



## Article

# Kindness and Control: The Political Leadership of Jacinda Ardern in the Aotearoa New Zealand COVID-19 Media Conferences

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**Abstract:** Aotearoa New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's management of COVID-19 media conferences demonstrated a complex negotiation of expressions of 'kindness' and political 'control' as Ardern sought to unify the national public and implement a national emergency that closed the border and suspended civil liberties and freedom of movement. This article considers the distinctive positive leadership style of Ardern while also demonstrating the ways it is grounded in the exigencies of the political field. A critical reading of Ardern's media conference answers reveals four nominated categories: positive assertions, management of conflict/disagreement, delineation of politician role/responsibility, and political evasion. The four categories map the terrain of agreement and disagreement and they locate the subject position of the politician on that terrain.

**Keywords:** Jacinda Ardern; COVID-19; kindness; control; media conference; political field; political leadership



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## 1. Introduction

Over four and a half weeks during March and April of 2020, Aotearoa New Zealand underwent an unprecedented 'level-4' lockdown of national life in response to the threat of the COVID-19 virus. On March 21, the government announced a four-level COVID-19 alert system; and two days later, it was announced that the nation had moved to alert level 3 for the next 48 h before moving into the complete lockdown stage of alert level 4 from 11.59 pm on March 25. As a state of emergency was announced and the country prepared for the lockdown, Ardern articulated a simple and clear message: "You are not alone. . . . Success won't be instant . . . You may not be at work but that does not mean you don't have a job. Your job is to save lives. If you have any questions and you are looking for answers, apply a simple rule—act like you have COVID-19. Be kind, stay at home, break the chain." (Prime Minister's 2020). On Sunday March 29, the Prime Minister joined the Director-General of Health at a media briefing in Parliament to announce the nation's first death linked to COVID-19.

The alert level 4 lockdown required citizens to 'self-isolate,' restricting contact to small 'bubbles' of other people, such as family members and flat mates. In what was one of the most restricted impositions on everyday life from around the world, people who did not work in designated essential services were limited to visits to supermarkets and pharmacies and outdoor exercise within their properties and immediate neighbourhoods. The purpose of the lockdown was expressed in terms of the 'elimination' of the virus in contrast to other nation-states, where 'control' of the virus was the public goal. At the time of writing, Aotearoa New Zealand had recorded a death toll of 26 from the COVID-19 pandemic, a low per capita figure on global comparisons, and there was international praise for the national response to the virus (In Awe 2020).

During the lockdown, regular media conferences occurred that involved presentations by Ardern herself, or sometimes a relevant government minister, and Dr. Ashley

Bloomfield, the Director-General of Health, or sometimes a relevant public servant. After providing statements on the latest COVID-19 statistics and government operations, both Ardern and Bloomfield fielded questions from the assembled journalists. The conferences were live screened on Facebook and TV1, one of the television channels run by Television New Zealand (TVNZ), a government-owned but commercially-operated network. Recordings and transcripts of the media conferences were also made available on the government's COVID-19 website (<https://covid19.govt.nz/> accessed on 1 April 2020). Over and above the necessary provision of information about daily updates, the media conferences assumed widespread popular appeal, described as "NZ's favourite reality TV show" (Walls 2020).

The success of the national response to the COVID-19 virus was in no small way attributed to the political leadership of the Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern. Ardern came to the leadership of the then Opposition Labour Party in exceptional circumstances, during the election campaign of 2017, when poor polling results prompted Andrew Little's resignation as party leader. Ardern campaigned effectively and improved Labour's standing but the ruling National Party recorded a comfortable lead on election day although they did not garner enough seats to govern under the mixed-member proportional (MMP) electoral system. Eventually, the New Zealand First party, under the leadership of Winston Peters, agreed to enter a coalition with Labour, and this, together with a confidence and supply agreement with the Greens, enabled Ardern to become Prime Minister. The actions and discourse of Ardern through the COVID-19 crisis further established her reputation as an effective and skilled politician, a reputation which had arisen from her work in response to other national crises, such as the Christchurch mosque attacks in 2019 and the Whakaari White Island volcanic eruption.

Jacinda Ardern's elevation to global political consciousness corresponds with an academic interest in the character of contemporary political persona and performance (Corner and Pels 2003; Craig 2016; Lunt 2019; Marshall and Henderson 2016; Rovisco and Lunt 2019). Performance facilitates not only the expression but the construction of identity (Butler 1990; Goffman 1959) and politics can be importantly understood as an expressive phenomenon that highlights the "values, perspectives and emotional attachments people have to politics," (Washbourne 2010, p. 43) embodied in connections with political leaders. Modern politics' predominant focus on individual political leaders rather than political parties and institutions (Poguntke and Webb 2005; Van Aelst et al. 2012) in turn elevates 'character' and 'trustworthiness' (Thompson 2000) as important criteria of political evaluation. Successful contemporary political leadership is also dependent upon an understanding of the performative requirements of different types of media. In particular, politicians and other public figures have to master what Marshall (2010) calls 'presentational' forms of social media, as well as the 'representational' forms of legacy media. Jacinda Ardern's political success has in no small way been built upon a particular performative style that foregrounds communication skills across mass and social media, empathy and compassion, combined with firmness and constancy, and command of policy detail. Ardern's gender has helped facilitate the production of such a political persona, whereby affective engagement and authoritative command have been effectively combined. While Ardern has demonstrated acumen in her usage of presentational media, it is worthy of note, for the purpose of this particular study, that it was the singular dominance of the televisual broadcast of the COVID-19 media conferences that helped enable the transmission of a clear, authoritative message and the imposition of Ardern's authority with regard to the production of a unified national response.

