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'Vaccine Passports Equal Apartheid': Covid-19 and Parliamentary Occupation in Aotearoa New Zealand

Thomas O'Brien, Department of Sociology, University of York, UK [t.obrien@york.ac.uk ORCID: 0000-0002-5031-736X]

Nicholas Huntington, Nursing Council of New Zealand, New Zealand [ORCID: 0000-0003-2574-4711]

Abstract

The success of Aotearoa New Zealand in preventing the spread of the Covid-19 virus was lauded internationally. Domestically, the reception was more complex, as the restrictions and guidelines introduced had considerable social and economic impacts. This profile focuses on the February 2022 occupation of the Parliament grounds in Wellington as the most visible manifestation of discontent. It examines the actors involved and how they attempted to draw on local cultural histories to justify their actions and make them recognisable to observers. The profile concludes by considering the potential legacy of the occupation and the forces it represented.

Keywords: Covid-19, occupation, anti-government, protest, convoy

The introduction of vaccine 'mandates' in late 2021, to manage the threat of Covid-19 in Aotearoa New Zealand (hereafter Aotearoa), saw the emergence of a concerted opposition movement. Coming at a time when the country had been closed to the outside world for over 18 months, it was a trigger for groups to coalesce and mobilise, manifesting most clearly in the 23-day occupation of Parliament grounds, which drew together vaccine sceptics, a fundamentalist church, far right groups and non-aligned individuals. The occupation's claims went beyond vaccination to encompass calls to bring down the government of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and prosecute politicians for crimes against humanity. While drawing on recognisable cultural foundations and reference points, the language, symbolism, and actors involved point to the possible emergence of a new strand in Aotearoa's political landscape

with strong parallels to international alt-right movements. This profile considers the context of the occupation, how it developed and the potential lasting impacts.

Background

The anti-vaccination occupation's roots lie in Aotearoa's approach to addressing Covid, which had been among the most successful in the world. A rapid national lockdown and closure of international borders in March 2020 minimised the virus's spread, preventing hospitalisations and deaths, with only 28 people dying of or with Covid by October 2021. The government's broader policy response, providing wage support, training subsidies, and welfare increases, reduced economic and social damage. The success of the response in 2020 created a perception that the country had 'beaten' Covid. As 2021 progressed, it became clear that this was not the case and the national mood shifted. Mask wearing was made compulsory in most public settings and continuing border restrictions made international travel difficult. Periodic lockdowns ('stay at home') also continued; most notably, an August 2021 outbreak in the country's largest city, Auckland, saw a 107-day lockdown and ongoing national restrictions.

The national immunisation programme itself also became a source of discontent. Most criticism centred on its supposedly slow introduction, management, and (in)effectiveness for the indigenous Māori population. A small but vocal community also coalesced in opposition to the idea of vaccination, bringing together actors who had long opposed the government's response to create a movement based around the concept of vaccination 'freedom'. In April 2021 the government issued a Ministerial Order that required people working in specific high-risk occupations or settings to be vaccinated. Initially confined to international border workers, from October this was expanded to include most health and disability workers, corrections facilities, and education staff. The government subsequently introduced a framework that set stricter controls on premises and events who allowed permitted patrons and allowed employers to require staff vaccination. Commonly referred to as 'mandatory vaccination' or 'vaccine mandates', critics portrayed these regulations as unjustified infringements on human rights, discriminatory, and promoting hatred toward the unvaccinated. This regime was the object against which the occupation would set itself.

Although often depicted as an internally peaceful country, Aotearoa has a long tradition of civil protests, most notably in recent history involving actions against the 1981 'Springbok Tour' by the rugby team of Apartheid South Africa. This wave of protests polarised the country, involving violent clashes between tour supporters and opponents as well as between protesters and the police (MacLean, 2010). These demonstrations and clashes have remained a potent cultural reference point for protest in Aotearoa. The Tour protests also occurred at a point when the relationship between Māori and the state was undergoing a period of re-examination that saw increased activism, starting with the nationally significant Māori Land March in 1975. Colonisation following the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi (1840) had brought Aotearoa into the British Empire, while also providing Māori guarantees around protection of governance, sovereignty, equity, and resources. Successive governments had failed to honour these commitments, and as in many settler states the loss of land rights was a central injustice, with confiscation (or 'compulsory purchase') leading to displacement and alienation of the Māori population (Hill, 2012). The importance of land as a source of trauma and site of struggle for Maori is common to many post-colonial movements. Building from the land march, Māori sought to increasingly assert their rights over the land, feeding into an environment of social and political change.

