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Conclusion: Future Reflections

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Simon P. J. Batterbury, Séverine Bouard,
Christine Demmer, Denise Fisher, Matthias Kowasch,
Isabelle Leblic, Pierre-Christophe Pantz,
and Eddie Wayuone Wadrawane

Abstract

This multi-authored chapter covers some statements and reflections on the geopolitical but also environmental, societal and economic futures in the aftermath of the third referendum in 2021 on political independence, and after the visit of French President Macron to New Caledonia-Kanaky in July 2023. While for the current French government, the future of the country lies within the French Republic, pro-independence parties see the decolonisation process as unfinished and continue fighting for indepen-

dence from French authority. The political landscape thus remains strongly divided. References to historical events and social and ethnic aspects of voting patterns complete some of the reflections. We also highlight the profound changes which are taking place in rural communities, the future of the nickel sector, and educational reforms.

Keywords

Independence · Nouméa Accord · Decolonisation · Nickel sector · Rural economy · Education

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This short chapter offers reflections by some of the book's authors, in the form of short statements, on the geopolitical but also environmental, societal and economic futures for New Caledonia-Kanaky in the aftermath of the third referendum in 2021 on political independence, which was largely boycotted¹ by pro-independence supporters. The visit of President Macron to the archipelago in July 2023 was an important further development.

Simon P.J. Batterbury This book has revealed how, caught at the intersection of geopolitical and economic interests, New Caledonia-Kanaky's political path has never been smooth. The focus on political negotiations in several chapters should not detract from recognising that they also have significant effects on everyday livelihoods and lifeways. Uncertainty persists and the “future together” or “shared destiny” enshrined in some political discourse is still a long way off. The work of Anaïs Duong-Pedica (2023), for example, shows how “the colonial and racial divide persists in structuring selves and society by corroding relationships to space, land, and people; erasing histories; and regulating life”. This is particularly the case for mixed-race (*métis*) Kanak-White people who traverse boundaries of identity that are imposed

¹Pro-independence leaders avoided the term “boycott” and called for “non-participation”.

and reproduced in political discourse and in everyday life. Troubling a “binary political landscape” will never be easy, in formal politics or at a personal level.

While acknowledging the sensitivity of racial differences and the need for negotiation in what he called a “profound, sincere political exchange”, President Macron’s visit to New Caledonia-Kanaky in July 2023 reaffirmed France’s intention to remain a significant force in the Pacific and across the archipelago, not least because of continuing tensions resulting from Chinese expansionism. His conciliatory visit to the North Province and to Tiouandé and Touho was followed by a speech back in Nouméa where he asserted that “New Caledonia is French because it has chosen to remain French”. To many observers, this statement was inaccurate, given that the third referendum on independence in 2021 was widely boycotted and conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic (Kowasch et al. 2022). It is unfortunate that this “economy with the truth” was not challenged more widely, having passed with barely a ripple of dissent across the Pacific and Australia, a powerful neighbour. Australia has a centre-left labour government, which treads carefully with its renewed support for France after a period of diplomatic tensions, but at the same time, it has developed strong support for Indigenous self-recognition across its Pacific neighbours, appointing the first Australian Ambassador for First Nations People, Justin Mohamed. In addition, Australia saw a major campaign and a national referendum for constitutional amendments to recognise and establish its own Indigenous government assembly, something its Pacific neighbour has had since 1999. Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs Penny Wong visited New Caledonia-Kanaky in April 2023. A year earlier, she said she was “determined to see First Nations perspectives at the heart of Australian foreign policy” (in Wadrawane et al. 2023), but during her visit, she had to remain neutral on the archipelago’s disputed governance arrangements.

During his own visit, President Macron reversed some of his government’s earlier statements. He wishes to replace the Nouméa Accord with a new agreement in 2024, which means amending the French Constitution, to open up electoral rolls to allow more French citizens to vote on island affairs, and his administration supports an increase in military training on Grande Terre. In this speech and in draft documents, he is following a hard line on French interests, and in my view, this is really bad news for independence supporters and for the process of decolonisation. As this book goes to press, we are waiting to see if they will really be implemented “from above” in Paris from 2024 onwards, continuing a tradition of imposed governance that dates back over 170 years.

Séverine Bouard What do environmental, societal and economic futures hold in the aftermath of the third referendum on political independence?

As elections, meetings, referendums and presidential visits (the last in July 2023) come and go, on the ground, the Kanak domestic economy continues to change and evolve. Recent studies show that agricultural activity is holding up rather well in the communities, and the gamble taken by the Kanak leadership in the North Province on the large KNS (Koniambo Nickel SAS) nickel project has increased opportunities for marketing (Sourisseau et al. 2021).

