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COVID timeline - Diagram

Power behind the throne: who's in charge of NZ's Covid-19 mop up

Stuff Political Reporters · 05:00, Jun 29 2020

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Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern answers questions about the New Zealand border at post-Cabinet press conference.

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The buck stops somewhere, but where exactly is never quite clear.

But the size and complexity of the response means that picking your way through who actually has responsibility can be very difficult. Here's a look at the main faces controlling NZ's Covid-19 response.



ROSS GIBLIN/STUFF

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has led the Covid-19 response

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern

The prime minister has been at the apex of the Government's coronavirus response. During the lockdown she held daily press conferences and even came up with the idea of alert levels herself.

In true crisis management style, she took charge of communication, and all Covid-related political messages came through her, with support on technical health and economic details by Director-General of Health Ashley Bloomfield and Minister of Finance Grant Robertson.

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Since the scaling down to level 1 she has left day-to-day management to Bloomfield and hapless Minister of Health David Clark.

quarantine system and fill any holes. This is the more usual chain of command and also usefully provides the PM with other people to hold accountable for failures.

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ROBERT KITCHIN/STUFF

Director-General of Health Dr Ashley Bloomfield has managed the health response.

Dr Ashley Bloomfield

The head of the Ministry of Health remains at the heart of the continued management of Covid-19 cases. His recommendations are littered throughout the Cabinet documents proactively released. This advice is sometimes followed, sometimes not, but is always seen as deeply important.

Bloomfield's presence at the daily press conferences has also turned him into something of a celebrity, but increased exposure comes with increased scrutiny – particularly over the recent border issues.

Bloomfield has a long career in public health.

health in the early 2000s before doing a stint at the World Health Organisation in Geneva, working on non-infectious diseases, before returning to Wellington and eventually leading both the Hutt Valley and Capital & Coast DHBs.

GETTY-IMAGES

Health Minister David Clark has faced scrutiny over his efforts during the response.

Health Minister David Clark

Dr David Clark (theologian, not physician) has been handed what former US Secretary of State Donald Rumsfeld would refer to as a "s... detail".

He is now in charge of all the various strands of the Government's health response to Covid-19, preparedness and unclogging the backlog of procedures and non-Covid health problems that occurred under lockdown. His job will get progressively harder until the election.

After being virtually invisible during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, his most notable contribution has been to pin the blame of border quarantine failings on his director-general of health.

Having spent lockdown under a cloud, after flouting his own Government's lockdown rules, he will be doing well to keep his portfolio until the election, and will certainly get a hefty demotion afterwards, should Labour be returned to the treasury benches.



GETTY-IMAGES

Housing Minister Megan Woods has a new role in overseeing isolation and quarantine facilities.

Housing Minister Megan Woods

If Steven Joyce was the Key Government's Minister for Everything, Megan Woods is the Ardern Government's Minister Fix-it. She was first put in charge of Christchurch earthquake recovery, then brought in to clean up the KiwiBuild mess left by Phil Twyford, and is now being deployed to ensure the Government's border quarantine and isolation regime works seamlessly. She has repeatedly, but quietly, proved herself capable of making tough political problems go away.

A good communicator, Woods has become the Government's day-to-day face of border control – now the key political chokepoint for new Covid cases.

Woods is also the Labour Party's campaign chair for the upcoming election, so is clearly cognisant of how politically damaging a border leaking coronavirus cases could be for Labour's re-election chances.

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Air Commodore Darryn 'Digby' Webb is now managing the border quarantine system.

Air Commodore Darryn 'Digby' Webb

The new border czar was installed in the job by Ardern on June 17, after the problems with the border were revealed.

But Air Commodore Darryn Webb had already been managing isolation facilities for weeks, just not the health response side. The assistant chief of the Defence Force, seconded to the All-of-Government team in April, is now attached at the hip with Woods, ironing out the issues with the border regime.

People within managed isolation say standards have certainly risen since the military took over. If there's one thing they know, it's logistics.



KEVIN STENT/STUFF

Former police commission Mike Bush is in charge of operations.

Former top cop Mike Bush

When New Zealand entered level 4 Mike Bush started off running the operational side of the All of Government Response team.

A lot of this involved communicating how exactly police would treat various levels of travel under level 4 lockdown.

Now that key operational tasks are being conducted at the border, and headed by the New Zealand Defence Force, it is unclear exactly what Bush's job is.

KEVIN STENT/STUFF

At an All-of-Government COVID-19 national response press conference, Controller John Ombler, Sarah Stuart-Black, Mike Bush, and Dr Ashley Bloomfield.

All-of-Government controller John Ombler

John Ombler has largely worked behind the scenes during the pandemic response, making few appearances at press conferences.

But both his title, "controller", and his track record, former deputy state services commissioner and head of the Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority, show he's managing the response from the top. The All-of-Government team he's leading includes the likes of Bush and police staff, officials from the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, and Civil Defence and Emergency staff.

He's effectively the chief executive of what's become an informal Government department, the Ministry for Covid-19. Whether Ombler is eyeing work on the frontline is not clear, but he has not been visible in recent weeks.

MONIQUE FORD/STUFF

Andrew Campbell

Andrew Campbell

The Government's chief spinner has a very simple job until the election: keep the PR wheels on the Government and continue to remind the public that the prime minister said from the start of the lockdown that New Zealand would get more Covid cases – but that cases in isolation and quarantine show the system is working.

Running any prime minister's communications team is a mixture of taking responsibility and apportioning blame.

Should David Clark continue to fail, expect to hear a distinct lack of support for him emanating from the ninth floor of the Beehive.

Campbell also has a much more complicated overarching job: assisting Ardern and Government ministers in explaining why and how New Zealand is, or isn't, opening up.

The irony is that the success of the "Unite against Covid-19" campaign has created another problem for the Government in opening up with Australia: a large chunk of the population wants the border open now with appropriate safeguards, while many others won't want to open until Australia has no cases.

His other task will be helping craft the message that the Government's economic response to Covid-19 has worked, making the best of a bad situation.

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Julia Haydon-Carr.

Julia Haydon-Carr

Julia Haydon-Carr is far from the spotlight but sources within Government describe her as key to the health response.

She's Ardern's health adviser, meaning she acts as an independent voice away from the ministry or minister of health. Independent advisers are crucial because every department, no matter how saintly its chief executive, has an agenda and an embedded way of thinking about problems.

Haydon-Carr is also a very close friend of Ardern.




HENRY COOKE/STUFF

Raj Nahna is Jacinda Ardern's Chief of Staff

Raj Nahna

As Ardern's chief of staff, Nahna is at the nexus of nearly everything that happens in government.

Occasionally pictured beside her, Nahna's role is more backroom than many of the other, more public figures who have fronted the Covid-19 response.

 Nahna worked for Chapman Tripp and also on Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign. He returned to New Zealand, joining Labour's Opposition research unit, although he didn't survive the David Cunliffe years.

He quickly moved into the Beehive under Ardern's leadership, becoming deputy chief of staff under then-chief of staff Mike Munro. Nahna took over as chief of staff in May 2019.

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