New Zealand at the 1930 Imperial Conference

The announcement early in 1930 that an imperial conference would be held that year came as no surprise to New Zealand. It was four years since the last full conference had defined dominion status and recommended an expert consideration of how it should be applied to existing law and practice. This had been carried out by the 1929 Conference on the Operation of Dominion and Merchant Shipping Legislation and decisions now had to be made on its recommendations.

New Zealand had taken little part in these constitutional developments; rather it had cherished its partnership in the Empire. Consequently it had not much interest in a conference which it at first assumed would deal mainly with inter-imperial relations. A few expressed concern that the bonds of empire would continue to be broken, but most believed that it was merely a question of giving formal approval to arrangements made because of the 1926 decisions.²

The abolition of appeals to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council was the only proposed change which aroused newspapers to eloquence, politicians to fervour and members of the public to action. On 21 January a deputation from the Loyalty League and the Grand Orange Lodge expressed its concern to the acting prime minister, G. W. Forbes, but was apparently contented by his assurance that the Government might be depended on to oppose anything affecting the unity of the Empire.³ Suggestions from the public about the attitude which should be taken by New Zealand at the conference discussions on inter-imperial relations were otherwise fairly rare and spasmodic.

¹ This article is a revised version of a research essay submitted as a partial requirement for an M.A. degree in history at Victoria University of Wellington in 1963. The author is an officer of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Wellington, to whom she is indebted for access to official documents and for permission to publish her essay. It has been revised for publication by Mrs Mary Boyd with substantial help from Mr I. C. MacGibbon on naval defence issues.
² New Zealand Herald, 24 February 1930; Waikato Times, 6 March 1930; Poverty Bay Herald, 5 August 1930.
³ Evening Post, 21 January 1930.
Although the agenda for the conference was supposedly under discussion from the beginning of 1930, the only information on this which filtered through to members of parliament and to the general public came from hints dropped by the British political leaders in public speeches. Evidently the New Zealand Government was very tardily informed and generally ignorant about the subjects to be discussed. As late as 26 July Forbes said that he had not yet received the agenda paper for the conference. Two days previously various government departments had been circularised by a note beginning: The agenda for the forthcoming Imperial Conference has not yet been finally decided upon but in view of the limited time now available it is necessary to take up at once the work of preparing the requisite material. From the information available it is probable that the agenda will include the following subject . . . . On 11 August Forbes commented:

It is only within the last few days that the agenda has been sufficiently developed to enable a statement to be made, and, indeed, I think that it is not yet finalized and that additional subjects may be expected to be added as time goes on. The distance of New Zealand from the United Kingdom, and the length of time that is necessarily taken in the transit of documents, combined with a delay on this occasion in preparing the agenda, have been the cause of some embarrassment in this connection.

Having to guess which subjects would be included on the agenda resulted in great confusion and very unsatisfactory preparation. While considerable material was supplied for the delegation on a number of minor subjects which were scarcely, if at all, mentioned at the conference, nothing was prepared for other items. More frustrating to the New Zealand Government, however, was the announcement of various items for the agenda without any reasons for their inclusion. A note was made for the delegation to enquire at the Dominions Office on arrival in London about what would be discussed under ten headings grouped in the category of inter-imperial relations; many more subjects in other categories were equally mysterious.

In the very short time available, most of the government departments coped admirably in producing the relevant factual documentation. However, of the more than one hundred briefs prepared, hardly any included recommendations or guidance for the delegation. The reason for this was quite clearly lack of information about the

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4 PM 153/15/5. (Background papers prepared for the 1930 Imperial Conference, held by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Wellington. The subjects and reference numbers are listed in file PM 153/15/2.)
5 PM to Minister of Public Works, 24 July 1930, PM 153/15/1.
6 NZPD, CCXXV (1930), 88.
7 The ten were: Aspects of Treaty Procedure, Counsellors of State, Instructions to Governors-General, Appointment of Governors-General, Ratification of Full Powers, Exequatur to Consuls, Status of High Commissioner, Sovereignty in Mandated Territories, Temporary Character of Mandates, Confederation of British Nationality on non-indigenous populations in Mandated Territory.
nature of the discussions. Consequently the delegates were ill-prepared for each topic of conversation as it arose at the conference and had no clear grasp of the more complex issues. They had, moreover, under conference pressure to devise an *ad hoc* policy which might or might not correspond to the attitude of the experts and officials in New Zealand.

The only item on the conference agenda which really interested New Zealand and on which the delegation revealed no inconsistency or lack of knowledge in London was the naval base at Singapore. On the understanding that work on this would proceed, the Coates Government in 1927 had undertaken to contribute £1 million for the dockyard, as part of New Zealand’s naval programme. The British Labour Government, which had come into office in June 1929 was devoted to the cause of disarmament and favoured proposals to transform the base into a civil one. The New Zealand Labour Party was also in favour of the defence work being dropped but it was a minority in Parliament. Both the United Party, which was in power with the help of the Labour members, and the opposition Reform Party supported the retention of Singapore as a naval base. The majority of New Zealanders were not convinced of the advantages of disarmament, particularly when this was proposed for their area of the world. Rather they recognised that their ultimate security depended upon Singapore and the British Main Fleet. Taxpayers, whatever their political affiliations might be, accepted the continued high expenditure on the base and on the maintenance of two cruisers on the New Zealand naval station. If, however, the base was to be used mainly for commercial purposes, opinion was that New Zealand’s substantial annual contribution, made purely from a defence point of view, should cease immediately.