The resilience of the rural economy will enable increasing autonomy, which is helpful given the rising cost of living experienced even in rural communities. However, it is still difficult to know whether the non-market economy will eventually dissolve completely as commodification and urban development advances and whether it will be able to meet the need for food self-sufficiency, particularly in the particularly tense geopolitical context of the Pacific. The spread of salaried employment in the nickel sector and climate change are disturbing semi-subsistence food production as well as traditional cultural practices. Socially, part of the Kanak rural world and the functioning of households is undergoing profound changes with the development of women’s employment, particularly in the mining industry. Households in the villages located close to the mines, as well as those further afield, sometimes supply large numbers of women who now find it very difficult to fulfil the traditional gender roles assigned to Kanak women (Bouard and Demmer 2023). Under these conditions, after several years working in mining, some of the men and women employed choose to return to the domestic economy. But given the pressures to increase nickel output to feed the global demand in recent years, it is unclear whether small-scale family farming can be sustained, given its labour intensity and the attraction of paid employment.

Political independence and decolonisation are central to the economic and social needs of Caledonian and particularly, Kanak society. They will enable the continued evolution and maintenance of territorial heritage (including resilient social and cultural practices, mobility, and non-market exchanges). There are important aspects of culture and heritage that must be part of Kanaky-New Caledonia’s future.

Christine Demmer At a time when a new coalition of anti-independence parties (the “Loyalist Union”) has announced, without reference to the colonised people, that the decolonisation process must be considered completed, the FLNKS (Kanak and Socialist National Liberation Front) has declared that it wants to negotiate with the State. Their part of the independence movement is still requesting full sovereignty. The political path towards “decolonisation within the Republic”, introduced by former Prime Minister Michel Rocard in 1988, never extinguished the struggle for independence. In this small Pacific archipelago, where Kanak as a

group forms the largest percentage of the total population, the idea of a “federal solution” or a “differentiated solution” has been rejected. The State continues to remain deaf to the Kanak desire to create a multicultural nation (with a common civil and customary status), as a partner with France. Accepting this demand would show that the definition of colonisation as a “crime against humanity”, as Emmanuel Macron asserted in Algeria in 2017, was not just his electoral slogan, but a commitment to truly come to terms with the colonial past. How can we move forward to another political solution now, 7 years later, given Kanak’s determination to achieve full political independence?

Denise Fisher The compromise political framework under which New Caledonia has operated peacefully for 30 years has expired, reopening uncertainty about the territory’s future governance and relationship with France. Sadly, the final independence vote guaranteed by that framework was politically nullified by an effective boycott by Indigenous independence supporters, after France declined their request to postpone the vote to enable their cultural grieving practices after the devastating impact of COVID-19. Early discussion between France and loyalist and independence groups is essential. But these groups are more polarised than ever, and talks must necessarily focus on areas of deepest difference. These include whether or not to hold yet another independence referendum, special citizenship rights of employment and voting eligibility for longstanding residents, governance institutions themselves, key powers including foreign affairs and defence, distribution of nickel revenues and genuine engagement of all young people in social, economic and civil life. Talks will inevitably redefine the territory’s relationship with France, with implications for the fragile immediate geographical neighbourhood, and the wider South Pacific region where Western interests, including major French national interests, are undergoing strategic challenges.

Matthias Kowasch Macron’s second presidency has to deal with the deep distrust of Kanak communities in New Caledonia-Kanaky. In 2022, Macron was re-elected as French president (winning in New Caledonia-Kanaky with 61% of support against 39% for Le Pen). Since then, the decolonisation process in the French overseas territory has been on an unofficial “stand-by”. From 1 to 4 June 2023, France’s Interior and Overseas Minister Gérald Darmanin visited Nouméa. To revive the dialogue and to cajole some cooperation, he made three proposals: (a) a promise of self-determination within one or two generations, a timeline which was immediately rejected by pro-independence leaders; (b) France did not rule out the transfer of further political competences including sovereign powers (defence, currency, law and order, foreign politics); c)

the restriction of voter eligibility in local provincial elections will – at present – not be changed (essentially confined to those already resident in 1988 and their descendants) (Fisher 2023). As of late 2023, there was little sign of a way forward for the political status of the archipelago, following the historic visit by President Macron in July 2023 and draft legislation on constitutional reform.

Mining is intimately linked to the colonial history of the country and the marginalisation of Indigenous Kanak people on Grande Terre. The dominant nickel sector may contribute economically to the wealth of the country, but it also makes New Caledonia-Kanaky one of the world’s largest CO₂ emitters per capita. The nickel and transport sector are emitting 84% of all greenhouse gases (Energy Observer 2023). There is now some action to reduce CO₂ emissions: Mining companies are required to cut emissions by 50% by 2035 and be zero neutral before 2050.

