

## SPECIAL REPORT

# Independence for Kanaky

## A media and political stalemate or a 'three strikes' Frexit challenge?

**Abstract:** The French-ruled territory of New Caledonia, or Kanaky, as Indigenous pro-independence campaigners call their cigar-shaped islands, voted on their political future on 4 November 2018 amid controversy and tension. This was an historic vote on independence in a 'three-strikes' scenario in the territory ruled by France since 1853, originally as a penal colony for convicts and political dissidents. In the end, the vote was remarkably close, reflecting the success of the pro-independence Kanak and Socialist National Liberation Front (FLNKS) in mobilising voters, particularly the youth. The referendum choice was simple and stark. Voters simply had to respond 'yes' or 'no' to the question: 'Do you want New Caledonia to attain full sovereignty and become independent?' In spite of prophecies of an overwhelming negative vote, the 'no' response slipped to a 56.4 percent vote while the 'yes' vote wrested a credible 43.6 percent share with a record turnout of almost 81 percent. New Caledonia is expected to face two further votes on the independence question in 2020 and 2022. The author of this article reported as a journalist on an uprising against French rule in the 1980s, known by the euphemism '*les Évènements*' ('*the Events*'). He returned there three decades later as an academic to bear witness to the vote and examine the role of digital media and youth. This article reflects on his impressions of the result, democracy and the future.

**Keywords:** decolonisation, history, media freedom, New Caledonia, Pacific journalism, Pacific media, referendum, reflections, South Pacific studies

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### Introduction: Painful memories

**A** PHOTOGRAPHER little known outside her native New Caledonia died on 16 February 2019 and her passing barely raised a ripple across the Pacific. She was 75. Yet Louise Takamatsu was a heroine. She took one of the most iconic political photos of the 20th century decolonisation struggles in the South Pacific. On 18 November 1984, Takamatsu, then a 34-year-old secretary working in the Maire (town hall) of Canala and a stringer for the

DAVID ROBIE



Figure 1: Referendum posters outside the Hotel de Ville, Nouméa, in November 2018.

French territory’s only daily newspaper, *Les Nouvelles Calédoniennes*, scored a scoop. On her trusty Canon, she captured an extraordinary image of Kanak pro-independence leader Éloi Machoro splitting a ballot box in half with an axe in the township on the East Coast of La Grand Terre island in protest against French territorial elections widely regarded as a sham by the indigenous Kanak people. This photo and others of Machoro supporters burning ballot papers in the opening salvo of an ‘active boycott’ of the elections were published around the world (Louise Takamatsu, 2019; Robie, 1988, 1989a).

I was in New Caledonia at the time bearing witness and although I missed the actual moment of the axing of the urn, I took photos of Machoro and his axe shortly before and also of the burning of the ballot papers. These photos of protest became symbolic around the world for the Kanak claim to self-determination and sovereignty along with my own pictures of the ballot box embers featuring on the cover of the regional *Islands Business* news magazine (Robie, 1984, 1989a, p. 117).

The following month, on 5 December 1984, 10 unarmed Kanak activists were brutally murdered by mixed-race settlers in an ambush as they drove home through the forest from



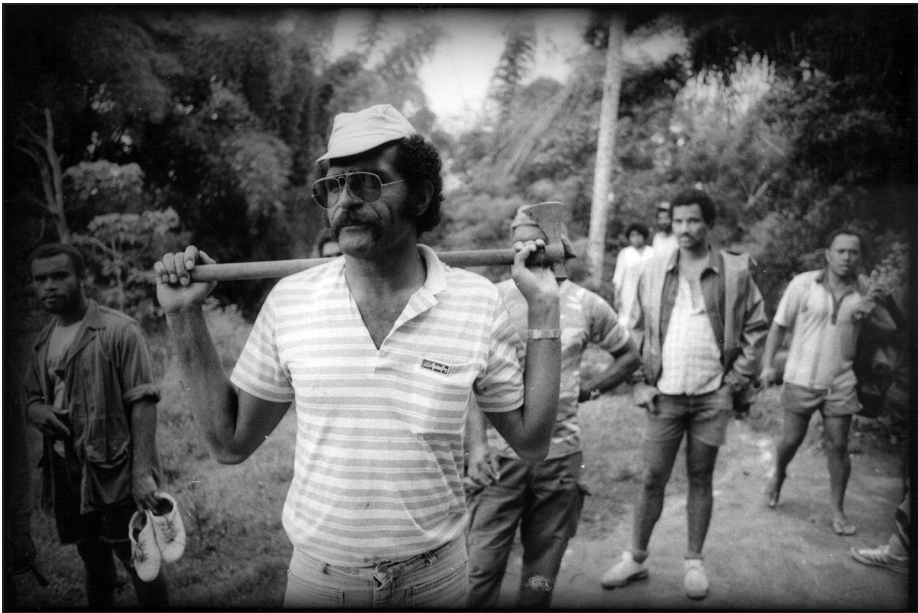
LES CALÉDONIENNES NOUVELLES/ARCHIVE

Figure 2: The iconic image of Éloi Machoro axing the ballot box at Canala, New Caledonia, 18 November 1984.

