GOVERNORS, PREMIERS & PRIME MINISTERS OF NEW ZEALAND

GOVERNORS



1792–1842

William Hobson

Irish-born Royal Navy officer who had previously fought piracy in the West Indies. Sent to New Zealand to negotiate British sovereignty, he **helped draft and signed the Treaty of Waitangi** in February 1840 and **chose the site of Auckland as capital**. Died in office in 1842.

30 Jan 1840 – 10 Sep 1842



1804–69

Willoughby Shortland

Royal Navy officer who served as Hobson's Colonial Secretary and took over as administrator after his death. His government was criticised for financial mismanagement and its handling of tensions with Māori, including the Wairau Affray of 1843.

10 Sep 1842 – 26 Dec 1843



1805–65

Robert FitzRoy

Former commander of HMS *Beagle*, the ship that carried Charles Darwin on his famous voyage; later became a pioneering meteorologist and founded Britain's Met Office. His short, troubled governorship was dogged by land disputes and colonial debt, leading to his recall in 1845.

26 Dec 1843 – 18 Nov 1845



1812–98

George Grey

Explorer of Australia before arriving in New Zealand, where he ruled with wide personal powers and **helped shape the 1852 Constitution Act that set up self-government**. Later returned as an elected Premier (1877–79) – the only person to have led New Zealand as both Governor and Premier.

18 Nov 1845 – 31 Dec 1853

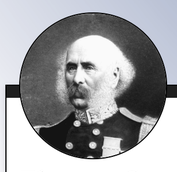


1802–64

Robert Wynyard

British Army officer who commanded New Zealand's forces before acting as administrator between Grey's and Gore Browne's terms. **Opened the country's first Parliament in 1854**, during growing calls for settlers to govern themselves rather than be ruled from Britain.

3 Jan 1854 – 6 Sep 1855



1807–87

Thomas Gore Browne

Previously governed the island of St Helena. His time as Governor coincided with the outbreak of the **First Taranaki War in 1860** over disputed land, even as he handed day-to-day government to the colony's first elected ministry under Henry Sewell in 1856.

6 Sep 1855 – 1861

PREMIERS

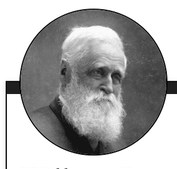


1807–79

Henry Sewell

English-born lawyer who had helped found the Canterbury settlement before entering politics. Became **New Zealand's first Premier** under responsible government but lasted just 13 days before losing a confidence vote; later returned in senior ministerial roles.

7–20 May 1856

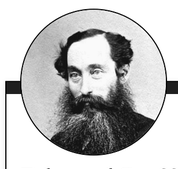


1812–93

William Fox

Barrister and artist who worked as an administrator for the New Zealand Company before entering politics. A fierce critic of government land and war policy, he led four short-lived governments over 17 years and was a prominent temperance campaigner in later life.

1856, 1861–62, 1869–72, 1873

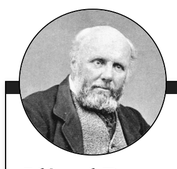


1819–1901

Edward Stafford

Irish-born; ran the Nelson settlement as its energetic first provincial superintendent before becoming Premier at 37, then the country's youngest leader to date. Governed through much of the 1860s New Zealand Wars with a reputation for careful, businesslike administration.

1856–61, 1865–69, 1872



1811–87

Alfred Domett

English-born poet and friend of Robert Browning. Served as Nelson's Colonial Secretary before becoming **Premier when British forces invaded Waikato in 1863**. Remembered today more for his epic poem 'Ranolf and Amohia' than for his short time in office.

6 Aug 1862 – 30 Oct 1863



1812–91

Frederick Whitaker

English-trained lawyer who became one of colonial New Zealand's most prominent (and criticised) land speculators. Served two terms as Premier and repeatedly as Attorney-General across four decades, mixing political power with private profit in ways controversial even then.

1863–64, 1882–83



1823–91

Frederick Weld

Born in England to a prominent Catholic family; came to New Zealand as a young sheep farmer before entering politics. As Premier he **moved the capital from Auckland to the more central Wellington in 1865**, and later governed Western Australia, Tasmania and the Straits Settlements (Singapore & Malaya).

24 Nov 1864 – 16 Oct 1865



1824–1906

George Waterhouse

English-born merchant who had already served as Premier of South Australia before moving to New Zealand. Unusually for a Premier, he sat in the non-elected Legislative Council rather than the House throughout his brief time in office.

