

History of the Governor-General

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Adjusting to responsible government

Settlers had been demanding a say in government in the 1840s. Governor Grey suspended an overly elaborate constitution in 1846, but the New Zealand Constitution Act 1852 gave male voters representative government.

Elections were held in 1853 for a House of Representatives. **Its members quickly demanded full self-government.** The years between 1853 and 1856 were difficult: the governor's appointed officials clung to office, while inexperienced politicians squabbled over parochial issues.

Our unhappiest governor

Sir Arthur Gordon (1880–2) did not want the job. 'I have been very greatly mortified by my appointment,' he sobbed. He preferred Crown colonies where he called the shots, but for the sake of his family he came, grumbling all the way, to New Zealand. 'For all this social work,' he candidly admitted, 'laying first stones of public buildings – making little speeches – opening Athenaeums – attending races – presiding at charity dinners and entertaining large parties of stupid people I am exceeding unfit'. He was right. He upset people, squabbled with ministers and left after 18 months.

Late in 1854 London approved self-government, and in 1855 Governor Thomas Gore Browne (1855–61) prorogued Parliament ready for elections the following year.

The term 'responsible', as in 'responsible government', requires qualification. Honours, awards, diplomatic relations and external defence remained an imperial responsibility. The Colonial Laws Validity Act 1865 proscribed any colonial law deemed 'repugnant' (i.e., contradictory to the provisions of an imperial statute) and enabled governors to refer dubious laws to London for final consideration.

By keeping control of policy in the crucial areas of defence (troops paid for by the British taxpayer were stationed in New Zealand) and Maori affairs, Gore Browne also set up tensions between Government House and politicians that lasted more than a decade.

Our most foolish governor

David Boyle, Lord Glasgow (1892–7), walked into the controversy created by Lord Onslow over Legislative Council (Upper House) appointments. The 59-year-old former naval officer 'was unknown to fame', one colonial paper quipped, and ill-suited to his job. In 1892 he crowed that his critics 'have resorted to Italics, which is a sure sign they are in a hole', but he was the one in trouble. He clashed frequently with ministers over accommodation, transport and defence, but above all over the Legislative Council. Even after London ordered him to follow ministerial advice he traded reports with his ministers.

Not all governors liked being relegated to a ceremonial role and there were several clashes with strong-willed politicians, especially former governor Sir George Grey, who entered national politics in 1875. Sometimes these lengthy, frosty exchanges of memoranda were referred to as 'Memorandumniads'.

Sir George Bowen (1868–73), Sir Hercules Robinson (1879–80) and Lieutenant-General Sir William Jervois (1882–9) handled responsible government well. Sir James Fergusson (1873–4) and Sir Arthur

Gordon (1880–2) did not. The Marquess of Normanby (1875–9), a sharp thinker, used ministerial weakness to wage a constitutionally suspect but highly successful campaign against former governor Sir George Grey.

In 1890 voters elected a Liberal government. The Liberals were reform-minded, but the conservative upper house, the Legislative Council, tried to apply the brakes. After the Council mangled several important government bills, Premier John Ballance asked Lord Onslow (1889–92) to approve some new nominations to the council.

Onslow refused, but went home early, leaving the dispute for Lord Glasgow to solve. Incredibly, Glasgow made an even bigger mess of things than Onslow. In a dispatch that had implications for the empire, Secretary of State for the Colonies Lord Ripon told Glasgow in 1892 that he could argue, but:

If, after full discussion, Ministers determine to press upon him [the governor] advice which they have already tendered, the Governor should, as a general rule, and where Imperial interests are not affected, accept that advice, bearing in mind that the responsibility rests with the Ministers, who are answerable to the Legislature, and in the last resort, to the country.

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