

# Divided? Splintered? What the parliament occupation says about New Zealand now

[By Toby Manhire](#) Editor-at-large



**The extraordinary events in Wellington in the last weeks have led some to declare a 'chasm of division' in society. Does that hold up, and what are the gravest dangers exposed, asks Toby Manhire.**

As the occupation of parliament enters its third week, things have taken on a Rorschach quality. Staring at the inkblot spread across the grounds of parliament and into the surrounding streets, observers see very different

pictures, ranging from a carnival of peace and love to a seething hotbed of extremism.

Opposition leaders in recent days have discerned something frightening: a country divided. David Seymour of Act [urged](#) discussions with protesters and the removal of vaccine mandates in the cause of social cohesion.

National's Chris Luxon was another to appeal to social cohesion. In a speech titled [A Divided Society](#), he said Jacinda Ardern had led "the most divisive government in recent memory". The parliament grounds occupation was "the culmination of underlying issues that have been rumbling along in our communities for some time" and New Zealand risked being "divided into warring factions, inextricably and increasingly opposed". Earlier in the day he published an [op-ed](#) addressing "the chasm of division that has opened up our country".

On Monday afternoon Ardern responded: "I do not think for a moment that differences in opinion mean we are divided as a nation. I absolutely reject that and I do not believe that is what we have on display."

## **How divided are we?**

The most powerful riposte to declamations of division is the vaccination uptake. On a daily basis the number of people who quietly head to a vaccination centre (on average more than 40,000 a day over the last fortnight) are a bucket to the drop of those encamped at parliament. Our vaccination

levels are among the best in the world, with 94% of people 12-plus double-vaccinated.

That is not, however, the whole story. A snap [Horizon poll](#) – based on a digital panel and with a relatively low sample of 520 – last week suggested that three in 10 people support the protest. It found that 61% are opposed, leaving 9% undecided or refusing to say.

An Ipsos poll [published](#) on Sunday, which surveyed just over 1,000 people on the Covid response, found that half considered the restrictions in place under the red light setting to be about right. The remainder were evenly split, with a quarter thinking the measures too tough and another quarter not tough enough. That might look at first glance a profound split; but is it? It in fact shows a whopping 75% believe the current restrictions are either appropriate or should go further. The same poll showed a drop in support for the overall government response, but 63% backed it still – a number many around the world would envy.

Such polling numbers, together with data that reveals a relatively high [trust in government](#) and [public services](#), give the lie to any idea of a social fabric ripping apart, says Max Rashbrooke, author of several [books on inequality](#) in New Zealand. “The protest is very frightening to see in and of itself. But is it a threat to social cohesion in the wider sense? I don’t really think it is,” says Rashbrooke from Wellington. “We’ve had much greater divisions on political issues in New Zealand in the past, where the split would be

more like 55-45, for instance, such as marijuana reform. Did people come out of that and say: the social fabric of New Zealand is irreparably damaged or social cohesion is under untenable strain? Of course not. Disagreement is just part of things."

The diagnosis of a social cohesion crisis is, reckons Rashbrooke, similar to attempts to characterise the protest action – with its assemblage of directly affected individuals, anti-vaxxers, natural healers, conspiracy theorists and insurrectionists – as a working class movement. "There are hundreds of thousands of people in poverty in New Zealand," he says.

"There are hundreds of thousands of people who have been made significantly worse off by the economic changes of the last 40 years – the huge increase in poverty, the widening gap between rich and poor – but those people are not out in this protest. They're not conspiracy theorists. Why would we suddenly see inequality through the lens of a tiny number of people? Why is that the working class voice we have to listen to? Why don't we listen to the much wider working class voice which is saying, as far as I can tell, we just want better healthcare, education, more affordable housing, higher wages?"

There is, however, something different about what is playing out now, Rashbrooke says. "I do understand why people are alarmed, and of course what we're seeing is that the intensity of feeling and to some extent the size of the crowd of people who have entered an alternate reality is

much greater than we thought. That's absolutely true. People have become radicalised in ways that I think maybe we thought wasn't happening in New Zealand, that we thought was just an American thing ... It definitely is a very constant set of people who have detached themselves a bit from the rest of New Zealand socially. That is alarming. That is a problem. I just don't think that's a social cohesion problem, the way that people would normally phrase it."

Outside parliament. Photo: Justin Giovannetti

## **Social cohe-what?**

What does social cohesion mean? Like so many of these terms, a settled definition is as simple as gripping an eel. The concept, if not the words themselves, tends to be traced back to sociologist Émile Durkheim. If you're doing well on social cohesion, shared values and social bonds abound, simmering social enmity or conflict not so much. The idea figured prominently in the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the 2019 terrorist attack on Christchurch mosques, with the ninth of its 10 sections devoted to a concept it [defines](#) like this: "A socially cohesive society is one in which all individuals and groups have a sense of belonging, social inclusion, participation, recognition and legitimacy."

