

6. The New Caledonia independence referendum

What happens now?

Abstract: This article gives an interpretative treatment of the historical record, from France taking possession of New Caledonia in 1853, through to the current Matignon process, assessing indications for coming developments. Focused on the debate over independence, it considers: interests of the French state as both arbitrator and participant in events; relations among the indigenous Melanesian Kanaks, European French *Caldoches*, and smaller ethnic communities; memories of colonial exploitation obstructing progress; the large nickel industry; immigration, and associated minority status of Kanak society—a central problem. It describes the alternation of left and right-wing parties in government in France, with Socialist Party governments commencing moves towards independence, possibly in association with France, and conservative governments moving to countermand those moves. It posits that the parties in New Caledonia have improved their chances of finding a positive outcome through jointly participating in government during 30 years of peace.

Keywords: Caldoche, Kanak, immigration, independence, Matignon Accord, New Caledonia, Noumea Accord, nickel, referendum

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Introduction

THE CONTEST continues in New Caledonia despite the pronounced majority against independence at the referendum on 4 November 2018. In that poll 141,099 French citizens resident in the territory decided on the question: ‘Do you want New Caledonia to accede to full sovereignty and become independent?’ They voted ‘no’ by a margin of nearly 13 percent, yet that did not settle the burning issue of more than 60 years (*RF*, 2018). One reason is that the margin was considered close for a situation in which two large communities, the indigenous Kanaks and European French, needed an agreed, very clear and conclusive outcome. Secondly the rules agreed to by the parties under the 1988 Matignon process permit the Kanaks to obtain two further referendums on independence in the coming four years.

This article provides an interpretative review of the historical record, emphasising

as salient dates: 24 September 1853, when France took possession, and 8 May 1988, which marked the re-election of the French Socialist President François Mitterrand and the outset of the Matignon Accords. It sets out to establish causes and effects of the present-day impasse, identifying contributing factors: conflict held over from a bitter colonial past; the Kanak movement leveraging indigeneity in its competition with the *Caldoche* settler society; the French state attempting to mediate while remaining a contestant for power, its policy on independence fluctuating with the alternation of left or right-wing governments in Paris—which might yet determine a final outcome; the great wealth generated by nickel, and problems linked with it, including immigration where Kanaks have become a dissatisfied minority. A final section views prospects for change in the status quo as being very likely enhanced by the experience of 30 years' peace and co-operation.

Past abuses

A tragedy befell the Melanesian people, the Kanaks of today's New Caledonia in 1853 with the proclamation of France's possession of their land. On the ceremonial occasion, Le Fevre (2013, pp. 42-43) observes there had been no consultation or assent, and chiefs in attendance were excluded from the formalities and signings, 'apparently not even qualified to serve as witnesses'.

Chappell (2003, p. 188) discounts European claims that colonisation brought peace, development and unity of society:

In practice, French colonisation was one of the most extreme cases of native denigration, incarceration and dispossession in Oceania. A frontier of cattle ranches, convict camps, mines and coffee farms moved across the main island of Grande Terre, conquering indigenous resisters and confining them to reserves that amounted to less than ten percent of the land.

The policy was abetted by 19th century theories about race, which held that Melanesians were savages 'incommensurably different' to Europeans and becoming extinct (Le Fevre, 2013, p. 41, p. 305). The colonisers encountered violent resistance, most traumatically during the 1878 Grande Revolte led by the senior chief Attai (Fisher, 2013, p. 29; Le Fevre, 2013, p. 64).

The drive for colonisation operated on several fronts:

- Convict transportation began in 1864, adding 250 souls to 100 free settlers. A total of 30,000 prisoners were transported until the abolition of the practice in 1897.
- Free settler immigration was encouraged, engendering the intractable problem of the eventual outnumbering of the indigenous population.

