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Early leaders

From 1840 New Zealand's governors ruled autocratically (with absolute authority), advised by the Executive Council and Legislative Council and answerable to the authorities in London. In 1854, though the new Parliament was still only there to provide advice to the governor, politicians had already asked for self-governance in domestic matters, rather than having to defer to Britain. That year, while awaiting the reply from London, the acting governor, Colonel Robert Wynyard, appointed politician James FitzGerald to his Executive Council. Thomas Forsaith succeeded FitzGerald in the role. However, neither the 'FitzGerald ministry' nor the 'Forsaith ministry' lasted long. Their leaders were not true premiers.

Dressing for the job

The 'Forsaith Ministry' was also known as the 'clean shirt ministry' because Forsaith raced to change his shirt on being summoned to Government House.

Many ministries

New Zealand's earliest genuine ministries, formed after Parliament became responsible (fully self-governing for most internal policy) in 1856, were short-lived. The first premier, Henry Sewell, was sworn in on 18 April 1856, but was gone by 20 May. His successor, William Fox, was replaced by Edward Stafford on 2 June. In all there were 24 ministries between 1856 and 1891. To many it is a blur of beards, names and dates, but power was transferred peacefully each time, showing that the fledgling democracy worked.

Cabinet membership was often more stable than the comings and goings of premiers might suggest. Sewell, for example, served in four different ministries. Julius Vogel, as influential in cabinet as he was when premier, sat in most ministries between 1869 and 1876, and returned in the 1880s.

Politicians banded about labels such as 'conservative' or 'liberal', but these were often just convenient terms of praise or abuse. For nearly 40 years ministries were cobbled together around personalities, parochialism and policy. However, premiers such as Stafford and Harry Atkinson served terms that were lengthy enough to have a stabilising effect on governments.

Premiers in paint and print

Some early colonial premiers were artistically inclined. The young William Fox captured the country's landscape in beautiful watercolours, while Alfred Domett wrote clunky poetry. Julius Vogel and John Ballance were newspapermen. In retirement Vogel published the futuristic feminist novel *Anno domini 2000, or, woman's destiny*.

Provincial versus central government

From 1852 to 1876 New Zealand had provincial governments. One divisive early issue was the relative power of central and provincial government. Stafford campaigned for the abolition of the provinces and was eventually successful, despite the initial opposition of Fox, Vogel and former governor Sir George Grey. Provincial governments were abolished under Vogel's leadership in 1876.

Māori affairs

The government's relationship with Māori was another explosive issue, with several ministries foundering over the handling of the wars of the early 1860s. By 1864, when Frederick Weld, on behalf of the New Zealand government, pledged to take full responsibility for internal defence, the heaviest fighting was over.

Internal affairs

Although some late-19th-century politicians aspired to New Zealand having its own Pacific empire, and others attended Australasian federation discussions in the early 1890s, New Zealand's foreign policy at this time was set by Britain. Most premiers were preoccupied by internal issues such as land settlement, roads, railways and ports.

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