

# Parliament grounds have been cleared but deep-seated issues remain

*After a 23-day occupation, Parliament grounds have been cleared, but online, the protest continues. Laura Walters examines how this group of Kiwis were led down a misinformation rabbit hole, and where we go from here.*

As occupiers rained paving stones upon police clearing Parliament's desecrated lawn, inside the Beehive theatre the Prime Minister addressed the nation.

"One day, it will be our job to try and understand how a group of people could succumb to such wild and dangerous mis- and disinformation," she said. "We have a difficult journey in front of us, to address the underlying cause of what we have seen here today."

Then Jacinda Ardern pivoted.

The occupation of Parliament grounds was shocking, and historic, but it wasn't unpredictable.

*Braden Fastier/Stuff*

The occupation of Parliament grounds was shocking, and historic, but it wasn't unpredictable.

"There has been an element of this occupation that has not felt like New Zealand. And that's because it is not," she said.

"It's a dangerous place when citizens are led into spaces where they believe so deeply in conspiracy theories that they act with such violence."

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There was a familiar tone to this narrative. The idea that this is not who we are. That this isn't a wholly Kiwi problem.

On the evening of March 15, 2019 Ardern stood in the same room, at the same podium, and distanced Aotearoa from the violent acts of one man, who just hours earlier, had opened fire on two Christchurch mosques, ultimately killing 51 people.

Jacinda Ardern tours the Parliament grounds following the 23-day-long occupation.

*BRADEN FASTIER / STUFF*

Jacinda Ardern tours the Parliament grounds following the 23-day-long occupation.

"We were not a target because we are a safe harbour for those who hate," she told Kiwis at the time.

"We were not chosen for this act of violence because we condone racism, because we are an enclave for extremism. We were chosen for the very fact that we are none of these things."

In the months following, the country learnt this wasn't entirely true. We heard time and again from the Muslim community, and throughout the Royal Commission of Inquiry, that hate did exist in our country, racism did exist, and those trying to raise the flag were ignored.

Now, as the country unpacks how a group of Kiwis were drawn down a rabbit hole that led them to the steps of Parliament, it's likely we will face the same reckoning. Dismissing what happened over 23 days at the start of 2022 as the work of malicious foreign actors is too simple, too easy.

On Day 23, police took assertive action to clear the protesters. But that doesn't mean the issues have gone away.

*Braden Fastier/Stuff*

On Day 23, police took assertive action to clear the protesters. But that doesn't mean the issues have gone away.

Sanjana Hattotuwa, an independent researcher who works on The Disinformation Project, says there are specific elements that may have

come from the United States alt-right playbook - the vocabulary; the QAnon conspiracy concept - but that doesn't mean the anger, the disaffection, the fear, or the violence belonged to another land.

This is how Hattotuwa puts it: "If that was the library that you checked out books from, the people who are checking out the books are Kiwis."

New Zealand needs to call this out for what it is, he says. "You've got a problem within the country..."

"The problem is that you're being tested like never before in your history."

Like others who research dis- and misinformation – trying to understand how divided societies, living in [splintered realities](#), can fall prey to wild and dangerous conspiracy theories – Hattotuwa says there is nothing surprising about what happened on Parliament lawn this past month.

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*Monique Ford/Stuff*

While the occupation ended in a predictably violent clash, many of those who attended or supported the protest are not violent, and do hold genuine grievances.

The world saw the explosion, but those who monitor the subterranean build-up of pressure could see the historical roots that go way back, and way down.

Those who latched onto conspiracy theories; whose vaccine hesitancy was inflated to become violent vaccine resistance, were primed for this eventuality.

In the last days of the protest, when the 'mumfluencers' in their Lululemon and middle-class libertarians had cleared out, those left were people who have long sat at the margins; on the periphery of society.

They weren't one type of person, one class, one ethnicity or culture. But they all had their own stories of harm or injustice that led to this distrust of institutions.

When looking for signs this was coming, a few stand out.

Vaccination research shows those with hesitancy are much more likely to have been excluded, disenfranchised, and have experienced inequity at the hands of institutional systems.

Ahead of the 2020 election, one of the top Google searches by Kiwis was 'jobs' or 'job security'. This was before the greatest economic impacts of the pandemic had been felt. As people lost jobs, family, and social networks due to the vaccine mandates, this lack of security has been exacerbated.

