

## Governing New Zealand Against COVID-19

An agreed fundamental duty of any government is to as far as possible protect the lives, health and livelihoods of its citizens from external attack, including diseases such as “COVID-19” caused by the virus SARS-CoV-2.

That name is however misleading. The pandemic is more usefully described as “SARS-2”. It was NOT a “black swan” - “an unpredictable or unforeseen event with extreme consequences”. It was predictable, frequently predicted and almost inevitable – a high-likelihood, high-impact risk to govern.

New Zealand’s governance body – its elected government – did not govern that risk. History, ecology and the vivid warnings of other new diseases (especially “SARS-1” in 2002) were mostly ignored by successive national governance bodies led by Clark (1999-2008), Key (2008-2017) and Ardern (2017-to date). Protective measures were neglected despite ample funds.

Most other national governments were equally negligent. Only a few (for example Taiwan) demonstrated a prepared and effective response. New Zealand’s unreadiness was however more inexplicable and hence more culpable than most, in the light of its substantial and long-standing investment in animal and plant biosecurity (where well-developed strategies encompass exclusion, rapid reaction, and long-term mitigation).

The initial reaction of New Zealand’s government to the developing SARS-2 pandemic was complacent and tardy. No relevant plan existed, testing and treatment resources were scanty, and the national border remained open to large-scale entry by untested humans. The first and obvious counter-measure of entry restrictions and checks was slow to emerge. The promulgated “policy” of relying on unverified and voluntary self-isolation was in reality just covering up the fact that resources were too scanty and were mobilised too slowly. Entering travellers were subjected to strict baggage checks for seeds and salamis, but not to health checks for known and serious human disease!

Over an intense few days in March 2020, the government lurched from complacency to panic. Critical analysis of the information developed and applied then, and the exact sequence of advice, discussions and decisions, has not been encouraged by the government. A precise assessment is no longer possible.

Nonetheless several key verifiable facts can be extracted from the detail, namely that:

- As noted above, the first part of the much-vaunted slogan – “go early and hard” – was not factual
- Decisions relied heavily on some sources of technical advice while ignoring others of equal merit
- The technical information that was applied was publicised in a selective and exaggerated manner
- Advisory bureaucracy developed a response framework to reduce many interacting dimensions of reality to just four simple quantum states or “levels”. While that was probably a useful analytical model, it should not have precluded more selective and flexible decisions.
- The rationale for imposing “Level 4” - the most severe and costly “lockdown” anywhere on the globe - was weak. The key advice paper cited national comparators selectively and applied circular reasoning.
- Decisions were made by a few people with little if any contribution from most government ministers.

In a mature democracy, three major stakeholder channels routinely operate to improve (or at least influence) governance processes and to help generate better (or at least different) decisions – media, opposition politicians and independent experts. How did those channels perform in this emergency, where most normal processes of travel, interaction and discussion were suspended?

Government decisions were communicated on-line to the public in a dramatic manner. Informed public assessment of those decisions necessarily relied heavily on a small number of media personnel who were invited to attend and participate in public government communications. Recordings of those media updates make it obvious that the participating journalists made no serious attempt to challenge or critically question any major government decisions or statements. Most

questions were puerile or concerned secondary detail. Others were asked too late or in a way that invited – or even began - a dismissive answer.

Consequently, little critical and timely comment on key issues appeared in mainstream media to facilitate public debate or comment on the government’s decisions. But the theatrical “live press conference” approach probably created a widespread and comforting illusion that thoughtful media review was operating.

