

# NZ's first overseas diplomatic

5 April 1871

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It is no surprise that New Zealand's first overseas diplomatic posting was to the United Kingdom.

Before Isaac Featherston was appointed as agent-general in London, the colony's affairs in the imperial capital were handled either by Cabinet ministers during brief visits or by paid agents whose interest in New Zealand was pecuniary rather than personal or political. Such men also lacked the knowledge and experience to deal successfully with high-ranking officials in London.

Featherston was a colourful character who had arrived in Wellington in May 1841 as surgeon superintendent for the New Zealand Company. When the first elections were held under the terms of the New Zealand Constitution Act in 1853, he was elected unopposed as superintendent of Wellington province. He went on to serve as a member of the House of Representatives, colonial secretary and minister without portfolio. Featherston favoured the greatest possible devolution of functions and powers to the provincial councils. From the mid-1860s he was increasingly concerned about attempts to undermine the provincial system.

Featherston became so formidable a leader of provincialism that from 1869 the Fox–Vogel government devised various ways to detach him from national politics. He was sent to the United Kingdom to negotiate for the retention of two British regiments in New Zealand. While unsuccessful in this mission, he did secure a British government guarantee of a £1 million loan for new roading in the colony. His appointment as New Zealand's first Agent-General followed soon after.

Much of Featherston's work involved recruiting migrants for Vogel's immigration programme. He disliked office work and never developed efficient business habits. Accustomed to near-autocratic power as a provincial superintendent, he struggled to adjust to his role as a public servant. If he thought his instructions were wrong, he simply ignored or disobeyed them, and as a result was frequently reprimanded. Featherston's chronically poor health contributed to his lacklustre performance in the years before his death in 1876.

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