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HEALTH & SCIENCE

Simeon Brown looks the taniwha in the eye without blinking – yet

New research overrides the Government's insistence that nursing shifts are safely staffed, suggesting thousands more hires are needed



by **Marc Daalder**

8 hours ago



Simeon Brown said he received a 'very warm welcome' at the NZNO meeting where nurses turned their backs on him. Photo: Marc Daalder

Analysis: Health Minister Simeon Brown knew going into his address at the nurses' union AGM that it would be tough ground, but his reception on Wednesday was ultimately ice cold.

Despite insisting afterwards he'd had “a very warm welcome”, the awkwardness and tension in the air were almost tangible as two dozen nurses began an impromptu protest, turning their backs on the minister. When his address ended with not a person in the room of a couple hundred people daring to clap their hands, the silence stretched on for long, painful seconds.

Kerri Nuku, the New Zealand Nurses Organisation president, deflated the tension somewhat with her following remarks, but Brown wasn't let off the hook either.

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“We have a saying back at home, look the taniwha in the eye and have the kōrero. And that is what this is an opportunity to do today. And as you can see, the frustration in the room is palpable. The frustration, nationally, is palpable,” she said.

“While we agree with some of the comments you've made, it is very concerning – we agree with the improvement, direction and results. What we can't support is that we are on the same page when we measure what cultural safety and safety of care looks like for patients.”

The members of the NZNO may have thought they were looking the taniwha, Simeon Brown, in the eye by inviting him to their AGM amid heightened tensions and strike actions. But he, too, chose to stare down the taniwha he sees in the powerful nurses union, not holding back in his address as he criticised the impact of the strikes on patients.

“Let me be clear: You have the right to strike. That right is part of a free and fair society. But it's also true that thousands of patients are affected. And it's not just critical appointments that are cancelled,” he said.

“One mother, whose baby was born prematurely, was told that skin-to-skin contact was critical for the baby's wellbeing, yet she was unable to hold her baby for two separate 24-hour periods because nurses were on strike.”



Nurses turned their backs on Brown in an impromptu protest. Photo: Marc Daalder

After excoriating the nurses for striking, Brown turned to blaming Labour's restructure of the health system for staffing shortages, then moved on to what he said had been the Government's successes in workforce planning. There was still more to do, but progress had been made, he said.

That, too, was Brown's line when questioned by reporters after his speech about new research commissioned by the NZNO from economic consultancy Infometrics, quantifying the size of the workforce shortage.

The research found an 8 percent increase in nursing numbers – equivalent to 2800 more nurses – was needed to achieve safe staffing levels across all shifts. On average across 2024, hospitals across the country were 587 nurses short each shift.

While staffing had increased slightly from 2023, it was still a dire figure and one which clashed with Health New Zealand/Te Whatu Ora's insistence that hospitals are safely staffed.

"With 592 hospital wards and emergency departments throughout the country, Te Whatu Ora's own data – which they fought to keep secret – shows that almost every ward, every shift is short-staffed," Paul Gouler, NZNO's chief

executive, said.

Health NZ was ordered by the Ombudsman to apologise after it unlawfully withheld data showing more than half of all day shifts were understaffed between January and November 2024, and 37 percent of all shifts total.

Both the Health NZ data and the new Infometrics report also come after then-health minister Shane Reti said the health agency had blown its budget last year by hiring too many nurses.

That wasn't a claim Brown resurrected on Wednesday, where he acknowledged there was more work still to do. But his response to repeated and specific questions about aspects of the report – findings on safe staffing, shortages heightened in cancer and cardiovascular wards – was to point the finger at the previous government and emphasise his Government's progress over the problems that remain.

"The report showed that there's been a significant improvement in the last few years. Those numbers were a lot higher back in 2022. They have been reducing, as the report acknowledges, there has been significant hiring of nurses in recent years – that is a positive step forward. But it also highlights, and I agree, there is more work to do," he said.

That work will be much more difficult to undertake when it is so hard to get nurses and the minister around the table. Right now, Brown is hoping that blistering criticism of striking health workers will pay off politically, averting public pressure to give in to demands around pay and staffing to get the health system running again.

Indeed, that's the tack taken by the Government more generally, responding to striking doctors, nurses, teachers and, most recently and unusually, principals. Ministers have become personally involved in commenting on strikes and bargaining, in defiance of past convention around arms-length arrangements. Those comments have been, uniformly, critical of the impacts of the strikes as well.

Brown used his electorate office to scold striking nurses two weeks ago, posting signage in the windows accusing the NZNO of disrupting 13,000 surgeries and appointments.

The problem for the Government is that, by and large, New Zealanders like teachers, doctors and nurses a lot more than they like politicians. Listen to almost any story about interacting with the health system and you hear two consistent messages: The system is broken, with long wait times and frustrating bureaucracy; and the people working in it are angels, doing their best with too little resource and too much demand.

If Brown hopes to drive a wedge between the public and nurses, he may be sorely disappointed. The more likely outcome is him driving a wedge between himself and the public.

Eventually, a deal will be struck and everyone will refocus on making the health system work. But there was no suggestion from either the minister or the union on Wednesday that either taniwha is prepared to blink first.



Kirk Williams

7 hours ago

The deceit is laid bare from the start when Simeon said he received a warm welcome!

Beating up on dedicated, hard working health care workers can only back fire. And as for blaming Labour – way overdue to accept responsibility. Labour's reforms hadn't had a chance to settle in before they were thrown out and replaced by nothing except Luxon's mate Lester Levy who achieved nothing except a totally unworkable plan.

So what did our grand coalition do – appointed Levy Chair of Health NZ and threw out Pay Equity for all including nurses in the primary sector and support roles.

Simeon, instead of hiding/denying facts and criticising all and sundry go in to bat for the public health sector. You got \$4billion for road pot holes last year, find \$4billion for the health pot holes where it is really needed.



Garry Moore

5 hours ago

Keep it up nurses. Your strength in numbers will show up this inexperienced, and doctrinaire minister for what he really is. Incompetent. He was with transport, and he is with health. Good ministers of health in the past, from both major parties, have had the ability to listen and to be collaborative. This guy shows no interest in neither listening, nor collaboration.



Gillian French

4 hours ago

According to RNZ at the time, 1090 people lost their jobs in the health sector due to reforms by the present coalition. This was done by the National coalition government – not Labour. Simeon Brown, perhaps you should remember that.

We need a Labour/National coalition so that we get agreement on the major subjects to achieve future security. The present one again off again according to who is in power is wasteful and frustrating.



Desmond Darby

3 hours ago

But even Labour/National accords that seemed to exist have been broken by this government, namely in housing densification and in rural greenhouse gas emissions. Hard to see how we can trust any in the future.

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