TE TIRA ĀRAI URUTĀ
NZ ROYAL COMMISSION
COVID-19 LESSONS LEARNED

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Royal Commission of Inquiry into COVID-19 Lessons Learned

Official interview transcript: Hon. Grant Robertson (follow-up)

26 September 2025

Present:	Grant Illingworth KC	GI	*Chair of the Inquiry*
	Judy Kavanagh	JK	*Commissioner of the Inquiry*
	Anthony Hill	AH	*Commissioner of the Inquiry*
	Nicolette Levy KC	NL	*Counsel assisting the Inquiry*
	Danielle Kelly	DK	*Counsel assisting the Inquiry*
	Inquiry Secretariat member	IS1	-
	Hon. Grant Robertson	GR	*Former Minister of Finance and Former Deputy Prime Minister of Aotearoa New Zealand.*
	Hon. Christopher Finlayson KC	CF	*Counsel for Hon. Grant Robertson*

	[administrative discussion redacted]
GI	Let's move on to the questions that have been notified for today, and the first of those relates to the August-December 2021 lockdown in Auckland, and in particular the advice you received Mr Robertson about macro-economic revenue and long-term economic effects of a protracted lockdown, and that includes the fiscal sustainability of the wage subsidy during that period. [redacted]
NL	[redacted]
GI	…. So, Mr Robertson, I just want to ask you about the decision-making process that operated when you were Minister of Finance during the period under inquiry. So we've heard from people like Brook Barrington who have said that there is a bit of uncertainty or lack of clarity over that decision-making process because not everything is recorded in the Cabinet paper that relates to the particular decision that's being made and a lot of information comes through to Cabinet via Ministers in a way that doesn't necessarily get recorded. Can you just give your view on that and just tell us how you see the recording of information that comes to Cabinet that gets discussed at Cabinet. I know it's confidential and we're not trying to breach that principle but just how efficient is that process and how good it is at keeping, for example, an historical record of decisions that have been made?

GR	Again, I guess I'd preface my answer by saying that there is Cabinet collective responsibility for decisions; that the process of making Cabinet decisions is a very long, historical process managed by the Cabinet Office who are internationally, as far as I'm aware, regarded as being very good at what they do and many other countries around the world have followed how our Cabinet system works. I don't really feel in a particular position to comment on the quality, in a sense, of that process. We were part of a very long-established process. For the benefit of those on the call, the development of Cabinet papers will begin either in a department or in a minister's office, depending on the nature of the issue. They will be consulted on exhaustively across government. We had a particular process in the COVID period where the DPMC group that had been brought together, which included officials from across government, also included in a novel way Rob Fyfe who was there from a business perspective within that group, so there was an additional layer in a sense of consultation and collaboration to pull together papers. A Cabinet paper will have multiple drafts, that's very common, as issues are debated. There are certain elements, and I apologise if I'm teaching people to suck eggs here, but there are certain elements that are required in a Cabinet paper. That includes, in the case of work that's relevant to me, Treasury comment – Treasury are always given the possibility of having their own section in a paper. Obviously with particular COVID-related decisions we had things within the Act that helped prescribe what it was that would go forward in a Cabinet paper. That would then go to a committee, as you know, be discussed from time to time; there'd be changes made as a result of the Committee's decision and then those decisions would go to Cabinet. And again, from time to time, in Cabinet there would be discussions that either accepted or didn't what was in the paper. The system is designed for a very deliberate form of decision-making which was not always possible in COVID. Less so in the period that you're covering but more so in the earlier period where we had many decisions to make very, very quickly. As a result of that we created the COVID Cabinet Committee that had power to act and that enabled us to make a number of decisions in a week, rather than having to go for the weekly decision-making process that the Cabinet and the Westminster model prescribe. That I guess is an answer by way of background to your decision. On a day-to-day basis in a government ministers are constantly making decisions. Government would grind to a halt if ministers weren't making decisions on a daily basis on

	the basis of the mandate provided to them by Cabinet and on the basis of needing to respond simply in real time to many issues. If I reflect back on the period of time in COVID, there were a lot of decisions to be made. Consultation occurred across government agencies and across ministerial offices to make that happen. The substance, if I can get if, of your question is whether or not I feel… I guess you're asking me if I feel the record-keeping was sufficient. Well, the Official Information Act has seen many, many documents released. Officials in my experience are assiduous at keeping records, at making sure they do record conversations, meetings and decisions. And so in the absence of perhaps anything more specific, my overall answer to your question would be in the circumstances we were working in decisions were made appropriately, in my experience.
GI	Right, so if I can just be perhaps a little more specific about the point that I'm pursuing, during the period under inquiry there were many decisions which had the effect of attenuating or diminishing fundamental rights and I don't think there's any argument about that – freedom of movement, freedom of expression… well, not so much freedom of expression but certainly freedom of movement and other basic rights were attenuated to a significant degree.
CF	What other basic rights? I think this is important, we need some precision. So you've said freedom of movement, freedom of expression, not freedom of expression and other basic rights. So we just need some clarity if Mr Robertson is to answer questions and probably I think with respect, and you have some experience in cross-examination, breaking down the question into particular answerable sections may be wiser.
GI	I agree. So let's just focus on freedom of movement. With lockdowns, which is the topic that we're looking at at the moment, involved the attenuation of that particular right for many thousands, perhaps millions of people. It could be said that there is an exceptional importance for record-keeping in relation to the reasons why those decisions were made which goes beyond the normal business as usual aspect of government. What do you say in response to that?
GR	I guess my first answer, if I go back to the beginning of my comments, there is Cabinet collective responsibility for decisions. I take my part in that. I'm also the Minister of Finance in this scenario and my focus is on those matters from a ministerial point of view. There was significant debate as you are aware about all of the so-called attenuating of rights that you

