

# 'So many rabbit holes': Even in trusting New Zealand, protests show fringe beliefs can flourish

[Tess McClure](#)

New Zealand's anti-vaccine convoy is hoping to be there for the long haul. Once a ragtag collective of tents, it has become a fully fledged encampment: it has free clothing tents, admin checkpoints, yellow-vested security guards, portable toilets, tents for charging phones, and a "blues lounge" where the band plays a light, jazzy reimagining of Pink Floyd's Brick in the Wall. "We don't need no vaccination, we don't need no thought control," a woman croons, tapping the bongos.

On the surface, the occupation of parliamentary grounds evokes a poorly planned but amiable music festival, but an undercurrent of violence – or its threat – throbs below. As well as chalked messages of peace and love, some protesters came bearing nooses, promises of a "war crimes trial" for politicians, journalists, and scientists, or outright demands to "hang them high".

On Wednesday, a man was arrested after driving a car directly at police lines. Police allege protesters have thrown faecal matter and acid over officers [some protesters say

this never happened, or was a false flag operation to discredit them]. Despite the encampment's commitment to being alcohol free, at least one fight has broken out between intoxicated campers. There have also been credible reports of police brutality, with one demonstrator alleging an officer gouged his eyes.

New Zealand has endured most of the pandemic with little experience of the death, mass unemployment, political incompetence or furious partisan infighting that has [plagued other countries](#). Its pandemic response has been characterised by remarkable levels of social cohesion and consensus. Support for pandemic measures – including highly restrictive ones like lockdowns and border closures – have often polled at more than 80%. New Zealanders' trust in scientists and one another rose during Covid-19, to [become the highest in the world](#). The convoy of furious citizens that have arrived on parliament lawns are the most confronting splintering of that vision. They are an uncomfortable reminder that even as much of the country has come to trust its leaders, scientists and fellow citizens, a vocal minority have come to opposite conclusions. As the occupation continues, researchers fear that it has become a radicalisation device, and a recruiting ground for extremist groups.

Anti-Covid mandate protesters outside parliament in Wellington. On the surface, the occupation evokes an amiable music festival. Photograph: Dave Lintott/REX/Shutterstock

## **Distrust, trauma, extremism**

"This is world war three," says Angela\*, taking a large bite of avocado salad. A chatty, retired kindergarten teacher from Mangawhai, she believes New Zealand's political parties are involved in a plot to use vaccines to thin the population, and will eventually face consequences for their crimes. "It's much more serious – well, not more serious, but a different kind of war from the first world war or second world war. It's basically a depopulation agenda." She is reluctant to say whether prime minister Jacinda Ardern or other government officials should be executed, as she doesn't like the idea of people dying. "But when the truth comes out, then they will have to be dealt with," she says.

New Zealand's pandemic response has been characterised by remarkable levels of social cohesion and consensus. Photograph: Dave Lintott/REX/Shutterstock

For some protesters, distrust of the government has long roots. Alex\* is manning the protest frontlines, standing with an enormous black motorbike behind the concrete bollards installed by police. At his feet is a large dog, whom he introduces as Jaws.

Alex says that his brother in-law suffered a heart attack in the weeks after his booster shot. "The trauma of that and the damage of that is still resounding within our family," he says. Data indicates heart problems are far more common as a result of Covid-19 infection than of vaccination, but Alex saw the booster and heart attack as connected. He believes Covid-19 was released deliberately, as part of a "plandemic" to enable millionaires, pharmaceutical companies, and world leaders to control the global population.

Alex is from Ngati Maahanga, Waikato, where the crown

committed atrocities and confiscated more than 485,000 hectares (1.2m acres) of land in the mid-1800s. Indigenous people have plentiful historical reasons not to trust state promises of protection. That history flows through to the present, Alex says, where Māori make up a significant portion of protesters today.

Those calling for trials and executions, Alex says, don't represent the majority. "When it comes to those who make extreme claims about retribution and stuff like that – those people have a belief of their own, that [it's] the only way to get justice for the injustices they feel have been perpetrated against them," he says. "That is solely and completely their own narrative. ... We are definitely not about that. What we want is the mandates dropped."



