

**Teacher's Notes:****Law and Order on the Goldfields****Background to the eGold Educational Activities**

The content included here can all be found on the eGold website. Student activities are designed to facilitate the self-exploration of this content and the development of independent research skills using eGold's Search, A-Z Index and Message Tree gateways.

**Timing & resources**

This lesson is designed to take place over three or four periods. Parts A and B require each student to have access to the eGold website. Part C might take place in the classroom over several periods depending on available time.

**Objectives**

At the conclusion of this learning activity students will have demonstrated the ability to;

- Employ social and independent modes of research to find answers to a number of targeted questions relating to Law and Order on the Goldfields.
  - Utilise a variety of online search techniques including eGold's Message Tree, Search engine and navigation tabs to extract information on a defined topic.
  - Analyse textual and visual primary sources.
  - Evaluate the statements made in a contemporary letter to the editor about Law and Order on the Goldfields.
  - Work collaboratively to devise a dramatisation of the events described in the letter, taking on the role of one of the key characters.
  - Engage with others in the class and with their work to understand and empathise with different points of view.
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## Overview

The central concern of Victoria's new Lieutenant-Governor, Charles La Trobe, and many other contemporary observers was how to maintain law and order in their fledgling colony in the face of the frenzied dash for gold. Not only did the government have to contend with the unprecedented upheaval in established centres as thousands of men left for the diggings, it also suddenly found it had to expand its control over a much larger area as makeshift settlements sprang up in previously isolated parts of the country. Thousands of diggers congregated in places like Ballarat, Bendigo and Omeo far from any infrastructure or sites of government.

In a desperate bid to regulate this 'scramble' for treasure on Crown lands, and with a view to raising revenue to meet the administrative and infrastructure costs of the gold fields, La Trobe announced the introduction of a licence-system in August 1851 to be effective from 1 September. Diggers were to be able to keep any gold they found but had to pay a hefty monthly licence-fee in order to dig for gold on a small claim. Following the model established in New South Wales, commissioners backed by a contingent of police would be appointed to regulate the fields and collect license fees.

With the luxury of hindsight, La Trobe's decision to follow the New South Wales administrative system – a system about which he himself had grave reservations - seems rash and hasty. But historian Geoffrey Serle argues that La Trobe's 'inefficiencies' must be measured against the 'appalling difficulties' he faced – the chaos provoked by the gold rushes as well as the internal governmental disputes that 'bedevilled' the situation. Members of the press were less sympathetic to the Governor's plight and immediately protested that this indiscriminate direct tax was unfair and defied common sense – it was a 'juggernaut tax to crush the poor' fumed a correspondent in the *Geelong Advertiser*. It was also unrealistic to expect diggers who had been working the ground for barely a month to be in a position to pay 30 shillings when many would as yet be unable to cover even personal expenses. Finally, there was as yet no way to enforce the system on the fields.

Government employees were not immune to the lure of gold: the police force and other sectors of the public service were decimated as men went off to try their luck on the diggings. The problems associated with imposing law and order on the itinerant gold communities quickly became severe. The difficulties associated with lack of man power and communication meant government officials were usually among the last on the scene of a new rush. No officials or police arrived at Ballarat until 19 September, four weeks after gold was first discovered there. The crises became acute in the wake of La Trobe's grossly misjudged (and soon revoked) proposal to double the license-fee, which provoked howls of protest from the press and diggers. In one anxious despatch to Earl Grey in London, La Trobe declared that the 'whole machinery of government is dislocated'. In others he despaired of ever securing a sufficient number of policemen, pleaded for military reinforcements and requested two men-of-war to protect the gold stores on the wharfs from potential plunderers.

During the first months of 1852 the government gradually established control. There was intensive investment in the police force and the administration of the diggings – or, perhaps more accurately, the police administration of the diggings. In March 1852 La Trobe reassured his superiors that 'the police force has increased in numbers and efficiency'. In September 1853, he wrote proudly that his force was, 'in as efficient a state as any similar body outside the mother country'. As early as May 1852, the governor was celebrating the large number of licenses recorded as indicative of the triumph of law and

order on the goldfields and the law-abiding nature of the digger population: 'Nothing can better show the power of the law, and the willingness with which the majority seek, by ready compliance with the regulations, to come under its protection', he wrote.

Meanwhile, the reports of many diggers and other observers suggested there was a marked *absence* of effective law and order on the goldfields, with criminal activity rife in some areas: '... no one intending to turn digger should leave England without a good supply of firearms. In less than a week, more than a dozen robberies occurred between Kyneton and Forest Creek – two of which terminated in murder', warned Ellen Clacy. La Trobe feared serious crime was a problem in some parts of the diggings, but he insisted the problem was exaggerated, particularly by unsympathetic papers such as the *Argus*. The central concern of La Trobe and his government seems to have been implementing and enforcing the license-system.

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### **References**

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