	note. Many, many questions were answered about that, both in the public arena and also within the decisions that led to the COVID Act and the matters that the governing legislation that allowed for that so-called attenuating of rights. So I think what you might be asking me is should Cabinet minutes, or Cabinet Committee minutes, or some other paper provide a greater level of reasoning than they currently do. Cabinet papers are prescribed to be ten pages long. Many, many times in the process of being in government I saw longer papers than that and large numbers of appendices created in order to meet the ten-page limit. So there is always a set of background information behind a Cabinet decision or a Cabinet minute. That's the material, as I say, much of which, certainly in relation to the Treasury, has been released into the public arena via that way. So I feel like I'm probably at the limits of what I can answer on those questions. I felt confident that the decision-making we were doing was based on evidence. I think much of that evidence is in the public arena. If there's a concern about how it's recorded, you are up against a very long history of the way Cabinet papers are written and Cabinet minutes are written.
CF	And of course, Mr Robertson was Minister of Finance. I know from nine years as Attorney-General that the guardian of those particular rights is the Attorney-General and Mr Parker was the Attorney-General in the relevant period and any specific questions relating to the Bill of Rights are probably best directed at him.
GI	For sure, and all I'm asking Mr Robertson to comment on is just the fact that the records that are available to us probably fall well short of the full reasoning and evidential basis for decisions that were made. I'm certainly not asking him to stand in the shoes of David Parker in relation to this role.
CF	Well maybe also the Cabinet Secretary, who at the relevant time was Michael Webster, and he could perhaps assist you with the constitutional aspects of preparation of Cabinet papers and the requirements of the Cabinet manual.
GI	Well perhaps I should say quite specifically that our research in relation to the Cabinet papers has indicated a very significant lack of detail in relation to decisions that were made. Now, that is not a criticism of Cabinet because Cabinet's working under pressure in extreme circumstances, but it is a question of whether that situation could be improved in the future, and that's really all we're pursuing at the moment. So having heard that Mr Robertson, is there anything further you'd like to say on that topic?

GR	Not much more than what I've just said already, that as a minister working in this process, we used the processes we had. Documents that you highlighted for this interview show that briefings that I received translated their way through to comments in Cabinet papers. That's what you would expect. That's the way in which the views of government agencies and the views of ministers would find their way into papers, so we were adopting a process that was very familiar to me and to many governments in the past. There is a plethora of information within government agencies that leads to that and as I say, if you're looking for a different way of recording of Cabinet material, I'd endorse Mr Finlayson's view that perhaps Michael Webster or someone of that like would be your best port of call.
GI	Right. So, if we just move on to the economic issues…
CF	Before you do can I just record that you said there were a number of fundamental human rights which were attenuated. You introduced freedom of expression and then you withdrew it. So, then you asked a question about freedom of movement. I think in fairness to Mr Robertson, are there any other particular freedoms that you want to put to him or do we rest with freedom of movement?
GI	We can rest with freedom of movement for present purposes.
CF	Right, thank you, thank you.
GI	So in relation to your role as Minister of Finance, you don't, as I understand it, claim to be an economist yourself. Now that is not pejorative, it's just simply stating my understanding of your position. So presumably you were relying heavily on advisors to advise you about the economic situation as it was and as it was predicted to be if various decisions were made.
GR	I'm not at all sure what the relevance of your first comment there was but in answer to your question, as Minister of Finance I took advice in the first instance from the Treasury, that is what they're there for, to be the advisor to the Minister of Finance. I also took on advice from other government agencies where that was relevant. As I covered somewhat extensively in my first interview, I was in very regular contact with members of the business community, the banking sector, members of the financial sector, other economists, Council of Trade Unions and a variety of other sources of advice. So as Minister of Finance it is important to do that. Our job then is to make decisions, as you know, based on a range of advice and that's what I did as other Ministers of Finance who have a variety of backgrounds have done in history.

GI	Yes, I just want to make it clear that was not intended as a jab at you in any respect. We're simply, by our Terms of Reference, required to consider whether you were well informed and that means that in the circumstances, as you've said, Ministers of Finance have many different backgrounds over the years, but we want to focus on how you were advised and what you were advised during the period under inquiry. Hopefully I've made that clear. So were there particular people within the Ministry that you were heading that provided you with key advice in relation to what was happening on the ground financially and predicting what was likely to happen in the future?
GR	The nature of the way advice is provided to ministers is it's generally filtered in a government agency through the Senior Leadership Team. You would expect that. And so obviously my primary contacts within the Treasury were the Secretary to the Treasury and the Senior Leadership Team. Within that, one of the Senior Leadership Team, Bryan Chappell, was part of the DPMC group that you've already alluded to and so he was involved with several other more junior Treasury officials in working across government, and so they were providing advice. Various Treasury officials were in regular contact for example with the business community and as part of the regular briefings that I received I got their version of that. And as noted in my earlier interview I had extensive contacts across the business community, the union movement, and so on around what was happening "on the ground". So I both got it, as you would expect, through the Treasury and more formal sources and then a vast array of informal sources.
GI	And to what extent were you satisfied that you were getting up to date, accurate information about economic issues as you were going through this process?
GR	I was satisfied that the Treasury were doing their best to understand the situation which, as we all know, was rapidly evolving and very uncertain at pretty much every corner. They provided, I believe, high quality advice to me, with the one caveat that in New Zealand we perhaps don't have all of the data sources that might be useful to have. I also mentioned this in my first interview that if the Statistics Department were to be interviewed for this they would say if we had more resources we could undertake more work and there would be more data and information for Ministers and clearly at one level I support that - as the Minister of Finance I also have only so much money to give the Statistics Department, so you know, I think within the realms of the data that we had available to us, yes.

