

## The 'Continuous Ministry' Revisited

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IN HIS ARTICLE on the 'Scarecrow Ministry', published in a festschrift for Willis Airey in 1963, Keith Sinclair began by commenting on the lack of detailed study of the structure of New Zealand politics in the 1870s and 1880s.<sup>1</sup> That article was part of the structural basis for the analysis of politics in Sinclair's subsequent biography of William Pember Reeves. The biography, the article, and a number of university theses written around the same time filled in many of the gaps in our political historiography.<sup>2</sup> Most of the thesis writers studied a particular election or the politics of a particular region. Nearly all began with Reeves's own description of politics, written in the 1890s, and then refined, expanded or refuted his views.<sup>3</sup> These works focussed on the relationship between politics and economic policy, on the 'Continuous Ministry', on the so-called 'liberal' challenges to this ministry, and on the emergence of a proto-party system from 1887.

In this article I want to return to the 'Continuous Ministry', a feature of

1 'The Significance of the "The Scarecrow Ministry", 1887-1891', in Robert Chapman and Keith Sinclair, eds, *Studies of a Small Democracy. Essays in Honour of Willis Airey*, Auckland, 1963, p. 102.

2 R. W. Armstrong, 'The Politics of Development: A Study of the Structure of Politics from 1870 to 1890', M.A. thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 1960; J. Bassett, 'Sir Harry Atkinson: A Political Biography, 1872-1892', M.A. thesis, University of Auckland, 1966, (subsequently published); E. Bohan, 'The General Election of 1879 in Canterbury', M.A. thesis, University of Canterbury, 1958; G. K. Cooper, 'New Zealand Politics in the early Eighties from an Auckland point of view', M.A. thesis, University of Auckland, 1960; A. M. Evans, 'A Study of Canterbury Politics in the Early 1880s with Special Reference to the General Election of 1881', M.A. thesis, University of Canterbury, 1959; D. W. Hinch, 'General Elections in Taranaki 1879-84', M.A. thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 1968; J. L. Hunt, 'The Election of 1875-6 and the Abolition of the Provinces', M.A. thesis, University of Auckland, 1961; A. M. Leslie, 'The General Election of 1871 and its Importance in the History of New Zealand', M.A. thesis, University of New Zealand, 1956; D. P. Millar, 'The General Election of 1884 in Canterbury', M.A. thesis, University of Canterbury, 1960; C. Whitehead, 'The 1887 General Election in Canterbury', M.A. thesis, University of Canterbury, 1961; J. M. R. Young, 'The Politics of the Auckland Province 1872-1876', M.A. thesis, University of Auckland, 1960. Later important theses have been J. H. Angus, 'City and Country, Change and Continuity: Electoral politics and society in Otago 1877-1893', Ph.D. thesis, University of Otago, 1976 and I. R. Fletcher, 'Parties in the New Zealand House of Representatives 1870-1890', M.A. thesis, University of Canterbury, 1982.

3 William Pember Reeves, *The Long White Cloud*, London, 1898.

politics which entered our historiography with Reeves's classic text, *The Long White Cloud*. In the first edition of his book Reeves wrote: 'When we come to look at the men as distinct from the measures of the parliament of New Zealand between 1870 and 1890, perhaps the most interesting and curious feature was the Continuous Ministry.' The 'Continuous Ministry' was 'a name given to a shifting combination, or rather series of combinations, amongst public men, by which the cabinet was from time to time modified without being completely changed at any one moment.'<sup>4</sup> This ministry had come to power under William Fox in August 1869 and held office until January 1891 except for one month in 1872 when it was turned out by Edward Stafford, between October 1877 and October 1879 when Sir George Grey was in power, and from 1884 to 1887 when Robert Stout was premier. For Reeves, who entered the House of Representatives in 1887, the 'Continuous Ministry' was not necessarily a bad thing, although it 'became identified with Conservatism as that term is understood in New Zealand'.<sup>5</sup> It retained its hold on power for 'more than one cause'<sup>6</sup> but the abilities of three leaders, Harry Atkinson, Frederick Whitaker and John Hall, were a major source of its strength. By 1924, when the revised edition of *The Long White Cloud* was published, Reeves had another explanation for the tenacity of the 'Continuous Ministry'. 'It was possible because New Zealand was still more or less of an oligarchy.' The 'masses' had allowed the 'Continuous Ministry' to remain in power because, prior to the 1890 election, they were neither organized nor self-assertive. It was not entirely clear whether the lack of organization and assertiveness was the result of a successful conspiracy on the part of the 'Continuous Ministry' or because the people had defaulted.

Reeves, of course, knew all about this oligarchy. He was born into it. His father had been a member of the 'Continuous Ministry'. As a child and adolescent he must frequently have met other ministers at his home, around the offices of the *Lyttelton Times* which his father owned, and at social events attended by Canterbury's upper-middle class. The 'Continuous Ministry' was not invented by Reeves. His role was to cement into political history a view of politics in which he and his fellow Liberals believed.

