

Social cohesion and societal polarisation

Long-term opportunities and challenges for Aotearoa New Zealand

Briefing for the incoming Prime Minister and Government

October 2023



Introduction

All liberal democracies are facing the challenges of loss of social and institutional trust and greater polarisation. Common factors include sociological change, digitalisation and disinformation and a change in the norms of discourse both within society and by the politicians. Aotearoa New Zealand is not immune and we must reflect urgently on how to sustain and enhance our sense of cohesion.

Key points

- Social cohesion at every level in a liberal democracy is critical for all citizens.
- There are two dimensions of trust: social trust and institutional trust. Both are crucial to a cohesive community.
- Institutional trust is the confidence that citizens have in those that formally or informally govern or influence it including politicians, Parliament, officials, ministries, the media, the justice and policy systems and such non-government agencies as banks and professional bodies.
- Institutional trust has been lost in many democracies: a loss accelerated by Covid. It is compromised by lack of transparency and consultation on vital civic matters. Parliament, government ministries and the Public Service Commission need to review their roles, behaviours and influence on institutional trust.
- Trust is vulnerable to the disinformation and misinformation made pervasive by social media. Restoring trust is essential if society is to effectively tackle intractable problems.
- Erosion of civil discourse is widespread and contagious.
- Institutional trust has been lost in many democracies: a loss accelerated by Covid. It is compromised by lack of transparency and consultation on vital civic matters.
- New digital and in-person consultation and participatory-democracy methods can help local and central government restore confidence in decision-making.
- Work is needed to restore trust in the mainstream media.
- Parliament, government ministries and the Public Service Commission need to review their influence on institutional trust.
- The education system and information environment are important trust builders.
- Erosion of civil discourse is widespread and contagious.
- Governments must consider innovative methods and tools for public consultation, engagement and public discourse on complex issues. New digital and in-person consultation and participatory-democracy methods can help local and central government restore confidence in decision-making.
- Koi Tū's globally informed reports offer additional action points for government and society to consider.

Context

Since 2019, Koi Tū has been globally active in exploring the factors that undermine social cohesion in democracies. To that end in 2020 it conducted an international workshop in London with global participants ranging from anthropologists to terrorism experts, publishing its analysis in 2021 (Gluckman et al., 2021).

During Covid, Koi Tū produced commentary on the risks to social cohesion posed by the pandemic and on behalf of the International Science Council, led global work on policy lessons from the outbreak (Gluckman et al., 2022). In 2022, the parliamentary protests in Wellington highlighted the presence of affective polarisation in Aotearoa New Zealand and further work drawing on local and global expertise to directly analyse the factors at play in the New Zealand context (Gluckman et al., 2023). Beyond these reports, Koi Tū has examined the state of New Zealand's democratic institutions (Gluckman, 2022), risk assessment and management (Gluckman & Bardsley, 2021) that in turn influence public confidence in institutions.

Box 1: The axes of trust

- Social cohesion in a democratic society depends on two interrelated dimensions, social and institutional trust.
- Sufficient trust and respect between those who are governed and the institutions and individuals they empower to govern them and organise society;
- Sufficient trust and respect between society's diverse members to foster co-operation for the good of all.
- Satisfying these ensures belonging, inclusion, participation, recognition and legitimacy are universally possible.

The analysis has used two axes of trust that are interrelated (see Box 1), but also illustrate the range of factors contributing to a default position of distrust by more than half of New Zealanders, particularly with respect to the government. This is not an acceptable position for a healthy democracy.

What is clear is rapid change – being experienced at present in technology, the environment, the economy, our demography and geostrategically – brings anxiety and fear. Such changes occurring at an unprecedented pace fuel the populism and belief in conspiracies evident globally with consequent aggressive rhetoric and tribalism spilling into citizens' lives. We are not immune in New Zealand.

New Zealand is generally seen as a cohesive society but it is not immune to division and there are warning signs. Matters to consider include:

- The potential for constitutional change: constructively resolving how Te Tiriti o Waitangi is interpreted and embedded into New Zealand society.
- The inherent dissonance between bicultural and multicultural identities in the face of major demographic and social change.
- The sense that transparency and inclusiveness of our central and local government democratic processes have been declining. Consultation by ministries and agencies has been increasingly cynical.
- Growing concern over the accountability of agencies and politicians to the Official Information Act, reports of the Auditor General, etc, and an increasing sense of a loss of transparency.
- The changed nature of social discourse given the make-up of New Zealand's fourth estate and the role of social media. Discussion of politically important topics is increasingly problematic due to the fragmentation of the media and sources of public information, and changes in how people get their news, with a tendency to operate in information, political, and social silos.
- The effects of disruptive technologies such as immersive and pervasive digital systems and growing capabilities of generative artificial intelligence. This is in addition to how technology has changed the way we work, live and operate. It is changing social norms that can affect individual identities and social mores.
- Disinformation and misinformation are exacerbating the issues fueling polarisation, undermining trust and democracy (see [Disinformation](#)).
- Declining mental wellbeing especially in young people (see [Youth mental health and wellbeing](#)).
- Covid's ongoing effects, including amplification of inequalities such as the digital divide, distrust in government and the prevalence of disinformation. Fallout from the pandemic on mental health, education and the economy will exacerbate erosion of government-citizen relations. Growing economic and persistent educational and health inequalities.
- Failure to resolve longstanding social issues of intergenerational poverty traps, housing costs, aged care, gangs and high rates of incarceration.