	It's also important to note what decisions we were looking for information on. And it is the nature of a government that you will look at matters in the aggregate often because we make many of our decisions in the aggregate rather than at a very specific level and we empower either other government agencies or in the case of COVID where we gave money to non-government agencies to do things, we empower them to deal with more individual circumstances. So at that level I felt well informed. I wouldn't be able to tell you how many thousands of emails, conversations I had with people impacted and affected. And so I was clearly able to see and hear. Like myself, all of my Cabinet colleagues are Members of Parliament, most of whom represented constituencies. We were having daily conversations about what all of this meant, what the economic impacts were. And so to the best of our abilities and best of the information at hand I think the advice I got, I felt, was sound.
GI	Are you familiar with IDI?
GR	Yes.
GI	And were you able to extract information from IDI or… sorry, not you personally, but were you able to get data from IDI that informed you as to what was happening?
GR	Well the nature of IDI, as I'm sure you'll be aware, is that again is an aggregation of data. It's not real time. So, like everything in government you're often dealing with statistics that can be up to a year old, depending on what point of the cycle you're in. So, IDI was a very important and useful tool for government over the whole six years that I was in, but it isn't a real time data set per se. We were getting real time information, for example, from Inland Revenue or the Ministry of Social Development, and we definitely utilised and understood that material. The reason why in the Cabinet papers that you… or Treasury briefing papers that you put forward for this call, you will see numbers about how many billion were spent on this, what we believe happened to GDP, that's because we were drawing on information. I also in the last interview talked about some of the things that I discussed with the Treasury as being useful real time data points and we brought in, if you've got concerns about availability of information, we brought in during COVID the public release of the weekly economic update that had been provided to Ministers of Finance for some time. I moved to release that into the public arena. So that included information on things like credit card expenditure, transport movements which is as very good indicator, particularly a fore-indicator around GDP. So we attempted to use what real time data was available. The banks

	were extremely helpful in telling us within the bounds of confidentiality what was happening in terms of movement of money, their key clients and so on. So, we had a lot of real time information, but IDI doesn't get updated in such a way to make that as relevant day to day, but certainly it's relevant in the overall decision-making of government.
GI	With hindsight – you refer to hindsight economics in your book – that IDI could be useful in indicating what actually happened by reference to real data, could it not?
GR	Certainly, and as I say, it's largely a retrospective tool because of the nature of the data it is aggregating together. I know that the current government uses it, we certainly used IDI as well.
GI	So in terms of real time data, we had Shaun Hendy who was doing some work in that area, perhaps not relevant to financial issues, but to what extent would you promote the idea that in a crisis of the kind that the country went through in our period under inquiry, an enhanced ability to access real time data would be valuable?
GR	I think as someone making many decisions over six years related to economics and finance the more data the better. It's almost self-evident isn't it. Making sure that we utilise the resources we have to generate the most relevant data is important. Making sure that the integrity of data that we use that other sources create is an issue that I think we have to work through as we go. So, for example, credit card transactions, that's largely emerging out of the banking sector. We trust those people, you know, there's no reason for us to believe that data would be wrong, but we do have to make sure that what sources we are using have integrity. So that would be a small caveat to me agreeing with you that the more the better in terms of what we fund Statistics and others to collect, we have to think about what is the best data for us to use. Data that doesn't have historical context can be less useful. If you've read the book you'll know I have my own views about the shortcomings of some of the measures we use in the economy, but one of the things I would say about something like GDP is that we have the historic dataset, so trends can be divined and that's vital. But yes, as a general principle, the more the better, filtered by the need for both integrity and relevance.
GI	So just on that topic of data and bearing in mind that we are under the rubric of the Auckland lockdowns, is there any specific data that you would have found valuable during that period of time that you did not have access to?

GR	In the specific period there, via Inland Revenue in particular, we can obviously understand what income people are generating and what they're claiming various tax-related issues on. The nature of that is you will only do that annually and I think that's the issue, is that we relied because people were applying for example for support, so that we would know the number of businesses whose revenue had dropped by 30 or 40% or more because that's what they had to claim in order to receive support from us. It's very hard within the bounds of privacy and confidentiality to demand much more than that from people. So turnover revenue, those sorts of issues, were of interest to us. As I say, heavy and light traffic movements told us a lot about what was actually happening, whether or not people were actually moving around. Credit card was a good proxy for where we were in terms of consumer behaviour. So we did have those sources. I did make this point Mr Illingworth in the earlier interview, and you may come to it in a different guise, but one of the things we learned quickly at an aggregate level for which I'm responsible as Minister of Finance is the importance of the Auckland economy to the wider New Zealand economy. And I used the example in the last meeting about the Nelson rental car company who were as affected by an Auckland lockdown as any Auckland-based business was. And so, the particular data that we might need is nationwide and so if the sort of direction of your question in a way is partly towards would more sub-regional data be better, would very stratified data about Auckland be better? It would be useful, but it wouldn't be sufficient and I felt confident that within the confines of what we had we were getting the information.
GI	Thank you, that's very, very helpful. Now you have I think it's fair to say repeatedly referred to the idea that 'the best health response is the best economic response' and I just want to ask you a couple of questions to test that proposition. I'm sure you realise that it's a heuristic or rule of thumb approach and I'm certainly not going to treat it as anything more than that, but when we get to the Auckland lockdown I think it's fair to say that deciding on when the Auckland lockdown should come to an end, it's probably not sufficient simply to repeat that mantra and say that the best health response is also the best economic response. And I'm going to put it to you more specifically. We were in a situation then, I think, where many, many, many thousands of people were restricted in relation to what they could do, including business activities and working and so on. The best health response might have been to keep people locked down for a lot longer than actually happened, which I think was when the traffic light system came into force in early December. So, the health response might have