After British politicians had indicated that economic affairs were likely to be on the agenda, these superseded all other matters as a topic for speculation. It was generally accepted that the economic part of the conference would be the most important and the most productive of results. The national cry was for greater co-operation in imperial economic matters. Suggestions on this theme included an Empire Trade Assembly and the extension of the Empire Marketing Board’s work, an Imperial Economics Secretariat, an Imperial Development Fund, and more regular meetings for discussions on imperial economic problems.

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8 On this whole question see W. D. McIntyre, ‘The Strategic Significance of Singapore 1917-1942: The Naval Base and the Commonwealth’, *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, X (March 1969), 69-94.

9 *Manawatu Standard*, 31 May 1930.

10 *Evening Post*, 29 May 1930 (editorial).

11 *New Zealand Herald*, 24 February 1930; *The Times* (Christchurch), 7 March 1930; *The Dominion*, 24 May 1930; *Evening Post*, 15 July 1930.

12 *Evening Post*, 29 May 1930.

13 *The Times* (Christchurch), 28 May 1930.

14 *The Dominion*, 15 August 1930.

15 *The Dominion*, 31 May 1930.
New Zealanders also urged support for increased trade with Britain and aid to the British economy. Forbes took this as the basis of a speech given a few weeks before leaving for the conference: 'There are big questions to be considered at the Conference. Trade within the Empire is a question to which a great deal of attention must be directed. When we look round we find that practically all the markets outside the Empire are closed to us by big tariff walls. Therefore it is up to us to give as much of our trade to the Old Land as we possibly can.'\textsuperscript{16} His subsequent elaborations on the same theme were received with general approval.

There was widespread regret that the British Government had decided to omit the subject of imperial preference from the agenda, particularly because of the strong support in New Zealand for the abolition of Britain's free trade policy. Nevertheless no substantial pressure appears to have been put on the Government to press this issue, possibly because of a generally-held hope that Britain would of its own accord abolish free trade. Forbes himself said at one of the Heads of Delegations' meetings that 'the representatives of New Zealand had come to the United Kingdom with the belief that the preferential system in force in New Zealand might be applied to New Zealand products coming into the United Kingdom'.\textsuperscript{17}

Public criticism of Canadian tariff policy, which excluded New Zealand imports, was more outspoken. Indeed trade preferences to Canada were considered one of the most important side issues of the conference, almost overshadowing the conference itself in the mind of the public.

The item on the agenda entitled 'Bulk purchase and price stabilisation' aroused considerable speculation. Reactions were mixed but at least one correspondent tended to regard this as a 'socialist red herring'\textsuperscript{18} dangled before the dominions by the British Labour Government in order to divert attention from its free trade policy. The New Zealand Farmers' Union and most of the small farmers were strongly in favour of the proposal, though public ignorance of the subject and of what the British Government proposed meant that few clear views were formulated.

Parliament gave to the forthcoming conference as perfunctory a consideration as the general public. Imperial and foreign affairs were scarcely mentioned during the 1930 session, due no doubt to the heavy pressure of domestic legislation, the uncertain position of the three parties and concern over the great depression. Indeed official interest in external affairs was only aroused by the worsening economic situation. The debate on defence, for instance, originated from the proposal to abolish compulsory military training introduced

\textsuperscript{16} The Times (Christchurch), 4 August 1930.  
\textsuperscript{17} PM (30) 7th. meeting, p. 9.  
\textsuperscript{18} Evening Post, 21 August 1930.
ostensibly because of 'the urgent necessity for economy,' as the Minister of Defence put it. The question of Canadian trade also attracted some members’ interest. Apart from these two issues and the customary formal debate on the conference, domestic matters consumed all the attention of the House.

This silence on imperial affairs was usually interpreted as unanimity which rose triumphantly above party politics. In fact, there were at least two contentious issues — namely, the future of the Singapore base and the question of bulk purchasing — which could have been fought out in the parliamentary arena. The Labour Party held definite views on both; but as the prop for an ailing government, it took a deliberate decision to smooth the Government’s way for the imperial conference, by acquiescing in the United Party’s views without forcing a division. The Government, anyway, had no intention of discussing imperial defence issues in Parliament and the Opposition under a former prime minister, J. G. Coates, did not question this attitude. If New Zealand expected to be fully consulted by the United Kingdom on foreign policy and defence, the need for secrecy had to be respected. With many of the facts unavailable to all but Cabinet ministers, a debate on Singapore would have been pointless.

In these circumstances it is not surprising that the day devoted to discussion of the conference proved singularly unproductive. Forbes himself scarcely helped the situation by indicating that he did not intend to be bound by Parliament’s opinion: ‘The House will no doubt agree that the representative of New Zealand must to a considerable extent be allowed a free hand in the discussion and decision of the various subjects to be dealt with at the Conference.’

