

Just asking questions: How lawyer Sue Grey became the hero of New Zealand's conspiracy underbelly



KATHRYN GEORGE/Stuff

Lawyer and co-leader of the Outdoors and Freedom Party, Sue Grey.

She's educated, eloquent - and a key player in spreading New Zealand's anti-vax movement. Kirsty Johnston reports on lawyer Sue Grey.

Sue Grey is not wearing a mask. It's late March and New Zealand is under strict Covid restrictions amid the [Omicron outbreak](#). Vaccine passes are still compulsory, and masks are required for shops and cafes, and flights. But Grey, lawyer and co-leader of the NZ Outdoors and Freedom

Party, is unvaccinated. She has no pass. And she absolutely does not believe in [masks](#). So we have arranged to meet outside, in Mt Maunganui, where she plans to base herself while campaigning for the Tauranga electorate seat, vacated just a week earlier by former [National Party leader Simon Bridges](#).

I choose a coffee shop next to a park, assuming I can order while Grey waits. However, when I get there, she is already inside, with her partner and party co-leader Alan Simmons, who is also bare-faced. She smiles her huge smile at the waitress and buys a dainty little cake with purple flowers on top. No-one says anything about a mask. When her cake arrives she takes a picture to send to her daughter. "She will love this," Grey says, tucking her phone back in her bag. Simmons leaves his on the table, recording our conversation.

In the past two years, Grey has become a cult hero of the so-called "freedom" movement, the leaderless, amorphous group brought together by the belief their rights are being impinged upon by [Covid-19](#) restrictions. Travelling the country with Simmons in their beat-up white van, Grey has been at the forefront of pushing back against laws governing lockdowns, [mandates](#) and the vaccine roll-out - her focus forming and re-forming as swiftly as the virus itself. At the same time, she has pushed unfounded Covid-19 therapies such as "sunshine and Vitamin D"; argued that only the old and weak die from Covid; and made false claims that the [vaccine](#) is causing widespread death.

READ MORE:

* [By positioning herself as a 'truth seeker', lawyer Sue Grey is fuelling Covid-19 disinformation](#)

* [Law Society to investigate complaint over anti-vax lawyer Sue Grey](#)

* [Lawyer Sue Grey aims to win Nelson electorate seat for NZ Outdoors Party](#)

Videos documenting Grey's public appearances throughout the pandemic show a growing base of adoring fans, and an increased revelling in her own quasi-celebrity status. At first, most of her appearances were online. And then she began to appear at small, regional marches. By October 2021, she gave a speech outside the High Court in [Wellington](#), where she was arguing that four aviation workers should not have to be vaccinated to work. A crowd held placards and flags, mobbing Grey before the hearing.

"It's a little bit like the Rosa Parks case in America, it's like Rosa Parks meets Fitzgerald and Muldoon," she tells the gathered supporters. They whoop and holler and clap. "God bless you, Sue," a voice behind the camera shouts.

NZ Outdoors and Freedom Party co-leader Sue Grey speaking at a rally in Auckland in June 2021.

Youtube

NZ Outdoors and Freedom Party co-leader Sue Grey speaking at a rally in Auckland in June 2021.

A month later, Grey is appearing in front of a crowd of thousands at a Freedom & Rights Coalition rally in [Wellington](#). She is again greeted with loud applause.

“Isn’t it fun?” she says. “When you’re the naughty ones? When you say, ‘actually I don’t care about your silly rules.’”

Unlike other big-time players in the anti-vaccine space, Grey doesn’t confine herself to one platform. She appears with Chantelle Baker and her father, Leighton Baker, former leader of the New Conservative Party. Voices For Freedom founder Claire Deeks posts her videos. She was on Magic Talk radio. She appears with conspiracy YouTuber Vinny Eastwood and on conspiracy platform Counterspin with far-right presenter [Kelvyn Alp](#). And she is popular. For example, a Facebook page called “Sue Grey is the Real Leader of NZ” has 21,000 followers. Facebook data provided to *Stuff* shows videos featuring Grey have resulted in 3.4 million views in the past two years. The most common emoji reaction to her posts is the heart symbol, meaning “love”.

“She has rockstar status,” says Nick Wilson, media studies teacher and member of FACT Aotearoa, a grass-roots activist group formed to push back against misinformation. “It’s interesting because all of these groups are constantly having spats, arguing with each other, and yet she slips in and out of them. She’s a chameleon.”