- Climate change, which will affect coastal communities, agriculture and rainfall. New Zealand's Pacific neighbours will be hit by rising sea levels. The national response to climate change will trigger debate about how economic and social trade-offs affect different parts of the community.
- How the balance between national governance and regional government evolves, which in turn is a proxy for centralisation versus distribution of authority and decision-making.
- A decline in social structures and organisations that sustain communities in the face of a more individualistic and virtual world.
- Innovative public consultation and deliberation techniques (see [Democratic innovation](#)) offer the potential for short term and rapid gains.

The biggest challenges may relate to the ongoing changes in the information environment brought about by artificial intelligence (AI), generative AI, and the metaverse, which allow for more pervasive audience manipulation and spread of disinformation. Although we document disinformation, little attention is paid to how to prevent it (see [Disinformation](#)). Fact-checking and similar approaches are not likely to make substantive differences.

It is also important to recognise that perceptions of the factors involved will vary by different groups and cohorts within our diverse society. If we are to have an effective way of protecting democracy and society, we need to undertake research that elucidates what different sectors of society believe or perceive in relationship to our cohesive society. For example, perceptions of fairness will differ enormously, yet it is an underlying and central factor to determining both our degree of social cohesion and the shape of our political economy.

The taniwha in the room

Sadly, underlying much of the recent social and political tension in our society is growing unease over how to resolve constitutionally the reality that we are a multicultural and increasingly diverse liberal democracy founded on a Treaty signed by two parties over 180 years ago. The post-colonial and contemporary consequences for Māori are undeniable when examined through virtually any lens, including identity, culture, equity, and socioeconomic positioning. Aotearoa New Zealand has been grappling for the past half century with how to repair the significant and persistent damage caused in the period after the Treaty was signed and to understand how to create a society in which all identities can be sustained, everyone can flourish while different world views live alongside each other. The Treaty cannot be ignored or brushed aside, but how this should be reflected in a modern liberal democracy remains contentious.

But there has been a reluctance to have an open conversation; words such as co-governance have been bandied about without explanation or clarification. Concepts such as *tino rangatiratanga* which are central to the Māori world view and their understandings of *Te Tiriti*, their relationship to their environment, their past and futures, are similarly obscure for most New Zealanders, irrespective of their ethnicity. And experts, both Māori and Pakeha, legal and otherwise, have different views of how the Treaty/*Te Tiriti* should be interpreted and reflected in New Zealand institutions and society as we move towards 2040, the bicentenary of its signing. This discussion may be difficult, but it is of constitutional importance if we are to sustain a vibrant 21st century democracy and cohesive society.

There are very different world views on how to approach this issue. Much of New Zealand appears scared even to try to discuss the issue – it being too hard or too sensitive and can place individuals at risk of *ad hominem* attack. Yet there are scholars, both Pakeha and Māori, that would suggest that the Treaty and liberal democracy are not at odds. And importantly, New Zealand's healthy future depends on finding consensual agreement.

There are multiple challenges to social cohesion in New Zealand and lack of resolution of these issues is an important factor. The cohesion of Māori communities is as challenged as any other community in New Zealand. However, the factors creating these challenges are both similar and different. They face particular challenges arising from both history and the current context, creating fragmentation and alienation both within Māori communities and between Māori communities and the wider community. Thus, New Zealand's strength as a united, cohesive society will depend on open discussion and resolution of what appear to be irreconcilable worldviews. In doing so, it may be important to separate the issues of social justice (inequities in health, education, housing, income, etc.) from those that define what kind of constitutional future New Zealand should have. The tendency has been to conflate these different issues even if they have significant overlap in their origin but conflating them will not lead to resolution. In an increasingly diverse society, it is important we agree that it is possible to have a multicultural liberal democracy and society that respects its constitutional origins and seek the future institutional framework that can achieve that.

These deep issues go well beyond the superficiality of tokenistic rhetoric and merit nonpartisan discussion as to how we prepare for 2040. Problems generally only get more complex and harder to solve if they are avoided.

Actions for consideration

Action that would help sustain New Zealand society's resilience and social cohesion:

- Undertake systematic research to explore factors that matter most to different sectors of society, so that priority is afforded to needed policy.

