

Addressing the challenges to social cohesion – webinar Q&A

Distinguished Professor Emeritus Paul Spoonley answers questions raised at the Koi Tū webinar on Thursday 31 August. Paul is an academic associate of Koi Tū and co-director of He Whenua Taurikura, the National Centre of Research Excellence for Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism.

Reports

[Addressing the challenges to social cohesion](#) by Sir Peter Gluckman, Paul Spoonley, Anne Bardsley, Richie Poulton, Te Ahukaramū Charles Royal, Hema Sridhar and Dawnelle Clyne, June 2023

[Sustaining Aotearoa New Zealand as a cohesive society](#) by Sir Peter Gluckman, Dr Anne Bardsley, Professor Paul Spoonley, Dr Charles Royal, Naomi Simon-Kumar and Dr Andrew Chen, December 2021

Q&A

- 1. Interested to hear Sir Peter and Prof Paul's take on the role of social media and mass dispersed instant global digital communication on perceptions of 'cohesion'.**

There are some interesting developments in terms of what this means and how to address it. If you are interested, have a look at the "Can Tech Promote Social Cohesion" conference in San Francisco in February this year, at the [Council on Technology and Social Cohesion](#) that was established at the conference or the work of [Jonathan Stray](#) at UC Berkeley as examples.

- 2. To what extent are the social cohesion issues rooted in Pakeha apprehension about their assumed superiority in both power and economy?**

There is an obvious and significant fracture in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand in relation to Pākehā anxieties (in some quarters to greater recognition of Te Tiriti o Waitangi, or the inclusion of Māori values, tikanga or te reo, and it is very apparent in the "debate" about co-governance. My own view is that Māori values and practices could strengthen social cohesion but this is not shared by some.

- 3. Is there a strengths-based perspective about how institutions and governments can earn (back) trust? How can we utilise positive social factors in our communities?**

It is an important question. My brief response would be to suggest that we need to explore participatory democracy and other options to ensure recognition, participation and inclusion (three of the five elements in the Canadian model of social cohesion), so our democratic system(s) need to be refined and updated. But

the second issue – which I mentioned in the webinar – was that we need a “community up” approach, not a “government down” one. We saw the power and the possibilities of community-led initiatives and partnership during Covid. It is an important lesson about what works and what might constitute a strength-based approach. However, re-establishing trust is going to be a major challenge. What can (or should be done) about those who are now very resistant to any form of democratic government or science-based systems of knowledge?

- 4. Thanks for the discussion on the Edelman Survey. What struck me in the last two annual surveys was the rankings of trusted entities. Business was the most trusted entity, followed by governments, then NGOs, followed by a long way by media and social media in particular. How can businesses in NZ lead us out of the decline in trust?**

In discussions about social cohesion, an often overlooked element is the private sector and companies. As I mentioned, my own experience as a Diversity Awards judge is that there are some excellent examples of what might be possible in the private sector (as well as the government sector, I should note). As a brief response, I would suggest looking at the [Diversity Works website and the award winners](#) as a good place to start.

- 5. What has your research found about the global decline in trust and cohesion and what are the lessons for us here, including your views on the role of disinformation and foreign actors?**

Can I suggest you look at the [Edelman Trust Barometer 2023](#) as one indicator of the decline in trust. As you will see, they identify four key developments: the collapse of economic optimism, a decline in trust in government, the media fuelling distrust, and an increase in polarisation. It is interesting to see which countries are defined as very or severely polarised (USA, Brazil but more surprising is the appearance of Sweden and the Netherlands). The issue (I think) for us in relation to disinformation is that the platforms are seldom subject to country-specific requirements or regulations, while we seem to have been significantly influenced by US politics, notably QAnon views, in the last 3 - 5 years. What can and should small states do in this global environment?

- 6. Is there a need for greater empowerment of communities as way to build social cohesion? In contrast to all the negative reports about the impact of Covid, there was one great benefit about the lockdown in NZ and that was how it did bring many local communities together.**

I agree, although some of this seems to have dissipated through late 2021, and then some of these fractions and fundamental disagreements (to put it politely) were on display in early 2022 on the grounds of Parliament. We do need to reflect on our experiences – both good and bad – during Covid and to learn from them.

- 7. Keen to hear your thoughts on US political scientist Barbara F. Walters proposition, (based on her experience working on a CIA task force aimed at predicting civil wars) that the surge in extremism and threats to global democracies largely stems from “a once dominant group whose members are fearful that their status is**

slipping away” and who will “take to violence in order to cling to power”. Understand that the US is a whole different country and not the best example but one of their best exports is their ideologies and cultures.