Hienghène to the village of Tiendanite. I was present at the village funeral three days later, one of the most harrowing moments of my life (Robie, 1989b). The victims, most of the village's menfolk, were buried in a single line with their 'caskets draped in blood-red, blue and green bands and [the] golden orb of the Kanaky flag, and frangipani and hibiscus blooms' (1989b, p. 110). Their justice was denied—a clan of six *métis* was arrested, charged with murder and then freed after the charges were dropped two years later on spurious 'self-defence' grounds (Chanter, 1998, p. 15; Maume, 2018a).

Ten graves in Tiendanite's cemetery today remind the villagers of the night a massacre cut down most of their menfolk—and their denial of justice. At Wan'yaat ... the ambushed trucks are mounted in concrete as a memorial to their sacrifice. Among the billowing strips of traditional cloth tied to the rusting vehicles is a simple, marble slab inscribed with the epitaph:

*Give your blood. Gve your life. For the beloved land.  
Your brothers. Your widows. Your young children weep.  
In a supreme gesture, you were offered in a holocaust  
And cried liberty.  
You have gone. Keep in your memory  
That the conquest of Kanaky.  
Is written in letters of blood forever* (cited in Robie, 1989b, p. 115)



DAVID ROBIE

**Figure 3: Kanak 'security' Éloi Machoro leader during the 1984 election active boycott. His action with the axe in splitting open a ballot box at Canala led to a series of events culminating in his assassination by French security forces in 1985.**

Machoro was assassinated by members of the French police tactical unit, *Le Groupe d'intervention del la Gendarmerie Nationale* (GIGN) security forces on 12 January 1985.

Later that year, I was on board the *Rainbow Warrior* for more than 10 weeks on a humanitarian voyage to the Marshall Islands to help Rongelap islanders suffering from the legacy of US nuclear testing. The ship was bombed by French secret agents on 10 July 1985, killing Portuguese-Dutch photojournalist Fernando Pereira (Robie, 1986). Back in New Caledonia, clashes and tension worsened over the next three years. On 22 April 1988, a group of young Kanak militants led by student activist Alphonse Dianou nervously killed four *gendarmes* while taking 27 others hostage on the Loyalty island of Ouvéa.

A cave siege followed at Gossanah with security forces storming the hideout on 5 May 1988 and killing all the hostage-takers in what is known as the Ouvéa massacre (Robie, 1989a, p. 277; Uechtritz, 2018). The political brinkmanship and cynical exploitation of the standoff by the presidential candidates, the incumbent François Mitterrand and challenger Jacques Chirac, is told chillingly in the 2011 feature film, *L'ordre et la morale* (titled *Rebellion* for the English language version), a docudrama by Mathieu Kassovitz. The peace negotiations after the Ouvéa tragedy led to the Matignon Accord signed by anti-independence leader Jacques Lafleur and *Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste* (FLNKS) president Jean-Marie Tjibaou in the initial framework that led to the historic independence referendum in New Caledonia on 4 November 2018. However, cultural philosopher and visionary Tjibaou and his deputy Yeiwéne Yeiwéne were in turn assassinated by Djubelly Wea in a further tragedy a year later on 4 May 1989. I had shared a hotel room with the assassin at a conference in Manila, Philippines, just a five months earlier when both of us participated in the 1988-9 International Peace Brigade following the ousting of dictator Ferdinand Marcos (Leadbeater, 2009; Peace Brigades International, n.d.).

Returning to New Caledonia for this historic vote nearly three decades later, my earlier experiences—outlined in two of my books *Blood On Their Banner* (Robie, 1989a) and *Don't Spoil My Beautiful Face: Media,*

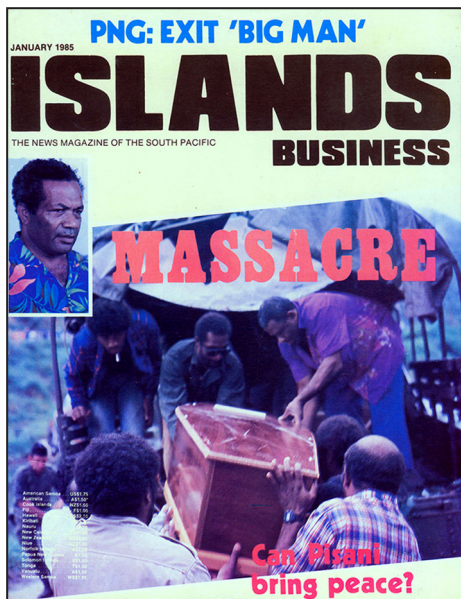


Figure 4: The January 1985 cover of *Islands Business* magazine (Fiji) after the Hienghène massacre.