Layer a unique and psychologically overwhelming global pandemic on top of this, and it's a recipe for chaos.

Indeed, those tasked with carrying out national security and terror threat assessments warned the prime minister of the possibility of this exact scenario. On at least two occasions in 2021, [the Government's Combined Threat Assessment Group \(CTAG\) concluded](#) there was a "realistic possibility" a violent protest or terrorist act could be carried out by extremist elements linked to the "overwhelmingly peaceful" opposition to the Covid-19 vaccine.

Hattotuwa says fear, anxiety, socio-economic status, lack of housing and job security, made many of the protesters particularly vulnerable to being captured by all manner of conspiracy theorists and extremists.

He has empathy for those who have been "vacuumed into conspiratorialism, based on genuine grievances".

"My real anger is directed at the people who have instrumentalised anxiety, and fear, and concern, and genuine vax-hesitancy... and then transformed it into vax-resistance, and violent vax-dismissal."

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WARWICK SMITH/Stuff

Those who were instrumental in instrumentalising the discontent felt by some Kiwis did not just appear out of nowhere – they have been building platforms and narratives for months, and years.

It's people like Counterspin Media's Kelvyn Alp – [a known extremist, who espouses conspiracy theories and far-right ideology](#). His violent content has included calling for the arrest and execution of politicians and the mainstream media, and attempting to air a foreign-made conspiracy video that posits the March 15 terror attack was a "false flag". Alp's outlet has gone from the extremist fringe to racking up tens of thousands of followers throughout the month-long protest, as he styled himself as sympathetic to all manner of marginalised Kiwis.

It's people like anti-vax influencer Chantelle Baker, who also portrays herself as an unbiased source of information, livestreaming multiple times a day from across the occupation. Baker's livestreams gave a platform to people who wanted to communicate a range of harmful and categorically incorrect conspiracy theories. Their rhetoric went unchecked and uncensored, and made it to an increasingly broad online audience as Baker's followers grew until her Facebook page was one of the most popular in the country.

It's people like those heading New Zealand's largest (and most well-resourced) anti-vax group, [Voices For Freedom](#).

It's the politicians, like Winston Peters, Matt King, Marama Fox and David Seymour, who legitimised the protest, but should have known better.

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*DAVID WHITE/STUFF*

Winston Peters wrested the Northland seat off National in a by-election in 2015 but the Tauranga by-election isn't likely to produce the same upset, writes Tim Hurdle.

In identifying those who should be held accountable, some politicians have already homed in on the ring leaders.

The day after police cleared the occupation, [Green Party co-leaders James Shaw and Marama Davidson shared similar sentiments](#).

"Yesterday, the grifters and the charlatans; the political opportunists and the white supremacists who were behind the protests melted away like cowards and abandoned the fields to the desperate people that they had led astray,"

Shaw said in the House.

Davidson said there needed to be repercussions for the protest influencers, organisations and politicians, who inspired and legitimised the occupation. Focusing only on the rioters who lit fires and threw pavement bricks would not be good enough, she said.

“Enablers grifting at the protests weren't the ones lifting up the bricks, but they certainly used their influence and platforms to whip it up.”

Hattotuwa says many of these people use an intentional and strategic approach to instrumentalising the genuine fears and concerns of New Zealanders.

And it's these people, with their range of agenda, who have given meaning to the harm people have experienced.

“Meaning is what makes pain tolerable,” he says.

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*KEVIN STENT*

Disinformation expert Sanjana Hattotuwa says he has empathy for those who have been “vacuumed into conspiratorialism, based on genuine grievances”.

Chief Human Rights Commissioner Paul Hunt is quick to recognise the protest and the anti-mandate movement include a range of people, with different experiences, and different agenda.

[After facing criticism for meeting with some factions of the protest](#), he's also quick to reiterate that he deplores the appalling conduct of the violent protesters, as well as the misogyny and the anti-semitism present at the occupation.

But Hunt acknowledges there are many Kiwis who have genuine questions, and those questions should not be brushed under the carpet.

“They shouldn't be insulted, they shouldn't be ignored, they shouldn't be called extremists, they shouldn't be called terrorists.

“Those who are peaceful doubters; they need to be heard.”

