Koi Tū
Centre for
Informed Futures

Commentary

Social cohesion: New Zealand's precious and fragile asset

Sir Peter Gluckman and Hema Sridhar

September 2025

Koi Tū
Centre for
Informed Futures

Koi Tū Centre for Informed Futures is an independent, non-partisan, future-focused boundary organisation dedicated to tackling the complex, long-term challenges shaping Aotearoa New Zealand's future.

We provide high-quality, evidence-based insights to address critical national and global issues arising from rapid social, economic, technological, and environmental change.

Our name, Koi Tū, was gifted by Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei. Koi means "the sharp end of an arrow" and "to be bright and clever," while Tū means "to stand" and conveys resilience. Like our namesake, Koi Tū aims to get to the heart of the most pressing long-term issues.

Koi Tū Trust is a registered charity – CC63033.

Contact

Distinguished Professor Sir Peter Gluckman is Koi Tū's Managing Trustee and the President of the International Science Council.

✉ peter.gluckman@informedfutures.org

Hema Sridhar is Koi Tū's Deputy Director and leads our work with government relations, technology and its impact on society, and foresight.

✉ hema.sridhar@informedfutures.org

Copyright information

Acknowledgements

We are grateful for the support of the Wright Family Foundation and other donors who support our broader work.

ISBN 978-1-0671045-0-4

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has had both immediate and long-term effects on our people, our society, and our collective sense of well-being. Beyond the most obvious impacts on our health and economy, the pandemic has both exposed and accelerated fractures within societies globally, which are constituted as 'liberal democracies' such as ours.

This is most evident in the declining sense of trust in authorities, as well as the polarisation and populism seen in many such countries. It is a credit to the inherent robustness of New Zealand as a society that, while not immune, our society appears, in general, to have been less affected than many others.

However, there are worrisome signs that the cohesiveness that has underpinned New Zealand society is in a somewhat fragile state. Covid-19 did not create this concerning situation; rather, the interwoven nature of the social fabric of liberal democracies like New Zealand has been progressively undermined over time.

While there is no agreed definition of 'social cohesion',[1] the term generally describes the state of our collective being as a society. It is never absolute, except in very repressive and autocratic regimes where individual agency is suppressed by fear and dictate. In a liberal democracy, cohesiveness operates differently and must be actively maintained.

The more cohesive a liberal society is, the better it is prepared to handle current and future challenges. In the absence of significant cohesiveness, a society cannot function well. The wellbeing of its people will be compromised in the face of the inevitable stresses, shocks and changes we all face. It can lead to considerable and growing instability.

Social cohesion is not an aspirational destination – it is a real-time indicator of the health of our nation. It needs to be embedded into our operational monitoring. We must also acknowledge the complex interactions of many factors, and thus we need to think beyond reductionist solutions.

Social cohesion and trust

Koi Tū Centre for Informed Futures has placed social cohesion at the centre of its work since its inception in 2019. We have worked both globally and nationally, publishing several seminal reports[2,3] and chairing international workshops[4,5] on factors that either undermine or enhance social cohesion and trust.

Without a high degree of cohesion, a democracy cannot be resilient. And without that resilience, a democracy cannot chart an agreed-upon path to address the major and generally unavoidable social, cultural, environmental, technological, economic, and geostrategic challenges ahead. Cohesion is not an absolute or end state. Instead, the level of cohesiveness relates to the degree of social and institutional trust in a society, which in turn reflects many factors which can vary depending on a variety of factors we have previously discussed.[2]

1 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/wp-content/uploads/pdf/Sustaining-Aotearoa-New-Zealand-as-a-cohesive-society.pdf

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

3 Gluckman, P. (2021). *Transitions, transformations and tradeoffs: Protecting and strengthening societal resilience and cohesion*. Koi Tū: The Centre for Informed Futures. https://informedfutures.org/wp-content/uploads/pdf/Transitions-Transformations-and-Tradeoffs.pdf

4 Bardsley, A., Chen, A., Owens, R., Gluckman, P., & Spoonley, P. (2021). *Societal resilience and cohesion: Identifying contributing factors and their interactions*. Koi Tū: The Centre for Informed Futures. https://informedfutures.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Koi-Tu-Societal-Resilience.pdf