The idea of a continuous ministry, or a basic continuity in government despite a number of changes in the constitution of the cabinet, first emerged in Parliament in 1875 during the debates on the abolition of the Provincial Councils. Abolition confused the rather muted political divisions that had existed in the House during the previous two sessions. The government, led from the Legislative Council by Daniel Pollen, had a large majority for its legislation, a majority which included several former members of the opposition. Even Stafford, who had abdicated leadership of the opposition

4 *ibid.*, p. 335-6.

5 *ibid.*, p. 336.

6 *ibid.*, p. 344.

7 William Pember Reeves, *The Long White Cloud*, 3rd ed., revised, London, 1924, p. 245.

in 1873, told the House at the beginning of the 1875 session that he would give the government his loyal support.<sup>8</sup> With Julius Vogel overseas and two new members, Harry Atkinson and Charles Bowen, representing Stafford's centralist faction in the government, the opposition was made up of an angry rump of provincialists, mainly from Auckland and led by Grey.

In attacking the abolition legislation, the opposition repeatedly pointed out that Pollen's government was the direct descendant of the Fox ministry which had taken power in 1869 in defence of the provinces. Although only two of Fox's ministers, Vogel and Donald McLean, still held office, the opposition argued that the government was 'to all intents and purposes the same government that then assumed office', and the ministers were 'continuing Ministers'.<sup>9</sup> John Sheehan, one of the ablest and most aggressive debaters in the opposition, claimed that the most 'inoffensive epithet' he could apply to the government was that of the 'continuous Government'. It was a government that had come into office 'on the shoulders of the Provincial party' and had now turned to bite the hand of its feeder.<sup>10</sup> The purpose of the rhetoric was to present the government as betraying its own principles.

In February 1876 Vogel returned from England and resumed his position as premier and colonial treasurer. His ministry was clearly a reconstruction of the 1874 ministry and there was little to be gained from accusing it of being a 'continuous government' — everyone could see that was the case. However, when Vogel resigned in late August and the ministry was reconstituted under Atkinson, the accusations began again. Frederick Whitaker, formerly superintendent of Auckland, now attorney-general, became the butt of the opposition. Atkinson had deliberately taken Whitaker into his government to counter the attack from Auckland but the ploy did not succeed.<sup>11</sup> Whitaker, previously a leading member of the opposition, tried to justify his apostasy by arguing that all governments contained men of 'different shades of opinion'.<sup>12</sup> He also tried to dissociate himself and his colleagues from the policies and actions of Vogel by arguing: 'So far as I am concerned, I distinctly state the Ministry is a new one. We are not bound by anything that passed before, and we had a clean sheet of paper to write what we like upon. . . . I absolutely deny that I am bound by any pledges of the former Ministry, and I deny altogether that I am in the slightest degree responsible for anything done by that Government.'<sup>13</sup>

Despite such disclaimers, made by Atkinson as well as Whitaker throughout the sessions of 1876 and 1877, the opposition succeeded in saddling Atkinson's ministry with the responsibility for government actions

8 *New Zealand Parliamentary Debates* (NZPD), 1875, 17, p. 14.

9 *ibid.*, pp. 260, 497.

10 NZPD, 1875, 19, p. 60.

11 Arthur Atkinson to Emily Richmond, 18 September 1876, Richmond-Atkinson Papers, Uncatalogued, 76/35, Alexander Turnbull Library.

12 NZPD, 1876, 22, p. 13.

13 *ibid.*, p. 178.

over the previous eight years. The 'Continuous Ministry' label was established by frequent reiteration. Samuel Hodgkinson, in the House for only his second year, flatly asserted: 'this is a continuous Ministry. There may have been new material put into it, but it is as much the same Ministry as an old garment is the same garment although it has been patched from time to time.'<sup>14</sup> Vincent Pyke extended the metaphor: 'It is a Ministry of heterogeneous particles. I do not know that there is one amongst them who belonged to the original Government. It has been patched and re-patched and darned until we do not know what part of the original Ministry is left. I say that all party government has been destroyed by the continual taking of Ministers from the Opposition benches.'<sup>15</sup>

Larnach, Rolleston, Stout and Ballance all referred to the government as the 'Continuous Ministry'. They meant it slightly. Julius Vogel regarded it as a compliment. He was annoyed that Whitaker and Atkinson had turned against him. In a letter to George Hunter he claimed that the Fox-Vogel-Atkinson ministries were 'really an unbroken link'. By denying this Atkinson had committed political suicide. Vogel also claimed that 'Atkinson's insisting on his Ministry being a new one broke up his party. Had he stuck to the old Vogel party & policy he might have had fewer additions but fewer still losses'.<sup>16</sup> The defections led to Atkinson's defeat in October 1877 and the assumption of office by Grey heading what was clearly a new government with an entirely new set of ministers.