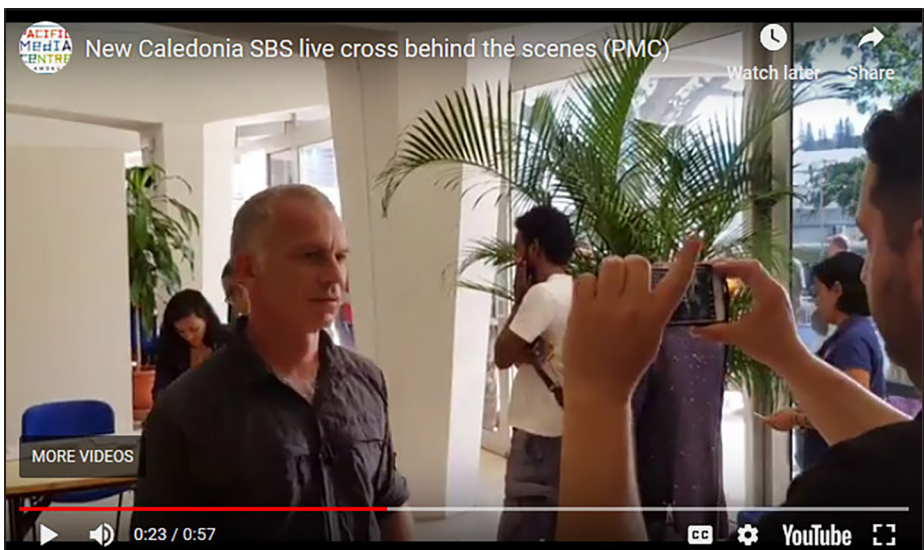


*Mayhem and Human Rights in the Pacific* (Robie, 2014)—gave me slight feelings of unease. There had been three decades of relative peace and social justice had definitely improved during that time—even if nowhere enough for the Indigenous Kanak people—and there had been significant progress in terms of self-government and economic development. However, what would happen if this vote on 4 November 2018 proved negative and the growing aspirations of the Kanaks for a new nation of Kanaky New Caledonia were again denied? It appeared impossible for independence to triumph given the demographic realities and policies from Paris designed to strengthen local autonomy, but weaken aspirations for independence. Rioting and barricades on the main road near the tribal area of St Louis on the outskirts of Nouméa the day after the referendum reinforced fears of what frustrated youth might do had it spiralled out of control (Robie, 2018). (See the page 90 panel on history).

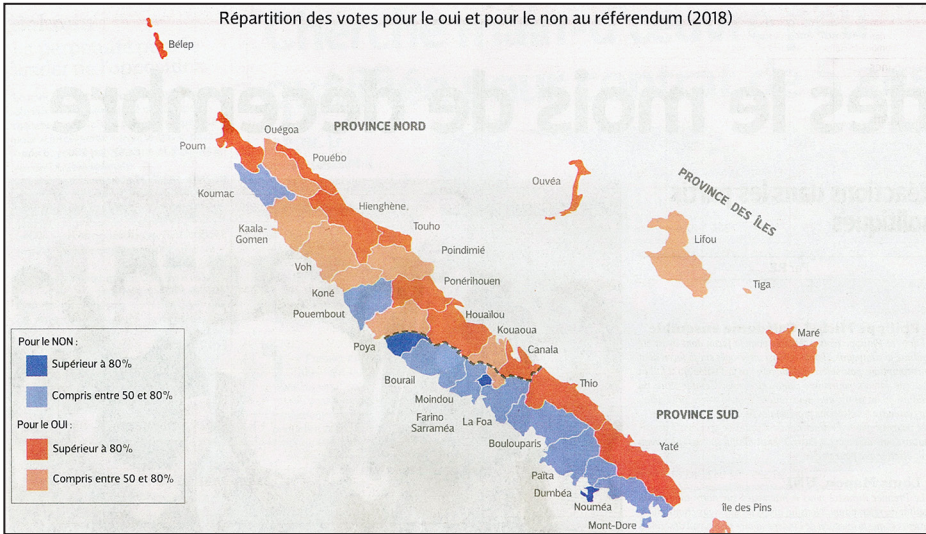
While some local journalists on the ground were cautious, predicting that the referendum was hard to call with probably a 50/50 or 60/40 outcome, some anti-independence leaders had been brazenly declaring the election a done deal



**Figure 5: The special identity card for voters registered for the referendum.**



**Figure 6: SBS Pacific reporter Stefan Armbruster (left) and SBS French executive producer Christophe Mallet preparing a live news feed from the Nouméa's Hotel de Ville.** Source: Freeze frame from Café Pacific video



**Figure 7: How they voted: Map showing the results and the breakdown of ‘oui’ (shades of red) and ‘non’ (blue) votes in the 35 communes of New Caledonia.**  
 Source: Official French High Commission results, 4 November 2018

with a crushing 70/30 outcome against independence likely (Duffield, 2018; Kanaks have already lost, 2018; Lyons, 2018; Maclellan, 2018; New Caledonia referendum; Zweifel, 2018). The conservative politicians ended up seriously embarrassed. The pro-independence FLNKS did a superb job in mobilising their supporters, especially the young (New Caledonia rejects, 2018). Final results confounded the pundits. The ‘non’ vote slipped to a 56.4 percent while the ‘oui’ vote wrested a credible 43.6 percent share of the vote with a record 80.6 percent turnout.