Although Forbes won wide approval, particularly from the Reform Party, for his statement that New Zealand would continue its traditional attitude on imperial matters, there were some mild protests about his general attitude. Moreover his statement that ‘we have no complaints and no demands’ came under fire, and quite justly so. The most outspoken attack came from J. S. Fletcher, Independent member for Grey Lynn, who had previously been a member of the United Party: ‘It is the business of Parliament to say what shall be done at the Imperial Conference by its delegate .... If Parliament had been asked to discuss these questions a month ago ... the House would have been in a better position to deal with the problems confronting us .... He is going to the Conference in a nebulous state of mind, and the result will be that we shall get nothing as the result.’

The debate was centred around economic affairs and, in particular, bulk-purchasing. Members were better informed on these matters, which were more easily related to the domestic scene and to their own personal experience and knowledge. Support for serious inves-
tigation of bulk-purchasing proposals extended well beyond the Labour benches; indeed, the whole question of bulk purchasing overshadowed imperial preference, which had anyway been well thrashed out in previous sessions. Forbes, himself, was personally not in favour of bulk purchasing as his subsequent attitude at the conference demonstrated. On this occasion he showed political finesse by avoiding any definite commitment: 'In view of the fact that there has been no detailed information given in regard to what is proposed, but simply a reference to the questions, it would be very difficult indeed to give any indication of the opinions that one might form . . . . It is certainly a matter that is well worthy of thorough examination; but I do not see how it would be possible at the present time to establish a scheme for the purchasing of the whole of our produce.'

The fact that the British Government supplied so little information about the conference and at such a late date partly explains the inability of the House to come to grips with any of the conference issues and the vagueness and ignorance of its members. However, the brevity of time allowed for debate was the subject of criticism. The net result was that the delegation attended the conference without a clear-cut policy, to the detriment of its clarity of thinking and efficiency.

Discussion in the Legislative Council on the conference was even more barren than in the House of Representatives. Imperial economics received only cursory attention. Sir John Sinclair’s motion ‘that the Council record its view that Empire unity be a guiding principle with the coming Imperial Conference’, was passed unanimously after the customary platitudes on devotion to the Old Country. The Leader of the Legislative Council, Sir Thomas Sidey, must have found little in the debate to guide him in his position of delegate to the conference.

Of all pre-conference issues the most contentious was that of representation. Normally this presented no problem as the task automatically fell to the prime minister. This befitted the dominion’s new status and the essential need for ‘strong representation’ in view of the British Labour Government’s policy on imperial matters. Current circumstances, however, made representation by the prime minister particularly difficult. It was clear at the beginning of the year when the date for the conference was announced that Sir Joseph Ward could not attend because of his health. This was deeply regretted, not solely because his valuable experience would be missed, but also because New Zealand could not then claim the distinction of having at the conference the only premier who had attended imperial conferences held prior to and during the Great War. There was no

22 NZPD, CCXXV (1930), 140.
23 Dominion, 4 August 1930.
24 There is no evidence available to show whether or not Caucus or even Cabinet discussed a policy for the conference.
25 NZPD, CCXXV (1930), 443 ff.
26 Evening Post, 4 February 1930.
obvious replacement in the United Party and none was named. The only suggestion the press produced was that a cabinet member should attend in company with J. G. Coates, leader of the opposition. Ward eventually solved the problem by announcing his retirement in May, and on to his successor, G. W. Forbes, automatically devolved the duty of representing New Zealand at the conference.

Difficulties about the delegation were not yet solved. By mid-1930, after two unsuccessful bye-elections, the United Party held only twenty-five seats in the House to the Reform Party's twenty-nine, and was being kept in power by a tenuous alliance with the truant Labour Party. Attendance at the conference would necessitate absence from at least half the 1930 session of Parliament, and on the order paper was a substantial legislative programme. There was general agreement that Forbes could not leave for the Conference 'with the knowledge that the first advice he received on reaching London might be that he was no longer in office'. Forbes therefore proposed at the beginning of the session to seek an assurance from the Reform and Labour Parties that no adverse motion against the Government would be carried if he went to the conference. His suggestion was frustrated by the highly contentious legislation introduced at the same time by his party. By the beginning of August, less than a month before the sailing date, restiveness was growing as to the prime minister's intentions. He had indicated that he would go to the conference if Parliament disposed of the main issues before his departure, but he had not shown any inclination to speed up the legislation.

The uncertain state of the country's economy together with the Government's new proposals fanned a belief that the prime minister should remain at home where he was needed rather than travel to the other side of the world at the tax-payers' expense to attend a conference on matters which hardly concerned them. Concurrently considerable doubt was being cast on Forbes's ability to represent New Zealand. Many felt that despite tradition and position, the country would be more ably served at the conference by its High Commissioner in London, Sir Thomas Wilford.