	been to keep people locked down over Christmas. But that would not have been a good response in terms of the economy, and it wouldn't have been a good response in relation to social licence. So, what do you say about those issues?
GR	Well I stand by that statement and I do refer you to a quite extended exchange on this matter in the first hearing that you weren't able to attend, that I think there is evidence that across the pandemic that statement bares true and I think there's international comparisons that allow us to also say that's true. At its very core if you're looking at it from an economic perspective a healthy and living workforce is a very important thing in making sure that the economy operates well. When we came to the latter period that you're covering now two things stand out to me. One was the uncertainty around the impact of Delta as a strain. We had protected New Zealanders significantly from earlier strains and we were highly uncertain as to what the impact of what appeared to be a much more deadly strain of the virus would be. And so the health response and the economic response remained tied, particularly at the beginning of that period, as we worked our way through what was a more virulent strain. So that would be my first comment as to why I still feel that statement applied. The second comment that I would make is a broader one, which is about the use of the phrase "lockdown". So in Level 4 it is undoubtedly a lockdown. Most businesses are not able to operate and there are significant restrictions as you alluded to earlier. By the time we got to the period between August and December 2021, Level 3 had refined itself and then as you're well aware, there were the ingradations put into Level 3 to allow a large amount of economic activity to take place. Not everything, and in particular in areas like hospitality and retail there were significant restrictions, but I would venture to suggest that at that period there was solid economic activity. Obviously as we moved further into the COVID Protection Framework in other parts of New Zealand in terms of Level 2, even more, and then when you're in the lower levels of the COVID Protection Framework, pretty much the activity we would see today. So I think the use of that term belies the fact that actually, there was a reasonable amount of economic activity, albeit reduced from normal times. The other thing I would say is that of course that's a phrase we used to explain, as you need to do in brief sound bites, what we were doing. There is always nuance and one of those things is that of course at its most extreme argument you could say the best health response would be no one ever leaving the house ever. Of course that's not what we're arguing. What we're arguing is that prioritising public health, making sure we have a workforce that's

	healthy, making sure that we have people being confident that they can go about their lives in a health manner, those things matter. And you yourselves have raised the issue that there are other impacts of lockdown and restrictions. We've said, and I've said a number of times, that we were aware that social licence and social cohesion mattered and they are, in a sense, part of a healthy workforce and a healthy country as well. So yes, it's not absolute and nobody's arguing that it's an absolute, but I still believe as a principle it stood up through the period of COVID.
GI	That's again very helpful, thank you.
	[redacted]
GI	… The situation that you have described in your book Mr Robertson relating to yourself, Dame Jacinda and others, indicates that there was a huge amount of pressure at the top level of decision-making during the time in question and nobody in this Commission would question that and it would be churlish to suggest otherwise. Do you see the potential for a different way of making decisions under extreme pressure that might be adopted in the future?
GR	I think always ministers in the Westminster system of government that we have will be required to make difficult decisions and eventually in any system there needs to be a final decision-making body and that is the Cabinet. And we took those decisions collectively and I think that remains, in the system that New Zealand has, the best way of doing this. Alluding to personal pressures, they are what they are. I think at the time we dealt with them to the best of our abilities. We were very focussed on the tasks that were at hand, tried to apply a set of values where there is imperfect information, which was clearly most of the time, and tried to make sure that we consulted broadly and understood the views of all those around us. So I don't have a particular reflection on a different way of making decisions. When you're in a situation like that you have to deal with it and so no, I don't have a particular view on that.
GI	But we do know that the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet had within its scope a COVID Committee. To what extent was that architecture helpful in terms of Cabinet and your role in particular?
GR	Yeah, and I covered a bit of this in the first interview as well. Yes, I mean in times of particular pressure, stress, crisis, having cross-departmental groupings come together is very useful. DPMC by its nature and particularly the Policy Advisory Group, already has that as a standing

	situation. This was obviously a highly expanded version of that. At a personal level I was very grateful to have Rob Fyfe within that group being able to be a direct conduit backwards and forwards for the business community. That was a useful model that is perhaps a little unusual. So yes, having those kinds of cross-departmental groupings is important. It's not that COVID's the only time that's ever happened either. Both before and after I've witnessed those sorts of groups being formed, certainly in the following year, in 2023, when we were dealing with the Auckland Anniversary Weekend floods and Cyclone Gabrielle. Again, groups were brought together. That's something that's available to any government to do and is obviously a very sensible course of action when you have a complex, messy issue to be dealing with.
GI	So I guess where that takes us to is this: you have described the huge pressure that fell on Dame Jacinda in relation to making key decisions. You've expressed a similar view yourself to the effect that 'there was nothing left in the tank' after that process and the question is whether it would have been helpful to have a layer of decision-making similar to the COVID Group within DPMC that would have shielded top decision-makers from having to make such difficult decisions under so much pressure? And whether that should be incorporated into the decision-making architecture in the future?
GR	Again, I'm probably not clear on exactly where that would sit, who it would be. I think the fact that it was a very intense period and one in which there was a lot of pressure, that is the nature of being the Prime Minister, the Minister of Finance – we are the ones who ultimately have to take those decisions. I'm not aware of, I presume you must be alluding to some sort of grouping of politicians or something, I don't know, but from my perspective ultimately we had to take those decisions. How we all felt at the end of that – I think globally you will see that many politicians who went through that period felt the same way. That's the nature of the job. It doesn't mean it's wrong, it doesn't mean the structure's wrong, it just means that it was a very difficult and stressful period. I still think we made good decisions and I still think those decisions were based on evidence and fact.
GI	You'd be familiar with the unit known as NEMA. That was housed within Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, and I see that as recently as this week NEMA has been shifted to be housed by DIA, which seems a little retrograde. But the question is whether an intermediary decision-making group that shields the top-level decision-makers from

