



Where do the parties stand? Long-term thinking & catastrophic risks

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ELECTION 2023

Where do the parties stand?



Summary

Will the next Government be ready for the future? In this *Briefing* we analyse responses to our pre-election survey of political parties in Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ) about policies to strengthen the country's resilience to long-term global risks and their intention to introduce a Global Catastrophic Risk Management Act. All five parties in the current Parliament responded to the survey and it was encouraging to see that most supported building resilience to climate change impacts, although only two mentioned specific climate change mitigation actions. The references to other potential catastrophic risks by the parties were minimal (eg, pandemics by only one, and cyber-attacks by one). No party mentioned any concern about “out-of-control” artificial intelligence and only one, Te Pāti Māori, favoured any consideration of a US-style Global Catastrophic Risk Management Act. In conclusion, there appears to be inadequate concern by this country’s political parties about the need for planning and actions to address plausible global catastrophic risks.

The Election 2023 Public Health Survey

In the lead up to the 2023 General Election, the Public Health Communication Centre contacted each of the five major parties with a set of questions about their position on five areas relevant to public health: future risks, tax, water quality, transport, and health equity. In this *Public Health Expert Briefing* series, experts summarise and analyse the parties’ responses.

You can read more about the survey [in our introductory article](#), and the articles in the series [will be collated here](#) as they are published.

If a nuclear warhead detonated somewhere in the Northern Hemisphere *tomorrow*, how would the NZ Government react? What if a cyberattack crashes the internet across the entire nation? We need to think seriously about and plan for these risks as well as those posed by the catastrophes that play out over decades, not days. Managing the impact of a warming climate on our health, environment and communities requires looking to a 50- or 100-year horizon, not just the next election.

Short-term thinking leads to the neglect of multiple public health problems particularly disease prevention and mounting environmental health concerns where the burden falls on those living in coming decades. Short-term policy horizons also undermine NZ’s capacity to respond to catastrophic and existential risks, including those from nuclear war and climate change.¹

Given this background, we included questions on these issues in our survey of political parties. Survey responses were obtained from all five parties in the current NZ Parliament, with responses received in June and early July 2023.

Policies on catastrophic risk

Our first question to the political parties asked:

- “Would your party favour introducing a Global Catastrophic Risk Management Act as enacted by the United States in 2022 (it could cover the risks of climate change, nuclear war, and out-of-control artificial intelligence)?”

The responses from the parties were all brief. They are summarised in the Table below (see the [Appendix for the full responses](#)). Only one party expressed interest in considering such a US-style [Global Catastrophic Risk Management Act](#): Te Pāti Māori. Two parties mentioned “climate change” as a global risk—Labour and the Greens—but only the Greens indicated any concern about any other specific potential catastrophic risk, specifically “pandemics”.

Table 1: High level summary of the political party responses, particularly regarding a US style Global Catastrophic Risk Management Act

Political party	Summary of response (see Appendix for the full response)	Favoured a GCRM Act?
Labour	Referred to its actions in government on climate change and more generally on actions to “strengthen our critical infrastructure”.	Not specifically answered.
Green	Referred to its actions relating to climate change and stated it would “take the same long-term approach to other environmental disasters, pandemics, and serious health risks.”	Stated it had no plans for this.
Te Pāti Māori	Only made the single comment as per the adjacent column.	“Te Pāti Māori are supportive of attempts to plan for and mitigate Aotearoa from existential risks, so we would consider this.”
National	Only made the single comment as per the adjacent column.	“National has no plans to introduce such an act.”
ACT	Not specifically answered.	Not specifically answered.

Policies on strengthening resilience to global risks

Our second question to the political parties asked:

- “Please expand on your party’s policies that will strengthen the resilience of Aotearoa New Zealand to long-term global risks.”

The responses from the parties are summarised in the Table below (see the Appendix for

the full responses). Climate change was the risk most referred to – by all parties except National. Only two parties, Labour and the Greens, referred to specific climate change mitigation actions. Adaptation-related responses were more common. The latter particularly involved building resilience into infrastructure, although the Greens also mentioned managed retreat relating to rivers and flood plains.

There were some policy descriptions for peace-making/demilitarisation from the Greens and Te Pāti Māori, but the specific risks of “nuclear war” or “great power war” were not mentioned. But “cyber-attacks” were mentioned as a risk by one party, Labour.