The occupation of Parliament grounds therefore referenced a pattern of complex social relations. As a tactic, occupation had to date primarily been focused around stewardship of the land, with the environmental movement and Māori being most active in this area. The environmental movement staged lengthy occupations on the West Coast of the South Island to protect old growth native forests and to hinder mining activities in ecologically sensitive areas (O'Brien, 2016). For Māori, the occupation of contested land has been a key tactic in the ongoing struggle for the redress of past wrongs, similar to movements in the United States and Australia (Iveson, 2017; Wetzel, 2009). Local Māori have engaged in many nationally significant occupations, such as those at Bastion Point in Auckland (1977-1978), Pākaitore (Moutoa Gardens) in Whanganui (1995), and more recently at Ihumātao in South Auckland (2016-2019) (Hancock and Newton, 2022). Such actions have entered the national imagination due to their intensity and duration, associating occupation with autonomy and sovereignty (Tino Rangatiratanga). Outside these two areas, occupation has not been a particularly salient tactic, particularly in urban environments, with the partial exception of

student occupations and a local manifestation of the 2011 Occupy movement (Ganesh and Stohl, 2013). The anti-mandate occupation was therefore drawing on a well-established method of protest with historical roots and resonances, in a way that was relatively novel.

The Occupation

Mass protests against Covid measures occurred in many countries, with organisers of Aotearoa's occupation taking inspiration from movements such as Canada's 'Freedom Convoy' and the 'Canberra Convoy' in Australia (Lim and Rigato, 2022; Roose, 2022). On 6 February 2022, several thousand people set off from different parts of the country for Wellington (the nation's capital) to protest vaccination requirements. 'Convoy NZ 2022' arrived on 8 February, making its way to Parliament grounds in the centre of the city. As some set up tents on the Parliamentary lawn, protesters expressed their position with signs such as 'No mandates, fuck off', 'Freedom over Fear' and 'If I wanted a man-date I'd be on Grindr', while blockading the surrounding streets with their vehicles.

The initial reaction of locals was one of frustration and bemusement but little immediate concern. The convoy appeared to represent a fringe movement, lacking coordination and a clear goal, and with little public support most assumed that it would follow usual pattern of meeting at Parliament for speeches and then dispersing. The convoy initially showed no intent to occupy, with co-organiser Derek Broomhall stating that if politicians wouldn't address the convoy they would just 'leave letters on the doorstep' (Searle, 2022). However, as convoy members refused to leave, and both vehicles and tents remained around Parliament, it became clear that the convoy had become an occupation. Police attempts to serve trespass notices on the second day were rejected, as self-appointed camp security guards forced them to withdraw. This set the tone for much of the occupation and an uneasy truce developed between police and protestors. Aside from occasional skirmishes, the camp settled into a pattern of stability and began to grow, with food trucks, portaloos, marquees, and performing spaces being set up. Attempts by Parliamentary authorities to disrupt those present with loud music and the use of sprinklers, and even one of the worst storms in Wellington's history, had little effect.

The occupation's central claim against vaccination soon developed into a general anti-government stance, and its demands became more diffuse as conspiratorial and anti-Semitic views took hold. Signs referring to the (non-Jewish) Prime Minister as 'Jew-cinda', and the spray-painting of swastikas pointed to antisemitic currents unconnected to vaccination issues. Calls for a 'Nuremberg 2.0' to try politicians accused of crimes against humanity for pursuing Covid protection measures echoed occupations elsewhere (Lim and Rigato, 2022). The threat of violence continued by messaging such as the chalking of 'Hang 'em high' on the Parliament forecourt, and was not confined to authority figures. Aggression was directed towards passers-by throughout the occupation – especially those complying with anti-Covid measures. Media were regularly threatened, and staff of government agencies in the vicinity were warned to wear casual clothes to avoid potential attacks. Protesters also engaged in symbolic violence, graffitiing walls and a nearby war memorial. Conversely, the Police sought to prevent escalation and maintained a cautious stance even as the occupation became more entrenched and public calls to evict the protesters grew. Drawing a direct contrast to historical police tactics used during the Springbok Tour and Bastion Point protests, and pointing to the relatively peaceful engagement of police with protestors at Ihumātao, the national Police Commissioner emphasised the importance of avoiding force (1 News, 2022).

Decentralisation and lack of coordination were defining characteristics of the occupation. While the convoy was initially organised by a small group from the South Island, there were a number of groups and individual figures present and involved. One of the most prominent groups was the fundamentalist Destiny Church, led by (self-proclaimed) 'Bishop' Brian Tamaki. Under the umbrella of an ostensibly independent 'Freedom and Rights Coalition', this group staged multiple protest events and marches in 2021, breaching public health restrictions, resulting in charges for Tamaki under Covid legislation. Vaccine requirements also provided a spur for new groups to coalesce. Voices for Freedom was a notable example, focused on spreading Covid conspiracies and challenging restrictions. The occupation also attracted fringe politicians such as the New Conservative Party's Leighton Baker and his daughter Charlotte, and alt-right organisations such as Counterspin Media and Action Zealandia (McConnell 2022a). These actors attempted to vie for control within the camp and over external publicity, leading to confused messaging and internal tensions. The Freedom

and Rights Coalition, for example, was at one point denounced as possible 'double agents' after a member suggested that camp members socially distance and move their cars.