A closer analysis of the figures produced some interesting statistics. The cleavage of the territory into the ‘white’ Southern” province and Nouméa, and the ‘brown’ Northern and Loyalty Islands provinces remained, but the stark divisions of the past appeared to be blurring in some places, reflecting an emerging common ground across ethnic divides. The white Southern Province with the bulk of the European population and the core of the territory’s wealth, polled a 73.7 percent no vote with a 26.29 percent yes vote, revealing signs of a growing pro-independence movement.

In contrast, in the Northern Province where the FLNKS-ruled local government has consolidated its position, there was a 75.83 percent yes vote and 24.17 percent against. In the Loyalty Islands, the vote was 82.18 percent yes and 17.82 percent no.

In Canala, where Machoro smashed open the ballot box, the vote was 94.27 percent yes and in Hienghène, where the Tjibaou massacre happened (the leader lost two of his own brothers in that Tiendanite ambush), the yes vote was marginally higher at 94.75 percent. However, the highest yes vote was in the Belep



DAVID ROBIE

**Figure 8: Kanak voters in the ‘white’ stronghold of Nouméa vote at the Hôtel de Ville—the city hall—polling centre.**

islands off the northern tip of Grande Terre Island. With barely 920 eligible voters, there was almost a 95 percent yes vote.

### **‘Liberty, equality and fraternity for all’**

French President Emmanuel Macron welcomed the vote by New Caledonians to remain French, pledging that the republic would ensure ‘liberty, equality and fraternity’ for all. ‘The only loser is the temptation of contempt, division, violence and fear; the only winner is the process of peace and the spirit of dialogue,’ Macron said in a state television address from Paris (Macron hails, 2018).

French Prime Minister Édouard Philippe flew to Nouméa from Vietnam on November 5, the morning after the vote, for a day of meetings with political leaders, customary chiefs and voting commission officials to take stock of the referendum. After meeting a range of leaders during the day and flying to Koné to meet President Paul Néaoutyine of the Northern province, a pro-independence stronghold, Philippe made a televised address from Première (the local affiliate of France TV) to the territory that night. Praising the people of New Caledonia for the peaceful conduct of the referendum, he called for a ‘meeting of the signatories’ in December to consider the next step. Prime Minister Philippe indicated that a fresh approach was now needed with a greater emphasis on social and economic development than political structures and to address ‘inequalities’. The Prime Minister had lunch with students at the University of New Caledonia. Following his TV address and an evening ‘pool’ interview with media, he flew back to Paris later that night.

‘Édouard Philippe was here to listen to us,’ said FLNKS president Roch Wamytan. ‘Despite the opposition crowing that they were going to dominate



DAVID ROBIE



**Figure 9: SBS French executive producer Christophe Mallet (left) and Pacific reporter Stefan Armbruster interview voters at Nouméa's Hôtel de Ville.**

Source: Freeze frame from Café Pacific video.

70/30, we have spoken of dialogue and negotiation.' Anti-independence *Rassemblement* leader Pierre Frogier said the referendum result 'anchors New Caledonia in France' and there was no need for further votes.

On referendum day, I travelled around with the SBS television crew from Australia, Pacific affairs reporter Stefan Armbruster and executive producer Christophe Mallet of SBS French radio. I was keen to get a sense of the reportage and I have the utmost respect for Armbruster's reporting, particularly from a 'diversity' perspective. They endeavoured to get a 'balanced' view of the voting mood by starting off at Nouméa's Hotel de Ville in the heartland of 'white' New Caledonia. They interviewed the first voter and also spoke to a range of people casting their votes with different stories to tell. I was also impressed with their live crosses for both television and radio absorbing a sense of atmosphere and colour. Leaving the town hall, we visited a new



DAVID ROBIE

**Figure 10: A Kanak voter wearing a 'Kanak New Caledonia' flag tee shirt at the Loyalty Islands special polling booth in Vallee du Tir, Nouméa.**



‘decentralised’ polling station for the Loyalty Island voters with a remarkably long queue for Lifou voters.

