

French–Australian Shared Histories

2018 Symposium

Imagination | Exploration | Memory



New Caledonia: a history shared but often overlooked 'au bout du monde'

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Introduction

In December 2017, the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) released a report on 'New Dimensions in the Australia-France partnership'.¹ The report was prompted by the \$50 billion contract for the construction of Australian submarines awarded to a French defence industry company, and a growing awareness in Australia of a new phase in that strategic relationship with France.

The report argued that to make the most of this new alignment Australia and France needed to gain a deeper understanding of one another, to move beyond the niceties of shared democratic values and shared suffering on the battlefields of two world wars.²

I approach my contribution to 'Imagination, exploration, memory: French–Australian shared histories' from this perspective. I am not a professional researcher, but I have learnt as a diplomat that exploring the past preserved in our archives helps us make sense of the present and be better equipped to shape the future. If Australia and France are to rise to the challenge of the ASPI paper and deepen our relationship in this positive period, this is what we must do.

In Australia, when we think of our shared history with France, we tend to evoke the grand elements: encounters by intrepid explorers, like those Jean Fornasiero has spoken of, and great adventures on foreign battlefields. But we can also learn from more modest memories. Colin Nettelbeck has introduced us to a man who, though little known, was instrumental in building an early trade relationship with France. I will also focus on part of our relationship that is often overlooked – New Caledonia: Australia's immediate neighbour; 'au bout du monde' for the French.

New Caledonia has been part of the shared history of Australia and France since European exploration began in the Pacific. We share history in the parallel experiences of our populations since colonisation and through the evolution of official relations between the governments of Australia and France in New Caledonia. What the archives can tell us about the official relationship is of particular interest.

Official relations began over 75 years ago, when Australia first sent a representative to Noumea. They have seen highs and lows over three-quarters of a century but the collections of the National Archives of Australia and other institutions show they have been consistently shaped by a mutual interest in regional peace and stability. As New Caledonia prepares for a referendum on its future political status in November 2018, Australia and France have the same hopes for a successful outcome from this democratic process; both wish to see a strong and stable New Caledonia that can play a constructive role in the Pacific region.

¹ Peter Jennings, Executive Director, ASPI, and Christophe Lecourtier, French Ambassador to Australia, in Jacinta Carroll and Theodore Ell, eds, *More than submarines: New dimensions in the Australia-France partnership*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute, Dec 2017.

² *Ibid*, pp. 4–6.

As we move to deepen our broader bilateral relationship, it will help us to understand this common interest. Yet New Caledonia does not loom large for most of our policy makers. In both our countries, we have not traditionally asked of the diplomats we send to either Australia or France that they be Pacific experts. Our relationship in New Caledonia has been experienced by a handful of individuals and overlooked by many others. I offer this contribution to help us explore our shared history, so that we may better navigate the future and continue to be constructive partners.

About New Caledonia

So where is New Caledonia? Despite having its own special status in the French constitution and lying less than three hours flight from the east coast of Australia, New Caledonia is not well known by most people in either France or Australia.

New Caledonia is a speck in the south-west Pacific Ocean with a total land area of 18,576 km². It has one fairly substantial (in Pacific terms) main island – which was once part of Gondwanaland that included the land masses of Australia and New Zealand – four smaller inhabited islands and numerous others scattered across a large and very beautiful lagoon. The main island contains around 25 per cent of the world's nickel reserves.

The population of New Caledonia is around 270,000. Its Indigenous people are Melanesian, from a number of different language groups but collectively known as Kanak. Other inhabitants are European, some fifth or sixth-generation New Caledonians and other more recent arrivals: Vietnamese, Polynesians, mainly from Wallis and Futuna, descendants of *pieds noirs* from Algeria and a handful of Arabs.

New Caledonia was named for Scotland by British Lieutenant James Cook in 1774.³ But neither Cook nor French Admiral Bruny d'Entrecasteaux, who passed by in 1793 looking for the missing expedition of La Pérouse, claimed the territory. Not until 1853 was New Caledonia annexed by France.