5 European Commission: Joint Research Centre, Scharfbillig, M., Allegra, A., Brossard, D., Cassio, L. G., et al. (2025). *Trust in science for policy nexus*. Publications Office of the European Union. https://council.science/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/JRC141424_01.pdf

It is important to reflect on the deeper meaning of the concepts of cohesion and resilience. We must distinguish between democracies where their people have some sense of empowerment, from autocracies and dictatorships where, to a greater or lesser extent, empowerment is lost. Sadly, we are seeing several democratic countries shifting quite overtly towards a more autocratic frame.

Dictatorships based on theology, despotic nepotism, or fascist, nationalistic leadership rely on fear and the power of the state apparatus to create the appearance of cohesion but limit the agency of citizens. The power of a democracy is that it does not rely on fear and control to maintain a cohesive society – it relies on trust.

Trust is a structural necessity in any organisation within a liberal society, as it enables cooperation across diverse identities, values, and worldviews, and supports the establishment of shared norms and expectations. These are critical in pluralistic societies. Trust also reduces public susceptibility to misinformation and polarisation, especially in times of crisis.

As we have previously described[1–5] and building on the work of others[6] resilient democracies rely on trust to create a cohesive state. In the absence of an external threat or crisis (for example, an earthquake or a terrorist event), it takes effort to sustain a high degree of cohesion. A society's response to threats and stresses can either exacerbate tensions or enhance cohesion. Cohesion may initially appear strong in the response to a crisis, but it can weaken depending on how events unfold during the recovery. We have seen this play out in our response to Covid-19, as well as during the Christchurch earthquakes and the Auckland floods.

Two dimensions of trust

Trust is itself a complex and dynamic concept that reflects the quality of the relationship between actors. It very much relies on the accumulated evidence an individual has that allows them to perceive the interacting party's character, ability, strength, or information as reliable. Trust and trustworthiness are core to social interactions of all kinds and much of our psychological equipment has evolved around our capacity to detect trustworthiness[7].

When considered at the level of a community it is helpful to consider two interdependent but distinct dimensions of trust.[2]

The first dimension is 'social trust'. Any large-scale society is comprised of individuals and collectives with diverse world views and values. In reaching consensus within a society, these diverse groups must consider the interests of groups other than their own; for cooperation is at the heart of our evolutionary success as a social species.[8]

In a modern liberal democracy, social trust requires that discourse between different groups remains constructive and civil – something that is being lost in an age of divisive debates or polemics, driven in no small part by social media. It is also strained by discrimination, social isolation, financial precarity and inequality.[9]

Social cohesion depends on people having a sense of belonging and being valued; however, for some of our youth, ethnic minorities, and economically marginalised groups, this does not exist. Loss of perceived or relative status is a deep psychological blow[10] and has played a major

6 See footnotes 1–4 for extensive references.

7 Mercier, H. (2020). *Not born yesterday: The science of who we trust and what we believe*. Princeton University Press.

8 Raihani, N. (2021). *The social instinct: How cooperation shaped the world*. St Martins Press.

9 Gluckman, P., Bardsley, A. & Sridhar, H. (2023). *Social cohesion and societal polarisation. Long-term opportunities and challenges for Aotearoa New Zealand: Briefing for the incoming Prime Minister and Government*. Koi Tū: The Centre for Informed Futures. https://informedfutures.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Koi-Tu-briefing-2023-social-cohesion-and-societal-polarisation.pdf

10 Fukuyama, F. (2018). *Identity: The demand for dignity and the politics of resentment*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

part in the post-Covid-19 anger as a result of the persistent economic downturn and in populist attitudes to migration seen particularly in other countries.

Social trust strongly influences, and is influenced by, the second dimension of trust: 'institutional trust', that is the degree of trust that exists between people and the institutions that set the rules that shape and govern that society.

Institutional trust refers not only to the need to trust in politicians and in the bureaucracy of government, but also to trust in the many other institutions that make up a society. These include the police, the justice system, the media, banks, insurance companies, hospitals, universities, and the institution of science itself. Public trust in these institutions began to decline well before the Covid-19 pandemic, but the pandemic accelerated the decline.