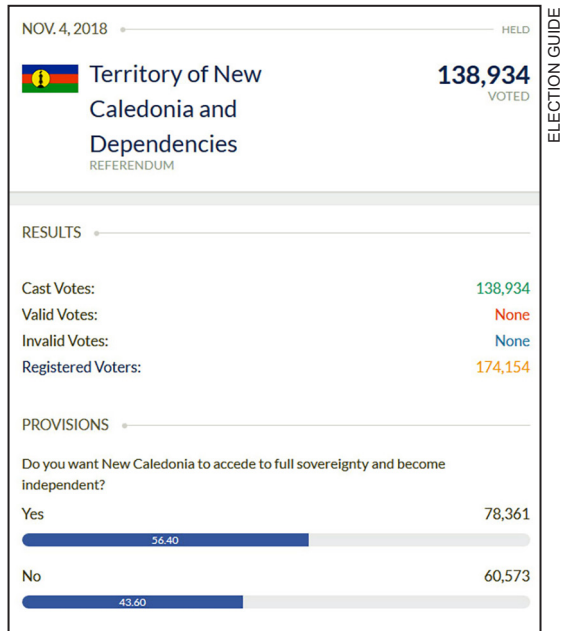
### Referendum law change

A law change was required in France in March 2018 to enable the Nouméa-based islanders to vote without having to pay expensive airfares to get to their home islands (Electoral law change approved, 2018). ‘This is an incredible privilege for us to be here [for the referendum],’ said French-born Mallet, who has lived in Australia for 16 years. One voter, Boris Ajapuhnya, told Mallet in an SBS French interview this was their ‘golden chance’, for the Kanak people to express their wish in an historic vote. He added: ‘The moment is right now.’

While the *indépendantistes* might have lost this vote, they did much better than expected. With up to two more referenda to come in 2020 and 2022, they are in a healthy negotiating position with an encouraging prospect of winning independence in the end, a ‘three strikes’ chance of achieving their ‘Frexit’.

The three anti-independence parties, *Les Republicains* led by Sonia Backès, regarded by many as New Caledonia’s version of Marine le Pen; *Rassemblement*; and *Caledonie Ensemble*; insist that the people have spoken and there is now no need for any further referendum. They were shocked that the *indépendantistes* did so well given that they had already written off the ‘declining’ demand for independence and were confidently predicting a crushing 70/30 vote against independence (Zweifel, 2018).

In the end, the vote was remarkably close, reflecting the success of the FLNKS in reaching out to the youth. The smaller *Parti travailliste* (PT), with a radical pro-independence platform, chose a strategy of non-active participation given the flawed nature of the ballot—it declined to call the action a ‘boycott’ (New Caledonia Labour Party opts out, 2018). The party is backed by the *Union syndicale des travailleurs kanaks et des exploités* (USTKE) trade union. The referendum choice was simple and stark. The 174,154 registered voters simply



**Figure 11: The final result of the November 4, 2018, referendum on independence in New Caledonia. Source: [www.electionguide.org](http://www.electionguide.org)**

## New Caledonia's timeline of injustice to independence?

**1774:** James Cook “discovers” Grande Terre Island for Europe and renames it New Caledonia because the landscapes remind him of Scotland.

**1853:** Admiral Febvrier-Despointes plants the French tricolour at Balade on the east coast of Grande Terre and takes possession of the island for Emperor Napoleon III to establish a penal colony.

**1864:** France despatches some 21,630 prisoners between 1864 and 1897. The convicts include 4250 ‘communard’ revolutionaries from Paris.



**Figure 12: An engraving of Grand Chief Ataï published in French magazine, *Le Voleur*, on 4 October 1878.**

**1874:** Exploitation of the nickel reserves begins after being discovered by engineer Jules Garnier a decade earlier.

**1878:** Grand Chief Ataï leads the first Kanak rebellion against colonisation, with a death toll of about 1200 Kanaks and 200 Europeans. Chief Ataï is beheaded and his skull is sent to the Anthropology Society in Paris for further study.

**1917:** When the First World War breaks out in Europe, the colonial administration tries to pressure Kanaks into enlisting (they are not yet full citizens of the republic). Following another revolt, three Kanak leaders are guillotined.

**1931:** Authorities take 111 Kanaks to a colonial exhibition in Paris as “authentic cannibals”. The same year the penal colony is finally closed.

**1946:** The Kanaks, deprived of rights under the *Code Indigénat* since 1887, which makes all French-governed indigenous peoples second class citizens, gain full citizenship.

**1984:** The FLNKS (*Front de libération nationale kanak et socialiste*) is created and organises a Kanak boycott of the territorial elections. The islands are on the edge of insurrection. On December 5, near Hienghène, 10 unarmed Kanak activists are assassinated in an ambush by mixed-race *Caldoche* (settlers).

**1987:** On September 13, the people of New Caledonia vote in a referendum on independence that is boycotted by the FLNKS and other pro-independence groups. The vote against independence is 98.3 percent with just 1.7 percent voting yes.

**1988:** On Ouvéa Island, four gendarmes are killed by FLNKS militants during the kidnap of a local police garrison. On May 5, French security forces storm the Gossanah cave where 27 gendarmes are being held hostage. Nineteen Kanaks and two soldiers are killed. On June 26, the Matignon Accord is signed by Jean-Marie Tjibaou, president of the FLNKS; Jacques Lafleur, leader of the anti-independence *Rassemblement pour la Calédonie dans la République* (RPCR); and Prime Minister Michel Rocard. The accord envisages self-determination in 10 years.