New Caledonia's political status has evolved over time from colony, to overseas territory, overseas collectivity and now a *sui generis* collectivity with its own special status within the French Republic. Much of this evolution was driven by the demands of the independence movement. These began with the first Kanak revolt in 1878, re-emerged in the 1950s and 1960s and grew in amplitude until violent struggles in the early 1980s led to the signature of the Matignon Accords in 1988.

Through a process of increasing autonomy under the Matignon Accords and then the Noumea Accord, signed in 1998, New Caledonia has gained its own government, governments for each of its three provinces, and responsibility for its own administration in all aspects other than foreign affairs, defence, citizenship, policing and monetary policy. New Caledonians are French citizens, with all accompanying rights and responsibilities but increasingly feel 'New Caledonian' as well.

³ Martyn Lyons, *The Totem and the Tricolour: A Short History of New Caledonia since 1774*, New South Wales University Press, Sydney, 1986.

Historical ties

Europeans in New Caledonia and Australia engaged with one another from the early days of French and British colonisation in the Pacific. Australian Martin Lyons has drawn on material from the *Archives Nationales* for his account of travels between New Caledonia and the British colonies of New South Wales (on the Australian mainland) and Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania) from the late 18th century. Whalers and sandalwood traders, Protestant missionaries tussling with French Catholics to secure religious recruits in the islands and even the occasional escaped convict made the voyage.⁴

As the concept of Australia as a single nation began to emerge, the early relationship with France in New Caledonia was shaped by Franco–British colonial rivalry. When the French administration was installed in New Caledonia in 1853 and a penal colony established, New South Wales was incensed by London's silence on the issue.⁵ The Australian press argued strongly for Australian federation to counter the fearful prospect of 'French Brigands' in the region (although France and Britain were allies in the Crimean war).⁶ But Britain was less concerned, so colonial life went on.

The labour potential of the Kanak population briefly interested Australia from the 1860s until the introduction of the White Australia Policy⁷. More than a thousand Kanaks, mainly from the Loyalty Islands, were taken to work in the Queensland sugarcane fields. Most were subsequently repatriated with some knowledge of English language and culture. But French had quickly become the common language in New Caledonia after annexation. The influence of Protestant missionaries had diminished rapidly and only vestiges of English culture remained: the game of cricket, still popular amongst Loyalty Islands women, and anglicisms such as 'stockman' and 'paddock' born of early agricultural exchange.

For the most of the 19th and early 20th centuries there was little acknowledgement of the shared experiences of these two remote penal settlements; the parallel struggles by convicts and free settlers battling to tame a new landscape far from home, mistrustful and antagonistic towards the Indigenous people. Colonial rivalry persisted and Australia kept a lazy but cautious eye on the French naval presence in New Caledonia.

World War II and the establishment of official relations

Despite alliance and joint sacrifice on the European battlefields during World War I, it took the emerging threat of Japan in the Pacific in the 1930s and doubt that Britain could protect Australia, for Australia to develop more cordial relations with the French in New Caledonia. In 1931, the Australian naval cruiser HMAS *Canberra* made a first official visit to Noumea and other fleet visits followed.⁸

After the fall of France in June 1940, it became crucial to Australia that New Caledonia remain on the side of the allies. A flurry of cables from this time, in the collection of the National Archives of Australia, shows a level of scrutiny of the official disposition in New

⁴ Lyons, *op cit.* p. 8.

⁵ Lyons, *op cit.* p. 41.

⁶ Lyons, *op cit.* p. 42.

⁷ Lyons, *op cit.* p. 10.

⁸ Nicholas Floyd, "1940: Free French *Coup de Force* in Noumea", in *Australie – Nouvelle-Calédonie 70 years of bilateral relations*, Australian Consulate-General, Noumea, 2010, p. 32.

