally adjusted number of new homes consented fell 2.0 per cent in January 2020, following a rise of 9.8 per cent in December. The number of new homes consented each month can vary significantly due to the timing of large multi-unit dwelling projects, such as townhouses and apartment buildings.

OFFICIAL INFORMATION STATS

The State Services Commission says the [latest statistics](#) cover 114 agencies that collectively completed 19,829 official information requests between July and December 2019, a 7.8% increase in volume on the previous six months. In the six

months to December, 57 agencies completed 100% of their OIA requests within the legislated timeframe. Overall, agencies responded to 19,383, or 97.8%, of requests on time, compared with the 97.4% requests answered on time in the January to June 2019 period. Since 2015 when the Commission started collecting OIA data, there has been an overall improvement in OIA requests being completed on time.

"This is another good result overall," said Mr Hughes. "The public service has responded to nearly 98% of OIA requests on time. That is good, but I expect agencies to continue to work hard to make official information more freely available."

More agencies are also releasing their OIA responses publicly. Of the 114 agencies, 49 have published OIA responses on their websites. In total, 1788 OIA responses were published during the six months, an 8.1% increase on the previous period. (1654 during the first half of 2019). In the six months to December 2019, the number of complaints to the Ombudsman notified to agencies decreased 9.1%, down from 208 to 189. A total of 24 final opinions were made by the Ombudsman against agencies, an 11.1% decrease on the previous period (27 during the January-June 2019 period).

NEW GOVERNMENT FUND

The Government's new \$300 million venture capital fund - announced in last year's Budget – is now open for business as the Elevate NZ Venture Fund. Finance Minister Grant Robertson says lifting New Zealand's productivity requires well-functioning capital markets enabling more high-potential technology companies to raise funds and grow.

"Early-stage technology companies often struggle to access capital which has limited them from achieving their potential and increased their reliance on offshore capital. "We need fast-growing firms operating in a healthy, well-capitalised start-up environment where New Zealand ownership can connect to the global market place with the benefits contributing to our prosperity.

"The new fund will capitalise on the foundation set by R&D and Seed investments, to support building an early-stage investment environment. Our aim is that, over time, private sector funds will take over the role, as we develop deeper capital

markets in New Zealand,” Grant Robertson said. Associate Finance Minister David Parker said the fund would be managed by the New Zealand Growth Capital Partners (formerly New Zealand Venture Investment Fund), on behalf of the Guardians of the New Zealand Superannuation Fund (the Guardians), who will oversee and monitor the performance of Elevate NZ.

CORONAVIRUS AND THE PACIFIC

Foreign Affairs Minister Winston Peters says New Zealand is partnering with countries in the Pacific to ensure they are prepared for, and able to respond to the global threat of Coronavirus (COVID-19).

“There are currently no confirmed cases of COVID-19 in the Pacific, but it is vital that New Zealand is working hard in partnership with our neighbours to ensure the region is safe and as prepared as can be,” Mr Peters said.

New Zealand is jointly funding the World Health Organisation’s (WHO) Pacific regional coronavirus response plan, in partnership with Australia, in response to requests for assistance from Pacific island countries. New Zealand is providing \$1 million to the WHO in Suva to support its Pacific Action Plan for COVID-19 preparedness and response.

The New Zealand Government has also signed a contract with the Institute of Environmental Science and Research (ESR) for countries in the South Pacific to send samples of potential COVID-19 cases to ESR’s laboratory in New Zealand for testing, free of charge. Supporting the Realm countries has been another focus of New Zealand’s preparations related to Coronavirus. “In partnership with the WHO, New Zealand has deployed a team to the Cook Islands to support COVID-19 preparedness, with further joint trips planned to Tokelau and Niue from next week,” Mr Peters said.



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