The Royal Commission report led to extensive and ongoing work by the government on social cohesion. Launching a consultation on a social cohesion programme, which

included potential hate speech laws, in the middle of last year, minister Priyanca Radhakrishnan [said](#): "The government wants to ensure Aotearoa is a place where everyone feels safe, valued, heard, has a strong sense of belonging, and is able to participate fully in society."

Radhakrishnan declined to answer questions this week, including on whether the current protest actions have a social cohesion component. She directed The Spinoff instead to Ardern's comments on division.

Paul Spoonley, a professor of sociology at Massey University, has been studying social cohesion for decades, most recently as an author on the Kōi Tū paper Sustaining Social Cohesion in Aotearoa New Zealand. Published in December, it observed, "The emotions of anger, fear, and hatred of others have emerged in the public square, most obviously in the US, but New Zealand may be trending in that direction, arguably accelerated by some responses to actions taken to address the Covid-19 pandemic."

It noted also this: "In New Zealand, much of the resistance to vaccines comes from members of society who, for historical and other reasons, have low trust in government or in other elites such as medical scientists, and this has been a frequent sentiment expressed by vaccine-resistant people."

Speaking to The Spinoff now, Spoonley says: "When it comes to Covid we've got among the highest levels of compliance and therefore cohesion anywhere in the world."

But it is one of those moments when we are reminded there are fault lines."

In 2006, during the Clark government, Spoonley was one of the authors of a cabinet paper on social cohesion. The focus was immigration, and how new arrivals could settle into communities. There were two gaps in their work, he says today. "What we missed – and it was our fault – was the treaty and Māori interests. And what we didn't anticipate was what was going to happen online."

That paper "didn't go anywhere". The government shifted to a "social inclusion approach" which saw social cohesion as a subset. It wasn't until the Christchurch terrorist attack and the Royal Commission that followed that social cohesion was again thrust to the foreground – in many ways because it was seen as a critical means by which to avoid any repeat of something so appalling.

The trouble is, social cohesion is not as simple as issuing an edict or passing a law. "If we're going to talk about social cohesion we should talk about something that is bottom up. It's not something that governments are particularly good at doing," says Spoonley. "I think the Covid crisis has shown that, particularly with Māori and Pasifika communities. Unless you work with those communities you're really not achieving cohesive outcomes."

He remains concerned about "the toxicity which is apparent online. We need to understand it better and

develop ways of addressing it." Such toxicity, of course, was a root from which March 15 grew. "The Christchurch terror attack and the protests at parliament should warn us that there is a very toxic and vitriolic element to our politics, which operates in a sort of parallel universe," says Spoonley. "Before the 15th of March, people would say: how big is the far-right? How many people are involved? How many groups are there? And my point was, it's not about size. It's about the potential to do things that undermine our social cohesion, particularly by violence." That, he says, should give us pause today.

## **'We could see this collision'**

For Debbie Ngarewa-Packer, co-leader of te Pāti Māori, the scenes on the grounds of parliament are in part a result of state failure when it comes to Māori, both in the Covid response and in the many decades before. "When people have a sense of being disconnected from the state and from their community, this is an example of what we get," she says.

In November the Māori Party called for an end to government mandates, "a narrow-minded approach that has vilified the unvaccinated people in this country". They argued instead for targeted mandates as "an important tool that whānau, hapū, iwi, businesses and communities should be empowered to use where and when they determine a need. We support them setting their own tikanga."

The party is not endorsing the occupation in Wellington, but bemoans the unwillingness across the last two years to look to a rāhui approach instead of blanket rules. "Māori have run rāhui for generations – rāhui for deaths, for murders, for accidents, for pollution, for everything. Why couldn't we have done rāhui our way for a pandemic? We are the most regulated people when it comes to tikanga."

For many who resisted vaccination, trust in centralised power had long ago eroded, she says. "There are generations of trauma and mistrust. Those conversations and those collective connections need to happen without interference." As far as those peddling conspiracy theories are concerned, "there was a part of us that was absolutely prime for the picking."

The challenge now, says Ngarewa-Packer, is rebuilding after the immediate crisis subsides. "Our whānau will come home, and we will help to heal. We will love and connect whether they're vaccinated or not ... Everyone has an opinion on the conflict. Nothing excuses violence. But we could see this collision. Now we have to focus on how we heal."

'I am so worried': Sanjana Hattotuwa

## **Splintered realities**

Divisions within those who remain at the occupation have become conspicuous in recent days, with police saying, "it

has become increasingly clear that genuine protesters are no longer in control of the behaviour in and around parliament”.