Caledonia not seen before or after.⁹ The New Hebrides (Vanuatu) sided with Free France in July 1940 and although Governor Pélicier in New Caledonia looked to be leaning to Vichy, it seemed the New Caledonian population also wished to rally to de Gaulle. But Australia did not have enough information to be sure. So, in August 1940, Australia's first official representative to New Caledonia, Bertram Ballard, was despatched to Noumea.

This was no small matter. Australia, as a federated nation, was less than 40 years old. Aside from London, where Australia had had a resident diplomatic presence since 1910, it had only two other diplomatic missions in Washington and Ottawa, both established earlier in the same year. Australia had had a trade representative in France, as we have heard from Colin Nettelbeck, but formal diplomatic engagement began with Ballard in Noumea.

Ballard's job was to determine whether New Caledonia was friend or foe and the British and New Zealanders were also waiting for his answer. He lost no time in providing his assessment: the local population favoured rallying to de Gaulle. A cablegram from Australian Prime Minister Menzies to the Australian High Commissioner in London, in the collection of the Service des Archives de la Nouvelle-Calédonie, contains Ballard's conclusion that 'the general aim of (the) popular movement is to remain French but to have temporary autonomy to enable them to participate fully with the British Empire'.¹⁰ Letters from New Caledonian residents, held in the Australian National Archives, confirm a strong desire to support 'the British and de Gaulle'.¹¹

Encouraged by Ballard's reporting, Australia became involved in a plan to transport a pro-de Gaulle official, Resident Commissioner Sautot, from the New Hebrides to New Caledonia and install him as Governor there. Australian warship HMAS *Adelaide* and Norwegian tanker *Norden* arrived in Noumea harbour carrying Sautot on 19 September 1940. As predicted by Ballard, they were met by a local uprising in favour of Free France.¹²

New Caledonia became a crucial base for American, Australian and New Zealand troops transiting on their way to battles further north.¹³ Australian investment helped arm the colony and build Noumea's port and airbases. Free French troops trained in Australia before going on to fight in the Middle East. Further brotherhood in arms was forged. Ceremonies to celebrate ANZAC day (Australia's day of remembrance on 25 April) were first held in New Caledonia during this time and continue to this day.

Britain and France insisted that communication about Australian support to the military in New Caledonia be negotiated through London,¹⁴ but the close working relationships and friendships forged by French and Australian officials in New Caledonia during this time paved the way for future engagement. Australian politicians, including Prime Minister Menzies who visited in 1941, became cognisant of the proximity of New Caledonia to Australia and the importance of a constructive relationship with France.

⁹ NAA: A981, NEW C I PART 3

¹⁰ Floyd, *op. cit.* p.34

¹¹ NAA: A981, NEW C I PART 3 Page 12 of 345

¹² For an evocative account of the tense arrival of the *Adelaide* and the *Norden* in Noumea harbour, with the guns of the town battery and the French naval sloop *Dumont D'Urville* trained upon them, see Floyd, *op. cit.* p. 35.

¹³ Several Australians and many New Zealanders are buried in the Commonwealth War Graves cemetery at Bourail in New Caledonia.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

Drifting apart postwar

This no doubt contributed to Australia's decision, postwar, to waive the debt France had accrued through Australian support to the war effort in New Caledonia. The National Archives of Australia holds cables communicating this decision to Paris and relaying the effusive thanks it received.¹⁵ Australia was concerned to ensure officials in New Caledonia knew of the gesture. During the visit to Australia of the Governor of New Caledonia in November 1949, the Foreign Minister was advised to make a statement advising of the decision and noting Australia's strong appreciation for French sacrifice and suffering during the war.¹⁶

But there is no record of whether this statement was made or how it was received and, after this brief period of warmth and mutual reliance, the gap widened again between New Caledonia and Australia. French overseas interests were focused elsewhere through the 1950s and 60s, in Indochina and North Africa and on the other side of the Pacific once the French nuclear test site was established in French Polynesia in 1962.

