

New Zealand's Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic: "Go Hard, Go Early"



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Elimination Strategy

Not so long ago, it was a rarity to find anything about New Zealand (also known as Aotearoa) in the international media. These days, it's almost an everyday occurrence, as events in the country's unique response to the Covid-19 pandemic are closely followed.

After an intensive effort to contain the virus, New Zealand has now had no cases of community transmission for over two months. The "go hard, go early" policy of rapidly implementing a strict lockdown that lasted several weeks was highly effective. At the end of the lockdown, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern reflected, "Around the world we saw people losing their loved ones and their livelihoods at a rate that was unacceptable to us. Our goal was to come out the other side as quickly and safely as we could."

While there have been some setbacks along the way, New Zealand has achieved a great deal in eliminating virus transmission within the community, and Ardern has received global acclaim for her compassionate yet decisive actions, including from the World Health Organization. Domestically too, there is still strong support for the prime minister, despite several recent revelations of Covid-19-related security breaches and problems with border control.

As of July 13, there are 25 active cases of Covid-19 in New Zealand, all people returning from overseas travel, and all of whom are staying in isolation or quarantine facilities. There have been 1,194 confirmed cases, plus 350 probable, while the death toll stands at 22. Since New Zealand's population passed the five million mark some time in May (mostly because of numerous Kiwis returning home) – enabling Ardern to coin the term "a team of five million" – this means a rate of around four deaths per one million population. According to data website Worldometer (<https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>), as of July 5 this ranked about the same as Australia, Singapore, Ghana and Malaysia. A few countries, notably Taiwan, Myanmar and Thailand (each with less than one death per million population) have done better, while many have far worse performances (e.g. the United States at 400 and Brazil at 320).

Except for border control, all of the stringent restrictions enforced during the lockdown have now been lifted. Ironically, while there is growing international interest in moving to New Zealand, (especially on the part of Americans – according to Immigration New Zealand, in May the number of US citizens seeking information on emigrating here was up by 65% over the same month last year), currently it is difficult for anyone other than New Zealanders to enter the country. Even for them, restrictions on the number allowed to return at the same time have been put in place to enable the isolation and quarantine facilities to

cope with the ongoing influx.

The government is faced with the dilemma of finding an equilibrium between opening up the country to the rest of the world, thus revitalizing its international tourism industry, a substantial part of the economy, and keeping New Zealanders safe by maintaining closely controlled borders. At the moment, the scales are definitely tipped towards the latter, and are likely to remain so for some time to come, especially now that we are seeing second waves of Covid-19 and resurgences when lockdowns are eased in other countries.

The "trans-Tasman bubble" to allow free travel between Australia and New Zealand that was being explored has been put on hold until the virus is under better control in Australia. The possibility of a "trans-Pacific travel bubble" had also been briefly considered but was deemed too unsafe and impractical. However, a "travel bridge" between New Zealand and the Cook Islands may be established in the near future.

Timeline & the 4 Levels

The first case of Covid-19 in New Zealand was confirmed on Feb. 28: a 60-year-old who had flown to the country from Iran, via Bali. In early February, the government implemented a China travel ban, but otherwise no restrictions were in place. From March 14 all people entering the country had to self-isolate for 14 days, excluding travellers from the Pacific Islands. The Reserve Bank declared an emergency cash rate cut and Air New Zealand stopped many services and halted share trading. The government announced a \$12.1 billion package to support workers, businesses, health and income support.

On March 21, New Zealand established a four-level alert system (based on existing wildfire alerts), with the country then being at level two. Those aged 70 or over were told to self-isolate at home, all non-essential domestic travel was discouraged, and working from home was encouraged. Two days later, we moved to Level 3, as the number of cases surpassed 100, including two community transmissions. Schools shut on March 24, all non-essential businesses closed and domestic travel was heavily restricted. The nation was given 48 hours notice of a move to Level 4, which began at midnight on March 25 and was to continue for at least four weeks, as a state of emergency was declared.

