

Story: Seddon, Richard John

Page 1

Seddon, Richard John

1845–1906

Politician, premier

This biography was written by David Hamer and was first published in the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography Volume 2, 1993

(Hamer, 2012)

Richard John Seddon was born at School Brow, Eccleston, near St Helens, Lancashire, England, on 22 June 1845. His father was Thomas Seddon, headmaster of Eccleston grammar school, who had married Jane Lindsay, a Scot from Annan, Dumfriesshire, and the teacher at the Eccleston denominational school. When she married her school closed. Richard had an elder brother and two sisters; two other siblings died in infancy. The family was brought up in the Anglican church.

Richard is said to have been an unruly boy. The only subject that interested him at school was mechanical drawing; according to one account he decided to become an engineer after winning a prize in this subject. His father tried unavailingly to make a Latin scholar out of him: 'In my father's school, I was one of a number of boys who were taught extra subjects, and after a time I came to regard it as little short of despotism that I should be kept indoors struggling with Latin while most of the boys were in the open playing at different games. I expostulated by not learning my lesson, with the usual result that might be expected from a schoolmaster, especially when his own son was at fault.' He was removed from school at the age of 12, allegedly because he was regarded as a difficult and unpromising pupil.

Between the ages of 12 and 14 Richard Seddon worked on his paternal grandfather's farm at Barrow Nook near St Helens. Relations between them appear to have become very strained. He then embarked on an apprenticeship at the workshops of Daglish and Company, engineers and ironfounders of St Helens. It is difficult to know exactly what happened during these years, as there are numerous conflicting accounts. One report stated that he was dismissed after a dispute over increased pay for apprentices, but another suggests that he served a five-year apprenticeship there and gave his employers complete satisfaction. He worked for a short time at the Vauxhall Foundry in Liverpool, but he became seriously ill with smallpox and on recovery was without a job as the foundry refused to have him back. It is not clear whether he actually finished his apprenticeship, although he did gain a Board of Trade engineer's certificate.

He decided to emigrate to Australia, probably with the aim of trying his luck on the goldfields, and in 1863 worked his passage to Melbourne on the *Star of England*. After a period at the Victorian government railway workshops at Williamstown, he prospected on the Bendigo goldfields, with little success. He then returned to the railway workshops where he established a reputation for great physical strength and a fondness for demonstrating it: he became a noted boxer and athlete. There is disagreement over whether he showed any interest in politics. One story says he was reported for speaking to his workmates on behalf of a candidate.

Seddon became engaged to Louisa Jane Spotswood in Melbourne, probably in 1865 or early 1866. Her late father had run a ferry at Williamstown. The family appears not to have given much encouragement to Seddon, and marriage was not permitted until he had improved his prospects – which did not look good. He may have been laid off from his job at the railway workshops about the time of his engagement.

In February 1866 he sailed for Hokitika, New Zealand, on the *Alhambra*, arriving on 1 March. He went to the Waimea gold diggings, joining an uncle, Nathan Seddon, who had written urging him to come. He is said to have engaged in hydraulic sluicing for gold on a large scale and apparently constructed reservoirs and water races to work the terraces at the right-hand branch of the Waimea Creek. Among his associates was James Steele with whom he had worked on a claim at Bendigo and who subsequently settled at Kumara and supported him politically.

One account says that Seddon made a good deal of money through mining activities, enabling him to open stores at Big Dam and elsewhere. It does appear that he prospered, because he was able to return to Melbourne and marry Louisa, who had waited three years for him. The ceremony took place at Trinity Church, Williamstown, on 13 January 1869. The couple then left for the West Coast, New Zealand.

Seddon's store at Big Dam did not prove very profitable, so in 1872 he expanded the business by obtaining a conditional publican's licence to retail liquor. As in Melbourne, he acquired a reputation as an athlete and fist fighter and was renowned for feats of strength and endurance, and for settling matters – including the payment of debts – with his fists.

Being in the limelight suited Seddon. In 1870 he was elected to the Arahura Road Board and in 1872 became its chairman. He was chairman again in 1875, 1879 and 1880 and served on it until May 1880 except for a period from May 1877 to December 1878. In 1874 he was elected to the Westland Provincial Council for Arahura, advocating a better water supply for the goldfields, and became chairman of committees on the council. In 1876, after two failed attempts, he was elected to the Westland County Council. When he became its chairman he unsuccessfully demanded an honorarium of £250 plus travelling expenses. He was later to be a strong advocate of the payment of parliamentarians.

