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Covid-19 inquiry: Commission criticises length of Auckland lockdown and Government spending; Dame Jacinda Ardern responds


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Health Minister Simeon Brown says New Zealanders' summer was stolen from them in 2021 when the Government continued Covid-19 testing restrictions that officials deemed not "necessary or practical", citing phase two of the Royal Commission's inquiry, which was released today.

Brown also criticised Labour's spending during the pandemic, saying the Treasury "told Labour from the beginning that Covid-19 spending needed to be timely, temporary and targeted. Labour ignored that advice".

Dame Jacinda Ardern and Grant Robertson responded to the report with a joint statement saying that it was "consistent with the first report", commissioned by Labour.

"We got a lot right. More than most. But there are areas that could have been better," they said.

"We accept the overall findings and recommendations of both reports," they said.

Current Labour leader and former Covid Minister Chris Hipkins previously criticised the way the terms of reference for this phase of the inquiry were set up.

"The fact that the [Royal Commission] terms of reference specifically exclude decisions made when NZ First were part of the [Labour-led coalition] Government ... I think the terms of reference have been deliberately constructed to achieve a particular outcome, particularly around providing a platform for those who have [conspiracy theorist views](#)."

The just-released 323-page final report from the Royal Commission's investigations into the Government's Covid response found the Government's conservative approach to purchasing RAT tests "actually increased disruption" rather than eased it.

Although the then Labour Government did on some occasions go against officials' advice, this was limited. Overall, the commission lauded the pandemic response, particularly the initial elimination strategy that saved many lives when "the stakes were immense" and ministers were "doing the best they could at the time".

Former ministers and their officials made "strenuous efforts to make the right decisions" and, overall, the decisions were "balanced and reasonable".

The first phase of the pandemic was powered by strong public trust in the Government, although eventually, some Covid restrictions went "too far"; the Government was "too slow" revoking them, and public patience waned.

This is the commission's second phase of investigations, prompted by the coalition agreements of NZ First and Act, and reviews the period February 2021 to October 2022. The commission's [first report was released in November 2024](#).

Auckland lockdown longer than necessary

Ardern described in her submission deciding when to lift the lockdown in Auckland, where residents were restricted in much of their activities for 107 days, as one of the "most challenging" times of the pandemic.

The Government kept Aucklanders in lockdown for four extra days to allow for more testing, against the recommendation of Dr Ashley Bloomfield, the Director General of Health at the time, the report says.

Hipkins, a key leader for the Labour Government during the pandemic, disputed this element of the report, saying advice from officials and Bloomfield changed regularly and decisions to lift the Auckland lockdown were aligned with official advice.

When the borders did open, officials described requirements for people crossing the Auckland border over the 2021 Christmas period to be tested for Covid within 72 hours as not "necessary or practical".

In some cases, these restrictions prevented people, particularly unvaccinated people, from coming in and out of the city to visit family over Christmas and New Year.

Brown said these requirements should have been rolled back earlier.

"The advice from the Ministry of Health was clearly that that was safe to do so," Brown said.

"The vaccination rates across the country were high enough to allow that to happen ... it did mean Aucklanders were facing further restrictions than they needed to while decisions were being made in Wellington."

A key influence in lifting Auckland's lockdown for ministers was the impact of the tight lifestyle restrictions for more than three months on residents' wellbeing.

At this point, trust in the Government was withering and patience to follow the rules was being tested with some people, who felt the restrictions were ineffective in stopping Covid, breaking the rules and spreading the virus anyway.

The initial "surge" in public trust in the Government had, for some people, crumbled. This decline, the report said, was not solely attributable to the Government's response, but also a "growing global tide of misinformation and disinformation".

The climax of anger among some was shown when a 23-day occupation of around 3000 people on Parliament's lawn ended with a violent clash with police.

NZ weak for future shocks

The inquiry caveats its findings on the "luxury" of hindsight, stating what might appear obvious "was often far from clear at the time".

The current coalition Government has blamed much of the economic problems today on the previous Labour Government, including its fiscal response to the pandemic.

A Treasury paper, released in August last year, [calculated the total cost of the pandemic to be \\$66 billion](#) and criticised Labour for overspending.

