

# Independence in the Pacific Should be a Positive Process

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**E**ARLY in June, New Caledonia's President, Pierre Frogier, who is also a Member of the French Lower House in Paris, told fellow MPs that 'Pacific island states were falling into anarchy'. Frogier was speaking during debates in the French National Assembly in Paris, where he stressed that New Caledonia was 'lucky to have major natural resources such as nickel, a third of the world's reserves'. He could have well added, New Caledonia was lucky to still have France.

Australia has just sent troops to the Solomons as a last desperate move to prevent a slow and irreversible decline into anarchy. Our English-speaking Pacific neighbours are suffering catastrophic social, economic, infrastructure, educational and governance collapse.

Little talked about, and standing in stark contrast, is the fact that New Caledonia, along with Tahiti, have a first-world standard of living and infrastructure to go with it. The per capita GNP for New Caledonia (\$US 15,000) and French Polynesia (\$US17,000) are in the top 20 in the world; both are higher than New Zealand. Life expectancy in New Caledonia and Tahiti are 73 and 72 years respectively, compared with 54 for New Guinea, 66 for Vanuatu and 65 for the Solomons. Literacy rates are at 91 per cent. And to top it off, all have the same basic rights as French nationals.

Whatever one thinks of this French presence, one thing is certain. Notwithstanding the recent

small Kanak protest against President Chirac on his three-day visit in late July, a very large majority of ethnic Kanaks don't want to end up like their Pacific neighbours.

It is true that in the 1980s New Caledonia was marked by political instability and civil unrest, but all of that has radically changed. In 1988, the Matignon Accords were established between the French Government and the two major political groups, the FLNKS, a coalition of pro-independence Kanak parties, and the 'loyalist' RPCR—made up largely of white Caldoche settlers, metropolitan whites, some Kanaks and minority immigrant groups. A decision on independence was postponed for 10 years.

This led to the framework of the Noumea Accord, signed on 5 May 1998, with a further vote on independence in 2014. Although the balance between separatists and loyalists has always been weighted towards staying with France—only 43 per cent of the population are Kanak—any move towards independence will always involve winning the confidence of the white 'caldoche' settlers and ensuring economic viability.

Nevertheless, the present French policy has specifically enshrined a process that is moving towards independence. There is a deliberate policy of openness towards its neighbours, support for the local Melanesian culture with the building of the huge, multi-million dollar Kanak Cultural Centre—an important focus for cultural exchanges with other Pacific Island countries—and govern-

ment-to-government exchange programmes for training Kanaks, not to speak of huge infrastructure and training budgets.

The Accords also contain an agreement for a process of inclusion of Kanaks in political power-sharing and a redirection of economic resources to Kanak provinces.

Skeptics will doubt French motives. France, unlike Britain, has had a long tradition of holding on to its former colonies. Martinique, Guadeloupe and Reunion are now integral parts of the French Republic, as much as, say, Calvados, or Savoie. But it would be hard to argue that it is for reasons of economic self-interest. All of these overseas departments [DOM], and the overseas Pacific Territories [TOM] represent a net drain on the national purse of around \$A2 billion annually. The fundamental principle on which France's policy rests is that of the will of the local population.

For New Caledonia, however, senior French diplomats see independence as inevitable and desirable. Nobody I have spoken to thinks otherwise. But when one considers the enormous amount of work still to be done by France in New Caledonia, there are important lessons to be learned about the disastrous results of hasty decolonization seen elsewhere.

The strong European presence—37 per cent of the total population—ensures a careful and long-term devolution towards independence, but at a pace that guarantees stability, adequate infrastructure and good

governance. This is precisely why New Caledonia has a distinct advantage over its neighbouring anglophone countries and it underlines just what are the obstacles to successful decolonization.

The Kanak population is very young, with 40 per cent under the age of 20 and a large majority of them dispersed in the bush. It is this group, naturally, that is struggling to improve its educational levels. Nearly a quarter of the European stock has a university education, whereas only 1.6 per cent of the indigenous Melanesians does. As with other Pacific Island peoples, the lack of motivation and opportunity, social and cultural difficulties due to the physical isolation of tribal villages, go a long way to explaining this situation.

Access to education is being addressed through a massive building programme and the establishment of live-in boarding schools. And all this comes with a sophisticated education system and a large number of highly trained metropolitan teachers.

There is also a comprehensive and successful '400 Managers' programme to address the specific deficit of managerial expertise in the indigenous population. The arrival of water, electricity and telephones has improved things enormously in the bush, but this infrastructure also requires skilled technicians to maintain it. Only a fifth of plumbers, electricians and builders are Melanesian, and of the 8,675 construction companies, nearly 80 per cent are in the southern province in and around Noumea, with only 4.9 per cent in the offshore islands.

A little admitted fact is that neither tribal life nor traditional practices are compatible with the economic development activities that sustain independence. To bridge this gap, for instance, each region has a programme that goes out to the villages to provide technical and administrative training

and support for small business. The Chamber of Commerce has developed a similar programme. In all, there are 80 training organizations in the territory, of which 60 are private. The state budget for this work has more than tripled since 1988. In 2002, over \$200 million was set aside. Already, by 1998, 2,365 people had been on courses, including apprenticeships and training in mining, tourism and agriculture.

The problem of transforming a traditional, tribal society to a modern one is difficult and will take much time and effort even within this efficient and functioning

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wealthy state. Special effort has had to be expended to create work where it would otherwise be easy to become discouraged due to lack of experience.

The repeated demands of political separatist groups such as PALIKA and other anti-colonial separatist groups, such as the Pacific Islands Association of Non-Government Organizations (PIANGO) which continue to affirm 'the indigenous Kanak people's right to self-determination and political independence from France', look very pie-in-the-sky, particularly in the context of the social, cultural, economic and political catastrophes surrounding them.

The truth is that, as Roger Sandall observes in his book, *Culture Cult*, [2001] 'the best chance for a good life for indigenes is the same as for you and me: full fluency and literacy in [a world language], as much maths as we can handle, and a job'. This of course is exactly what France's presence is attempting to establish for the Kanaks in New Caledonia. Through its infrastructure and long-term presence, France provides those things necessary for success.

At some stage we might just be honest enough to admit that hasty independence often does not work. The point of comparing the French experience with neighbouring states is that this process is not easy. Even in a society such as New Caledonia, where a large number of the people are European, with good infrastructure and an efficient, first-world democratic governance, it requires a sustained and long-term effort. As Sandall emphasizes, 'Studies show that the contrast between the wealth-producing cultures of Western Europe and the poverty-producing traditional cultures, goes back for centuries.' Critically, he observes, 'the break with communal arrangements was the essential first step forward'. Clearly this is a long and painful process.

The strident rhetoric of separatism and imported images of Bob Marley and black revolutionary heroes used in the eighties have difficulty today convincing anyone that a solution lies down that road.

We should thank France for its sanguine and steady purpose in paving the way for a truly independent, sovereign and successful neighbour.

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