Seddon became well known on the West Coast for his work as a miners' advocate or lay litigant, representing miners in the goldfields warden's court. Soon he depended on this work for an income. He lived at Stafford for some years, but in the winter of 1876 staked a claim on the newly discovered goldfield at Kumara and went to live there. He transferred his publican's licence from Big Dam, and established the Queen's Hotel at Kumara. He also operated a store and butchery. The hotel was both the family home and the centre of his political life and involvement in community affairs: a son remembered miners constantly coming in to talk with him. Later the family moved into a separate house where Seddon had his office.

In 1877 he was elected the first mayor of Kumara. He was responsible for the selection of a site for the township, which was established on a plan said to be reminiscent of the layout of Melbourne. This success in local politics came at a time when Seddon's business affairs were at a low ebb: in October 1878 he filed a petition in bankruptcy. However, he soon arrived at a settlement with his creditors. He increased his warden's court work and discontinued the butchery business. Relatives seem to have taken over the work of running the hotel, although he remained the owner.

In 1879 Seddon thought of leaving the West Coast to live in the North Island. He visited Palmerston North and then Wanganui, looking for a place to settle. According to an account given by him in 1893 when he was anxious to establish his closeness to John Ballance, they first met at this time and a friendship began. He visited the Waimate Plain in the North Island with a view to buying land there but decided against it because of the unrest associated with Te Whiti-o-Rongomai. He did not give up this idea and maintained an interest in the area and in Te Whiti.

His ambitions began to focus on a career in Parliament. In 1876 he stood unsuccessfully for Hokitika, coming fourth in the poll, although first on the Waimea diggings. Undeterred, he began to study Hansard and works on parliamentary procedure, learning Thomas Erskine May's *A treatise on the law, privileges, proceedings and usage of Parliament* almost by heart.

In 1879 Seddon stood again for Hokitika and this time was elected. He later claimed his decision to stand was influenced by an exchange of telegrams between himself and Sir George Grey, who was then premier. The story went that Seddon asked Grey whom he wished to see standing, and Grey replied, 'You are worthy; stand yourself'. However, there is no contemporary evidence for the sending of these telegrams. Indeed, Grey is reported to have commended another of the candidates. It may have been a story that Seddon later invented, or he may have read back into the situation in 1879 what actually did happen in 1893, when he secured the premiership.

As a new member of Parliament, Seddon was a Greyite or 'Greyhound' and – for possibly the only time in his political career – called himself a radical. Later, especially in the succession crisis of 1893, he propagated the myth of his affinity with Grey to strengthen his own claims to the Liberal leadership. Yet he was by no means always an uncritical supporter of Grey. He opposed making Grey opposition leader in 1880 and was highly critical of his political manoeuvring in 1884.

In 1881 he secured election for the new seat of Kumara by a narrow margin, and retained it until 1890. As it was very much a mining constituency (it did not include Hokitika), he continued to be preoccupied with the problems of miners. From 1890 to 1906 he represented Westland.

In Parliament Seddon became notorious for his verbosity, and was ridiculed as uncouth. Rumours were spread that he had been unable to read until the age of 30. His tendency to drop the 'h' was satirised. He himself said soon after entering Parliament that 'he must be excused on account of his provincial accent. At certain times, when he got excited, it came to the front.'

He was a notable obstructor of business in the House and was prominent in the stonewalling of the Representation Bill in 1881. In 1880–81 he termed himself an independent but supported the opposition. Seddon saw himself as primarily a representative of the West Coast, which was, in his view, a very distinctive part of New Zealand. In his speeches he identified strongly with the miners. He became known for his relentless pursuit of issues of a very parochial nature, notably the management of the Kumara sludge channel. He took little interest in other issues such as land reform and was not a major figure in the politics of the 1880s. However, because of the undeveloped nature of the West Coast, he became a centralist who opposed provincialism and favoured central government responsibility for expenditure on roads and bridges. Financial expediency helps to explain his transition from intensely parochial politics in the 1880s to support for 'state socialism' in the

1890s.

It is possible that Seddon was offered the position of minister of mines by Julius Vogel or Robert Stout in 1884 in return for West Coast support. He did not accept this offer if it was made, but in any case rose to prominence in the opposition after the 1887 elections. A leading authority on mining legislation and chairman of the Goldfields and Mines Committee in 1887 and 1888, Seddon repeatedly introduced bills to abolish the gold duty. Yet he was still not a major political figure, and was not thought of for the leadership of the opposition in 1889: his national reputation was still to be made. Seddon knew little of New Zealand beyond the West Coast, and it knew little of him.

