

COVID-19 OPINION: What's NEXT?



An Agenda for Renewal That Starts With The People

BY PAT SNEDDEN MNZM

In a curious life I am Chair of the Auckland District Health Board and the Chair of an education innovation called Manaikalani, a digital pedagogical innovation for low decile New Zealand. I am writing this over ANZAC weekend on the verge of moving to Alert Level 3 next week with the potential to move to Alert Level 2 within a couple of further weeks. Goodness, have we already forgotten the joys of what Alert Level 1 might bring?

No reflection in this time should begin without an enormous whoop of joy as we appear to have dodged a significant bullet. Go hard, go fast has got us to a potential safety zone, which we occupy alone in the world as positive infection cases could move to zero in the next couple of weeks.

How have we done this? Clear and decisive leadership has been central to success as has consistent and repetitive truth telling, backed with science based judgment.

Around the rest of the world we have seen a form of viral chaos as, with a few notable exceptions, leaders have lied to their people, delayed intervention, ignored the science that doesn't suit their narrative, privileged the wealthy over the poor and acted with crass insensibility as the death tolls mount.

We have not done this. Our people have responded with attention, discipline and love and it has been hard but not impossible. Each death announced gives us pause for reflection and households throughout the motu hold our elderly close for fear of peril. This is a fair assessment. The police data will tell us that thousands of kiwis have not followed the rules some of the time but in a population touching 5 million this is barely a handful of irresponsible actions each day.

Right now, for the first time in my life, if I do not follow the rules of social distancing, hand washing and coughing into my arm I put you at risk. If you don't do the same you put me at risk. This is regardless of our positioning on the social and economic ladder. We are all at risk if we

don't frame our life in consideration of the other. This is a brilliant metaphor for animating our future. When you prosper I prosper. It is our collective national safety net.

So why have I been anxious about the next bit?

This virus has exposed our raw underbelly of inequality. On the TV news last week the queues to the food banks lined the footpaths challenging the requirement for social distance within the poor community. These New Zealanders have lost their jobs and need feeding. Whole lines of them. On the same news report a GP representative complains that having already received \$45m of direct income support to their practices and getting further financial support available for small business, it is still not enough. Even though more has been promised. The average GP earns \$197,000 pa.

The low income worker will not receive 20% of that salary yet for both the doctor and the low income worker to prosper both have to survive and both need to be in consideration of the other.



Pat Snedden in his Ponsonby lockdown bubble.
From left to right: Alice Snedden, Pat Snedden, Josephine Ayers,
Leon Wadham and Merata Snedden.

Without question this is a recession. Both the educated and the unlettered are at risk of losing their jobs. So let's decide what we now need as a nation and let's retrain and invest in our workforce to meet these new needs.

Such a level of income disparity surely mitigates against our collective national safety net. But I am not yet despairing of this.

Our Finance Minister Grant Robertson had this to say on March 17 as the Government announced its first economic response: "In New Zealand we have been here before with major economic and social crises. In my lifetime we have seen governments respond with austerity and ideology that has done enormous damage to the fabric of our society. But we also have other examples such as the first Labour Government who responded with investment, pragmatism, optimism and kindness. It is from them that I take my lesson on how we recover and rebuild in a just, fair and far-sighted manner."

As if to make the point emphatically, the government announced over the weekend it would spend \$100m to house the homeless in sustainable accommodation. No government has made such a bold move in my working life and I am now 65 years old.

The public mood is shifting. Think about the way we are talking and admiring essential workers in the supermarkets and the hospitals. Think of the volunteers that take the food to the elderly with a cheery word. Think of the whole cohort of landlords who have struck rent deals that recognise new realities. There are a myriad of gestures of kindness and shared commercial pain that recognise we are reliant on each other and we will look after each other.

And when the jobs start to disappear fast what should we do? Let's start with an agenda of renewal. First we will acknowledge what we have now discovered:

- we are now inextricably linked and prosperity for the one is the responsibility of the other;
- without a fully resourced and functioning national public health system the country will be swamped by the next pandemic;

- without an education system that pays attention to the quality of teaching and adapts to the digital world we will leave ourselves prone to the ridicule of science, the spreading of ignorance and the numbing of critical faculties essential for a safe and prosperous future;
- without infection control administered to the highest standards by some of our lowest paid workers we cannot be safe in our operating theatres and our wards;
- without the disciplines now in place for online medical consultations and online learning we would not have been able to sustain our health and learning and when the next pandemic comes our preparation for home based learning and coping with our health issues will have been greatly enhanced.

Without question this is a recession. Both the educated and the unlettered are at risk of losing their jobs. So let's decide what we now need as a nation and let's retrain and invest in our workforce to meet these new needs. Here's are just three immediate ideas that span health and education:

- let's invest as a nation to retrain loads of professionals put out of work and put them in our schools as teachers and let's lift the pay levels of teachers commensurate with a professional industry payment. Teach First NZ knows how to do this. Let's scale them up;
- let's recognise the value of the allied health services in the health system as first responders through their pay rates including the cleaners and orderlies;
- let's attract and train a whole new cohort of public health workers to address the underlying health inequalities that contribute to poor outcomes for a good number of New Zealanders including establishing a National Maori Public Health Unit that is properly resourced to specifically close the gap in life expectancy relative to the population at large.

Then let's get to the highways and the roadways.

Pat Snedden is Chairman of the Auckland District Health Board and Chair of the Manaiakalani Education Trust, a programme addressing inequity in education that NEXT invests in.