

Beyond Reform: A Plan for the Renewal of Governance

A plan for real change

Step One: Establish the public mandate for transition

Nothing this significant can be imposed by a political party, a group of experts or a charismatic leader.

The first step is a national process that helps people understand:

1. what the existing system was designed to do
2. where it is no longer functioning
3. what must remain protected
4. what should be redesigned
5. what kind of future people wish to build together.

This could begin through a **National Commission for Democratic and Institutional Renewal**, independent of the government of the day.

Its task would not be to propose another restructure. It would facilitate a wide public examination of the state itself.

Participation would occur through:

- iwi and hapū processes
- citizens' assemblies
- local and regional forums
- rangatahi assemblies
- disability and accessibility forums
- migrant and cultural communities
- sector-based deliberations
- digital participation
- dedicated processes for future generations and the natural world.

The output would be a public transition mandate rather than a party manifesto.

Step Two: Name the non-negotiable foundations

Before dismantling anything, the country must agree on what the new system is being built to protect.

These foundations might include:

- human dignity
- Te Tiriti o Waitangi
- democratic participation

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- tino rangatiratanga
- the rule of law
- ecological integrity
- intergenerational responsibility
- equity
- cultural plurality
- freedom of expression
- transparency
- public accountability
- care for those most affected by change.

These become the constitutional guardrails for the transition.

Without agreed foundations, institutional transformation can be captured by whoever holds the most power, money, technology or influence.

Step Three: Map the existing state as an ecosystem

We cannot responsibly dismantle what we do not understand.

A whole-of-state map would identify:

- where decisions are made
- who holds formal and informal power
- where funding flows
- where information is held
- which institutions duplicate one another
- where people become trapped between agencies
- where the Crown's obligations are fragmented
- which laws reinforce obsolete structures
- where communities already govern effectively
- which services are too important to disrupt
- where innovation is currently prevented.

This is not an organisational chart.

It is a map of relationships, dependencies, incentives, authorities, data, legislation, culture and consequences.

Every major state function would then be classified:

Protect

Functions that must remain stable throughout transition.

Examples include emergency response, health services, income support, justice, infrastructure and national security.

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Repair

Functions that are necessary but inequitable, fragmented or poorly designed.

Transfer

Functions better held by iwi, local government, communities, regional institutions or specialised public bodies.

Retire

Rules, agencies, processes or reporting requirements that no longer serve a meaningful purpose.

Reimagine

Functions requiring entirely new institutional models.

Step Four: Create a temporary transition architecture

The existing government cannot be expected to redesign itself while simultaneously protecting its own incentives, conventions and power.

A temporary transition structure would be needed.

This could include:

A Transition Assembly

A representative body containing:

- Crown institutions
- iwi and hapū representatives
- local government
- citizens selected by sortition
- rangatahi
- community and sector leaders
- constitutional and systems experts
- ecological and future-generation representatives.

It would not replace Parliament immediately. It would develop, test and recommend the architecture of the next system.

A Stewardship Council

An independent body responsible for assessing whether decisions strengthen or weaken long-term wellbeing, democratic integrity, Te Tiriti relationships and ecological resilience.

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A Public Transition Office

A professionally staffed institution coordinating pilots, legislation, public participation, evaluation and continuity of essential services.

A Transition Ombudsman

An independent safeguard for communities and individuals harmed or excluded during the transition.

These bodies should be time-limited. Their purpose is to create the bridge, not become another permanent bureaucracy.

Step Five: Separate stewardship from short-term political management

One of the deepest problems in contemporary government is that long-term stewardship is repeatedly overridden by short electoral cycles.

A future system should distinguish between:

- setting enduring national direction
- democratic political choice
- operational delivery
- independent guardianship
- local and indigenous authority.

Parliament should continue to make contestable political choices. But it should not be the sole guardian of the future.

