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Backdown: 10-year passports for Kiwis

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New Zealand moved to five-year passports in 2005 in response to security concerns sparked by the 2001 terrorist attacks in the US.
Photo / Mark Mitchell

New Zealanders are set to enjoy 10-year passports once again - but at a price. It is understood the Cabinet will decide in the next few weeks to extend the passport validity period, which was reduced to five years in 2005. This will require an amendment to the Passports Act, and is likely to lead to higher fees for renewing a passport. Prime Minister John Key said officials wanted the validity period to remain at five years. But he hinted that the Government would go against their advice and revert to 10-year passports. "Good news is coming," he told NewstalkZB.

The change followed an independent review of passport security measures by former diplomat and Foreign Affairs chief Simon Murdoch, and a separate review of the costs related to processing passports. The two reports were finished in December and sent to Internal Affairs Minister Peter Dunne to make a recommendation to the Cabinet. The Government is unlikely to use urgency in Parliament to change the legislation. But it may seek a shortened public consultation process, which would require agreement from other political parties. Mr Key has previously warned that a return to 10-year passports is likely to lead to higher fees because revenue from processing the documents will fall. At present, it costs \$135 to renew a passport.

Analysis by the New Zealand Ten-Year Passports campaign showed that fee was more expensive than nearly every other comparable country. New Zealand moved to five-year passports in 2005 in response to security concerns sparked by the 2001 terrorist attacks in

the US. It was expected that other countries would do the same, but this did not happen. Australia and the US still require their citizens to renew their travel documents only once a decade. In addition, developments in biometric technology have allayed concerns about passport fraud and counterfeiting.

Last year, a 12,000-signature petition organised by Australian-based New Zealander Kyle Lockwood urged Parliament to return 10-year passports. Previously, Mr Lockwood had said five-year passports were "frustrating and expensive", especially for people living abroad where residency visas had to be updated every five years. "We have found that many dual citizens have given up renewing their New Zealand passports because of the short five-year validity term," he said. New Zealand's major trading partners, including the US, Britain, Canada and Australia, all had 10-year passports, Mr Lockwood said. The petition was backed by a parliamentary committee, but the Government was less enthusiastic. It said biometric chips were only one of a number of security measures, and having shorter validity periods allowed passports to be refreshed with the latest technology more frequently. Officials said New Zealand passports were ranked highly in terms of access to other countries and if the documents became compromised, that could affect New Zealanders' travel. The Government also pointed to evidence of increasing "imposter" crime, such as the misuse of genuine passports, and said checking and updating the documents more regularly was a way of countering this type of crime.

The Key Administration said it ordered the review of passport validity periods and costs to make sure that a change would not "compromise the security and integrity for which New Zealand passports in particular are currently recognised". Brent Thomas, House of Travel commercial director, said 10-year passports were likely to benefit frequent travellers. "The biggest issue we've got is for a number of countries you have to have six months' validity on your passport. While the Government issues a five-year-passport, the reality is it doesn't actually last five years in a lot of cases," Mr Thomas said. "Going back to 10 years would make it significantly better for people who travel a lot because they wouldn't have to replace it ... effectively in 4 years."