Infrastructure in times of exception: Unravelling the discourses, governance reforms and politics in ‘Building Back Better’ from COVID-19

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Abstract
In seeking to counter adverse economic impacts resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, many governments quickly announced major infrastructure stimulus packages alongside a series of governance reforms to speed delivery. Despite significant differences between political, institutional and policy contexts of countries, clear trends emerged, most notably discourses of promise promoting the possibilities of state-led infrastructure allied to reforms to expedite delivery. Using case studies of Australia, Aotearoa-New Zealand and the UK, we draw upon theories of postpolitics and states of exception to explain how these approaches comprise a form of infrastructuralism that both elevates the criticality of infrastructure at the same time as depoliticising infrastructure planning. We argue that the promises of Building Back Better did not constitute the radical rupture from earlier practices initially promised and that in future crises we need to resist the closure of political space that typically accompanies emergency measures and ask ‘what infrastructure, for whom and where?’

Keywords
Pandemic, infrastructure, COVID-19, postpolitics, states of exception

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Planning for infrastructure-led recovery

In this paper, we seek to advance debates on infrastructuralism and planning in times of crises. By examining the infrastructure discourses, governance, and politics during COVID-19, we consider the extent to which they signal a shift or rather a deepening of the ongoing depoliticisation of infrastructure decision-making processes. The term infrastructuralism is used to capture the political detachment, governance rescaling, and reshaped power-relations typically connected to periods of crisis response (Walby, 2015). This conceptualisation assists in exposing the new politics of infrastructure planning under exceptional conditions that could prove difficult to unpick.

While governments have positioned infrastructure construction as a targeted response to COVID-19, we argue that it should be seen as part of a longer history of infrastructure-led approaches to crises. For instance, Roosevelt’s New Deal as a response to the recession of the 1930s is often cited as inspiration for more recent programmes putting government-led infrastructure at the heart of rebuilding societies and economies. This is evident even in the recent terminology such as ‘Green New Deal’ used to justify infrastructure programmes to address the global pandemic and parallel crises around global environmental change, food security and energy security. In a similar vein, state-led investments in road-building and social housing following the second world war delivered a Keynesian-inspired boost to economies which was allied to optimism around the promise of modernity. What differs in the current period is that to understand the promise of infrastructure investment we need to frame it within the politics and practices of neoliberalism and the multiple crises claims that shape contemporary infrastructure discourses, governance and politics.

To explore this, we undertook an international case study approach, examining infrastructure-led economic recovery strategies from COVID-19 in Aotearoa-New Zealand, Australia, and the UK. These countries have long-experimented with neoliberal policy reforms and presented themselves as early models of neoliberal reforming agendas for rolling back the state associated with the prime ministers of the day (Rogernomics in New Zealand, economic rationalism under Keating in Australia and Thatcherism in the UK: Larner 2006). All have subsequently sought to reconfigure the state in support of neoliberal ideas around competitiveness and productivity, whilst continuing to assert individual rights and responsibilities (Peck 2013).

Major state-led infrastructure investment programmes have recently been promoted in all three nations to stimulate private sector investment and job creation. Pre-pandemic, all three countries experienced similar discourses regarding the slow and problematic delivery of major infrastructure projects holding back economic growth and the related requirement for governance reforms, particularly in planning. Each country had established ‘independent’ national infrastructure commissions to develop infrastructure strategies and advise governments on spending priorities. With the scene already set for boosting spending on infrastructure mega-projects, all sought to justify using large-scale investment in ‘shovel-ready’ infrastructure and ‘fast-track’ processes as part of their response to the economic impacts of COVID-19.

To understand the implications of these trends, we draw on theories of postpolitics and states of exception, and Dodson’s (2009) three-fold analytical categories of infrastructure discourses, infrastructure governance, and infrastructure politics. Government documents, media announcements and related public debates were examined thematically in relation to each of these categories and to themes emerging from the literature review (see Tables 1–3). We define ‘infrastructure’ in an encompassing manner to try to capture the scope and breadth of infrastructure discourses of promise.
The depoliticisation and repoliticisation of infrastructure at times of crisis

This section brings into conversation literatures on postpolitics and states of exception to contextualise the political promise of infrastructure and its existing technical instrumentalities, with the ways power is mobilised and foreclosed in infrastructure planning during times of ‘crisis’.

Postpolitics and infrastructure

Postpolitics literature has been used by urban studies scholars to examine how consensus-brokering in strategic planning conceals power through practices and processes of depoliticisation (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2012; Swyngedouw, 2009), shielding elite interests from public scrutiny where claims for equality could be otherwise made.

Emerging out of a philosophical tradition led by post-foundational thinkers including Rancière (2004, 2006) and Mouffe (2000, 2005), the central tenet of postpolitics is that politics is never static. Instead, politics evolves by taking new forms to protect the hegemonic position of the state through increasingly pervasive and sophisticated practices of depoliticisation that in recent decades aim to expedite neoliberal policy reforms promoting growth and wealth creation whilst reducing state spending and regulatory capacity. State tactics include using technologies of government such as legal frameworks, institutions, discourses, expert practices and deliberative processes that shape what counts as legitimate voice, delineating which aspects of decision-making can be challenged, by whom, and how.

