

Holyoake, Keith Jacka

1977

1904–1983

Farmer, orchardist, politician, prime minister, governor general

By G. A. Wood

Biography

The Holyoake connection with New Zealand goes back to 1843, when the great-grandparents of Keith Jacka Holyoake settled at Riwaka, near Motueka, and it was there that he spent much of his youth and began his farming career. He was born, however, at Scarborough (Mangamutu), near Pahiatua, on 11 February 1904. His parents, Henry Victor Holyoake and his wife, Esther Eves, ran a small general store. Subsequently the family lived in Hastings and in Tauranga, then, after the death of Keith's grandfather in December 1913, they settled on the family's hop, tobacco and fruit farm at Riwaka.

After leaving school at 12 to help on the farm, Holyoake had lessons at night from his mother, who had been a teacher. A hard worker and physically strong, he had taken the farm over by his 20s and established himself in the farming community. As well as joining local producer organisations, he represented his district in tennis and rugby, and from 1930 to 1933 was president of the Golden Bay – Motueka Rugby Union. In 1931 he was chosen as the Reform Party candidate to contest the Motueka electorate against George Black, who had captured the seat in 1928 for the United Party from the Reform Party incumbent. In 1931 Black stood and held the seat as an independent in opposition to the newly formed Reform–United coalition government. He died some months later, and on 1 December 1932 in a three-way contest against two former MPs, Holyoake won the seat to succeed Black as Parliament's youngest member. Eventually he was to retire from Parliament as father of the house and its oldest member.

At the 1935 election Holyoake's was one of only 19 seats retained by the coalition parties, which in 1936 combined as the New Zealand National Party. In 1938, however, boundary changes were against him; he lost the seat to the Labour Party candidate and it was clear that there was no longer a political future for him in the Nelson region.

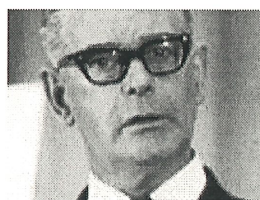
But his party wanted him. He was one of the most promising of the new generation of National Party politicians. He had immediately impressed in Parliament as an advocate of tobacco growers, not surprisingly, given the role he came to play in farmer organisations: he served not only on the executive of the New Zealand Tobacco Growers' Association, but also as president of the Riwaka–Motueka branch of the New Zealand Farmers' Union, as Nelson provincial president of the



Keith Jacka Holyoake, about 1960



Keith Jacka Holyoake

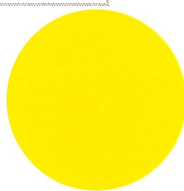


Keith Jacka Holyoake



New Zealand National Party cabinet, 1951

3rd



union (1932–41), and Nelson–Marlborough representative on the dominion executive. He was on the executives of the Motueka District Fruit Exporters' Association and the Motueka and Nelson Progress Leagues. From 1933 to 1939 he was appointed to the Cawthron Institute Trust Board.

When it became known that the MP for Pahiatua, Sir Ethelbert Ransom, was retiring, Holyoake was nominated in 1940 to stand as his successor. With help from National Party supporters he was financed into a sheep and cattle farm at Waitahora, in the centre of the electorate. After he sold his Motueka orchard, the family moved to Dannevirke and a manager was kept on the new farm.

Holyoake was now married with three children (two sons and then a daughter); two more daughters were born later. In fact he twice married Norma Janet Ingram: at the Registrar's Office, Wellington, on 24 September 1934, and again on 11 January 1935 at their Presbyterian church in Motueka. Although brought up in a strict Open Brethren environment, Holyoake in later years was an irregular attender of the Presbyterian church.

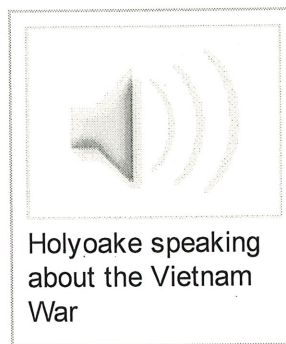
Formerly Pahiatua had been contested between Liberals (later the United Party) and Reform. As the candidate of these parties' successor, the National Party, Holyoake was assured of a safe seat for as long as he wished. In late 1940 the party's first leader, Adam Hamilton, was replaced by Sidney Holland. Had Holyoake been in Parliament at the time he might well have been a contender for the post. Because of the Second World War a general election was not held until September 1943, and it was only then that he was able to return to Parliament.