Ardern has become an emblematic figure for consideration of the character of contemporary political leadership. Political leadership skills are manifested in the communication of clear and consistent messages, delivered with an appropriate tone, that interact with a certain social context and shape public opinions and responses (Hamilton and Bean 2005; Whittle et al. 2015). Leadership has often been considered in the context of the management of crises, and more recent research has scrutinised the exercise of commu-

nicative skills during such crises (Gigliotti 2016; McGuire et al. 2020). As Gigliotti (2016) has noted, effective political leaders must be able to deliver institutional messages while also conveying a human ‘authenticity’, and this kind of negotiation is at the heart of the difficulty of successful political leadership, where political authority and realism must successfully co-exist with an honesty that includes the display of vulnerability and the ability to respond openly to expressions of difference. Research has also observed how women are often cast into leadership roles during times of crisis and how they are often able to produce an appropriate communicative style that is more dialogical and informed by an ethics of care (Maiorescu 2016; Oliver 2006). Ardern’s leadership skills with regard to the COVID-19 crisis prompted praise (Friedman 2020; Wilson 2020) and exhibited many such features of effective political leadership although, as this study highlights, discussions of political leadership must move beyond singular focus on the individuality of the leader and also consider the politics of the politician’s delineation of their role and responsibility and the exigencies of their specific management of the political field.

Before discussion of the COVID-19 media conferences, and an analysis of Ardern’s answers can take place, it is also necessary to more broadly contextualise both the politics of the ‘emergency’ status of the COVID-19 crisis and also the character of the ‘kindness’ that Ardern invoked in response to the crisis. While Jacinda Ardern’s leadership has been generally marked by the promotion of a positive political persona and an explicit desire not to engage in personal attacks, the discourse that is to be analysed here occurred in the context of a national (and global) crisis that necessitated the mobilisation of national unity, the closure of the border, and the suspension of civil liberties and freedom of movement. That is, the positive political discourse and the beseeching for kindness towards other citizens occurred at the time of a unilateral imposition of extraordinary political control due to a perceived national ‘emergency.’ Political theorists (Agamben 1998, 2005; Honig 2009; Scarry 2011) have offered various perspectives on declarations of exceptional states of emergency: those moments when political sovereignty is initiated and enacted because executive branches of government act without legislative debate, upending the established political order. Such states of emergency usually occur because of military or humanitarian interventions, and, as Agamben (1998, 2005) has noted, such exercises of biopolitical power enable fundamental decisions over life and death, and also significantly determine whether such actions are ‘beyond’ politics. As we will see, the status of the ‘politics’ of Ardern’s leadership and her response to the crisis crucially informs the COVID-19 media conferences and the analysis suggests that rather than representing an ‘end’ to politics, the government’s actions negotiated the very category of politics, including the range of agents whose actions constitute the ‘appropriate’ political response to the crisis.

Any call from a political leader for ‘kindness’ can often seem both extraordinary and also engender immediate skepticism given the toughness of the political field. Kindness, like many associated terms of emotion which structure interpersonal relations, carries a complex history of meaning and a plurality of contemporary understandings, and any specific analysis of the use of the term must be aware of such resonances and the possibility that there may be multiple legitimate consequences arising from the invocation of the concept. It is possible to understand kindness as a form of camouflaged control that enhances the ego of the one who bestows kindness and subjugates the recipient. It follows that individual acts of kindness can also be critiqued for not substantively addressing the ongoing injustices or injuries that prompted the kindness, as when kindness is allied with acts of charity. Writing about the media narratives of kindness that were deployed across a range of countries during the COVID-19 crisis, Dutta and Elers (2020, p. 109) note: “there is a dark side to these narratives, one that does not serve those who are precarious, underprivileged or marginalised, by obfuscating and erasing necessary conversations on the transformative policies and infrastructure changes needed to address fundamental structural issues underlying deep inequalities we inhabit in a COVID world.” It is also possible to understand the use of kindness in political crises such as the pandemic as an instrument of governmentality, where the management of populations, and specifically

their health and ongoing viability, is the *sine qua non* of contemporary governance (Foucault 1991). As Phillips and Taylor (2009) remind us, part of the problem with contemporary uses and understandings of kindness is that we are primarily indebted to the Victorian relegation of the concept to the individual, domestic, and specifically gendered domain. As such, we have become distanced from earlier, more radical understandings of the concept in the eighteenth century, where '*kind-ness*' foregrounded the interpersonal basis of subjectivity, and it was conjoined with an understanding of 'sympathy,' which carried a social apprehension of 'fellow feeling,' and ideas of 'universal benevolence' which informed emerging republican democracy. Aware of such contexts, Jacinda Ardern's deployment of kindness can be understood as a complex and striking strategy, raising questions about gender and politics, the conventional register of political discourse, and the role of emotion in public formation.

## 2. Study Framework and Method

This study discusses the political leadership style of Ardern through an examination of her discourse and performance during the COVID-19 media conferences. It focuses on Ardern's statements and answers in the media conference as manifestations of her political leadership style and, as such, it does not foreground the role of journalists in their questioning of Ardern even though the character of their questions prompts different responses from the Prime Minister. This study considers the negotiation in Ardern's political leadership style between expressions of kindness and empathy and her skillful control of the unfolding political dynamics surrounding the pandemic. This political style involves negotiation between expressions of unity and the management of conflict, drawing on the values and interests of different public actors, such as scientists, business people, and other politicians, as well as the general public. More substantively, this study considers how the skill in Ardern's political leadership style resides in her management of the 'politics' of the moment, variously assuming: a position 'beyond' the politics of the pandemic; a stance that limits political effects due to the pandemic; and explicitly adopting a political position which is validated through alignment with other significant public actors, and the national interest more broadly. As such, this study seeks to counter common dominant understandings that optimal 'political leadership' resides, paradoxically, in leadership where politics is evacuated or manifested in expressions of common sense. This study is informed by a critical reading of Ardern's media conference discourse and performances: unlike Clayman and Heritage's (2002) overview of the different types of answers in news media interviews, the focus here is more on the delineation of different types of answers vis-à-vis the structure of the political field rather than the offering of a more fine-grained sociolinguistic scrutiny of the discourse.