It was not until 20 August, less than one week before the departure date, that Forbes definitely announced that he would attend. At the same time Sir Thomas Sidey was named as the other delegate. This was considered a suitable choice not least because he was prepared to undertake the journey at his own expense. His position as Attorney-General and leader of the Legislative Council and his legal background ostensibly well fitted him for the task. However his inexperience of imperial affairs matched Forbes's; nor was he as knowledg-

27 Manawatu Evening Standard, 10 February 1930.
28 Dominion, 29 May 1930.
29 The Unemployment Bill, the Customs proposals and the Budget.
30 Wairarapa Age, 2 August 1930.
31 Evening Post, 7 August 1930 (Letter to the Editor); Christchurch Sun, 11 August 1930.
able on constitutional law as his predecessors to imperial conferences had been.\textsuperscript{32}

Named as advisers to the delegation were Dr G. Craig, Comptroller of Customs, Dr E. Marsden, Secretary of the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research, F. D. Thomson, Head of the Prime Minister's Department, and C. A. Berendsen, Secretary for External Affairs. Dr Craig's chief function — the negotiation of trade agreements with Canada and France — was outside the scope of the Conference but presumably he assisted on the question of preferential tariffs. Dr Marsden's inclusion, probably on account of these agreements, scarcely seemed warranted; indeed it was queried at the time.\textsuperscript{33} In view of the importance New Zealand was placing on the economic side of the conference, the choice of economic advisers was surprising.

On the non-economic side, the choice was limited and obvious. A frequent attender of imperial conferences, Thomson added the experience which otherwise was markedly lacking. Berendsen also had previously attended an imperial conference and had a sound working knowledge of imperial and foreign affairs. However he had no assistance and, therefore, probably little time for adequate pre-conference preparation. The delegation was joined in London by Sir Thomas Wilford. Although he had been High Commissioner for less than a year, he had been Minister of Defence in 1928-29 and New Zealand representative at a London Naval Conference early in 1930. It seems most likely that the advice of Lord Jellicoe was secured before the Conference opened.

The leader of the delegation, 'New Zealand's most improbable Premier',\textsuperscript{34} had been a member of cabinet for less than two years, and prime minister for scarcely three months. The portfolios of finance, customs and external affairs were still new to him. He had never attended a major overseas conference, nor had he any particular interest in imperial or foreign affairs. He was befogged by the legal intricacies of dominion status. He was backed only by a minority party, uncertain of his political future, and farewelled with expressions of doubt about his ability to handle conference discussions. Personalities of delegates were important because of the intimate nature of imperial conferences and Forbes's character determined New Zealand's attitude as markedly as his predecessors' had done. He had a reputation for courage and hard work, an agreeable and modest bearing, a pacific disposition and conciliatory approach,\textsuperscript{35} which undoubtedly endeared him to many, yet his personality combined with his difficult position, inexperience and lack of political ability,
to make him one of the most ineffectual representatives ever sent from New Zealand to an imperial conference.

The auspices under which the New Zealand delegation set off for the 1930 Imperial Conference could therefore scarcely have been worse. The delegates were inexperienced, politically inept, inadequately prepared and ill-informed. They had no expert knowledge of or interest in the subjects to be discussed at the conference. No general policy nor even one on specific points had been shaped. Politically insecure, they were victims of the necessity to compromise between the United and Labour Parties’ views. Faced by a bleak financial outlook they had to keep the need for stringency and economy uppermost. It was these factors rather than the opinions and sentiments of the New Zealand public which determined their attitude at the conference.

There was a distinct difference in the way that the New Zealand delegation handled the two major topics of the 1930 Imperial Conference: inter-imperial relations and economic questions. In discussions on inter-imperial relations the delegation on the whole was obstructive, unhelpful, ill-prepared and ignorant. On economic matters it held to a clearly-defined line and showed a good grasp of the issues involved.

In his opening statement at the Conference, Forbes made it clear that New Zealand’s position on inter-imperial relations was the same as in 1926; that his country was satisfied with the present situation but prepared to agree to the new proposals in the interests of unanimity. His contemporaries were sometimes apt to assume that New Zealand’s evident satisfaction with the status quo in this period applied in a general way to all her dealings with Britain. Indeed New Zealanders themselves tended to give this impression by their expressions of loyalty. New Zealand’s satisfaction, however, applied only to the constitutional position, as a speech prepared for Forbes to give at the conference on imperial relations indicates: ‘For our part we have never been embarrassed by any restriction on our activities or threatened by any exercise of the constitutional powers which, until recently at any rate, have rested in the hands of His Majesty’s Government in the United Kingdom . . . . New Zealand for one has no desire to embark upon any unnecessary examination of the theoretical potentialities of the position now set up . . . . We have not been materially interested in questions as to the theory of constitutional relationships.’

In contrast to this, the main part of the draft speech is concerned with complaints about the British Government, namely its tendency to allow inadequate time for consultation and to take decisions on

\textsuperscript{36} Summary of Proceedings of the Imperial Conference 1930, Cmd 3718, 16-17.

