

Living the Kiwi dream?

A new poll shows growing frustration towards our leaders and the Covid response, discovers **Kirsty Wynn**

A survey of New Zealanders by renowned British politician and pollster Lord Michael Ashcroft has revealed a growing frustration with a “sluggish” vaccine rollout after initial pride and wide governmental support for our Covid response.

The release of “Living the Kiwi Dream? Politics and Public Opinion in New Zealand” comes as Aucklanders grapple with their 74th day in lockdown and Christchurch joins the growing list of regions hit by Delta.

It is the first time Ashcroft has polled a country outside of Britain and he said the three-month survey of 5000 New Zealanders was carried out because the nation was one “close to his heart”.

The billionaire, who famously put up a \$200,000 reward to encourage the return of stolen war medals in 2009 and gave even more to help after the Christchurch earthquakes, has spent a lot of time here and “has many Kiwi friends”.

Ashcroft was fascinated with the world’s view of New Zealand’s initial Covid response and the actions of Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern.

New Zealand grabbed the world’s attention with its reaction to the Covid pandemic, he said, and Ardern had been propelled to the status of an “international celebrity”.

“I was intrigued to find out more about her apparent political success and to see whether New Zealanders themselves accord their leader as much reverence as do the pundits overseas.”

Ashcroft’s poll found Ardern had wide support and her “go hard, go early” lockdowns were applauded.

“Her ability to speak for and to the country – as in the aftermath of the Christchurch mosque shootings in 2019 – are appreciated across the political spectrum,” he said.

Those polled acknowledged the issues Ardern has dealt with during

her time as leader, including the Christchurch terror attacks and the White Island eruption.

“She’s had a really tough time. I think she’s done really well. And part of that is personality because she’s a very empathetic person,” said one.

“It puts us on the map and it puts us in the news. We’re a small country and ... we like to see our name out there when we do good things,” said another.

“Jacinda’s a good communicator and was good in crisis management, but ultimately she lacks leadership in coming up with a clear strategy,” said another.

Despite some criticisms, Ashcroft’s poll found Ardern “far and away the country’s most popular political figure”.

But Ashcroft’s research also found a remarkable shift in Kiwi opinions regarding the Covid response from the initial outbreak in 2020 to the arrival of Delta in late August 2021.

Most Kiwis polled thought the Government had done a good job handling the pandemic, introducing restrictions at the right time, following the right scientific advice and communicating the rules clearly.

As time went on, a degree of frustration had begun to set in, Ashcroft said.

After 18 months, many felt the authorities were using the same tools as they had at the beginning of the pandemic, while the approach in the rest of the world had evolved.

Opinion was even stronger when it came to providing New Zealanders with a Covid vaccine.

Many blamed what they saw as “the unnecessarily slow vaccine rollout” for the continuation of what they considered an “inflexible and heavy-handed approach”.

This was especially true for those polled in the South Island where,

until this week when two cases of

Delta were found, the risk of contracting the virus seemed low.

“The initial strategy worked, but now we’re on Delta. If the vaccine rollout was done earlier, we should have avoided this lockdown,” said one.

“I feel like we went from being one of the best countries in the world with our response to Covid to one of the worst in vaccine rollout,” said another.

Business owners said there was no clear direction with no time to prepare and “last-minute” decisions.

“It’s really weird being only a few days ahead of what’s happening. People are quite smart and could probably deal with ‘if this happens, then in six months’ time we expect this,’” one said.

“As a small business owner, we’ve got no idea what’s going on.”

The Government’s zero-Covid elimination policy was also a source of debate.

Many in the focus groups were sceptical of the goal, which has since been sidelined, and said since the virus would not be eliminated worldwide, keeping it out of New Zealand forever would mean permanent restrictions on travel or an endless series of lockdowns.

Some were supportive of the zero-Covid policy and felt the Government was right in its “cautious approach”.

Labour voters especially said the economic cost was worth it if lives were saved.

“There will be a cost which will take some time to regain, but once you die there is no coming back,” said one.

The research also revealed feelings about the Covid response and healthcare.

Many felt the pandemic had exposed weaknesses, especially in the number of ICU beds and the state of our only children’s hospital, that had



been building for some time.

“The Government is spending billions of dollars a week on stuff that should have been dealt with a while ago,” one said.

“You’ve got hospitals like Starship, the national children’s hospital, having to resort to raising funds by advertising on TV for ICU beds. They shouldn’t be having to do that.”

Covid-19 Response Minister Chris Hipkins said New Zealand’s strategy had been to protect lives and livelihoods from the virus and it had “delivered on both counts”.

“We continue to have the lowest number of Covid-19 cases, hospitalisations and deaths per capita of any country in the OECD.”

“Our strong health response has also been good for our economy, with economic activity above returning to pre-lockdown levels

earlier this year.”

Auckland Business Chamber CEO Michael Barnett said the poll revealed the feeling in the business community of “knee-jerking and lacking a plan” before Delta hit.

“In most business environments there would have been a ‘what if’ question posed by heads of government departments.

“The Government drove a programme that was a health response. It should have been a health and economic response.”

Ashcroft hoped his poll would provide some answers.

“I hope this research – encompassing New Zealanders’ attitudes to political and social issues, the economy, their country’s overall direction, and its place in the world – will prove valuable to anyone interested in the subject,” he said.