The 1887 *code de l'indigenat*, in force until 1946, enabled land confiscations outside the protections of metropolitan French law (Le Fevre, 2013, p. 64),

reducing reserves by 57 percent (Le Fevre, 2013, p. 68). Kanaks could not leave reserves without permission and did unpaid labour for public works. Fisher (2013, p. 30-31) provides figures indicating the effects of dislocation and psychological derangement, disease and violent conflict on the Kanak population. This was estimated to be 45,000 in 1860, but reduced to 27,100 in the 1920s, recovering to some 30,000 in 1940 and close to 104000 in 2019. With increased immigration of Europeans, Polynesians from Wallis and Futuna and Asian labourers from Indonesia, Japan and Vietnam, the approximate Kanak proportion of total population steadily dropped from close to 100 percent in 1850 to 68 percent in 1887, 50 percent in 1956, 46 percent in 1969 and 39 percent by 2018.¹

Le Fevre (2013, p. 52) wrote about the ‘myth of Melanesian collective property’ (quoting Merle, 1995), describing the ancient landscape, with each feature named, denoting pathways of ancestors, *chefferies*, related also to traditional hierarchies of entitlement. In this interpretation, that lay of the land and custom was misunderstood, or wilfully misconstrued by French officials as a simple ownership in common. There were arbitrary seizures and colonial authorities took it on themselves to prescribe certain lands for tribes, the *tribus*, as their reserves.

The discovery of nickel in 1874 brought great wealth and opportunity to New Caledonia, with per capita Gross Domestic Product now close to Australia’s, but also brought major environmental, industrial and political problems, especially associated with more people being brought in and large-scale expansion.

The roots of present-day distrust—‘memories of injustice, exploitation and oppression which often remain strong in local tradition’ (Henningham, 1991, p. 28)—grew out of 19th century colonialism. Confronted by aggressive and expropriative strangers the Kanaks struggled to resist through to the cultural awakening and impactful political mobilisations of the latter 20th century.

Shock of war and post-war reforms

The Kanak population fell to its smallest number around 1930. The French-owned company *Société Le Nickel* generated more migration (Fisher, 2013, p. 29) and provided rich investment opportunities for settlers, notably the ‘fifty families’² seen as a thriving local bourgeoisie, itself increasingly interested in self-government though always ‘within the Republic.’ As war loomed, Australian, British and New Zealand governments diverted exports of the strategic mineral away from Japan, installed military facilities in the South Pacific, including Noumea, and assisted the Gaullist Free French to establish control.

New Caledonia’s occupation by up to 100,000 United States and New Zealand troops gave the same jolt and expansion as in Honiara, Port Vila or Townsville. The famous ‘casual generosity’ of the GIs, many black and independent enough to destroy ideas about genetic servitude, changed minds. Kanaks ‘experienced what it was like to be treated as relative human equals, to be paid fair wages for

work, and travel freely outside of a reservation’— with complaints from settlers about a new ‘arrogance’ among ‘natives’ (Le Fevre, 2013, p. 74-76).

New Caledonia shared in the global post-war decolonisation movement. A multi-racial reform party, the Union Caledonienne (UC) dominated the Territorial Assembly until after 1969; the *code de l’indigenat* went, and Kanaks had full French citizenship by 1958. French legislation under a leftist government, a *loi-cadre*, allocated restricted powers to the colonial legislature. The UC supported by Kanaks and poor white or Asian workers, attempted reforms including the still-popular social security system, *La Cafat* (<https://www.cafat.nc/>). In reaction, expatriate or settler groups rioted in Noumea in 1955 and 1958, demanding removal of the UC and there were bomb attacks in 1962 after France’s loss of Algeria (Chappell, 2003, p. 190).

Shock of recolonisation

On his return to power in 1958, De Gaulle offered the French colonies independence with no money from France, or incorporation in a greater French community. Confidence in the system was strong enough that enrolled New Caledonian voters opted for ‘France’ by 98 percent in the 1958 referendum (Fisher, 2013, p. 50). France then imposed a systematic recolonisation (Chappell, 2003, p. 188), commencing a contest between right and left-wing intentions for New Caledonia through to this day. Chappell (2003, p. 190) documents the Gaullist High Commissioner, Laurent Pechoux, removing powers of the elected colonial government—initially control of the civil service, police and radio station. The 1963 constitutional law, *loi Jacquinet* (Chappell, 2003, p. 191; Fisher, 2013, p. 56), abolished the positions of colonial Ministers and relegated the legislature to consultative status only.

