

Levine, 2016

Story: Capital city

New Zealand has had three capital cities – first at Russell, in the Bay of Islands, in 1840, then, just a year later, at Auckland. Since 1865 the more centrally located Wellington has been the country's capital, and in 2011 travel publisher Lonely Planet dubbed it the 'coolest little capital in the world'.

Story by Stephen Levine

Main image: The Beehive, the executive wing of Parliament

Story summary

The capital city is the location of a country's major government institutions. New Zealand's capital is Wellington. It is the base for Parliament, the offices of the cabinet and prime minister, the residences of the prime minister and governor-general, and the country's highest courts.

The first capital

After the Treaty of Waitangi was signed in February 1840, Governor William Hobson established his official residence at Russell in the Bay of Islands. This was New Zealand's first capital.

The second capital

Several Māori chiefs offered Hobson land at Tāmaki-makau-rau (Auckland) so he could establish a capital there. From March 1841 Auckland was the capital. After New Zealand became self-governing, the first General Assembly met in Auckland in May 1854. However, there was concern about the site, particularly because its northern location made it difficult to travel to – especially for MPs from the South Island. 11

Choosing a third capital

In the 1850s some MPs attempted to have the General Assembly meet in a more central location. Wellington hosted a session of the assembly in 1862, and in 1863 it was proposed that the capital be moved somewhere on the shores of Cook Strait. An independent tribunal of three Australians decided on the location. They visited a number of sites and chose Wellington – a decision that led to public protest in Auckland, and an unsuccessful bid by Auckland assembly members to separate from the rest of the country.

Wellington, the third capital

Wellington has been the capital since 1865. It gains economic benefits from jobs for public servants and government investment in infrastructure. National cultural organisations such as the Royal New Zealand Ballet, the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra and the Museum of

New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa are in Wellington – as is the Pukeahu National War Memorial Park. In 2011 travel publisher Lonely Planet described Wellington as the ‘coolest little capital in the world’.

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