Holyoake was immediately given a seat on the opposition front bench, and in 1947 was formally named to the new post of deputy leader by Holland, following a straw vote in caucus. Through the 1940s he continued his involvement in farmers' organisations, serving seven years as dominion vice president of the Farmers' Union; representing New Zealand at the 1946 conference in London, which set up the International Federation of Agricultural Producers; and serving on the council that established the Federated Farmers of New Zealand in 1944. His wife, Norma, also played an active role in the Women's Division of the New Zealand Farmers' Union.

National won the 1949 election and the family moved to Wellington. Holyoake became minister of agriculture in the Holland government. He also was for a year (1949–50) in charge of the DSIR, and was minister of marketing until the Marketing Department was abolished in 1953.

The agricultural portfolio had become notorious as a political graveyard; eight years in the post, however, enhanced Holyoake's reputation as a level-headed good administrator and by and large he won the support of farmers. Under Holyoake farm mechanisation was encouraged, the 'extermination policy' achieved near elimination of the disastrous rabbit pest, and the dismantling of marketing controls was completed. Until 1954 New Zealand was still selling its meat and dairy products to Great Britain under bulk trading agreements, and Holyoake went to London twice to negotiate new price levels. In 1955 he presided at the Food and Agricultural Organisation conference in Rome and on his return home, in a route that took him through the Indian subcontinent, he visited the USSR – a major initiative for the time, albeit bearing little economic fruit. In 1957 he led a delegation seeking to protect New Zealand's access to the British market, though without notable success.

Although Holyoake was acting prime minister whenever Holland was overseas, and in recognition of this was made a privy counsellor in 1954, only after the 1954 election was he formally designated deputy prime minister, the first to receive the title. When in 1957 Holland decided to retire, he named Holyoake as his successor as party leader – an odd exercise of prime ministerial prerogative. Prime minister for but two months before the general election, Holyoake made modest changes to the Holland team, taking the Maori affairs portfolio from the one retiring minister,



relinquishing agriculture, and bringing in one new minister. After polling his caucus, he appointed John Marshall his deputy. Against a vigorous Labour campaign there was a huge swing away from National, which was not, however, reflected in the narrow two-seat majority of the new government.

The 1957–60 Labour government faced an exchange crisis and immediately reimposed import controls. Some months later its 'Black Budget' became a propaganda gift that Holyoake exploited to the full. Three years of opposition gave him opportunity to stump the country and establish himself as a vigorous political campaigner. In 1960 he also undertook a six-week tour of South East Asia. In the 1960 election he was restored to office comfortably, continuing to hold it, if not necessarily as comfortably, through the elections of 1963, 1966, and 1969. As well as prime minister, he became minister of external affairs (later foreign affairs), along with the then traditional role of leader of the House. Until the death in 1967 of his first finance minister, Harry Lake, he also was effectively in charge of government economic policy.

Three years in opposition established two key characteristics of the post-1960 Holyoake government: a focus on civil liberties and a low-key approach to economic management: 'steady as it goes'. Years in government were to lessen devotion to the first, and appointment of Robert Muldoon as minister of finance in 1967 ended the second.

The Holyoake government was responsible for bringing the office of ombudsman into the Westminster system of government; taking broadcasting and censorship out of direct political control; setting up a number of other autonomous or quasi-autonomous government organisations; and improving parliamentary scrutiny of the executive, including introducing a daily oral question period. The existence of the New Zealand Security Intelligence Service (SIS) was for the first time publicly admitted, and its minister, the prime minister, publicly acknowledged. A comprehensive review of the public service led to reform, restructuring and rationalisation. The government published and endeavoured to act upon the Hunn Report, a major and damning report on the disadvantaged position of Maori in New Zealand society, and by embracing the 'No Maoris No Tour' cause, Holyoake ended the practice of an apartheid sporting body in South Africa dictating the racial composition of touring New Zealand rugby teams. He also, in 1963, announced the policy of banning the storage or testing of nuclear weapons within New Zealand territory and he was the first of a succession of New Zealand leaders to protest continued French nuclear testing in the Pacific region.

