

History of the Governor-General MCH, 2014r

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Late last century New Zealand governments patriated (indigenised) the governor-generalship.

People

In 1967 the National government appointed Sir Arthur Porritt, who admitted he was 'the complete Pommy who never ceased to be a New Zealander'. Sir Arthur had been born in Wanganui, but lived most of his life in Britain, where he was personal surgeon to the Queen. The next governor-general, Sir Denis Blundell (1972–7) lived in New Zealand when not serving it overseas.

Since Blundell's term, all governors-general have been New Zealand residents. Lawyers and judges have predominated. Labour governments appointed the first Maori (Sir Paul Reeves, 1985–90) and the first female governor-general (Dame Catherine Tizard, 1990–6).

A bad move

In 1977, without advising the leader of the Opposition, Prime Minister Robert Muldoon appointed a serving Cabinet minister, Sir Keith Holyoake, governor-general. 'It sets a precedent that New Zealand could do without', the New Zealand Herald warned, and opinion polls showed public disquiet.

Publicly, Muldoon was unrepentant. Holyoake performed neutrally, but behind the scenes, civil servants and the palace drew up new procedures. No more serving politicians were made governor-general.

Instruments of office

Governments made important changes to constitutional arrangements and symbols of national identity: a new Royal Titles Act (1974); the first purely New Zealand honour, the Queen's Service Order (1975); the appointment of a New Zealand Herald of Arms Extraordinary (1977); and the Seal of New Zealand Act (1977).

In 1980 the Cabinet Office issued the Review of the Letters Patent 1917 Constituting the Office of Governor-General of New Zealand.

Letters patent are issued by a monarch or government granting a right, monopoly, title or status to an individual or a body corporate.

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Timeline 1

1977

P17A

1983 p.180

updated 3rd edition reference

The review culled outdated provisions from the 1917 letters patent and brought the remaining provisions up to date.

The new letters patent were counter-signed in 1983 by the New Zealand prime minister, symbolising the patriation of the office.

Our last constitutional crisis?

In 1984 Sir Robert Muldoon lost an election after nine years in office. Convention required him to follow the instructions of the prime-minister elect in the short period between the election and the return of the official writs, needed for swearing in new Executive Councillors. But Muldoon refused to co-operate over the widely-expected devaluation, turning a currency crisis into a constitutional crisis. Muldoon's colleagues met Governor-General Sir David Beattie (1980–5), who agreed to dismiss Muldoon if he still refused to co-operate. Fortunately Muldoon backed down and the crisis passed.

That crisis inspired a review of the New Zealand Constitution Act 1852, described memorably by political scientist Keith Jackson as 'the shortest and most ridiculous written constitution of any nation in the world'. The Constitution Act 1986 finally removed the formal powers of the Queen and her United Kingdom Parliament to make law for New Zealand. As Andrew Ladley said, 'it represented the last step in what might be termed the constitutional domestication of the United Kingdom Crown in New Zealand'.

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