11 Oct 1872 – 3 Mar 1873

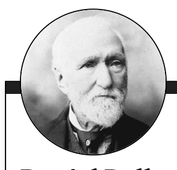


1835–99

Julius Vogel

London-born Jewish journalist and goldfields businessman who became one of the colonies most influential financial figures. As Treasurer he launched a huge borrowing programme that funded railways, roads and mass immigration in the 1870s; served two terms as Premier; later knighted.

1873–75, 1876



1813–96

Daniel Pollen

Irish-trained doctor who worked as a colonial surgeon before entering politics. Filled in competently but unassumingly as caretaker Premier while Julius Vogel was overseas, and remains one of the least well-remembered 19th-century Premiers.

6 Jul 1875 – 15 Feb 1876

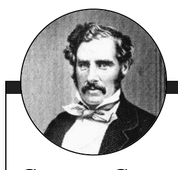


1831–92

Harry Atkinson

English-born farmer and militia officer who fought in the Taranaki Wars before entering politics. Served as Premier on four separate occasions, seen as a cautious, fiscally conservative figure through the difficult economic years of the 1880s.

1876–77, 1883–84, 1887–91

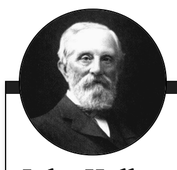


1812–98

George Grey

Former autocratic Governor (see above) who returned to New Zealand politics as an elected Premier. Though his own ministry was short and combative, reforms during his time in office, including **near-universal male suffrage** in 1879, outlasted him.

13 Oct 1877 – 8 Oct 1879

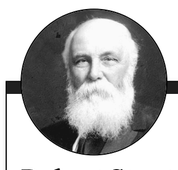


1824–1907

John Hall

English-born farmer and Canterbury provincial politician before entering national office. His government passed New Zealand's first old-age and land reforms; after leaving office he became **a leading campaigner for women's right to vote**, achieved in 1893.

8 Oct 1879 – 21 Apr 1882

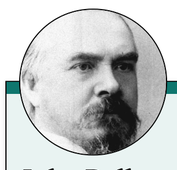


1844–1930

Robert Stout

Orkney-born lawyer and prominent secularist and social reformer who led New Zealand twice in partnership with Julius Vogel, in what became known as the Stout–Vogel ministries. Later served over 20 years as Chief Justice, New Zealand's top judge – a rare shift from head of government to head of the judiciary.

1884–87

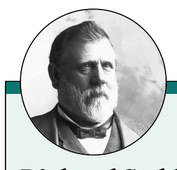


Liberal
1839–93

John Ballance

Irish-born journalist who founded and edited the *Wanganui Herald* before entering politics. Built the Liberal Federation, New Zealand's first organised political party, uniting rural and urban reform-minded voters. Died in office in 1893, just before his government delivered women's suffrage.

24 Jan 1891 – 27 Apr 1893



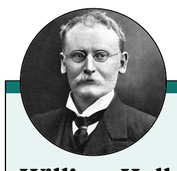
Liberal
1845–1906

Richard Seddon

English-born former goldminer and West Coast publican known as 'King Dick'. Dominated New Zealand politics longer than any other leader – 13 years – with a hands-on, populist style. **His government passed women's suffrage (1893) and old-age pensions (1898)**; died suddenly at sea returning from Australia.

1 May 1893 – 10 Jun 1906

PRIME MINISTERS



Liberal
1851–1936

William Hall-Jones

English-born builder who settled in Timaru before entering local then national politics. A renowned administrator, he oversaw construction of the Raurimu Spiral railway route and briefly led the country as caretaker between Seddon's death and Ward's return from overseas. **First to hold the title 'Prime Minister'.**

21 Jun – 6 Aug 1906

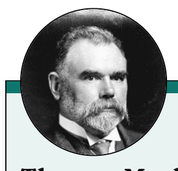


Liberal/United
1856–1930

Joseph Ward

Born in Melbourne to Irish Catholic parents; built a grain-trading business in Invercargill before entering politics, surviving a period of personal bankruptcy in the 1890s. **Led New Zealand to Dominion status in 1907**, and returned to the top job 22 years after his first term, this time leading a different party.

1906–12, 1928–30

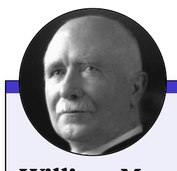


Liberal
1853–1930

Thomas Mackenzie

Scottish-born surveyor and explorer of Fiordland before entering politics, later serving as Ward's Minister of Agriculture. Became Prime Minister after Ward's resignation and lost a confidence vote after just over three months; later served as New Zealand's High Commissioner in London.