Democracy assumes that majority decisions must still consider minority interests. Scholars of extreme populism point out that autocrats – even those elected through seemingly democratic means – often twist the concept of the 'will of the people' to match their own agenda,[11] effectively silencing minorities and disregarding their interests. Trust underpins democratic legitimacy as people are more likely to accept decisions and policies when they trust the process and the actors involved even if they are not the decision they individually wanted.

Democracies are struggling to maintain institutional trust. This is not a theoretical issue, but rather one that will determine our futures. So why has institutional trust fallen to the point that unfortunately the default position in New Zealand is one of distrust?[12,13]

Global decline of trust

Across the democratic world, a decline in public trust began to emerge during the economic challenges of the 1980s. In the following decades, this erosion of trust was compounded by rising societal polarisation, influenced by shifts in the media and information environment, and in some countries, by the effects of informal migration. The pandemic further intensified these trends.[1] In liberal democracies, an increasing number of people came to perceive the current economic model as producing unfair and unequal outcomes.

Individual perceptions of fairness vary according to one's financial status but promises made by those in power about economic futures over recent decades have been perceived as broken.

The reality is that so much is beyond the power of an individual politician, political party or government, even though the rhetoric might suggest otherwise. Global issues often determine the economic futures of small countries like New Zealand. However, the growing inequalities and overt and egregious manifestations of excessive wealth have exacerbated a sense of relative unfairness for many.

Koi Tū's previous structured consultation of what 'fairness' means, conducted on behalf of Treasury, found that by far the majority of New Zealanders felt that fairness means 'equality of opportunity' rather than the 'equality of outcome'.[14] However, the community was divided between those who believed that society, in general, provided equal opportunities and those who thought it did not. The issues affecting social cohesion and institutional trust are however far

11 Collins, H., Evans, R., Durant, D., & Weinel, M. (2019). Experts and the will of the people: Society, populism and science. Palgrave Pivot.

12 Acumen. *Acumen Edelman trust barometer 2022*. Acumen. https://acumennz.com/acumen-edelman-trust-barometer/acumen-edelman-trust-barometer-2022/

13 Acumen. *Acumen Edelman trust barometer 2025*. Acumen. https://acumennz.com/acumen-edelman-trust-barometer/acumen-edelman-trust-barometer-2025/

14 Bardsley, A., Clyne, D. & Harvey, F. (2024). *Perceptions of fairness in New Zealand: Phase 2 report. Koi Tū report to the New Zealand Treasury*. Koi Tū: The Centre for Informed Futures. https://informedfutures.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Fairness-report-Phase-2-FINAL-COVER.pdf

broader than just economic ones. In our international and domestic work, we have identified many factors of variable importance to different parts of the population that undermine social cohesion.[4]

Rapid change is inherently unsettling, and we have witnessed unprecedented shifts in technologies, culture, demographics, and geostrategic positioning. The 'information environment' has also undergone transformation, once dominated mainly by social media it is now expanding to other digital channels of influence. This changed information environment has led to information overload, constant competition for the attention of viewers, and growing difficulty in discerning truth due to mis- and disinformation and highly targeted content increasingly generated by artificial intelligence (AI). This is a real threat to any concept of democracy as a form of government decided by informed voters.

The very nature of how we have conversations has changed. Polemics have replaced serious, thoughtful discourse, and shifts in the information landscape have fuelled rapid changes in cultural attitudes for many, leading to growing social disharmony. This is partly because the digital ecosystem is designed to amplify identity-based narratives and perceptions, pushing more extreme-held views and polarised content. Algorithms across multiple platforms reinforce this further, creating and embedding echo chambers. The digital environment has fragmented any sense of a shared reality.

In the recent intense and increasingly politicised debates in many countries over diversity, equity and inclusion, or over gender issues or reproductive rights, the discussion has become one of who determines what values should dominate: the State's collective view, or that of the individual. This highlights the intersection of social and institutional trust, where each impacts the other.