When the Liberals took office in January 1891, Seddon was given the portfolios of mines, defence and public works; he became minister of marine in 1892. He continued to suffer ridicule for his lack of polish, and was accused of being still only 'partially civilised'. But these attacks only rebounded against his critics in the new age of self-consciously democratic politics. His identification with the common man became a major asset for Seddon and his party. He now transferred to the national scene the populist style of politics which he had perfected over many years on the West Coast. Until the end of his career he toured the country constantly, addressing innumerable meetings and banquets, and hearing countless requests for public works from deputations. As minister for public works he promoted a co-operative contract system for road-making and other projects. He mastered the art of giving away very little while flattering his audiences. These exhausting journeys forged close links between him and the New Zealand people.

In 1892 Seddon's mastery of parliamentary procedure paid off when John Ballance became ill: it made him the logical choice as acting premier. Ballance wanted Stout to be his successor, but his illness progressed too rapidly for him to arrange an orderly transfer of the leadership. He died at the end of April 1893. On 1 May cabinet agreed that Seddon would serve as retaker premier and that the party would settle the matter of the leadership when Parliament reassembled in two months' time. The expectation was that caucus would choose between Seddon and Stout. Seddon, determined to win and buoyed in his resolve by telegrams to and from Grey, resorted to devious tactics. He ensured that there was no free choice between himself and Stout by, in effect, presenting the caucus with two options: a split in the party or acceptance of himself as leader. Seddon completely outmanoeuvred his rival, Stout, whose tactics only intensified Liberal members' fears that their party would become too divided to carry through its reform programme. Seddon then used the government's victory under his leadership at the ensuing general elections as a vindication of his conduct. By implying that he had been confirmed in his position by the people, Seddon was responsible for a significant elevation in the status and role of the premier.

Seddon's prime-ministerial style was foreshadowed when, in an early speech in the House, he said that 'A president is all we require.' He further suggested that ministers should be eliminated and that heads of departments should simply carry out instructions. Later, as premier, he was accused of being an autocrat: his nickname, 'King Dick', suggested there was a widespread impression that he was one. He exercised a remarkable surveillance over all aspects of the work of government; this was still possible at a time when the entire administration could be fitted into one building. The price that had to be paid was a working day that stretched well into the night.

Although he continued to live in Kumara until 1895, Seddon was rarely at home. He closed his hotel. In Wellington he lived at the Club Hotel in Lambton Quay or in rooms in Hawkestone Crescent. Occasionally a member of his family accompanied him on his travels. His wife attended to his constituency business, and according to their son, T. E. Y. Seddon, enjoyed doing so. In March 1895 he moved permanently to Wellington with his wife, their six daughters and three sons; the family lived in a house in Molesworth Street. It was a very political home with members of Parliament constantly calling in on business.

Seddon was always loyal to those who were loyal to him – a prerequisite for political survival which he had learned early in his career. In his first speech in the House he told of how he felt when, on the Westland Provincial Council, he decided to oppose the party he had been allied with for the previous two years. He gave a pledge to do this 'in the heat of passion, at a moment when I was off my guard, and for three days and nights I was as miserable as I could possibly be'.

He was skilful at handling third-rate politicians, and it was among these that he found his closest associates. He sheltered the mediocre in his cabinet and received their loyalty in return. Dissident Liberal members were not tolerated and were denied advancement. He saw the more independent-minded back-benchers as a potential threat to the stability of the government if they were ever allowed anywhere near the front benches. However, the consequence of his decision to appoint men of limited administrative ability and political nous to most cabinet posts was more work for himself.

Seddon concentrated a large proportion of the most important portfolios in his own hands during his premiership. He replaced William Pember Reeves as minister of labour in January 1896 and held the portfolio until his death. Much of the work of implementing and amending the industrial conciliation and arbitration system fell to him, and he established an

effective relationship with the secretary of the Department of Labour, Edward Tregear.

In June 1896 he replaced Joseph Ward as colonial treasurer and held this portfolio until his death. He was a very cautious financier who budgeted for surpluses, and maintained the spirit of 'self reliance' advocated by Ballance. He made a carefully calculated and restrained return to the policy of first borrowing for land development and settlement and only then for essential public works. He was minister of education from June 1903 until his death and for the same period was minister for immigration. For much of his career he regarded the Chinese with considerable dislike, and promoted legislation to prevent any further Chinese migration to New Zealand.