After the fall of Grey's government, wracked by internal dissension and unable to handle the country's economic problems with any certainty, there was a succession of ministries led by Hall, Whitaker and then Atkinson. These ministries also attracted the label of the 'Continuous Ministry' as the leadership changed hands with little change of policy or direction. Links were made backwards to the pre-Grey ministries.<sup>17</sup> Power was seen, and not only by the opponents of the government, to be back in the hands of the old élite. Sir Charles Clifford, Speaker of the House of Representatives in the 1850s wrote to Hall from his retirement in Staffordshire: 'It warms my Heart to see New Zealand still obliged to look to the "old identities" for its guidance in time of peril & I can fancy myself still among you surrounded by all the old tried & competent leaders. Would that you could have at your back for a couple of sessions such a House as I presided over.'<sup>18</sup> Then came the 'unholy alliance' of Stout and Vogel, difficult even for Reeves to categorize, followed by a reversion to the 'Continuous Ministry' with Atkinson as premier until January 1891. With the victory of the Liberals in the election of 1890, however, the 'Continuous Ministry' had had its day.

14 NZPD, 1877, 26, p. 31.

15 *ibid.*, p. 60.

16 Vogel to Hunter, 31 January 1878, to Moorhouse, 30 January 1878, Vogel Papers, MS 2072, Vol.2, Alexander Turnbull Library.

17 e.g. see Grey NZPD, 1881, 40, pp. 251, 325.

18 14 October 1880, Hall Papers, MSS 1784, Vol. 39, Alexander Turnbull Library.

No minister who held office in any one of its combinations ever returned to the treasury benches.

Historians have accepted that the ministries which constituted the 'Continuous Ministry' had a continuity of personnel. It also seemed that the differences among the leading politicians were not those of significant principle. In August 1882 John Hall could write to William Gisborne, who had served in government with Fox from 1869 to 1872 and Grey in 1879,

It is true we have been sitting on opposite sides of the House, but there has not been such opposition between us in matters of principle. Our case I think illustrates the unreality of political divisions in New Zealand, if they are supposed to represent real differences of principle. Where, since the settlement of the provincial question, is the real difference in political principle between  $\frac{3}{4}$  of our public men? Stout and Hutchison differ in toto from you and me, and Grey differs from everyone, himself included; but beyond this, & a few others, the differences are mainly personal & accidental, and men sitting on opposite sides often are more nearly in agreement, than are members of the same party, or even of the same Cabinet. I don't see how this can be cured, or even whether it is desirable to cure.<sup>19</sup>

It was because of their personnel, rather than their policy, political opinions, or measures, that Reeves described the succession of ministries in the 1870s and 1880s as continuous. When that personnel is broken down into groups of ministries, the continuity is not so apparent. Thirty-seven European politicians served in Reeves's 'Continuous Ministry'. Six of these politicians also served in ministries Reeves viewed as the opposition. Of the remaining 31 ministers, 25 fall into three distinct groupings. Twelve served only in the period 1869 to 1877; eight served only between 1879 and 1884; and five served only in the Atkinson government of 1887 to 1891. This leaves six men serving in ministries across the period in which the 'Continuous Ministry' was said to have dominated. Atkinson and Whitaker appear in all three phases; John Hall made a brief appearance in two ministries between July 1872 and March 1873, in another in September 1876 and was then premier from October 1879 to April 1882. William Russell, George McLean and Edwin Mitchelson were minor ministers who straddled two phases. The continuity of personnel applies most clearly *within* phases; across the whole period the overlap occurred only at the highest level.

There are also striking differences in the way governments were constituted and changed over these three phases. Between 1869 and 1877 the 'Continuous Ministry' was reshuffled under five different premiers, involving 22 European ministers in eight different combinations. Only Donald McLean was common to the eight ministries. The Hall-Whitaker-Atkinson phase, between October 1879 and the election of 1884, was quite different. Three premiers formed three ministries with a total of only nine members, six of them common to all ministries. No minister, other than the three

19 10 August 1882, Hall Papers, MSS 1784, Vol.27.

premiers, had held a portfolio before. Atkinson's reconstructed ministry, which survived only five days between the failure of the first and the formation of the second Stout-Vogel government in 1884, brought back George McLean and gave a brief ministerial spot to Edward Wakefield and Richmond Hursthouse, neither of whom had reached such eminence before or were to do so again. The final phase of the 'Continuous Ministry' was entirely stable, all the ministers coming and going with Atkinson.

**TABLE I**  
**The membership of Reeves's 'Continuous Ministry'**  
**shown in the three phases.**

1869-77	1879-84	1887-90
Bathgate Bell Bowen Featherston Fox Gisborne <sup>1</sup> D. McLean Miller Ormond O'Rorke Pollen Reeves Reid <sup>1</sup> Reynolds <sup>1</sup> E. Richardson <sup>1</sup> Sewell <sup>1</sup> Vogel <sup>1</sup> Waterhouse	Bryce Connolly Dick Hursthouse Johnston Oliver Rolleston Wakefield	Fergus Fisher Hislop G. F. Richardson Stevens
Hall G. McLean		
	Mitchelson Russell	
Atkinson Whitaker		

<sup>1</sup>These men also served in ministries Reeves described as the opposition to the 'Continuous Ministry'.