This study draws on the COVID-19 daily media conferences from 31 March 2020 until 29 April 2020, which was the day after the nation moved from the level-4 lockdown to level 3. The media conferences were viewed by the researcher, either on the day of the media conference or in subsequent days via the government's COVID-19 website (<https://covid19.govt.nz/> accessed on 1 April 2020). The viewing of the media conferences provided access to the visual and aural dynamics of Ardern's performance, including bodily deportment, tone of voice, and the character of her interactions with others. The transcripts of the media conferences were scrutinised and a schema of answers constructed, contrasting positive and fulsome answers with responses where there was evasion or degrees of qualification. The researcher's judgement about positive and evasive answers was supported through identification of the character of follow-up questions (or their absence) by journalists and also by reference to the daily news reportage and commentary of Ardern's media conference performances. The analysis was motivated by the identification of the discursive types of Ardern's answers and it did not seek to offer a contrasting quantification of the types of her replies. The character of answers involving qualification were further considered and two types of answers were identified: those responses where Ardern was legitimately circumscribing her sphere of authority and expertise and those

responses where there was explicit and legitimate engagement with political conflict and disagreement. The transcripts of the media conferences and the quotations used in the following analysis were drawn from the government's COVID-19 website.

### 3. COVID-19 Media Conferences

The Aotearoa New Zealand COVID-19 media conferences were the informational focus of the national engagement with the threat, spread and containment of the virus. Media conferences are a staple of political communication, and while they can be routine and regular events, they are often called because of an important announcement, such as the release of new policy, a political crisis, or a national disaster (Seymour-Ure 2003). Media conferences are a generalised form of public communication undertaken by institutional actors and newsworthy individuals, and more specifically they are a particular genre of political communication: they commonly feature initial framing statements by politicians, and as such can be efficient and effective forms of information dissemination, and they are coupled with subsequent dialogical encounters with assembled journalists. Unlike news media interviews, political media conferences are initiated by politicians, held within the province of the political field (Bourdieu 1991; Benson and Neveu 2005), and politicians control the questioning by journalists, giving political actors considerable power and control over the communicative process. Alternatively, the questions of journalists regularly deviate from the initial framing statements of politicians and the cumulative force of questioning by a body of journalists can resist attempts by politicians to redirect the focus of discussion. Political media conferences are sometimes broadcast media events and sometimes they are simply opportunities for information collection for subsequent reportage. There are broadly two types of political media conferences: those hosted by individual politicians, usually in a domestic political context, and two-party conferences that feature pairs of national leaders, often held after bilateral and summit meetings (Banning and Billingsley 2007; Kumar 2003).

The Aotearoa New Zealand COVID-19 media conferences exhibited many of these features of the genre although there were a couple of factors that deviated from the standard format and practice. The COVID-19 threat was a national crisis that unfolded over an extended period of time and the regular daily occurrence of the conferences gave them a particular prominence as they became part of everyday news consumption routines of a national public under lockdown, eager for updates of the latest numbers of cases and deaths, hopeful for confirmation over time that the worst of the crisis had passed. Media conferences are usually one-off events and even if there is a national crisis that unfolds over time it is not common for daily updates through a formal media conference. Paradoxically, then, the exceptional status of the COVID-19 media conferences derived from their routine occurrence. For Ardern, as Prime Minister, this enabled her to engage with the nation regularly in a direct and personal manner, a rare opportunity even for a media-savvy political leader in highly mediated public culture. Also, as already noted, the COVID-19 media conferences became a regular joint media conference featuring both the Prime Minister and Bloomfield, the Director-General of Health. This co-existence of a public health official and the Prime Minister on a shared stage helped Ardern ground the legitimacy of the political response to the virus in the context of independent health advice that her government was receiving. As such, the 'politics' of the management of the crisis could be successfully framed as seemingly 'beyond politics' and insulated from scrutiny and debate. Of course, political leaders in other countries also held shared COVID-19 media conferences with public health officials although Ardern's successful alignment of political management with public health advice was sharply contrasted with Donald Trump's early media conference performances where the officials were sidelined and the constancy of Ardern's media conference appearances sharply contrasted with Boris Johnson's intermittent public visibility.

This study here focuses on Ardern's COVID-19 media conference discourse and performance but it is also noted that the perceived success of her political management of



the crisis extended to other media interviews and social media postings. The Prime Minister was described as “ubiquitous” throughout the lockdown, “appearing at the majority of the briefings, and supplementing those with radio and television interviews, as well as hosting lockdown conversations with other New Zealanders, and conducting a large number of her signature Facebook live appearances” (Grieve 2020). While the Prime Minister was receiving praise for her political management of the COVID-19 crisis and also for her communication skills, she also encountered media criticism. Amid growing concerns about the effect of the lockdown on the economy, right-wing broadcaster and commentator Mike Hosking clashed with the Prime Minister in a radio interview over Ardern’s claim that the gap between the announcement and the implementation of the end of the level 4 lockdown was only two business days (Cheng 2020a). There was also media criticism about confusion regarding Ardern and Bloomfield’s use of the terms, ‘elimination’ and ‘eradication,’ with regard to control of the virus (Soper 2020). More generally, journalists did write critically of the tight political control Ardern exhibited throughout the lockdown (Trevett 2020; Cheng 2020b; Vance 2020). Through all this though, the then Opposition leader, Simon Bridges, was also subject to widespread public criticism following a Facebook posting where he criticised the government for not being able to move to level 3 lockdown with greater haste (Simon Bridges 2020).