A generation of New Caledonians growing up at this time knew Australian manufactured products, such as Arnotts biscuits and Vegemite, but they knew few Australians and Australians knew little about them. The visit in 1953 of the first Australian cruise ship to Noumea, the *Orcades*, was sadly not the start of a fruitful way to build people-to-people relations. Australia's Consul General reported that the passengers were disappointed by the high prices and inefficient service and the passenger superintendent of the Orient Line declared the two-day visit to have been 'too long'.¹⁷

Nickel was more significant in the Australia–New Caledonia relationship. Australia knew that becoming the principal supplier of coal to New Caledonia would be a way to maintain influence. But, hindered by industrial disputes in Australia's postwar coal industry,¹⁸ it could only watch with concern as New Caledonia looked to the United States, under the Marshall Plan, and even India.¹⁹

1970s and 1980s: Re-emerging tensions

Having failed to establish commercial closeness, our ways began to part more significantly in the 1970s. Australia, the colonial administrator of Papua New Guinea since the end of World War I, was preparing that country for independence and keen to prove its credentials as a supporter of Pacific island independence aspirations.

The Kanak independence movement, reshaping and gaining strength in this period, hoped for Australian support. But in the 1970s and early 1980s, Australia was still cautious of any vacuum that could let in Soviet influence. France remained a stable and valuable Western ally in the region. Even a new left-wing Australian Government, elected in 1983, initially

¹⁵ Both the President of the French Council of Ministers and the French Foreign Minister stated, in separate correspondence, that the gesture "touched the hearts of the French people" and sealed the deep friendship which had been forged in the brotherhood of shared sacrifice in war. See NAA: A1838, 324/1/3 Page 14 of 36 and NAA: A1838, 324/1/3 Page 12 of 36

¹⁶ NAA: A1838, 324/1/3 Page 15 of 36

¹⁷ NAA: A1838, 324/1/1 PART 1 Page 7 of 312

¹⁸ R.W.L. King, "Progress in the Australian Coal Mining Industry, 1950-1966", Commonwealth of Australia, Department of National Development, Bureau of Mineral Resources, Geology and Geophysics, Records, 1967/156, p. 3. at https://d28rz98at9flks.cloudfront.net/12101/Rec1967_156.pdf

¹⁹ NAA: A1838, 324/1/2 Page 11 of 157 and NAA: A1838, 324/1/2 Page 16 of 157.

made only cautious statements in favour of self-determination. They declined to support either the Provisional Government of Kanaky or a push by the Front pour la Libération nationale kanak et socialiste (FLNKS) to have New Caledonia re-inscribed on the UN's list of non-self-governing territories.²⁰ Instead, the ruling Australian Labor Party included in its policy platform support for the French Pisani/Fabius plan, which proposed a two-year transition period before 'independence-in-association with France'.²¹

But the Australian public mood was shifting. The Australian Aboriginal land rights movement had heightened popular awareness of Indigenous rights and the public was inclined to sympathy for the independence movement when violence erupted in New Caledonia in 1984. The Australian media sensationalised the events, writing colourfully of a violent struggle on Australia's doorstep.²² News of French Government involvement in the sinking of Greenpeace ship *Rainbow Warrior* in Auckland Harbour in 1985 further hardened the public line.

By 1986, when Jacques Chirac came to the French presidency with a more overtly pro-Overseas France disposition, and began to dismantle elements of the Pisani plan,²³ it was clear there would be trouble in the bilateral relationship.²⁴ Although Australia's strategic interests still favoured France remaining constructively engaged in the Pacific, the Australian Government was under increasing pressure to respond to a domestic audience that saw French actions as anything but constructive.

At the South Pacific Forum meeting in 1986, Australia supported a push by the Melanesian Spearhead Group to put the question of New Caledonia before the UN decolonisation committee. Despite French diplomatic efforts to forestall the motion at the UN,²⁵ the General Assembly voted in its favour in December 1986 and New Caledonia was re-inscribed on the UN list of non-self-governing territories.