Certain matters require longer-term stewardship, including:

- ecological limits
- major infrastructure
- constitutional integrity
- intergenerational equity
- data and technological governance
- national resilience
- Te Tiriti obligations.

Institutions responsible for these matters should have public legitimacy, transparent mandates and strong accountability, but should not be reset every three years.

Step Six: Rebuild democracy beyond elections

Voting is essential, but it is insufficient.

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People cannot meaningfully govern themselves through a few minutes in a polling booth every several years.

A mature democratic system would combine:

- representative democracy
- participatory democracy
- deliberative democracy
- indigenous governance
- local decision-making
- digital civic participation
- direct public oversight.

Possible mechanisms include:

- permanent citizens' assemblies
- participatory budgeting
- public policy juries
- citizens' initiative processes
- stronger select committee powers
- community right-to-propose provisions
- transparent lobbying registers
- limits on political donations
- recall or review processes for serious failures
- public access to policy evidence and modelling
- ongoing civic education.

The purpose is not constant referenda. It is sustained participation with enough time, information and deliberation for people to exercise judgement.

Step Seven: Move from centralised delivery to distributed stewardship

Not every decision belongs in the capital.

Authority should sit at the lowest level capable of carrying it responsibly, with national coordination where necessary.

This means developing a layered system:

Whānau and community level

Local participation, mutual support and community-designed services.

Hapū, iwi and indigenous institutions

Authority grounded in whakapapa, tikanga, whenua and tino rangatiratanga.

Municipal and regional level

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Place-based transport, housing, environmental management, economic development and community infrastructure.

National level

Rights, redistribution, national standards, macroeconomic coordination, justice and matters requiring collective scale.

Transnational level

Climate, migration, trade, technology, oceans, security and planetary risks.

This is not devolution as abandonment.

Resources, authority, capability and accountability must move together. Central government cannot transfer responsibility while retaining funding and control.

Step Eight: Replace departmental silos with life-centred systems

People do not experience life in government departments.

A child may simultaneously be affected by housing, education, health, income, transport, culture, disability services and neighbourhood safety. Yet the state divides that life into separate files, eligibility criteria, budgets and agencies.

Future systems should organise around life conditions and shared outcomes, such as:

- thriving children and whānau
- lifelong learning
- dignified ageing
- healthy places
- resilient communities
- meaningful work and contribution
- ecological regeneration
- cultural identity and belonging
- digital and technological wellbeing.

Departments may still exist for specialist capability, but accountability and funding should increasingly sit across shared missions rather than isolated portfolios.

Step Nine: Change the economic operating logic

Government cannot cultivate flourishing while the wider system continues to reward extraction, short-termism and the transfer of cost to future generations.

Institutional transformation therefore requires changes to:

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- public finance
- taxation
- procurement
- ownership
- investment
- measurement
- competition policy
- land and resource governance.

National success cannot be reduced to economic growth.

A broader public balance sheet should account for:

- human capability
- ecological health
- infrastructure
- cultural strength
- institutional trust
- social cohesion
- resilience
- unpaid care
- future liabilities.

Every major decision should disclose who benefits, who carries the risk, what is depleted and what is being left to future generations.

Step Ten: Build government as a learning system

Current systems often treat adaptation as evidence that the original plan failed.

A complex system must expect uncertainty.

Government should operate through:

- continuous sensing
- small-scale experimentation
- rapid feedback
- transparent evaluation
- distributed learning
- safe-to-fail pilots
- sunset clauses
- regular institutional review.

Every major law and institution should have a scheduled review point.

Not merely:

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Did this programme meet its targets?

But:

Does this institution still need to exist in this form?

Public servants should be rewarded for learning, collaboration and prevention—not simply compliance, budget management and ministerial responsiveness.

Step Eleven: Transform the political system itself

Political institutions cannot remain untouched while the administrative state is redesigned.