#### 4. Results and Discussion

What is noteworthy arising from scrutiny of Ardern’s discourse in the COVID-19 press conferences is the variety of dialogical and rhetorical strategies that the Prime Minister deploys in her statements and answers. To this extent, the global journalistic and public fascination with the ‘positivity’, ‘friendliness’ and ‘kindness’ that is central to Ardern’s political persona can overshadow recognition and acknowledgement of the discursive flexibility she enacts with regard to discursive encounters with different political and public actors with accompanying variable contexts of consensus and conflict. This, in turn, highlights that the ‘control’ Ardern exhibits is not simply the singular imposition of her political will that characterised the nation’s swift and strong response to the virus—which was also the subject of local journalistic critiques of the Prime Minister—but also more broadly her skillful management of the discursive territory of the crisis. Across a range of political, scientific and medical, public and cultural issues arising from the COVID-19 crisis, Ardern was mostly able to read the exigencies of the political moment and respond ‘appropriately’. These performances of political rhetoric exemplify Fairclough’s (2000, p. 96) observation that rhetorical style is “not an invariable way of using language; it is rather a mixture of different ways of using language, a distinct repertoire.” The repertoire of Ardern’s answers in the COVID-19 media conferences are summarised in the following analysis through four nominated categories: positive assertion, management of conflict/disagreement, delineation of politician role/responsibility, and political evasion. The categories are not mutually exclusive—instances of evasion, for example, may occur through references to the limited authority or responsibility of the role of Prime Minister—but they serve the function of mapping the array of discursive strategies that are deployed by Ardern across the many different issues that arose out of the management of the national lockdown. The discussion will now unpack each of these identified categories as a way of illuminating the process by which Jacinda Ardern was able to exert her kindness and control with such political success.

##### 4.1. Positive Assertions

The most prominent feature of Jacinda Ardern’s COVID-19 media conferences, and her dialogical media encounters more generally, is the positivity of her approach, which includes an apparent willingness to engage with the questioner and the dialogical encounter, the invocation of her own agency and the agency of others, an apparent desire to be fulsome in her explanation of the contexts and circumstances that inform her reasoning and actions, and sometimes a willingness to be self-effacing and acknowledge limitations

and errors. Such an approach is distinctive in contemporary political practice given the combative generic status of political interrogative encounters (Craig 2016). Such positivity is not a refusal to acknowledge or engage with conflict and criticism but it does work to change the tenor of the encounter with the positive effect of appearing to foreground the subject of discussion more so than the self-interest of the participants.

Ardern's positivity during the COVID-19 media conferences was foregrounded in the statement she regularly made at the completion of her opening remarks to the media, saying "I am now happy to take your questions". This positive ushering forth of the 'q-and-a' exchanges was further supported by regular acknowledgments of Ardern's willingness to answer questions and even to affirm the virtues of particular questions. In the 31 March media conference, for example, in response to a question about testing Ardern replied: "Yeah, good question to ask, because you will have heard the director-general talking about sentinel testing." In the very next exchange, a journalist asked "Can you please just clarify for the people at home again: how far can they go?" and the Prime Minister replied "Happy to". The political desire to answer questions was to some degree influenced by the particular circumstances informing the media conferences: a national lockdown in response to burgeoning viral infection rates prompted the necessarily urgent task of providing vital information to the public about the management of the virus and public behaviour. Such informational demands did, to some degree, alter the conventional dynamics between politician and journalist, but nonetheless the exchanges regularly featured statements by the Prime Minister where she declared a lack of information or uncertainty about facts and a subsequent willingness to check details and get back to journalists. At the April 5 briefing, on a question about discrepancies between the new Health Act order and previous governmental statements, Ardern initially politely disagrees with the premise of the question stating she believed there was consistency across the two positions but upon persistence by the journalist she further answers: "Oh from the version that I saw, there was allowances for shared bubbles, but I'm happy to go back and look. But my understanding was that it is utterly consistent with what we had. I'm happy to check again for you, though, Ben". As such, Ardern defuses potential conflict with the offer to check, while maintaining her position, and the personal connection through the use of the journalist's name further couches the exchange in a positive manner.

Ardern strikes a balance in her answers between the assertion of her agency and also a willingness to entertain the legitimacy of the position of others. That is, the positivity of Ardern is not an asinine niceness but it derives from an ethical commitment to the communicative exchange and a recognition of the political value that flows from such a commitment. Ardern's assertion of her agency will be illuminated in subsequent discussion of her management of political conflict and disagreement with others but for now it can be noted that Ardern's political agency is also communicated through her framing statements that always preceded the question-and-answer exchanges. These statements enabled Ardern to respond to the latest developments with the virus and the accompanying actions and commentaries of others and, as is common practice in media conferences, the framing statement attempts to circumscribe and pre-empt the following questions from journalists. On April 14, the Prime Minister announced four more deaths from COVID-19, the highest daily death toll up to that point. Ardern responded with comments about the legitimacy of the government's public health response, overseen by the Director-General of Health, and also public commentary about the possibility of easing the strict public restrictions given the case numbers had fallen:

**PM:** We always knew there would be more deaths, even at level 4, and especially in cases where the virus enters a vulnerable community like an aged care facility. It is, however, a reminder of how much worse the spread and death toll would be had we not taken the actions we have taken to break the chain of transmission ...

The [aged-care facilities] review will look at Rosewood but also the facilities where the containment has been successful and we have had aged care facilities who have successfully

managed to contain COVID-19. It is timely, and I do endorse the quick action taken by the director-general on this – it was something I absolutely agreed with and supported . . .

