

What impact did Liberal policies have on the Maori?

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The policies of the Liberal government had a profound impact on Maori society. While efforts were made to provide for Maori interests, there was a general lack of conviction from most Liberal politicians. Many policies that were ostensibly oriented towards addressing Maori issues embodied ulterior motives, that were aimed at maintaining or furthering the interests of the European population at large.¹ This was especially true insofar as Maori land and Maori political issues were concerned. Maori pressure groups, Liberal political expediency and popular European pressure had combined in various degrees to shape policies towards Maori. But Liberal policy, despite genuine efforts from mainly Maori politicians, was generally coercive and failed to ameliorate Maori social circumstances and political aspirations in the long run. Only in certain areas were there positive responses, but they were often short-lived due in part to legislative constraints and a lack of resources. Maori society under the aegis of Liberal policy therefore remained underdeveloped, exploited and subordinate to the interests of Europeans and political expediency.

By the time the Liberal government came to power in 1890, Maori political aspirations had become a potent force in New Zealand politics. There was growing Maori disillusionment with prior governments over grievances stemming particularly from the 1860s land wars and the continuing alienation of Maori land. Maori nationalist resistance movements had crystallised in the late 1880s to stem the growing tide of land alienation and to seek redress for past grievances. Petitions to parliament and deputations to the queen of England were met with indifference, and Maori sought to reassert their political aspirations through political pressure on parliament.²

By 1892 the Kotahitanga and Kingitanga movements had set up separate parliaments gaining wide support amongst Maori.³ The Kotahitanga movement in particular became the major focus of Maori nationalism and aspirations. It placed a strong emphasis on Maori self-determination, with the Treaty of Waitangi as its focal point. As the movement gained strength, Kotahitanga promulgated its own legislation seeking both to modify and replace existing statutes.⁴ It particularly pursued the right to set up District Committees to deal with

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- Wood, G.A. 'The Creation of the Provinces', *New Zealand's Heritage*, pp. 594-99.

land issues, thus preventing further land alienation. However, when these proposals were submitted to the Liberal government in 1894, they were rejected because they openly opposed further alienation of Maori land, and at a more fundamental level they appeared to challenge the authority of the Crown.⁵

Instead Seddon moved to introduce a more acceptable set of policies which appeared to give Maori greater autonomy but clearly within the overall constraints of government policy.⁶ The 1900 Maori Councils Act established Maori councils and committees to promote and enforce health and sanitary measures and the Maori parliament disbanded in anticipation of greater Maori control over Maori issues. A 1903 amending act further widened the powers of Maori councils to include the power to reserve tribal shellfish and fishing grounds and to register Maori dogs.⁷ Despite an initial zealous pursuit of reform, the councils had lapsed into relative inactivity within a few years,⁸ largely due to inadequate funding and administrative support.⁹ Because of the accompanying divisiveness in Maori society, the 1900 Maori Councils Act had effectively removed the sting from the Kotahitanga movement and the quest of the Maori parliament for a measure of continuing tribal sovereignty.¹⁰

Despite the limited resources and autonomy given to the Maori councils and committees, health measures were partially successful in ameliorating the social circumstances of the Maori. Important work was done particularly in the areas of village sanitation and general living conditions. Under the 1900 Public Health Act, Maui Pomare, the first Maori Health Officer, promoted and implemented programmes educating Maori towards higher standards of hygiene and sanitary measures.¹¹ Hygiene lectures were given and a Maori nursing scheme was established. Substandard *whare* were destroyed and many new *whare* and latrines were built. A vaccination programme was also established and by 1905 over 6,000 Maori were inoculated.¹² These reforms had coincided with the revival of the Maori population from a low point of 39,854 in 1896.¹³ And although the recovery of the Maori population cannot be wholly attributed to these reforms,¹⁴ they did contribute to a sustained rise in numbers and a significant improvement in life expectancy.¹⁵

As a concomitant part of Liberal health reforms, the 1907 Tohunga Suppression Act made a limited impact on Maori society. Its ostensible aim was to improve health care by discouraging and suppressing the 'pernicious customs' and the power of the *tohunga*.¹⁶ The practices of 'ignorant charlatans' gave some justification for its implementation. But the act

proved difficult to enforce largely because of Maori unwillingness to expose genuine faith-healers.¹⁷ Despite the conviction of six *tohunga*¹⁸, the act was rendered ineffective partly because of the difficulty in obtaining evidence, but mainly because the *tohunga* was still an integral part of Maori cultural beliefs and practices.¹⁹