	effectively becoming micromanagers would be helpful in a future infectious disease emergency?
GR	I think it's important in a democracy for significant decisions to be taken by the elected representatives of the people. At every point during COVID, in addition to that, government agencies were empowered to take a range of decisions all the way from who might get support to particular regulatory matters that were the powers of individual departmental CEs or whatever. So with respect, I think probably much of what you might be concerned about exists. NEMA, if that is an example you're drawing, is on the ground making decisions on a day-to-day basis. I wasn't sitting in a Work and Income office deciding who got support under the wage subsidy. Equally, the Minister of Primary Industries wasn't involved in all of the regulatory decisions around port movements. We already do this and so other than us getting into a long and discursive machinery of government discussion I would suggest that coordination across government is important in these situations. Finding ways to ensure the decisions can be made rapidly and in a good value-driven way is important, but I'm not sure on the basis of this part of this conversation I would agree that it's appropriate for there to be another layer of decision-making. Our system puts the elected members of parliament in Cabinet in that and I believe that's appropriate.
GI	So in the Phase One report, the Phase One Commissioners which unfortunately included me at the very tail end, made some recommendations which included promoting the idea that a central agency function might assist in the decision-making process. I'm not sure if you're acquainted with that part of the report. So what's your comment on that?
GR	Again, just reiterating what I've said, the way that DPMC undertook its work and brought people together from across government and outside government was extremely useful and having a central agency such as DPMC do that is the right thing to do. Beyond that and any further decision-making layer as you're suggesting I think is a different question. But obviously you're entitled to that view, and the first Phase group's report stands as it's written.
GI	Right, but the key point that perhaps we can take from what you've just said is that the role that DPMC played in coordinating an all-of-government response through the COVID Group that it hosted was an effective way of helping you to make the right decisions.
GR	Absolutely.

GI	Alright, so I'm getting to the end of my questions on topic number one you'll be pleased to know. And so the final issue is people falling between the cracks. You clearly have a background in which you are focussed or have been focussed in the past about the most vulnerable people in the communities that you've represented.
GR	Is that a question? To which the answer is yes, but…
GI	Well, I'm stating the obvious, but the question really is to what extent do you feel that in your role as Minister of Finance, especially during that Auckland lockdown, there was sufficient granular information about what was happening on the ground to particularly vulnerable people that government was able to make decisions that protected those people?
GR	Look, as I said in one of my earlier answers and I think actually Commissioner Kavanagh asked me quite specifically about this in our first engagement, obviously as a government we're advised in those areas by agencies like the Ministry of Social Development, Oranga Tamariki, etc, etc. And so we were getting regular and good flows of information. I worked closely with the Minister of Social Development, Carmel Sepuloni, during that period so I was very well aware of where some of those pressures were. I mentioned earlier that our relationships weren't just with the business community, we were also in close relationships with NGOs. We'd provided the Whānau Ora agencies with significant amounts of money quite early in the process and continued to do that. I recall during the period in question I visited Auckland when it was in Level 3 and visited a number of those agencies during that time, as well as business communities and so we were very aware. It was one of the reasons why food security became a real topic during 2021 and 2022. Again, as I mentioned to Commissioner Kavanagh in the last call, COVID exacerbated issues that were already there, COVID didn't create those issues, and so we need to bear in mind that we're dealing with some longstanding distributional and inequality issues that were then brought to the fore. But we did very directly support things like food security but also the agencies in the community who work on the ground. So I felt like we knew. Again, you've had people I'm sure come to you and say perhaps they felt they weren't being heard completely. We certainly knew and understood those issues. As I mentioned earlier, my caucus colleagues, my Cabinet colleagues, were all Members of Parliament representing those communities and they would frequently raise the issues they were seeing, and we attempted to respond to them. The flipside is that many people felt we spent too much in

	COVID but much of the spending we did was to keep people in work and to keep people's basic needs being met and as you know, if you've read my book, Mr Illingworth they are the things that matter a lot to me. So was it perfect? Obviously it can never be, but I feel like we were aware of those issues and we responded to them as we could.
GI	Final question. W.E.A.G. You mention that in your book. Can you just tell us about that?
GR	Not 100% sure about its relevance to your Inquiry but I'm happy to answer it.
GI	You'll see that it a minute.
CF	I've read Mr Robertson's book, but I can't say that W.E.A.G. leapt out at me as a term. What are you referring to please?
GR	I can answer the question Chris. The Welfare Expert Advisory Group which the government established early chaired by Dame Cindy Kiro, now the Governor-General. And had a range of people in it from the community sector and the business sector and it made a range of recommendations about how to improve the lives of those who are supported by the state and other organisations. We worked through many of the recommendations of that over our time in government and I'm very proud that we were able to do some of what were regarded as the most significant elements of that, including indexing benefits to wages, lifting the rates of main benefits back to the value that they were before they were so cruelly cut in the early 1990s. So that's W.E.A.G. and no doubt Mr Illingworth has a follow up question now that we've all clarified what it is.
GI	Yes, so I do. So the question is this: to what extent would an expert body of that kind be of assistance in a future pandemic in relation to ensuring that people don't fall through the cracks?
GR	Yeah, look, I think if what you're getting to is 'how did the Ministry of Social Development, the Minister of Social Development know what was happening on the ground?' Having a representative group that could help advise I'm sure would be useful to them. Pulling those sorts of things together in the height of the pandemic would have been very challenging but it was happening in an ad hoc manner anyway. But the idea that there might be a group of people you could bring forward to help advise, I'm sure the Minister of Social Development would appreciate that advice. It was a very important and useful report. It was obviously done over a long period of time, based on a lot of research, and its nature's a little bit different but the point I'm taking from what you're asking is having groups from across the