Over the weekend and today, I have seen some commentary that is not unexpected—commentary that reflects our success to date in stamping out the virus as reason enough to take our foot off the pedal; it is not.

We see from these comments that the agency of Ardern and her government is manifested in the successful management of the *temporality* of the political crisis: the legitimacy of past actions, knowledge about future occurrences, and the quick and appropriate responses to exigencies, whether it be a bureaucratic review or a put-down of the latest media musings.

Equally, the Prime Minister was not reticent in acknowledging the possibility of communicative failings. Confusion about that status of the scanning app at the 19 April briefing prompted the following exchange:

**Media:** Can I just return to the topic of the app. So, it sounds like now that's an optional thing: it's something you might not even go down the path of—

**PM:** No, no. Sorry if I haven't been clear—

**Media:** Will it be formally considered at some point?

**PM:** No, no. Forgive me if I haven't been clear. The app is absolutely part of our work programme, and work is underway, and it will be a feature of New Zealand's response. What I've said is that it won't be part of the criteria around whether we move or not, and in large part that's because an app will only ever supplement the work that we have to do for contact tracing.

This exchange is indicative of Ardern's strategy, whereby open and transparent communication about the *interpersonal* dynamics of an exchange is coupled with a firmness in the articulation of the *content* of government actions.

In addition to providing information and managing the ongoing exigencies of the virus outbreak, the COVID-19 media conferences were significant rhetorical moments where Jacinda Ardern deployed positive affect in the construction of a 'national imaginary.' One of the Prime Minister's favourite phrases that has now entered into mainstream Aotearoa New Zealand public consciousness is the 'team of five million,' emphasising the coordinated national effort in fighting the virus. Ardern's ongoing encouragement of the public, including her regular stated concern for the physical and mental health of individuals, families and relationships, was a vital feature of the government's strategy of unifying, mobilising and disciplining the national population. At the 19 April media conference, there was discussion about the ending of the strict level-4 lockdown:

**Media:** Did you think we'd be in this position when you announced the lockdown 30 days ago?

**PM:** You'll remember that at the time, someone asked me whether or not I was afraid, and my answer to that was no because we have a plan. But what everyone has proven is that we've been able to fulfil that plan because we've been in it together. And so, I did think it was possible, and New Zealanders proved it.

The positivity of Ardern's discourse is supported bodily through her performances of the emotion of kindness. As has been previously noted (Craig 2016), the disciplined bodies of politicians are informed by the codes of value and behaviour of the political field (Bourdieu 1991) and are integral in the transmission of their power. Equally, the bodily performances of politicians express their individuality and such behaviour communicates the character and authenticity that is so crucial for success in a political culture where traditional ideological differences between parties and politicians have diminished significance. Importantly, the performances of political bodies are always *relational* phenomena and the contexts of such corporeal intersubjective relations (Crossley 1995) both structure the performances and inform the evaluations of the performances. Ardern's performances at the media conferences were in relation to the assembled journalists and also the national television



audience and her expressions of kindness and concern were effective *because of* her disciplined discursive and performative control. Ardern was deliberate and demonstrative across an extended period of daily media conferences and such consistency contributed to public perceptions about the genuine character and trustworthiness of her, and her government's, response to the virus crisis. The negotiation of kindness and control was also influenced by Ardern's status as a *female* political leader and it is argued that the legitimacy of her invocation of kindness as a woman was facilitated by her accompanying disciplined performative control.

Media conferences are, of course, not communicative events where embodiment is foregrounded. Ardern's reputation for her emotional connection with constituents derives from her interpersonal interactions with members of the public, most notably at times of crisis, captured in iconic moments such as her hug of a victim of the Christchurch mosque massacre while wearing a hijab. Nonetheless, Ardern's COVID-19 media conference performances supported her discourse of kindness and respect, manifested in her tone of voice, gestures, use of humour, and her professional treatment of journalists and the management of communicative turns. Ardern did not lose her temper during the media conferences and she was able to deploy an even tone of voice that also expressed emotion, as she implored the public or disputed the contentions of journalists. Ardern exhibited an appropriately serious professional manner throughout the media conferences but she also sought to engage in a personal and friendly way with journalists. In one notable moment when a journalist lost their train of thought Ardern provoked mirth, and international media attention ([Americans Lose It 2020](#)), with the comment: "No, I will come back to you—no problem. I do worry about your sleep at the moment though, Jason". Ardern also exhibited her control of the communicative process through her forceful use of gestures, allocating the sequencing of questions that were to occur, sometimes with explanations about the reasons for the assignments.

#### 4.2. Management of Political Conflict/Disagreement

The effective control that Jacinda Ardern exercised throughout the COVID-19 media conferences occurred significantly through her management of various disagreements and sources of political conflict. At times, Ardern explicitly and sharply articulated her disagreement with others and this had the effect of combining a strong sense of leadership and a straightforward honesty. Such statements do not jar, but rather work in conjunction with Ardern's more general tone of positivity, to cumulatively give expression to the balanced manufacture of kindness and control which is characteristic of Ardern's political persona. At other times, the Prime Minister's disagreement was more rhetorically couched, often because she was apparently aware of the exigencies of the political field. The April 22 media briefing was notable for Ardern clearly stating disagreement on no less than five occasions, taking issue with the New Zealand Medical Association, a distinguished epidemiologist, a journalist, two political colleagues from her party, and the Principal of her former school! Ardern's disagreement with her political colleagues, who had sought to minimise the impact of the lockdown on businesses, was circumscribed, with her commenting: "I disagree with those comments, and the Minister of Finance did—as he appeared at the time—as well." Ardern, as such, takes the political risk of clearly publicly disagreeing with two of her MPs but she does not elaborate on the reasons for the disagreement and the absence of journalistic follow-up on the comments enabled the limitation of political damage. In her disagreements with others, Ardern also at times made reference to the communicative basis of the disagreement, addressing the premises of contention and seeking to clarify the source of the disagreement. Her disagreement with the New Zealand Medical Association, and the journalist who asked questions on the matter, generated the following two exchanges:

**Media:** The flu vaccine roll-out was also described as a debacle by the New Zealand Medical Association. If the flu vaccine roll-out was so poorly orchestrated, how can we ensure the same doesn't.