The Holyoake years were notable for Holyoake's continuance of the progressive assertion of a distinct New Zealand identity, and for the expansion of New Zealand's international contacts, notably in South East Asia. A major challenge for the Holyoake government, foreshadowed from 1961, was British entry into the European Economic Community (EEC). So heavily was New Zealand bound to the British markets that if special provision had not been made for continued access for New Zealand agricultural produce, the results would have been disastrous. Holyoake deliberately played down the issue, and chose not to oppose British membership. A significant step towards diversification was a limited free trade agreement with Australia, negotiated in 1965 by Holyoake's minister of overseas trade, Marshall, who later also negotiated the terms of the arrangements for New Zealand under which Britain joined the EEC.

More controversial were the Holyoake government's relations with the United States. Principle, anti-communism, defence commitments and trade all played their part in a decision to support the United States in the Vietnam War. Holyoake made his government's stand an issue in the 1966 general election; it was one on which he could readily boom his commitment to taking the right course and to opposing communism. But alongside his rhetoric in public was a cautious approach in private.

Holyoake was an outstanding parliamentarian. Within his party he was appreciated for lacking the brusque manners of his predecessor. For cabinet selection, he held straw polls of his caucus and worked closely with his deputy, John Marshall. The achievements of his ministers in the portfolios

he had given them reflected his ability to make good combinations of person with task, a skill that only failed him in the last three years of his premiership. In contrast to later prime ministers he did not reshuffle ministries between elections: having given a man a task (he never appointed a woman minister) he might leave him to it over a number of years.

Within his party, in cabinet and caucus, Holyoake showed authority and firm leadership. Outside the party, however, it was only in the last years of his premiership and afterwards that his image changed, from pompous, unimaginative, perhaps rather vain and not very effective in the new medium of television, to master politician. Stories came to be told of his quirky sense of humour, of his modest style of living and working, of the prime minister who would hurtle along a state highway taking a trailer of farm manure back to his garden in the city, of how he would signal a bad humour by starting the day at his desk still wearing hat and coat. No writer, his annotations for officials might consist only of initials, or the prime ministerial tick.

Holyoake was not one to formulate and craft his ideological credentials. His was a pragmatic approach, moving along more or less in tune with public opinion. He had not even been a member of the Reform Party when he was picked out as a potential party candidate and launched on a political career. He boasted of his relationship to the nineteenth century radical and political agitator G. J. Holyoake. Nevertheless, his political model was his first party leader, Gordon Coates; the admiration and respect were evidently reciprocated. Opposition to 'socialism' and to state control, and commitment to private enterprise, were his constant values. His belief in being straight with the electors and sticking by election promises was more typical of his day than later years.

Straight after a narrow and rather unexpected fourth successive electoral victory as prime minister in 1969, Holyoake's government was humiliated in early 1970 in a disastrous by-election; commentators speculated about when he would retire, and by the early 1970s his long-serving deputy also was in private encouraging him to retire. The government was perceived as care-worn, two of its strongest ministers had died, it appeared to be less in touch with the mood of the country, and was facing more dissent and more division. Not until early 1972, election year again, however, did Holyoake finally step down. By then he had become the senior statesman of the Commonwealth. Marshall, who took over, retained him as minister of foreign affairs until National lost office at the end of the year.

In 1970 Holyoake was knighted. Already in 1963 as prime minister he had received the customary distinction of being made a Companion of Honour. Victoria University of Wellington had in 1966 awarded him an honorary LLD, as did the Seoul National University in 1968.

Sir Keith actively campaigned for his party and its leader, now Robert Muldoon, in the 1975 election. After the election he was appointed to the Muldoon cabinet with a new title of minister of state. Early in 1977 he left politics, not honoured in bipartisan eulogies, but the subject of political controversy as the unexpectedly designated governor general. Royal displeasure at the appointment was hinted, and reaction by the opposition was not softened by lack of forewarning. Holyoake's term was limited to three years, not the normal five, thereby expiring during the term of whatever government was elected in 1978.

Holyoake, assisted by his wife, carried out his vice-regal role with dignity and without hint of political controversy. In 1980, the year he retired, he was appointed a Knight Companion of the Order of the Garter – the first New Zealander so honoured for New Zealand services. Norma Holyoake's contribution to public service was recognised in the same year by her being made Dame Commander of the Most Distinguished Order of Saint Michael and Saint George, and the New Zealand standing of both was acknowledged when they became companions of the Queen's Service Order. Sir Keith also in 1977 was made a Knight of the Most Venerable Order of St John of Jerusalem, and his wife a companion of the order. Keith Holyoake died at Wellington Hospital on 8 December 1983; Dame Norma died in the same hospital 12 months later, on 18 December 1984. They were survived by their five children.

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