I agree with this – in part. I would suggest reading Arlie Hochschild’s book, *Strangers in Their Own Land. Anger and Mourning on the American Right*. I was at UC Berkeley (doing some work on the newly emergent Tea Party) and at a seminar on what such groups meant for American politics. Most in the room thought that such groups were a minor or temporary part of American politics, that the recognition and importance of diverse groups to American political life would outweigh those who sought to dismiss diversity recognition – or those who were attracted to politics such as those offered by the Tea Party were simply misinformed.

Arlie said that those suggesting such things were misreading what was happening especially in the US heartland with both working-class and middle-class groups who felt marginalised and angry about what America was becoming in terms of the recognition of minority faith, ethnic and gender groups. And compliant in this marginalisation were institutions like the media and mainstream politicians, including those in the Republican Party. In the year that her book was published (2016), these politics had moved from the margins to the centre of US politics with the election of Donald Trump. As the *Financial Times* noted, the politics of vitriol (and denial) had arrived. The challenge is to ensure that we can respectfully (but vigorously) disagree on political and other matters – without resorting to shouting but not listening, without resorting to violence, and to an acceptance of democratic political process. It looks as though the 2023 General Election will test these precepts.

8. How democratic are we really?

It is an important and straightforward question – and the answers are complex and depend on who you are, what sort of socio-economic position you occupy and your ethnicity. The answer will depend on who is replying.

9. Interesting examples about Canada but my understanding is they don’t embed first nation participation like we do?

One of the paradoxes of Canada is that they are superdiverse (as is Aotearoa New Zealand) and they have done (in my view) a better job of welcoming and settling immigrants than we have but there is a very different story with First Nations peoples. I would refer to them for guidance on some/many elements of a social cohesion approach but certainly not all, and you have highlighted one dimension.

10. Mindful that certain groups and communities have perpetually faced disenfranchisement and have never really placed their trust in our institutions. I wonder to what extent is our kōrero is biased towards a Western perspective on social cohesion, trust, democratic participation and a sense of belonging?

Good point. That is why I think certain Māori values – manaakitanga, whakawhanaungatanga – could be deployed much more widely in Aotearoa New Zealand but also that we should explore new ways of participatory democracy. Can

we use new digital technologies in combination with kanohi ki te kanohi events and spaces. The degree of disengagement in local body elections recently is deeply worrying but what would incentivise and acknowledge communities?

11. I heard recently that critical thinking skills are a focus of the humanities but in NZ and more so internationally there is a focus on STEM over humanities in school and higher education? Does this have an impact in how we learn to discuss, listen, empathise? Beyond social cohesion but also human kindness?

For me, the unpredictability and rapid changes occurring in society and the world of work mean that transferable skills – problem solving, working in teams and diverse communities, literacies (digital included), critical thinking – are all even more essential. As I say to Year 13 students, 40% of current jobs will not exist in a decade, while 65% of the jobs you will do are yet to be created. Content is less important than the skills you bring to a situation, context or issue. But alongside this emphasis on transferable skills, we need to acknowledge the significant challenges of uncertainty and the disruption and damage that social media platforms and activities do. Social cohesion, by definition, involves dealing with possibilities as well as those elements – socio-economic disadvantage, digital divides – which have a range of negative outcomes.

12. What about the role of universities in this context?

Universities need to both contribute to and to model social cohesion. But they are (domestically but also internationally) facing a period of austerity that will limit their opportunities to innovate and do things that contribute in positive ways to social well-being and skills acquisition. I personally have been disappointed in the way in which universities and their staff have not embraced some of the challenges of the Covid lock-down to move much more deliberately and strategically to online offers. New Zealand universities are going to face increasing international competition and we need to embrace new models of pedagogy and learning, as well as the possibilities of new technology.

13. How significant is the role of poverty in minimising the effectiveness of education in empathy and social skills? Is social cohesion able to be increased without addressing poverty? Is it a chicken and egg situation?

The simple answer is that poverty has a huge role to play in undermining social cohesion. I have used – and continue to use – a Canadian approach to social cohesion but if I have a criticism it is that there is insufficient attention to justice and rights issues – and the impacts of socio-economic disadvantage. The UN definition of social cohesion or that of the EU place much more emphasis on economic equity and inclusion – as we should.

14. Is one of the issues that of scale? Consultation is perhaps meaningful in a small community but what role does it play on a national scale, and now through the borderlessness of social media?

Scale is hugely important. Our research tends to show that social cohesion is most in evidence at the local level. It becomes more problematic at a national level and has been made more complex by recent political developments (especially internationally but also locally) and the influence and impacts of social media. And this is a major challenge for a small country like Aotearoa New Zealand as many influences and systems are global and not subject to local or state-level influences. That surely must be a major challenge to construct a form of social cohesion which works in this environment but also from global to local levels.