That doesn't mean agreeing with what they say - engaging with these groups means critically listening and challenging.

But there is a very real risk these people will be lost to the extremities, if their grievances are not acknowledged or recognised, through official channels.

“Anxious, troubled, worried people go looking for answers and certainty,” Hunt says. “And they turn to those with whom they think they have something in common, and social media inflates the existing ideas.”



*Tom Lee/Stuff*

Early in the pandemic, Ardern was praised for her masterful mass communications skills. But as time moved on, and the response to Covid-19 became complex, the communication strategy needed to adapt.

Public narrative researcher, advisor and co-director of The Workshop Jess Berentson-Shaw has been watching how anti-vax groups and alternative media outlets communicate with communities, and she says they're outdoing the Government.

Early in the pandemic, Ardern was praised for her masterful mass communications skills. She was reassuring, and clear – her leadership united the country.

But as time moved on, and the response to Covid-19 became complex, the communication strategy needed to adapt. And it didn't.

Meanwhile, groups like Counterspin Media, Voices For Freedom, and Chantelle Baker understand how to harness the power of new media, Berentson-Shaw says. They recognise the power of storytelling, they understand how to harness fear and appear relatable, and they managed to execute a successful astroturfing campaign.

They have another advantage.

“They don't have to communicate complex, uncertain, constantly changing

concepts to people. It's simple, it's emotive – some of it is batshit crazy – but it's not complex.

“Once you've got people there, you draw them in, and then you just keep going.”

These groups listen to people – something the state has not excelled at, historically.

Berentson-Shaw says throughout the pandemic, the mainstream has dismissed those with vaccine hesitancy as stupid.

“We're the stupid ones for thinking we can just communicate the same way we've always communicated, treat people like infants, and not take into account what the research is saying.”

The protesters might be gone from Parliament grounds, but the protest is not over.

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Like others, Berentson-Shaw says she expected this sort of violent opposition to happen. “And I think it will continue to happen as we move into a climate change space as well.”

Hattotuwa says [the protest will live on](#). He sees the chatter online.

“I cannot stress how real this is, and how long-lasting this will be.”

Prior to the February occupation, there was a small collection of Kiwis on alternative social media platform Telegram. That number has ballooned.

That's a dangerous space, Hattotuwa says.

“Once they start genuinely engaging there, there is nothing we can do to get them back into a shared reality.”

And foreign actors will continue to stoke the fires of discontent.

"It's so unglamorous; it's so trite, but we just have to sit with them, and listen, and talk, and challenge them," Chief Human Rights Commissioner Paul Hunt says of how to heal the country.

[It's no coincidence Russia's state-sponsored propaganda machine, RT News, has been covering these events](#), which call into question the strength of a western democracy's cohesion, just 18 months out from a general election. Or that Twitter accounts posting anti-mandate and anti-vaccine misinformation, quickly pivoted to pro-Kremlin messaging following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

"The clamour and the call today may be for quick fixes, but that's not going to happen. There is no quick fix. And this isn't going away," Hattotuwa says.

Hunt has a similar take; he doesn't have any neat, simple answers, because there aren't any.

But there are a raft of short-, medium- and long-term solutions that should be explored.

Much of the groundwork was laid following the March 15 terror attack. [The Royal Commission identified many of the same tears in New Zealand's social fabric](#): a lack of inclusion, a lack of government systems and programmes geared towards countering extremism and fostering social cohesion, and social media's power to inflame current divisions.

But the work has been slow to roll out, and has not been well-articulated.

At the pointy end, the police (with Corrections, intelligence agencies and the Ministry of Social Development) are creating a new de-radicalisation programme.

This type of rehabilitation programme aims to help the most extreme and violent members of society.

When asked at a media conference about what police were doing to support and de-radicalise these protesters, [Assistant Police Commissioner Richard Chambers said](#): "We have a significant amount of effort going into this full-time, and what you've seen unfold over the last three weeks doesn't mean

that we are necessarily going to do anything different to what we do as a police agency alongside other agencies."

ALDEN WILLIAMS/STUFF/Stuff

New Zealand faced a reckoning after the March 15 terror attacks, and many of those lessons can be used in rebuilding from this violent occupation.