Critical factors

Media

Trust in New Zealand's traditional media is one of the lowest amongst similarly developed, English-speaking democracies.[12,15] This low level of trust may reflect the small size of our media landscape, yet media, with their responsibility to inform, educate and assist in holding systems to account[16] are core to a well-functioning democracy.

The decline in trust in the media is widespread across the democratic world. Fiscal realities for media companies, which have lost in the competition with the digital world for a falling advertising dollar, have led to an editorial shift toward sensationalism and opinion, rather than focusing on their traditional role of informing the public to support healthy democratic debate.

The way in which individuals consume information has fundamentally changed. With on-demand content, individuals can access information as needed, with narratives unfolding in real-time, accessible through multiple channels. Information, including news, is consumed through short, visually engaging content through TikTok, Instagram or YouTube, and via influencers and trending memes that resonate with lived experiences and support the channel's economic model by grabbing the viewer's attention and clicks. Generational differences have emerged in how and what information is distributed, creating another challenge.

---

15 Myllylahti, M. & Treadwell, G. (2025). *Trust in news in Aotearoa New Zealand 2025*. AUT research centre for Journalism, Media and Democracy (JMAD). https://www.jmadresearch.com/trust-in-news-in-new-zealand

16 Koi Tū: The Centre for Informed Futures. *Submission to the Economic Development, Science and Innovation Committee. Aotearoa New Zealand Public Media Bill no. 146-1*. Koi Tū: The Centre for Informed Futures. https://www.parliament.nz/resource/en-NZ/53SCED_EVI_125298_ED10389/779bda3dd2888ba68f3db0ff05f98ff665f459be

Communities thrive through networks of mutual support and trust, as well as a sense of belonging and identity that foster participation in civic life. The availability of trustworthy local information supports these self-reinforcing elements through journalism as a source of local facts, not rumours. Community news outlets connect people in ways that larger news outlets cannot because they are rooted in local relevance. They bring hyper-local stories that would otherwise go unreported, and disseminate information on community achievements, social and cultural issues, and events that bring people together and cultivate a sense of shared purpose and cohesion. They also make an invaluable contribution to the commercial life of a community. Koi Tū is soon to release a report on the growing challenges created by these 'news deserts' and loss of access to local information, in turn undermining social cohesion and local democracy.

Undoubtedly, the nature of civic – and indeed political – discourse has been dramatically altered by the rise of social media. The platforms promote anonymity and have weakened the impact of slander and libel laws. As a result, targeted abuse of individuals has accelerated and, disturbingly, become almost a social norm. There is little accountability for those who post harmful content, nor for the social media platforms that host it.

This has caused significant harm to individuals and more broadly, it has degraded the quality of discourse across all forums, including our political process, further fuelling public cynicism.

With the emergence of ChatGPT and agentic tools, AI is increasingly curating personalised content for individuals, further replacing traditional media and local news sources. It creates personalised 'truths' and erodes any mechanism for shared or collective trust. The media have, to date, been a primary vehicle through which individuals have sought the information that catalyses collective trust and held institutions and entities accountable.

Overall, the emergent information environment allows misinformation and disinformation to be more easily spread and in turn undermine social and institutional trust, exacerbate differences and promote belief in conspiracy theories.

Wicked problems

Policy making is by its very nature an abstract system in which it is not clear to the public how their voices are heard and how particular decisions are made. This leads to continued suspicion about influences and interests, a lack of confidence in our decision-making institutions, and disengagement from local governance, as evidenced by the low voter turnout and public engagement in consultations.

A contributing factor is the scepticism amongst voters that arises from decades of political promises, across the ideological spectrum, that claim simple solutions to complex, deeply rooted problems – often referred to as 'wicked problems.' These include issues such as intergenerational disadvantage, youth crime, the structure of the education system, a failing health system, and climate change.

There is an intrinsic connection between the challenge of wicked problems and societal cohesion, as wicked problems test the very fabric of how societies cooperate, trust, and adapt. Possible solutions are often contested for short-term political reasons, yet any effective solutions will require long-term thinking rather than knee-jerk singular responses. While the public wants action and results, there is a growing awareness that real progress on such challenges requires sustained, coordinated efforts across multiple political cycles. Our constitutional arrangements make this difficult.