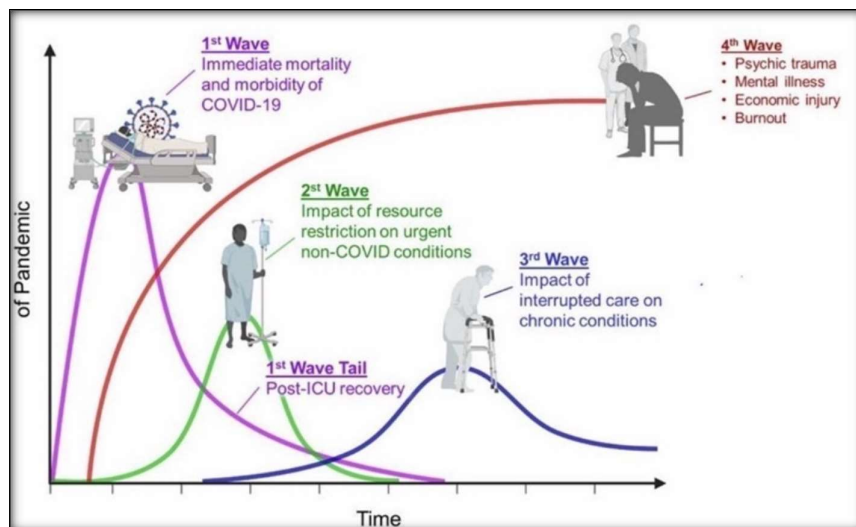
In an emergency, governance structures and processes often need to change. In this case, no temporary governance body such as a “government of national unity” including opposition politicians appears to have been considered. An innovative substitute for normal Parliamentary oversight – the Epidemic Response Committee, comprising a majority of opposition members including the chair - was however established as a governance oversight and insurance mechanism. The effectiveness of that committee, meeting remotely and online, depended upon the information made available and the quality of participation of its non-government members. In the event, information flow was erratic and the main opposition party seemed too bewildered to properly question decisions or add significant value. Nevertheless, the Committee’s televised proceedings did create a useful forum for challenge and debate that was publicly accessible and reported on.

Independent experts, particularly some economists, did develop a number of challenges and critical questions. However, with normal interactions suspended and mainstream media and political channels operating as outlined above, experts who might be critical of government decisions had little access to most of the public. Their commentary was disseminated mainly through online newsletters and Websites that tended to “narrowcast” only to self-selected minorities.

The decisions and emergency measures of March-May 2020 can be analysed and argued about in detail. Stepping back from that detail, what can be fairly stated about what ensued?

Public tolerance of, and compliance with, “lockdown” measures was impressively high even in cases where specific aspects of those measures were not obviously optimal. A wider range of emergency administrative activities, often improvised and sometimes innovative, functioned surprisingly well.

Operationally, immediate and direct impacts on life and health from SARS-2 have been minimised. By that short-term measure, New Zealand achieved strong performance. However, the consequent longer-term life and health impacts cannot yet be understood and measured. It is uncertain that the government’s response to SARS-2 will achieve net benefit in public health over the full cycle of health impacts diagrammed below.



(Graphic by Victor Tseng @VectorSting)

Net public health benefit, if any, has been achieved only at enormous economic cost. As any good

governance body knows, economic resources are inherently limited and nothing can truly be “priceless”. For example, any calculation to divide total economic cost by likely numbers of lives saved will generate normally unthinkable dollar values of tens or hundreds of millions per life. The likely demographic profile of the lives saved suggests that QALY (quality-adjusted life-year) calculations – the normal tool to evaluate public health investments – would give astonishing results that no responsible governance body could rationally accept.

Intuitive benchmarking with countries that achieved similar operational outcomes also suggest that economic cost has been excessive. For example, Australia appears to have achieved a similar public health outcome at about half the economic cost and some Asian countries have done even better. (The longer-term economic outcome is still unclear and benchmarking studies will inevitably be complicated by many other factors.)

Government funding support to protect livelihoods range from undoubtedly sensible direct emergency responses to quite dubious investment projects. The frequently quoted Kiwi adage of “We haven't got the money, so we'll have to think” (attributed to Ernest Rutherford, the New Zealand-born father of nuclear physicists, from his early days on the family farm) has not been applied. A tendency to “throw money at every problem”, establish centralised programs, and fund them from borrowing, is apparent. The government’s “economic recovery” package so far shows little evidence of strategic thinking or long-term direction.