The education policies of the Liberal government had also made a limited impact on Maori society. For example, the 1894 School Attendance Act which extended compulsory education to Maori children proved difficult to enforce due to isolation from schools, the absence of roads and the predilection of parents to keep children home to assist in social and economic activities.²⁰ The Native Schools Code 1897 which prescribed the syllabus for Native schools also had serious shortcomings. The code failed to accommodate Maori cultural considerations and in the long term contributed to cultural deprivation and Maori antipathy towards education.²¹

Although the Liberal patronage of Maori education was one part of the continuing policies initiated by James Pope in 1880,²² there was little headway made in the education of Maori children during the Liberal era. Despite the increase in schools being built and rising school attendances, Maori academic achievement remained extremely low. In 1906, only 29 proficiency certificates were awarded to pupils in Native schools out of a roll of 4,174 and the majority of these successful candidates were European rather than Maori pupils.²³ While this failure can be in part attributed to Maori social circumstances and cultural attitudes, there were serious deficiencies in the syllabus, teachers' attitudes and the overall cultural context in which education was provided.²⁴ Liberal education patronage contributed to continuing efforts at assimilation and therefore disregarded Maori culture and Maori social circumstances. Ultimately, it resulted in pupils suffering from 'cultural deprivation and the effects on an over-academic curriculum, unrelated to the needs of individuals or those of the surrounding [Maori] community'.²⁵

Liberal land policy had undoubtedly made the most devastating impact on Maori society. Because of the insatiable demand for land by settlers and the Liberal policy of promoting rural farmholding and closer settlement, Maori land was bound to become the focus of Liberal land policies from the outset. This became increasingly apparent since the policy of 'busting up' the great estates failed to meet the increasing demand for land from expectant settlers.²⁶ In 1890 Maori had still retained 11 million acres of land but despite sustained and

vociferous Maori opposition, a further 3.1 million acres were purchased during the Liberal era.²⁷

Most of this land was acquired during the 1890s through a series of legislative measures that validated disputed claims and facilitated further land purchasing.²⁸ These measures had serious ramifications for Maori. For example, the establishment of the Appellate Court in 1894 effectively removed Maori recourse to either the Supreme Court or Privy Council. The 1892 Native Land Purchasing Act, 1893 Native Land Purchasing and Acquisition Act and the 1894 Land Court Act undermined Maori aspirations for self-determination by compulsorily investing their sale proceedings with the Public Trustee.²⁹ The reintroduction of Crown pre-emption in 1894 was particularly a bitter point of contention to Maori because it took away control of their own destinies and deflated the price of land. Maori land was, on average, acquired for less than six shillings but settlers were prepared to pay far more for it. Moreover, the land that was made available under the Lands for Settlement scheme by the break-up of the great estates was acquired by the Liberals for an average price of 84 shillings. In the long term then, 'Maori landowners rather than the "squattocracy" were vanquished by the state's promotion of closer settlement'.³⁰

Other aspects of these early Liberal land policies had similar coercive underpinnings and caused much concern, if not hardship, to Maori. The 1893 Native Land Purchase and Acquisition Act which lowered the age at which Maori could sell land from 21 to 17 attracted much criticism from Maori politicians who felt that this change had created one law for Maori and another for Europeans.³¹ Under the 1894 Lands for Settlement Act, Maori lessees were liable for a 'just proportion' of any expenditure involved in leasing or surveying of their lands.³² Because covering the cost of leasing land entailed further land alienation, selling rather than leasing became a better option to Maori. The 1895 amending act which imposed stiff fines or imprisonment on anyone who purchased more than their entitlement of land or failed to meet the occupancy and improvement conditions under it had similar implications for Maori since they generally lacked the capital to make improvements such as noxious weed control.³³

Given the many grievances that Maori felt about these early Liberal land policies it becomes very understandable that the Native Land Administration Act of 1900 was approached with mistrust. This act, as a parallel development to the Maori Councils Act, established Maori Land Councils which gave Maori greater autonomy to administer their lands.