A leaflet explaining the levels and the risk assessment and public health and social measures to be taken in each was distributed to every household: Level 1 – Prepare (disease is contained); Level 2 – Reduce (disease is contained but risk of community transmission growing); Level 3 – Restrict (heightened risk that disease is not

contained); and Level 4 – Eliminate (likely that disease is not contained). It was helpful, if a little scary (since so much was still unknown), to have the specific details of what each level entailed at this early stage.

New Zealand's first Covid-19-related death occurred on March 29. On April 20 it was announced that Level 4 would be extended for an additional five days, until midnight on April 27, when we moved to Level 3, and then back to Level 2 on May 14. Schools reopened on May 18, while on May 21 bars could reopen, as long as strict physical distancing measures were followed. On May 16, the number of active cases dropped to under 50 for the first time, and by May 29 there was only one active case in the country. Gatherings of up to 100 were allowed again. On June 8, the National Transition Period that came into force on May 13 due to Covid-19 was terminated and, at midnight, we moved to Level 1. All virus-related restrictions, other than border control, were lifted. The prime minister said, "We are confident we have eliminated transmission of the virus in New Zealand for now, but elimination is not a point in time, it is a sustained effort. We will almost certainly see cases here again. That is not a sign that we have failed – it is a reality of this virus".

The Lockdown Experience: Be Kind, Stay in Your Bubble!

With the start of lockdown, everything suddenly stopped. Whatever you had with you, in your home, on your property, at that moment in time, was basically what you had for the duration. Whatever was broken stayed broken, unless you could fix it yourself. We were not allowed to leave our "bubbles" except for food or medicine, or short walks. All non-essential business and services, including international postal services, were closed down, and the country was more or less shut off from the rest of the world. With some panic buying and the surge in home baking, many supermarkets ran out of basic items such as flour. There was much fear, uncertainty and worry, but at the same time the lockdown was marked by a spirit of kindness and compassion, with people looking out for each other and checking on the elderly and vulnerable. The four households at the end of our street set up a mutual support system whereby whenever any of us went to

the supermarket or pharmacy, we would contact the others to see if they needed anything. We also all freely shared the excess produce from our gardens.

It all seemed to happen very fast, but this speedy response was surely one of the key factors in New Zealand's relative success in containing the virus. How did Kiwis survive the strict lockdown, which involved huge sacrifices and economic loss? What helped people get through? Nature, including gardening and frequent walks, and the greater variety and number of animal and bird species around; shared humor; innovative activities such as treasure hunts for children, when people put teddy bears in their windows for children to spot when on walks. The daily press conferences given by the government, usually with the prime minister and popular Director-General of Health Ashley Bloomfield in attendance, were effective in inspiring confidence and spreading understanding, with their clear communication, messages of support, and willingness to address difficult issues.

Other factors were the strong local community solidarity; connections with and concern for others, by whatever means were possible (encouraged by the constant injunction, perhaps unique to New Zealand, to "be kind"); and technology – everything from online education and discussions, Zoom meetings, free online music concerts and film showings (many of which would normally be charged for) to fixed-line telephones for calling elderly friends and relatives without Internet connections or mobile phones.

Several major celebrations occurred during the lockdown period, including Easter and Mother's Day. Many found being unable to be with close family members sad and difficult, but found innovative ways to connect. Anzac Day on April 25 marks the anniversary of the first key military action fought by Australian and New Zealand forces during World War I and is one of the country's most important national dates, usually celebrated with great fanfare and ubiquitous town parades. This year, for the first time ever, all such public events were cancelled. Instead, Kiwis were encouraged to get up at 6.00 a.m. and stand at their gates or front doors in silent remembrance of all those who have died in war. Some decorated their homes, lit candles, or played *The Last Post*. Friends who took part found it very moving.

Most people were strongly supportive of the government's strict lockdown measures, and endeavored to follow them. I heard a few

Photo 1: Author



A deserted rugby field. All sports events and practices were cancelled during the lockdown.

Photo 2: Author



As lockdown restrictions eased, there were long queues for haircuts. Customers wait their turn at a barber's in Paeroa.

grumbles and some dissatisfaction when Level 4 and then Level 3 went on for so long, and were extended, especially from the business community. Some compared New Zealand unfavorably to Australia, which had similar Covid-19 statistics at that point, with far less stringent measures in place. On the whole, however, there was a spirit of adventure, of finding a way to get through this, of all being in it together.