Although the move had been led by Melanesian members of the South Pacific Forum, France was quick to blame Australia and New Zealand for the success of the motion. Relations hit a low point. Australian Consul General, John Dauth, was expelled from New Caledonia. No reason was given, but Australia assumed it was retaliation for the UN vote.²⁶ Dauth's 2010 account of the Australian reaction to his expulsion illustrates the mood at the time:

It being early in January and there not being very much other news, it was big news...there was massive media coverage and I had my 15 minutes of fame. Walking in the street in Sydney after I got back to Australia, people I had never met

²⁰ "Kanak leaders says struggle to oust French will go on", *Age*, 21 Nov 1984, p. 9; "South Pacific Forum Communiqué", 29 Aug 1984; "FLNKS fails to get Australian support," *Canberra Times*, 26 June 1985, p. 3; Hugh White, "Noumea digs in on independence", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 Nov 1984, p. 7; Department of Foreign Affairs, *Backgrounder*, 4 Sept 1985, p. 1; *South Pacific Forum Communiqué*, Department of Foreign Affairs press release, 29 Aug 1984.

²¹ ALP, *Platform, Resolution and Rules*, 1986, p. 151.

²² See for example, "Violence in the Pacific," *Age*, 22 Nov 1984, p. 13; John Coomber, "Kanaks fight for autonomy", *Canberra Times*, 17 Nov 1984, p. 6; Denis Warner, "Violence inevitable at our back door", *Melbourne Herald*, 12 Nov 1986, p. 6.

²³ Stephen Henningham, "The Uneasy Peace: New Caledonia's Matignon Accords at Mid-Term", *Pacific Affairs*, 66(4), Winter 1993-94, p. 524.

²⁴ John Dauth, "My expulsion is now little more than a footnote in history", in *Australie – Nouvelle-Calédonie 70 years of bilateral relations*, Australian Consulate-General, Noumea, 2010, p. 40.

²⁵ John Connell, *New Caledonia or Kanaky? The Political History of a French Colony*, Research School of Pacific Studies, ANU, Canberra, 1987, p. 397.

²⁶ Dauth, *op. cit.* p. 41.

came up and clapped me on the shoulder or shook my hand vigorously. Being beaten up by the French seemed to be a positive qualification for many Australians in those days.²⁷

The relationship was far from rosy as Michel Rocard became Prime Minister in France in 1988. Yet even as domestic and regional interests were driving stronger Australian support for self-determination, Australia remained reluctant to make an enemy of France. The government consistently declined to call for France's complete departure from the region and when France took action to restore peace in New Caledonia, Australia was quick to lend enthusiastic support.²⁸

By June 1988, facilitated dialogue between the pro and anti-independence parties had led to the Matignon Accords. These foresaw significant French financial support for Kanak culture and education, an administrative structure under which New Caledonia could assume more autonomy, and a referendum on independence in 1998. Australia declared itself firmly behind the process.²⁹ Foreign Minister Bill Hayden held 'warm and genial' talks with President François Mitterrand in Paris³⁰ and a cordial period of two-way high level visits and enthusiastic rhetoric followed. Foreign Minister Gareth Evans, who took over from Hayden, received a warm welcome in Noumea as part of his first overseas visit.³¹ Bob Hawke, on the first Australian Prime Ministerial visit to New Caledonia since 1941, praised the improved relationship, looked forward to closer ties, and said 'to anyone who might question whether France can play a legitimate and constructive role in the Pacific, I now say: look at its role in the Matignon Accords'.³²

Evans glowingly described the Matignon Accords in a 1991 book as a 'constructive reconciliation' process, responsible for a 'more relaxed atmosphere' in the Australia–France relationship and growing Antarctic, trade, investment and training cooperation.³³ A moratorium on nuclear testing, declared by Mitterrand in 1992, removed residual Australian popular concern about the renewed closeness with France.