\textsuperscript{37} PM 153/15/4. There is no record whether this speech was given at the conference; it is unlikely that it was as no suitable opportunity was apparently provided.
matters of foreign policy without consulting New Zealand. After
listing the foreign policy decisions with which New Zealand disagreed
the speech continued: 'It is from this point of view that we have
considered the desire of other Governments that a forward step should
be taken in regard to the constitutional relationships, inter se, of the
members of the British Commonwealth of Nations.'

This is a very rare example of New Zealand expressing — or in-
tending to express — support for the new dominion status in order
to attain more freedom in affairs of foreign policy. In general the
degregation took the unhelpful attitude that constitutional matters
were purely theoretical arguments and had no practical application.
This applied particularly to Sidey's attitude during discussions in the
Committee on Inter-Imperial Relations.38

The delegation expressed no opinion at all on a number of sub-
jects concerning inter-imperial relations, including: appointment of
Governors-General,39 issue of exequaturs to foreign consuls, the use
of the Great Seal in the ratification of treaties and issue of full
powers. All these, apart from the first, were admittedly fairly minor
legal points arising out of the acceptance of the theory of dominion
sovereignty. More surprising was the delegation's silence when the
matter of liaison officers was raised,40 as this matter had concerned
New Zealand.41 Nor is there any record of comments on the
nationality of married women, though New Zealand was apparently
anxious for agreement on the subject.42

While silence was one predominant characteristic of New Zealand's
attitude on imperial relations, satisfaction with the existing system
was another. During the discussions on phraseology in official docu-
ments,43 nationality, the 'accession' and 'nevertheless' clauses in com-
mercial treaties,44 and the right of appeal to the Judicial Committee
of the Privy Council, New Zealand's delegate merely expressed
briefly his country's satisfaction with the present situation. Nor was
he alone in doing so; on almost all these points the Canadian and
Australian delegates took the same view.

On the other hand, the New Zealand delegation found itself in a
minority when it expressed satisfaction over the existing channels of
communication. The particular point at issue was Britain's suggestion
that dominion governments should communicate direct with British

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38 Forbes was absent from most meetings of this committee.
39 For the final decision on this see Summary of Proceedings at the Imperial
Conference 1930, Cmd. 3717, Section VI (g).
40 EIR (30), 7th meeting, 6.
41 NZPD, CCXXV (1930), 530, 531.
42 Dominion, 21 January 1931 (Statement by Forbes on his return.)
43 Some dominions were objecting to the use of the phrase 'His Britannic
Majesty' in official documents.
44 These clauses were ones written into British commercial treaties enabling
the dominions to accede to the treaties if they wished. The South African and
Irish delegation felt that the clauses implied that the dominions were not fully
sovereign.
representatives at those foreign posts where they were not separately represented, provided the matter was of little importance and that copies of the communications were sent to the British Government at the same time. Forbes commented that he had no desire to alter the existing procedure; though he agreed to withdraw his objection if the other dominions considered the proposal desirable.\(^45\) Apparently he did not understand that the question had been raised to expedite inter-governmental communications. As New Zealand seldom wished to communicate with British foreign missions, he was not concerned about the practical operation of the system. He simply objected to the principle of change.

In contrast to its general attitude of passivity during inter-imperial relations discussions, the New Zealand delegation took the initiative regarding the system of communications. 'Mr Forbes said that he wished to call attention to the desirability of giving Dominion Governments more time upon which to come to important decisions on policy. He explained that on more than one occasion the New Zealand Government had been requested to express their opinion on an important question over the weekend, as it were, and he thought that in the case of New Zealand the fairly considerable expense involved in explaining these questions fully by telegraph would be justified.\(^46\)

His statement was not relevant to the topic under discussion and no other delegate commented on his complaint or volunteered a similar one. The same theme had been developed, but at greater length and with more bitterness, in the prepared speech on imperial relations. New Zealand's 'loyalty' certainly did not prevent it from criticising the British government when its interests were felt to be at stake.

Another occasion when New Zealand showed some initiative was during the discussion on the proposed tribunal for the settlement of disputes between members of the Commonwealth. Forbes opposed the idea of permanent machinery as he felt that these disputes could be settled by mutual agreement without permanent machinery. He suggested that it would be sufficient merely to affirm the principle of arbitration.\(^47\) As this idea seemed to have been based on an idealistic notion that commonwealth disputes would be amicable ones, his suggestion was opposed almost unanimously.

The discussion on the proposed tribunal is a particularly clear illustration of the difference between the attitudes adopted by Forbes at the Conference and his brief paper prepared in New Zealand. The Solicitor-General had suggested that the tribunal should be partly composed of members of the Privy Council. Forbes apparently did not raise this idea. The paper had also recommended that the delegation 'might well agree to any generally accepted proposal'. As the

\(^{45}\) EIR (30), 7th. meeting, 3.
\(^{46}\) ibid., 6.
\(^{47}\) ibid., 1st. meeting, 3.
matter was not of particular moment to New Zealand, Forbes, however, put up an individual opposition to the suggestion of a permanent tribunal. Probably this particular attitude was personal to Forbes, for at a later meeting Sidey commented 'that the Prime Minister of New Zealand was not in favour of the appointment of a permanent tribunal',' whereas the customary phrase was 'that New Zealand is not . . . . ' Despite the fact that the government departments actually gave very few recommendations, this was not the only occasion when Forbes diverged from them, and indeed there is nothing to indicate that he had even read the material supplied.

