

New Zealand COVID-19 inquiry endorses abandonment of elimination strategy

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Late last month the New Zealand government released a 700-page report from the first phase of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into COVID-19, examining the country's response to the pandemic from 2020 to 2023.

The commission was chaired by Tony Blakely, a University of Melbourne epidemiologist, assisted by John Whitehead, a former New Zealand treasury secretary, and Hekia Parata, a former National Party government minister of education.

These appointees were intended to produce a predetermined conclusion: that any public health measures to stop the spread of COVID and save lives must be “balanced” against the need to protect “the economy.” This is the dominant theme throughout the commission's report, which is designed to ensure that in any future pandemic the response is subordinated entirely to the profit interests of the corporate and financial elite.

Blakely initially supported stringent lockdowns and border quarantine measures in Australia and New Zealand. Later, after the emergence of the highly-infectious Omicron variant of COVID-19, he minimised the severity of the virus. He advocated a “let it rip” policy, telling Radio NZ in February 2022 that the government was being “too cautious,” and should work faster at dismantling public health measures in order to “let Omicron wash through in a timely manner.”

The commissioners' report seeks to justify the overall response of the former Labour Party-led government—above all, the decision announced by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern in October 2021 to end the elimination strategy, which had kept the country almost entirely free from COVID-19 during the first two years of the pandemic.

This was followed by the progressive removal of all restrictions on the spread of the coronavirus and the adoption of a criminal policy of mass infection, which had already killed millions of people worldwide.

In 2022, lockdowns and border quarantine measures were overturned; schools and workplaces fully reopened without social distancing; mask and vaccine mandates were ended, and COVID testing was discouraged in order to keep sick people at work.

In August 2023, the last remaining requirements for people to self-isolate if they had COVID, and to wear masks in healthcare facilities, were scrapped by the Labour government.

These steps—all of which are tacitly or explicitly supported in the Royal Commission's report—produced a public health disaster. Total deaths from COVID-19 sky-rocketed from around 30 in late

2021, to over 4,500 to date, with more people dying every week. More than 44,200 people have been hospitalised for COVID-19, placing an enormous burden on the healthcare system.

The Royal Commission noted the “clear and consistent pattern of higher hospitalisation rates for people living in higher deprivation areas” and greater fatalities among Māori and Pacific people, who are largely among the poorest. Hospitals in working class areas were frequently overwhelmed with COVID cases, a crisis exacerbated by the running down of public healthcare under successive governments.

Despite this, the report complacently states that the surge in deaths in 2022 was “not the best scenario we might have hoped for [but it] was a pretty good one,” because the initial elimination strategy and vaccination meant that there was “a much lesser cumulative mortality burden than we would have experienced had we allowed the virus in during 2020.”

In fact, while vaccination reduced the risk of severe illness it did not stop mass infection, illness and large numbers of deaths from the highly-infectious Omicron and subsequent variants of COVID-19. During July 2022, as the WSWS reported, New Zealand's weekly rate of deaths from COVID was among the highest in the world. COVID remains the country's deadliest infectious disease.

The Royal Commission highlighted the initial success of the elimination strategy, noting that from 2020 to early 2023, New Zealand “experienced ‘negative’ excess mortality, meaning there were fewer deaths in that time period than what would have been expected during a ‘normal’ year.”

The border quarantine measures and the closure of schools and businesses in March-April 2020 succeeded in stopping circulation of the virus, allowing daily life to proceed in a relatively normal way. As well as stamping out COVID-19, these measures eliminated influenza and RSV for approximately two years, a significant achievement that contributed to a fall in the country's mortality rate.

The commissioners then justify the ending of the “zero COVID” policy by arguing that the lockdowns were no longer working. The report echoes the Labour government's position that the “social licence” for such measures, especially support among business leaders, was eroding. In deciding to ease and then completely end a lockdown in Auckland in late 2021, while the Delta variant of the virus was still spreading, the report says, “Cabinet had to balance many different outcomes and impacts—health, social and

economic—as well as equity considerations.”