The 'Continuous Ministry' then is not a particularly apt label when describing government over a twenty-year period. It was, as Edward Wakefield claimed in 1884, a 'catch-word',<sup>20</sup> a part of the opposition rhetoric used to establish a continuing responsibility for policies and actions from which different governments were eager to escape and for which the

individuals in government often had little individual or collective responsibility. The label can, however, be used with some meaning in the period 1869–77, the time during which there really was a ‘shifting combination’ of men in power, when the ministry was frequently changed by taking in new members, and quite crucially, by taking in men who had previously been in opposition.

The ‘Continuous Ministry’ kept in office from 1869 to 1877 by astute manipulation of men and money and by exercising an almost infinite flexibility in its policy. It also ruled over a House, which, although similar in the range and occupational background of its members to later Houses,<sup>21</sup> was rather different in the way its members behaved. Between the elections of 1866 and 1879, the House of Representatives, on whose support ministries depended, was characterized by high levels of inexperience and change. Resignations were numerous, by-elections frequent, the temporary member and the ‘novice’ member highly visible. The ‘fluidity’ of the House was remarked upon by Leslie Lipson in his 1948 study of politics, where he observed a relationship between the rate of turnover in the House, the insecurity of governments, and the frequency of ministerial crises.<sup>22</sup> However, except for Fox’s fall in 1872, the ministerial changes which occurred between 1869 and 1877 had nothing to do with a loss of support in the House. They can all be explained in personal terms, or, in one or two cases, such as the departure of O’Rorke in 1874, by the adoption of a policy that an individual member could not accept. Indeed it seems to be the case that an inexperienced and unstable House, far from causing ministerial crises, was one of the factors that enabled the government to remain in power and to change its ministers without jeopardizing its control. From 1879 there was much greater stability both in the membership of the House and in the membership of ministries, and a more regular pattern of alternating governments. It would seem that this change was a precondition for the emergence of party politics in the late 1880s.

Table II sets out the composition of the House of Representatives in the Parliaments between 1866 and 1890. It shows the size of the House for each Parliament, the total number of members who served during the lifetime of each Parliament, the number and proportion of men serving in each Parliament for the first time (‘novices’) and the number and proportion of ex-

21 A preliminary and tentative occupational analysis of the 361 European MHRs between 1866 and 1890 gives the following result: Pastoralists/runholders/estate owners 78, farmers 50, lawyers 45, journalists 36, engineers and surveyors 10, other professions 19, merchants 34, general business/entrepreneurs 32, timber trade 16, building contractors 10, auctioneers 5, shipping 3, banking 2, mining 4, storekeeping 4, miscellaneous 5, not available 8. There seems to be a decline in the category of pastoralists and an increase in lawyers over time. However, occupational analyses of nineteenth-century settlers are fraught with difficulties; see Miles Fairburn, ‘Social Mobility and Opportunity in Nineteenth Century New Zealand’, *The New Zealand Journal of History*, XIII, 1 (1979), pp. 43–60.

22 Leslie Lipson, *The Politics of Equality*, Chicago, 1948, pp. 80, 120.

perienced members.<sup>23</sup>

**TABLE II**  
**The Composition of the House of Representatives 1866-1890.**

	Size of House	Total Number of Members	Novice Members		Experienced Members	
			Number	%	Number	%
1866-70	70/76 <sup>1</sup>	120	65	54.2	55 <sup>2</sup>	45.8
1871-5	78	107	55	51.4	52 <sup>3</sup>	48.6
1876-9	88	117	57	48.7	60	51.3
1879-81	88	95	33	34.7	62	65.3
1881-4	95	104	42	40.4	62	59.6
1884-7	95	111	40	36.0	71	64.0
1887-90	95	102	29	28.4	73	71.6

<sup>1</sup> In 1867 two members for the West Coast and four Maori members were added to the House.

<sup>2</sup> Includes Tancred and Whitaker who were entering the House for the first time but who had previously sat in the Legislative Council.

<sup>3</sup> Includes Gisborne whose previous experience had been in the Legislative Council.

It is at once apparent that Parliaments before 1879 had a high turnover rate; many more men served than there were seats. After 1879 the turnover rate declined markedly. The table also shows a marked, if not unexpected, increase over time in the proportions of experienced members, with the seventh Parliament, 1879-81, registering the greatest shift in the balance between novices and experienced men.

Every general election between 1866 and 1890 returned a substantial number of novice members to the House. Table III sets out the results of general elections in terms of sitting members, experienced politicians (men who had previous parliamentary experience but were not sitting members), and total newcomers.