The New Zealand delegation did not contribute at all to the long and involved discussion on the inter se applicability of treaties. This was raised by the Irish delegation, which felt that non-applicability implied that the Empire as a whole was a sovereign state. When a Canadian delegate suggested a satisfactory compromise proposal, all the other delegates agreed immediately, except Sidey, who said that he would like time for further consideration. There was no apparent reason why only New Zealand should need more time, and the request must have been particularly annoying for the other delegates who had carried the long debate up to that point.

New Zealand's unhelpfulness and unconstructiveness arose partly from lack of understanding of the issues involved and of the other delegates' attitudes. During the discussion on nationality, Forbes enquired rather querulously whether 'it was necessary for them to lay down a common status. In 1926 they had settled their position, and was it necessary to raise it again? New Zealand was also unhelpful in its unfailing tendency to object to anything that seemed to go further than the 1926 formula. Sidey was particularly apt to do this, as for example when he objected to the phrase 'international units' as a description of the dominions. New Zealand's stubbornness was well matched in this instance by the Irish delegation which refused to agree to the phrase's omission, and the matter had to be postponed.

The New Zealand delegation was particularly unco-operative during the debate on the draft Statute of Westminster. The idea of a 'permissive' clause exempting New Zealand from the provisions of the statute was generally accepted by the other dominions in order to cater for New Zealand's particular attitude. However, the delegation suggested delaying the legislation on the grounds that it had not been adequately considered. At a meeting on 21 October Sidey said that:

The Report of the Conference of the Operation of Dominion Legislation had never been discussed by the New Zealand Parliament . . . . He

48 ibid., 10th. meeting, 4.
49 ibid., 6th. meeting, 4.
50 PM (30). 13th. meeting, 5.
51 ibid., 19th. meeting, 5.
thought that it followed from the conclusions of 1926 that the Colonial Laws Validity Act should be repealed. He thought, however, that there was room for some consideration as to the consequent legislation . . . . He urged that it would be best not to come to a final decision at the present Conference as to legislation to give effect to the Report of 1926 . . . . As far as New Zealand was concerned, the proposals had not received much consideration.  

At a meeting of the Heads of Delegations, ten days later, he suggested delaying the legislation for four years. His argument was not accepted by the other dominions, all of whose parliaments had considered the 1929 report. No explanation for New Zealand's dilatoriness was requested or given, but it was presumably due to lack of interest in the contents of the report.

The New Zealand delegate then objected to the 'permissive' clause in the draft exempting only New Zealand, and said that he could not see the objection to a general 'permissive' form. The chairman explained, indeed explained more than once, the reasons against this and in favour of legislation which would cover the dominions in general. Other delegates at this meeting appealed to New Zealand not to stand in the way of general agreement. Forbes, in reply, asked for longer time to examine the bill in detail.

In a final attempt at obstruction New Zealand insisted that its special case should be recited in both the preamble to the Statute and in a clause. At the last meeting of the Inter-Imperial Relations Committee, Sidey produced a draft recital for the preamble: 'But in the case of the Dominion of New Zealand with the reservation that no provision of this Act shall extend to that Dominion as part of the law thereof, unless that provision is adopted by the Parliament of that Dominion.'

After a brief discussion, however, he agreed to drop the idea of a special recital, provided that the proposed clause was inserted in the statute.

Right from the beginning of the conference it had been clear that New Zealand was far more interested in economic matters than in inter-imperial relations. Its most important statement on economic affairs was Forbes's speech in the second plenary meeting held on 8 October. At this meeting all delegates spoke on the economic aspects of inter-imperial relations, but Forbes far surpassed the others in length. His loquacity, although due partly to repetitiveness and to extensive quotations of trade figures, indicated the importance that New Zealand placed on the subject.

He made firm proposals for further development of inter-imperial trade. He suggested, as the most important step, the maintenance and extension of tariff preferences. These should be extended, he felt,

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52 EIR (30), 8th. meeting, 2-3.
53 PM (30), 12th. meeting, 4-6.
54 EIR (30), 13th. meeting, 4.
55 Cmd 3717, 97-117.
'either by a general arrangement or, where necessary, by individual agreements between any two or more portions of the Empire'. He applauded the work done by the trade commissioner services and outlined the need for more of these. He recommended the extension of the functions of the Imperial Economic Committee or a similar body which could supply data and advice on all trade and industrial matters. He concluded with two recommendations addressed to the United Kingdom alone: that it should build tariff protection against the 'dumping' of surplus products of other countries, and that it should introduce a tariff preference in favour of Empire products.

Forbes's unusual firmness and clarity reflected New Zealand's vital interest in and almost unanimous opinion on these questions. Indeed the only other subject at the conference which produced a similar firmness from the New Zealand delegation was the Singapore base. During discussions on Empire trade, Forbes displayed an active, if not always intelligent, interest and accurately represented the feelings of his fellow countrymen.