The immediate reasons for this policy, which predictably caused bitter, long-term resistance, were that the French government was determined to conduct nuclear testing in the South Pacific, following the loss of testing ranges in Algeria and would not ‘give a megaphone’ to possible opponents (Steinmetz in Frediere, 2018; Duffield, 2018). Such testing by the Americans and British had already drawn strong opposition (Henningham, 1991, p. 40; Maclellan, 2017; Duffield 2018a). The Gaullist project fitted traditional colonial policy: France could recover glory as an independent nuclear power, demonstrating global influence through its overseas dependencies. French nationals looking to gain fortunes or perform good works would be protected (Le Fevre, 2013, p. 18; Fisher, 2013, p. 85). Economic growth brought some share of advantages to all; missionaries, including many who strove to help indigenes, received validation through the continuing existence of large Christian congregations.

Nickel production virtually tripled from 1967 to 1971 (Fisher, 2013: 57), with the immigrant population increasing by 20 percent. As 2000 Algerian *pied noirs*

re-settled in New Caledonia, Chappell (2003, p. 199) notes that ‘attitudes’ also arrived; former colonials could bring resentments and rejection of multi-cultural ideas. Migrants received special agency assistance and Prime Minister Pierre Messmer wrote his famous 1972 memorandum declaring that indigenous nationalism should be neutralised by creating a non-indigenous majority, through ‘an operation of overseas colonisation’ (Chappell, 2003, p. 191; Fisher, 2013, p. 56). ‘Breed whites,’ said the Noumea Mayor Roger Laroque (Chappell, 2003, p. 191).

France and instability in the Pacific region

French governments seeking to uphold France’s strategic, political, cultural and economic prominence (Henningham, 1991, pp. 21-23) became a source of instability in the South Pacific after 1960. The inter-governmental Melanesian Spearhead Group, supporting and including the Kanaks, obtained re-inscription of France by the United Nations Decolonisation Committee. That diplomatic check exhibited the phenomenon of newly independent states pursuing their own interests. It reflected extensive conflict over the nuclear tests which continued until 1996 and aggravated relations with Australia and New Zealand. Matters worsened after the bombing of the Greenpeace ship *Rainbow Warrior* on 10 July 1985 in Auckland, an enactment of the ‘deep state’ that no French government would completely disown, delivering only very recalcitrant apologies over time. The sour exit of the French from Vanuatu also drew opprobrium (Fisher, 2013, pp. 53-55; Le Fevre, 2013, p. 5). Relations recovered after 1988, notably after the end of nuclear tests in 1996.

Protest and the *Évènements*

The year 1969 saw the bitter realisation by Melanesians that they had lost majority status in the general population, ascribing it to a deliberate manipulation of numbers (Henningham, 1991, p. 122), a moment seen by Chappell (2003:200) as a turning point for Kanak awakening: ‘The outnumbered Kanak now had to assert their indigeneity as leverage, but calls for Kanak independence—tied to socialism—polarised politics and ethnic relations.’ A positive sense of Kanak solidarity had been generated by the cultural revival movement under the inspired leadership of Jean-Marie Tjibaou, but now resistance and response would bring the territory close to civil war.

Returning youth leaders who had experienced the Paris May revolution, like Nidoish Naisseline from a chiefly family in the Loyalty Islands, ran into hard-line suppression of their protests (Chappell, 2003, pp. 193-97). Kanak groups began a decade of direct action: civil disobedience, hunger strikes, circulating tracts, challenging colour bars at chic restaurants or hotels and pervasive graffiti (Chappell, 2003, p. 198). Some made contact with revolutionary regimes in Cuba or Libya.

This change ended the liberal period that had seen gradual progress towards independence. The multi-cultural *UC* lost most of its non-indigenous membership and support to the conservative party, *Le Rassemblement pour la Calédonie dans la France (RPCR)*, headed by Jacques Lafleur, which won the 1977 territorial elections.

Most white Caledonians and other immigrants, fearing exclusion, fled towards the right, and loyalists were already manipulating dependent Tahitians and Wallisians into violent action against pro-independence Kanak (Chappell, 2003, p. 200).

