

Waitangi Day

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Waitangi Day Act 1960

In 1957 the Labour Party promised that 6 February would be declared a public holiday in view of the Treaty of Waitangi's historical significance and its influence on Pākehā–Māori relations. Labour won the 1957 election and the four Labour Party Ratana Māori MPs (Tiaki Ōmana, Tāpihana Paikea, Iriaka Rātana, Eruera Tirikātene) tried to hold it to its promise.

The Waitangi Day Act 1960 declared that 6 February would be known as Waitangi Day, and would be observed throughout the country 'as a national day of thanksgiving in commemoration of the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi'. The act did not provide for a public holiday, although any locality could substitute Waitangi Day for any public holiday it already observed. A copy of the Treaty in English was appended as a schedule.

Without the holiday the act was not much more than a gesture, but Prime Minister Walter Nash defended it. He noted that Māori had requested a day of thanksgiving and that 6 February was already being marked overseas as a New Zealand day. Nash envisaged schools building on the recognition of the day that some had been giving it since the 1940s. A paid public holiday would be too costly, and the government wanted to minimise any suggestion of divisiveness. 'We should not think of ourselves as Maoris or pakehas, but rather as one people,' the prime minister said.

Māori requests for a national day and a public holiday continued. In 1963 the National government passed the Waitangi Day Amendment Act. Waitangi Day now supplanted the Auckland provincial anniversary day for Northland. This reinforced identification of the day with the north. This government was no more ready than its predecessor to introduce a new universal paid holiday nor to substitute Waitangi Day for the country's provincial holidays.

Growing interest

Legislative recognition of the day was a first step towards creating a public holiday, and the annual commemoration built upon it. In 1960, for the first time, Waitangi Day ceremonies were held at night and attended by members of the diplomatic corps.

Theatrical touches, with naval ships illuminated offshore, enthralled the 4000-strong crowd. It was a performance to be repeated, and it was. Royal visits continued to play an important part in developing public sentiment for and attachment to Waitangi. The 1963 visit was arranged so that the Queen arrived on the *Britannia* from Fiji, first stepping onto New Zealand soil at Waitangi. Speeches made much of the harmony between the two races.

Turi Carroll, the chairman of the New Zealand Māori Council, made it clear in his address to the Queen that Māori wanted the Treaty to have further statutory recognition. Besides long-standing grievances, there was irritation over recent legislative measures, which indicated a drive towards assimilation of the races.

Interest in Waitangi Day increased in both Māori and Pākehā communities in the 1960s. The focus for each was different. Broadcasts and telecasts carried Waitangi Day into the nation's homes and raised public interest in what was still generally perceived as a historic commemoration. Media coverage was no doubt of interest to Māori too, but their involvement was different. While speeches dwelt on racial equality, a unique history of harmonious race relations and a unified nation, such expressions were likely to generate very mixed feelings among many Māori participants and listeners. By the late 1960s organised Māori activity aimed to secure a national holiday as a first step towards legislative recognition, usually referred to as ratification of the Treaty.

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