

Premiers and Prime Ministers

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Leaders of the nation

Find out more about the 40 premiers and prime ministers who have held office in New Zealand since 1856. Each biography links to a page with further information. The entries are in chronological order of term served.

Henry Sewell

Premier: 7–20 May 1856

Henry Sewell, our first premier, was more of a sojourner than a settler. Although he spent 17 years in New Zealand in three periods between 1853 and 1876, he never put down deep roots. More...

William Fox

Premier: 20 May–2 Jun 1856; 12 Jul 1861–6 Aug 1862; 28 Jun 1869–10 Sep 1872; 3 Mar–8 Apr 1873

William Fox headed New Zealand governments four times. A rug-puller rather than a bridge-builder, he was better at defeating governments than he was at leading them. More...

Edward Stafford

Premier: 2 Jun 1856–12 Jul 1861; 16 Oct 1865–28 Jun 1869; 10 Sep–11 Oct 1872

Edward Stafford was New Zealand's youngest leader and a stable influence on the early colonial government. He held the post of premier on three different occasions between 1856 and 1872. More...

Alfred Domett

Premier: 6 Aug 1862–30 Oct 1863

Alfred Domett is best remembered for establishing the Parliamentary Library and for his much-derided epic verse *Ranolf and Amohia: a South-Sea daydream*. More...

Frederick Whitaker

Premier: 30 Oct 1863–24 Nov 1864; 21 Apr 1882–25 Sep 1883

Despite Frederick Whitaker's advanced views on electoral reform,

this two-time premier tarnished his reputation by land speculation and confiscation. More...

Frederick Weld

Premier: 24 Nov 1864–16 Oct 1865

Frederick Weld was only briefly premier, but the fact that he was a Roman Catholic showed how different New Zealand was to Britain (which has still never had a Catholic PM). More...

George Waterhouse

Premier: 11 Oct 1872–3 Mar 1873

George Waterhouse, who never stood for elected office here, was a premier on both sides of the Tasman, leading South Australia (1861-3) and New Zealand (1872-3). More...

Julius Vogel

Premier: 8 Apr 1873–6 Jul 1875; 15 Feb–1 Sep 1876

Although he spent just 18 years in New Zealand, journalist, businessman and politician Julius (Sir Julius from 1874) Vogel dominated this country's political scene. More...

Daniel Pollen

Premier: 6 Jul 1875–15 Feb 1876

Largely forgotten today, Daniel Pollen was considered a 'safe man' and a good administrator. In July 1875 he took over the premiership from the absent Sir Julius Vogel, although Harry Atkinson really ran things. More...

Harry Atkinson

Premier: 1 Sep 1876–13 Oct 1877; 25 Sep 1883–16 Aug 1884; 28 Aug–3 Sep 1884; 8 Oct 1887–21 Jan 1891

Harry Atkinson was premier four times – five if you count the 'restitution' of his first ministry a fortnight into its life. Like Edward Stafford, he was a stabilising force who transcended regionalism for national interests. More...

Sir George Grey

Premier: 13 Oct 1877–8 Oct 1879

Sir George Grey was our only politician for whom the premiership was an anticlimax. He had governed autocratically from 1845 to 1853 (greatly shaping our constitutional arrangements) and returned as

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governor in 1861. More...

John Hall

Premier: 8 Oct 1879–21 Apr 1882

John (later Sir John) Hall was a force in our politics for several decades. In the late 1880s and early 1890s he led the parliamentary campaign for votes for women. More...

Sir Robert Stout

Premier: 16–28 Aug 1884; 3 Sep 1884–8 Oct 1887

The careers of Sir Robert Stout and Sir Julius Vogel were so closely intertwined that Stout's governments are usually referred to as Stout-Vogel ministries. Both men started their public lives in Otago and they followed similar policies. More...

John Ballance

Premier: 24 Jan 1891–27 Apr 1893

John Ballance, who led the Liberals to power in 1891, was called 'the rainmaker' by voters relieved to see the return of prosperity. More...

Richard Seddon

Premier: 1 May 1893–10 Jun 1906

Richard Seddon's nickname, 'King Dick', says it all. Our longest-serving and most famous leader didn't just lead the government – many argued he was the government. For 13 years he completely dominated politics. More...

William Hall-Jones

Prime Minister: 21 Jun–6 Aug 1906

Although William Hall-Jones merely warmed the seat while Richard Seddon's designated successor, Sir Joseph Ward, returned from Europe, he was the first leader to enter office as prime minister, not premier. More...

Sir Joseph Ward

Prime Minister: 6 Aug 1906–12 Mar 1912; 10 Dec 1928–28 May 1930

Sir Joseph Ward, New Zealand's political Lazarus, led governments nearly a quarter of a century apart. He entered Parliament in 1887 and used his interest in technology and business to strengthen the early Liberal Cabinets. More...

Thomas Mackenzie

Prime Minister: 28 Mar–10 Jul 1912

The Liberals were already yesterday's men when they named Thomas Mackenzie as successor to Sir Joseph Ward. He only lasted three and a half months before being defeated in the House – the last New Zealand PM to lose power in this fashion. More...

William Massey

Prime Minister: 10 Jul 1912–10 May 1925

William Massey is our second-longest serving leader. Reviled by the left for crushing 1913 strikers with his 'Massey's Cossacks', he kept most of the Liberals' reforms, cleaned up the public service, increased home ownership rates and spent more on education, roads and electricity. More...

