

Page 1. New Zealand and the Pacific

New Zealand is a South Pacific nation with strong cultural, economic and political ties with other Pacific nations. The population of Pacific Island descent was 6.9% of the total population in 2006, and was projected to grow to 8% by 2016. Auckland, with a quarter of its population identifying themselves as Māori or Pacific Island in 2006, was regularly described as the world's largest Polynesian city. Pacific Islanders have, since 1993, held seats in New Zealand's Parliament.

1972

Pacific identity

New Zealand has always been, geographically, a group of Pacific islands. As New Zealand's identity has shifted away from being a distant outpost of the British Empire, it has increasingly emphasised linkages, both cultural and political, with other island nations in the Pacific. New sources of cultural inspiration – including those brought by Pacific migrants – have become important.

Special relationships

New Zealand, economically and politically a minnow in the wider world, is relatively large and powerful in the Pacific. Foreign policy towards the Pacific Islands has been driven by a variety of objectives – some of them long-standing, such as expanding trade and capital flows, or strategic considerations. Others include the provision of development assistance, opposition to nuclear testing, and the management of post-colonial political crises. There has been an underlying focus on political stability.

New Zealand retains special relationships with its former colonies. The Cook Islands and Niue have 'free association' agreements, giving their governments substantial budgetary assistance and the people New Zealand citizenship. In 2012 Tokelau remained a non-self-governing New Zealand territory. Samoa was also under New Zealand jurisdiction from 1920 to 1962, when it gained independence. Generally, New Zealand has assumed particular responsibilities in Polynesia, while Australia has taken the leading role in Melanesia.

New Zealand's first minister of Pacific Island affairs (Richard Prebble) was appointed in 1984. In 1990 the Pacific Island Affairs Unit became the Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs, which was concerned with the social, economic and cultural development of Pacific peoples in New Zealand.

New Zealand–Australian alignment

New Zealand policy towards the Pacific Islands has often been closely aligned with the Australian approach, in relation to trade, aid and the handling of political crises. The two countries tend to adopt a common approach on Pacific matters at meetings of the Commonwealth and United Nations, and where disagreements occur these are usually kept out of the media limelight.

The Pacific Islands Forum

The Pacific Islands Forum (initially the South Pacific Forum) held its first meeting in Wellington in August 1971, attended by representatives from Nauru, Western Samoa, Cook Islands, Tonga, Fiji, Australia and New Zealand. An earlier regional organisation, the South Pacific Commission, was set up in 1946. Its founding members were the colonial powers present in the Pacific: Britain, France, the United States, the Netherlands, Australia and New Zealand. The commission concentrated on advancing the technical, professional, scientific and administrative capability of Pacific Island people.

The forum was to become the premier regional political body. By the 1980s it focused on opposing the resumption of French nuclear testing at Moruroa and the dumping of nuclear waste. The South Pacific Nuclear-Free Zone Treaty was agreed at Rarotonga in August 1985. As conflict flared in New Caledonia between pro-independence and loyalist groups in the mid-1980s, the forum backed the French territory's re-inclusion on the United Nations list of 'non-decolonised territories'.

Crises in 2000 posed particular challenges for New Zealand, Australia and the Pacific Islands Forum. The Fiji coup of May 2000, followed by a coup in the Solomon Islands, generated growing concern about 'failed states' within the region. Riots in the Solomon Islands and Tonga in April and November 2006, and another coup in Fiji in December 2006, have generated friction within the forum.

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