In the state’s efforts to protect its hegemonic position, it can attempt to transfer, defer, or displace the political in multiple ways (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2015). The political here concerns counter-hegemonic challenges directed at the state to claim equality of voice and treatment where previously these had been denied (Mouffe, 2013). As Wood and Flinders (2014) argue, depoliticisation strategies can be found across the fabric of contemporary government. For instance, government can shift powers to new governance bodies reducing accountability and transparency. Also, it can shift the state’s relationship with its citizens (e.g. transferring responsibilities to the individual) and adopt powerful discursive practices that normalise these relations thereby reducing the impact of opposition.

Important though depoliticisation is to this argument, it is crucial to see it in relation to parallel processes of repoliticisation in response to attempts to foreclose opportunities to voice fundamental disagreement with state strategies. Rancière (2004: 8) argues that whilst the state can deploy a range of techniques for suppressing dissent, it is unlikely to achieve this permanently, since paradoxically ‘politics is always on the point of disappearing, and thus perhaps always on the point of reappearing’. The questions of where politics will reappear and in what form are interesting to ask when governments make crisis claims. For instance, opposition might be initially contained as people are urged to ‘pull together’ and back government, in effect deferring the political moment to beyond the ‘event’ (a pandemic), the financial announcements (infrastructure-led recovery projects), or decisions taken under new powers (fast-tracking processes).
From a planning perspective, depoliticisation and use of expert-led processes that reduce avenues for meaningful citizen engagement is not new. The modernist urban redevelopment projects of the early part of the post-war welfare state in many western societies came under academic and political scrutiny precisely because of their technocratic instrumentalities (Ravetz 1980; Stretton 1970/1989; Sandercock 1976), a critique also levelled at many recent infrastructure projects (Haughton and McManus 2019; Searle and Legacy 2021). Similarly, some recent state depoliticisation tactics resonate with or draw inspiration from earlier practices, such as independent housing and New Town commissions, where expert bodies and practices seek to ‘take the politics out’ of contentious debates by constructing public reasoning in ways that resist public scrutiny (Jasanoff, 2012). Nor is protest against major road-building and urban redevelopment projects new, as many trenchant critiques of technocratic planning practices in the 1960s and 1970s revealed (e.g. Arnstein 1969; Ravetz 1980; Iveson 2014). But what has changed radically in the period since is that infrastructuralism has become more central to neoliberal strategies and crisis responses, and governments have become more sophisticated in their attempts to present these as apolitical investments for the public good.

In the face of competing pressures and calls for their attention, much of the public remains disengaged from infrastructure politics. But there are numerous examples of groups seeking to reopen infrastructure debates that governments would like to foreclose. These can then create backlashes against government reforms and practices that seek to circumvent public rights to object, that would in effect roll back some of the moves towards greater public participation in planning that emerged in response to the critiques of technocratic planning practices in the 1960s and 1970s. More generally, politicians have had to respond to the fact that larger numbers of people have become sceptical about political promises and more questioning of technical expertise than in the immediate aftermath of World War II. Those seeking to promote neoliberal reforms, market rationalities, and the use of expert-led systems for decision-making have responded by seeking to reposition expectations around the right to protest and claims for equality of treatment with the imperative for major infrastructure provision, particularly where these can be justified as a crisis response (McAuliffe and Rogers, 2018).

In short, increasing sophistication in depoliticising decision-making has been countered with increasing sophistication in the tactics of repoliticisation, not least in relation to major infrastructure projects (Haughton and McManus, 2019, 2021). This response draws attention to the ways politicisation dynamics exist in a dialectical interplay, particularly as variant forms of rapidly mutating neoliberal orthodoxy (Peck, 2013) infuse government thinking around issues such as promoting major new infrastructure projects.

**States of exception and infrastructure**

In a different way, the State of Exception literature is also about the politics of state power and the opportunities of emergencies. Drawing upon the work of Agamben (1998, 2005) and Ong (2006), the idea considers how the state extends its power in times of crisis, war, or terror and the implications for deliberation, contestation and democracy. Some authors have drawn a distinction between actual, anticipated, or imagined emergencies (e.g. Klein, 2007), where crises claims have been deployed as a rationale for increased state powers and emergency legislation. There is an element of responsibility in such claims – of a government duty to provide stability to external shocks – often combined with a promise that a return to normality will not just apply to everyday life, but also to the newly acquired state powers.

It is important to acknowledge that even under states of emergency, extensions of state power may meet resistance. As Anderson (2020) argues, such moves can precipitate intense political scrutiny and opposition to state excessiveness, drawing on fears of over-reaching government. For
Anderson, this suggests the need to analyse what he refers to as ‘scenes of emergency’ in relation to the dis-assembly and re-assembly of the state, rather than as straightforward power grabs. Taking this argument further, and drawing on our earlier arguments, we may also consider these scenes in relation to processes of de- and re-politicisation and the remaking and rescaling of governance in pursuit of new state infrastructure strategies.

In postpolitical terms, states of emergency can set the conditions for the state to extend its powers to pursue existing economic goals and to depoliticise this very act in the process (Swyngedouw, 2014). From these perspectives, the state can be seen as seeking to legitimise its recovery work and infrastructural focus by deploying economic rationalities that foreground jobs and growth as a national aim, relegating to the background questions about who benefits and how, and who are losers and why. Broader issues like climate change can be acknowledged, but it is the pursuit of high economic growth that most powerfully shapes recovery strategies.