The commissioners describe the decision as a “judgement call” and even suggest that the lockdown could have been ended sooner—as was done with the lifting of similar restrictions in the Australian states of Victoria and New South Wales. They also make the unsubstantiated claim that the Omicron variant that became dominant in 2022 was “probably impossible to manage with an elimination strategy.” In fact, China was able to suppress Omicron outbreaks, including in Shanghai.

Arden’s announcement on October 4, 2021, that the government would move away from an elimination strategy was the outcome of a concerted pressure campaign by big business, both in New Zealand and internationally. It was immediately applauded by the *New York Times* and other mouthpieces for the financial elite, which insisted that the world had to “learn to live with” mass COVID infection.

The decision was made without consulting the government’s own public health experts, who warned against ending the Auckland lockdown and called for it to be strengthened to stamp out the virus.

The current Labour Party leader, Chris Hipkins, who served as COVID-19 response minister during the transition to the “let it rip” policy, responded to the Royal Commission’s report by stating: “I think we lost the room in Auckland... people stopped following some of the lockdown restrictions.” The lockdown lasted from August to early December 2021 but it was undermined, not by public non-compliance, but by the government’s decisions to ease restrictions.

Hipkins blamed Labour’s crushing election defeat in October 2023 on the supposed unpopularity of lockdowns. In fact, a *New Zealand Herald* poll published on September 2, 2021 found that 85 percent of respondents supported the elimination strategy, including 87 percent of people in Auckland. Only 13 percent said the country should “live with” COVID-19.

Labour won the 2020 election, with more than 50 percent of the votes, largely because of public support for the elimination strategy. Its support dropped precipitously in 2022, as thousands of people became sick and died from COVID-19, and amid escalating social inequality, poverty and homelessness.

Hipkins also told the media he accepted the Royal Commission’s finding that border restrictions should have been lifted sooner and that vaccine mandates, in Hipkins’ words, “went too far.” He pointed to anti-vaccination and anti-lockdown protests—including the occupation of parliament’s lawn in early 2022—as evidence that such measures became unpopular. In fact, the protests were supported by a small minority and organised by far-right groups such as Voices For Freedom and Destiny Church.

Members of the current National Party-led coalition government have attacked the Royal Commission report for failing to openly repudiate public health principles. The far-right NZ First and ACT Parties, which play a major role in the government, repeatedly minimised COVID and attacked lockdowns and vaccine mandates during last year’s election campaign.

NZ First leader Winston Peters, the deputy prime minister, who courted anti-vaccination groups during the election, said in June that the Royal Commission was “nothing more than a Labour

Party political tool.” On NZ First’s insistence, a second phase of the inquiry will be held next year to investigate “vaccine efficacy and safety” and “the imposition and maintenance of lockdowns” especially in 2021. The aim is to further undermine and discredit these life-saving measures.

Meanwhile, the government is systematically attacking the public health system, including through the destruction of thousands of jobs, even as COVID-19 continues to spread and scientists are warning that bird flu threatens to become another pandemic.

This is part of an international process: the ruling class throughout the world is attacking science and dismantling public healthcare, which is seen as an unacceptable drain on the wealth of the billionaires who run society. Hundreds of billions of dollars must also be slashed from healthcare and other social programs to pay for imperialist wars against Russia, Iran and China.

Most notably, US president-elect Donald Trump has named anti-vaccination conspiracy theorist Robert F. Kennedy Junior to run the Department of Health and Human Services, and proponent of mass COVID infection Jay Bhattacharya as director of the National Institutes of Health. This is the equivalent of putting arsonists in charge of the fire department.

The scientific knowledge and resources exist that could eliminate COVID-19 and other preventable diseases, which are now resurging throughout the world. If the elimination strategy initially adopted in New Zealand and China had been implemented on a global scale, the COVID pandemic could have been ended within a matter of months.

Such an undertaking, however, is incompatible with the capitalist system, in which all of society’s resources are subordinated to the dictates of the financial elite and its insatiable drive for profits. The only way to put an end to the pandemic and prevent an even more catastrophic outbreak in future, is through the mobilisation of the international working class in the fight for the socialist reorganisation of society.



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