Grey’s zenith came during the parliamentary occupation. Messages swept alternative channels Telegram and Zello, hyping her arrival at [‘Camp Freedom’](#). Over the three weeks, she posted dozens of videos to the Outdoors Party Facebook page (her own having been shut down for 30 days for violating the platform’s misinformation rules).

Followers flocked to her, particularly those alleging vaccine injuries, or those who had been made jobless after refusing to get the vaccine.

"It would take me about an hour to go 10 metres because everyone wanted to take a selfie with me," Grey says. "I spoke with thousands of people."



Marion Van Dijk/Stuff

Grey helped defend Brian Tamaki and others charged with breaching lockdown rules throughout the pandemic. (File photo)

But even after the announcement that mandates would be lifted, and the heat has come out of the "movement", Grey isn't slowing down.

Just last week she appeared in court representing [a doctor who had imported](#) the anti-parasitic drug, Ivermectin, with the intention of using it on his patients. (A [recent study](#) found the drug does not reduce the risk of hospitalisation following a Covid infection). The same day, Grey was name-

checked by friends of [far-right extremist Richard Sivell](#) as he was being arrested for threatening to kill the Prime Minister. Later that week she gave a talk to farmers about AGENDA 2030, a set of United Nations development goals that some believe will be used to ["enslave humanity"](#).

And of course, she announced her run for Tauranga, her second shot at Parliament, an ambition borne from her new-found high profile and from what she says has been a strong positive demand for someone "with her skills."

"We've got such great feedback that I've gone 'OK, let's do it,'" Grey says. "I'm a big fan of running with whatever the mood is."

A lawyer convinced

In person, Grey is just the same as in her videos: warm, charming, confident. She tells me, earnestly, how hard it's been for the unvaccinated these past months. She's been unable to find places to eat lunch, to find motels to stay in. The rules are confusing, the vax passes oppressive.



LAWRENCE SMITH/Stuff

Sue Grey spent hours interviewing protesters on Facebook livestreams at the occupation in February 2022.

Over the next hour, she tells me that Parliament lacks diversity; that there's no opposition standing up to the Government; that the easy freedoms we once had in New Zealand are gone; that freedom of speech has also gone.

Most passionately, she tells me repeatedly that the vaccine offers "no real protection" against Covid-19, and there's no research showing it prevents infection or transmission against [Omicron](#).

([Data shows](#) a person is significantly less likely to be severely sick, hospitalised or die from Omicron if vaccinated, especially following the third (booster) dose.)

In fact, she says, she believes the vaccine is harmful.

(Roughly [two-thirds](#) of the world's population has received

at least one dose of a Covid vaccine. [Trials and real-world data](#) have shown the Covid vaccines are [safe and effective](#). Serious side effects associated with the vaccine [are rare](#).)

“What if you’re wrong about the vaccine?” I ask Grey.

“What if you’re wrong, and you tell lots of people not to get it... and they die?”

“I don’t believe I’m wrong,” Grey says.

From conservation to vaccines

If Grey’s name seems familiar to you, that’s likely because it is. The Nelson-based lawyer first attracted public controversy in 2003, during an investigation into alleged corruption in the scampi industry. Grey, whose client was one of the main accusers, was appearing before a select committee when she began a relationship with Green Party MP Ian Ewen-Street. Both were obliged to step down, and Ewen-Street later left politics. They are no longer together.

Just a few years later, Grey was back on the front page. While representing a group of wool growers in a court case against the Wool Board, she discovered a judge who had ruled against her client jointly owned a racehorse stud with a Wool Board Lawyer. Grey accused the judge, Bill Wilson, of a conflict of interest. The judge, Bill Wilson, later resigned, after a supposedly confidential Judicial Conduct Commissioner report about him was made public. [Grey was fired](#) from her job at the Department of Conservation over

her role in the case, after also being accused of having a conflict of interest by Director-General of the department, Al Morrison.

In 2016, Grey again made headlines. She became deeply involved in the medicinal cannabis movement, acting for the first women to bring prescription cannabis into New Zealand. Her work exposed a "loophole" in the Misuse of Drugs Act, taking numerous cases in court. She has also defended "Green Fairies" like [Rose Renton](#) on charges of cultivating cannabis for medicinal use. Renton - and later a number of others - received a discharge without conviction.