Jean-Marie Tjibaou's independentist front briefly came into office in 1982 with support from a break-away group from the loyalist majority, his accession once again provoking violent actions by right-wing gangs. Hope of a turn-around arose with the election of the Socialist Party President François Mitterrand in 1981 (Chappell, 2003, p. 200), but rising conflict obstructed dialogue.

Armed clashes called *les Évènements* started in 1984 in a setting of 'almost intolerable tension and violence' (Fisher, p. 61). In September the Kanak political groups formed the socialist united front, the *Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste (FLNKS)*, declaring plans for a government in exile, flying the new Kanaky flag and calling a boycott on elections set for November 18. The Évènements are seen as having started with the smashing of a ballot box by the activist Éloi Machoro on election day (Fisher, 2013, p. 61). One month later, he organised the occupation of a large land-holding where he was killed by a police sniper. Kanaks had burned down polling stations and erected road-blocks, where fatal exchanges took place with anti-independentists, including the ambush killing of two brothers of Tjibaou with eight other Kanaks (Fisher, 2013, p. 61). Clashes went on for more than two years.

Architecture of a peace

From the 1950s, French Socialist Party governments concentrated on building relationships and constructing a deal that might enable a peaceful independence, usually in a form of association with France. They produced structures and principles ultimately followed in the Matignon process. Conservative governments, under De Gaulle and later Chirac, would stop the process and undo the work done. Their local affiliates participated in negotiations when they were happening, but also waited for opportunities to set things back.

Socialist Party initiatives for settlement

The 1956 *loi-cadre* (under Overseas Territories Minister Gaston Defferre) transferred certain powers to elected assemblies, enabling the *UC*'s experiment in multicultural government. While mostly rescinded during the Gaullist

recolonisation, it did foreshadow the current allocation of all but five key powers to the territorial legislature (defence, foreign affairs, justice, law and order, and currency). Eventual transfer of those powers now defines the independence debate.

In July 1983, the Minister, Georges Lemoine, convened all parties in France, proposing the 1984 elections ahead of a five-year lead-up to a vote on independence. It anticipated the Matignon formula, delay before a referendum and mutual recognition contained in the Matignon accords. Kanaks would receive acknowledgement of an ‘innate and active right to independence,’ and would accept all New Caledonians taking part in the decision-making (Fisher, 2013, p. 60). Also anticipating Matignon, the agreement foundered on disagreements over the electoral list, Kanaks demanding stiff residential voter qualifications to off-set their minority status.

The August 1985 Fabius-Pisani law, made as the Socialist Party faced defeat in the forthcoming French elections, offered independence in association with France under Article 88 of the French Constitution, an untried device for affiliation of a partner state. A similar proposal is under discussion in 2019. The plan delineated three provinces where Kanak and Caldoche parties could respectively govern and exercise substantial powers, in effect a power-sharing arrangement carried into the later accords. It envisaged a vote the following year by residents with three years standing, on a limited independence, with France retaining central powers like defence and security. The three-year rule would become an ongoing sticking point (Fisher, 2013, p. 60; Chappell, 2003, p. 200).

Shock of the Chirac premiership 1986-88 and deaths on Ouvéa Island

The notoriously combative conservative French politician Jacques Chirac was Prime Minister from 1986-88, during which time he attempted an immediate closing down on independence for New Caledonia. Concurrently campaigning for election as President of France in 1988 and working with the French-loyalist *RPCR*, he set up the referendum on independence in 1987, open to three-year residents. The poll was boycotted by Kanaks, produced a 98.3 percent ‘no’ on a 59 percent turn-out of registered electors. A second statute initiated moves towards removing Kanak citizens’ Customary legal status which provided preferential access to joint acquisitions of reserve land (Bernigaud in Duffield, 2018). A garrison of 6,000 troops fanned out among the Kanak villages, to keep order and eventually help with development projects, but this exacerbated dissent.

Chirac’s disruption of the evolving search for a settlement abruptly ended with the hostage-taking crisis and military action on Ouvéa Island, in which six police and 19 Kanak fighters were killed. Both Mitterrand and Chirac had approved the armed response to free the hostages, on 5 May 1988, between the two voting rounds in their election. Mitterrand won and called a general election which returned his

Socialists to power. Exhausted political leaders were anxious to talk once the incoming Prime Minister, Michel Rocard, could get proceedings underway.

