

The New Caledonian Referendum on Independence Part 1: Historical Origins

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In November 2018, the territorial community of New Caledonia will determine whether to become an independent state or remain under French sovereignty. With less than one year to the vote, there are details yet to be finalised, including long-running divisions on who is eligible to vote. This In Brief is the first of a three-part series exploring different aspects of the referendum process. It examines the historical origins of the referendum and the complexities associated with democratic self-determination in the New Caledonian context.

New Caledonia, annexed by France on 24 September 1853, formally remained a colony of France until its integration into the republic at the end of the Second World War. French citizenship was granted to indigenous subjects in 1946, gradually followed by voting rights. New Caledonia's integration led to France unilaterally removing the territory from the UN List of Non-Self-Governing Territories in 1947. Broader reforms throughout the short-lived French Union (1946–58) led to New Caledonia enjoying significant administrative autonomy from Paris. In 1958, 98% of New Caledonia's eligible voters voted in favour of remaining an overseas territory under the new Constitution of the Fifth Republic (JORF 5/10/1958).

However, in a series of reforms during the 1960s, France wound back the territorial autonomy enjoyed by New Caledonia, despite protests from the dominant multiracial political party, the *Union Calédonienne* (UC) (Caledonian Union). Between 1967 and 1972, high nickel prices fuelled a nickel boom that saw thousands of migrants arrive in New Caledonia from metropolitan France and Wallis and Futuna. The indigenous Kanak population declined from 48% in 1963 to 42% in 1976 of the territorial total (ISEE 2017). More insidiously, the French government began to actively pursue migration and settlement as a means of reinforcing French sovereignty over the territory at a time when neighbouring Melanesian territories were preparing for independence and France faced mounting criticism for its nuclear testing program in French Polynesia.

Calls for independence began to emerge in the late 1960s, especially among left-leaning, mostly Kanak, student

radicals. In 1976, some of these groups formed the *Parti de libération kanak* (Party of Kanak Liberation), while the UC soon declared its support for independence. In response, many non-indigenous people left the UC, and Jacques Lafleur gathered anti-independence voters under the banner of the *Rassemblement pour la Calédonie dans la République* (RPCR) (Rally for Caledonia in the Republic). In 1981, some pro-independence parties formed the *Front Indépendantiste* (FI) (International Front), which, in 1984, was expanded to form the *Front de Libération Nationale Kanak et Socialiste* (FLNKS) (Kanak and Socialist National Liberation Front).

An ensuing dilemma concerned how the Kanak people could exercise self-determination and attain independence in a territory in which they found themselves a large minority. The RPCR and the French government insisted on the universality of French citizenship and democratic rights, with anti-independence parties dominating local political institutions. Not only was the Kanak population a demographic minority, but the RPCR consistently pointed out that the FLNKS could not speak on behalf of all Kanak people since a small but significant proportion supported remaining with France. Therefore, loyalist political rhetoric often contrasted the supposedly multiracial basis of French citizenship with the ethno-nationalism of the independence movement that excluded much of the population.

In July 1983, Socialist minister for the overseas, Georges Lemoine, invited the FI, the RPCR and a smaller centrist party called the *Fédération pour une nouvelle société calédonienne* (Federation for a New Caledonia Society, to talks at Nainville-les-Roches. At the conclusion of the talks, the French government recognised for the first time the innate and active right to independence of the Kanak people, as well as the existence of a *fait colonial* (a colonial reality) in New Caledonia. Furthermore, the French government agreed to a referendum in which independence would be one of the options proposed. However, the RPCR refused to accept the right to independence for a part of the population or the restriction of the right to vote.

Questions remain on how a right to independence could translate into a political settlement leading towards full sovereignty, and who would be able to participate in a referendum of self-determination. Restricting the right to vote to the Kanak, or a particular segment of the population, transgressed French constitutional precepts concerning the equality of rights of all French citizens, including suffrage.

The FI and the FNSC agreed that the right to self-determination was reserved for the Kanak people *and* those termed as 'victims of history' — the descendants of long-term, non-indigenous free settlers, convicts, and indentured labourers (Barbançon 2008). This notion placed an emphasis on a shared experience of suffering due to French colonisation, distinguishing between earlier non-indigenous communities, and more recent metropolitans (Tjibaou 1996:184). For the FI, sharing self-determination with the 'victims of history' was a concession since the [1960 UN Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples](#) recognised the right to self-determination for 'colonised peoples'. However, many non-Kanak flatly rejected the portrayal as victims, while calling for their own contributions to the development of New Caledonia to be recognised. Regardless, the translation of this discussion into a voting rights restriction remained problematic. The French government and the RPCR refused to accept the FI's demand for eligibility to be restricted to those with at least one parent born in New Caledonia.

During this time, France maintained that decolonisation could only occur within the framework of the French Constitution. But the FLNKS successfully lobbied Pacific states, including Australia and New Zealand, and eventually gained the support of Australia and New Zealand to re-inscribe New Caledonia on the UN List of Non-Self-Governing Territories in 1986, despite French protests. The inscription placed pressure on France to respect the self-determination of the Kanak as the 'colonised people', without stipulating independence as the sole, possible outcome.

However, France remained opposed to a referendum on independence that excluded some citizens. In 1987, Jacques Chirac's conservative government organised a vote on independence with a three-year residency requirement, subsequently boycotted by the FLNKS. It took the blood spilt during the [Ouvéa crisis](#) in April–May 1988 for political leaders to agree to a political settlement.

The Matignon-Oudinot Accords — signed by Jean-Marie Tjibaou of the FLNKS and Jacques Lafleur of the RPCR, and approved by a national referendum on 6 November 1988 — put into place a new political-institutional structure that focused on the geographical and ethnic rebalancing of the

territory's economic development. Despite being a nationwide vote, little more than a third of France's eligible voters participated, reflecting the relative lack of interest in overseas affairs among the general public. In New Caledonia, only 57% of voters approved the Accords, with substantial numbers on both sides sceptical of the arrangement (JORF 10/11/1988). Indeed, the compromise made by Tjibaou ultimately cost him his life; he was assassinated by a disillusioned FLNKS member on 4 May 1989.

The Accords pushed back the referendum on full sovereignty to 1998. Eligibility to vote would have been based on eligibility for the 1988 referendum — constitutionally referred to as the 'population concerned'.

However, a referendum never happened in 1998. Instead, the Noumea Accord, signed on 5 May 1998, agreed to delay it to between 2014 and 2018, motivated by a concern that a referendum could marginalise a large minority of the population and spark a repeat of the violence a decade before. The Accord stipulated that those with a minimum 20 years' residency as of 31 December 2013 would be eligible to participate. As Part 2 will outline, despite the imminence of the consultation expected in November 2018, there continues to be disagreement on the development of the electoral list.

Author Notes

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