**1989:** On May 4, Jean-Marie Tjibaou and Yeiwéne Yeiwéne, his FLNKS deputy, are assassinated on Ouvéa by Djubelly Wéa, a Kanak indépendantiste opposed to the Matignon Accord.

**1998:** The Nouméa Accord is signed by French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, Jacques Lafleur and Roch Wamytan, the new president of the FLNKS. This accord envisages progressive 'emancipation' for New Caledonia. A referendum shows 72 percent in favour of the accord.

**2004:** Bitterly divided for 15 years, the Tjibaou, Yeiwéne and Wéa families meet at the Tjibaou *tribu* village of Tiendanite for a custom 'forgiveness' ceremony.

**2010:** Prime Minister François Fillon makes official the flying of both the French and Kanak flags on official buildings and at events. Jacques Lafleur dies on December 4.

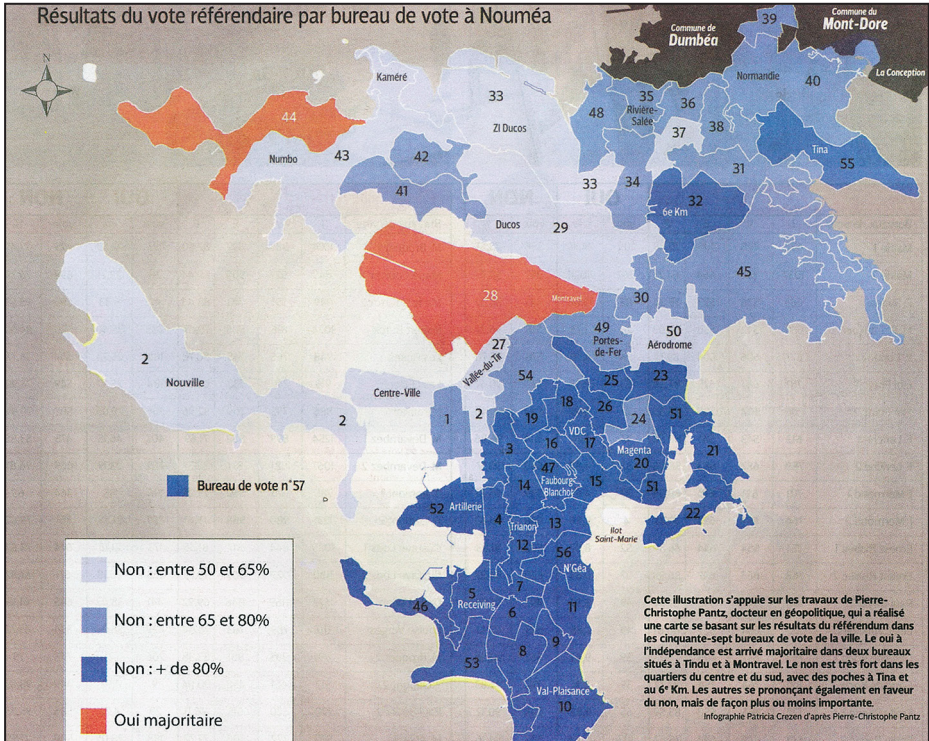
**2014:** The Museum of Natural History in Paris returns the skull of Chief Ataï to his descendants, 136 years after the death of the revolutionary chief.

**2018:** On November 4, the eligible voters of New Caledonia vote on independence with 56.4 percent rejecting independence and 43.6 percent voting in favour. Up to two further votes on independence are provided for in the Nouméa Accord for 2020 and 2022.

**2020:** And next ...?

(Maume, 2018b)





**Figure 13: The ‘white’ city Nouméa, characterised by the blue zones in the affluent suburbs east and south. The pro-independence zones are mainly in the impoverished housing estates of the west (depicted by orange and parts of the pale blue), such as Magenta.** Source: Official French High Commission results, 4 November 2018.

had to respond yes or no to the question: ‘Do you want New Caledonia to attain full sovereignty and become independent?’

The encouraging 2018 yes vote is even more remarkable when taking into account the demographic gerrymandering by the French government that ensured the indigenous Kanaks would remain a minority in their homeland and even in this vote. New Caledonia has been ruled by France since 1853 when it declared the island territory a penal colony. More than 22,000 convicts were shipped to New Caledonia in the 19th and early 20th centuries,



DAVID ROBIE

**Figure 14: Pro-independence Radio Djiido’s editor-in-chief Romain Hmeun takes the pulse of the voting mood at Nouméa’s Hôtel de Ville.**

including Muslim rebels fighting against colonisation in Algeria, and dissidents from the 1870 Paris commune. Later migrants included Japanese, Javanese and Tonkinese (North Vietnamese) labourers working the nickel mines.