Wicked problems have and will expose the fault lines in our society, whether these are economic, cultural, social or intergenerational. Public trust erodes if our institutions respond poorly, unequally, or engage on issues in a tokenistic manner. In doing so, social trust is lost as communities feel unheard or excluded.

Furthermore, wicked problems, by nature, generally involve identity, values, and emotions and, if left to fester, inevitably fuel division. Misinformation, fear, political opportunism, media, and algorithms further fragment public discourse, preventing any consensus on a way forward. Thus, a rethink on our political traditions is a precondition for solving wicked problems.

With the rise in the use of AI systems within the public sector, particularly in decision-making that will impact the public, there is an increased concern about ethics, transparency, and bias in the underlying data. While AI may offer opportunities to tackle wicked problems, how this is done will be key in ensuring the public maintains confidence and that institutional trust is not further eroded. Formal and independent mechanisms of oversight on government's use of data and AI would be trust enhancing.

Science

Science is argued to be central to a well-functioning democracy,[17] helping societies make informed decisions. However, trust in the institution of science is threatened.[5] This is partly due to perceived arrogance within parts of the scientific community itself, but more significantly because science is increasingly confronting inconvenient truths, such as climate change or genetic modification. Koi Tū have been involved in global discussions on whether the challenges to trust in science are simply a spillover from declining trust in institutions or whether there are distinct elements.[5] Certainly trust in science, be it over vaccinations or climate change or genetic modification, has become a badge of political identity. It is often easier to attack the science rather than confront the discomfort of cognitive dissonance. Moreover, extreme populist movements frequently reject science as a legitimate source of truth or authority, further eroding its role in public discourse, breeding fear and fragmentation.

Science plays a significant role in providing a shared reference point and collective understanding to anchor public discourse, particularly on complex issues. It also provides a mechanism for societies to navigate uncertainty and complexity.

Trust in political institutions

Public scepticism about the performance of our politicians, parliament and civil service is widespread. In New Zealand, we have seen a decline in trust in our politicians,[12,18] even though most in our society do not have the perception of the 'deep state' that is rife in the United States. But the conduct of our politics undermines institutional trust as we have previously detailed;[2] for example in the lack of effective rules limiting lobbying, the overuse of parliamentary urgency and a somewhat dismissive approach to reports and advice from the Auditor-General or Ombudsman: this is true irrespective of which administration is in power.

Part of this decline stems from the inherently adversarial nature of our political system; the short political cycle can lead to large policy swings across cycles. In this context, the capacity to find a consensual way to address what we have called wicked problems becomes more challenging as

17 Collins, H. & Evans, R. (2017). *Why democracies need science*. Polity.

18 Acumen. *Acumen Edelman trust barometer 2024*. Acumen. https://acumennz.com/acumen-edelman-trust-barometer/acumen-edelman-trust-barometer-2024/

reaching across the major political divide is not seen as attractive to a party's own interests, even if in the national interest.

A major factor is the impact of decades of over-ambitious political promises from across the ideological spectrum, that claim simple solutions to complex, deeply rooted problems. While the public wants action and results, there is a growing awareness that real progress on such challenges requires sustained, coordinated efforts across multiple political cycles.

Around the democratic world, support for political extremes has grown – often at the expense of the centre. This is not surprising in the digital age: extreme views receive more attention on social media and are increasingly dominating mainstream media because they generate clicks. As a result, information is increasingly replaced by opinion, and that opinion is increasingly polarised. Clear, simplistic messages from the political fringes tend to resonate more easily online, while the more nuanced messaging from the centre of politics struggles to gain traction amongst the digital noise. Inevitably, centrist messaging appears bland compared to that from the periphery of politics.

New Zealand's electoral system, Mixed Member Proportional (MMP), was developed in post-war Germany to avoid extremes having political control while promoting a more centralising consensus. New Zealand adopted MMP in part as a response to the unanticipated rapid economic reforms of the 1980s, aiming to encourage more collaborative governance. However, MMP now operates within a digital age that, by its very nature, amplifies polarisation. The system's previous preference for centrist coalition-building is increasingly challenged by the louder, sharper messaging of smaller, more extreme parties.