The framing around crisis and urgency can mobilise tactics of depoliticisation, but these invariably foreclose opportunities for a politics of opposition only partially and temporarily. For whilst tactics for suppressing dissent may work up to a point, fractures will eventually emerge, particularly when the inequality created by suppression triggers oppositional forces to form new politics of resistance (Rancière, 2004). This dialectic sets depoliticisation processes in co-existence with processes of repoliticisation as fresh claims are made for equality (Haughton and McManus, 2019). Integral to these processes of de- and re-politicisation are claims about the necessity of governance reforms. To remove blockages to major infrastructure projects, these claims may be directed as critiques. Examples include portraying local planning systems as too bureaucratic and slow, and protesters as anti-progress or self-interested. Such claims give support to the creation of parallel national or state level approval processes for fast-tracking infrastructure planning decisions and rescaling planning powers away from local governments (Gibson et al., 2022; McManus and Haughton, 2021).

The states of exception literature helps explain how new and expedited forms of postpolitical tactics come into being. Indeed, the well-worn phrase ‘never waste a good crisis’ is often invoked ironically in such moments and the heightened sense of urgency can be used by governments as a legitimising tactic to build consensus, but not without also creating new grounds for challenge of the dominant model (Anderson, 2020). There is dissent on many fronts across the political spectrum and it is virtually impossible – and indeed undesirable – to suppress these, so the state has to find new ways of accommodating or at least, engaging through, for instance, introducing new venues for community engagement. However, in the context of states of emergency, governments have scope to push through reforms curtailing public rights to object. Where governments can claim to be addressing multiple states of emergency these reforming opportunities potentially magnify. We now turn to our case studies to explore these issues in the context of ‘Building Back Better’ from COVID-19.

Planning for infrastructure

Pre-pandemic infrastructure discourses, governance reforms and politics

Each case study nation has different styles of leadership, politics, and governance, as well as varying cultural expectations around the role of the state, democratic engagement, and scalar distribution of powers. Nonetheless, there are also similarities in their strategies to recover economically from the pandemic, notably in relation to advocating new infrastructure, the existing and new discourses used to support this, and how claims about speedy delivery necessitated exceptional governance reforms.

There is also a comparable context in how the three countries were turning to infrastructure pre-pandemic as part of ongoing governance debates. For example, in Aotearoa-New Zealand the crisis
stimulus was in addition to a strong recent focus on establishing a ‘pipeline’ of infrastructure investment that predated COVID-19. This included establishing, for instance, an autonomous Crown Entity – the New Zealand Infrastructure Commission in 2019 – created to coordinate, develop and promote an approach to infrastructure able to help address an ‘unprecedented infrastructure deficit’ (Walls, 2019) and substantial new funds, such as the ‘New Zealand Upgrade Program’ and the ‘Provincial Growth Fund’. There was also political consensus on the need for planning reform, quicker infrastructure decisions, and an emerging debate concerning how current infrastructure responds poorly to sustainability and climate change (e.g. Climate Change Commission, 2020).

Likewise in Australia, particularly in Victoria, the Big Build programme was designed to facilitate economic growth, create jobs and to build the infrastructure ‘that will keep Victorians moving in the decades to come’ (State of Victoria, 2022). While the planning and governance supporting infrastructure delivery is different by state in Australia, clear trends were emerging toward the announcement of mega-projects before producing a business case. Indeed, Australia had achieved a normalisation of the ‘infrastructure turn’ (Dodson, 2009), precipitating calls from neoliberal think tanks to rethink infrastructure’s centrality in national growth strategies, citing concerns of costs overruns and failure of due planning (see, Terril and Danks, 2016). In more recent years, the existing politics of infrastructure are set within a context of a climate crisis. A bushfire season in 2019-20 led to calls for stronger national coordination, amplified by a Royal Commission calling for a national agency to coordinate recovery and support resilience, which was introduced in May 2021 (Commonwealth of Australia, 2021). At the time of writing, such calls remain unheard in the wake of more recent devastating floods.

Infrastructure was also central to pre-pandemic debates in the UK. The newly elected 2019 government made much of its agenda for reversing the austerity politics of cutting public sector spending over the previous decade, instead promising to build 40 new hospitals, plus other infrastructure investments in transport, energy and housing. Running through these electoral promises was the mission to improve national productivity whilst reducing geographical inequalities across the country, known as the ‘levelling-up’ agenda.

With the pre-pandemic era of infrastructure politics in view, this section looks across the countries and analyses their infrastructure discourses of promise, governance reforms, and politics of the pandemic era, a framing that draws on Dodson’s (2017: 90–91) identification of key analytical aspects of the ‘infrastructure turn’ in planning. Discourse includes statements made by governing authorities and the ‘normative connections between objects’. Reform focuses on the practices and ways in which infrastructure becomes knowable as an object. Politics relates to the ‘material political interest present in the production of infrastructure’.

**Infrastructure discourses of promise**

On the 17th March 2020, Aotearoa-New Zealand became one of the first to announce a COVID-19 stimulus package, encompassing some 4% of GDP and comprising a series of measures aimed at businesses, health, and beneficiaries. Attention turned to infrastructure, and by 1st April the government released a high-profile call for ‘shovel-ready’ infrastructure proposals, a nationwide competition for infrastructure funds (New Zealand Government, 2020a). This initiative received political consensus, in part due to the synergies with existing discourses concerning how inadequate Local Authority funding and investment had contributed to an infrastructure deficit that was constraining growth, productivity, and the supply of land for housing (e.g. Bennett, 2020; Johnson, et al., 2018).

The degree of political consensus regarding the existing problems, extended to the new crisis framing: to ‘Build Back Better’. Widely used across political parties it offered a discourse of
promise that framed recovery as opportunity; not just new infrastructure to support short-term job creation, but referenced in Jacinda Ardern’s 17th October 2020 election victory speech as able to ‘build an economy that works for everyone’ (RNZ, 2020). While there were attempts to provide alternative framings, for example, the Green Party tried to align investment with the terms ‘green recovery’ or ‘nature-based economic recovery’, they also used Building Back Better as a pliable means to critique the extent to which existing infrastructure supported sustainability, social justice, and climate change goals.