	community that can provide advice is always important and I'm sure the Minister would have appreciated whatever advice she could get.
GI	And did you as the Minister of Finance in the period in question consider that it would be of value to have that information, that on the ground current information, being fed through to you in a way that was better than what you've experienced during the time?
GR	As I say, I believe we were getting good information, regular information from a range of sources and I won't repeat all the answers I've given to you about who those people were. W.E.A.G. was a policy advisory group. It advised on the responses that government should make and those things are not all able to be done all at once, so I don't think it's quite analogous. I was trying to be helpful in my answer to say pulling groups together that are from across the community to help provide advice is a useful thing and that was done in different ways during the pandemic and you'd need to ask Minister Sepuloni or Debbie Power or somebody what formal mechanisms they used, but I can tell you there was an awful lot of information flowing through in a more informal way.
GI	Thank you. Commissioner Kavanagh, do you have any further questions in relation to the Auckland lockdown?
JK	Well I do have a couple of questions but they relate much more to the period 2021/2022 and the advice that was given by Treasury. Would you like me to ask those now?
GI	Yes please.
JK	Okay. So Mr Robertson, I can't remember whether when I last met with you that the Treasury's Long-Term Insights Briefing of 2025 had been released or not, it was around about the same time I think, is that right?
GR	I think so, yep.
JK	But I hadn't actually read it at the time that we had last met. And so I have a question and also a comment to make to you in regard to that briefing. So the one that I'll start with is the one that's the second one on the sheet that we gave you and that briefing suggests that some of the strength of the economy, much stronger than in fact we had ever expected at the end of 2020, may have been caused at least in part by the strength of the fiscal stimulus, mostly through the wage subsidy. Do you think that that's a reasonable interpretation of that time?

GR	Yeah, look and we did cover a little bit of this last time. The strength of the economy, as you know, the projections, the forecasts, were exceeded. Now, projections and forecasts are exactly that and they're based on the assumptions that were made at the time about what would happen with COVID. As we discussed, the level of uncertainty that we were dealing with in terms of the period of time you're talking about, meant that our response necessarily was going to be based on the initial forecast, the initial impacts we thought, and the importance we felt of, in the case of the wage subsidy which you've raised, keeping people's attachment to their employment. So you have both the immediate fiscal impact of people still being employed, still being paid and us putting money in to deal with that. And then you have the long-term impact, and I know this is an area you know a lot about, about the scarring effect of unemployment and that that is measured over generations, not just in an immediate period of time. And as I've said again earlier on, one of the big drivers for me was not seeing unemployment go to 13% as the Treasury had forecast it would. In the end it never got higher than 5%. That, in my opinion, is a mixture of both the support that we provided and the economic conditions that then prevailed. Our role in influencing those economic conditions was yes, I'll acknowledge there was certainly a role from the fiscal stimulus that occurred. Having said that, the New Zealand economy was able to benefit from higher commodity prices from other things that were happening in the world as well. So yes, it was part of what occurred because fiscal stimulus is designed to stimulate the economy. How much was required, we had no idea at the beginning of 2020 what that was and again, at the risk of drawing Mr Illingworth's ire about particular phrases that we used a lot, cash flow and confidence was what the business sector needed. And we provided that and the economy did well. The extent to which the fiscal stimulus was the exact reason for that would be debated by economists significantly, but it was a part, I accept that.
JK	Thank you. You talked about forecasts. So the Long Term Insights Briefing had a look back at the forecasts for core Crown revenue that was made in 2020/2021 and 2022 and it's fair to say that those forecasts were well out, both in terms of overestimating and then underestimating the amount of core Crown revenue, which I'm sure must have caused you some grief at the time. You might just be interested to know, so this is a comment from me rather than a question, is that we've done a little bit more digging on that very point and discovered that the over and under estimation, in other words the forecast errors, around revenue were way out of whack in almost every other country. So we are talking about a

	phenomenon that occurred. It occurred in the United States I think and Australia and Canada and what have you. I don't know whether that gives you some comfort or not. What it does signify to me is that this is tricky stuff, that certainly in a pandemic we may have to be a little bit more cautious about our forecasts going forward in pandemics.
GR	Yeah, it's very interesting Commissioner Kavanagh because it does. I already was aware of this. It does come back in some senses to the fact that while economists are very important and useful parts of decision-making, they generally use models. And the problem in COVID is the model couldn't really appreciate the dramatic effects and so forecasting is model-based and the Treasury actually, and I'm sure you will have spoken to them, would tell you if you looked over a long span of history that their forecasting has generally been pretty good and pretty accurate. What COVID showed globally is models don't always work when the variables change so quickly and rapidly and so uncertainly. So yes, I'll take some solace from your research, thank you.
JK	Okay, thank you. That's all I have, since I had the pleasure of interviewing Mr Robertson last time round.
GI	So let's go to the room and ask Commissioner Hill whether you've got any questions that you would like to pursue.
AH	That's been very helpful Mr Robertson. I'm the health guy here, not the economist, so I'm not going to get into economic questions. I do have one slightly seemingly non-essential detail question to ask you but I want to pick up, if I may, on the conversation you had with Mr Illingworth earlier and it's the theme that we are reflecting on of information at Cabinet level, what's brought to the table and what's captured and you've covered that comprehensively already. But one question that comes up in our conversation around the Commission is 'was there soft intelligence that people brought to the table?' You mentioned about the pipeline that feeds in, you mentioned the knowledge that your colleagues had around the table. Some of us would assert that's kind of captured quite well by that pipeline that you mentioned but the question keeps coming up – is there a gap where material information discussed at Cabinet informing the Cabinet decision, is not recorded in that process?
GR	Yeah, look again this is definitely the risk of repetition. I think the discussions that take place within a government department under the Public Records Act are to be recorded. Now, I'm not the person for you to have a long interrogation of that with, you'd need to be talking to