In the previous independence vote in 1987, boycotted by the FLNKS and other pro-independence groups faced with an unfavourable franchise, *indépendantistes* argued that only the indigenous people should vote on the territory's independence. The vote against independence was 98.3 percent while just 1.7 percent voted yes. However, the turnout was only 59 percent (1987 New Caledonian independence referendum, n.d.).

Of the 174,154 registered referendum voters in the 2018 referendum (voters could register right up until polling day), 80,120 were Kanak and 94,034 on the common civil role were also entitled to vote. A total of 141,099 people cast a vote. Forty percent of the New Caledonian population are Melanesian Kanaks, 29 percent European, and 9 percent are Polynesians from Wallis and Futuna Islands. The rest are a mixture of Asian and Pacific communities, such as Tahitian.

Controversy surrounded the policy preventing so-called *Zoreilles*, recent arrivals from metropolitan France or other French territories, from participating in the vote, whereas New Caledonian-born *Caldoche* were allowed. However, the pro-independence groups maintained that only indigenous people should be allowed to vote. The referendum voters were restricted under the Nouméa accord to those eligible under the following criteria (Référendum de 2018, n.d.):

1. Registration on the special electoral roll for the 1998 New Caledonian Nouméa Accord referendum (or fulfilled its requirements but not registered) (Nouméa Accord, n.d.)
2. Born in New Caledonia and registered in the special electoral list for the provinces (LESP)
3. Residence in New Caledonia for a continuous period of 20 years
4. Born before 1 January 1989 and lived in New Caledonia from 1988 to 1998
5. Born after 1 January 1989 with a parent who was on the special electoral roll for the 1998 Nouméa Accord referendum (or who fulfilled its requirements but was not registered)
6. Born in New Caledonia with three years' continuous residence (prior to 31 August 2018).

The encouraging mobilisation of youth voters, a significant change since the



**Figure 15: Pro-independence FLNKS president Roch Wamytan: 'The struggle isn't over until we are decolonised.'**

2014 provincial elections, and the emergence of a growing cadre of young multi-ethnic voters who are more open to a shared future than some of their conservative parents augurs well for the *indépendantistes*. ‘This referendum was a victory for the youth. The loyalists’ predictions were thwarted,’ said FLNKS president Roch Wamytan, adding:

This vote was a big leap forward. We will continue on our pathway, we will prepare the people in New Caledonia for independence. The struggle isn’t over until we are decolonised. One winner in the vote was fear. Over the past six months, we have tried to allay fears about retirement provisions, security and education. We clearly didn’t do enough. We will work harder on this for the next ballot. (Cited by Robie, 2018d)

FLNKS official Alosio Sako said: ‘We’re a short step from victory, and there are still two more ballots to come.’

### Independence inevitable

Some who voted against independence are resigned to the belief that one day New Caledonia will become independent anyway. On my flight back to Auckland, a conversation with Sammy, a Lebanese-born New Caledonian with a French passport, and his *Caldoche* wife, who were heading to Hanmer Springs for a holiday in ‘très jolie’ New Zealand, gave me some interesting insights. Ironically, Sammy migrated to New Caledonia after “*les évènements*” in the 1980s to escape the civil war in Lebanon. He said:

Independence is inevitable. I only wish they would get on with it and not have votes, delaying things. Build for the future instead of yet another vote. In spite of the vote against independence, it is the way it is going. One day New Caledonia will be independent so it is best to restart our future now. We have a chance to build something really new.

“The *indépendantistes* are very determined. (Interview with Robie, 2018d)

He seemed to be reflecting the view of Prime Minister Édouard Philippe, who hinted at some



Figure 16: Independent Caledonia TV ... making waves and telling the stories of all ethnicities.



key policy changes to deal with social conditions and ‘balancing’ the economic cleavage in the nickel-rich and tourism booming territory. France subsidises the territory budget by €1.3 billion (NZ\$5.1 billion) a year.

What made Sammy choose New Caledonia? It is so far away from Lebanon—‘it was just like Syria is today’—and he had read an article about New Caledonia in the French magazine *Geo*. In fact, *Geo* had just published a cover story in October 2018 about New Caledonia headed ‘New Caledonia: So near, so far’, a 43-page spread dedicated to the beauty, culture, environment and flora and fauna of this ‘marvellous archipelago’. It would entice anyone.

The magazine quoted linguist and poet Emmanuel Tjibaou, one of six sons of the assassinated Kanak leader Jean-Marie Tjibaou, who has been director since 2012 of the impressive Tjibaou Centre, a cultural memorial to his father.

‘Being “Kanak”, or a “man”, isn’t a question of skin colour,’ he said. ‘The centre introduces Melanesian culture to Western eyes that are not accustomed to it. Kanak traditions are oral, like elsewhere in Oceania. We live our culture—we discover it through singing, or dancing; we speak, or we weep.’

