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Cook Islands and Niue

The Cook Islands, taken under a British protectorate in 1888, became New Zealand's first South Pacific Island colony in 1901. British Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain acknowledged what he described as the legitimate disappointment of New Zealand in regard to the 1899 settlement in Samoa (in which Britain withdrew its claim to the islands, which were divided between Germany and the US). Chamberlain backed the appeals of New Zealand Prime Minister Richard Seddon for annexation of the Cooks. Land was to remain under native tenure and the ariki (chiefs) were to be consulted. In practice, the British Colonial Office authorised annexation before receiving the consent of the ariki, based on assurances from Seddon and Governor Lord Ranfurly.

The borders of New Zealand were extended on 11 June 1901 to incorporate not only Rarotonga, Aitutaki and the rest of the southern Cook Islands, but also the northern Cook Islands and Niue. Eventually Suvarrow and Nassau were also included within the territory of the Cook Islands.

First World War service

Several hundred Cook Islanders and Niueans reinforced the Maori (Pioneer) Battalion during the First World War, serving with British troops in Egypt, Palestine and France. Many were ammunition handlers. Admired by the British for their stamina, capability and cheerfulness, the men were commended for 'steadiness and contempt for danger'.¹

Self-government in the Cooks and Niue

The Cook Islands secured territorial self-government through a 'free association' agreement with New Zealand on 4 August 1965. Niue established a similar arrangement on 19 October 1974. Both adopted constitutions that empowered 'Her Majesty the Queen in Right of New Zealand', and both remained part of 'Our Realm of New Zealand'.² Agreements allowed islanders continued New Zealand citizenship and thus open access to New Zealand. The associated states were expected to have 'shared values' and received ongoing budgetary assistance. Unlike the Micronesian associated states linked to the United States, Niue and the Cook Islands did not become members of the United Nations.

Tokelau

New Zealand assumed control over the Tokelau Islands from Britain in 1926, and incorporated them within the territorial boundaries of New Zealand in 1948. Tokelau, which had fewer than 2,000 people on its three atolls, voted in 2006 on the proposal that the territory become a self-governing state in free association with New Zealand. 349 registered voters were in favour – 60.1%, short of the required two-thirds majority. A second referendum in 2007 obtained the support of 697 voters (64.4%) – 16 fewer than needed.

In 2020 Tokelau remained a New Zealand dependent territory. In practice, the taupulega (village councils) of the atolls of Atafu, Fakaofu and Nukunonu exercised ongoing powers, with the territory also having a General Fono (assembly) and elected officials – a Faipule (leader) and Pulemuku (village mayors) on each atoll. New Zealand provided broad but distant oversight from Wellington.

Nauru

After the First World War, New Zealand shared in the British Empire mandate over Nauru (previously controlled by Germany). The mandate, administered by Australia, guaranteed a plentiful and cheap supply of the island's phosphates to assist New Zealand agriculture. In 1968 Nauru became the second Pacific Island state to obtain independence.

Until the 1990s the profits from phosphate mining made Nauru wealthy. Once the easily mined phosphate was gone, Nauru became heavily indebted, and by 2004 was in great financial difficulty. The government sought and received assistance from the Pacific Islands Forum on the basis of the Biketawa Declaration. In 2009 forum leaders decided that Nauru no longer needed special assistance. From 2012 Nauru received aid from Australia in return for hosting an offshore Australian immigration detention facility.

Footnotes:

1. Quoted in Denis Fairfax, 'Pa George Karika.' Dictionary of New Zealand Biography, (last accessed 21 February 2012).
2. 1983 Letters Patent Constituting the office of the Governor-General of New Zealand, (last accessed 21 February 2012).

How to cite this page:

Jon Fraenkel, 'Pacific Islands and New Zealand - Cook Islands, Niue, Tokelau and Nauru', Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/pacific-islands-and-new-zealand/page-5> (accessed 19 November 2020)

Story by Jon Fraenkel, published 20 Jun 2012

Story: Pacific Islands and New Zealand

Cook Islands annexed, 1900



Queen Makea of the Cook Islands (left) listens as New Zealand Governor-General Lord Ranfurly reads the annexation proclamation on 7 October 1900. In the background are British military personnel. Women were among the most powerful of the Cook Islands' ariki (chiefs). However, their public role did not fit New Zealand administrators' view of appropriate behaviour, and whenever possible their authority was ignored or limited.

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