GLENN MCCONNELL/STUFF

Police and protesters violently clashed during a chaotic morning on Molesworth Street in Wellington on Wednesday (some of the language may be offensive). Video first published March 2, 2022.

Grey is also a long-time opponent of cellphone technology, first opposing 3G towers in 2009, and then shifting on to wifi, then 5G. A former friend told *Stuff* that Grey - who has a bachelor of science - had an idea that if you hold a cellphone next to your head, you'd get a brain tumour.

(There was [no consistent increase](#) in brain cancers in New Zealand in the 15 years to 2010). In 2020, she embarked on a series of national protests, claiming 5G was a "human rights issue".

In recent years, Grey's most high-profile campaign has

been against the use of pest poisons to protect native birds. From 2017, she began to run workshops on anti-[1080](#) activism. She also took several court cases - including one in Nelson, opposing a brodifacoum-laced bait drop at the Brook Waimarama Sanctuary, and another in Auckland, seeking to stop a 1080 drop in the Hunua ranges. Grey lost both cases. In the Auckland case, the court found Grey's argument was "legally without substance."

In March 2020, when Covid-19 hit New Zealand, Grey had just announced her appointment as co-leader of the Outdoors Party, and her intention to run for the Nelson seat. Set up in 2015 by Simmons and his long-time friend David Haynes, the Outdoors Party originally focused on environmental issues, in particular those which affected game sports like hunting and fishing. After Grey joined - and Haynes departed - its policies expanded, calling for the immediate cessation of the use of 1080, a moratorium on the allocation of medicinal marijuana, and an inquiry into [5G](#).

With the arrival of the virus, however, Grey began to focus full-time on [Covid](#). She immediately began to criticise New Zealand's response to the pandemic as "draconian". She questioned the severity of the virus. She argued that only the elderly or infirm were affected. She asked why the Government wasn't advising people to take zinc and eat good food? She advocated sunshine, not vaccines.

As the pandemic intensified, so did Grey's rhetoric. Boosted

by an early win in court centring on a technicality in the law that governed the [vaccine roll-out](#), she began to compare immunisation to rape and murder. In an Outdoors Party press release, Grey called the vaccine roll-out to teenagers "government-mandated genocide". She recorded a video about the Nuremberg principles, linking the administration of the [Covid-19 vaccine](#) to the unethical human experiments the Nazis conducted during World War II. And, she said the vaccine was causing deaths.

"I've heard a Picton school teacher died 48 hours after getting the Vax," Grey wrote on Facebook.

"So sad to hear of the reports of a Jabathon collapse and fears of a death at Takaka."

"Confirmed: First NZ schoolgirl Vax death. The tragic early end to an innocent life."



Facebook

Screenshots from Grey's Facebook where she made several false claims about Covid-19 vaccine deaths.

None of those deaths were caused by vaccines, [family and authorities confirmed](#). Later, [several complaints](#) were made with the Law Society about Grey's conduct. And, in the case of the schoolgirl, both Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and Chief Coroner Judge Deborah Marshall [spoke out publicly](#) against Grey's claim.

The truth didn't deter Grey.

She said the coroner was wrong to make a call on the girl's death so quickly, She began to work on compiling lists of people who said they'd been injured by the vaccine. Her claims - and that of the Outdoors Party - became more and more extreme. She alleged there was electronic nanotechnology in the vaccine ([there wasn't](#)).

"Has anyone looked at factors that might explain the large number of car and swimming accidents?" Grey wrote on Facebook earlier this year "Are there any novel medical treatments or other factors that might explain this?"

Her followers lapped it up. "Vaxcidents are definitely happening," one woman replied. "I've saved a girl's life who was having a seizure at a major intersection, her foot slipped off the brake and she was heading into oncoming traffic. she was vaxed 3 days prior."

[\(Serious side effects are rare,](#) closely monitored and investigated. There is no data suggesting a link between the vaccine and either drownings or car accidents.)

In late 2021, Grey even tried to push her ideas through the courts. During the "no jab, no job" case, where Grey represented four airport workers who lost their jobs after refusing to get vaccinated, she tried to argue that Covid testing was "more an art than a science". The judge rebuked her. "I think I can safely assume Covid exists, can't I?"