The Royal Commission said the strong economy in 2019 and 2020 helped New Zealand's response to Covid but, like many countries, New Zealand was left "in a weaker position to weather the next economic shock".

"There is a pressing need to reduce public debt to provide a buffer for future pandemics or other economic shocks."

Treasury advice during the pandemic, as relayed in the report, included warnings that the longer the lockdown, particularly for Auckland, the further economic recovery is likely to be pushed out.

Too slow removing mandates

Some worker mandates, perhaps one of the more controversial restrictions that required certain workers to be vaccinated, could have been removed sooner, the report said.

Mandates were in place for border workers for an "excessive" amount of time in 2022, almost two months after unvaccinated residence visa holders were allowed to enter the country.

There was also a delay in removing mandates for healthcare workers, the report said. The Ministry of Health had recommended revoking the mandates on August 29, but this did not happen until September 26.

"In our view, where measures limiting fundamental rights are found to be no longer necessary, they should be removed promptly and as a matter of priority," the report said.

"In hindsight, some vaccination requirements were introduced too slowly, some lasted too long and some went too far."

Arden and Robertson call for Government to get ready for next pandemic

Arden and Robertson called on the Government to implement the recommendations from both phases of the Royal Commission, upping New Zealand's preparedness for the next pandemic.

"The job now is to ensure NZ is better prepared for the next pandemic. We join the commission in urging the Government to take the findings of both reports and implement them as a matter of urgency," they said.

"The commission's observation, 'there is no scenario in which NZ – or any other country – could have confronted the pandemic without some cost', will be just as true for the next time.

"Our best safeguard is to ensure we are as well prepared as we can be. Over the last four years, we have fully co-operated with both phases of the inquiry, including many hours of interviews, and wish to extend our thanks to the Royal Commission staff for their important work on behalf of New Zealand," they said.

Ministers didn't get vaccine advice

Some mandates for the education sector required workers over the age of 12 to be fully vaccinated, including volunteers. But after the mandate was implemented, the Covid-19 Technical Advisory Group produced advice "against requiring two doses for 12-17-year-olds".

The report revealed this advice was not provided to ministers or to the 12-17-year-olds who were subject to the vaccine requirement, a failure the commission describes as "significant".

"While this deficiency is mitigated by the information that was widely published about the risk of myocarditis in this cohort, this does not diminish the issue of vaccine mandates continuing to reflect outdated advice, when advice informed by additional evidence was available."

Covid test approach increased disruption

The Government's hard focus on using PCR tests because they were the "most accurate" at the time ended up increasing "disruption", rather than easing it, the report said. By the time the Government sought alternative tests (RATs), the global market was saturated with orders.

This "slowness in approving alternatives" meant the PCR system was "ultimately overwhelmed" and some people could not access reliable tests easily to determine whether they should self-isolate.

The lack of capacity led to some organisations losing faith in the public testing system. During the Delta outbreak, several Taranaki iwi trained their own volunteers to administer saliva-based PCR tests that were processed by a private provider.

This helped identify and contain an outbreak at Eltham School in December 2021. The Taranaki District Health Board paid for these tests after the Ministry of Health declined.

Brown said the Government was carefully reviewing the commission's findings and expected to respond to the recommendations by July.

Recommendations include producing legislation outlining for the public the most significant legal powers a government could use during a pandemic, such as lockdowns or mandates.

It also recommended an agency be tasked with monitoring public trust and social cohesion in New Zealand and developing policy advice about improving both.

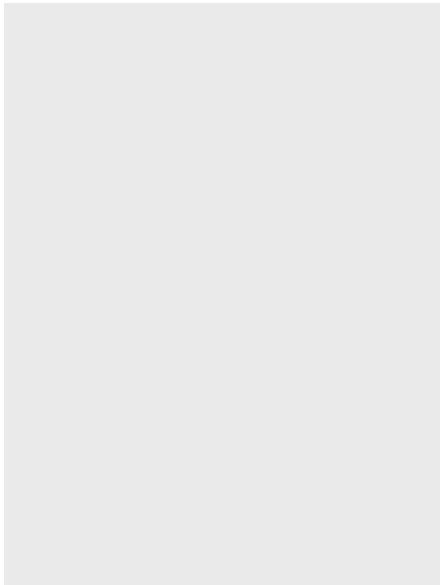
"The report also found that the cost-of-living pressures New Zealanders are still feeling today – and the ongoing lack of social cohesion for some – are part of that story," Brown said.

