

Addressing challenges to social cohesion in Aotearoa

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Credit: Claudette Wicks on Unsplash

New Zealand's status as a cohesive high-trust nation is being strained by political, economic and environmental pressures, exacerbated by technological disruptors.

With a general election looming that will inevitably highlight the country's political fault lines, Koi Tū: The Centre for Informed Futures has released a discussion paper on the cohesiveness of New Zealand society.

It paints a picture of increased polarization stemming from a range of stresses, including the unhelpful stirring of tensions by purveyors of mis- and disinformation.

These are testing times, says Koi Tū director Sir Peter Gluckman, who with deputy director Dr. Anne Bardsley is a lead contributor to "Addressing the challenges to [social cohesion](#)."

In such an environment, Sir Peter says, Aotearoa New Zealand needs to pay more attention to strengthening both institutional and [social trust](#) and staying on top of factors that might weaken them.

"When social cohesion is undermined or threatened individual's anxiety, anger and frustration are elevated. People's trust in both government and other citizens is undermined," Sir Peter says.

"The way a government operates and communicates in this context can make the situation better or worse."

Although ours has traditionally been perceived as a highly cohesive, high-trust society with a healthy democracy, many factors are contributing to rising anxiety and concern among some sections of our society, says Dr. Bardsley.

"The list of possible causes is long and includes high income inequality, poor housing affordability, personal safety, the economy and climate change," she says.

"New Zealand's position in many metrics of well-being has declined compared with other countries over the past two decades.

"Economic inequalities have clearly grown. And as elsewhere there are growing gulfs in confidence about the future between different age and ethnic cohorts."

The October 14 election brings into focus New Zealand's "shallow" democracy, says Sir Peter, with its unchecked single house of parliament, weak parliamentary committees whose government members are anxious to be seen to be team players and an opposition more intent on political objectives than broader policy discussions.

Loss of trust in the government, which may be even worse at local-authority level, spills over to other institutions and society in general.

"Institutional and social trust are both needed for a democratic society to be resilient and cohesive. They are interdependent concepts.

"How a government behaves affects social trust. Where social trust breaks down institutional trust is generally lost, providing a breeding ground for autocratic and populist leaders."

Reluctance globally to establish agreed standards, suitable governance and accountability has furthered the misuse of social media and technologies such as artificial intelligence and deep fakes to spread mis- and disinformation thereby undermining trust, say Sir Peter and Dr. Bardsley.

They say "weaponized narratives" propagated by social platforms can lead to the kind of community split seen in the 2022 protests in Parliament's grounds.

Co-author distinguished professor emeritus Paul Spoonley—an associate of Kōi Tū—says a key question will be whether the fractious politics of January 2022, and the declining trust in core institutions such as government and the media will continue on in 2023 and play a part in the [general election](#).

"It will be a test of the level of trust and engagement among some individuals and communities who appear to have been radicalized by the politics of disinformation of recent years," he says.

Prof Spoonley balancing societal inclusion against the negative effects of social media is not easy.

"COVID was an interesting test case of both disengagement and engagement. Public health measures worked best when communities such as Māori and Pasifika were included as partners. Such inclusion improves trust and social cohesion. The issue is how to moderate and ameliorate the negative effects of vitriol and disinformation on social media. That is a huge challenge."

Dr. Te Ahukaramū Charles Royal (Kōi Tū strategic advisor Māori) says like all communities, the social cohesion of iwi and Māori communities is challenged by issues such as climate change and inclement weather events, the cost of living, population pressures, and [trust](#) in authorities.

"However, there are other factors too at play within iwi/Māori communities of the past 20–30 years that have contributed to the erosion of social cohesion. Older alliances, collaborations and ways of working together (such as the King Movement and the Māori Churches), have declined.

"At the same time contemporary Treaty claims processes have encouraged 'tribal 'isolationism' where claimants retreat to protect their

individual positions, overlooking traditional and vital Māori values such as whanaungatanga (relationships) and manaakitanga (acts of generosity)," he says.

The discussion document, which follows on from the 2021 release of Koi Tū's Sustaining Aotearoa NZ as a Cohesive Society report, lists several actions to increase New Zealand's social cohesion and resilience.

At an institutional level they include seeking a political accord to improve parliamentary processes and political discourse.

The discussion paper's authors also urge New Zealand to join the global conversation about how to manage new and disruptive technology such as artificial intelligence in a more precautionary and inclusive manner.

More information: Addressing the challenges to social cohesion.
informedfutures.org/challenges-to-social-cohesion/

Provided by Koi Tū: the Centre for Informed Futures

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