The Matignon and Noumea Accords

The conference at the Matignon Palace was acclaimed as deft statecraft which brought Lafleur and Tjibaou together after five years. The agreement and the supporting Oudinot pact, drew on the principles established in previous attempts, under Defferre, Lemoine and Fabius-Pisani. It committed both sides to respecting the right of the other to live in New Caledonia (Bernigaud in Duffield, 2018). There would be a referendum for independence after a decade.

Recognising Kanak anxieties about population, a separate electoral roll for territory voting would use long-term residency: those enrolled in 1988 could vote in 1998. The three provinces plan would continue, giving *Caldoche* interests in the South based on Noumea and giving Kanak leaders formal power in the North province and Loyalty Islands, including significant options for engagement in the nickel industry. The provinces selected members for a legislative Congress, which emerged with a small anti-independentist majority. France would fund an ambitious economic development programme in Kanak-held areas and expanded education and training. The Accord was signed in Paris on 21 August 1988, approved in a national referendum by 80 percent, on a 37 percent voter turnout.

The Matignon Accord did not obliterate tensions and unresolved conflicts. Where the Évènements had dissuaded immigration, the new era brought minerals expansion and revived it. Tjibaou and his deputy, *Yeiwéné Yeiwéné*, were assassinated in 1989 by a follower claiming they had conceded too much. LaFleur died in 2010. Part of the agreement had been that the French government would buy his shareholding in the nickel company *Société Minière du Sud Pacifique* for the Northern province—valued at US\$21.25 million in 1990 (Fisher, 2013, p. 67). The arrangement demonstrated much about the strategic importance of nickel, the actual great wealth of holdings and power among the *Caldoche* elite, its entrenched position in the institutions as well as a sense of social responsibility and disparities of wealth and opportunity which the transfer to the Kanak dominated province was meant to help alleviate.

The successor agreement, the 1998 Noumea Accord was brokered by yet another Socialist premier, Lionel Jospin, and approved by a referendum in New Caledonia by 72 percent with 74 percent of eligible voters taking part. It extended the time limit for the independence referendum by another 20 years. As part of economic rebalancing, it dealt extensively with the allocation of nickel resources geographically and among companies and institutions, including provincial governments, producing an accompanying industry agreement, the Bercy accord. The referendum plan contained a safety valve feature whereby if the first vote was ‘no’ (as it was) there was provision for two more referenda in

2020 and 2022. The French state began handing over all government powers save the ‘five.’ Under terms of a new Organic law, New Caledonia received the status of an associated country able to enact separate legislation, *lois du pays*, overseen by France’s Constitutional Council not its government. It affirmed use of a separate electoral list recognising ancestral or long-term residency (Fisher, 2013, pp. 69-71; Robertson, 2018). Some excluded residents have unsuccessfully appealed to international tribunals or the United Nations.

Commentaries and the *Lendemain*—prospects for the future

The Macron government convened new Paris negotiations late in 2017 to set in motion the November 2018 referendum. The 20 years’ interregnum since the Matignon talks produced peaceful, but insecure, political relations. Two broad, opposing camps made a loose orthodoxy: Kanak, independentist, poorer, left wing versus European, anti-independence, richer and right wing. Both sides had divisions, the anti-independentists in particular forming new parties, like *Caledonie Ensemble*, still loyalist, but determinedly multi-racial—taking most of the *RPCR* support base. Collaboration in government under the Accord with Ministers coming from both the majority and minority had bolstered civility. Political violence and racist outbursts subsided markedly.

Yet both sides became stubborn when debating the dangerous question of who could vote. It was agreed that those on the 1988 rolls and their descendants would qualify, with other conditions available to confirm enrolment, such as long-term residency tests or votes for Kanaks living abroad. The insistence on beginning at 1988, already excluding many residents of 14 or more years’ standing, is bound to become less sustainable as time progresses. Anti-independentists unsuccessfully appealed to a constitutional court against the 1988-plus-10-years rule, citing wording in the Accord that might have moved the residency cut-off date from 1998 to 2004 (Fisher, 2013, pp. 101-102).