In Australia, initial attention on promoting post-pandemic economic recovery positioned infrastructure as a central feature, reflecting longer-standing commitments to improving the country’s infrastructure. Australia has had an independent advisory body to government since 2008, Infrastructure Australia, whilst some states have established their own independent statutory commissions to advise on infrastructure priorities, including Infrastructure Victoria (2015-) and Infrastructure NSW (2011-).

On 6 October 2020, the Liberal-National Commonwealth government announced a budget that would embrace a market and private-sector-led recovery. There was also a commitment to ‘Build Back Better’, a phrase used in the wake of the 2019-2020 bushfires and again during the pandemic across both politics and sectors in the community (e.g. ABC Radio National, 2020; Environment Victoria, 2021). An initial reliance on ‘shovel-ready’ projects, was evidenced by the Commonwealth government’s $1bn commitment towards jointly funded state projects in 2020 to ‘support jobs immediately’ (Australian Government, 2020), with some focus on ‘smaller shovel-ready projects, in part to provide opportunities for small and medium-sized contractors and suppliers’ (Infrastructure Magazine, 2020). Compared to Aotearoa-New Zealand where there was a stronger discourse supporting a green recovery, this was largely absent in Australia. Instead, what dominated was a discourse of ‘securing Australia’s future’ (Frydenberg, 2020). This evolved into ‘securing Australia’s recovery’ in the 2021-22 Budget calling for a strong economic recovery and forecasted lower than expected unemployment (Commonwealth of Australia, 2021).

The UK Chancellor announced a major infrastructure investment programme in March 2020 before the first COVID-19 lockdown. Intended initially to support the newly elected government’s efforts to seize what it presented as the opportunities of Brexit to boost the national economy and to re-balance growth across the country. Proposals were dominated by transport but also included measures on energy, housing and other sectors. This initial announcement was followed by a further spending review in November 2020 which promised a capital spend of £100 bn in 2021-22 to aid recovery. Accompanying the November statement, a National Infrastructure Strategy (NIS) was published, which included a £4 bn ‘levelling-up’ fund to help harder hit communities in the North and Midlands (HM Treasury, 2020).

This Infrastructure Strategy was in formal terms the government’s response to the National Infrastructure Commission (NIC) recommendations from a pre-pandemic 2018 report, but also drew on the pandemic experience to justify priorities. The NIC was established in 2015, led by a group of experts mainly from industry. The sub-title of the 2020 Infrastructure Strategy, ‘Fairer, Faster, Greener’, signalled how the government wanted the strategy to be seen. Not simply a list of mega-projects, but a transformative agenda for the entire country. The limited critical media coverage of the NIS may reflect how it was framed as a response to expert advice, plus the way in which new investment proposals were presented in broad-brush terms as addressing both long-standing infrastructure deficits and the need to kickstart the economy post-pandemic. Whilst some favoured projects were announced, many details were left unclear, their deterritorialised status in effect deferring and displacing the potential for political conflict.

As in Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand, ‘Building Back Better’ became a term frequently used by national politicians to justify infrastructure spending, whilst also adopted by a wide range of sectoral lobby groups. The term ‘shovel-ready’ was occasionally used by ministers intent on
showing that they could bring about a rapid economic recovery or by construction industry sector groups. A specific example came in June 2020 when the government announced it was bringing forward plans for £5 bn of spending on new capital projects to aid recovery, mainly allocated to hospital and school projects, but also including:

£900 m for a range of ‘shovel ready’ local growth projects in England over the course of this year and next. This will enable local areas to invest in priority infrastructure projects to drive local growth and jobs. (Prime Minister’s Office, 2020)

Table 1 summarises the existing and new infrastructure discourses of crisis and promise. The first characteristic to note is how similarities emerged in a context of significant difference. Each country has high-profile ‘crises’, such as rapidly escalating house prices in New Zealand, bushfires in Australia, or Brexit in the UK, as well as existing social, economic, spatial, ecological and intergenerational challenges, many of which were amplified by COVID-19. Yet, the early infrastructure-led recovery strategies proved relatively blind to national contexts or regional/local nuance, with instead a broad recognition that problems exist and this was an opportunity to ‘Build Back Better’.

A further comparison is the dominance of political economy rationalities in how crisis is invoked even in times of relative stability by pointing to failures of statecraft, such as governance and regulatory failures. In contrast, the emergence of very real national emergencies, such as COVID-19, leads to emphasis on more solution-oriented discourses of promise, such as Building Back Better, where potentially radically different visions become promoted as possible, albeit temporarily. As might be expected with these arguments, the future is a strong motif, as is the

