Māori independence

Pōtatau established a boundary between the territory in which his authority held sway and that of the governor: 'Let Maungatautari [River] be our boundary. Do not encroach on this side. Likewise I am not to set a foot on that side.' His aim was not to oppose the Crown but to provide authority in the lands placed under his mana (authority). Supporters believed it was possible for the mana of the two monarchs to be complementary. To Māori, the Kingitanga was a development for Māori, not against Europeans.

Given the tribal nature of Māori society, there was some surprise that a pan-tribal movement had been established. Most Māori were loyal to their own hapū (sub-tribe) first and foremost. The historian Michael King believed that as the European population grew it created a sense of Māoriness that made it possible for Māori to think beyond their tribal affiliations and distinguish between a Māori and a non-Māori world. British unity under the Crown was perceived as a strength, and supporters of the Kingitanga believed that if Māori could replicate this sense of unity they would have a better chance of withstanding the full impact of colonisation.

Despite this argument, important iwi such as Ngāpuhi, Te Arawa and Ngāti Porou did not join the Kingitanga. Some opponents dismissed it as a Waikato movement that had little support in other parts of the country. Historian James Belich maintained that the Kingitanga did not symbolise a radical change. 'It was not a declaration of Māori independence – this already existed – and it added no new territory to the Māori sphere. It sought merely to unite pre-existing polities. But in other ways the Movement was an important change. Together with the rise in anti-land-selling generally, it raised the profile of Māori independence from a level which the British disliked but tolerated, to a level which many found entirely unacceptable.'

When fighting broke out between British troops and supporters of Wiremu Kingi in Taranaki in March 1860, the Kingitanga was portrayed as being behind the war. Most Kingitanga supporters in lower Waikato, including Pōtatau himself, actually opposed involvement in the Taranaki War, but when Ngāti Maniapoto fighters arrived to help Kingi's men, the finger of blame was pointed at Waikato.

The settlers and politicians saw this as an opportunity to crush all
the so-called Māori troublemakers in one hit. Instead, the war in Taranaki eventually reached a stalemate.

The Kingitanga resisted further European encroachment and opposed new roads, and it sought self-government in Māori areas. The movement took on the appearance of an alternative government with its own flag, newspaper (Te Hokio), councillors, magistrates and law enforcement system. The Kingitanga government even had a minister for Pākehā affairs.

See also:

- Te Kingitanga – troubled times, 1860–94

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