

The Vogel era

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Timeline
1870
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1974
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In 1870, Colonial Treasurer Julius Vogel launched the most ambitious development programme in New Zealand's history. He proposed to borrow huge sums from Britain to revitalise and accelerate European colonisation. The money would be used to assist British migrants to settle here, to speed up the purchase of Māori land, and to build the 'public works' or infrastructure essential for economic development: railways, roads, bridges, port facilities and telegraph lines.

The steam railway was the cutting-edge technology of the time, and the centrepiece of Vogel's plan was a bold promise to build 1000 miles (1600 km) of rail lines in nine years. Despite problems and delays, this aim was achieved – New Zealand's rail network grew from a mere 74 km in 1870 to 2000 km by 1880. British migrants flooded in, almost doubling the colony's population in ten years. New regions were 'opened up' to Pākehā settlement, and central government became increasingly powerful, eclipsing its provincial rivals.

Today Vogel is generally seen as a nation-building visionary, but he was a controversial figure in his time. When the colony slipped into a long depression in the 1880s, many blamed his overambitious borrowing in the previous decade. His policies contributed to the dispossession of Māori and the exploitation of the natural environment. The 'Vogel era' was a decisive moment in New Zealand's 19th-century transformation from a Māori world to a Pākehā one.

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