By then, France was interested in more significant regional economic integration by its overseas territories. Alain Christnacht, French High Commissioner to New Caledonia from 1991 to 1994, was encouraged to develop relations with neighbouring countries.³⁴ He had cordial and friendly relationships with successive Australian Consuls-General, and visited Australia in 1991 and 1993, when his delegation met the Australian Prime Minister. And Australia's economic engagement with New Caledonia did grow. Discussions on a significant joint venture agreement in the nickel sector began soon after the signature of the

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Sarah Walls, "Kanak ratify Matignon plan", *Sydney Morning Herald* 12 Sept. 1988, p. 13.

²⁹ Greg Fry, *Australia's South Pacific Policy: From 'Strategic Denial' to 'Constructive Commitment'*, Working Paper 8, Research School of Pacific Studies, ANU, Canberra, 1991.

³⁰ "France-Australia relations improve under Mitterrand", *Pacific Report*, 5, 26 May 1985, p. 3; "Paris and Canberra join forces on New Caledonia", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 May 1988, p. 17.

³¹ Lindsay Olney, "Paris set to mend fences with Australia in New Caledonia", *Courier Mail*, 14 Sept. 1988; Roy Eccleston, "Evans triumphs in New Caledonia", *Australian*, 15 Sept. 1988, p. 1; Sarah Walls, "Noumea gives Evans a warm reception", *Age*, 15 Sept. 1988, p. 8.

³² Prime Minister, Mr Bob Hawke, "New Chapter in Relations with New Caledonia: speech to a dinner on July 27 in Noumea", *Monthly Record*, July 1990, p. 437.

³³ Gareth Evans and Bruce Grant, *Australia's Foreign Relations in the World of the 1990s*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1991, pp. 177-8.

³⁴ Alain Christnacht, "The Matignon Accords: the handshake that changed the game", in *Australie – Nouvelle-Calédonie 70 years of bilateral relations*, Australian Consulate-General, Noumea, 2010, p. 49.

Matignon Accords.³⁵ By 1993, trade between Australia and New Caledonia had reached A\$175 million, second only in the Pacific to that with Fiji.³⁶

The resumption of French nuclear testing in the Pacific in September 1995 seemed, at the time, to bring an abrupt halt to this positive engagement. After an initially cautious official Australian response (Evans called the decision ‘deeply disappointing’), the Australian Government responded to popular outrage in Australia by increasing the rhetoric. Prime Minister Keating, well known for eschewing diplomatic niceties, made a rare statement of direct opposition to the French presence in the Pacific:

...the legitimacy of (the French) presence ... is called into question by a scant disregard for the opinions and the interests of ... Pacific Islanders.³⁷

But even in the midst of this explicit official objection, aimed at winning domestic favour during an electoral period, Keating qualified the remark:

...that is not to make a comment about the French Territories. This has always been a matter between the people who live there and France itself.

The thread of mutual interest was still evident and, in hindsight, the tension of 1995 was only a hiccup in the positive trajectory of the relationship. The tests were over by 1996. By 1998 France had signed the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer was strongly endorsing the democratic process that led to the Noumea Accord and France’s constructive role in New Caledonia and the Pacific.³⁸

By the late 1990s, as Graeme Dobell writes in the recent ASPI paper:

France’s ‘constructive role in the Pacific’ had become the Canberra mantra. For the South Pacific, France had rid itself of the habit of blowing things up. Australia’s 20th-century dread of France’s role in the South Pacific has slowly transformed to a 21st-century desire—that France stay and play, and help pay.³⁹

Australia welcomed the prospect under the Noumea Accord of a further 20 years of constructive French engagement as a measured transfer of autonomy to the New Caledonian Government took place.

The contemporary period: mutual recognition of shared interests

Beyond 1988, in the closed period for archival official records, I can no longer draw on historical sources. But I will conclude with some reflections on the past 20 years based on contemporary sources and my own observations.

³⁵ Between Dallhold holdings and Société Le Nickel. See Helen O’Neill and Sarah Walls, “Outbreak of entente cordiale in Noumea”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 Sept. 1988, p. 15.

³⁶ Gordon Bilney, Minister for Development Cooperation and Pacific Island Affairs, *New Caledonian Territorial Delegation Visits Australia*, Media Release, MPA 6, 27 Sept. 1993.