It is notable that the highest proportion of newcomers was returned in the general election of 1871, giving credence to the view that this election was some sort of turning point in political history. Fully a third of the sitting members decided not to contest the 1871 election and only three of these ever returned to the House. The fifth Parliament, then, the Parlia-

23 This table differs in a number of respects from Lipson's table (p. 121). There are a number of inaccuracies in Lipson's figures. He had also compared each House with its predecessor, whereas my interest is in the individual politicians and their experiences. If a politician had previously been in the House or the Council his views would have been known to other politicians. The calculations in this article have been made from a card index of all men elected to the House of Representatives between 1866 and 1890. This has been derived from lists in the *Parliamentary Debates*, from the *Journals of the House of Representatives*, and, from 1879, returns of elections in the *Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives*. Each politician's career in Parliament has been fully traced before 1866 and after 1890 when the career extended beyond the period of interest. Other material has been derived from newspapers.

**TABLE III**  
**Men returned to the House of Representatives in**  
**General Elections 1866–1887.**

	1866		1871		1876		1879		1881		1884		1887	
	No.	%												
Sitting Members	34	48.6	39	50.0	44	50.0	54	61.4	48	50.5	55	57.9	62	65.3
Experienced politicians	10	14.3	6	7.7	9	10.2	4	4.5	11	11.6	11	11.6	9	9.5
Novices	26	37.1	33	42.3	35	39.8	30	34.1	36	37.9	29	30.5	24	25.2
Total	70	100.0	78	100.0	88	100.0	88	100.0	95	100.0	95	100.0	95	100.0

ment which witnessed the most frequent ministerial reshuffles, when it first met in August 1871 had the lowest proportion of experienced members of any Parliament between 1866 and 1890. Even some of the 'experienced' politicians had little familiarity with the House, six having been there for only one session and Edward Jerningham Wakefield having not sat since 1855. The members were malleable; few of the newcomers had strong opinions or knew much about political manipulation. It was even difficult to keep some of them in Wellington. John Evans Brown wrote despairingly to Hall, who was away from the House ill, 'Karslake went away without first making *certain* arrangements for a pair and now it cannot be arranged at all. . . . As he has no excuse for going away, he should return without a moment's delay otherwise resign his seat and allow someone to come up at once. Rhodes also has no pair. . . . Can you not succeed in persuading Karslake to return at once? and also Rhodes?'<sup>24</sup>

The proportion of novices elected in general elections shows some odd fluctuations but with a general downward trend. The one major exception to this trend was in 1881 when seven new electorates were created and when a higher than usual proportion of sitting members, from both sides of the House, lost their seats.

The change in the proportion of novices in the House occurred, however, not so much because fewer of them were returned at general elections, but because patterns of persistence of MHRs over the lifetime of a Parliament altered.

Between 1866 and 1879 a high proportion of the men who were elected to the House did not serve out their full term. Only half of the men elected in 1866 were still in the House when it was dissolved in 1870; about 30% of those elected in 1871 and 1876 had gone by the time the Parliament to which they had been elected had run its course. In contrast, after 1879, with the rather unusual exception of the ninth Parliament (1884–7), over 90% of those elected in general elections were still in the House when the Parliament was dissolved. The increasing persistence of members must have had a

<sup>24</sup> Evans Brown to Hall, 18 October 1871, Hall Papers, MSS 1784, Folder 63.

considerable impact on the operations of the House, the quality of debate and the relationships between members, backbenchers and leaders.

Why was it that so many members failed to serve out their full term before 1879? Leakage could be caused by one of four reasons: death, resignation, disqualification, or elevation to the Legislative Council of sitting members. Table IV sets out these reasons for each Parliament.

**TABLE IV**  
**Reasons for 'Leakage' from House of Representatives 1866-1890**  
**during the life of a Parliament.**

	1866-70	1871-5	1876-9	1879-81	1881-4	1884-7	1887-90
Death	1	2	4	3	3	7	5
Resignation	43	26	19	5	6	6	3
Disqualification	0	1	1	0	1	0	0
Appointment to L.C.	2	2	5	0	0	3	0
Total:	46	31	29	8	10	16	8

It is at once obvious that the major cause of leakage was resignation and that after 1879, even allowing for shorter Parliaments, resignations declined dramatically. The increase in leakage between 1884 and 1887, which on the face of it seems to reverse the trend, was caused by a sudden increase in the death rate of MHRs, not by an increase in resignations.

To see why political careers were so fragile in the 1860s and 1870s it is necessary to consider individual reasons for resignations. These reasons are not always easy to discover and publicly announced explanations for a premature resignation from Parliament must always be suspect.<sup>25</sup> However it is possible to find out why a good number of politicians left the House before their terms were up.