But both the factionalism and the insurrectional extremism – complete with the almost routine calls for mass execution of politicians, journalists, scientists and more – have been obvious for some time to anyone keeping half an eye on the digital communications of many of the [groups involved](#). These ideas – including the message threads and livestreams of conspiracy-propagating outfit Counterspin – seep beneath the grounds of parliament like the [befouled](#) stormwater system feeding out into Wellington harbour.

For the last 190 days, Sanjana Hattotuwa has been watching and analysing these digital substrata of misinformation and disinformation as part of a research project for Te Pūnaha Matatini. On each of those days he has monitored 112 channels, sifting through around 9,000 to 10,000 posts and comments. Every day he fills about 25 pages of a notebook.

Over that period, there has been something approaching exponential growth. “It is a virus, and it has measurably carved its way into normative discourse online since August 17,” he says. In September, the channels he followed were populated by about 40,000 members and followers. Today, that number is more than 320,000.

He does not suggest a chasm has opened up in society. But

he sees something that keeps him awake at night. His concern, he told The Spinoff from Dunedin, is what he calls ["splintered realities"](#) – widening fissures on basic truths that risk giving rise to truly appalling things in the real world. He's worried especially because he's seen it happen before, in his homeland Sri Lanka.

The sometimes festive images of the protest outside the Beehive are "fundamentally different to what is promoted, projected and engaged with online", he says. "What has been usurped online is democratic debate and dialogue on the question of mandates, [replaced] with something that denigrates and destroys and, I can't stress this enough, aimed at the total evisceration of democracy."

## **The hellscape of toxicity**

Platforms like Facebook and YouTube remain fertile ground for misinformation, but the big growth platform for the most extreme views is Telegram. What Hattotuwa calls a "hellspace of toxicity in Aotearoa and globally" is "fundamentally different" because it welcomes many who have been turfed off the more familiar platforms but also because it doesn't deploy an algorithm – a device by which certain types of content can either be elevated, but also buried, according to its design.

The biggest surge Hattotuwa witnessed was February 6, the day the convoy modelled on the Canadian template set out. For the first time, video engagement for misinformation

channels was greater than that for mainstream media channels. On February 10, when police made more than 100 arrests on the lawns at parliament, something similar happened. This time, misinformation outlets had outperformed the mainstream media on Facebook's stablemate Instagram, a social medium more usually associated with fashion and food than angry protest movements. Suddenly Hattotuwa saw the "vocabulary of QAnon" being shared, with everyday users "sucked in by producers who are really quite harmful but delivering livestreams which are really quite compelling".

Alarmingly, the commentary by the original convoy channels has been attracting much less attention than the more extreme voices. "The most extreme are getting higher engagement and higher growth," he says. The more extreme the comment, the more engagement it gained.

For Hattotuwa, the lack of any substantive political response to this burgeoning threat is greatly disappointing. After the New Lynn terrorist attack last year, "the country was very very quick in a month or so to revise counterterrorism laws", he says. This time, "I haven't seen anything that speaks to what I believe is necessary investments in social cohesion."

However small on a national scale the protest may be, however benign and genuine so many of those who have pitched up in Wellington may be, the nature of so much of the vigorous communications that lie beneath are truly

shocking. The exchanges, says Hattotuwa, are “so horrific that I don’t think most people would recognise their country”.

He adds: “I feel so sad. It takes a toll on you. It’s a path. And somebody like me knows where it leads to. The markers of the journey around the *telos* – in Greek, the end point of this journey – I have lived. The patina on my skin is the negotiation of this bloody violence elsewhere, which is why there is an emotional connection to what I study. Because Aotearoa shouldn’t be showing the nature that I’ve studied in terms of international disorders elsewhere. It’s as anomalous as malaria or a tropical disease in the polar circle.”

The trajectory, says Hattotuwa, is chilling, and there is a real risk that it might get worse, feeding into the 2023 election. “The degree to which things have gone awry,” he says, pausing and taking a deep breath, “if this erosion continues exponentially, we are looking at a very different electoral landscape 18 months down the line.” And yet the mentality in his adopted country seems still to be one of she’ll be right. “I am so worried,” says Hattotuwa. “Because nothing that I am looking at suggests that she will be right.”

*Annabelle Lee-Mather, Toby Manhire and Ben Thomas discuss the protest and the response from politicians and police in the Spinoff’s Gone By Lunchtime podcast. Listen on [Apple Podcasts](#), [Spotify](#) or your favourite podcast*

provider.

***The Spinoff's political coverage is powered by the generous support of our [members](#). If you value what we do and believe in the importance of independent and freely accessible journalism – tautoko mai, [donate today](#).***