As Koi Tū has previously described,[19] New Zealand has a simple democratic system: it operates on a short electoral cycle, has a single and relatively small[20] parliamentary chamber limiting the power of select committees, a strong party whip system leading to a dominant executive, and minimal rules about lobbying. In recent years, we have also seen less willingness among political leaders to accept responsibility for mistakes, perhaps more so than in previous generations.

In parallel, public scepticism about the performance of our politicians, parliament, and civil service is widespread. Part of this stems from the inherently adversarial and non-consensual nature of our political system limiting the ability to have a clear vision of our future and national identity. The political and societal tensions that have emerged over the past two election cycles over the status of the Treaty of Waitangi, for example, have become harder, not easier, to resolve.

These structural and behavioural factors together undermine public trust in our institutions. While some of this could be addressed through structural reform, much of it is attitudinal and behavioural. Rebuilding trust requires deep reflection within our political and policy communities on what is truly needed from the political system in a new digital era.

The Covid-19 pandemic exposed weaknesses in our trust in institutions – political, administrative and the police – as it did worldwide.[21] As seen in many other such shocks in recent New Zealand history (such as the Christchurch earthquakes or Auckland floods), and as with international experiences, crises test the cohesiveness of our society. Initially there may be a honeymoon response bringing us together but there is a high risk that the more hidden long-term impacts on our mental, economic, social and educational wellbeing will be unequally experienced dividing

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

20 Compared to the size of the Executive which in turn is relatively large compared to that in many countries.

21 International Science Council. (2023). *Unprecedented & unfinished: Policy lessons and recommendations from COVID-19*, 2nd edition. International Science Council. https://council.science/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/UnprecedentedAndUnfinished-2ndEdition-2023_N.pdf

us into groups who can put the event behind us and those who for genuine reasons cannot. It is easier to forget and move on rather than acknowledge the consequences. Any reviews or inquiries following such events must be viewed as opportunities to extract meaningful lessons and focus on effective means to repair or enhance social cohesion and generate trust. Just as we invest in other measures to rebuild physical infrastructure, we must equally prioritise rebuilding the emotional and mental resilience that underpins thriving communities.

Conclusion: valuing social cohesion

Societal cohesion has long been one of New Zealand's greatest strengths – a foundation for our resilience in the face of rapid technological change, natural disasters, climate pressures and shifting geopolitics.

Cohesion rests on two main pillars: social trust between people, and institutional trust in our democratic systems, media, science, and governance. These two dimensions of trust are faltering, and a concerted effort is needed to rebuild them. We must not be complacent – we cannot ignore the challenge or consider it as peripheral to the nation's future. Protecting these pillars requires us to address weaknesses in our politics, improve the quality and reliability of our information, and ensure that technologies, such as AI, are transparent and accountable.

Social cohesion is not a by-product of prosperity or stability – it is needed to generate both. The economic costs of a loss of cohesion or a failure to promote it are enormous in terms of human capital and productivity. Social capital is a national asset that should be treated as such and thus requires regular monitoring and active investment to maintain its value. It also requires clear and strong leadership to champion this at all levels, including communities, the private sector, industry, local and central government, and politicians. Equally importantly, it requires the active engagement and the involvement of all members of our society to ensure it not only survives but grows stronger in the years ahead.

New Zealand missed an opportunity when the debate to replace our national flag became just another political argument. It was held back by a lack of expertise in flag design and by a failure to clearly define what should and could have been the underlying purpose of the debate – defining who we are.

The country, its leaders and institutions, and its people need to value social cohesion. Without it, we risk becoming more divided, less resilient, and less able to face the complexity of challenges or equipped to overcome the wicked problems that inevitably will shape our future.

Koi Tū
Centre for Informed Futures

Koi Tū Trust

Level 11, 48 Emily Place, Auckland 1010

PO Box 91850, Victoria St West, Auckland 1010

NZ Registered Charity: CC63033

informedfutures.org

FSC
www.fsc.org
100%
From well-managed forests
FSC® C153850

Printed using environmentally responsible paper.