Grey lost the case, with the court reiterating that the

vaccine was safe and effective, she said it was just a “step in the journey”.

“Ultimately people-power will prevail.”

Just asking questions

Despite her high profile within the anti-vaccine community, Grey has so far escaped the levels of public scrutiny afforded other conspiracy activists like Destiny Church leader Brian Tamaki or failed political aspirant Billy Te Kahika.

The Law Society’s standards committee has referred complaints about Grey to the much more serious Lawyers and Conveyancers Disciplinary Tribunal, which hears and determines disciplinary charges against members of the legal profession.

Whether Grey will be sanctioned, however, is still very much in doubt.

“She is very careful in her construction of plausible deniability,” says misinformation researcher Dr Sanjana Hattotuwa, of the Disinformation Project. “She is very good at that, presenting as an ‘every woman’, this caring person with a law background. She is always “just asking questions”, so if anything happens she won’t be blamed for it. It’s dog whistling.”

Hattotuwa was one of the few experts willing to go on

record about Grey. *Stuff* spoke to dozens of others - former employers, friends, lawyers, academics, journalists, and people who had faced litigation by Grey before - and almost all refused to comment. Some were wary of a defamation suit, given Grey's professional status, but the majority were more concerned about being dragged into something that could "turn nasty".

"Look at her history," former Nelson MP Nick Smith said. "There is a pattern of behaviour by Sue Grey where she has gone three or four steps too far in advocating a cause."

Dom Thomas/RNZ

Former Nelson MP Nick Smith said he didn't agree with the way Sue Grey undertook her advocacy work.

Smith cited the Brook Valley case as an example, where ratepayers and the voluntary Brook Waimarama trust were [left more than \\$100,000 out of pocket](#) when the group opposing the poison drop (mainly out-of-towners) [appealed the case all the way to the Supreme Court](#), then [pleaded poverty](#), and dissolved itself. (As an aside, the same group of people were behind the Ngā Kaitiaki Tuku Iho court case against the vaccine rollout, after forming a new incorporated society, including board member Alan Simmons and having its legal documents witnessed by - you guessed it - Sue Grey. Group chair Christopher St Johanser, last week told *Stuff* it had "plenty of money" for further legal action, and that Grey charged them reduced fees. Grey told *Stuff* she wasn't making huge money taking

such cases, but relied on business clients for her income).

On the day of the [aerial poison drop itself](#), the sanctuary fence was vandalised, and a hole was drilled in a helicopter refuelling tank. Late morning, Smith was attacked with rat poison. It was rubbed on him by cannabis campaigner Rose Renton. Later, Renton was defended by Grey, and [recieved a \\$400 fine](#).

Smith said he was disappointed with Grey's behaviour during the case.

"It's fine to have a different view on the pest operation, and nor do I have difficulties with Sue Grey defending clients," Smith said. "What I do have a problem with is that in her defence she effectively defended rubbing poison on me as a legitimate form of protest."

This is a concern that arises again and again around Grey. From spreading untrue information, to refusing to delete posts that are wrong, to moderating her followers on her pages, to working with people like former leader of far-right group [NZ National Front Kyle Chapman](#), critics say her behaviour works to effectively validate viewpoints and ideas that are harmful or wrong.

Protests on the day of the Brook Valley poison drop.

BRADEN FASTIER/Stuff

Protests on the day of the Brook Valley poison drop.

"She's high-profile, she's a lawyer, and people trust her, but

she has no boundaries about who she will or won't associate with," says Andrew Mackie, another FACT Aotearoa member. "When she appears on [Counterspin with Kelvyn Alp](#), and she doesn't reject what he says, that signals to people that what he's saying is OK."

Grey rejects these accusations.

"I would work with anybody who's got a vision for freedom and democracy and those willing to work with others," she said. "I don't think it's a case of legitimising views or not."

"Obviously, I don't like hate speech and those sorts of things. But... if you hear an issue, the hate often goes out of it."

But when asked about the hate speech and misogyny directed against the Prime Minister, Grey doesn't answer the question, and begins instead to talk about the oppression of women she witnessed while travelling through India and Pakistan. She also refuses to denounce Alp, who advocated for Ardern and the rest of the MPs in Parliament to be hung.