28 Mar – 10 Jul 1912

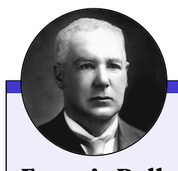


Reform
1856–1925

William Massey

Northern Irish farmer who settled near Auckland before leading the conservative Reform Party to power in 1912 promising freehold land reform. Governed through **World War I** and the **1913 waterfront strike**, deploying mounted special constables ('Massey's Cossacks') against strikers; NZ's second-longest-serving Prime Minister.

10 Jul 1912 – 10 May 1925



Reform
1851–1936

Francis Bell

The first Prime Minister actually born in New Zealand (in Wellington), and a distinguished, long-serving Attorney-General. Took the top job reluctantly, as a caretaker after Massey's death, before quickly handing over to Coates; also the last Prime Minister to have sat in the non-elected Legislative Council.

14 – 30 May 1925

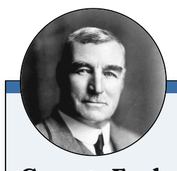


Reform
1878–1943

Gordon Coates

Decorated World War I veteran known as the 'Jazz Premier' for his youthful, modern campaign style in the 1920s. Later served in Peter Fraser's wartime national government during World War II, despite being from an opposing party – a rare display of wartime political unity.

30 May 1925 – 10 Dec 1928



United (Coalition)
1869–1947

George Forbes

Canterbury farmer with little formal schooling. Took over when the ailing Joseph Ward stepped down; when Labour withdrew its support in 1931 he formed a coalition with Gordon Coates's Reform Party to impose Depression spending cuts. The coalition weathered the 1932 unemployment riots but was swept away by Labour in 1935, and **its two parties later merged to form National**.

28 May 1930 – 6 Dec 1935



1st Labour
1872–1940

Michael Joseph Savage

Australian-born miner and union organiser who became NZ's **first Labour Prime Minister** and its most fondly remembered. His welfare reforms, including state housing and social security, laid the foundations of the modern welfare state. Died in office, mourned nationally.

6 Dec 1935 – 27 Mar 1940



1st Labour
1884–1950

Peter Fraser

Scottish-born stonemason and union organiser who was briefly **jailed during World War I for opposing conscription**. Led New Zealand through most of World War II, later playing a **leading role in the founding of the United Nations in 1945**; widely rated among the country's most capable Prime Ministers.

27 Mar 1940 – 13 Dec 1949



1st National
1893–1961

Sidney Holland

Businessman from a prominent Christchurch political family who became the new **National Party's first Prime Minister**. His government's most dramatic moment was the **1951 waterfront dispute**, one of our largest and longest industrial confrontations.

13 Dec 1949 – 20 Sep 1957



1st & 2nd National
1904–83

Keith Holyoake

Left school at 12 to help run the family farm near Pahiatua; nicknamed 'Kiwi Keith'. New Zealand's third-longest-serving Prime Minister, governing through most of the 1960s, and later the only person to serve the country as both Prime Minister and Governor-General.

1957, 1960–72



2nd Labour
1882–1968

Walter Nash

English-born; New Zealand's oldest incoming Prime Minister, at almost 76, and the last born outside the country. Served for decades as Finance Minister under Savage and Fraser before finally becoming Prime Minister himself in 1957.

12 Dec 1957 – 12 Dec 1960



2nd National
1912–88

Jack Marshall

Wellington-born lawyer and World War II army officer known as 'Gentleman Jack' for his courteous style. Served eleven years as Holyoake's deputy before a brief prime ministership of less than a year, and later became a fierce critic of his successor, Robert Muldoon.

7 Feb – 8 Dec 1972



3rd Labour
1923–74

Norman Kirk

Left school at 12 and worked as a labourer and town mayor before entering national politics; Labour's first New Zealand-born Prime Minister. Led an ambitious reform government covering welfare, the environment and foreign policy before dying suddenly in office in 1974, aged 51.

8 Dec 1972 – 31 Aug 1974



3rd Labour
1927–95

Bill Rowling

Trained as a teacher and economist before politics; became Prime Minister unexpectedly after Kirk's sudden death and led New Zealand through the **mid-1970s oil-shock** recession. Later served as ambassador to the USA during the height of the **ANZUS nuclear dispute**.