Kanak demands that all citizens with *custom* status should automatically be enrolled, and enrolment procedures simplified, ended in compromise. With 25,000 Kanaks missing from the special roll, 11,000 were automatically inscribed from the general, French national roll (Robertson, 2018). A United Nations monitoring commission criticised the ‘unreliable’ state of files and poor communication with electors by local government offices managing the poll, specifically at Noumea and Dumbea, strongly anti-independence areas (UN, 2018). The rolls require work and will cause more disputes.

Nickel industry

New Caledonia is renowned as the world’s fifth largest producer, pushing ahead with new mines and processing facilities. Nickel provides 80 percent of territory export earnings. Fisher (2013, p. 129) noted some of the difficulties that could arise from large-scale engineering and mining works:

Even one major nickel plant in an island economy is a massive undertaking, involving billions of dollars, complex technological and metallurgical challenges, labour concerns, social and environmental factors... Even for the French State, the projects are enormous ... Added to that is the fact that the relatively inexperienced New Caledonian Government, and provincial administrations, under their new-found powers from the 1998 Noumea Accord, are tackling these large projects in their first years of existence, while developing legislative frameworks along the way.

Complex ownership and financing arrangements add to conflicts over environmentally damaging strip-mining projects, with seven main mines now in long-term production or coming into operation. The Kanak parties have a major political stake in the local public sector company *Société Territoriale Calédonienne de Participation Industrielle (STPCI)*, which acquired 30 percent of SLN under the Accords. They want revenue to tackle poor housing, employment, public education and general health. Commercial interests from Australia, Canada and Japan have large holdings, but French interests dominate, predominantly the state-owned Eramet corporation.

Interests of the French state

The French state in its awkward position as arbiter, stake-holder and participant in the politics of New Caledonia and enforcer of law and order would much prefer to stay there. The national government continues to commit more than US\$1.435-billion annually to New Caledonia (Fisher, 2013, p. 125; Henningham, 1991, p. 22) while insisting (Girardin in *LNC*, 2019) that any outcomes will respect an abstract local ‘public interest’. It retains substantial control in the disputed policy areas of immigration and the nickel industry, where French law may take precedence, for example as retained external powers, or a duty to keep strategic reserves (Chappell, 2003, p. 191), or where the Accords are silent or found to be ambiguous.

It operates a large military command from Noumea, seeing national interest in its role as a guarantor of security in the South Pacific and Western ally—a strategic bulwark to keep out prospective new entrants like China. The military space programme is taking over from nuclear testing. The tradition of protecting French citizens remains strong. There are 278,000 in New Caledonia, up to one-third from metropolitan France. Adding to the wealth produced by nickel is the windfall of the huge, expanded Exclusive Economic Zone acquired by France, through its overseas territories, under the 1982 United Nations Law of the Sea Convention (<https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/countries-with-the-largest-exclusive-economic-zones.html>). A large section extending West from Grande Terre contains hydrocarbons, not yet thoroughly surveyed. The Accords allocate prime control to New Caledonia, but leave space for interpretation over

the use of EEZ resources (Fisher, 2013, pp. 125-6; Henningham 1991, p. 22). Interest in New Caledonia in metropolitan France may be sluggish, as with the low voter turnout in 1988 (Duffield, 2018b), but might readily be activated as in the past by any return to violence, or a perceived abandonment of rich natural wealth to a potentially weak and fickle independent state.

Public servants—valuable resources and subject of discord

Use of European French functionaries remains important to effective governance, but is taking up prime jobs and adding to the population imbalance. Independentists must continue trusting the professional detachment of, for example, those working for the Kanak-dominated Northern province government. Similarly, nickel has brought in highly-skilled staff. Whatever the political impacts of immigration, the skills and technology transfer are widely promoted as essential, at least until Kanak personnel can be brought up through education and training schemes. Those are provided especially under the Accords, but measures of school performance and outcomes of training programmes have lagged and change will require time (Fisher, 2013, pp. 141-43).