Table 2: High level summary of the political party responses on strengthening the resilience of Aotearoa NZ to long-term global risks

Political party	Summary of response (see Appendix for the full response)	Comment
Labour	Referred to its actions in government on climate change, such as passing the Zero Carbon Act. It also referred to commencing work to increase the resilience of NZ’s critical infrastructure. This was to address “a range of crises, whether these are natural hazards such as extreme weather events or other threats such as cyber-attacks.”	Part of the response was somewhat tangential eg, “banned single-use plastic bags”.
Green	Referred to its plans around “long-term, nature-based solutions to climate risks” (eg, a Climate Change Adaptation Bill; funding “tangata whenua and community-led adaptation and resilience to climate change”; “managed retreat”). This also related to plans to “implement an Equitable Transition Strategy towards a low-emissions economy where workers throughout Aotearoa have good and sustainable jobs.” Also referred to focusing NZ “defence policy on climate change responses, humanitarian responses, and environmental monitoring, and oppose New Zealand participation in the AUKUS alliance.”	This was one of the most detailed responses provided.
Te Pāti Māori	Referred to its concern for “global crises, such as wealth inequality and climate change.” Also referred to a policy of “military neutrality and withdrawing from the Five Eyes alliance. We should be a neutral diplomatic force for peace and justice in the Pacific region.”	This was another response that dealt with demilitarisation/neutrality, but without specifically linking it to addressing the risk of “nuclear war”.

Political party	Summary of response (see Appendix for the full response)	Comment
National	Argued that the most important thing we can do “is to grow the economy.” This would allow for “resilient infrastructure” to be afforded.	This seemed to us to be the most simplistic and non-specific answer given by any of the five parties.
ACT	Supported “a greater focus on building more resilient infrastructure”. This was “to meet increased risk of storms (which have been increased in their effect by climate change).” “ACT currently has no views on the risks of nuclear war or out-of-control artificial intelligence.”	It seemed refreshingly transparent for a party to state it “has no views” rather than not answering the question or giving a vague answer.

Comment

It was encouraging to have all five parties respond to this survey and to see the concern of most of the parties around climate change (mentioned by all except National), at least in terms of building resilience and adaptation. Indeed, it would be surprising to see otherwise given the run of climate change-related severe weather events hitting Aotearoa NZ during the first half of 2023. Even so there was a marked lack of detail from most parties on their plans for both mitigating climate change (with emissions reductions) and for further adapting to its impacts.

The references to other potential catastrophic risks by the parties were minimal (pandemics by only one, and cyber-attacks by one). These omissions were surprising given the recent major shock of the Covid-19 pandemic, concerns for future pandemics arising from bioengineered organisms,² and the threat of a major war given the Russian invasion of Ukraine (including the concern by international experts of the rising risk of nuclear war³). Furthermore, no party mentioned any concern about “out-of-control” artificial intelligence, despite a prompt in the first question and that this is a widely publicised concern of experts.⁴ Only one party, Te Pāti Māori, favoured any consideration of a US-style [Global Catastrophic Risk Management Act](#).

It appears that NZ political parties do not yet see ‘global catastrophic risks’ as a distinct category to be approached in a systematic and comprehensive way. Concern seems to focus only on a limited set of familiar risks, which leaves the country vulnerable to unprecedented or unexpected events. This situation contrasts with growing interest elsewhere in building long-term thinking into the policy-making process.¹ Indeed, the NZ Productivity Commission has recommended a “Parliamentary Commissioner for Future Generations”.⁵ It may be that unless there are future-focused institutions anticipating large scale risks, then such risks cannot be addressed. Fortunately, a recent international look at institutional arrangements to ensure the wellbeing of future generations shows what can be done.⁶

What is new in this Briefing

- NZ political parties do not generally express a strong commitment to building long-term thinking into their policy-making processes.
- Similarly they do not identify 'global catastrophic risks' as a distinct category to be approached in a systematic and comprehensive way.

Implications for public health policy and practice

- All political parties should have explicit policies on how they will manage long-term policy responsibilities, particularly for managing catastrophic risks.
- Public health researchers and practitioners have a role in articulating the likelihood and scale of the full range of long-term and catastrophic risks, encouraging the necessary public debate on these important issues, and advocating for institutional and constitutional changes to facilitate or require such risks are addressed.

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Appendix: Full responses from the five political parties to the survey

The questions we posed were:

- **Question 1:** Would your party favour introducing a Global Catastrophic Risk Management Act as enacted by the United States in 2022 (it could cover the risks of climate change, nuclear war, and out-of-control artificial intelligence)?
- **Question 2:** Please expand on your party's policies that will strengthen the resilience of Aotearoa New Zealand to long-term global risks.

Responses below (as provided by 6 July) are in the order we received them.