Benefits resulting from the lockdown included more awareness of one's own and local resources, getting to know one's neighbours better, spending more time with family, the joys of gardening and home cooking, learning flexibility and innovation, developing the ability to get by with less, and confidence at the end in knowing that we somehow managed to survive. People became more self-reliant and resilient. When restrictions were eased, many were reluctant to leave the substantially different peace and tranquillity that they'd got used to. Even now, though the familiar former traffic noise and congestion is back, there is less movement than before, with more people staying home rather than attending gatherings in person.

Homecoming

My husband Hitoshi and I returned to New Zealand from Europe on March 20, the day after the borders were closed to all but returning citizens, permanent residents and their families. At Auckland airport, we underwent detailed questioning by medical officers and were given various instructions. At that stage we were allowed to travel by shuttle back to our own home, where we stayed in self-isolation for 14 days, with no going out at all allowed, except for a short daily walk. Things felt uncertain and unclear; systems were not yet properly in place. For example, we were told at the airport that there would be thorough follow-ups, but we received only one check-up phone call, on the 14th day, the purpose of which was not clear.

In contrast, a friend who returned to New Zealand from Japan a week later, on March 27, received five or six calls from the Health Department during his 14-day self-isolation at his home, as well as a visit from the police on Evening 13, because he hadn't picked up his phone. There was no contact tracing in place then; current returnees

can download a special app to keep track of their whereabouts.

Now, things are much stricter. All those entering New Zealand are taken directly from the airport to a managed isolation facility for 14 days and kept there under strict conditions, with testing on Day 3 and Day 12. If they refuse to be tested, they must stay a further two weeks. All who test positive are taken to a separate quarantine facility. Kiwis are being strongly advised by the government not to undertake any overseas travel; if they go anyway, on their return, they will have to cover some or all of the costs of their isolation and/or quarantine themselves. The prime minister has said she feels it is important to differentiate such cases from New Zealanders who are coming back home now after a long time stuck overseas, for whom the government currently covers the costs.

Effect on Agriculture & Horticulture

As well as this pandemic, New Zealand's farmers have been faced with a longstanding battle with the cattle disease *Mycoplasma bovis* and a serious ongoing drought. Nevertheless, in spite of considerably reduced cattle processing capacity during the lockdown, recent performance has been better than predicted. According to Westpac Bank's *NZ Weekly Commentary* for July 13, the recent surge in dairy prices has "provided an important counterbalance to the softness in global economic conditions". In May, the government announced a \$500,000 relief funding package for farmers in Waikato and Northland. Agriculture industry representatives hope that the prime minister's enhanced international profile will help promote primary-sector exports.

The Well-being Budget

Announced on May 14 was the 2020 Budget, which included a \$50-billion Covid-19 response fund, saving or creating thousands of jobs and aiming to reduce unemployment to pre-coronavirus levels within two years, along with an eight-week extension of the Covid-19 wage subsidy scheme. Finance Minister Grant Robertson called the fund "the most significant financial commitment in modern history".

Photo 3: Barry Natusch



These kingfishers made this tree their home during lockdown, when there was a marked increase in bird species and activity.

Photo 4: Author



Lunchtime in the city, July 3. Without international tourists, central Auckland is much quieter than usual, even after the return to Level 1. The words on the steps name two stars in the constellation of Matariki, marking the Māori New Year (from July 13 this year), a time of reflection and celebration.

The large-scale spending was welcomed, despite some concern about the huge government debt (expected to be 53.6% of GDP by 2023) resulting from the long-term borrowing needed to finance it. The budget focused on well-being, and includes \$3 billion on infrastructure, \$1.6 billion for trade and apprenticeship training, and \$400 million for tourism.

