

The Seat of Government Commission, 1864: an Australian intervention

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On negative evidence the most protracted series of non-events in New Zealand history were the steps leading to the decision in 1864 to transfer the capital from Auckland to Wellington. The often lengthy debates from 1856 until 1863 on the merits of an administrative capital closer to the geographic centre, which provoked threats from Auckland that it would secede if deprived of its almost divine right and by Otago that it would withdraw if nothing was done, resulted in a compromise decision to abide by the choice of an 'impartial tribunal', perhaps from beyond the seas. The selection of Wellington led to an immediate outburst by Auckland, followed by Otago, but the 'Separation' issue, which rumbled on in the far south until the end of the provincial period, was out-riden.

A cursory glance at the standard works reveals little. A now vintage handbook on the legislature, Frank Simpson's *Parliament in New Zealand* (1947), has a succinct paragraph on the topic so far avoided by the *Parliamentary Record*, the Oxford compendium, the *Encyclopaedia* (although it would have been in McLintock's unwritten second volume of parliamentary history), Sinclair, Oliver, back to that remote but invaluable contemporary, Alfred Saunders, a faltering exception. He started well but when Nelson and its neighbouring candidate, The Grove, were passed over, lost interest. Nevertheless, if we work back to an imprint of 1866 there is light in the pages of a still neglected chronicler, C.R. Carter, at least on the moves leading to the adoption of the Australian compromise resolution. Una Platts is unique in drawing on Carter for a summary in *The Lively Capital* but baulks at the final steps, perhaps too painful to enlarge upon.

Clearly, there must be good reason for breaking silence on so moribund a topic of which any extended treatment would be far from the range of this journal. However, the generous gift to the writer, when in Australia recently, of copies of four most interesting letters by Joseph Docker, written from New Zealand as one of the three commissioners appointed, was more than an excuse,¹ when a check revealed that the Library held the Commission's minutes and associated documents.²

Controversy about the site of the capital arose within three years from the meeting of the first parliament. Henry Sewell, during his