

Political and constitutional timeline

Explore some of the key moments and events that have helped shape the course of New Zealand's political and constitutional development. Follow the links for more detail.

1833

James Busby arrives in the Bay of Islands as British Resident in New Zealand – a junior consular representative with little power. See [Governing New Zealand](#), [Frontier of chaos](#) and [Taming the frontier](#).

1834

Northern chiefs gather at Busby's house at Waitangi to choose a Flag of the United Tribes of New Zealand to fly on New Zealand-built trading ships.

1835

A Declaration of Independence of New Zealand is drawn up by Busby without authorisation from his superiors. This asserts the independence of New Zealand, with all sovereign power and authority resting with the hereditary chiefs and tribes. The declaration is eventually signed by 52 Maori chiefs. See also [Background to the Treaty](#).

1839

The British government appoints William Hobson as consul to New Zealand, with instructions to obtain sovereignty with the consent of a 'sufficient number' of chiefs. See [Land and ideals](#) – background to the Treaty.

1840

The Treaty of Waitangi is signed on 6 February by about 40 chiefs. By September another 500 chiefs in different parts of the country have signed. On 21 May Lieutenant-governor Hobson proclaims British sovereignty over all of New Zealand: over the North Island on the basis of cession through the Treaty of Waitangi and over the southern islands by right of discovery. New Zealand becomes a dependency of New South Wales, a British Crown Colony that is governed by Sir George Gipps.

1841

New Zealand becomes a separate Crown Colony, ending its connection with New South Wales. Communicating with London takes many months.

1846

New Zealand is divided into two provinces, New Ulster and New Munster.

1852

The New Zealand Constitution Act (UK) establishes a system of representative government for New Zealand. Six (eventually ten) provinces are created, with elected superintendents and councils. At the national level, a General Assembly is established, consisting of a Legislative Council appointed by the Crown and a House of Representatives elected every five years by males over the age of 21 who own, lease or rent property of a certain value. See [The House of Representatives](#).

1853

The House of Representatives' first 37 Members of Parliament are elected.

1854

The First Parliament meets in Auckland.

1856

'Responsible' government begins in New Zealand, with an executive supported by a majority in House of Representatives. The governor retains responsibility for defence and

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Maori affairs.

1858

The Waikato chief Te Wherowhero becomes the first Maori King, taking the name Potatau. The rise of Te Kingitanga reflects Maori desires for a leader to unite the tribes, protect land from further sales and make laws for Maori.

1864

The colonial government asserts its responsibility for Maori affairs.

1867

Four Maori parliamentary seats are created (initially as a temporary measure for five years), with universal suffrage for Maori males over 21. The first Maori elections are held in 1868. See Maori Members of Parliament and Maori and the vote.

1876

The provinces are abolished, leaving central government as the single legislative authority. Hundreds of local bodies soon come into being.

1879

Universal suffrage is introduced for all males over 21.

1893

Universal suffrage is introduced for women over 21 (including Maori). New Zealand becomes the first self-governing country to grant the right to vote to all adult women.

1900

New Zealand claims the Cook Islands and annexes several other territories in the early 20th century.

1901

The Commonwealth of Australia is established. New Zealand has declined several opportunities to become a member.

1902

New Zealand adopts its official national flag.

1907

New Zealand becomes a dominion. Prime Minister Sir Joseph Ward reads a proclamation announcing that New Zealand has ceased to be colony and is now a dominion.

1917

The title of governor is changed to Governor-General. See The governors.

1917-18

The Imperial War Cabinet (IWC) meets in London, attended by Prime Minister Massey. The IWC resolves to convene a post-war imperial conference to readjust the internal relations of the Empire based upon the full recognition of the dominions as autonomous nations, with a voice in imperial foreign policy.

1919

Women gain the right to stand as candidates for Parliament. See Women Members of Parliament.

1923

At British request, New Zealand extends its jurisdiction to cover the Ross Dependency in Antarctica.

1926

The Balfour Declaration defines the (white) dominions as 'autonomous Communities within the British Empire, equal in status, in no way subordinate one to another in any aspect of their domestic or external affairs, though united by a common allegiance to the Crown, and freely associated as members of the British Commonwealth of Nations.'

1931

The British Parliament passes the Statute of Westminster, which removes London's right to legislate for the dominions unless they ask it to do so. New Zealand declines to ratify the statute until 1947.

1934

Waitangi Day is formally celebrated for the first time.

1939

Britain appoints its first high commissioner to New Zealand; by early 1941 the last of the Governor-General's ambassadorial functions have been removed. See History of the Governor-General.

1940

The New Zealand Centennial celebrates the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi as the nation's founding moment, but the celebrations focus mostly on material progress.

1944

New Zealand signs the Canberra Pact with Australia.

1945

New Zealand joins the United Nations as 'New Zealand', dropping the term 'dominion'.
See Dominion status.

1947

New Zealand finally adopts the Statute of Westminster 1931.

1949

New Zealand citizenship comes into existence under the British Nationality and New Zealand Citizenship Act 1948.

1950

An act is passed to abolish the Upper House of Parliament, the Legislative Council (effective from 1 January 1951).

1953

New Zealand's name changes in official usage to the 'Realm of New Zealand'.

1969

The voting age is reduced to 20.

1974

The voting age is reduced to 18.

The Royal Titles Act 1974 gives primacy to the title 'Queen of New Zealand' in New Zealand.

Waitangi Day (then known as New Zealand Day) becomes a national holiday.

5

The Treaty of Waitangi Act establishes the Waitangi Tribunal as an ongoing commission of inquiry to hear grievances against the Crown concerning breaches of the Treaty (initially, only those occurring after 1975). See The Treaty debated.

1985

The Waitangi Tribunal is empowered to investigate Treaty claims dating back to 1840. Maori have since lodged numerous claims against the Crown, and a number of major reports have been released and settlements reached.

1986

The State-Owned Enterprises Act is the first of many statutes to refer to the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi. This has given the Treaty far-reaching recognition in national and local government.

The Constitution Act finally removes the last faint provision for the British Parliament to make laws for New Zealand.

The Royal Commission on the Electoral System recommends (among other things) that a referendum be held on changing the voting system from first past the post (FPP) to mixed member proportional representation (MMP).

1983

Letters Patent 'patriate' the Governor-Generalship as a purely New Zealand office. See History of the Governor-General.

1987

The Order of New Zealand is instituted as the country's highest honour.

1990

The Bill of Rights Act safeguards New Zealanders' democratic and civil rights.

1989

Wide-ranging local government reforms drastically reduce the number of local authorities.

1993

A binding referendum changes New Zealand's voting system from FPP to MMP.

1996

An entirely New Zealand system of royal honours is established.

The first general election held using the MMP voting system results in the first coalition government for more than 60 years.

2004

The Supreme Court Act 2003 comes into effect, abolishing the right of appeal to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in London and establishing a New Zealand-based court of final appeal, the Supreme Court.

See also Women's suffrage milestones.

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