Our history of citizenship rights and human rights

New Zealanders are proud that we have often led the way among nations in recognising and extending the rights of citizens and others. We are proud, for example, of being the first to give women the right to vote in 1893. Earlier, in 1879, we had extended voting rights to men whether they owned property or not. And Māori rights to participate in Parliament with specific representation were recognised from 1867. There was never an established Church in New Zealand, and people have always been free to practise their own religion and, generally, express their beliefs.

New Zealand has also recognised specific injustices of the past in which the rights of citizens were violated.

There have been formal apologies to many iwi over violations of Treaty rights and the general rights of Māori citizens as part of the process of resolving historic Treaty grievances. We cannot be proud of the events that gave rise to the resolution process, but the process itself has been recognised by iwi, New Zealanders generally and many indigenous and other people around the world as a success.

There was specific discrimination against Chinese wanting to come to New Zealand, and those already in the country, from the 19th century through until the 1930s. This led to the government making a formal apology in 2002 to those who paid the discriminatory poll tax and their descendants.

New Zealand administered Western Samoa after the start of World War One. Previously it was administered by Germany. In 2002 New Zealand apologised for the injustices arising from New Zealand’s administration of Samoa in its earlier years and the special state of the relationship is acknowledged in our citizenship laws.

We have also established a range of agencies to advance and protect human rights and advise government on improving our diverse society. These include the Ombudsman, the Human Rights Commission, the Independent Police Complaints Authority, the Privacy Commissioner, and Ministerial portfolios with supporting staff for Māori, Pacific Peoples and Ethnic Communities. New Zealand is a strong advocate of human rights at the United Nations and in all its dealings with other countries.

In New Zealand it is unlawful under the Human Rights Act 1993 to discriminate (except in rare cases) in providing services or employment on the grounds of:

a. sex, which includes pregnancy and childbirth:

b. marital status:

c. religious belief:

d. ethical belief, which means the lack of a religious belief:

e. colour:

f. race:

g. ethnic or national origins, which includes nationality or citizenship:

h. disability,

i. age,

j. political opinion, which includes the lack of a particular political opinion or any political opinion:

k. employment status:

l. family status:

m. sexual orientation, which means a heterosexual, homosexual, lesbian, or bisexual orientation

One change in citizenship law as a result of strengthening human rights legislation was a change in 1977 to allow citizenship by descent to be passed on through mothers as well as fathers and providing New Zealand citizenship status to those previously discriminated against.
Suffrage Petition: Archives New Zealand Collection