

Legislative Council

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Originally published: 21 January 2016

Last updated: 21 December 2020

The Legislative Council was part of New Zealand's Parliament for almost 100 years. Read the story of this Upper House — from its hopeful beginnings to its eventual abolition by the 'suicide squad'.

Hopeful beginnings

The Legislative Council was the Upper House of New Zealand's Parliament until 1951. It was modelled on Britain's House of Lords. Unlike the elected House of Representatives (Lower House), Council members were appointed.

In 1853 the Legislative Council began with 13 members. Over the years, the Council grew to reach a peak of 54 members.

Women were not allowed to serve as councillors until 1941, and it was 1946 before the only five were appointed. Māori were slightly better represented. The first Māori councillors were appointed in 1872, not long after the creation of the Māori seats in the House of Representatives. It was agreed that there should always be Māori representation on the Council.

It was hoped that the Council would prevent the House from passing laws too quickly — and introduce some laws of its own. But when the Council tried to take an active role in the 1860s and 1870s, it clashed with the House. From then on, it rarely did more than revise laws from the House.

All members of the Legislative Council from 1853 to 1950 are listed here.

<https://www.parliament.nz/en/visit-and-learn/mps-and-parliaments-1854-onwards/members-of-the-new-zealand-legislative-council-1853-to-1950/>

Stacking

From 1857, Governments began appointing Legislative Council members. They immediately started 'stacking' the Council — filling it with their own supporters.

But stacking had its problems. A new Government was sometimes constrained by the Legislative Council appointed by the previous Government.

Conflict with the Liberal Government



Legislative Council chamber, 1890s.

Source: A.T. Bothamley photograph. Alexander Turnbull Library, PA1-q-158-43

The 1890s brought conflict as the Council resisted the Liberal Government's laws. The Government tried to stack the Council, but the Governor refused its appointments. When Britain ruled in the Government's favour, the Council became powerless.

The suicide squad

In the 1940s, when the Labour Government stacked the Legislative Council, the National Party argued for the Council's abolition. When National came to power in 1949, it restacked the Council — this time with the 'suicide squad'. These members would accept a law to end the Council altogether.

On 1 December 1950, the Council members linked arms and sang the National Anthem before leaving Parliament for the last time. On 1 January 1951, the Council was abolished.

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