| Country            | Pre-pandemic discourses of infrastructure crisis | New discourses of infrastructure promise                  |
|--------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| Aotearoa-New Zealand | Infrastructure deficit                          | Build Back Better                                         |
|                    | Inefficient Local Government planning           |                                                           |
|                    | Slow decision making                            | Shovel-ready                                               |
|                    | Low economic productivity                       | Faster decision making                                     |
|                    | Poor supply of land for housing                 | Short-term job creation                                    |
|                    | Poor mitigation/adaptation to climate change    | Modernise the economy                                      |
| Australia          | Delivering the right infrastructure for a growing nation | Build Back Better                                         |
|                    | Low economic productivity                       |                                                           |
|                    | Bushfires and critical infrastructure           | Shovel-ready                                               |
|                    | High congestion (‘getting you home sooner and safer’) | Building our future                                       |
|                    |                                               | Securing Australia’s future and recovery                   |
| UK                 | Infrastructure deficit                          |                                                           |
|                    | Planning failures                               | Renewed emphasis on levelling up agenda                     |
|                    | Slow decision-making                            | Shovel-ready projects                                      |
|                    | Improve national competitiveness                | Faster planning                                            |
|                    | Post-Brexit agenda for levelling up across UK   | Green recovery with links to climate change                |
|                    | Need for independent expert advice on infrastructure priorities | Greater emphasis on active travel, affordable homes, zero carbon, health and education. |
promise of modernity, and increasingly of community resilience to withstand future crises (cf Anand, et al., 2018). However, these narratives of crisis response also defer its nature and associated politics to a future time and place, and foster ambiguities over whether new infrastructure reflects new thinking and circumstances, or simply advances pre-existing plans. Paradoxically, to help foster consensus, these aspirational statements typically avoided focussing on specific projects, in effect deterritorialising promises and their associated projects, rendering opposition more difficult to mount, but setting the scene for future cuts as the longevity of the pandemic created new budgetary constraints.

It is worth noting that, particularly in Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand, the ability to build faster was curtailed by local lockdowns where construction activity was heavily reduced, and also by prolonged closure of international borders. In the UK, the impacts of Brexit on European migrant workers also raised fears of skill shortages in construction and other sectors. Large projects such as building new hospitals also involve considerable lead times in terms of generating designs, getting approvals even under new less onerous regulatory systems, and issuing contracts to construction firms. The result was that during the pandemic itself, the provision for ‘faster planning’ was mainly mobilised to support smaller infrastructure interventions like new bike lanes or designating temporary low traffic neighbourhoods. Table 1 reveals how earlier and newer discourses show a degree of commonality not only across the different countries but also pre- and during COVID-19. In all three countries, the political opportunity to promote an infrastructure-led recovery, meant many reforms and interventions drew heavily on existing debates and project proposals. In the terminology of the period both reforms and project proposals were ‘shovel-ready’.

**Infrastructure governance reforms**

Just as the Aotearoa-New Zealand Government acted quickly to contain the pandemic, they also moved swiftly to enact governance reforms aimed at delivering their promises of infrastructure investment, faster decisions, and job creation. For instance, the deadline to submit proposals to the ‘shovel-ready’ fund came a mere 2 weeks after its establishment. In practice, only institutions with existing project proposals, or those with the ability to rapidly develop a compelling business case could easily contribute.

A new expert advisory forum was quickly established to assist in decision-making. The ‘Infrastructure Industry Reference Group’, whose members included experts from some of the major infrastructure providers, would receive proposals, whittle down contenders, and prepare a shortlist of projects for government to consider. The criteria were not open for debate: they had to be of an infrastructure nature, construction-ready, of a large enough size to create material employment benefits, as well as a broad catch-all consideration of benefits and risks. While open to all kinds of infrastructure in all places, it made no reference to existing inequalities nor the more aspirational goals frequently trailed in the Build Back Better discourse, beyond economic recovery.

On the 3rd May 2020, a law change was proposed introducing a new ‘fast-tracking’ planning process for 2 years, a measure which quickly came into effect on the 9th July. As a result, certain infrastructure proposals could be processed by a small ‘Expert Consulting Panel’ within 25 days. These proposals would not only by-pass typical assessment processes and community consultation, but also have a ‘high expectation’ that consent would be granted. We now see more critique, particularly from the practice community start to emerge. This encompassed concerns about the speed of the new processes, the redistribution of power away from citizens and local planners towards Ministers and experts, the fragmented nature of the project-oriented recovery and how this inhibited the potential for more transformative changes (e.g. Neilson, 2020; White, 2020). The
Government Minister drew explicit parallels between the public health and economic response in defending the changes:

We went hard and early to beat the virus and now we’re doing the same to get the economy moving too…. The consenting and approval processes that are used in normal circumstances don’t provide the speed and certainty we need now in response to the economic fallout from COVID-19. (New Zealand Government, 2020b)

In Australia, financial instruments in the form of wage subsidies and unemployment support were quickly released by the Commonwealth government at the start of the pandemic. This fiscally conservative government campaigned in 2019 on returning the federal budget ‘Back in Black’, and were critical of Labour’s response to the Global Financial Crisis 10 years earlier. But when the pandemic hit and job losses increased, the government was forced to support an annual budget deficit that would see Australia experience ‘its longest stretch in the red in more than half a century’ (Kehoe, 2020).

In common with elsewhere, the Building Back Better discourse highlighted the crucial role of government in responding to the pandemic. In Australia, the role of the state governments was of particular importance given the federated structure. The swiftness of response and level of co-ordination showed the value of government in responding to major societal challenges. For instance, similar to Aotearoa-New Zealand, a Building Victoria’s Recovery Taskforce was established in April 2020 and ran for 3 months to help identify smaller ‘shovel-ready’ projects, and assess those for fast-tracking through the planning permit and planning scheme amendments processes (Government of Victoria, 2020). The Taskforce supported local government and this was observed, for instance, in the installation of new bike lanes in the City of Melbourne (City of Melbourne, 2020). This taskforce was later replaced with a 12-month Development Facilitation Program in October 2020 to resume some of the duties of the taskforce, including identifying projects for accelerated assessment (State of Victoria, 2021).