	Brook Barrington and you need to be talking to the Chief Archivist and so forth and so on. But discussions, conversations that government officials might have with those who would be informing that, are meant to be recorded in some form or other. So there should be a record of that somewhere. In terms of conversations a minister might have with somebody, I mean I have numerous conversations on the phone with business people or in their businesses. They weren't all written down by the nature of the kind of conversation they were, but they can be accurately recalled, for example, through looking at diaries and saying well this meeting happened on that day and so on. We try our best to record meetings but in a rapidly evolving situation like COVID that was always going to be very, very challenging for every phone call or every casual conversation in the street or on a walk or at the supermarket. So look, I'm not going to comment on the direction you're going in but I think there are limits to the way that you can capture everything. There probably is a conversation you want to have with government agencies about what that is but yeah, I am just repeating myself. There is a very long-established process for the way Cabinet works and if you're looking to recommend changes to that, that's obviously your decision.
AH	Thank you.
GI	[IS1], do you have any questions that you would like to ask?
JK	Just before we do that Grant, I notice that there's question 4 around the economic advice on decisions about vaccine mandates and I'm not sure that that was actually allocated to anybody to ask, but I would like to ask it if I may.
GI	Of course.
CF	Great, thank you.
GI	So for present purpose though the answer is that we are accepting pretty much the same approach as was adopted in Phase One, which is that the broad colloquial understanding of vaccine mandates included a wide range of different forms of, to put it bluntly, coercion or pressure for people to be vaccinated in a number of different situations. … [redacted]
	[redacted]
JK	And with respect to this particular question, I'm focussing on occupational mandates. So that's the requirement to get a vaccination or potentially lose your job. We've had a look at the economic advice on decisions that were made around vaccine mandates and found it to

	be quite sparse, and I'm sure that Mr Robertson that you will have been interested in this area as I know that unemployment is something that you care deeply about and I recall some work, in fact, that I did at the Productivity Commission on the future of work in which we discussed the scarring effects of unemployment and I believe it was a paper that was done by Dean Hyslop in fact using IDI and lead data. And so I was rather surprised to discover that in the Cabinet papers regarding decisions to have vaccine mandates, that there was a paucity of information about the likely scarring effects for people who decided after the mandate that they weren't going to get vaccinated and that they would potentially lose their jobs. And I felt that that was a gap somewhat. Do you recall that time and that paper?
GR	I certainly recall the time vividly. I think you're right, is the short answer to the question. I don't think there was a lot of economic analysis about the impact of mandates per se. I think there were two reasons that I would posit for that. The first is that the rate of vaccination was so high that the overall fiscal or economic impact of those who chose not to be vaccinated and then subsequently lost their jobs relative to the economy was low and so at an aggregate level the kind of thing a Minister of Finance concerns themselves with because the rate of vaccination was so high, it probably was therefore not getting a lot of attention perhaps from the Treasury or in the end, myself as Minister of Finance. That's not to diminish the impact on those individuals. Clearly on those individuals there's potential for a significant employment impact in our system, and this would be my second point, that would then become work that the Ministry of Social Development and others would do to support people into other forms of work. I also know that at an individual employment level there was the opportunity in some cases for people to work remotely or to be moved to other duties and other ways of working. And so that would be essentially down to the employer and the employee to work that through. So I don't want to diminish the impact on individuals, but I think the paucity of advice relates to the fact that at an aggregate level it wasn't a significant economic or fiscal impact.
JK	Thank you very much. So that leaves us with some questions about pandemic preparedness in the future. Did someone in the room want to…
GI	Look, I think Judy if you go through those points and then we'll come back to [IS1] and just see if they have got any further follow ups.
JK	Thank you. I guess I'm now going to channel again the 2025 Treasury Long Term Briefing and a conversation also that you and I had back a few months ago about the best kind of

	response for a future pandemic was in fact to have a strong economy. So you've got plenty of largess to use up and certainly you were in a position where you had a really healthy kind of fiscal headroom to play with in there. Are there any other lessons that you have for us about economic resilience to position New Zealand to respond effectively in another pandemic?
GR	Yeah lets, for the purposes of our time today, take as read what I said in the first interview where this issue was covered as you say, quite a bit. Perhaps one other reflection around resilience, and we did begin to do this work as a government, was to look at across the supply chain, what does New Zealand need? And I made this comment in brief when talking about the vexed issued of the production of toilet paper and I don't mean to be completely facetious with that comment because domestic production of some staples and products is important, and making sure we have access to supply and also stockpile of supply of certain products and this is now, I can't believe this but it's a controversial thing to say, but access to paracetamol actually became an issue for us briefly. It didn't ever run out in New Zealand, but you might recall that you could only buy restricted amounts of it at the supermarket for a period of time. So I think that would be one of my reflections, is we started that work and I believe I'm sure it will continue to some extent but knowing in a pandemic the things New Zealanders need and how we're going to access those in a time of crisis globally is, I think, a very important thing for us as a country.
JK	Thanks. One of the other things that I've noted in the Treasury's recent Briefing is this notion about the tendency in a crisis to ratchet up debt. And if you get crisis after crisis after crisis you're piling on not only lost opportunities for the younger generation, but the potential for future debt which has to be repaid. How can you think about the impacts of future generations and how can that be built into pandemic decision-making when you've got the crisis at the moment?
GR	Again, I feel the answer to this is important regardless of a pandemic or regardless of a crisis. The way that intergenerational issues are considered is important and without wanting to blow my own trumpet, one of the things about the wellbeing approach and the Treasury's work on living standards is one of its fundamental drivers is intergenerational equity and wealth. Debt is one element of that. As you know, in the two Budgets I produced before COVID we kept debt around 20% of GDP and ran a surplus and while 20%... we can argue about numbers, I think perhaps that's lower than it needs to be but again, going back to our