The vagueness around these programmes has been [cause for concern for some experts working in this area](#). Following the terror attack in Auckland's New Lynn on September 3 last year, Muslim community members and an expert in countering violent extremism questioned whether police is the best agency to be leading this work.

"It's very hard to shake someone's hand and then punch them in the face," Australia National University (ANU) criminologist Dr Clarke Jones said at the time.

It's unclear whether this has been taken into consideration.

But the vast majority of people with genuine concerns about vaccine mandates won't be moved through the justice system, or through a formal countering violent extremism rehabilitation programme. Those teetering on the edge need a different approach.

This should be encompassed by the Government's programme on social cohesion. The work came out of [the Royal Commission report](#), which included [an entire volume devoted to building social cohesion](#), with a focus on listening to communities - all communities.

Again, the details are vague, and midway through the protest the minister in charge of the work stream Priyanca Radhakrishnan repeatedly said [she did not see the link between what was happening at Parliament, and issues regarding the country's social cohesion](#).

But others working in this space say New Zealand's social fabric is clearly fraying. And as Hattotuwa puts it, we need more glue.

That won't be a quick fix, but the Sri Lankan-born disinformation researcher says Kiwis should not discount the qualities that make it entirely possible to rebuild, based on shared values and tolerance – he puts that down to a certain *je ne sais quoi*.

Berentson-Shaw says it's important not to over-complicate things. Government should start with the basics: designing and delivering social, health and economic programmes with equity at their heart.

"That would be a social cohesion programme for me," she says.

Then there's devolvement to trusted communities in decision-making and communications, and education programmes to build broad-mindedness and foster inclusion – something the Human Rights Commission and Ministry of Education are developing.

For Hunt, building inclusion and acceptance is about talking, and even more about listening.

"It's so unglamorous; it's so trite, but we just have to sit with them, and listen, and talk, and challenge them."

But he doesn't see an alternative.

"If we don't do that, there's a risk that this will be aggravated. It might go underground for a bit, and then pop up elsewhere."

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*Henry Cooke/Stuff*

After the Christchurch terrorist livestreamed his attack on Christchurch's Muslim community, the prime minister (along with Emmanuel Macron) initiated the Christchurch Call to counter violent extremism online.

Then there's the beast that is social media. Social media is a tool, and it hasn't caused any of these problems, but its design, algorithms, the tech giants' commercial incentives, and the weaponisation of these communication platforms, have all been instrumental in causing harm.

After the Christchurch terrorist livestreamed his attack on Christchurch's

Muslim community, the prime minister [initiated the Christchurch Call to counter violent extremism online](#). Meanwhile, the [Department of Internal Affairs created a crisis response](#) to remove extreme, violent and objectionable material being shared online in real time.

Both programmes are a good start, but they don't address the questionable material that has fuelled this protest; the misinformation; the grey areas.

That content is policed internally by social media companies through their community charters. The problem is these principles aren't always upheld.

Hunt believes this creates a space for a small, nimble, independent monitoring organisation. Someone outside government and outside the companies, who can be responsible for identifying where these principles have been breached, and hold companies to account.

While that might sound like a toothless approach, businesses have clear obligations in this space.

In 2011, [the United Nations endorsed the Ruggie Principles](#), which formally recognise businesses do have human rights responsibilities. And while this has largely been applied to extractive industries – think the harm done to indigenous people by mining companies in West Papua – it's time to think about them in terms of the human rights breaches that take place on social media platforms.

None of these solutions are straightforward, or clear-cut. And in some instances, the first iterations will fail.

That's why we need to increase our tolerance for uncertainty, Berentson-Shaw says.

Right now, there are calls for analyses, for answers, and for accountability. But it will take time to gather the answers – whether that's through ongoing conversations with communities, or a more formalised inquiry process.

“There is uncertainty, this is an uncertain time. It's OK to not know.”

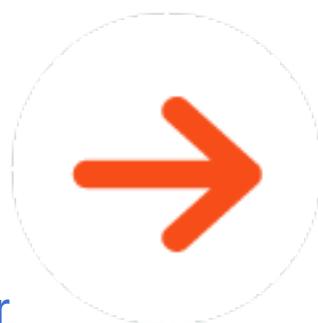
And while that won't sit well with the public, the media, or politicians, taking a breath presents an opportunity to be uncertain, to deal with some of the emotion, and to consider the best way forward.

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