New Zealand: A Case Study For Hawai‘i

Aotearoa (aka New Zealand) has always held a special place in my heart, and I have had a deep affinity for the nation and its people since my time there as a 22-year-old Fulbright Scholar.

Although there to further my studies at Victoria University of Wellington, I was present when my uncle Fred Betham was appointed High Commissioner from Western Samoa to New Zealand, which provided me an opportunity to experience the diplomatic culture of this Pacific Island nation. I also took advantage of my passion for basketball to travel around the country to do clinics and play hoops at a time when the sport was just emerging from under the shadow of rugby. And, of course, I became an instant fan of the fabled All-Blacks, which remains intact till today and have returned on a number of occasions.

Whether through the obvious similarities between the Maori and Hawaiian cultures or the generous and amiable spirit of my “mates,” I left the country with a sense that there is a genuine connectivity between us. Both Hawai‘i and Aotearoa share a rich Polynesian kinship; they count tourism among their top economic drivers, where in Hawai‘i it is No. 1, and in recent years, have emphasized commitments to eco-conscious policies with New Zealand a bit ahead.

These things considered, I have been injecting in my discussions with government and tourism officials, that Hawai‘i should emulate New Zealand on how it handled COVID-19.

New Zealand quickly declared a state of emergency and Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern’s “go hard go early” philosophy put the island nation into a Level 3 lockdown as early as March 23. Just 48 hours later, the lockdown was increased to level 4, which urged residents to “stay in your bubble to save lives.” By April 27, Ardern had announced that the country had stopped community transmission of COVID-19 and began a strict and consistent process of re-opening the country’s businesses. At the time of this writing, they actually experienced days with no incidence of new cases.

Ardern has set a high bar for leaders through her decisive style. She has had those around her accountable to the same rules as her constituents, even going so far as to demote a member of her cabinet who was witnessed breaking lockdown rules.

She has also made clear that the path forward will depend on strategic timely decisions. New Zealand is poised to reconsider travel with Australia, and the two Tasmanian Sea nations seem anxious yet deliberative.

We should tap into some Hawai‘i-based Kiwis with deep understandings of both Hawai‘i and New Zealand — people like East-West Center vice president Karena Lyons, who is the former New Zealand ambassador to several Micronesian countries, or Polynesian Cultural Center president Alfred Grace, first Maori head of PCC, and director Seamus Fitzgerald, Maori cultural specialist and BYU-Hawai‘i lecturer, among others. This would help us identify cues from New Zealand on how to smartly navigate our reopening process.

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