	first interview I took you back to Gabriel Makhlouf's speech on debt, clearly New Zealand should keep debt under control and I believe relative to the rest of the world we still do that. And all governments, including the one I was in, was working towards lowering that debt having utilised it just as Mr Finlayson's government did during the Canterbury earthquakes. Debt rises when you're dealing with that, Government expenditure rises when you're dealing with that, but outside of that time you do need to be careful and you do need to see ways of reducing it. So that does remain important. I also think that there are other elements in intergenerational fairness and equity that need to be mentioned, and you and I have covered this already, but the scarring effect of unemployment is one of those. And so the money that we spent, the nearly $20 billion that we spent on the wage subsidy scheme did keep people in work in a way that perhaps didn't happen in other crises. So while debt is an important thing to manage and control I think other elements of intergenerational fairness are also important. And in any given crisis you need to make a judgment around the balance of those intergenerational aspects and that's probably enough of a comment from me on that. But suffice to say, as I said in the first time, the reason we kept debt low, put money aside, was for a rainy day and it poured down and we utilised what we had.
JK	Thank you. I think perhaps yeah, Grant has talked around some of the other topics that are there so I think I will leave it there and maybe Grant, we can move to the room.
GI	Right, so coming back to first of all, Commissioner Hill, is there anything further that you would like to ask concerning the remaining questions?
AH	No thank you.
GI	[IS1]?
IS1	Kia ora Grant. Thank you very much for your time and for your answers, it's really appreciated, particularly noting that we're trying to have this focus on the lessons learnt for the future. I'm just wanting you to sort of to build off the challenges that you sort of had there and it had been mentioned, is that particularly the Treasury macro models go out of equilibrium during these shocks. In fact if we look back further you see the same thing happened through the GFC. These large shocks push them sort of out of alignment. And that makes it challenging to navigate to the data if that work is often previously sort of done. Now, there are a range of different ways that that can sort of help assist and I realise agencies try, particularly the Treasury, providing assistance on that. Do you have any sort of

	thoughts about what might be the additional types of models, support structures or economic advisory sort of groups that could help to calibrate back to the mix of real time data that you do have, mix of sort of economic principles that you're having to do, but also the strategy that you're trying to achieve to? So it is really challenging. There's this mix of immediate information you need, but there's also the building up how these sectors have been affected which won't be what's in the same as the macro models. There's also a build up of also how the cumulative impacts start to build across society and change the economy. Do you have any insights around actually how some of that could be build up for the future?
GR	Yeah, it's a very interesting question and I'm sure the Treasury would have a lot to say about this and I would hope their excellent working paper series, some of that might go towards this because I do think you're raising a useful point. The first comment I would make is a caveat, which is every pandemic, if we're talking about pandemics, is going to be different and it's going to have different impacts. And the GFC as an example of a different kind of crisis that did have a different impact. You end up with one crisis is a demand side crisis and another crisis is a supply side crisis, and so saying that there's an absolute kind of way of predicting and forecasting and modelling, I don't think you were saying, but I just want to make that point at the outset that anything I'm about to say is caveated by that. The cumulative effect was the bit I thought I might just focus on briefly, which is that the Treasury did work very hard and you'll see even in the papers that you appended for this meeting, to seek from Ministers a set of principles for the approach. And I was part of the reason why we did that, which was to help the Treasury shape both their responses but also how they might model the impact. So rather than just saying immediately when we went into this period that you're covering we're just gonna carry everything on as we did from the first phase, we actually said well what are the principles of our approach to this stage? And I think I'll get the dates wrong but it would have been probably the September paper, maybe the August paper, that actually sought my agreement to a set of principles for that. That approach I think is a very useful one because it then can define for the Treasury and other government agencies not just what the government should be doing but what the impact of what the government might do is. So I think that is a useful tool. How then that would be incorporated into a specific model for forecasting in particular, you would need to be asking that question of the technical folk who do that modelling, but I think that was both a useful element and one that could be a little bit of a guide.

	We've covered a little bit already with Mr Illingworth the question of how data then gets adopted and the IDI, we've talked about a lot today, it's a great model but it isn't quite designed for that, so you might want to think about something that can be created where inputs that are real time data are inputted into some kind of model that can predict for you. Again, you'd need to ask the tech experts just how feasible that is because of how the data is generated but that kind of work. And the modellers at Treasury do a good job again, so I think there's scope there to do what you're asking for, but it will be necessarily limited by the different nature of a crisis or a pandemic.
GI	Is Monte Carlo simulation something that could be used in that context?
GR	Again, I'd let the technical experts answer that Grant, I'm not gonna pick up that. But there are simulation models that economists use all the time, and I'd leave that to the technical experts.
GI	Yeah. Anything else from you [IS1]?
IS1	No, I have one slight cheeky question but I'll park that one to do with constitutional issues about the PFA and its ability to… yes, I see, I see, I think you understand…
GR	I'm on the record…
IS1	If the models don't work how can the PFA report on fiscal responsibility and management. But it's a slightly cheeky question.
GR	Yeah, well I guess the answer to that is that the models generally do work, it's just in crisis and exceptional circumstances they won't. As I say, there's a good set of working papers that the Treasury do on some of these issues and I think it's worth noting. I won't repeat it but I did cover my views around the Public Finance Act and how it did and didn't help us during COVID in my first interview.
IS1	Thank you.
GI	Alright, Ms Levy?
NL	No, I have been here to learn, not to question, thank you.
GI	Alright, well look, that is just really, really helpful for us Mr Robertson. We appreciate the frankness with which you've spoken to us this evening, or this morning from your point of view. I hope things go well for you in Dublin and I just have one final question for you and

	I'm sure as former Minister of Sports you'll be able to answer it. What's the result going to be between the Wallabies and the All Blacks tomorrow night?
GR	Yes, well one of the things I learned as Minister of Sport is never to answer that question Mr Illingworth so no, my namesake is under pressure and you mentioned pressure earlier on and there's only one job in New Zealand with greater pressure than being the Prime Minister and that's being the All Blacks coach, so I wish him all the best.
GI	Right, well I wish you all the best as do my fellow Commissioners. You have played a vital role in the history of our country. It will never be forgotten. Some people may not remember you with fondness but as far as we are concerned, you and your colleagues did an amazing job. You did the best that you could under extraordinary pressure and on behalf of New Zealand we thank you.
GR	Thank you very much.
GI	So have a great time in Dublin and unless there's anything else Mr Finlayson we'll call this meeting to an end.
CF	No, thank you very much folks.
GI	Okay, thank you.
End of interview	