"Look, I think that he's got his views," Grey says. "The way things are... something that is treated as completely out there one day, six months or a year later has suddenly become quite a normal way of looking at things... history changes all the time. I think the more perspectives the better."

MARTIN DE RUYTER/Stuff

Grey with medicinal cannabis campaigner Rose Renton. (File photo)

She also takes no responsibility for what others post on her social media, she says.

"I mean, this is the whole problem," she says. "We've had a mummy state telling us what we can and can't think and do. And it takes away personal responsibility. My view is the opposite."

This includes when she posts things that are untrue.

"I don't believe I've ever posted that something is a vaccine injury without absolutely compelling evidence," Grey says.

But what about the case of the schoolgirl, where there was no evidence, and she's caused harm to a grieving family and the people who viewed and believed her post? Does she think her version of "public interest" outweighs their feelings?

"I'm hugely respectful of families, and especially when they've just suffered a loss," she says. "But I'm also a mother. And I'd like [my children] to have access to all of the information."

Mackie says Grey isn't uncommon among conspiracy theorists in believing their work is a necessary public good.

"In their minds, they're a whistleblower," he says. "They've

turned rumour-mongering into a moral duty. And in doing so, they've insulated themselves from any problem in their own head."

Pivoting to the political

New Zealand is now more than a month on from the parliamentary occupation. A recent attempt to repeat the protest failed dismally. [Omicron](#) is waning. The borders are reopening. The imminent threat of disinformation fracturing society seems less pressing.

"It's not," Hattotuwa says. "The long and short of it is we are seeing a pivot now, away from anti-mandates and towards the general election.

Already, on the back alleys of Telegram, there are whispers about broader political moves. Amid the anger, there was talk of starting a coalition of small parties. Creating an alternative to the mainstream.

Last election, the Outdoors Party only got 0.1 per cent of the vote. Just 679 people in Nelson voted for Grey. Ideological allies Advance Party got 1 per cent. The New Conservatives got 1.5 per cent. Even combined, they barely stand a chance at a single seat.

"It's not so much the electoral outcome that's a concern," Hattotuwa says. "It's that the election is going to be fundamentally different to any New Zealand has had in the past. And all these people like Alp, some of the protesters -

they are against government in general. They advocate killing of MPs. It is not good for political discourse or democracy.”

Martin De Ruyter/Stuff

Grey is running in the Tauranga by-election. In 2020, she was a candidate for the Outdoors Party in Nelson. (File photo)

Online, there is a video of Sue Grey in 2017 discussing her “blueprint” for how to get authorities to listen, even if mainstream media won’t. She suggested activists flood the comments sections of news sites with comments about 1080, even on unrelated articles.

“We’ve got to be more noisy and cause more trouble than any of the other problems so we go to the top of the list.”

Soon afterwards, the livestreams and comments sections of every news outlet in New Zealand were overwhelmed in a spike of 1080 activism. Later, 5G activists used the same tactics.

“It’s exhausting,” New Zealand Telecommunications Forum chief executive Paul Brislen says. He’s concerned the focus will go back on the communications networks post-pandemic. “Before [Covid](#) there were towers being burned down, towers attacked, all because of misinformation.”

Facebook data from the beginning of April confirms his worst fears. Almost soon as the protest chatter waned, action on the 1080 and 5G Facebook group increased

again.

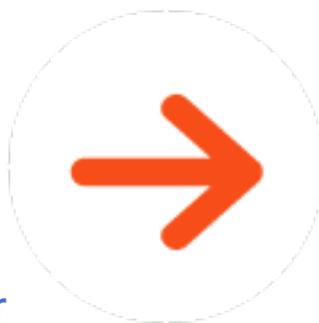
There's also increased chatter about [Three Waters](#), about [He Puapua](#), about Marsden Point. There's only one question left: What cause will Sue Grey pick next?

**** Correction: The New Conservatives received 1.5 per cent of the vote last election, not 1 per cent.***

Corrected on 10 April 2022.

Getting to the truth takes patience and perseverance. Our reporters will spend days combing through documents, weeks cultivating delicate sources, and months - if not years - fighting through the Official Information Act, courts and red tape to deliver their stories.

By supporting Stuff you'll help our journalists keep the pressure on. Make a contribution from as little as \$1 today.



[Become a supporter](#)