**PM:** I disagree with them on that.

**Media:** How can we ensure that the same doesn't happen with the roll-out of COVID-19 vaccines, should one be developed?

**PM:** Well, firstly, I would disagree with that premise. The flu vaccine, and flu vaccinations, started earlier than we usually would, for good reason—we wanted to be prepared. And we have more flu vaccine than we would usually offer as well. So I disagree with their assessment of the flu vaccine.

**Media:** Those people who have commented at committee today, they're representatives of front-line workers. So by disagreeing with their statements, are you saying that their concerns aren't valid?

**PM:** No, not at all. You characterised the roll-out of the flu vaccine in a way that I simply disagreed with. That is not in any way.

**Media:** I didn't characterise it that way; the New Zealand Medical Association did.

**PM:** You gave a quote that I disagreed with. That does not mean that I in any way trivialise or dismiss the views of our health workforce. In fact, much of what we have done has been informed by what we've seen, hear, and know of what's happening on the ground. It's been an incredibly important part of our COVID response, and I continually get feedback—both about where we need to do more, go further, but also what people are pleased we've done as well.

In another exchange at the April 22 briefing, the Prime Minister does not directly express disagreement but contrasts and balances criticism with reference to alternative positions articulated by other experts:

**Media:** Sir David Skegg just told the committee that if we had reached the gold standard of contact tracing, we'd come out of level 4 now. Is the failure of us to meet that standard earlier—is that causing unnecessary economic hardship?

**PM:** No. No, that was not the basis of the decision. Equally, whilst David Skegg has made that statement, you'll have seen that others—like Shaun Hendry—encourage New Zealand to stay in for two weeks longer, in order to lock in the benefits of being at level 4.

As we will see in the next section, Ardern's typology of answers includes the delineation of the politician role, most notably with references to experts, and this strategy can enable the Prime Minister to both respectfully refer to the expertise of others and deflect responsibility from her actions. In this example, the criticism of one expert is weakened with reference to the alternative view of another expert without Ardern having to directly oppose such a distinguished epidemiologist.

The expression of Ardern's disagreements with others is partly dependent upon the identity and character of those holding different points of view. As we have seen, it is difficult for Ardern to engage with criticism of elite figures within the scientific field but it is easier to respond to political 'opponents,' although this is partly attenuated when the Prime Minister engages with politicians outside of Aotearoa New Zealand, where diplomatic considerations also impact on Ardern's discourse. We see such a negotiation in Ardern's response to the Australian Immigration Minister Peter Dutton's statement about certain New Zealanders residing in Australia returning home given the contexts of the COVID-19 crisis:

**Media:** Do you understand the acting Australian immigration Minister's statement on temporary visa holders in Australia? Do you understand that affecting New Zealanders in that it, effectively tells unemployed or previously casually employed workers to leave Australia and to come home?

**PM:** Well, it struck me that that actually applied to anyone, any New Zealander, who had been affected that may not be eligible for their JobKeeper programme,

and that could be a wide number, a wide range of New Zealanders. And I think what he'd do well to remember is that if they wish for Australia to be in a position to gear up in the aftermath of the outbreak, then they'll need a workforce to do that, and New Zealanders make up that workforce. They on average earn more and pay more taxes than others, they are a key part of the Australian economy, and I would've thought they wouldn't want to be so quick to lose them. The second point I would make is that New Zealanders also make up the health workforce and that there are some, for instance, who won't be being kept on because they may have been involved in contractual arrangements in the health workforce and in elective services. And that I would've thought, again, would be a workforce that they would wish to keep. I'll happily take them back, though.

In this answer, Ardern's lack of regard for Dutton, a controversial right-wing politician in the Liberal-National coalition government, is evident, although the character of her answer is different from the more explicit statements of disagreement that have already been discussed. The force of Ardern's fulsome answer is communicated through processes of repetition, although the Prime Minister initially expands the number of people potentially affected by the statement, increasing the scope and severity of Dutton's action. Ardern's criticism is verbalised through reference to a lack of logic, given a posited disparity between the proposed action and Australian economic interests, and this lack of logic is reinforced at both a national level and also in more specific terms with regard to the health workforce in the country. The Prime Minister also repeats three times phrasing ("I think what he'd do well to remember," "I would've though they wouldn't want," "And that I would've thought, again, would be a workforce that they would wish") that foregrounds her perception of Australia's interests and the incongruity between the statement and those interests. As such, Ardern's criticism is strongly communicated but also 'softened' through her 'willingness' to consider the interests of Australia, providing a semblance of diplomacy. The positivity of her final statement implicitly but clearly communicates her judgement of the deficiency of Australia's position as she succinctly highlights the interests of Aotearoa New Zealand.