Seddon was minister for public works until March 1896 and minister of defence until June 1896 and again from January 1900. He became native minister in September 1893 and held this post until the end of 1899. His attitude to the Maori, while sympathetic, was basically paternalistic. He made frequent visits to Maori tribes and used his powers of persuasion to obtain consent to the selling of land. In this he was very successful.

When Seddon became premier in 1893, many major reforms had already been made or were being formulated. Important reforms which were enacted in the early years of his premiership included the Government Advances to Settlers Act 1894 and the Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act 1894. Long an opponent of votes for women, he was obliged to accept this reform when it was passed – to his surprise and chagrin – by the Legislative Council in 1893. His skilful handling of the controversial liquor licensing issue in 1893–94 established his credentials as leader, took the force out of Stout's challenge, and earned the gratitude of Liberal members who had found it very embarrassing electorally.

The reform that became most closely identified with Seddon personally was the Old-age Pensions Act 1898, partly because of his determined promotion of it over several years against strenuous opposition, and partly because underlying his interest it was his long-standing concern for the welfare of ex-miners on the West Coast. This was a measure in which Louisa Seddon also took a particularly close interest.

A favourite project was the building of workers' dwellings. He was strongly influenced by municipal housing schemes in London and Glasgow in the late 1890s and his views shaped the Workers' Dwellings Act 1905. He also demonstrated concern for teachers, remembering his parents, and was behind the introduction of a superannuation scheme for teachers in 1906.

Seddon would not allow extra-parliamentary party organisation to dictate to the government. In 1880 he had called government by party one of the greatest evils the colony had suffered from: 'Party government in a colony like this is simply a farce. We ape too much.' Well-publicised rebukes to party organisations that advocated more radical policies after the 1893 election made plain who was in control. Instead of developing party organisation he made a practice of personally intervening in constituencies to ensure choice of the 'right' candidate and to prevent surplus Liberal candidatures. He resorted to many forms of persuasion – including promises of patronage.

In 1899 he brought about the formation of the Liberal and Labour Federation of New Zealand. As its title suggests, one of its principal purposes was to ensure the continued integration of labour into Liberal politics. It was given only a limited influence over the choosing of candidates and minimal input into the making of policy, which was retained firmly under the control of the parliamentary party.

Seddon had a zest for politics and was not easily depressed or thrown off course. He had learned most of the tricks of political survival in the rough-and-tumble world of West Coast politics, and sometimes behaved outrageously, flouting the conventions. But he had a very acute sense of when he could get away with this, and he almost invariably did. He was also a master at turning the tables on his opponents. His enemies were tempted to exploit the mistakes of his early career, usually to their own undoing. Seddon was pursued by critics such as George Hutchison and T. E. Taylor and was always successful in foiling them.

Numerous political scandals erupted during his premiership. Most were petty, some even farcical, such as the 'Bun Tuck' scandal of 1898, when Hutchison claimed that Seddon had had Chinese associates in his mining ventures. Seddon survived, and even attracted public sympathy, accusing his critics of harassing him in order to undermine the government and its reform programme. The most celebrated scandal erupted in 1905 when allegations were made of an unauthorised payment to one of Seddon's sons. These claims were proved to be totally without foundation. Sympathy for Seddon undoubtedly helped him to win his fifth successive election victory.

Seddon was an active and noisy imperialist. He put pressure on the Colonial Office to annex Samoa so that New Zealand could administer it on Britain's behalf, and also sought the incorporation of Fiji in New Zealand. He was very critical of Britain's caution at a time when other powers were expanding their control over territories in the Pacific. He was especially

- upset at Britain's acquiescence when the United States took control of Hawaii in 1898; he had already made his feelings known directly to President William McKinley on a visit to Washington. However, he did succeed in persuading the Colonial Office to permit New Zealand's annexation of the Cook Islands in 1901.

Seddon played a prominent role in the affairs of empire from 1897 on. He became well known for his promotion of New Zealand's interests in the name of imperialism. His extroverted behaviour made him something of a celebrity when he attended the colonial conferences of 1897 and 1902. In recalling his early childhood Seddon emphasised his delight in pageantry, and early experiences may help to explain his imperialism and his enjoyment of events such as Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee. He also attracted much publicity for his outspokenness about the South African war: he visited South Africa in 1902 at General Kitchener's invitation. He was increasingly ready to arouse and exploit popular nationalism.