Security Breaches & Other Scandals

As of June 15, New Zealand had had 24 consecutive days with no new coronavirus cases, and was basking in a positive, hopeful mood. This was sharply rocked by the revelation on June 16 that two people who had been granted permission on compassionate grounds to leave their managed isolation without having been tested, later tested positive. The pair had driven 650 kilometers to visit a dying relative, in a private vehicle. At first it appeared that they had contacted no one on their journey, but it soon emerged that they had asked two friends for help after they got lost. Over 300 people the two had had been in contact with, including passengers and crew members on their flights to New Zealand, and fellow residents at the Auckland hotel where they were in isolation, have been tested.

Even more shocking were the stories that came to light after this incident, when others told of their own experiences in having been let out of isolation facilities without being tested, or of taking part in unallowed, potentially dangerous gatherings. Many Kiwis felt bewildered as to how these rule violations could have happened, and angry, after having survived the severe lockdown measures for several weeks, and sacrificing so much in order to achieve elimination of Covid-19 in the community – including being unable to see their own dying relatives or attend their funerals. These revelations seriously shook the people's confidence in the government's measures.

The prime minister immediately apologized for the blunders and put all quarantine and isolation facilities under the control of the military. Exemptions to leave isolation on compassionate grounds have been suspended. The fairytale-like story of New Zealand's success in having zero cases of the virus was over. The mood of the country underwent a dramatic change, but led to more thorough checking that the stringent controls so painstakingly and boldly put in place are actually, and always, being implemented.

However, more security breaches followed. On July 8, a man escaped from quarantine at a central Auckland hotel and was absent for around 70 minutes; he tested positive the following day. This was the second case of absconding; the other was a woman who climbed over a fence to get out. There were two further incidents, one involving a man using wire-cutters to escape from an isolation hotel in Hamilton, making four abscondings in one week – out of a total of around 28,000 people who have so far passed through the isolation/quarantine facilities. Air Commodore Darryn Webb, assistant chief of defense, who has been put in charge of New Zealand's isolation and quarantine measures, said on July 10 that six-foot-high fences have now been erected at all the facilities, and stricter rules implemented. The absconders, to be charged under new legislation, face a substantial fine or six months in prison. Adding to the pressure, the Australian government is deporting Kiwis who were being detained in Australia back to New Zealand; 30 will arrive this week and a special

isolation facility with extra security measures has been set up for them. They've promised in advance to obey the security rules.

In other scandals, then Health Minister David Clark, who has since resigned, breached the lockdown rules himself. There was also a disturbing leak to media outlets of the personal details of 18 Covid-19 cases by National Party politicians, who later resigned. (Fortunately, the media chose not to release this information.) On July 14, finding the pressure too much, Todd Muller, the recently elected leader of the Opposition, suddenly quit, becoming the shortest-serving leader since the National Party was formed in 1936.

It remains to be seen how this will affect the National Party's showing in the coming general election on Sept. 19. In a speech at the Labour Party Congress 2020 on July 5, acknowledging the challenges her government has faced, including a terrorist attack, the White Island volcanic eruption, and Covid-19, Ardern said, "I can't think of a time in our recent history when we have been collectively challenged by such a cruel combination of events. Our national character has been repeatedly put to the test and ... we have shown grit and determination."

What an Opportunity!

New Zealand's experience of Covid-19 has highlighted inequalities and revealed stark injustices, such as the shorter lifespan and greater vulnerability of Māori. Many are reluctant to return to the old norms, and intend to build a more equitable, fairer society going forward. Things that seemed impossible before, such as housing the homeless, have been achieved. Numerous employees have been set up to work from home, at least part-time; a four-day work week may take root. Activists call for a Green Recovery involving more strategic (rather than reactive), long-ranging measures to address urgent issues such as regenerative agriculture, freshwater reforms and other environmental and human rights concerns, and that incorporate Māori values such as *kaitiakitanga* (stewardship, guardianship, and protection of the sky, the sea, and the land).

This is a pivotal time in New Zealand's history as we come out of this period and readjust. As my friend Gwenyth Wright, 94, said, "I hope we can learn from this virus and change our way of living. What an opportunity this is!"

JS

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Photo 5: Author



As New Zealand moved to Level 3, people were strongly encouraged to "shop local".