The occupation also attempted to claim language and lineage from indigenous activism. Māori distrust in government structures stemming from experiences of colonisation was a recurrent issue for Aotearoa's Covid response, and this was co-opted by non-Māori critics to broaden their support base (Hannah et al, 2021; Hurihanganui, 2022). Attempts to frame anti-vaccination in terms of indigenous sovereignty were apparent in the occupation, as Tino Rangatiratanga (sovereignty) and He Whakaputanga (United Tribes of New Zealand) flags were visible (Waatea News, 2022). Notices citing tikanga (traditional customs and practices) and pre-Treaty iwi (tribal) authority were also used to justify the occupation. This was strongly rejected by local and national Māori leaders, who denounced the occupation as disrespecting tikanga (McConnell, 2022b).

The occupation ended after 23 days, following increasing threats and calls for nationwide action from within the camp and its development as a hotspot for Covid infections. Having maintained order with only periodic confrontations, the police moved in on the morning of 2 March to remove tents, evict occupiers, and clear the site. Encircling the camp, the police slowly shrunk its perimeter, forcing those present to move on. The subsequent conflict lasted several hours, culminating in occupiers setting fire to tents, rubbish, and a children's playground on Parliament grounds, and attempts to damage the nearby university. By the end of the day, the camp had been cleared and groups of protesters had been dispersed. Some established minor campsites, while others sought refuge at a suburban marae (communal or sacred meeting ground) only to be forcibly prevented from doing so by the local community. Meanwhile, work began to restore the grounds, at first physically and later through a Te Whakapiki Mouri ceremony to cleanse the spiritual damage that had been inflicted on the Parliamentary precinct.

The Aftermath

Identifying the occupation's legacy requires some unpacking. In direct terms, while the government did end some occupational vaccination requirements and loosen Covid-related restrictions on movement and gatherings, these moves had been planned previously. The

occupation seems likely to have a more definitive legacy in the management of space around Parliament and other public locations. The public had exceptionally free access to Parliament grounds, which extended to the grounds' status as a traditional venue for mass protest, with official Parliamentary support available for managing such events. In the aftermath of the occupation, parliamentary authorities signalled that access would likely be restricted. Key to this was government cited violent messaging and actions associated with the occupation. This had particular salience as the occupation ended in the shadow of the third anniversary of the Christchurch Mosque attack and growing consciousness of far-right activity in Aotearoa (Gilbert and Elley, 2020), as well as recent events such as a 2019 assault on New Zealand Green Party co-leader James Shaw and 2021 axe attack on Parliament buildings.

The ability of the convoy and occupation to attract attention and supporters into a decentralised movement was apparent as it was underway. However, the future of the groups involved in the occupation and the movement itself is uncertain. Following the occupation, participants set up new encampments, but in-fighting continued as groups attempted to consolidate their respective positions and blame each other – or government instigators – for the riot that ended the occupation. Lack of coherence was a theme throughout the occupation, as unlike other recent occupations, such as Ihumātao, the anti-vaccination camp lacked clear leaders and a defined, practically achievable goal. Critically, this reduced their ability to maintain discipline over the protest fringe and allowed violent imagery and conspiratorial messaging to proliferate. This lack of coordination also appears to have caused a problem for the Police. Having developed occupation management tactics based around de-escalation through engagement and negotiation, they appeared unsure how to proceed when faced with a decentralised movement.

The new millennium has seen conservative movements in Aotearoa increasingly use mass mobilisation tactics, targeting environmental protection, social reforms, and labour rights in the film industry. However, the occupation marks a step beyond this to tactics previously characteristic of Māori and environmental activists. The event appears to have drawn in people not normally involved in politics, potentially reflecting Russell's (2022: 13) argument that "the act of occupying space creates a fleeting experience of freedom, empowerment and autonomy, something that representational politics seems currently incapable of achieving."

The occupation's 'freedom' discourse also has some echoes in current opposition to government water reforms. Alongside the prominence of rightist actors from outside Aotearoa's conservative and libertarian mainstream, and the violent messaging and antipathy to journalists, the occupation would seem to provide fertile ground for the emergence of an extreme populist movement. This is hampered, however, by disorganisation and incoherence. Occupiers ranged from neofascists to Māori sovereignty activists, and – inside or outside the occupation groups – there appears to be no clear Trump or Bolsanaro-type figure around whom a movement could coalesce. The 2023 general election will provide a key test for whether the occupation and its participants can be mobilised into a more stable political force, or the occupation will prove to be an aberration induced by the challenges and stresses of COVID-19.

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Bios

Thomas O'Brien is a lecturer in the Department of Sociology, University of York. His research concerns democratisation, environmental sociology and social movements. Recent work has appeared in *Journal of Cultural Geography*, *Urban Geography*, and *British Journal of Sociology*.

Nicholas Huntington is Director of Policy, Research, and Performance at the Nursing Council of New Zealand. His personal research interests primarily concern evidence use, workforce and skills policy.