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The Transformation of an Icon in the New Economy:
A Theoretical and Empirical Exploration of the New Zealand Reforms

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology at Massey University, Albany, New Zealand

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Abstract

This thesis is concerned with the impact of neo-liberal reforms, initiated in response to the exigencies of a new technologically-driven global economy, on a conservative interventionist state. It is a sociological work, which encompasses history, politics, economics, organisations, social action and societal change.

Between 1984 and 1990, the Fourth Labour Government embarked upon the reform of the structure and operation of the New Zealand economy. That reform ranks amongst the most radical and far-reaching in twentieth century New Zealand. Not only were the scope and magnitude of the changes significant but they were also implemented with a rapidity that took most of the country by surprise. Consequently, New Zealanders were exposed to a new and flexible economy, where market forces provided a major contrast with the ideals of equity and consensus that had shaped social conditions since the 1950s. This new environment had significant implications for the career expectations and working environment of many people, and for the delivery and content of public services.

This thesis adds to the existing body of knowledge on the New Zealand reforms by capturing and investigating the perspectives of key actors who were involved, in a number of ways, with the transformation of the economy. It explores the theoretical and empirical basis of the reform programme, the restructuring process, the nature and scale of an intense commercialisation strategy, the attitudes of a new generation of workers and the reactions of New Zealanders when their ontological security came under threat.
Key aspects of the reforms are framed and analysed through
the transformation of the New Zealand Post Office from an
icon of the interventionist state, a major employer and
key service provider – to a commercial enterprise which
sought to be a competitive, flexible, profit-driven
organisation typical of the new economy. The experiences
of politicians and senior managers who were responsible
for this transformation – through to individuals who
depended on the organisation for services and jobs, are
represented in the thesis as indicative of the actions and
responses of New Zealanders, generally, regarding much
broader social and organisational changes brought about by
the reforms.
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