There was, however, an interesting development in his personal attitude in these discussions. In his speech on 8 October, which really marked the beginning of the economic discussions, Forbes showed a polite embarrassment about criticising the British Government: ‘Perhaps I may be allowed to conclude by pointing out that in the preference which New Zealand has consistently accorded to British goods, we have never, at any time, looked for a *quid pro quo* from this country, and we do not do so now, but, if after consideration some measure of preference could be extended to Empire produce, it would be greatly appreciated by our people.’

This appeal, touching though it was, was probably virtually ignored by the British Government, harassed by the worsening economic situation and demands from more robust and less 'tactful' dominion delegates. Nevertheless they would have been justified in concluding that they were unlikely to have any difficulty with 'loyal' New Zealand over economic questions. If they did think this, events soon proved them wrong. In the subsequent economic discussions between the Heads of Delegations, Forbes became forceful, outspoken and less inhibited, particularly when the United Kingdom persisted firmly in its refusal to drop a free trade policy. Backed by Ireland, he led a very strong attack on a British proposal that 'the existing preferential margins should not be reduced for a period of three years or pending the outcome of the proposed Conference, subject to the rights of the Parliaments to fix their own budgets from year to year'.

His objections were that it would bind New Zealand to an unfair bargain and it would not solve the problems arising from the dumping of Russian agricultural products. He added that New Zealand should be left free to work out its own tariff policy.

56 ibid., 116-117.
57 PM (30), 23rd. meeting, Appendix I.
58 ibid., 23rd. meeting, 6-7.
Forbes was more anxious than any other delegate to reach some form of agreement on economic matters, preferably a unanimous one. When he realised that unanimity was out of the question, he concentrated on the task of forcing the United Kingdom to make a unilateral declaration on economic policy. Although other dominions, such as Canada, demurred at the idea of a unilateral rather than a multi-lateral statement, Forbes insisted, and one was eventually agreed upon. This incident was important as it demonstrated that New Zealand, like the other dominions, was prepared to sacrifice the ideal of imperial unity when it felt its interests directly threatened.

Forbes's attitude on bulk purchasing contrasted with his attitude on the other economic matters. Public opinion in New Zealand had been divided on the question; indeed the recommendations Forbes had received from the organisations handling primary produce showed marked variations. The New Zealand Farmers' Union expressed its unqualified support, and the Department of Agriculture and the New Zealand Fruit-Export Control Board their cautious approval. The Department of Industries and Commerce felt that while the scheme had distinct advantages, it did not seem possible or expedient to introduce it at that time. The New Zealand Meat Producers' Board expressed great interest but did not commit itself to any attitude. The Board of Agriculture and the New Zealand Dairy Produce Board were opposed to the scheme. Although all the recommendations were qualified by the fact that the exact nature of the proposals was not known, most gave conditions which would need to be imposed if the scheme were to operate satisfactorily.

In view of the very strong interest in the proposals on bulk purchasing it might have been expected that the New Zealand delegation would have played an important and active part in the discussions on them. The fact that it did not was possibly due to Forbes's personal opinion which seems to have been against the scheme:

The view held in New Zealand is generally averse to the extension of State trading or to the interference of the Government in commercial matters any further than is necessary for the welfare of the people. It seems to me that before such a scheme could be put into operation many difficulties would have to be overcome, and until some concrete proposals are brought forward I would prefer to suspend judgment on the matter. It is true that during the Great War various lines of goods were brought under effective State control, but one is bound to recognise that measures which might prove successful in a time of national emergency may not be applicable when that emergency no longer exists.

Forbes may have been active in the bulk purchasing discussions during meetings of the committee on economic co-operation, but his

69 Cmd 3717, 42-43.
60 Cmd 3717, 115.
attitude at the meetings of Heads of Delegations indicates that this is unlikely. His suspicion of the scheme was made quite obvious. He agreed grudgingly to discuss quotas, but said that he personally thought that tariffs were the only practicable method of assisting the dominion producer in the United Kingdom market.\textsuperscript{61} He said that the matter had been discussed in New Zealand, but his view was that the difficulties connected with it were insuperable.\textsuperscript{62} He apparently gave no indication of the extent of support for the scheme that actually existed in New Zealand, nor did he mention any of the conditions upon which New Zealand would have insisted if the scheme had been brought into operation. On this matter it is clear that he did not accurately represent New Zealand opinion; the vagueness of the bulk purchasing proposals and the confidential nature of the discussions precluded any fear of domestic repercussions.

In the debates on foreign policy and defence, New Zealand was primarily concerned with the problem of naval security in the Pacific, while accepting the need for imperial unity and co-ordination. Fairly typical was its request for guidance in the planning of its forces so that they might co-operate in an 'Imperial Emergency'.\textsuperscript{63} On service matters, Forbes revealed little interest until the basic security issue, the Singapore base, had been resolved. He eventually sought co-ordination in detailed imperial defence planning at a meeting of the Committee of Imperial Defence shortly after the conference.

