From the mid-1960s New Zealand–South African rugby contest was central to South Africa's attempts to maintain international sporting contact. Those opposed to apartheid believed that isolating South African sport would increase the prospect of real change. By July 1969 the All Black Tour was founded by the University of Auckland students with the specific aim of opposing sporting contact with South Africa. With a Springbok tour to New Zealand scheduled for 1973, the issue was to become increasingly politicised.

In the run-up to the 1972 election, Norman Kirk, the Labour opposition leader, promised not to interfere with the tour. After winning the election, he attempted, unsuccessfully, to persuade the NZRU to withdraw its invitation to the Springboks while at the same time attempting to negotiate with anti-tour activists and groups. His advice from the police was that if the tour went ahead it would 'undermine the greatest achievement of this country has ever known'. As if to warn him of the potential for civil unrest, a granstand at Papakura was burnt down on 9 April 1973. Kirk's mind had already been made up. Days earlier he had written to the NZRU informing them that the government saw no alternative, pending selection on a genuine merit basis, to a postponement of the tour. Aware of the likely fallout from this decision – there was strong public support for the tour – Kirk conceded that he would be 'falling in his duty' if he didn't accept the criticism and do what he believed to be right. The Government was elected to govern.

The decision to 'postpone' the tour was also influenced by the fact that Christchurch was hosting the 1974 Commonwealth Games, which black African nations were likely to boycott if the tour proceeded. Critics of the decision believed that not only had Kirk performed a policy backflip, he had bowed to threats from 'rent-a-mob' activists. Those who believed that 'sport and politics don't mix' (referred to by activist Tim Shadbolt as RENTPOCS – 'Rent Politics Out of Sport') never forgave him.

There is no doubt the decision hurt Labour at the general election in 1975. While National had itself cancelled an earlier tour in 1967, what appeared to hurt Labour most was its original pledge not to interfere. Nation's new leader Robert Muldoon declared that the cancellation of the tour was 'one issue on which people will change their vote'. He maintained that a National government would welcome a Springbok team to New Zealand, 'even if there were threats of violence and civil strife'. Muldoon's confidence seemed to be confirmed by Nation's landslide victory. Events in 1976 and 1981 perhaps vindicated Kirk's decision.