"New Zealanders made enormous sacrifices and placed enormous trust in their government. We owe it to them to understand what happened and learn from it."

Julia Gabel is a Wellington-based political reporter. She joined the *Herald* in 2020 and has most recently focused on data journalism.

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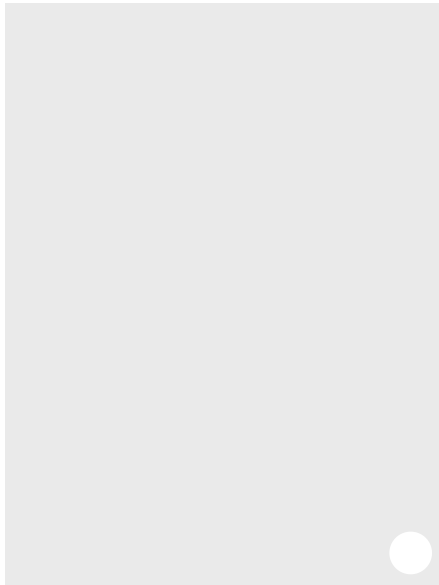
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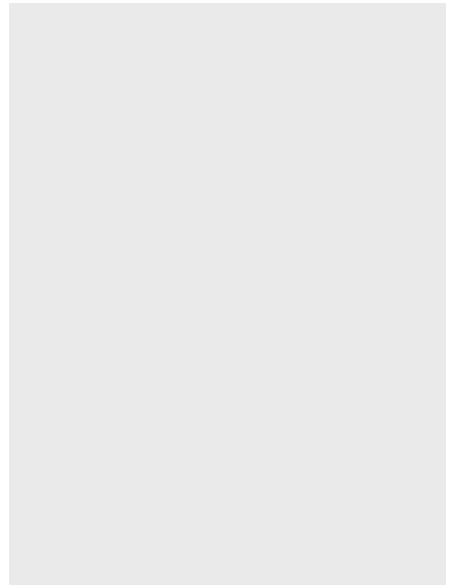
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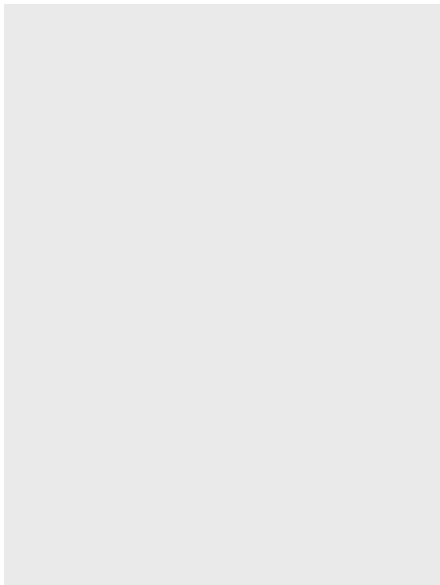