Sir Francis Henry Dillon Bell

Prime Minister: 14–30 May 1925

Sir Francis Bell was PM for only 16 days, but held several distinctions – he was our second-oldest PM (74), the first born in New Zealand, and the last to come from the Legislative Council. More...

Gordon Coates

Prime Minister: 30 May 1925–10 Dec 1928

Gordon Coates seemed unbeatable. Tall and handsome, the affable war hero embodied modernity – he was the 'jazz premier'. In 1925's presidential-style election voters were invited to take their 'Coats off with Coates'. More...

George Forbes

Prime Minister: 28 May 1930–6 Dec 1935

George Forbes succeeded the dying Sir Joseph Ward, but his term in office coincided with the harsh economic and social climate of the 1930s Great Depression. More...

Michael Joseph Savage

Prime Minister: 6 Dec 1935–27 Mar 1940

Michael Joseph Savage, New Zealand's first Labour PM, was probably also its best-loved. His avuncular image hung in the homes of the Labour faithful for decades. More...

Peter Fraser

Prime Minister: 27 Mar 1940–13 Dec 1949

Peter Fraser, New Zealand's wartime PM, led the nation for a decade.

He was respected rather than loved like his predecessor Savage. But he is rated by many experts as our finest PM. More...

Sidney Holland

Prime Minister: 13 Dec 1949–20 Sep 1957

The National Party's first PM came from a Canterbury political dynasty. His father, Henry, a mayor of Christchurch, entered Parliament in 1925. Sid's son Eric later followed him into the House. More...

Keith Holyoake

Prime Minister: 20 Sep–12 Dec 1957; 12 Dec 1960–7 Feb 1972

'Kiwi Keith' Holyoake is our third-longest-serving leader. Although criticised for sending troops to the Vietnam War, he is now seen as 'the most dovish of the hawks', who did the bare minimum to keep America happy. More...

Walter Nash

Prime Minister: 12 Dec 1957–12 Dec 1960

At almost 76, Walter Nash was New Zealand's oldest incoming PM and the last one born outside New Zealand. He had two wives, Lotty and Parliament. He was still an MP when he died aged 86. More...

John (Jack) Marshall

Prime Minister: 7 Feb–8 Dec 1972

'Gentleman Jack' Marshall, for long – too long, he felt towards the end – Keith Holyoake's deputy, was PM for less than a year. But he served Cabinet well for two decades. More...

Norman Kirk

Prime Minister: 8 Dec 1972–31 Aug 1974

In 1972 Norman Kirk broke National's 12-year grip on the Treasury benches and became Labour's first New Zealand-born PM. Less than two years later he became the fifth PM to die in office. More...

Wallace (Bill) Rowling

Prime Minister: 6 Sep 1974–12 Dec 1975

Norman Kirk's death brought Bill Rowling to the prime ministership unexpectedly in August 1974. A member of an old Tasman Bay farming family, and a teacher by training, he had been finance minister since 1972. More...

Robert Muldoon

Prime Minister: 12 Dec 1975–26 Jul 1984

Rob Muldoon was one of our most polarising PMs. To supporters he was the voice of 'the ordinary bloke'. To his opponents he was a dictatorial bully. More...

David Lange

Prime Minister: 26 Jul 1984–8 Aug 1989

Seven years and one stomach-stapling operation after entering Parliament in 1977, David Lange became PM a week before his 42nd birthday. More...

Geoffrey Palmer

Prime Minister: 8 Aug 1989–4 Sep 1990

Geoffrey Palmer, the hardworking, loyal deputy who became PM when David Lange resigned dramatically in August 1989, knew that Labour was doomed. 'What I got from Lange was a hospital pass.' More...

Mike Moore

Prime Minister: 4 Sep–2 Nov 1990

In September 1990, just weeks from an election Labour seemed certain to lose, the caucus made Mike Moore New Zealand's third PM in 13 months. More...

Jim Bolger

Prime Minister: 2 Nov 1990–8 Dec 1997

New Zealand's most openly republican PM, Jim Bolger presided over major electoral reform and Treaty of Waitangi settlements. He also outflanked Cabinet opposition to funding the new national museum. More...

Jenny Shipley

Prime Minister: 8 Dec 1997–5 Dec 1999

'This ain't a damn beauty contest. If you come into politics to be popular, then you've picked the wrong sport', Jenny Shipley declared. New Zealand's first woman PM came to power in 1997 after staging a carefully planned coup against Jim Bolger. More...

Helen Clark

Prime Minister: 5 Dec 1999–19 Nov 2008

Jenny Shipley may have been our first female PM, but Helen Clark was the first elected one. By 2008 she was our fifth-longest-serving

PM and the first Labour leader to win three consecutive elections. More...

John Key

Prime Minister: 19 Nov 2008–12 Dec 2016

John Key served a parliamentary apprenticeship of just six years before becoming PM. Like David Lange, he was one of the few recent PMs without prior Cabinet experience. More...

Bill English

Prime Minister: 12 Dec 2016–26 Oct 2017

Like Jack Marshall, Bill English served a long political apprenticeship before becoming PM. After 26 years as an MP, including 11 as a Cabinet minister and eight as Deputy PM, English secured the top job in 2016. But like Marshall in 1972, his grip on power was to last a mere 10 months. More...

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Jacinda Ardern

Prime Minister: 26 Oct 2017–

New Zealand's third female PM, and at 37 our youngest leader since Edward Stafford in 1856, Jacinda Ardern had the most meteoric rise to power of any New Zealand PM – three months prior to being sworn in, she was not even leader of her party. More...

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