Another example of an emerging ‘new wave’ institution is a small startup digital television channel based at Koné. Funded largely by the Kanak-governed Northern province, it is an inspirational initiative compared with the dominant Premiere television, which is part of the state-run network with six channels that look to Paris, and *Les Nouvelles Calédoniennes*, which has been very hostile to independence in the past. However, the newspaper is less virulent these days.

### **Caledonia TV making mark**

Caledonia TV is already making its mark as an independent channel that is ‘telling our own stories’ about Kanak culture, music and traditions and exploring all ethnicities in New Caledonia. It played an important role in the referendum by setting up TV studios in the University of New Caledonia and providing balanced coverage and ready access for grassroots people to engage in a dialogue about their future.



DAVID ROBIE

**Figure 17: Caledonia TV reporter Duke Menango: telling stories with a difference.**

I interviewed one of the journalists involved in referendum coverage in the campus studios, Duke Menango, who had completed part of his early training as a journalist at Aoraki Polytechnic journalism school in Dunedin on a New Zealand aid scholarship. He said:

Caledonia TV started off as a web-based channel in 2012 and then became a fully fledged TV station the following year.

It was important to give people a choice. Previously television was dominated by the state media monopoly with only one direction and one point of view. I don't think we were being well represented as Kanaks and as Kanak reporters.

With us, we are going out to the people—the grassroots, and we are giving them a voice. A voice for the different tribes. And it isn't just the tribes, we are telling the stories of all ethnicities.

We're giving everybody a voice. (Interview with Robie, 2018d)

### **Opposition from mainstream media**

However, Caledonia TV faces a stiff challenge from the 'mainstream' media, which is generally not sympathetic to independence. On the weekend of the referendum, *Les Nouvelles Calédoniennes* devoted a full page to an editorial denouncing independence. 'France or the unknown?' warned editor-in-chief Olivier Poisson, who derided the FLNKS, claiming that it was presenting an unclear, even 'confusing' platform, with contradictory objectives.

In contrast, it's a fact that we know New Caledonia is already independent. For sure, it isn't a question of full sovereignty, but whether the country already decides its economic orientation, imposes its own taxes, leads education, runs health, and is able to enter into international accords and partnerships. (Poisson, 2018)

Finally, his message was: 'It's too risky to take on powers that are too great for so little to gain.' In a separate interview published by a website in English the day before the vote, Poisson warned of a new 'cold war' with China in the Pacific. About his own personal view towards independence, he remarked:

Since I myself have come here only in 2014, I am not allowed to participate in the referendum. If I could, I think I would vote no. The danger is too great than an independent New Caledonia could lose much of its standard of living. And the protection France gives us. (Archy news, 2018).

His message irked many *indépendantistes*, and drew criticism that the newspaper was illegally breaching the political blackout prior to the referendum

'What kind of bullshit is that again?' asked Magalie Tingal Lémé, a former

news editor of the pro-independence Radio Djiido commenting about his editorial. ‘The editor-in-chief is not supposed to make any comments since the official campaign is over since last night. Some journalists should start being real journalists in this country.’ Tingal Lémé was elected to the Northern Province assembly as an FLNKS candidate.

**E**ARLY in 2019, both the pro-independence and the ‘anti’ movements launched their advocacy campaigns and coordinated efforts to prepare for the territorial elections due in May, which both sides see as the next big test of independence. *Indépendantistes* declared that the result of the referendum was a reminder of the obligation of France that it needed to ‘accompany New Caledonia to full independence’. However, when French Overseas Territories Minister Annick Girardin, during a television interview on 7 January 2019, floated the notion of New Caledonia becoming independent ‘in association’ with France, invoking the Cook Islands model with New Zealand, she was greeted with anger by conservative opponents (Girardin comment causes outrage, 2019). In February, three anti-independence parties, including *Rassemblement pour une Calédonie dans la République*, joined forces in a desperate attempt to forge a ‘future with confidence’ campaign against Kanaky (New Caledonia independence parties join forces, 2019).

While Sonia Backès and her new *l’Avenir en Confiance* (Future with Confidence) coalition did indeed shake up New Caledonian politics and cement the hardening divisions during the provincial elections, it was the emergence of a new party, the Wallis and Futunan community-backed *L’Éveil Océanien* (Oceania Awakening), that surprisingly seized the balance of power (Menango, 2019). The three Oceania lawmakers elected to the new territorial Congress gave them considerable negotiating power with 26 pro-independence members and 25 anti-independence members in the 54-seat chamber. Remarkably, the Wallisian party sided with the *indépendantistes* to elect Roch Wamytan as Congress president (Zweifel, 2019). The strategic stakes are, according to analyst Denise Fisher, ‘high for France, as it seeks to oversee fair votes, aware that outcomes in New Caledonia will have knock-on effects on French Polynesia and its other territories’ (Fisher, 2019). France has now joined both Australia and the United States in ‘sharpening rhetoric’ as a counterbalance to China in the Pacific.



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