In the UK, the government used the first pandemic lockdown period to announce major new reforms to the English planning system in mid-2020 and subsequently placed planning reforms at the heart of its infrastructure strategy too. The new proposals involved a radical overhaul of local planning, suggesting a three-tier zoning system be introduced to reduce opportunities for local communities to delay individual development proposals. In the case of infrastructure planning, reforms were announced in the 2020 NIS to reduce environmental assessment requirements and to expedite planning approvals. Planning approval powers for major infrastructure projects has rested with central government since 2008, with smaller projects still subject to local planning decisions. New proposals would remove discretion from local authority planning committees to debate certain types of development proposals, in effect imposing national priorities for growth on local planning systems. In contrast to Aotearoa-New Zealand, these proposals were intended as permanent reforms, rather than time-limited experiments to expedite COVID-19 recovery. However such was the opposition to attempts to reduce the public’s right to object to unwanted proposals that many aspects had been dropped by early 2022.

The pandemic was also used to add a further level of justification for the ‘speeding up’ emphasis in relation to infrastructure. In the summer 2020, the government announced that it was setting up a ‘Project Speed Taskforce’ to be led by the Chancellor. The work of Project Speed is acknowledged in the NIS and credited with bringing in reforms to environmental regulations and the planning system that were seen as blocking development.

Table 2 shows the key emergency governance reforms and the main critiques that emerged in response. It reveals the intended shift towards centralised and expert-led decision-making processes with less space for either the assessment practices associated with major infrastructure or the
necessary politics typically associated with more transformative futures. Infrastructure was recast as more of a technical than political endeavour, and so amenable to streamlined processes of de-liberation backed by national political decision-making, requiring limited public opportunities for debate (see Legacy, 2017). In simple terms, in each country, we observed the bundling of discourses of infrastructural promise and rapid state action with targeted changes in infrastructure and planning governance.

Infrastructure politics

Within Aotearoa-New Zealand the launch of an infrastructure stimulus policy generated a high degree of political consensus, receiving only limited critique from opposition or minor parties. The government discourse involved repeated reference to the ‘Team of 5 Million’, a framing that brought a sense of collectivism as well as compliance. Significantly, any fissures were not regarding the emergency processes, impact upon democracy or transparency, or overall direction. Instead, they focused on a few individual funding decisions, the political nature of successful ‘big announcements’, or how even this emergency urbanism lacked urgency (e.g. Willis, 2020).

While the shovel-ready fund had depolitical tendencies regarding specific infrastructure and its delivery it repoliticised other political arenas, notably regarding government debt, a debate that has since gathered pace. As Covid-19 hit national debt was very low at just over 19% of GDP, while Local Government debt had been steadily increasing since 2006, raising concerns about its ability to fund growth and improve local wellbeing (New Zealand Productivity Commission, 2019). The combination of a Labour government in power, consensus for state stimulus, and the discourses of

| Country          | New emergency governance reforms                                                                 | External critiques of reforms                                    |
|------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Aotearoa-New Zealand | Establishment of new funds for ‘shovel-ready’ infrastructure<br>Expert group established to review infrastructure proposals<br>‘Fast-track’ law for certain infrastructure<br>Expert panels can determine major development proposals | More power for Ministers but competition means lack of national coordination<br>More power given to ‘industry’ experts<br>Continuation of existing priorities, less time to advance transformative projects<br>Limited acknowledgement of uneven effects of pandemic and existing inequality<br>Less opportunity for citizen involvement |
| Australia        | Infrastructure Investment Program established<br>Delivery in ‘partnership’ with state/private sector<br>New expert group Building Victoria’s Recovery Taskforce established<br>Development Facilitation Program | Disconnect between ‘hard infrastructure’ of National government with the social infrastructure of Victoria. Fast-tracked programs praised by development lobby groups but questioned elsewhere. Strong critique that recovery effort was not addressing climate change |
| UK               | Competitive funding schemes for town centre renewal and active travel projects<br>New Project Speed Taskforce established<br>New zoning rules proposed | Concern about centralisation of powers<br>Opaque criteria for ‘competitive’ allocations of funds to local projects. Less opportunity for local citizen involvement |

Table 2. New governance reforms and emerging critiques from professional bodies, political parties, lobby groups and other ‘stakeholders’.
‘Build Back Better’ created a wider discussion about the role of the state and the possibilities of infrastructure. For example, there were media discussions regarding opportunities to reshape the economy, for increased investment in more active travel and local living, or to use the stimulus to transition towards a zero carbon economy (e.g. Grieve, 2020; West 2020; Woolf, 2020). It should be noted that beyond the ‘shovel-ready’ initiative, more targeted funds relating to infrastructure were also established but these were significantly smaller in scale even if greater in public engagement. For instance, Waka Kotahi, the Transport Agency, launched a small Tactical Urbanism fund ‘Innovating Streets for People’ which would provide 90% of funding for councils to co-design projects with local citizens to experiment with reducing vehicle speeds and promoting cycling and walkability. These have proved controversial, however, particularly with local businesses, leading to some officials to stress their temporary and experimental nature (Mather, 2021).

