

three weeks reign as Premier, suggested, on 25 April 1856, that as Auckland had only twelve of the thirty-seven seats in the House, twenty-two of which were in the southern provinces, the northern capital should host only one session in three.<sup>3</sup> A month later he managed to get through a motion which gave the Governor authority 'to select a more convenient central place'. Sewell, with some later commentators, favoured Nelson, but after some shuffling it was decided that the next session should be in Auckland as before.

When the gold discovery of 1861 led to a sudden explosion of Otago population, pressure mounted for a change. Thomas Dick, Member for Dunedin City, moved a resolution in August 1862 urging the selection of a central site. The debate on the question was appropriately in Wellington, during the second session of the third Parliament (July to September 1862), as the result of a decision on the lines of Sewell's original 'rotation' proposal. In Saunders's words, 'It had more than once been decided or understood that the next meeting... would be in Wellington; but, so far, something had always turned up to prevent it.'<sup>4</sup> The interlude is best remembered for the wreck of the *White Swan*, carrying a number of members and some records. Although the losses were confined to the vessel and a few files, and the quantity of the latter somewhat exaggerated,<sup>5</sup> it was not a good omen for change. In the short term Dick's motion was lost by one vote. During the debate, Stafford, the Premier for the five crucial years 1856 to 1861, expressed his preference for the Marlborough Sounds, the place 'intended by nature for the purpose', rather than Nelson.<sup>6</sup>

A year later, in 1863, during the October/November session, there was further debate. Two new factors gave the southerners grounds for hope. Wellington, Nelson and Marlborough members reached an understanding during a private meeting before the debate and the 1862 Representation Act had given an additional four seats to Otago. C.R. Carter, a self-taught successful contractor, one-time Chartist with, later, a penchant for world travel—and New Zealand book collecting—seems to have taken the initiative behind the scenes. Informal discussions had shown that most of the members on either side of Cook Strait were 'far from indisposed to submit the rival claims of the two provinces to a species of arbitration'.<sup>7</sup> At a meeting at the Masonic Hotel on 11 November twelve members agreed that, in order to ensure the transfer of the Government to some suitable locality in 'Cook's Strait', they would 'forego their own provincial prepossessions, and submit to the final arbitrament of an independent tribunal...'. To this end,

... proper steps should be taken to request the Governments of New South Wales, Victoria, and Tasmania, to appoint a Commission consisting of three gentlemen,