#### *4.3. Delineation of Politician Role/Responsibility*

It has already been noted that a distinctive feature of the Aotearoa New Zealand COVID-19 media conferences was that they were joint media conferences, featuring the Prime Minister and the Director-General of Health, and that the alignment between the political and health science responses was an important factor in conveying the legitimacy of the government's actions. The media conferences provided a complex political and communicative context: Ardern's willingness to 'listen to the science' helped frame the government's actions as 'beyond politics' and yet there was, nonetheless, an explicit politics at play, as the government initiated a particular national strategy which was distinguished from strategies in other countries, and which was countered by other political agents and a diversity of public opinion. The media conferences, thus, posed a political problem for Ardern where there was a need to 'distinguish' herself in her role as the nation's leader while also in some senses deferring to the authority of others outside the political field. Ardern, however, was also able to use such a context as a political opportunity in her COVID-19 media conference answers, deflecting criticism through reference to the advice of clinicians. At the 1 April media conference, for example, Ardern delineated the limits of her role with regard to COVID-19 testing:

**Media:** The Director of Public Health today said that there was a lot of—

**PM:** The director of public—oh, the Director of Public Health, not the director-general. Correct.

**Media:** said that there was a lot of uncertainty around community transmission. Do you accept now that the testing criteria should have been loosened weeks ago?

**PM:** You will have heard me constantly and consistently say that clinicians needed to use their discretion, and that always existed. Regardless of international travel, regardless of contact with anyone else who had COVID, they've always had the discretion to test if they believed they needed to. Now we have another change from the doctors, the clinicians, again, that has broadened it out even further for absolute clarity.

**Media:** Regardless of that, why was that not done weeks ago?

**PM:** Again—again—the ability for someone to use their discretion has always existed, and I'd point out that, you know, actually.

**Media:** I'm not talking about discretion; I'm talking about the case definition.

**PM:** Ah, well, the case—ultimately a case definition that's got discretion says that even if you don't meet that criteria, you can test, but you will have heard me consistently point to that discretion always existing. Derek, it's never been for me as a politician to determine who should be tested, but it's always been my message that we have built the capacity so that we have the ability for clinicians to test who they believe they need to test.

As such, Ardern's answer emphasises several features about her leadership and the government's strategy: she stresses the consistency of her discourse on the subject and refers to the government's role in ensuring the capacity for testing, leaving the actual decisions about testing to those with requisite expertise.

At the 14 April media briefing, there was another example where Ardern was able to differentiate the decision-making process, and in this particular exchange she was able to transform an implicit criticism of her into an emotional identification with the criticising subjects:

**Media:** The family of a man who died at Burwood last night, part of the Rosewood cluster, wants to know why they couldn't put on PPE gear and be with him in his final moments.

**PM:** And this is one of the devastating effects of COVID—that we are losing people to it, and loved ones aren't being given the chance to be with them when that happens, but that's because we don't want to lose more people. PPE is not failsafe and, ultimately, I need to rely on clinicians making those incredibly tough decisions, because I know that I would find it incredibly difficult to tell a family member that.

The COVID-19 media conferences bolstered the political fortunes of Jacinda Ardern, providing her with a daily national stage to demonstrate her competent management of the crisis, allowing her to appear Prime Ministerial. Such a designation—'Prime Ministerial' (or equally, 'Presidential')—paradoxically carries an obvious sense of political authority while at the same time conveying a capacity to 'rise above' political exigencies, usually performing with gravitas in accord with a national interest. Ardern's focus on the management of the virus crisis resulted in her circumscribing, to some degree, conventional domains of political discourse, such as disagreements with political opponents, and such activity worked to enhance her political fortunes. At the 22 April media conference, for example, Ardern was asked about Opposition criticism and also social media attacks in the following exchange:

**Media:** Prime Minister, do you think that the National Party and Simon Bridges are guilty of politicising the COVID crisis?

**PM:** You'll forgive me for being utterly focused on the Government's response to COVID-19, and that means that I have paid no attention to any, therefore, of the commentary that may have been coming from within the National Party itself.

**Media:** Have you noticed this kind of increased vitriol on social media? We've seen one post today that's, actually, there are death threats against you. And I

know that you've said that's an unfortunate reality of your role, but is there a responsibility on Facebook, perhaps, to be distracted by anything through this period, including statements made on social media.

**PM:** Well, to be honest, as I've said, that's something that does come with the job. And I have not allowed myself to be distracted by anything through this period, including statements made on social media.

#### 4.4. Political Evasion

The final kind of answer category, political evasion, is to some degree linked to the management of political conflict/disagreement and also, as we shall see in the following example, it can involve reference to the delineation of the politician's role/responsibility. The specificity of political evasion here is captured by an evaluation of the unsatisfactory nature of the answer on a spectrum that is nonetheless informed by recognition of the necessary and legitimate contestability of political circumstances and discourse (Craig 2016, pp. 33–40). The discussion in the previous three answer categories have highlighted the skill and competency of Ardern's political discourse but here it is suggested that her answers reveal an inconsistency which point to an explicit political strategy which remains unstated by the Prime Minister. Such discourse is all the more noteworthy because of Ardern's more general communicative transparency. The following excerpt refers to one of the most controversial political moments in the COVID-19 narrative when Health Minister David Clark was discovered to have broken the lockdown rules by twice exercising outside of the immediate area of his residence. He was subsequently demoted, but not sacked, by the Prime Minister, who nonetheless said she would have sacked Clark under normal circumstances but that the health sector could not currently experience disruption (Cheng 2020c). In order to capture the extended process of evasion, it is necessary to provide the following lengthy excerpt:

**Media:** Prime Minister, would you charitably describe David Clark as an idiot?

**PM:** I've said both publicly and privately to him that I'm, obviously, very disappointed that we've even had to discuss his activities some days ago. I think he fully understands my position, and, equally, I know the public do too.

**Media:** Do you have confidence in your health Minister?

**PM:** I do.

**Media:** Has he been asked to lay low?

**PM:** He's been asked to restrict any activity that could be considered to put him at risk, in the same way we're asking every New Zealander to do that. We don't want a situation where people engaging in risky exercise, for instance, causes there to be call-outs or unnecessary call on our front-line services. None of us want that. And so he fully understands my expectations of him. He needs to be a role model.

