PREMIERS AND THEIR TERMS IN OFFICE
OF NEW ZEALAND

Henry Sewell
William Fox
Edward William Stafford
William Fox
Alfred Domett (CMG)
Frederick Whitaker MLC
Frederick Aloysius Weld (CMG KCMG, GCMG)
Edward William Stafford
William Fox
Edward William Stafford (KCMG)
George Marsden Waterhouse MLC
William Fox (KCMG)
Julius Vogel
Daniel Pollen MLC
Sir Julius Vogel KCMG
Harry Albert Atkinson
Harry Albert Atkinson (Ministry reconstructed)
Sir George Grey KCB (PC)
John Hall (KCMG)
Frederick Whitaker MLC (KCMG)
Harry Albert Atkinson
Robert Stout
Harry Albert Atkinson
Sir Robert Stout KCMG
Sir Harry Albert Atkinson KCMG
John Ballance
The Rt Hon Richard John Seddon
William Hall-Jones (KCMG)
The Rt Hon Sir Joseph George Ward Bt, KCMG
Thomas Noble Mackenzie (KCMG, GCMG)
The Rt Hon William Ferguson Massey
The Rt Hon William Ferguson Massey
The Rt Hon William Ferguson Massey
Sir Francis Henry Dillon Bell GCMG, KC, MLC, (PC)
The Rt Hon Joseph Gordon Coates MC
The Rt Hon Sir Joseph George Ward Bt KCMG, GCMG
The Rt Hon George William Forbes
The Rt Hon George William Forbes
The Rt Hon Michael Joseph Savage
The Rt Hon Peter Fraser CH
The Rt Hon Sidney George Holland CH, (GCB)
The Rt Hon Keith Jacka Holyoake
The Rt Hon Walter Nash CH, (GCMG)

7 May 1856 – 20 May 1856
20 May 1856 – 2 June 1856
2 June 1856 – 12 July 1861
12 July 1861 – 6 August 1862
6 August 1862 – 30 October 1863
30 October 1863 – 24 November 1864
24 November 1864 – 16 October 1865
16 October 1865 – 28 June 1869
28 June 1869 – 10 September 1872
10 September 1872 – 11 October 1872
11 October 1872 – 3 March 1873
3 March 1873 – 8 April 1873
8 April 1873 – 6 July 1875
6 July 1875 – 15 February 1876
15 February 1876 – 1 September 1876
1 September 1876 – 13 September 1876
13 September 1876 – 13 October 1877
13 October 1877 – 8 October 1879
8 October 1879 – 21 April 1882
21 April 1882 – 25 September 1883
25 September 1883 – 16 August 1884
16 August 1884 – 28 August 1884
28 August 1884 – 3 September 1884
3 September 1884 – 8 October 1887
8 October 1887 – 24 January 1891
24 January 1891 – 27 April 1893 (died)
1 May 1893 – 10 June 1906 (died)
21 June 1906 – 6 August 1906
6 August 1906 – 28 March 1912
28 March 1912 – 10 July 1912
10 July 1912 – 12 August 1915
12 August 1915 – 25 August 1919
25 August 1919 – 10 May 1925 (died)
14 May 1925 – 30 May 1925
30 May 1925 – 10 December 1928
10 December 1928 – 28 May 1930
28 May 1930 – 22 September 1931
22 September 1931 – 6 December 1935
6 December 1935 – 27 March 1940 (died)
1 April 1940 – 13 December 1949
13 December 1949 – 20 September 1957
20 September 1957 – 12 December 1960
12 December 1957 – 12 December 1960
Note: Awards in brackets were received after the term(s) in office.
Auckland via Wellington, Nelson and New Plymouth for the General Assembly, he gave sustained thought to the future of responsible government, now imminent, and particularly the financial relationship between the centre and the provinces. Within a day of arriving in mid-April 1856, Sewell was asked by Gore Browne to form the first responsible ministry as FitzGerald remained in poor health. Sewell demurred then, in the absence of anyone better qualified, agreed. He announced the members of his ministry on May 7 – and resigned on May 20, after factions in the House had refused acceptance of parts of his Address in Reply that dealt with the relationship between the provinces and what was called the ‘general government’. His strong belief that, while they would be delegated powers in many areas and would control land policy, the provinces must be ultimately subordinate to the centre, but his cogent expression of these views did not convince a narrow majority of committed ‘provincialists’.

During a fortnight of attempted deals and brief, unlikely alliances that made the first attempts at MMP coalition-making in 1996 look very tame, Sewell continued, as a temporary colonial secretary, to conduct government business. When William Fox, a leading ‘provincialist’, became New Zealand’s second premier, in practice his policies differed very little from those proposed by Sewell. His first ministry was to be equally short lived.

William Gisborne, perceptive colonial official and politician observed of Sewell: “He was a man of culture and of considerable ability; and his conversation sparkled with cleverness and wit .... He was remarkably quick in seeing the points of a complicated subject, though in treating it he used too much the arts of the advocate. His speeches, though occasionally eloquent and effective, often had the flavour of forensic insincerity .... His nature was supple and pliant; it was not robust enough to stand alone, but clung to natures of stronger fibre and a firmer growth. His mind had breadth, but it was slippery, and unable to grasp great principles; its strength was dissipated on small things .... The political stage was to him what the warren is to the rabbit: he was ever dodging in and out of holes .... He was fond of office; and he was not exclusive in his political associations.”

Henry Sewell was not premier again, but he sat in the General Assembly for a total of 11 years – four in the House of Representatives and a further seven in the nominated upper house, the Legislative Council. His durability and usefulness were remarkable.

Aside from his own brief ministry, he served in other ‘responsible’ ministries headed by Edward Stafford, William Fox, Alfred Dommett and Frederick Weld, usually as attorney general, before finally leaving politics in 1873.

As Scholefield commented: “Sewell always faced the rising sun. Each new premier as he took office seemed to him to be the only possible premier, and Sewell himself the only possible attorney-general.”

He remained a ‘centralist’ at heart but, with the need to make a living more pressing than personal political beliefs, he served in the ministries of the most determined ‘provincialists’ with seeming equanimity. He also pioneered loan and shipping negotiations in Australia and England in 1857-58 and in fulfillment of his arcane passion for land title systems, became the country’s first registrar general of lands in 1860.

Henry and Elizabeth Sewell left New Zealand in 1876, and he died in England three years later.

W P Morrell wrote: “He was a good man of business .... and he had already shown in 1854 that besides his talent for administration he possessed unusual talent for debate. But there was something lacking in him too. It was found that, though fond of office, he had no fixity of purpose. A little too conscious, perhaps, of his abilities, he was yet not robust enough for leadership, and never really won the confidence either of the House or of the country.”

David McIntyre has observed that Sewell was lonely, pessimistic and snobbish. He also wrote: “.... he was a tireless correspondent, negotiator and committee man, a great drafter of bills and resolutions. He was the chief ‘man of business’ in the first New Zealand Parliament.”