

The 1980s

Page 10 – 1987 - key events

State-owned enterprises born

The State-Owned Enterprises Act 1986 – the key provisions of which took effect on 1 April 1987 – heralded a major overhaul of New Zealand's state sector. A number of government departments became commercially oriented organisations with a stronger emphasis on efficiency and profitability. A prime target of these reforms was the Post Office Department, which was replaced by three SOEs - New Zealand Post, Telecom and Postbank. Telecom and Postbank were eventually sold into private hands. Many communities, especially small rural settlements, bore the brunt of rationalisation in areas such as the postal service. Hundreds of post offices were closed in a drive for efficiency.

page 167

Māori becomes official language

Concern for the future of the Māori language led to a Te Reo Māori claim to the Waitangi Tribunal in 1985. This asserted that te reo was a taonga (treasure) that the Crown (government) was obliged to protect under the Treaty of Waitangi. The Waitangi Tribunal found in favour of the claimants and recommended a number of legislative and policy remedies. The Maori Language Act which came into force on 1 August 1987 made te reo Māori an official language of New Zealand. Te Komihana Mo Te Reo Māori – the Māori Language Commission – was established to promote the use of Māori as a living language and an ordinary means of communication.

Black Tuesday

The 1987 Hollywood blockbuster *Wall Street* is the archetypal portrayal of the financial wheeling and dealing – not to mention excess – of the 1980s. New Zealand may not have had anyone quite as ruthless as 'corporate raider' Gordon Gekko, but many New Zealanders thrived in these deregulated times. In 1987 the *National Business Review* published its first New Zealand 'rich list'. Everything changed in October when New York's Wall Street stockmarket dropped sharply. The effects were immediately felt worldwide. Billions were wiped off the value of New Zealand shares within weeks. Many investors lost everything as companies that had over-extended themselves were dragged under and went bust. Small 'mum and dad' investors were also burned by the experience.

'An unfortunate experiment'

In June *Metro* magazine published an article by Sandra Coney and Phillida Bunkle entitled '*An unfortunate experiment*'. This raised serious questions about the treatment of cervical cancer patients at National Women's Hospital, Auckland. Dr Herbert Green had been convinced that abnormal cells in the cervix often did not develop into invasive cancer. For the best part of 20 years he had monitored women without treating them – or informing them of this experimental approach to their treatment. A number developed cervical cancer, and some died. Two of his colleagues worried about Green's approach had failed to convince the medical establishment of its dangers. The outrage which followed the *Metro* article led to the establishment of a Committee of Inquiry headed by District Court Judge Silvia Cartwright. Her final report in 1988 condemned the experiment and proposed radical new measures to ensure patients' rights.

Other 1987 events

- On 19 January Dennis Conner's *Stars and Stripes* ended New Zealand's dream debut at the America's Cup regatta with a decisive 4-1 victory over New Zealand's 'plastic-fantastic' *KZ-7* in the challenger final.
- The 6.3-magnitude Edgecumbe earthquake caused damage in Edgecumbe, Whakatāne and Kawerau. There were no fatalities but the damage was the most significant since the 1931 Napier earthquake.

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