Police allege protesters have thrown faecal matter and acid over officers. Photograph: Dave Lintott/REX/Shutterstock

Many say their views have been misrepresented – that heavy-handed views like a “Nuremberg 2.0” trial are a small minority, not reflective of the wider group. But on Thursday night, the protesters conducted some – admittedly unscientific – internal polling of their own. In a poll posted in the protesters’ internal Telegram group, they asked “Should all members of parliament & media face crimes against humanity charges?” About 1,400 participated. Ninety-four per cent voted yes. Asked more specifically about civil uprisings, the vote was split – around half voted for “only peaceful” disobedience, and around half for uprisings.

On encrypted messaging apps, more extreme views surface. Some supporters compiled lists of names – politicians, prominent scientists, journalists – who were due for trial for crimes against humanity. Others ridiculed those calling for peaceful demonstrations. “The banners should be saying: hang the traitors. Hang Jacinda. Hang the demon midget [Covid-19 response minister Chris] Hipkins. Hang these people,” one participant said in a series of voice messages broadcast to the group.

Children play in front of a wall outside parliament in Wellington. Photograph: Dave Lintott/Rex/Shutterstock

## **Conspiracies no different to 'learning a language'**

Some researchers fear that the protests and their attendant online groups are acting as a whirlpool of radicalisation, and a recruiting ground for extremist or far-right groups. As well as those who are simply vaccine-hesitant or anti-mandate, they say the protests have been infiltrated by darker ideas: antisemitism, misogyny, neo-fascism and calls for violence. The moderate or curious turn up, and can be exposed to increasingly extreme discussions.

"It's what you call total immersion," says Dr Sanjana Hattotuwa, an extremism specialist at research centre Te Pūnaha Matatini. "It actually isn't any different to learning a language. The best way to learn a language is to put

yourself in and try to navigate a context or environment where you don't speak the language, where you're forced to learn it in order to just basically get out and move around," he says. "The same applies when you're surrounded by conspiratorialism."

**I hear really wacky things. But it's like, some of them just resonate**

Lisa\*, a softly-spoken 67-year-old, opted not to get the vaccine as she does not believe in

pharmaceuticals, she says, and came to the protests because she believes vaccine mandates are "inhumane". Since turning up, however, she has heard many more conspiratorial ideas.

"There are so many rabbit holes. I listen to the rabbit holes, and some of them scare me deeply," she says. "Because they make so much logical sense."

Lisa says that over her time at the protest, her own perspective has shifted, as she has been exposed to the theories of others. She is increasingly convinced that there are wider things at play. "These people have been researching and thinking about this for quite some period of time," she says. "I hear really wacky things. But it's like, some of them just resonate."



Some researchers fear the Wellington protest could be a recruitment ground for extremists. Photograph: Dave Lintott/REX/Shutterstock

More moderate arrivals at the protest, Hattotuwa says, are plunged into an environment thick with ideas that would otherwise be fringe. Over time, the group can concentrate, like a solution boiling down: moderate attenders start to peel off, and the core that remains can harden, build solidarity, and feel increasingly alienated.

The trajectory of these groups is not always predictable, Hattotuwa says, but they tend to veer increasingly extreme. The extremism-monitoring project he works on has recorded an explosion of conspiracy theories and extremist rhetoric online, with sharing and engagement of misinformation vastly eclipsing the flow of information from reliable sources.

“Looking at every measurable day on day ... nothing

indicates or suggests, or gives an iota of hope that the moderates or moderate viewpoints, or a shared reality is winning out."

Hattotuwa, originally from Sri Lanka, says he sees worrying trends that remind him of fissures in his home country. New Zealand being a high-trust society, he says "is not an inoculation" against extremism or misinformation. "High trust does not mean that you have a greater handle on truth."

If New Zealand's convoy protest ends, it is likely to be by attrition. Police have established a strictly enforced border: cars can leave, but not enter. Protesters on social media reported exhaustion, tension, malaise, and mild skin rashes. Many blamed the symptoms on an electric wave weapon, rather than side-effects of 15 days in a sodden, crowded campsite.

On the main stage, an organiser entreats the crowd to stamp out bad behaviour toward police, abuse of passersby, and splintering into factions. "It can't continue," he says. "I'll tell you this – if it does continue and you don't start cleaning up the fringes, you're going to have Wellington against you, and you're going to have the people of New Zealand against you."

In the straw in front of him, a discarded, contextless piece of signage with the words "Neo-Nazi???" drifts across the ground.

\*Names have been changed

This article was amended on 28 February 2022. An earlier caption incorrectly described children playing in front of a barricade erected outside parliament. It is a pre-existing wall.