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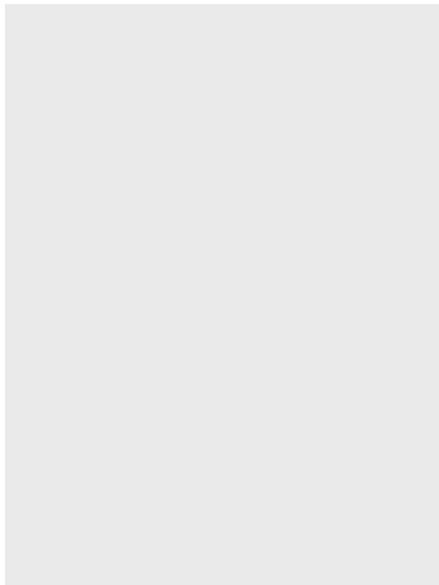
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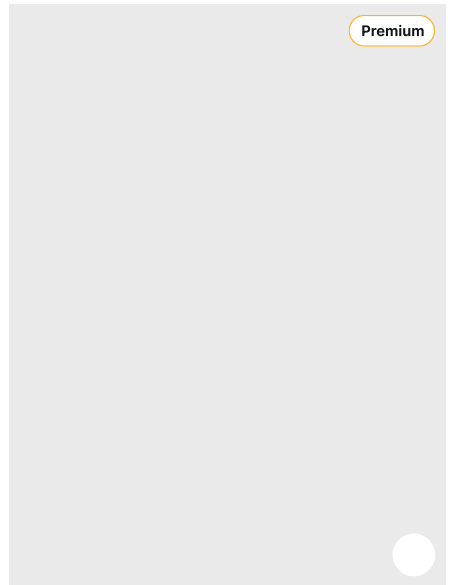
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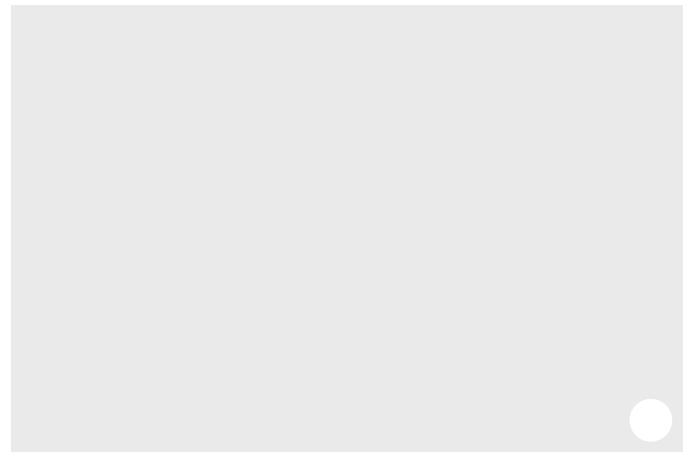
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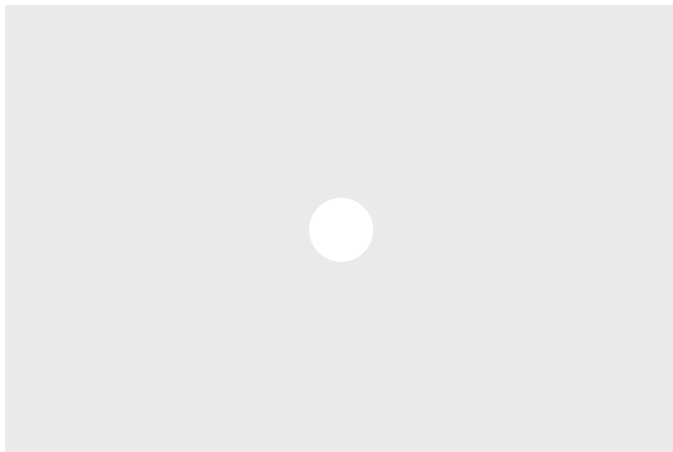
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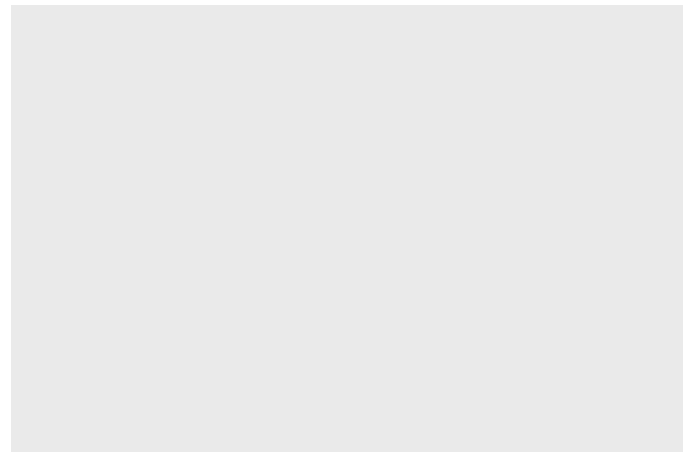
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