Actions that would focus on institutional trust:

- Create a safe non-partisan environment to resolve how a multicultural democracy can be built on bicultural underpinnings.
- Seek a political accord to improve parliamentary processes and political discourse and discourage the use of ad hominem political epithets.
- Strengthen compliance with the Official Information Act.
- Resolve the ongoing confusion between the roles of central and local government.
- Improve public consultation by both central and local government including the timings of the consultation.
- Introduce more systematically innovative democratic techniques for consultation – both digital and participatory.
- Elevate society's expectations that politicians confront complex issues and promote discourse on long-term matters.
- Expect greater resolution by consensus of matters that span political cycles and seek less-adversarial cross-party approaches to address the many issues relating to economic and social disparities.
- Tighten regulation of lobbyists.
- Develop policies to promote a robust media environment across all modalities.
- Improve civics teaching in schools.

Actions that would focus on social trust:

- Introduce systems-thinking education and raise awareness of disinformation.
- Take steps to optimise young New Zealanders' socio-emotional development, which is critical for executive function formation in infants and children.
- Strengthen the use of Reithian principles in public broadcasting irrespective of medium.
- Promote a campaign to reduce tolerance of ad hominem attacks while protecting freedom of speech.
- Reinforce the information-sharing role of public media.
- Promote community activities that impart eusocial activities (sports, social groups, etc.) especially in disadvantaged communities.
- Be a leader in the emergent global conversation about how new generations of technology might be managed in a more precautionary manner.

References

Gluckman, P. (2022). *Deepening our democracy*. Koi Tū: The Centre for Informed Futures. <https://informedfutures.org/deepening-our-democracy/>

Gluckman, P., & Bardsley, A. (2021). *Uncertain but Inevitable: The expert-policy-political nexus and high-impact risks*. Koi Tū: Centre for Informed Futures. <https://informedfutures.org/high-impact-risks>

Gluckman, P., Bardsley, A., Spoonley, P., Royal, C., Simon-Kumar, N., & Chen, A. (2021). *Sustaining Aotearoa New Zealand as a cohesive society*. Koi Tū: The Centre for Informed Futures. <https://informedfutures.org/social-cohesion/>

Gluckman, P., Spoonley, P., Bardsley, A., Poulton, R., Royal, C., Sridhar, H., & Clyne, D. (2023). *Addressing the challenges to social cohesion*, Koi Tū: The Centre for Informed Futures. <https://informedfutures.org/challenges-to-social-cohesion/>

ISC. (2022). *Unprecedented and unfinished: COVID-19 and Implications for National and Global Policy*. International Science Council. <https://council.science/publications/covid19-unprecedented-and-unfinished/>

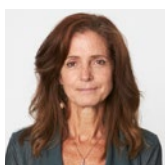
Spoonley, P., Gluckman, P., Bardsley, A., Hunia, R., Johal, S., & Poulton, R. (2020). *He Oranga Hou: Social cohesion in a post-COVID world*. Koi Tū: The Centre for Informed Futures. <https://informedfutures.org/wp-content/uploads/pdf/Social-Cohesion-in-a-Post-Covid-World.pdf>

Key contacts



Distinguished professor Sir Peter Gluckman is the director of Koi Tū: The Centre for Informed Futures and president of the International Science Council. He was chief science advisor to the prime ministers of New Zealand 2009–2018.

✉ pd.gluckman@auckland.ac.nz



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



Hema Sridhar is a senior research fellow at Koi Tū. She leads our work on the impact of emerging and disruptive technologies on society. She was formerly chief science advisor to the Ministry of Defence.

✉ hema.sridhar@auckland.ac.nz



KOI TŪ: THE CENTRE FOR INFORMED FUTURES

Koi Tū: The Centre for Informed Futures is a research centre and an independent, non-partisan think tank at Waipapa Taumata Rau, University of Auckland with associate members across New Zealand and the world.

We address critical long-term national and global challenges arising from rapid and far-reaching social, economic, technological, and environmental change.

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

Copyright information

This report is covered by the Creative Commons Licence 4.0 International.

When reproducing any part of this document, including tables and figures, full attribution must be given to the report author(s).



**UNIVERSITY OF
AUCKLAND**
Waipapa Taumata Rau
NEW ZEALAND

**KOI TŪ:
THE CENTRE FOR
INFORMED FUTURES**

HELP CREATE AN INFORMED FUTURE

We engage with people and organisations focused on the long-term development of New Zealand, and on core issues where trustworthy and robust analysis can make a real difference.

Professor Sir Peter Gluckman

Director, Koi Tū: The Centre for Informed Futures

Phone: +64 21 775 568

Email: pd.gluckman@auckland.ac.nz

THANK YOU TO OUR SUPPORTERS

Andrew and Elle Grant

Anita Baldauf

Bernard Pesco

Bernard Sabrier

David Levene Foundation

The Gluckman Family

Graeme and Robyn Hart

Gus Fisher Charitable Trust

Kelliher Charitable Trust

Modena Trust

The MSA Trust

Norman Barry Foundation

The Tindall Foundation

The Wright Family Foundation

informedfutures.org



Printed using environmentally
responsible paper.