Possible reforms should be publicly considered together rather than as isolated technical adjustments:

- longer parliamentary terms balanced by stronger accountability
- greater independence between executive and legislature
- stronger parliamentary scrutiny
- transparent coalition agreements
- limits on executive urgency
- improved representation
- citizens' chambers or assemblies
- stronger constitutional protection
- independent appointments processes
- regulation of lobbying and political financing
- mechanisms for long-term national commitments
- civics education from school onward.

Political leadership would shift from promising to control the future to helping society navigate uncertainty responsibly.

Step Twelve: Constitutionalise the new settlement

Pilots and conventions are not enough. Once tested, the new relationship between people, Crown, whenua, institutions and future generations must be given constitutional force.

A constitutional settlement could clarify:

- the authority of the state
- the place of Te Tiriti
- the distribution of power
- fundamental rights and responsibilities
- the status of future generations
- the standing of the natural world

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- the role of local and indigenous governance
- emergency powers
- public participation
- the limits of executive authority
- processes for future constitutional adaptation.

The constitution itself should be capable of evolution, but not casual political manipulation.

The sequence matters

This cannot be attempted as one dramatic rupture.

A credible transition might unfold across four horizons.

Horizon One: Reveal and prepare

Years 1–2

- create the public mandate
- establish the independent commission
- map the state
- identify constitutional foundations
- protect essential services
- begin civic education
- identify communities already practising future-fit governance.

Horizon Two: Build and test

Years 2–5

- establish citizens' assemblies
- pilot place-based governance
- test shared-outcome funding
- transfer selected authority and resources
- establish stewardship institutions
- trial new accountability and participation mechanisms
- introduce sunset and review provisions.

Horizon Three: Transition authority

Years 5–10

- retire obsolete institutions
- merge or redesign fragmented functions

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- transfer agreed powers
- reform Parliament and political financing
- scale successful regional and indigenous models
- embed long-term public stewardship
- draft the constitutional settlement.

Horizon Four: Constitute and renew

Years 10 onward

- ratify the new constitutional arrangements
- complete institutional transition
- maintain continuous public evaluation
- preserve the capacity for future adaptation.

The dismantling test

Every institution, policy and process should be asked:

1. What life-serving purpose does this perform?
2. Who gave it authority?
3. Who benefits from its current form?
4. Who is excluded or harmed?
5. What assumptions does it preserve?
6. Could this function be performed closer to the people affected?
7. Does it strengthen relationships or fragment them?
8. Does it increase future capacity or consume it?
9. Is it adaptable?
10. Should it still exist?

If an institution cannot answer these questions convincingly, it must be repaired, transferred, replaced or retired.

What prevents this becoming another failed reform

Several disciplines would be essential.

Do not begin with structure. Begin with purpose, relationships and constitutional foundations.

Do not centralise the transformation. The new system must be practised across many places, not designed entirely from the centre.

Do not confuse speed with progress. Some obsolete rules can be removed quickly. Constitutional trust must be built carefully.

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Do not allow political parties to own the process. They must participate, but the transition must belong to the public.

Do not abandon continuity. People who depend on public services cannot become collateral damage.

Do not design only for efficiency. Resilience, dignity, belonging, legitimacy and adaptability matter just as much.

Do not replace one elite with another. Expertise must serve public deliberation rather than substitute for it.

Do not build a perfect final model. Build institutions capable of learning and changing.

The deeper change

The hardest structures to dismantle will not be departments, laws or parliamentary procedures.

They will be the beliefs beneath them:

- that power must be concentrated to be effective
- that expertise belongs only to institutions
- that uniformity creates fairness
- that people are service users rather than participants
- that nature is a resource
- that culture is an addition rather than an operating system
- that politics is competition for control
- that the future can be governed through prediction
- that government is something done to people.

The future system must be based on a different proposition:

Governance is the shared practice of cultivating the conditions in which life can flourish.

That is the transition.

Not government made slightly more efficient.

Not politics with a new set of personalities.

Not another framework laid over the old world.

The deliberate transfer from control to stewardship,