6 Sep 1974 – 12 Dec 1975



3rd National
1921–92

Robert Muldoon

Accountant and World War II veteran; one of NZ's most combative and polarising leaders, championing 'the ordinary bloke' and clashing fiercely with critics. His interventionist economic policies and the **1981 Springbok rugby tour** dominate his legacy; lost power in a snap 1984 election amid a currency crisis.

12 Dec 1975 – 26 Jul 1984

4th Labour
1942–2005

David Lange

Barrister known for his sharp wit; became Prime Minister at 41. **Led landmark nuclear-free legislation in 1987**, straining relations with the USA, while his government also **launched sweeping free-market economic reforms**; internal disputes over their pace eventually led to his resignation.

26 Jul 1984 – 8 Aug 1989

4th Labour
b. 1942

Geoffrey Palmer

Constitutional law professor before entering politics, Palmer was a key architect of major reforms including the **Bill of Rights Act** and the shift toward MMP voting, but served less than 13 months before being replaced by his own caucus.

8 Aug 1989 – 4 Sep 1990

4th Labour
1949–2020

Mike Moore

Left school at 14 and worked factory jobs before becoming, at the time, New Zealand's youngest-ever MP. Made Prime Minister by his caucus just weeks before an election Labour was expected to lose – and did; later became Director-General of the World Trade Organization.

4 Sep – 2 Nov 1990

4th National
1935–2025

Jim Bolger

Son of an Irish immigrant farming family from the King Country; led the National Party to a landslide win in 1990. His government made major welfare cuts, **oversaw the shift to MMP**, and **reached significant Treaty of Waitangi settlements**, including the 1995 Waikato-Tainui settlement.

2 Nov 1990 – 8 Dec 1997

4th National
b. 1952

Jenny Shipley

Former teacher and Canterbury farmer who replaced Bolger as National leader and Prime Minister in a party-room challenge, becoming **New Zealand's first woman Prime Minister**. Lost office at the 1999 general election.

8 Dec 1997 – 5 Dec 1999

5th Labour
b. 1950

Helen Clark

Political scientist and academic before entering Parliament. The **first woman to become Prime Minister by winning a general election**; won three consecutive elections. Later led the United Nations Development Programme, one of the UN's most senior roles.

5 Dec 1999 – 19 Nov 2008

5th National
b. 1961

John Key

Raised by a single mother in a state house, Key was a successful currency trader before entering politics. Led National to three election wins; his government responded to the **Global Financial Crisis** and the **2011 Christchurch earthquakes**. Resigned unexpectedly in 2016.

19 Nov 2008 – 12 Dec 2016

5th National
b. 1961

Bill English

Southland farmer's son and long-serving Finance Minister before becoming Prime Minister with barely a year until the next election. Narrowly lost the tightly contested 2017 election despite National winning the most seats, when NZ First chose to form a coalition with Labour instead.

12 Dec 2016 – 26 Oct 2017



6th Labour
b. 1980

Jacinda Ardern

Became Labour leader just weeks before the 2017 election in a late surge. New Zealand's third woman Prime Minister and youngest leader since 1856; led the national response to the **2019 Christchurch mosque attacks** and the **Covid-19 pandemic**.

26 Oct 2017 – 25 Jan 2023



6th Labour
b. 1978

Chris Hipkins

Became Prime Minister after Ardern's resignation, inheriting a difficult economic and political climate just months before the 2023 election. Nicknamed 'Chippy'; had previously led the government's Covid-19 response as minister of health.

25 Jan – 27 Nov 2023



6th National
b. 1970

Christopher Luxon

Former CEO of Air New Zealand who entered Parliament in 2020 and became Prime Minister three years later – one of the shortest political apprenticeships of any NZ leader. Led New Zealand's first three-party coalition, with ACT and NZ First; ACT's Treaty Principles Bill prompted one of the largest hīkoi in our history before being voted down.

27 Nov 2023 – present

About this poster

Everyone who has led New Zealand's government since 1840: the Governors appointed from Britain who ran the colony until settlers won responsible government in 1856, then the elected Premiers and Prime Ministers who followed. The title 'Prime Minister' became official in 1907.

The ribbon below shows every term in office to scale, coloured by party. Formal political parties began in 1891.

- Governor
- Liberal
- United
- National
- No formal party
- Reform
- Labour

SOURCES

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Prepared with the help of various Anthropic Claude models.

v0.5 – October 2026

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1840 1850 1860 1870 1880 1890 1900 1910 1920 1930 1940 1950 1960 1970 1980 1990 2000 2010 2020 2026