The armed forces, police and paramilitary Gendarmerie make up a large ‘French’ presence with unfortunate histories of conflict, mainly with Kanaks. Since the *Rainbow Warrior* bombing (Robie, 2005) and the New Caledonia *Évènements* (see Robie, 1989—a comprehensive chronicle including investigative sections also on the fate of the Greenpeace ship), questions will be raised about the quality and discipline of these forces, and their control under a new government. The police presence remains widely valued and is considered essential, though with reservations about the numbers fielded to meet possible disturbances, as during the 2018 referendum. Tension exists in districts prone to violent disturbances where police will maintain check-points.

An indicative factor in the debate over immigration, population and independence is the presence in New Caledonia of more than 6000 retired French civil servants drawing premiums up to 175 percent on already substantial pensions, which are available to state retirees after service anywhere in France or its dependencies if they go to live in an overseas territory. This scheme to boost the numbers of an educated European population is expensive and will be phased out from 2027 (Fisher, pp. 117-19). Such premiums are not available to New Caledonia government employees and Kanak representatives propose cancelling them after independence (Duffield, 2018c).

Social relations and electoral politics—what future?

Consensus can be imagined around the notion of an independence in association with France, though independentists will want the five residual powers always assumed to be on offer in the 2018 referendum. They proposed the inclusion of the

qualifying expression ‘full sovereignty’ with the connotative, near-absolute ‘independent’ in the referendum question (Dayant, 2018). That is an instance of the Kanak leadership’s focused political intent, a level of sophistication doubted as opinion polls suggested a much bigger ‘no’ vote in 2018. The result indicated a more viable contest. It undermined the attempted knock-out blow against independence by the *RPCR* under Pierre Frogier, who asked the French government to scrap further referenda as foregone conclusions, a request the government refused (Frédière & Poisson, 2018). The voting proved the Kanak organisation could produce a big indigenous vote strongly for ‘yes’ with significant support beyond the Kanak population. It signalled that a community-based ‘get-out-the-vote’ campaign would reliably deliver big numbers with scope for a second type of operation to extend the movement’s appeal into a wider community.

Much will depend on the Kanak assessment of their position and any chances to get an additional net seven-percent, and reverse the 2018 referendum result, by 2022. Demands for electoral reform might see more Kanaks enrolled, but not enough to succeed if such calls are confined to a single minority community. Independence strategists might consider census data which in recent years has included growing numbers of people who might be approached for support, that is, those who describe themselves as neither Kanak nor European, but as New Caledonian, mixed race, undisclosed or other. It might be false encouragement, as the Kanak share of the population continues to decline in the face of immigration. Many of those who identify themselves as ‘mixed race’ are likely to be Wallisians, who make up nearly nine percent of the population and are not allied with the Kanaks. Additional categories would also contain more Europeans (Fisher 2013, pp.109-111, 117). However it might also indicate a possible reservoir of residual support, from individuals and small groups, including younger voters normally more sympathetic towards independence.

The FLNKS and associated bodies face a choice: to continue with the aspiration of a pre-1853 Kanaky, basing their power on cultural and ethnic-nationalist solidarity; or to build on the two-part offering, independence and full sovereignty in association, which might attract many non-Kanaks. The new state might be a Kanaky headed by Kanaks instead of by French Europeans, but in full association with the demanding modern world. Taking such a product to prospective new voters would mean venturing further into the Western system of campaign politicking which so far has been more the preserve of the anti-independentist camp. The *Caldoche* parties also may campaign to get additional support from demographic niches, though the figures suggest that hopes of a mass cross-over of Kanaks voting ‘no’ had no substance.

An important option for change would be to resolve the political deadlock between the Kanak population and the *Caldoches*. The participation of both sides in making an electoral list that excluded ‘newcomers’ implied some form

of common interest or, however reluctantly, mutual recognition. Locally born Europeans make up perhaps 10 percent of total population (Fisher, 2013, p. 31, p. 109). *Caldoche* parties have co-operated with Kanaks in government, but have also taken part in unsuccessful moves to obtain a one sided settlement from a succession of French governments. These have included Laflueur's consorting with Chirac on the 1987 referendum, his moves to head-off a referendum in 1998 (Fisher, 2013, p. 69) and Frogier's bid to prevent referenda in 2020 or 2022. The common ground is further fractured by the long-term memory of colonial exploitation such as the *code de l'indigenat*.