Turning to Australia, COVID-19 and the responses generated by governments at all scales and political leanings exposed the existing crises of privatisation, casualisation, and climate change. Despite the uneven impacts these conditions have had on vulnerable groups, as with Aotearoa-New Zealand, there has been an embrace of infrastructure delivery, with little scrutiny and engagement about distributional issues. Infrastructure proposals have been supported by depoliticising discourses that signal to the public that a response is coming. Elsewhere, the discourse and speed left little space for engaging with questions about who will benefit, how, and where those benefits are distributed. For example, ‘Build Back Better’ was used as a critique of the increasing gap in Australia between the haves and have-nots and supported a call to ‘do better’ stressing the need to create a fairer and greener Australia (McCalman, 2020). There remains a strong politics of ‘opportunity’ coming from sectors such as planning which is looking to advance the 20-min neighbourhood concept (e.g. Dalheim, 2020). What this moment of opportunity seemed to present was an opening – at least within some corners of planning – of what was deemed impossible pre-COVID-19, into something that was entirely possible, rendering visible the power of government will.

In the UK, the promise of an infrastructure-led recovery, with its rallying call of ‘Build Back Better’, speeding up delivery, and reducing planning delays, represented a continuation of ‘business as usual’ for a UK government perennially in the business of ‘reforming planning’ by reducing local planning discretion in favour of national direction (Allmendinger and Haughton, 2019). The 2020 NIS contained large elements of continuity with previous announcements about the scale and scope of the government’s intentions in relation to infrastructure, responding not only to the need for a post-pandemic economic recovery but also attempts to boost productivity and address the ‘levelling-up’ agenda directed at the so-called ‘left-behind’ places. The timing coincided with the UK government hosting COP26, in Glasgow 2021, so a focus on investments to tackle climate change policies was a political priority. There were enough signs however of a desire for a transformative agenda for future infrastructure to trigger debates in the media and beyond around, for instance, moving towards zero carbon and active travel.

One of the most immediate aspects of the revised infrastructure spending commitments during 2020 was to bring forward new investment in infrastructure to promote cycling and walkability, including encouraging local authorities to build emergency bike lanes and use selective road closures to promote low traffic neighbourhoods. Whilst the initial policy impetus was to deliver actions at speed, very quickly the approach changed in response to some of the intense local debates that were generated, including vandalisation of some road closure barriers. At a project level, the emphasis shifted to more initial public engagement, including greater emphasis on communicating to residents what the projects were intended to achieve. As with Aotearoa-New Zealand, in many cases, new measures were reframed as experiments which could be changed in response to lived experiences and further consultation. It could be argued that this experience reveals how the politics of dissent has been embraced to find ways of improving the social acceptability of local
infrastructure projects, even if this slows down their implementation. So far, however, these lessons
do not appear to have altered the approach to national planning for major infrastructure projects.

Table 3 looks across the three cases to summarise some of the new infrastructure politics, in
particular tactics of depoliticisation and repoliticisation. With regard to the former, we see dominant
infrastructure narratives which emphasise its technical, expert and urgent nature, whose deliberation
requires reformed processes and practices to deliver promised economic boosts more rapidly. These
new arrangements bring existing technical communities of practice into new formations
(e.g. Infrastructure Industry Reference Group or Taskforces) to administer central recovery funds.
While suggesting a degree of independence and oversight, they serve to depoliticise pre-existing
infrastructure priorities, particularly with regard to a preference for large-scale ‘national’ projects
that can more easily demonstrate job creation criteria and give more power to central government
and industry and less to Local Government and the public. With little in these national strategies
regarding the location and nature of new proposals, sweeping promises can be made about addressing
various forms of geographical inequity, and social and environmental injustices, which are
then difficult to refute.

Table 3. New Infrastructural politics in responding to the COVID-19 crisis.

| Depoliticisation tactics | Repoliticisation tactics |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Dominant approach        |                          |
| Infrastructure framed as an urgent national concern | Concerns ‘shovel-ready’ privileges existing projects or those actors and agencies best able to mobilise expertise |
| Infrastructure framed as technical and expert | Concern inadequate discussion of the structural effects of pandemic, such as working from home |
| ‘Independent’ Infrastructure commissions or industry experts given power | Backlash against some regulatory changes and proposed priorities such as active travel schemes |
| Scalar relationships      |                          |
| Increased centralisation of funds and competitive bidding, using ‘technical’ criteria | Discontent in how Central/Federal government funds Local Government, call for extra local funding given history of austerity in UK and high local debt in NZ |
| More Ministerial power; less power for decision making at sub-national tiers | Lack of transparency and allegations of political bias in which sectors/places benefit most |
| Relationship between state and citizen |                          |
| More focus on rapid decision making, less scope for deliberation | Disconnect between national push for economic growth with local social equity agendas, limited radicalism in prioritising policies promoting climate and social justice |
| Traditional planning and engagement seen as slow and political. Limited opportunities for objecting to infrastructure priorities and projects | Rapidly implemented projects create public anxiety, notably around reclaiming road space for active travel |
| Less opportunity for local citizen involvement in the types of infrastructure and its location | Local government assumes ‘risk’ of introducing changes, acknowledging closeness to citizens |
| Attempts to push through planning reforms in some cases abandoned or changed, as citizens via local MPs push back | |
Interestingly, at the same time as some opportunities for public discussion are rendered near meaningless by lack of detail, the prevalence of discourses emphasising the criticality of infrastructure revitalised other areas of infrastructure politics and re-worked central-local tensions. In Aotearoa-New Zealand and the UK we see, for example, claims of inadequate local government funding reopen. All three countries also witnessed intense political debates about the desirability of smaller scale local projects, like walkable neighbourhoods.