Perhaps surprisingly more politicians resigned from the House to visit or to return to England than for any other single reason. It is known that 25 MHRs resigned for this reason, and this number does not include Vogel, who was appointed to a government post in London. Over half of these men were pastoralists or large landowners, whose trip was a sign of the prosperity they were enjoying in the early and mid-1870s.

The second most important factor in early resignations was business or financial pressure. Merchants, entrepreneurs and professional men figure prominently among those who resigned to give more attention to their business activities. This could be, as with the lawyer Robert Stout, because a business was suffering in the absence of an owner or partner.<sup>26</sup> In some

<sup>25</sup> The reasons for the resignations of 76 out of the 88 men who left between 1866 and 1879 during their parliamentary term have been ascertained. These have been found by checking newspapers, the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, and other biographical sources. I would like to thank Diana Beaglehole for information on Wellington MHRs.

<sup>26</sup> D. A. Hamer, 'The Law and the Prophet: A Political Biography of Sir Robert Stout. (1844-1930)', M.A. thesis, University of Auckland, 1960, p. 43.

cases the pressure was greater. Henry Driver was elected to represent Roslyn in the general election of 1871 but resigned before Parliament met. He advertised that his resignation was for personal reasons, which were 'scarcely necessary for me to explain at present'. That day the *Otago Daily Times* carried a notice of bankruptcy proceedings against his firm.<sup>27</sup> Vogel, publicly in 1876, and Donald Reid, privately in 1878, said they resigned because their personal interests had suffered while they attended to public matters.<sup>28</sup> The regional spread of resignations also indicates that politics and business did not mix easily. Proportionately more members from Auckland and Otago-Southland than from Wellington resigned for business reasons. The Wellington members, who could pay close attention to their businesses even during the session, rarely resigned before their terms of office expired. Whereas the early resignations of pastoralists reflected affluence, the early resignations of business and professional men reflected their less secure financial bases and the more insistent demands of their work.

The early 1870s saw an increase in resignations by men who were accepting government appointments. Between 1869 and 1876 nine men resigned after receiving government jobs (a number of others stood down at the 1871 general election for the same reason). This was a measure employed both to reward followers and to get rid of men whose support was not assured and gave rise to many accusations of jobbery and corruption.<sup>29</sup>

Ill-health was the stated reason for a few unexpected resignations but it is sometimes difficult to know if this was an excuse rather than a reason. It was certainly genuine in the cases of two consecutive MHRs for the jinxed seat of Caversham. In 1872 Richard Cantrell resigned and died shortly afterwards, as did his successor, William Tolmie in 1875.

It is rare today for a politician to resign because of constituency pressure or other political considerations but this was not unknown in the nineteenth century. South Island MHRs seem to have been particularly responsive to the views of their constituents. Several Dunedin members resigned when they found themselves at odds with their voters, a message usually conveyed to them at rowdy meetings on their return from a session in Parliament. Even the premier was not immune from this kind of pressure. In 1868 Stafford was forced to resign his Nelson seat and move to Timaru where Alfred Cox obligingly created a vacancy. In 1878 Charles Button resigned from Hokitika because his constituents wanted a representative who would sup-

<sup>27</sup> *Otago Daily Times*, 9 August 1871.

<sup>28</sup> NZPD, 1876, 21, pp. 629-30; Reid to Harry Atkinson, 4 June 1878, Harry Atkinson Papers, MSS Papers 91, 19/12c, Alexander Turnbull Library.

<sup>29</sup> J. C. Richmond to E. Stafford, 16 August 1871; J. B. Gillies to Stafford, 3 February 1872, Stafford Papers, MSS 28, 42; 54, Alexander Turnbull Library; W. Rolleston to Stafford, 30 August 1871, Rolleston Papers, Uncatalogued, Vol. 1A, Alexander Turnbull Library; J. D. Ormond to D. McLean, 3 January 1872, McLean Papers, MSS 32, 485, Alexander Turnbull Library.

port the Grey government and he felt unable to do this.<sup>30</sup> He was replaced by a carpet-bagger, Seymour Thorne George, who was married to Grey's niece.

The corollary of a high leakage rate from the House was a large number of by-elections. The interested voter might be called on to vote as many as three times for his representative in one Parliament. Between 1866 and 1870 over half the electorates had one by-election; nine electorates had two. Over 30% of the electorates had by-elections between 1871 and 1875 and again between 1876 and 1879.

A few men who lost their seats in general elections took the opportunity to return to the House at a by-election. For instance, Patrick Dignan was first elected to the House in an uncontested by-election in 1867. He shared the representation of the two-member constituency of Auckland City West with John Williamson. In the 1871 general election he had to defend his position in a contest with Williamson and the superintendent, Thomas Gillies, whose parliamentary seat of Mongonui had been abolished. Although Dignan was a popular personality in Auckland, he had no chance against rivals of such weight, and polled poorly. However, when Williamson died in 1875 Dignan had little trouble in regaining the seat at a contested by-election. William Fox, the former premier, lost his seat in the general election of 1879, a loss he attributed to block voting by Roman Catholics in Wanganui. Fox told Hall it was the end of his political career, an end which he did not regret, though the manner of the defeat, by 'a mob who voted like dumb driven cattle at the word of a priest', was galling.<sup>31</sup> However when, within seven months, William Willis, the member for Rangitikei resigned on account of ill-health, Fox threw his hat into the ring at once and was elected in a three-way contest.