While the Koniambo project in the North Province has a clear geopolitical objective dating back decades, having been initiated by supporters of economic emancipation from France (Batterbury et al. 2020), as of 2023, Goro Nickel is preparing to supply Tesla with nickel for battery manufacturing. Tesla wants to secure and control its supply chain but is also insisting on tighter environmental standards and social responsibility. The critique is that some “greenwashing” is taking place – Tesla’s electric cars are mostly bought by environmentally conscious affluent consumers, who sometimes overlook the conditions of production and the CO₂ embedded in the supply chain. In addition, the Goro Nickel smelter has a long history of accidents including heavy environmental damage. Therefore, the future will reveal if Goro Nickel serves as a cautionary example of how difficult it is to achieve true sustainability – sustainability that is an important approach (but also a buzzword) to deal with global environmental changes and to preserve the outstanding marine and terrestrial biodiversity of the archipelago. In the beginning of 2024, all three nickel smelters in the country (Koniambo, Goro Nickel and the over 100 years old Doniambo) are in financial difficulties, they have a combined deficit of €1.4 billion (NC la 1ère, 2024) which emphasises the social-economic risks of dependence on the commodities sector. The activities at Koniambo are currently even suspended.

Isabelle Leblic It is not fair to reduce the independence vote to a vote along ethnic lines. The independentists have taken up the “bet on intelligence” made by Jean-Marie Tjibaou in the 1980s. Since the Matignon-Oudinot Accords in 1988, or even since the round table of Nainvilles-les-Roches in 1983, the hands extended by the Kanak towards the non-Kanak for the construction of an independent country are innumerable. On the other hand, the non-independence positions are becoming increasingly clear-cut, close to racism, and political leaders do everything to thwart a positive evolution of the

country. They even brought forward the third and final referendum to ensure a “no” vote in 2021, against all decency in the face of Kanak mourning, refusing to postpone it (Leblic 2021a, b). All this happened with the help of the French State, moving away from its declared position of impartiality. Today, the pro-independence activists are still trying to break the deadlock, but they no longer believe in promises that are never kept. They demand strong action. There is no indication that this will come. However, the future of a democratic Kanaky-New Caledonia, concerned with balanced development respecting the environment and with social and economic justice that allows well-being for all, whatever their origin, means this is a small price to pay.

Pierre-Christophe Pantz Electoral ethnicization, reinforced during the first and second referendums on independence from France, was confirmed during the third consultation in 2021, and this has proven to be a dead end. The cold reality of 30 years of elections, then referendums, has left the broad contours of the vote unchanged: Kanak people continue to vote essentially for independence while the bulk of non-Kanak people continue to reject it massively. The ethnic border has largely remained unchanged despite appeals on all sides for an intelligent vote. Since the electorate is frozen, the quest for a majority (for or against independence) is dependent on relatively marginal demographic movements. And it is clear that the evolution of the balance of power seems to be deeply crystallised and stabilised, unchanged by the 2021 consultation. Overall, given the impermeability of the political allegiance of the Kanak and non-Kanak blocs of the New Caledonian population, the majority vote of one camp over the other solves nothing and looks more like a Pyrrhic victory.

Eddie Wayuone Wadrawane In 2006, Carole Reynaud Paligot wrote in her book *La République raciale (1860–1930)*: “...the racial mixing of settlers and Indigenous people should create a ‘tropical race’, adapted to the tropical climate, and which will compensate for the inability of White people to acclimatise. [...]” (p. 57). If physically people were “colored” following such miscegenation, this was symbolic since their heads remained European. The results of the various referendums in the contemporary period have sufficiently shown resistance to changing this state of mind to create an emancipated and sovereign country.

Schooling continues to build and shape minds, giving new generations a sovereign and emancipated spirit. Knowledge gained at school should promote an emancipatory cognitive challenge for students, and not their ideological enslavement. Back in 2001, at the presentation of the new curricula for primary school education in New Caledonia, Marie-Noëlle Themereau, former New Caledonian President,

declared: “In the city, the village or the community, schools should take the first step towards families. This is the indispensable mark of respect for our public service”.

Almost 16 years later, the New Caledonian Educational Project voted by the parliament in January 2016 was a major institutional advance, because fundamental elements of Kanak culture were included in the curriculum. This inclusion offers a bridge of intercultural understanding and could contribute to overcoming social inequalities. However, fundamental elements of Kanak culture introduced into schooling need strengthening in the social world as well, in order to promote a change of mentalities.

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