Overall, while we see discourses of promise and transformation associated with ‘Build Back Better’, these tend to mask the realities of important continuities in terms of both infrastructure priorities and the direction of governance reforms. In each case reforms have further reduced the opportunities for transparent public debate about uneven development, changing national priorities and strategic directions particularly dependence on mega-projects, with some limited concessions to allow local debate around individual smaller projects.

To date, national governments have sought to distance themselves from infrastructure protests by leaving local governments to deal with outbursts of discontent as objects emerge. While infrastructure investment may have merit, the lack of discussion regarding the substance of outcome inequalities or new opportunities to change course, is symptomatic of a locked-in, depoliticised and deterritorialised trajectory in the national planning and delivery of infrastructure. Instead, what is observed is a crisis response that leverages legitimate concerns about local and regional uneven development or a failure to address ongoing crises like climate change, to advance infrastructure funding that promotes and continues narrow national economic objectives. In many ways, neither the unique experience of the pandemic nor current spatial inequalities have had much influence on the questioning how much infrastructure investment might be appropriate or addressing changing public priorities revealed during the Covid pandemic and lockdowns.

**Conclusion**

This paper set out to critically analyse how existing claims about the need for more infrastructure and less planning were mobilised to address both long-standing concerns about economic, social and geographical structural inequalities, as well as more immediate aspects related to economic recovery from the pandemic. In contrast to other historic States of Emergency (e.g. Anderson, 2020; Adey, et al., 2015), neither the COVID-19 economic response nor the focus on infrastructure was subject to significant contestation in the three nations studied. This consensus was influenced by pre-pandemic discourses that framed the delivery of infrastructure as problematic and a failure of statecraft, in particular inefficient planning and decision-making. Theories of postpolitics and states of exception help reveal that while the pandemic became a dominant rationale for investment, this concealed the influence of pre-existing systemic discourses around infrastructure deficits and slow planning, allowing existing narratives and slippery promises of infrastructure to be presented as somehow unchallengeable.

The effect was to normalise infrastructure construction as necessary in a crisis (as stimulus for short-term economic stability), necessary in shaping cities (as characterised by the ‘infrastructure turn’), and necessary in Building Back Better (as societal and system transformation). The centrality of infrastructure in multiple contexts forecloses important questions of ‘what infrastructure’, and, of increasing importance under climate change, ‘is traditional physical infrastructure designed to move goods and people around faster actually necessary’? Combined, these discourses and reforms go some way to ‘cordon off’ infrastructure planning from public debate and political scrutiny – less ‘too big to fail’ as we have seen previously and more ‘too important for politics’.

It is important to appreciate how early promises about the transformative potential of proposed new infrastructural projects represented a specific moment of infrastructural politics. However, as the pandemic continued and costs mounted, governments have paid more attention to reducing
public debt and inflationary pressures. Rather than seeing new rafts of imaginative transformative infrastructure proposals, for instance, diverting funding from road-building projects to those promoting active travel, or even reducing the imperative to travel at all, there was a subsequent reversion to pre-pandemic modalities, and cautionary consolidating announcements that maintained the depoliticisation of infrastructure, but repoliticised the level of debt that would be tolerable and so tempering the range of promises made.

What survived, was that in all three countries regulatory efficiency remained a key objective, with faster planning and ‘shovel-ready’ narratives underpinning the politics of major governance reforms. The centralisation of power via opaque national competitive funds administered by experts reduced the scope for local and public engagement and, by extension, scrutiny. In turn, these arrangements meant that claims could be made about governments using infrastructure spending to address geographical inequalities, whilst a lack of detail about projected socio-economic and environmental impacts meant these were hard to challenge. Importantly however, rather than being straightforward examples of depoliticisation, these interscalar changes also invoked new processes of repoliticisation, revealing tensions between the desire for swift approval and implementation of infrastructure by national and state governments, and the inevitable repoliticisation of these projects at the local level when impacts become visible. We are also now seeing the repoliticisation of government spending and infrastructure aspirations as the pandemic wears on.

This article has four key messages. First, we demonstrate that many reforms are familiar to those advocated pre-pandemic, such as critique of inefficient regulatory, governance and planning settings or low productivity, but now reapplied as central to state of emergency discourses. As such, we argue that while the new discourses, reforms and politics of infrastructure might have initially appeared innovative and directly related to the challenges of COVID-19, they should be seen as locked-in to existing political priorities, including support for major road-building projects, and reforms to planning in general and infrastructure planning in particular. Second, we highlight an inherent contradiction at the heart of this reconfigured infrastructuralism. It seeks to increase the social significance and economic criticality of infrastructure while simultaneously positioning it as too complex for the public to appreciate, too important to countenance delays, or too political for planners to mediate. Our third point regards the consequences of how these changing state/social relations privilege expert voices and existing economic priorities, which we argue may embed existing inequalities by accumulating power, both hierarchal and within technical professions, while shifting contested infrastructure politics to where the material reality of this new infrastructure may stimulate new conditions for opposition.

A fourth and final message is that if we really want to ‘Build Back Better’ we must hold accountable those mobilising discourses of promise during crises by resisting the closure of political space that typically accompany these emergency claims and ask the key questions of ‘what infrastructure, for whom and where?’. This allows us to interrogate the normalisation of infrastructure as ‘necessary’ – almost regardless of problem – unpick the assumptions of growth and productivity, and importantly, avoid maladaptation to climate change. If we do so, rather than bringing forward ‘shovel-ready’ infrastructure based on short-term jobs, we are more able to advance radical ‘shovel worthy’ alternatives, which can better address current spatial inequalities as well as facilitate the longer term societal transitions that need to be debated and openly scrutinised in public fora.

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