Seddon was just under six feet in height and weighed nearly 20 stone in later life. He ate and drank without moderation. Totally committed to politics he had few other diversions, although he was fond of dancing and liked to sing at parties and musical evenings. He occasionally played euchre at night after work with his staff.

A foreign observer, Henry Demarest Lloyd, once recommended those who sought redress to go direct to the premier. Indeed, Seddon was constantly being approached by people who wished to discuss their grievances with him. He had to devise various stratagems to cope with the incessant pressures for interviews without upsetting those who sought them. It seems that the only places where he could be safe from importunity were on horseback and out at sea: he sometimes took the government launch out on Wellington harbour for fishing, and went riding in later life, partly to escape the throngs of supplicants around his home and partly for exercise. He became a familiar figure on his horse around Thorndon.

Seddon was very conscious of his public image. He took great pains over his style of dress, adopting a trade-mark frock-coat, often worn with a flower in the button-hole. His personality and style made him a favourite subject for the pens and wit of caricaturists. Yet in spite of the many references to his geniality, photographs hardly ever reveal him laughing or expressing pleasure. He looks straight at the camera, unsmiling.

Seddon's popular image derived largely from his political philosophy, which was simple and unsophisticated: 'It is the rich and the poor; it is the wealthy people and the landowners against the middle classes and the labouring classes.' He had a strong instinct for the limits of public willingness to accept change, and emphasised the importance of not ranging beyond what public opinion was prepared to accept. He invoked the principle of democracy to restrain the more impatient and radical sections of his party. Seddon feared losing the major Liberal reforms by going too far and provoking a public backlash: his main political aim was to consolidate the major achievements of 1891–94. In this he was notably successful. He also humanised government at a time when there was a massive increase in the regulation of New Zealanders' lives, with numerous new government departments and many more laws for the bureaucrats to enforce.

He was immensely skilful in handling crowds and meetings. He had a remarkable memory for the names, faces and personal circumstances of people whom he met (although he was often careful to get a full briefing from his private secretary beforehand). He excelled at projecting an impression of friendliness and sympathy, and innumerable accounts tell of his expansiveness when meeting people. Privately he had a view of 'the people' that was by no means starry-eyed, and was aware that the public could be cruel. Nevertheless, conservatives who were suspicious of the popular notion of democracy saw him as pandering to the untutored whims of the common people. His relationship with politicians of an intellectual bent such as William Pember Reeves was often uneasy.

From about 1897 Seddon's health began to fail. His long hours of work, his frequent arduous journeys into the backblocks, and his prime-ministerial style of leadership took their toll. The photographs began to betray the strain. He developed a heart condition. He then had to work even harder to counter the potentially destabilising effects of concern within the party about his deteriorating health. There were rumours that he would resign to go to London as agent general, causing speculation about who would succeed him.

From 1900 on he came under increasing pressure from frustrated back-benchers to reconstruct the cabinet and get rid of some of the less competent ministers. He was evasive, not wanting to dismiss men who had been loyal to him. He saw advantages in keeping the prospect of reconstruction perpetually dangling before the back-benchers. There were plots to engineer his retirement, but these all came to nothing because of the unwillingness of Joseph Ward, his obvious successor, to force the issue. Seddon was afraid of weak government if he stepped down. However, he did indicate that he had decided to retire from the premiership on his return to New Zealand from the Colonial Conference, which was to be held in London from April to May 1907.

In fact he did not survive to attend the conference. He died on 10 June 1906 on board the *Oswestry Grange* while returning

from a visit to Australia. One of his last political pronouncements was a telegram to the Victorian premier, Thomas Bent, on the eve of his departure: 'Just leaving for God's own country'. Seddon was buried on Observatory Hill, adjacent to the Botanic Garden in Wellington. He was survived by his wife, who died in 1931.

After his death Richard Seddon became a symbolic figure. His prominent statue outside Parliament Buildings has come to represent the authority of the state in New Zealand. The labour movement was later to invoke his name and memory, claiming to carry on the humanitarian tradition of Seddonian Liberal politics. The most enduring aspects of his reputation have been his humanitarianism, his boisterous imperialism, and his status as the originator of a populist style of prime-ministerial leadership in New Zealand.

How to cite this page:

David Hamer. 'Seddon, Richard John', from the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography. Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, updated 12-Feb-2014

URL: <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/biographies/2s11/seddon-richard-john>

All text licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 3.0 New Zealand Licence unless otherwise stated. Commercial re-use may be allowed on request. All non-text content is subject to specific conditions. © Crown Copyright.