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Impossible decisions and the job he never got to do - Grant Robertson on his time in politics

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All governments make decisions with "imperfect information", but Grant Robertson says his experience during the Covid-19 pandemic was an "extreme sports version of that".

In a sit-down interview with RNZ before his valedictory speech at Parliament on Wednesday night, Robertson recalled some of the impossible decisions he had to make, the intensity of threats against him personally and the Parliament protest that has continued to have an impact.

The interview took place in the Beehive theatrette - the room where some of the country's biggest announcements and events have been responded to - the Christchurch earthquakes and terror attacks, the Whakaari disaster, the borders being closed and Covid reaching New Zealand's shores.

Robertson has been in and around Parliament for two decades and much like the Beehive theatrette, he has heard and seen a lot.

Asked about a particular memory he has of that room where he can still today recall exactly how he felt, Robertson said 15 March 2019 stood out.

"I was actually sitting at the back behind the journalists, and I'd been upstairs with Jacinda immediately before we came down, both the first time and then the second time we came down when we had all the information," Robertson said.

"It even gives me chills to think about it now, but the moment that Jacinda said how many people had been shot, there was an audible gasp in the room from the journalists, because it was the first time that many of you had had that number confirmed as well.

"It still remains one of the most difficult and challenging days in New Zealand's history, and we've just had the anniversary and I think of all the family and friends of those who did die."

Robertson said the comments from then-Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern about plans to change the country's gun laws and the "level of clarity, compassion, and focus that she brought to that stands out for me".

In 2020 Covid-19 arrived and during lockdowns there was only a very small group of people left in the Beehive to try to keep the prime minister's bubble tight.

Robertson had been included in her circle to make sure they could keep working closely together and he could help with the media conferences on a daily basis.

Even when he wasn't needed, he would come to the Beehive theatrette and sit in the back to keep a gauge on what sort of questions were being asked and remain on top of the information that was being shared.

Robertson told RNZ working in the Beehive during that time was "quite a bizarre experience".

"I remember on the first day after lockdown the prime minister's press secretary, Andrew Campbell, came in and said he'd been stopped by the police on the way to work, saying what are you doing?"



Grant Robertson giving a Covid-19 update with Director General of Health Ashley Bloomfield, August 2021. Photo: POOL / NZME

Ministers and the seven staff travelling to work got letters printed saying who they were and what they were doing.

By the time the election rolled around later that year in October, Labour won a single-party majority for the first time in MMP history.

While there was lots to celebrate, with Labour bringing in plenty of new MPs, Robertson said the "enormity of what came next did hit very quickly" on election night.

"We'd managed to control Covid in its first wave, but we could see what was happening around the rest of the world, and we knew that we were going to be up against it for some time.

"It was an enormous task and it definitely didn't feel like a huge celebration."

Robertson recalled speaking to a pandemic expert in early 2020 and asking how long it might last; the expert replied, "Oh, three to five years".

"I was thinking, 'No, that can't be right', but of course the three-year end to that was sort of getting close to being true in terms of the way we were managing it, and we didn't know we'd get a vaccine so quickly."

Looking back, he accepts the government didn't get every single decision right - but he pushed back on criticism of Labour for continuing to spend money and running Budget deficits at a time inflation was ballooning.

Asked if he should have put the brakes on spending sooner, Robertson told RNZ he didn't buy into that and he "absolutely" doubles down on the spending under his watch.

"Obviously there will be an individual project here or there that people don't like."

But in Budget 2022, which Robertson says was about establishing Te Whatu Ora and giving it money to get going and Budget 2023, and it responding to Cyclone Gabrielle and the Auckland floods, he says that spending was all justified.

He doubts the business community were worried about the money being spent during the pandemic because the "vast bulk of the time, they were the recipients of it".

"There was some concern among some commentators that we needed to drastically cut government spending in a hurry. In my view, that would have been exactly the wrong thing to do.

"The idea I could somehow click my fingers and go from spending 34 percent of GDP to spending 29 percent one day would have been dramatic cuts in the public service."

Robertson believes that would have been irresponsible and "risked undoing some of the good we'd done".

Photo: RNZ / Angus Dreaver



Greater and more intense threats against MPs

The former deputy prime minister and finance minister is open about how much politics has changed in his 15 years as an MP and the greater security threat to politicians that exists.

In 2022 he travelled the country in the middle of the year to talk to communities about the Budget he'd delivered in May.

Earlier that year the three-week occupation of Parliament had taken place and Robertson recalls travelling to Dannevirke to chat to 50 local business people, most of whom had attended the protest.

"It felt very dangerous, we were chased out of the hall, our car was surrounded, we were abused, threatened, and had to jump in the car and hurtle away down the road.

"It was frightening for everyone involved."

A similar incident happened in Whangārei not long after.

That was when Robertson realised the intensity of what he describes as a "small and vocal group of people who went, I think, well beyond what anyone would see as protest, to the kinds of threats and abuse".

During that Parliament protest Robertson, who was also Wellington Central MP, struggled with what was unfolding on the lawn.

On the day the police moved to clear the occupation he said he could watch for only so long before having to turn away.

"I was horrified, I mean the trees were on fire, it looked extraordinarily dangerous and frightening for the emergency services and police.

"I found it disturbing and I remember watching for a while and then not being able to watch."

As Robertson prepares to leave not only Parliament, but also Wellington, to return to his home town of Dunedin where he'll take on the job of Otago University vice-chancellor, he concedes the one job he never got to do in politics that he would have liked to is Minister for Education.

"There was this bugger called Chris Hipkins around who wouldn't get out of the way," he jokes.

While he says it's hard to explain the life of an MP, the closest he can get by way of comparison is "people who have played sport".

He thinks then of another example and goes on: "Or if you've been through some amazingly traumatic experience with a group of people".

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