**Media:** Prime Minister, do you recognise that he's unable to do his job right now because he appears to be hiding from the media because of his mountain biking?

**PM:** I wouldn't classify him that way at all. I expect him to continue to do his job, obviously.

**Media:** [inaudible] to do interviews. Even when he put out a press release on Friday which was a good-news story about repurposing ICUs, we couldn't speak to him about that.

**PM:** Again, I wouldn't interpret it that way at all, Tova.

**Media:** But where is he?

**PM:** You know exactly where he is: he's in lockdown and so, obviously, remains in the same place that he has all the way through lockdown been, and that is



in Dunedin. And I expect him to model the same behaviours while we're in lockdown as others. He continues to do his job, and many other New Zealanders continue to do their jobs from the place that they are in lockdown.

**Media:** Do you expect him to be fronting for interviews as, you know, regular responses—and, I think, including Q+A this morning, was a no-show.

**PM:** Oh, keep in mind, of course, that, I think, Q+A has had the Minister of Finance—there is no lack of members of the Government continuing to make sure we're available every day to continue to answer the questions that the public and yourselves have.

**Media:** As a key Minister, though, would you expect him to be fronting on stories like that as a matter of course?

**PM:** Yes, and he will continue to do so, but you also have a range of other Ministers, including myself, consistently available to answer your questions.

The question that opens this exchange is a reference to Ardern's criticism of a man who in a Facebook video prank had deliberately coughed and sneezed at supermarket shoppers. The Prime Minister had said she would "charitably" describe the man as "an idiot" and so the question from the journalist is something of a comedic provocation. The Prime Minister begins the exchange by clearly expressing her criticism of the minister while still declaring confidence in him. The discussion over a number of question-and-answer exchanges then addresses the issue of the public availability of Clark and his hiding from further media scrutiny. Ardern stonewalls by declaring that the minister is continuing to do his job but over a sequence of answers she does not specifically address the charge about Clark's media unavailability. She firstly responds to the lack of press release follow-up with the bald declaration that "I wouldn't interpret it that way at all" without giving reasons for her interpretation. Ardern then avoids the charge about Clark's Q+A unavailability by deflecting to the availability of other members of government. The unsatisfactory nature of that answer prompts a follow-up question and again Ardern offers an unsatisfactory answer by referring to a situation that clearly is not occurring when she states that she expects the minister to front up to the media and that he "will continue to do so." This political obfuscation occurs because Ardern cannot say publicly that she is seeking to minimise the damage to the government's political capital by shielding Clark from scrutiny. She may understandably want to stay focused on managing a national health crisis but here Ardern nonetheless exercises a more conventional form of political control that is contrary to her stated political persona and strategy.

## 5. Conclusions

In October of 2020, the Labour Party, led by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, was swept to power with a substantial enough majority to allow the Party to govern alone, a major achievement under the MMP system of government, and the first time such a result has occurred since the introduction of MMP in Aotearoa New Zealand in 1996. The result was largely credited to the high public approval of the Prime Minister's performance, most notably arising from perceptions about her management of the COVID-19 crisis. In March of 2021, Ardern announced that she would not continue with her regular weekly interview with right-wing commentator Mike Hosking on the radio station Newstalk ZB, although she and government ministers would appear "as and when issues arise." Ardern's decision prompted a news media backlash about her unwillingness to face tough political interviews and her desire to control the media, although some commentators also noted the declining significance of an older, talkback radio audience and the need to diversify the Prime Minister's media appearances (Bradbury 2021; Edwards 2021). Ardern and her government continue to enjoy significant public approval but the election victory and the Newstalk ZB decision exemplify the ongoing work of political leadership and its perpetually fragile character where questions of political power and accountability inform decision making.

The preceding study has illuminated the careful, negotiated performance of political leadership through the discourse of Aotearoa New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern in her answers during the national COVID-19 daily media conferences. The invocation of the need for kindness in the national response to the pandemic echoed features of Ardern's less combative political persona and was manifested in her engagements with journalists and the content of her answers. The use of kindness was an effective political strategy, appropriate given the nature of the infection that threatened the population, but also an astute way to defuse political contestation, particularly when it was supported by competent management of the crisis. Ardern's kindness facilitates a particular form of political agency that, while acknowledging the views of others, accrues political capital from demonstrations of such ethical engagements.

Ardern's kindness is an important component of the necessary exercise of her political control that derives from her formulation of her political persona, the delineation of her relationships with others, and her navigation of the exigencies of the political field. This study has identified four categories or types of answers from her COVID-19 media conferences: positive assertions, management of political conflict/disagreement, delineation of politician role/responsibility, and political evasion. The categories of answers are not intended to, and cannot, be demarcated as separate, unrelated discursive categories but instead they offer a map of the political terrain of agreement and disagreement and they locate the subject position of the politician on that terrain. As Clayman and Heritage (2002) have noted, unlike questioning, there is no definitive, grammatical marker of 'answering,' and this in turn points to the inherently contestable character of democratic political discourse that is also always oriented to a range of different recipients (Craig 2010). This study has not sought to valorise the leadership of Jacinda Ardern but it has tried to demonstrate through one case study how one national leader has both relatively successfully foregrounded a positive political style that challenges the combative conventions of political performance while also pragmatically engaging in different rhetorical strategies in a bid to manage the agonistic public discourse that circulates around, and challenges, her political leadership. Finally, it is hoped that further research with regard to other politicians might build upon the types of answers identified in this study so that we gain a more comprehensive understanding of the nature of political rhetoric in contemporary political leadership.

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