More commonly by-elections were contested and won by novice politicians. Thirty-three out of the 46 men elected at by-elections between 1866 and 1870 were entering the House for the first time;<sup>32</sup> 23 out of the 30 elected between 1871 and 1875 and 21 out of the 28 elected between 1876 and 1879 were also new entrants. Even when the number of by-elections declined after 1879, a majority of the men who were returned to the House by this route were coming in for the first time. A by-election was useful for a newcomer because most of the known politicians already had a seat and there was rarely much interest. In 1869 the *Otago Daily Times* complained that no-one was interested in coming forward to contest a Dunedin City by-election. 'Among the few who possess the necessary qualifications, none can be found patriotic or ambitious enough to accept the proffered honour. The claims of business are paramount.'<sup>33</sup> Two years before this John Kerr, in coming forward for an Auckland by-election, told the voters that he was

30 *Otago Daily Times*, 18 May 1878.

31 Fox to Hall, 6 September 1879, Hall Papers, MSS 1784, Vol. 37.

32 All the men elected to the new seats were novices.

33 *Otago Daily Times*, 5 March 1869.

a third-rate man and they really needed someone of the stature of a Whitaker or a Russell.<sup>34</sup>

Between 1866 and 1870 at least half the men returned to the House at by-elections were unopposed. But in the 1870s contested by-elections became more general. Fox's government, and in particular Donald McLean, were the first to see the significance of these. Before the 1870 session of Parliament McLean corresponded with government supporters all round the country over resignations and impending by-elections. Resignations were carefully timed to do the least harm to the government and polling was organized in a number of seats.<sup>35</sup> After this time it became much rarer to let a seat slip away in a by-election uncontested.

The dramatic slump in resignations, and consequently of by-elections, after 1879 clearly needs explaining. On the surface there seems an easy explanation for it coincides with the introduction of triennial parliaments. It would seem logical that men who might not be able to remain in Parliament for five years would find it easier to hang on for three. If this were the case and other factors remained constant, we would expect to find a higher percentage of sitting members retiring at general elections. This, however, was not the case as Table V shows.

TABLE V

**Sitting Members of the House of Representatives:  
behaviour in general elections.**

	1871		1876		1879		1881		1884		1887	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Did not stand	25	33.3	14	18.0	13	14.7	12	14.3	10	10.6	12	12.6
Stood and won	39	52.0	44	56.4	54	61.4	48	57.1	55	58.5	62	65.3
Stood and lost	11	14.7	20	25.6	21	23.9	24	28.6	29	30.9	21	22.1
Total	75	100.0	78	100.0	88	100.0	84 <sup>1</sup>	100.0	94 <sup>2</sup>	100.0	95	100.0

<sup>1</sup> One seat vacant, three members elevated to Legislative Council after dissolution and, therefore, not available for re-election.

<sup>2</sup> One seat vacant.

The proportion of members in the House at a dissolution who did not contest the following general election was highest in 1871, declined sharply in 1876, and then fluctuated within a few percentage points. In elections after 1879 fewer men resigned from the House before their term was up and a slightly higher proportion of men sought re-election. This would suggest that the reasons for resignation prior to 1879 almost ceased to operate. Fewer politicians were tripping off to England, a likely situation given the

<sup>34</sup> *New Zealand Herald*, 6 August 1867.

<sup>35</sup> Charles Brown to McLean, 24, 30 March, 27 April 1870; Henry Driver to McLean, 29 March 1870; Charles Heaphy to McLean, 6, 14 April 1870, McLean Papers, MSS 32, 178; 249; 355.

economic downturn of which many complained in the House, and political activism was becoming less of a hindrance to business pursuits. Certainly scarcely any politicians were being appointed to government posts. The greater persistence of MHRs also suggests that more of them were making a serious career of politics. This was a factor in the clearer political alignments which emerged in the 1880s.

Another factor which points to an increasing professionalism among politicians is the declining number of one-term MHRs after 1879. Table VI shows the number of Parliaments served in by all the members of the House who were elected between 1866 and 1890. The entire political career of each of these members is accounted for, that is their parliamentary service in the House both before 1866 and after 1890.