³⁷ Paul Keating as quoted in Lenore Taylor and Cameron Stewart, “Keating questions French credibility”, *Australian*, 14 Sept. 1995, p.1.

³⁸ Alexander Downer, Minister for Foreign Affairs, *New Caledonia: referendum on the Noumea Accord*, Media Release, 9 November 1998

³⁹ Graeme Dobell, “Australia’s long dread of France in the South Pacific”, in Carroll and Ells, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

The relationships between Australia and France in the Pacific and between Australia and the Government of New Caledonia have continued to improve since the signature of the Noumea Accord, mirroring the broader Australia–France bilateral relationship. By 2008, not only had domestic and strategic interests pushed France and Australia into a constructive relationship in New Caledonia but, for the first time, both shared a view on the direction New Caledonia should take. Both supported a democratic process to determine New Caledonia's political future. Both believed that, regardless of the shape that future might take, New Caledonia must become more integrated and active in its geographic region. Australia and France were both active in supporting the full membership of the Pacific Islands Forum, which New Caledonia achieved in 2016. In 2010, French High Commissioner to New Caledonia, Yves Dassonville, led a multi-party New Caledonian delegation to Australia to build direct ties in areas of New Caledonian autonomy. Regular New Caledonian Government visits followed.

French political leaders also began to see first-hand the significance of New Caledonia in the relationship with Australia. Itineraries for their official visits to New Caledonia began to include Australia: for example, Defence Minister Hervé Morin in 2008, Foreign Minister Alain Juppé in 2012, and President François Hollande in November 2014, the first visit to Australia by a President of the French Republic.

As the relationship strengthened, Australia became less timid about voicing its support for France's constructive engagement in the region. This position was not always easy to accept for New Caledonians with a strong, albeit inaccurate, memory of Australian support for independence in the 1980s.

As Australia's Consul-General in Noumea from 2007 to 2011, I would explain what some saw as an implausible change of heart by noting that 20 years is a long time in the life of a young country. Australia in the 1970s had been newly divested of its own colonial administration of Papua New Guinea and anxious to prove its credentials as a supportive partner of the newly independent Pacific Island countries. Two decades later, we had become a 21st-century nation weary of bandaid responses to problems where independence had not lived up to its promise, such as in the Solomon Islands and Bougainville. The shine had also worn off independence for many of the countries of the south-west Pacific. By 2008, after several decades of economic and political struggle, discussion in the Pacific Islands Forum was more often about pooling regional resources for common goals than about shaking off vestiges of colonialism. Even the Melanesian Spearhead Group had little time left for such causes. Australia could see that the nature of regional independence had changed and this influenced our perspective on New Caledonia's future.

France, in a Europe where increasing integration had also changed the nature of 'independence' could share this view. France had given up, for example, monetary control, one of the key elements of the 'independence' sought by the FLNKS in the 1980s. France and Australia could see that greater regional engagement by New Caledonia would help broaden the perspective of its internally-focused political players, from both sides of the debate. It would help them to understand what had changed around them over time.

In retrospect, and with the benefit of the archives, I see there was no change of heart to explain. Australia has consistently favoured the maintenance of stability and peace in the Pacific region, as has France. At times, our perspectives on how best to achieve this have differed but more often than not, and consistently for the past two decades, they have been aligned.

And so, as we move towards the referendum in New Caledonia in November, Australia and France are in a strong position to speak openly about the shared strategic interests that shape our engagement in the Pacific. Together we face the challenge of disaster relief, on which we cooperate with New Zealand through the FRANZ agreement, watch carefully the increasing activity of China in the region just as once we watched Russian activity closely, and hope for an outcome in New Caledonia which ensures peace, stability and prosperity for those who live there, and a strong New Caledonia that can contribute actively to its region.

In the coming years, those charged with building and deepening our broader bilateral relationship will do well to keep this small yet significant part of our shared history in mind and draw on what it tells us about who we are and how we engage.

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