

POLITICS

Document reveals minister's early tensions with Covid Commission chair

Brooke van Velden was advised to tell the Covid-19 Commission chair she was losing her confidence amid concerns about running over time and budget



by **Marc Daalder**

14/08/2025



'I will continue to lobby Brooke van Velden'. Photo: Facebook

Internal Affairs Minister Brooke van Velden said she had confidence in the chair of the Royal Commission into the Covid-19 Response despite a briefing obtained by Newsroom suggesting significant tensions between the pair earlier this year.

In February, officials at the Department of Internal Affairs briefed van Velden ahead of a meeting with the chair, Grant Illingworth KC, advising her to “make clear your expectation that the chair implements improvements in the

inquiry's planning, risk assessment, and progress reporting, and failure by him to commit to do so will further undermine your confidence in him and in the inquiry".

Talking points drafted by officials went further, warning deviation from the commission's schedule or budget "will not be acceptable" and that the minister would "have no option but to consider other solutions" if improvements were not made. It is not clear whether van Velden actually made use of these talking points in her meeting with Illingworth.

READ MORE

COVID-19

[Govt to wait a year before considering Covid Royal Commission advice](#)

COVID-19

[What the Royal Commission really said about the Covid response](#)

The Royal Commission delivered its initial report last year, but the Government has tacked on an additional phase which will look with more detail at lockdowns and vaccine safety and efficacy, while also holding public hearings – the second round of which were cancelled on Wednesday. That phase was given less than 18 months to prepare its report, relatively little time in the scheme of Royal Commissions.

Part of the terms of reference for the new phase required it to provide assurance about its progress, timeliness and budget with quarterly reports. Van Velden received the first of these on January 30 and wrote to Illingworth on February 10 to raise concerns about the lack of detail.

A week later, Illingworth replied with a second report with more detail, but officials advised van Velden in a briefing released under the Official Information Act that this was still insufficient.

"While the chair's recent letter provides more detail against the reporting requirements of terms of reference, these deficiencies have not been fully addressed," officials wrote.

Many of the specific concerns raised by officials are redacted in the document, but one line that was released shows concerns about the commission running over time.

"Another risk we see concerns the timing of the activities towards the end of the inquiry. Experience suggests that the inquiry will likely need more time for natural justice and the production of the final report than it has currently allocated," they wrote.

Royal Commissions frequently run beyond their original deadlines. The three most recent commissions – phase one of the Covid-19 commission, the inquiry into the Christchurch terror attacks and the inquiry into abuse in state- and faith-based care – all required at least one extension.

The talking points drafted for van Velden focused on this.

"The Government has made a significant investment in this inquiry in a challenging fiscal and economic environment. Any variation from on time and within budget will not be acceptable. There is no additional funding available. Nor is there additional time – when your report is delivered it will already be six years since the start of the pandemic," the recommended lines stated.

“As I have communicated before, including in your appointment letter, I will not be supportive of any proposals to delay the delivery of the final report. I have heard several times from you that the inquiry is making excellent progress, but I have yet to see sufficient evidence to back this up or a detailed plan that gives me confidence that you will meet your deadline.”

Van Velden was to ask Illingworth to commission an independent assessment of the inquiry’s “planning, progress, risk analysis, and financial situation, including expected expenditure to the end of the financial year”.

“I am not prepared to let further valuable time pass without evidence that the necessary progress is being made. In the absence of you making these improvements, my concerns and lack of confidence will remain. I will then have no option but to consider other solutions,” the minister was advised to tell Illingworth.

Van Velden told Newsroom the talking points were “suggestion” that didn’t always reflect the nature of a meeting.

“During my meeting with the chair I reiterated the need for the final report to be delivered on time and within budget. The chair provided me with additional information about how the inquiry is progressing to meet its deadline and this gave me the assurance I wanted,” she said.

“I have confidence in the chair of the Royal Commission of Inquiry and still expect the final report to be delivered to me by February 2026. The commission has not sought additional time or funding.”

A spokesperson for the inquiry said it was tracking well on time and budget, confirming it had not sought any additional time or funding from the Government.

“In February 2025, the minister raised some concerns with the inquiry chair about the level of detail included in the inquiry’s quarterly report for the October to December 2024 period. In response, the chair wrote to the minister to specifically address the areas the minister sought more information about, including providing further detail about the planned stages of the inquiry, more comprehensive financial information, and further detail about other areas of the inquiry’s work,” the spokesperson said.

“The inquiry chair subsequently met with the minister where his letter was discussed. As a result of the meeting, the chair agreed to amend the inquiry’s reporting to ensure the minister’s needs were met. A new reporting approach and template were agreed.”

Separately, the commission announced on Wednesday that it was cancelling a second round of planned public hearings after former Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and ministers Chris Hipkins, Grant Robertson and Ayesha Verrall declined to attend.

The former ministers said the hearings would be performative rather than informative, as they had already been interviewed by both phases of the commission in private and were willing to answer any additional questions as well.

The commission said it could compel the politicians to attend but that this would conflict with the requirement in its terms of reference to not take an adversarial or legalistic approach. Rather than hold the hearings without the key decision-makers, it decided to cancel them.