Resident Europeans are able to provide business and professional experience and knowledge of modern statecraft or law essential to maintaining the islands' economy – although those could be expatriates rather than permanently ensconced *Caldoches*. A Kanak response is that this is part of a level exchange, as expressed by Andre Qaeze Ihnim, speaking for the FLNKS: 'We have provided the country, the land. French people have brought technology and expertise, and we must cooperate' (Duffield, 2018). The practice of French law that endorses customary rights of Kanaks to land should help arguments that ownership inheres in original occupation of the islands (Berginaud in Duffield, 2018).

The Kanak movement interprets the Accords process as a preparation for independence. It is concerned that continuing with the status quo could bring lasting alienation of a large proportion of the populace. Andre Qaeze Ihnim presents the overall Kanak position as being adamant on achieving independence and refusing to concede the country or become 'extinct'. (Chappell, 2003, p. 122). With sporadic disturbances even after the electoral calm of 2018 (Duffield, 2018d), there is a drive to prevent a revival of violence:

We talk to our young people. Some people say we want the French to go home, and we ask them, if you would do it like that, then what would you do? They are not angry for nothing, they may give expression to anger in their hearts and are always asked what would they do otherwise. (Duffield, 2018c)

He avers that *indépendentists* have demonstrated a will to achieve their objectives through productive dialogue:

We have been following the route laid out when our leaders signed the documents in 1988, as a kind of guideline to go on to sovereignty and independence. We recognised the differences between ideology and reality, and have spent 30 years getting experience in managing the country—and showing that now we are ready. That is our understanding of what our leaders signed on to. We would want to manage through consultation and a kind of negotiation, and would say (to the French), if you want to stay in the country, for it to be managed like this, then come and stay ... We

are not against them. We just ask that now we can ... share and manage it together (Duffield, 2018).

That resolution on finding future accord is echoed on all sides, including French President Emmanuel Macron who said: 'The only way to go now is through dialogue.' (Duffield, 2018d). There have been ameliorating gestures like the support from Frogier for flying the two flags together; or from the anti-independence, former President of New Caledonia Philippe *Gomès*, who said: 'When there was no dialogue there was violence; when there was dialogue it enabled keeping the peace (Duffield, 2018c).'

The prospectus bodes for a certain reversal of status common in the history of decolonisation generally. *Caldoche* interests would benefit from and might always feel the need for full legitimacy in the country if wanting to continue there and in positions of leadership. The Kanak population has an indelible status of original ownership, deep and continuous cultural tradition in place, their ancient *chefferies* marking out the land, and the fact of never having surrendered sovereignty. Settlers, unless hailing from some privileged lineage in France, might base a claim on forebears arriving in the 19th century, not always something to be proud of in the present era. Noting the adage of sociology that a status is achieved when the aspirant is accepted by holders of that elusive status, it is ultimately for Kanaks to finally make *Calédoniennes* of the *Caldoches*. It is theirs to confer, perhaps by far their strongest hand in coming encounters.

New Caledonia has almost arrived at the *lendemain*, the day after the final vote. The November 2018 referendum demonstrated the existence of a relatively even divide within the society, and another referendum is to be scheduled under law for two years' time. The situation on the ground is characterised by the existence of the two main communities, Kanak and French, in an uneasy intentional harmony, but there are also indications of the possibility of an as-yet uncharted multi-culturalism.

Other facts to consider include the high stakes element of the rich economy based on nickel and prospective additional resources under the sea; immigration, especially when linked to the nickel industry which has been weakening the position of the indigenous Kanaks; and the traditional strategic interest of the French state in maintaining its foothold in the South Pacific. That interest contradicts, complicates, and renders suspect the role of France as a broker in the independence debate. History has found New Caledonia's future being determined by alternating left-wing and right-wing French governments, the former interested in organising pathways to independence, the latter often trying to stop the process. Relationships among all these interests continue unresolved, but the peaceful interregnum since the Matignon Accord was signed in 1988, and the will for dialogue, are a positive omen for the future.

Notes

1. A break-down of community numbers in the New Caledonia population drawing on census figures is given in Fisher, 2013, p. 107
2. Influential families including Ballande, Barrau, Bernheim, Higginson, Marchand, Lafleur, Pentecost (Fisher, 2013, p. 29)

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