**TABLE VI**  
**Number of Parliaments served in by men elected to the**  
**House of Representatives 1866-1890.**

No. of Parliaments	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	Total
European MHRs	134	76	58	37	20	12	6	6	5	3	3	1	361
Maori MHRs	9	2	3	0	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	21

Political careers varied enormously in length and significance. The majority of MHRs served in only one or two Parliaments. One hundred and forty-three (37.4%) were elected to the House only once. Joseph Ward had the longest and also one of the most successful careers of the men entering the House before 1890. He eventually served in twelve Parliaments, dying in office in 1930. However, Ward and two other long-serving men, James Carroll and James Allen, were first elected to Parliament in 1887 and do not figure prominently in our period. Of the politicians whose careers fall more firmly into the nineteenth century, the longest serving was G. M. O'Rorke, first elected to represent Onehunga in 1861, and re-elected at every election except that of 1890, until he entered the Legislative Council in 1904. Almost as successful as O'Rorke was James Macandrew, first elected in 1853 and in the House until his death in 1887, except for a short period in the early 1860s when he was in a spot of financial trouble.

At the other end of the range are the 'oncers', men elected to the House on a single occasion. The appearance of 'oncers' added to the instability and inexperience of Parliaments, and is most marked in the pre-1879 period. Over half the 'oncers' (84 or 62.7%) served their solitary term before 1879. These men flitted on and off the political stage with great speed. Some, as with Robert Mitchell, who was elected to represent Waikouaiti at a by-election in 1868, served for less than a full session. Mitchell took his seat, spoke six times in the House, resigned and left the country. William Adams had a similar parliamentary career although he was a more political animal. Trained as a lawyer, Adams arrived in Nelson in 1850 and became prominent in Marlborough politics. When the member

for Picton resigned in 1867 Adams took the seat for one session, resigned and never stood for Parliament again.

Such brief parliamentary careers were sometimes arranged for personal and business reasons. Gustav von der Heyde, who sat in the House in 1874 and 1875, is a case in point. Von der Heyde, a German, arrived in Auckland in the 1860s. He joined the timber firm of Henderson and Macfarlane and married Henderson's daughter. The firm controlled the electorate known as the Northern Division or, later, Waitemata. Thomas Henderson held the seat from 1855 to 1867. When his wife died in 1867 Henderson resigned to go overseas and was replaced in the House by his partner, Thomas Macfarlane. Macfarlane was a 'oncer', remaining in Parliament until the general election of 1871, when he stepped aside for Henderson to resume his place. In 1874 Henderson again resigned and Von der Heyde was called on to contest the seat for the firm. He won, but two years in Wellington were enough for him. In December 1875 he announced he would not stand in the general election because politics took up too much time.<sup>36</sup> Henderson contested the seat but was defeated by a rival timber merchant, who thus ended Henderson and Macfarlane's long monopoly of the seat.

As far as can be ascertained, 67 of the 'oncners' contested only one election. Such men predominated in the early Parliaments. Of the 38 men whose parliamentary careers began and ended in the fourth Parliament, 33 chose not to contest the election of 1871; out of 25 'oncners' in the House between 1871 and 1875, 15 did not stand for re-election in 1876 (a further three had died). By 1887 only three of the 14 'oncners' in the ninth Parliament did not return to face the voters. Again this suggests that a political career had become more viable and more desirable, even for the least successful politicians.

From 1879 the composition of the House of Representatives changed. Members were more likely to serve out their full term and more likely to stand for re-election. Each Parliament had fewer novices and fewer newcomers. Working in the House together members became more aware of the need to organize outside the House, particularly at election time.<sup>37</sup> A greater continuity among MHRs also had the effect of making their political views and affiliations clearer and better known. An electorate that had returned a member two or three times, and read his speeches in the newspapers for several years, knew what they were voting for — or what they were voting against. A more stable House meant more stable governments and the likelihood of a more stable opposition appearing. A more stable group of supporters meant that governments had less flexibility in policy and in changing ministers. The very instability of the House, combined with the inexperience of many of its members, although not the only explanation for the rule of the 'Continuous Ministry', had certainly helped

<sup>36</sup> *Daily Southern Cross*, 9 December 1875.

<sup>37</sup> e.g. see T. Hall to J. Hall, 29 October 1881; J. Hall to J. Fulton 2 January 1882, Hall Papers, MSS 1784, Folder 101; Vol. 7.

create a situation in which premiers and ministers could move in and out of office without seriously undermining support for the government. This charmed situation ended in October 1877 when Atkinson proved unable to manage the House with the same skill as his predecessors, and two opposition factions sank their differences and carried a motion of no-confidence. After the dissolution of 1879 and a general election, a new kind of House resulted in a new kind of ministry: politicians began to behave in a way that would eventually lead to the emergence of political parties.

If a 'Continuous Ministry' in Reeves's sense existed it was between 1869 and 1877, when the government underwent a series of shifts arranged between the dominant political groups. After the fall of the Grey government in 1879 the label was an anachronism. Its continued use was as a piece of opposition rhetoric, implying a set of political views, rather than a specific form of government. By singling out the 'Continuous Ministry' as 'perhaps the most interesting and curious feature' of the political scene of the 1870s and 1880s, Reeves helped to obscure as much as to clarify the complexities of political behaviour in that period.

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