

Democratic innovation

Long-term opportunities and challenges for Aotearoa New Zealand

Briefing for the incoming Prime Minister and Government

October 2023



Introduction

Local and central government increasingly struggle to make decisions that are evidence-informed and have broad public support, particularly when it comes to complex and long-term intergenerational issues such as climate-change mitigation. Taking either the technocratic or populist route may be tempting but the best solutions are those supported by science and democratically endorsed.

Key points

- Current democratic systems are not well set up to make decisions on complex or intergenerational issues.
- Innovations in democratic theory and practice offer opportunities for the public good while preserving the core values of liberal democracy.
- A centre of excellence for democratic innovation is needed to help study, promote, trial and educate about possible reform.

Context

It is widely recognised that liberal democracy as we know it is in crisis around the world. Democratic decline has been most obvious in countries such as Turkey and Hungary which are essentially being led into “plebiscitary dictatorships”. More generally, the symptoms of this democratic malaise include:

- declining voter turnout at elections;
- falling trust in governments and national institutions as shown by surveys;
- shrinking political-party membership;
- growing polarisation;
- the durability of authoritarian regimes.

Although Aotearoa New Zealand is still a strong democracy by many measures, some of these symptoms are evident here. Explanations for this apparent crisis are many. The changed information environment is one. The dissemination of information through remotely located algorithm-driven platforms rather than traditional media has deepened existing polarisation and created new divides.

Another persuasive explanation points to economic disappointment. Global capitalism and liberal democracy are deeply entwined. Because of this interconnectedness, the economic woes of the 2008 global financial crisis and its aftermath inevitably contributed to today’s political malaise. Yet beyond these ostensibly external drivers of the crisis it must be recognised that there are internal system problems. Capital markets may do their core job effectively but they do not take account of externalities such as environmental damage or runaway technologies.

The three-, four- or five-year political cycles of representative democracy do not deal well with problems of a longer intergenerational nature. What is needed is to hold on to the principles of democracy – people’s right to participate in collective decision-making – while considering how democratic systems set up in the 19th and 20th centuries need to be modernised to solve 21st-century problems. The field of democratic innovation is flourishing globally. The practice and theory of deliberative democracy has been particularly successful. Citizen assemblies and juries on complex issues from climate policy to water reform, abortion legislation, assisted dying and transport planning are a response to the need to rethink representation and information environments in modern times. They have been tested in settings as diverse as Canada, Latin America, Ireland and Australia.

Deliberative democracy should not be seen as antagonistic to representative democracy but rather complementary, working on problems that transcend electoral cycles, require deep engagement and

consideration of trade-offs and may be seen as too hot for politicians to handle. Indeed, deliberative democracy processes can share the burden of decision-making with elected representatives in instances of high political risk.

Our team at Koi Tū has contributed to this work with research in the field through convening the first citizens' assembly in Aotearoa New Zealand and trialing shorter forms of democratic deliberation. In our research, we tested formats of democratic engagement developed internationally but adapted them to local conditions, considering Te Tiriti o Waitangi obligations and the rights of mana whenua. From the start, we built relationships with local government and public organisations as we trialed innovative processes on questions of real-life significance, such as the next source of water for Auckland; equitable, affordable and efficient urban transport; and the fair distribution of transport costs in a future electrified system.

Koi Tū has also worked with digital tools that assist deliberative democratic processes. Some countries, notably Taiwan and some European nations have moved to sophisticated digital consultations (as opposed to simplistic polls or *pro forma* digital consultations as conducted by New Zealand agencies), and we have successfully piloted their use in New Zealand.

While public consultation is required from local and central government, its application has been weak. Consultation is often very late in the policy process, rushed and against a *pro forma* questionnaire implying predetermined conclusions, often at an inconvenient time for effective input and only attracting lobbyists or interest groups. This has likely been a major factor in the growing cynicism of the public to both local and central government. Both deliberative democratic approaches to decision-making and new modes of digital engagement offer potential solutions.

The wide interest in our work and requests to collaborate and assist from New Zealand and international organisations make it clear that a centre of excellence for democratic innovation is called for. The role of this centre would be to design and trial democratic processes and procedures. It would track, collate and promote local and international knowledge in democratic innovation; co-ordinate research and practice; educate new researchers and practitioners from graduate students to government officials and elected members; and evaluate and report on new activities and processes.

Actions for consideration

- **Recognise the problems faced by democratic systems globally and in New Zealand.**
- **Commit to study, then act on issues that are causing or may cause the weakening of democracy in New Zealand.**
- **Establish and support a centre of excellence for democratic innovation.**
- **Encourage the use of well-conducted democratic processes, preferably through independent agencies.**

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Key contacts



Dr Anne Bardsley is the deputy director of Koi Tū and leads our work on democratic innovation, risk and the future of Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland.

✉ a.bardsley@auckland.ac.nz



Dr Tatjana Buklijas is the associate director – academic at Koi Tū.

✉ t.buklijas@auckland.ac.nz



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Our name, Koi Tū, was gifted by Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei. It means ‘the sharp end of the spear’. Like our namesake, Koi Tū aims to get to the heart of longterm issues challenging our future.

This document was developed as part of a comprehensive briefing to the incoming prime minister and government. The full document is available informedfutures.org/briefing-to-incoming-government-2023

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Professor Sir Peter Gluckman

Director, Koi Tū: The Centre for Informed Futures

Phone: +64 21 775 568

Email: pd.gluckman@auckland.ac.nz

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