Labour Party

Question 1 (GCRM Act)

The Labour Party is undertaking significant work to address the risks presented by global threats to New Zealand. Our efforts to reduce emissions, combat the impacts of climate change, and strengthen our critical infrastructure are just some of the ways that we are responding to these global threats.

Question 2 (long-term global risks)

We've made tackling climate change a priority. In 2020, we declared a climate emergency, committing to urgent action to reduce emissions. We passed the Zero Carbon Act - aiming to reach net zero carbon emissions by 2050. The Government Investment Decarbonising Industry Fund is supporting businesses to make the switch to clean energy —this policy has already reduced lifetime emissions by 8.12 million tonnes. Our Jobs for Nature programme is helping to drive our economic recovery, revitalise our regions, and restore our environment. We've banned single-use plastic bags and committed to phasing out more single-use plastics.

This month, the Government commenced consultation on work to increase the resilience of New Zealand's critical infrastructure. Recent events, such as Cyclone Gabrielle, have demonstrated the interconnected nature of New Zealand's infrastructure system, where outages in one sector can quickly cascade across the entire system. In that context, it is essential that our critical infrastructure system - including electricity generation and distribution, telecommunications, transport and our financial sector - continue to operate when faced with a range of crises, whether these are natural hazards such as extreme weather events or other threats such as cyber-attacks. The outcomes of this first phase of consultation will inform the development of more detailed options to improve the government's regulatory approach to delivering resilient critical infrastructure. The Government expects to conduct a second round of consultation on these options in the first half of 2024.

Green Party

Question 1 (GCRM Act)

The Green Party currently does not have plans to develop or promote the implementation of a Global Catastrophic Risk Management Act. However, we recognise the need to ensure long-term planning for serious and catastrophic risks. Over the last two years, we have

seen the devastating impact floods and fires can have on communities and our environment. The Green Party will take urgent action to cut climate pollution, as well as adapting and planning for what cannot be avoided. We'll take the same long-term approach to other environmental disasters, pandemics, and serious health risks.

Question 2 (long-term global risks)

We will:

- 1. Prioritise long-term, nature-based solutions to climate risks. To do this, we'll pass a Climate Change Adaptation Bill to provide an equitable, long-term framework for adaptation and managed retreat. We'll also promote climate adaptation in planning approaches to land and water use to support ecosystem health and restoration.*
- 2. Increase local governments' ability to fund tangata whenua and community-led adaptation and resilience to climate change, including a 'room for rivers' approach, to restore floodplains.*
- 3. Prioritise long-term, nature-based solutions over short-term engineering solutions and increase funding for community organisations around Aotearoa to deliver these.*
- 4. Focus New Zealand's defence policy on climate change responses, humanitarian responses, and environmental monitoring, and oppose New Zealand participation in the AUKUS alliance. We'll scale-up support for adaptation in neighbouring Pacific countries and ensure climate keeps the spotlight on the world stage.*
- 5. Reform Ōtakaro to operate as a Ministry of Green Works to deliver public infrastructure and stable green jobs. This will support low emissions and climate resilient infrastructure in Aotearoa.*
- 6. Develop active labour market measures to support workers to retrain and match skills development with labour market needs when workers are made redundant due to industry changes. To do this, we'll bring together unions, government, employers, iwi and hapū to implement an Equitable Transition Strategy towards a low-emissions economy where workers throughout Aotearoa have good and sustainable jobs.*

National Party

Question 1 (GCRM Act)

National has no plans to introduce such an act.

Question 2 (long-term global risks)

The most important thing we can do to strengthen the resilience of Aotearoa New Zealand is to grow the economy.

It is only through a strong economy that we can lift incomes, solve the cost of living crisis and afford the public services – including resilient infrastructure – that Kiwis deserve.

ACT Party

Question 1 (GCRM Act)

[Survey authors' note: Not specifically answered – see below].

Question 2 (long-term global risks)

ACT supports a greater focus on building more resilient infrastructure – as seen with the recent cyclone, infrastructure needs to be able to resist and respond that to meet increased risk of storms (which have been increased in their effect by climate change). ACT currently has no views on the risks of nuclear war or out-of-control artificial intelligence.

Te Pāti Māori

Question 1 (GCRM Act)

Te Pāti Māori are supportive of attempts to plan for and mitigate Aotearoa from existential risks, so we would consider this.

Question 2 (long-term global risks)

Te Pāti Māori policy priorities are aimed at reducing and eliminating the impacts on Aotearoa from global crises, such as wealth inequality and climate change. We also have a policy of military neutrality and withdrawing from the Five Eyes alliance. We should be a neutral diplomatic force for peace and justice in the Pacific region. This will reduce the risk of being caught up in the wars of competing imperial powers.

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