New Zealand had made clear to Britain its refusal to discuss ratification of the London Naval Treaty, Singapore, or the General Act for the Pacific Settlement of International Disputes before the Conference. In reply to a request for comments on the Act, Forbes had telegraphed:

\begin{quote}
In view of the meeting of the Imperial Conference in October next, His Majesty's Government in New Zealand would much prefer that this subject should be reserved for discussion at the Conference by all His Majesty's Governments. Indeed, they are of the opinion that subjects such as the General Act, the Model Treaty to Strengthen the Means of Preventing War, the Model Treaties of Non-Aggression and Mutual Assistance, the draft Convention of Financial Assistance and the proposed Convention of Financial Assistance and the proposed amendment to the Covenant of the League are particularly appropriate for such discussion and they had contemplated that an attempt would be made at the Conference to arrive at a uniform policy in respect of these matters.\textsuperscript{64}
\end{quote}

All these proposed subjects were important to New Zealand's naval security, whether by restriction of British naval capacity, or, more directly, as the justification for further naval disarmament by the British Government. In attempting to secure a uniform policy at

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{61} PM (30), 8th meeting, 4.
\item \textsuperscript{62} ibid., 9th meeting, 5.
\item \textsuperscript{63} E (30), No. 37, 4.
\item \textsuperscript{64} Forbes to PM (UK), 18 July 1930, E (30), No. 22, 16.
\end{itemize}
the conference, New Zealand hoped to be able to influence British policy. Unfortunately for Forbes the other Dominions generally supported the British Government which probably accounted for the rapid disillusionment of the New Zealand delegation and their subsidiary role in these discussions. On the rare occasions when they did participate, the New Zealand delegates displayed the same attitude of unhelpfulness which was evident in the debate on inter-imperial relations. They objected to acceding to the General Act for the Pacific Settlement of International Disputes unless it was made clear that the subject matter of immigration was included in the reservation on domestic jurisdiction.65 The likelihood of foreign interpretation of Britain’s Belligerent Rights at Sea was regarded with apprehension. In discussion on the amendment to the Covenant of the League of Nations, they said they had misgivings about extensions of the sanctions contained in the Covenant,66 because the burden would fall largely on the Royal Navy if there was a rupture. On these, and most other, points of foreign policy, they were prepared to concede to general opinion because of their concern for unanimity, certainly not through lack of interest.

The topic in this part of the discussions in which New Zealand showed most forcefulness and interest was of course the Singapore base, whose importance to Pacific naval security was more obvious and direct. Although all the other dominions but Ireland had ratified the London Naval Treaty, New Zealand refused to do so until after the Singapore Committee had met.67 Forbes was concerned that the Treaty would be used as justification for the continuation of the ‘slow down’ of work on the base that had been announced in 1929, or even the complete abandonment of the project, which might leave New Zealand defenceless. Underlying his concern was fear of Japan.

Representatives of the three governments concerned (Britain, Australia and New Zealand) met therefore on 16 October to consider the British proposals.68 These were that the present policy of ultimately establishing a defended naval base should remain unchanged, but that expenditure on it, apart from that necessary to complete the air base, should be postponed for five years. An outbreak of war, said the British delegate, was very unlikely during the next ten years. The Australian prime minister concurred with merely a brief statement that the base should not be abandoned. Forbes was far more outspoken. He pointed out that naval advice indicated that without the base the Fleet would be powerless in Far Eastern waters. A study of those documents supplied to the New Zealand Government by the Foreign Office indicated a great deal of unrest in the world, and he therefore hesitated ‘to share without question the confidence felt by the United Kingdom Delegates in the sure mainten-

65 PM (30), 17th. meeting, 3.
66 E (30), No. 40, 7 (Report of Committee on Arbitration and Disarmament).
67 PM (30), 9th. meeting, 2.
68 E (30), No. 36, Report of Committee on Singapore.
ance of peace during the next decade'. When such vital imperial interests were at stake, he felt that one could not rely on a sufficient warning being given of a deterioration in the international situation. Forbes agreed to the British proposals only because of the difficult financial situation. Nevertheless, in the absence of these financial considerations, it is unlikely that New Zealand would have refused to accept the British proposals with the consequent risk of further deterioration in the imperial unity upon which it depended.

The general attitude of the New Zealand delegation at the Conference shows that attachment to the ideal of imperial unity did not preclude frank statement of national interests. The current British Government's policy meant that British and New Zealand attitudes conflicted often, and on all these occasions, New Zealand was as stubborn and obstreperous as any other dominion. Indeed Forbes was rebuked for this on his return, and a comment on it was credited to the Dominions Secretary at the end of the conference: 'Mr Forbes, we were delighted to meet you, but thank God you are going.' There was therefore no trace at this conference of a loyal subservience to Britain.

Nor was the fact that New Zealand played a passive and unconstructive role during much of the conference the result of filial devotion. It was due partly to lack of interest, but also to the particular circumstances in 1930: the inexperience and personality of the delegates, and the lack of information and preparation. Indeed, under these circumstances, it is surprising that New Zealand's attitude should have shown as much forcefulness as it did.

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69 NZPD, CCXXVIII (1931), 550-551; The Round Table, XXII, 225-226.