Liberal politicians had anticipated that Maori would invest large areas of land in these councils to be made available for leasing. But Liberal hopes were dashed when it became apparent that Maori were reluctant to part with their lands so readily, because only 6,773 acres of land were made available for leasing.³⁴

In 1905 the Maori Land Settlement Act, in response to growing settler demand for land, substantially revised the 1900 act by replacing Maori Land Councils with three-member land boards with a European majority. This act was a pretext for further Maori land alienation and made compulsory the investing of land not required for occupation. The 1909 Native Land Act threw the door wide open to Maori land purchasing by waiving Crown pre-emption and saw private buying outstrip Crown purchasing. By 1920 Maori owned less than five million acres of land, of which three million were leased.³⁵

The impact of the Liberal land policies is well summed up by Tom Brooking.³⁶ The purchase of so much land, so quickly, and for so little money was catastrophic for the development of sustainable Maori farming. The development of sheep farming in particular was stifled by these policies. Because credit, made available to settlers under the Advances to Settlers scheme, was not extended to them, Maori had limited options and their lands remained underdeveloped. Brooking further reasons that if Maori had been given a chance to succeed, the results would have almost certainly benefited everyone, in that the cycle of Maori dependency on the state would have been broken.³⁷

In assessing the impact of Liberal policies on the Maori, it is evident that Maori society remained underdeveloped and over-exploited. Limited progress was made to facilitate Maori development in the areas of health, education and land utilization. The Maori quest for greater autonomy met a similar fate. Had the Liberals acknowledged and responded to Maori protests and aspirations, it would surely have led to a lessening of bitterness between Maori and Pakeha in the long term. Sadly, Liberal policy instead was part of a continuum of state ambivalence towards Maori, and it widened the fracture between Maori and Pakeha. As Brooking points out this fracture has yet to be healed.³⁸

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NOTES

1. See Tom Brooking, 1992. "'Busting Up" the Greatest Estate of All: Liberal Maori Land Policy 1891-1911', *New Zealand Journal of History* 26, 1, p. 83.
2. R.J. Martin, 1965. 'The Liberal Experiment', in J.G.A. Pocock (ed.), *The Maori and New Zealand Politics*. Auckland, Blackwood and Janet Paul Ltd, pp. 48-52.
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4. Ranginui Walker, 1990. *Ka Whawhai Tonu Matou: Struggle Without End*. Auckland, Penguin Books, pp. 166-69.
5. Mason Durie, 1990. *Partnership and the Advancement of Maori Health: A Paper presented at the First International Conference of Health Administrators*. Palmerston North, Massey University, p. 8.
6. Ibid.
7. G.V. Butterworth 1990. *Maori Affairs*. Wellington, Iwi Transition Agency: GP Books, p. 61.
8. Michael King, 1981. 'Between Two Worlds' in W.H. Oliver with B.R. Williams (eds), *The Oxford History of New Zealand*. Auckland, Oxford University Press, p. 281.
9. Martin, p. 54.
10. Durie, p. 9.
11. G.V. Butterworth 1971. 'Sir Maui Pomare', in Ray Knox (ed.), *New Zealand's Heritage: The Making of a Nation*. Part 58, Auckland, Paul Hamlyn Limited, p. 1981.
12. Ibid.
13. M.P.K. Sorrenson, 1971. 'The Young Maori Party', in Ray Knox (ed.), *New Zealand's Heritage: The Making of a Nation*. Part 58, Auckland, Paul Hamlyn Limited, p. 1619.
14. See King, p. 281. King argues that the Maori recovery owed less to health reforms than to the decline in epidemics, the acquisition of immunity and the increase in the child-bearing age group.
15. Butterworth, 1990, p. 62.
16. Ibid., p. 58.
17. Malcolm Voyce, 1989. 'Maori Healers in New Zealand: The Tohunga Suppression Act 1907', *Oceania* 60, 2, p. 113.
18. Ibid.

19. Ibid.
20. See J.M. Barrington and T.H. Beaglehole, 1974. *Maori Schools in a Changing Society*. Wellington, New Zealand Council for Educational Research, p. 140.
21. Ibid., p. 156.
22. See Barrington and Beaglehole, pp. 124-60.
23. Ibid., pp. 144-45.
24. Ibid., pp. 135-60.
25. Ibid., p. 156.
26. Brooking, 1992, p. 78.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid., pp. 83-89.
29. Ibid., p. 83.
30. Tom Brooking 1981. 'Economic Transformation', in W.H. Oliver with B.R. Williams, (eds), *The Oxford History of New Zealand*. Auckland, Oxford University Press, p. 238.
31. Brooking, 1992, p. 88.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid., p. 89.
34. Butterworth, 1990, p. 62.
35. Brooking, 1992, p. 79.
36. Ibid., pp. 97-98.
37. Ibid., p. 97.
38. Ibid, p. 98.

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