



POLITICS Q AND A

Former PM Sir Geoffrey Palmer's stark warning about NZ's democracy

By Q+A Reporters 1:25pm



Geoffrey Palmer: Why people are unhappy with democracy

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His new book *How to Save Democracy in Aotearoa New Zealand* reflects on the reasons behind people's unhappiness with democracy, and how to fix it. (Source: Q and A)

Former prime minister Sir Geoffrey Palmer has warned New Zealand's democracy is in a fragile position – like many countries

around the world – saying more work is needed to make it stable and robust.

Sir Geoffrey has had a distinguished career within and outside frontline politics, serving four terms as an MP, along with tenures as a member of the Privy Council, a judge at the International Court of Justice, and as Law Commission president.

Currently an honorary fellow of law at Victoria University, he spoke with Q+A about his forthcoming book, titled *How to Save Democracy in Aotearoa New Zealand*.

"My whole conviction in writing this book was in making sure New Zealand's democracy is as robust as it could be, so that it could withstand these terrible international tendencies that have come upon us," said Sir Geoffrey.



Sir Geoffrey Palmer speaks to Q+A's Jack Tame in September 2025 (Source: Q and A)

"Decay and rot set in in democracies and, if it's not addressed, it gets worse. That's what allows populism to take over, and authoritarianism to flourish."

Among his criticisms was the breakdown in the rule of law in overseas countries and the abandonment of norms in international relations, highlighting that a permanent member of the UN Security Council – Russia – had launched an illegal invasion of Ukraine.

He noted that the number of countries recognised as democracies had been in decline.

Sir Geoffrey said he didn't think it was inevitable New Zealand would go in that direction, "and we're not in bad shape compared to most of them", but that around the world, democracy had clearly been in retreat.

Eroding Parliamentary processes

A central criticism he made of New Zealand was the erosion of Parliamentary processes by successive governments – particularly the use of urgency for passing legislation, by which normal processes scrutinising bills are skipped.

"If you want to process a great deal of legislation, the Parliament's not sitting enough to deal with it," said Palmer, noting that drafting legislation effectively was time-consuming and difficult.

"MPs are grossly overworked. It is a very big system of government we have. To keep it properly working, you have to have accountability," said Sir Geoffrey.

He has previously argued the number of MPs should increase to enhance the scrutiny and accountability of the executive branch of government.

"The public doesn't like politicians but, the trouble is, the Parliament is going down in public estimation, and the reason it's going down is that people don't trust it," he said.

"If you don't have authentic democracy in your institutions and people don't trust it, you're on the road to perdition."

Palmer added: "Democracy is a very fragile form of government. It slips and slides away without people noticing."

For the full interview, watch the video above

Q+A with Jack Tame is made with the support of New Zealand On Air

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