Medium-term preservation of any net public health benefit achieved, at whatever cost, is fragile, and contingent upon:

- Continued and effective quarantine arrangements for residents and visitors
- Continued partial disengagement of the New Zealand economy from the global economy
- The early development and mass deployment of effective new vaccines and treatments
- Non-occurrence of adverse events such as reintroduction or rapid evolution of SARS-2
- Foregoing any immunological benefits that might arise from a different approach (many experts argue that to unduly avoid the inevitable development of “herd immunity” is counter-productive)

Intuitive benchmarking suggests that New Zealand as a lightly-populated and remote island nation faced a lesser challenge from SARS-2 than most. And it is clear that the government’s response to SARS-2 has been seriously deficient in the fundamental governance disciplines of risk management and strategy. A reactive and often haphazard “scramble defence” to mitigate past governance deficiencies would not normally be highly commended.

Yet most of the public consider the government’s response outstanding, and many almost deify their Prime Minister. That remarkably favourable perception is a tribute to the effective communication, public relations and “damage control” techniques the government deployed. Global hysteria on mainstream and social media, widespread public fear, and a marked lack of skill and diversity across New Zealand’s own mainstream media reinforced those techniques. In that heated atmosphere, pious and emotive statements that might normally have been viewed as contrived and mawkish were instead received with approval or even rapture.

Less emotive observers are likely to have quite a different perception. As one colleague commented, “it’s irritating to see such praise and trust for something that really boils down to woeful planning”.

Through that earlier negligence, an emergency arrived. Would an alternative government have done a better job in emergency governance? A governing body with more diverse and more capable members, collectively possessing wide experience extending outside academic and political spheres, would surely have asked more sceptical questions and searched for more balanced and flexible responses. It seems likely that an optimised package of “80/20” measures could have achieved similar public health benefits at much less economic cost.

And finally, good governance is about service to others. How far in its emergency governance did the current government set aside its political philosophy and vested interests to instead prioritise the national interest?

An assessment in relation to political philosophy is not simple. Many emergency measures that any government would probably have undertaken aligned strongly with the current government's dominant political philosophy of widening the scope of government and individuals' dependency upon it. Crisis demands and an uncertain future environment make the optimal limits around "spend now, worry later" hard to define. What can be said is that some controversial policies outside the public health and economic spheres were not set aside, but rather consciously advanced either within emergency responses or behind the scenes. One publicly obvious example is intensified racial discrimination through preferential health funding and selective law enforcement – divisive practices inconsistent with constantly urging all citizens to "Unite Against COVID-19".

The vested interest of any elected government is to retain power through re-election, creating an incentive to interpret events and decisions within a self-congratulatory narrative. Opinion polls demonstrate that the crisis favoured the current government. A natural tendency to "rally around the flag" was amplified by strong approval of its emergency response and inherently reduced discourse on wider and longer-term issues.

With the emergency abating, greater public attention to political philosophy, governance capability and leadership authenticity can be expected. Ultimately a new (or continuing) government will begin to govern with a fresh mandate. Until then, a novel and demanding environment will create many opportunities for the current government to visibly favour national interest over its own political philosophy and vested interest.

From the story so far, what national governance improvements can we make? Weaknesses such as domination of national governance by professional politicians and short-term thinking are too entrenched to easily remedy. But one quick win would be to structure and operate all Parliamentary review committees in the same way as the Epidemic Response Committee, so that any government's executive decisions and proposed legislation receive genuine critical review and quality assurance and not just a token rubber-stamp from its own side.

Another quick win would be to make the ministerial salary pool a fixed total rather than an open-ended fund. That would create incentives to shrink and tauten our oversized national governing body, drop "passenger" board members, and rationalise the remarkably complicated structures and processes currently applied to plan and deliver governance for our "team of (only!) five million".